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Dante and the Construction of a Mediterranean Literary Space

Revisiting a 20th Century Philological Debate in Southern Europe and in the Arab World

Elisabetta Benigni

Università degli Studi di Torino

elisabetta.benigni@unito.it

Abstract

This article examines the ideological implications of the literary debate about the Arab-Islamic influences on Dante's *Divina Commedia* and the emergence of the idea of Mediterranean literature. It traces the question of "influences" back to 16th century Italy, casts the modern controversy about Dante and the Arabs in the broader context of borders, and questions the definition of European and Romance literatures in relation to Arabic literature. It then focuses on the 20th century debate about the Arabic roots of the *Commedia* in Italy, Spain and the Arab world in order to account for the reception and translation of the *Commedia* into Arabic.

Keywords

Dante – Comparative Literature – Egypt – Asín Palacios – Translation

Introduction

The relation of Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* to Arabic-Islamic literary tradition has been a contested topic for the last two centuries. Paul Cantor's "The Uncanonical Dante,"¹ published in 1996 and Maria Corti's "Dante and

1 Paul Cantor, "The Uncanonical Dante: The Divine Comedy and Islamic Philosophy," *Philosophy and Literature* 20 (1996): 138-153.

Islamic Culture,”² first published in Italian in 1992, stand as two landmarks in the history of a polemic that has, since its very beginning, been charged with political meaning. Cantor’s and Corti’s articles represent both the culmination of a long tradition of scholarship on this problematic philological issue as well as the opening of the literary field onto a new methodology—namely the introduction of an inter-cultural literary perspective. In the context of our discussion of literature and languages across the Mediterranean Sea, this article offers a critical examination of the well-known controversy that animated the field of Romance and Arabic literary scholarship during the course of the 20th century. My contribution will first focus on the ideological and political context where the question of the “Islamic Dante” emerged. An overview of the debate among Arab scholars, Orientalists, and Romance philologists reveals that it was, in fact, more than a simple philological quarrel. It represented one of many factors that shaped the idea of the Mediterranean as a cultural and literary space during the time of colonialism and the rise of modern orientalist scholarship.³ The debate about the Islamic sources of Dante was in fact strongly marked by the complex and contested processes of nation-building and identity formation in the Arab world.

The first part of the article concentrates on the historical background of the debate over the alleged Arabic sources of Romance literature. This background has been identified in the age-old controversy about the existence of a shared Mediterranean—or “South European”—literary space and about the extent to which Romance literature has been influenced in its formative period by Arabic literary culture. In the second part of my contribution, I turn to the debate about the Islamic sources of the *Commedia* in Italy, Spain and the Arab world and to the reception of Dante’s translations by an Arab readership.⁴ Although seldom presented together, these two domains of analysis are closely related and mutually imbricated. The “Arab Dante” is, in this regard, an exemplary case to discuss how the Mediterranean paradigm was received in contexts shaped by colonial hegemonies and how it invited modern Arab scholars to rethink their own literary heritage in light of an unstable and fragile dialectic between

2 Maria Corti, “Dante and Islamic culture,” *Dante Studies* 125 (2007): 57-75.

3 Andrea Celli, *Dante e l’Oriente: Le fonti islamiche nella storiografia novecentesca* (Carocci: Roma, 2013), 11; María R. Menocal, *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 115-135.

4 The uniqueness of Arabic studies in Italy and Spain as opposed to Arabic studies in North Europe had been studied by Karla Mallette, *European Modernity and the Arab Mediterranean: Toward a New Philology and a Counter-Orientalism* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2010).

literary and political hegemonies. Following in line with Erich Auerbach,⁵ we shall look at this case study as a connecting point to aim at a larger question, that is, the possibility of a trans-national literature of the Mediterranean, where the sea emerges as a metaphor for a system of nets of intertwining lines of political imaginaries.

Origins: Creating Europe through Literary Debates

The idea of a recurring literary influence in the Mediterranean space was present in European literary debate long before the Braudelian conceptualization of the entangled space and long before the emergence of the first studies on the relationship between Dante and Arabic sources. In fact, the question of Arabic origins dates back to the forefather of Romance philology, Giovanni Maria Barbieri (1519-1574), who was active in Modena during the 16th century. Barbieri spent his life at the Modena court and, for a period of six or seven years, at the French court of Francis I. It was most likely during his stay in France that he engaged in a careful study of Provençal, the language of old courtly poems. His knowledge of Romance languages, together with his reading of Arabic sources in Latin translation and of Hebrew with the help of the Jewish scholar Mosé Finzi, constituted the philological material on which he based the thesis presented in *Arte del rimare* (Art of the Rhyme), the study to which he devoted the last years of his life. The work was conceived as an ideal continuation of Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia* in three volumes, although Barbieri managed to accomplish only the first before his death. The main question he addresses in this volume is dedicated to the origin of the rhyme as the distinctive feature of Provençal poetry.⁶ Both Francesco Petrarca and Dante Alighieri had already undertaken a similar attempt to trace the obscure origins of the rhyme. Barbieri emphasizes the historical evidence that both Sicily and Provence were the two areas where rhyme actually originated. The implication

5 Erich Auerbach, "Philology and *Weltliteratur*," translated by Marie and Edward Said, *The Centennial Review* 13 (1969): 1-17.

6 On this question, Roberto M. Dainotto develops María R. Menocal's argument. He traces the origins and the development of the progressive denial of the Arabic role in the construction of the European literary space. See Roberto M. Dainotto, "On the Arab Origin of Modern Europe: Giammaria Barbieri, Juan Andrés, and the Origin of Rhyme," *Comparative Literature* 58 (2006): 271-292; María R. Menocal, *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 71-90; Mario Eusebi, "Andrés, Arteaga, Tiraboschi e il contrasto sulle origini della prosa rimata," *Saggi di filologia romanza* (2005): 243-248.

is that Dante and Petrarca respectively were strongly influenced by Arabic culture. Building on this hypothesis, he proposes the audacious idea of an Arabic origin of the rhyme. Moreover, he refers to Arabic Medieval Andalusia as a distinct space whose literary and musical influence was essential for the sound structure of Spanish, French and Italian vernacular poetry. Barbieri's scholarship circulated as a manuscript for almost two centuries and was largely read, even if seldom quoted until it was transformed into a book by the end of the 18th century.

In the same decades, the debate about the Arab influence on European poetry recurred in the work of the Spanish Jesuit Juan Andrés (1740-1817), *Dell'origine, progresso e stato attuale d'ogni letteratura* (On the Origins, Progress, and State of Art of All Literature).⁷ Published in Mantua—where the exiled Juan Andrés lived for some years before moving to Naples to work as director of the royal library assisted by the Maronite Miguel Casiri (1710-1791)—*Dell'origine, progresso e stato attuale d'ogni letteratura* supports the theory of the Arabic origins of the French and Italian courtly poetry. More generally, Andrés aims to demonstrate that the Arabs were the source of European literary and scientific *risorgimento*,⁸ and that Spanish poetry under Arab influence was the origin of modern poetry.⁹

As a response to this claim, a few years later, in 1791, the Jesuit scholar of literature, aesthetics and music, Estban de Arteaga (1747-1799), published in Rome *Dell'Influenza degli Arabi sull'origine della poesia moderna in Europa* (On the Influence of the Arabs on the Origin of European modern Poetry).¹⁰ The work challenges the scholarship on the Arabic influence up to his day. Referring to Andrés's theory of Arabic influence and to others, Esteban de Arteaga questioned the assumption that similarities were due to actual contacts, and went so far as to elaborate a culturalist theory of difference regarding the expression of emotions in literature.¹¹

7 Juan Andrés, *Dell'origine, progressi e stato attuale d'ogni letteratura* (1782-1799), 2nd ed., 8 vols. (Parma: Stamperia Reale, 1785-1822).

8 Andrés, *Dell'origine, progresso*, 1.156.

9 "Quest'uso degli spagnoli di verseggiare nella lingua, nella misura, e nella rima degli arabi può dirsi con fondamento la prima origine della moderna poesia." Juan Andrés, *Dell'origine, progresso*, 1.275.

10 Estban de Arteaga, *Dell'Influenza degli Arabi sull'origine della poesia moderna in Europa* (Rome: Pagliarini, 1791).

11 In the course of the fierce polemic with Juan Andrés, Arteaga used Montesquieu's climatology in order to express the impossibility for arts and poetry to be created in the heat of the Arab regions, looking instead at Provence as the cradle of poetry. Dainotto, "On the Arab Origin," 285.

It was in the context of this debate over the origins and the influences of literary forms that Girolamo Tiraboschi (1731-1794) decided to publish Barbieri's *Arte del rimare* with a new introduction and a significant new title: *Dell'origine della poesia rimata* (On the Origin of Rhymed Poetry).¹² With the increase of interest in matters of origin in the 18th century, Tiraboschi supported the thesis of Barbieri against de Arteaga's refusal. In Tiraboschi's teleological approach to literary history, the space of the Mediterranean figures prominently. The Arab influences and Arab-Christian commercial and cultural exchanges across the sea are considered formative moments in the history of Romance literature.¹³

During the course of the 19th century, the search for Arab roots continued. One particular representative of this lively scholarship was the writer and economist Jean Leonard Simonde de Sismondi (1773-1842). In his *De la littérature du Midi de l'Europe* (On the Literature of the South of Europe),¹⁴ written between 1813 and 1819, Simonde de Sismondi compares Romance literature with Arabic and Persian traditions, suggesting the probable influence of Arabic and Persian on Spanish and Provençal lyric. Discussions over the geography of the literary space like that of Simonde de Sismondi are recurrent in 19th century's literary salons, where the discourse over the appropriation of courtesy poetry and Provençal lyric as an essential part of European identity was increasingly linked to a political agenda.¹⁵ With the rise of nationalist ideals and discourses of cultural purity, the topic became increasingly charged with ideological significance. What was at stake by then was not simply a philological problem over the origin of poetry and rhyme but a question about the origins of Europe itself and the double nature of European culture divided into North and South.¹⁶ Madame de Staël's (1766-1817) *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* (On Literature Considered in its Relationship with Social Institutions),¹⁷ written in 1800, alludes to some of these North-South divisions. In her work, Madame de Staël stresses the connections between literature and the theory of cultural influences, delineating

12 Girolamo Tiraboschi, *Dell'origine della poesia rimata* (Modena: Societa Tipografica, 1790).

13 Dainotto, "On the Arab Origin," 287.

14 Jean C.L. Simonde de Sismondi, *De la littérature du Midi de l'Europe*, 4 vols. (Paris: Treuttel et Wurtz, 1813-1819).

15 According to Menocal, "the Arabist theory reached the peak of its popularity among *literati* (Sismonde de Sismondi, Claude Fauriel, Stendhal, E.J. Delecluze, and Eugène Baret, for example), in the first half of the nineteenth century." Menocal, *The Arabic role*, 80.

16 Roberto M. Dainotto, *Europe (in theory)*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

17 M.me de Staël, *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*, 2 ed. (Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier, Eugène Fasquelle, 1800).

a clear separation between a literature of the South and one of the North of Europe:

Il existe, ça me semble, deux littératures tout à fait distinctes, celle qui vient du Midi et celle qui descend du Nord; celle dont Homère est la première source, celle dont Ossian est l'origine. Les Grecs, les Latins, les Italiens, les Espagnols, et les Français du siècle de Louis XIV, appartiennent au genre de littérature que j'appellerai la littérature du Midi.¹⁸

[It seems to me that there exist, in fact, two literatures that are absolutely different; that coming from the South and that coming from the North; that where Homer is the primary source and that where Ossian is the origin. The Greeks, Latins, Italians, Spanish and French until the century of Louis XIV belong to the literary genre which I would call literature of the South.]¹⁹

The extent to which a theory of influence is crucial for Madame de Staël is visible in the chapter she devotes to Italian and Spanish literatures. Here, she explains that the works of Ludovico Ariosto and Torquato Tasso—as much as Spanish poetry—are the outcome of the encounter of the Oriental imagination nourished by despotism with northern European chivalry poems:

Dans l'Orient, le despotisme tourna les esprits vers les jeux de l'imagination; on était contraint à ne risquer aucune vérité morale que sous la forme de l'apologue. Le talent s'exerça bientôt à supposer et à peindre des événements fabuleux . . . On a réuni les deux genres en Italie; l'invasion des peuples du Nord a transporté dans le Midi la tradition des faits chevaleresques, et les rapports que les Italiens entretenaient avec l'Espagne ont enrichi la poésie d'une foule d'images et d'événements tirés des contes arabes. C'est à ce mélange heureux que nous devons l'Arioste et le Tasse.²⁰

[In the Orient, despotism leads spirits toward the use of imagination; one was obliged not to risk any moral truth but in the form of the apologue. The ability was devoted to the construction and depiction of fabulous events . . . In Italy, the two genres were united; the invasion from Northern

18 M.me de Staël, *De la littérature considérée*, 162-163.

19 The translations of the quotations in the article are all mine.

20 *Ibid.*, 149-150.

people brought to the South the traditions of chivalry, and the connections between Italy and Spain enriched poetry with images and accounts taken from Arab tales. It is thanks to this fortunate mixing that Ariosto and Tasso appeared.]

Nevertheless, even though she acknowledges that there was a *mélange heureux*, Madame de Staël refuses the suggestion that Arab poetry could have been the origin of Provençal poetry. While using the word *influence* in her writing, she does not employ it as a synonym for *origin*.

Following de Staël's proposition, many theories emerging during the 19th century, inspired by previous scholarship, subverted the discourse of Arab origins. Finally, a notion of a dominant Christian Latin Europe gained ground against the backdrop of a progressively vanishing theory of Arab origins.²¹ The course of the history of the discipline of Romance philology as it has developed in modern European countries carried this tradition forward, developing an exclusivist approach to literature. Eventually, the idea of Romance literature as a self-contained and sufficient entity led toward an abandoning of the theory of Arab influence, a theory that in the 20th century will be ultimately relegated to the realm of Arabic scholarship.²²

However, some scholarly efforts to reconstruct a Mediterranean literary space remained alive, especially in the contexts of studies carried out by philologists and scholars of Arabic language who engaged in a comparative approach. The path leading to this reconstruction was, in fact, the emergence of modern comparativism and Orientalism: to compare Romance texts and Arabic sources was considered necessary to rediscover a space "in between."

21 A. Wilhelm von Schlegel in his *Observations sur la langue et la littérature provençales* (Paris: Librairie grecque-latine-allemande, 1818) insists on the fact that, despite the probable original invention of the rhyme, "Muḥammad's sect has never had the slightest influence on anything that constitutes the original genius of the Middle Ages" (67-69). His brother Friederich Schlegel pointed at the fact that the influence was limited to Andalusia and that the literature of "Catholic countries, such as Spain, Italy and Portugal" is radically distinct from that of North Europe. Cited by Dainotto, "On the Arab Origin," 288. See also María Rosa Menocal, *The Arabic Role*, 81.

22 According to Menocal: "This academic conceptual banishment of the Arab from medieval Europe was to have extraordinary power . . . The sporadic suggestions of Arabic influence . . . were dismissed as unworthy of serious consideration, or at best were subjected to unusually heated and vitriolic criticism. The proponents of such ideas, predominantly Arabists, were dismissed as individuals who simply had an axe to grind rather than a conceivably legitimate contribution to make and who, in any case, were not knowledgeable in the field of European literature." Menocal, *The Arabic Role*, 81-83.

The central issue was, of course, still that of the influence of supposedly Arabic or Islamic sources on Romance literature. However, by the turn of the 19th century, the exploration assumed the form of a new debate: that of Dante's use of Islamic sources and of Dante's connection to Islamic culture, an issue that was simultaneously emerging in various academic circles in Europe and, just a few decades later, in the Arab world.

Comparativism: Dante across the Nations

In Europe, the interest in Dante and the Orient, and more specifically the Islamic world, was the outcome of an increasing attention to comparative studies of folklore, history, and literature. Literary scholars interested in comparative philology, like Antoine Frédéric Ozanam (1813-1853),²³ Angelo De Gubernatis (1840-1813),²⁴ Italo Pizzi (1849-1920),²⁵ Alessandro d'Ancona (1835-1914),²⁶ and Arturo Graf (1848-1913),²⁷ were the first to recognize similarities between the *Commedia* and Islamic theological allegories and popular narratives, revealed primarily through an examination of the structural model of the journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. Articles devoted to this topic appeared in the newly established literary journals at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The strong positivist spirit that permeated comparative studies by that time led Italian scholars to go beyond the simple acknowledgment of similarities: their efforts focused on providing a concrete corpus of philological and textual evidence.

In 1907, Angelo De Fabrizio noticed echoes of a book containing the narration of the ascension of the Prophet Muhammad (*Libro Halmerici*) in the work *Specchio della fede cristiana* by the Franciscan friar Roberto Caracciolo da Lecce

23 According to René Guenón, Antoine F. Ozanam in his *Essai sur la philosophie de Dante* (Paris: Faculté des Lettres, 1838) discussed Indian and Islamic influences on the *Commedia*. See René Guenón, *Lesoterismo di Dante* (Roma: Atanòr, 1971).

24 See Angelo De Gubernatis, "Le type indien de Lucifer chez Dante," *Actes du x^e Congrès des Orientalistes: Dante e l'India*, *Giornale della Società asiatica italiana* 3 (1889): 3-19.

25 Italo Pizzi studied the influence of Persian lyrics on the *Stilnovo*. See Italo Pizzi, *Storia della poesia persiana*, vol. 2 (Torino, 1894).

26 Alessandro d'Ancona, "La leggenda di Maometto in Occidente" in idem, *Studi di critica e storia letteraria* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1912).

27 Arturo Graf focused on the description of Paradise and Demons in Dante and in the various legends from the Middle Age. For the use of Islamic sources, see: Arturo Graf, "Il mito del Paradiso terrestre and Demonologia di Dante" in idem, *Miti, leggende e superstizioni del medioevo* eds. Clara Allasia and Walter Meliga (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2002).

(15th century). Angelo De Fabrizio went so far as to suggest that the translation of the same *libro Halmerici* could have also influenced Dante in his *Commedia*.²⁸ However, this and other similar hypotheses did not have any relevant impact on the canonical scholars of Dante, especially in Italy. All in all, the cultural climate around this time, especially in newly unified Italy, was moving in an opposite direction: the significance of Dante was itself undergoing a process of systematization and interpretation as the icon of a national poet, acquiring the typical characteristics of the imaginary of the Italian Risorgimento. Despite Dante's harsh criticism against the institution of the Church of his time, the "sacrato poema" (sacred poem) was integrated into the canon of Italian national literature as the symbol of Medieval Western Christianity and Italian identity.²⁹

When the *Commedia* appeared for the first time in the Arab world, around the end of the 19th century, it was commonly compared with the *Risālat al-ghufrān* (Epistle of Forgiveness). The *Epistle of Forgiveness* is a 10th century Arabic masterpiece by the poet Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī (b. 363/973). According to 'Ā'isha 'Abd al-Raḥmān, an Egyptian professor who devoted her efforts to the study of Abū 'Alā' al-Ma'arrī's work, the first comparison between the *Commedia* and the *Risālat al-ghufrān* dates back to 1886 and was published in the Egyptian journal *al-Muqtaṭaf*.³⁰ The comparison was triggered by the observation of the distinctive structure of the katabasis. The *Risālat al-ghufrān* describes the ascent to Paradise and descent into Hell of the protagonist Ibn al-Qāriḥ. Over the years, this recurring theme became a vexing question in various critical editions and in essays devoted to *Risālat al-ghufrān*. In the context of the comparison, Arab scholars considered Dante's *Commedia* to

28 Angelo De Fabrizio, "Il 'Mirag' di Maometto esposto da un frate salentino del secolo xv," *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 49 (1907): 299-313. See Sabina Baccaro, "Dante e l'Islam. La ripresa del dibattito storiografico sugli studi di Asín Palacios," *Doctor Virtualis: La rivista online di storia della filosofia medievale*, 12 (2013): 13-33, 19.

29 See Andrea Ciccarelli, "Dante and Italian Culture from the Risorgimento to World War I," *Dante Studies* 119 (2001): 125-154. For an overview on the history of Dante's canonization in Italian culture (18th to 20th centuries), see: Carlo Dionisotti, "Varia fortun adi Dante," *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1967), 255-303.

30 See 'Ā'isha 'Abd al-Raḥmān, *al-Ghufrān min Abū 'Alā' al-Ma'arrī* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1954), 312 (footnote 1). According to Carlo Alfonso Nallino, however, "la curiosa analogia fra il libro di Abū al-'Alā' e la *Divina Commedia* fu rilevata per la prima volta dal sig. Abdelrahim Ahmed . . . in 1897" [the curious analogy between the book by Abū al-'Alā' and the *Divina Commedia* was noted for the first time by Abdelrahim Ahmed . . . in 1897]. See Carlo A. Nallino, *Raccolta di scritti editi ed inediti* (Roma: Istituto per l'Oriente, 1940), 439, (footnote 1).

be derived from al-Ma'arrī's prototype. The Lebanese scholar Jurjī Zaydān (1861-1914) took the lead in this debate. In his famous *Tārīkh ādāb al-lughā al-'arabiyya* (History of Arabic Literature), published between 1911 and 1914, he argues that both Dante's *Commedia* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* derive from *the Epistle of Forgiveness*.³¹ According to Zaydān: "There was a borrowing (iqtibās) through which the idea [of al-Ma'arrī] came to his two successors [Dante and Milton]. Dante appears after the encounter between the Franks (Europeans) and the Muslims. Compared to the Franks, the Italians were the first to experience this encounter."³² It is worth noting that Zaydān was among the 20th century Arab intellectuals who proposed a process of "historization" of literature "within a national linguistic tradition."³³ In other words, in the Arab world—as in Europe—the question was echoed in contexts where the canons of literature and methodologies of literary studies were undergoing a process of systematization into "modern" categories based on linguistic and national identity. In both cases, the debate was related to the emergence of a historicizing and comparative perspective on literature with respect to an imagined Medieval Mediterranean. Arab scholars, to be sure, manifested since the end of 19th century a positive inclination toward the hypothesis of the Islamic influence on Dante. This inclination has to be read against the background of the fragile dialectic of powers during the colonial period and the constant shift between the acceptance of the colonial intellectual predominance and the subtle and constant desire to subvert it.³⁴

An article published in the *Revue Africaine* in 1919, "Sources Musulmanes dans la 'Divine Comédie'" (Islamic Sources of the Divine Comedy),³⁵ interestingly attests the attempt to come to a conclusion in the debate concerning the circulation of the eschatological theme and the borrowing from al-Ma'arrī in Dante. The author, Saâdeddine Bencheneb, advocates the idea that Dante's travelogue derives from the Islamic tradition of the Mi'rāj as well as Ma'arrī's work (10th century). Curiously, Bencheneb begins his article with the hope that the current 20th century would see an end to the ongoing polemic.³⁶ After

31 See Jurjī Zaydān, *Tārīkh ādāb al-lughā al-'arabiyya*, Cairo: Maktabat al-Hilāl, 1911-1914, vol. 2, 265.

32 Ibid.

33 See Michael Allan, "How Adab Became Literary: Formalism, Orientalism and the Institutions of World Literature," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43 (2012): 172-196, 185.

34 Shaden Tageldin, *Disarming Words Empire and the Seductions of Translation in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

35 Saâdeddine Bencheneb, "Sources musulmanes dans la Divine Comédie," *Revue Africaine* 3-4 (1919): 483-493.

36 "We hope that a balanced and impartial critique in our century will lead to an acceptance of the new proposal which appeared after passionate discussions and confirmed

having presented to the reader a long list of resemblances between the *Risālat al-ghufrān* and the *Commedia*, Bencheneb ultimately defines in a concise way the broad spectrum of possibilities for the theory of influences:

Dante Alighieri semble donc dépendre de l'islam, par la conception de son poème de deux manières: indirectement par les éléments islamiques qui existaient dans les légendes de ces "précurseurs" chrétiens; directement, par les éléments islamiques qui, sans exister dans les dites légendes, se rencontrent dans la Divine Comédie.³⁷

[It seems that the poem by Dante Alighieri depends on Islam in its conceptualization in two ways: indirectly, through the Islamic elements already elaborated in the legends of Christian precursors; and directly through Islamic elements that, without existing in these legends, are still found in the Divina *Commedia*.]

Despite Bencheneb's attempt to end the quarrel, the issue of influences will be raised again and again during the following decades. In the same year of the publication of Bencheneb's article, 1919, the debate exploded on a large scale. In fact, it was in 1919 that Miguel Asín Palacios published his *La Escatología musulmana en la Divina Comedia*. After the publication of Miguel Asín Palacios's book, the interest in the comparative reading of the *Commedia* received even more attention in both European and Arab contexts.

Asín Palacios, *La escatología musulmana en la Divina Comedia* (1919) and its European Reception

It was the groundbreaking study by the Spanish Arabist Miguel Asín Palacios *La escatología musulmana en la Divina Comedia*, published in 1919, that triggered the debate on an international level. In his book, Asín Palacios delivered a fascinating corpus of textual references from the Islamic tradition, focusing on the literary trope of the *Qiṣṣat al-Mi'rāj*, the Prophet's ascension to Heaven. He systematically collected different versions of the story from a variety of literary sources that flourished in Islamic culture and showed the possible resemblances with the *Commedia*. He drew special attention to the topography of the afterworld: the funnel-shaped hell made of different layers, the

the allegedly outrageous investigations of Labitte, Ozanam, d'Ancona, Graf, Cancellieri." Bencheneb, "Sources musulmanes," 484.

37 Bencheneb, "Sources musulmanes," 493.

Paradise composed of spheres, planets, and stars where an immaterial light radiates from the center of the Empyrean. Moreover, he noted several other similarities: the appearance of obstacles like the three beasts, the types of punishments laid on the damned souls, and the presence of guide characters.

Although Asín Palacios presented an abundance of textual material, his thesis left the issue of textual transmission open. Identifying concrete channels of transmission and circulation was not central to his argument, nor was his aim to interrogate the pure originality of either Islamic or Christian models. He entered the realm of comparative studies on Dante with the aim of demonstrating that no geniality exists without the inspiration of pre-existing materials circulating across a cultural space. He writes:

Y ahí teneis esquematizada la tesis de mi disertacion que, seguramente, sonara en algunos oidos a sacrilegio artistico o hara dibujar quiza la sonrisa de la ironia en los labios de no pocos que todavia creen en la inspiracion del artista como *fenomeno preternatural*, independiente de todo estudio imitativo de modelos ajenos. Es este un prejuicio.³⁸

[Here you find the framework for the thesis of this book, which may sound profane to some ears or may even cause an ironic laughing for those many who believe in the artistic inspiration as a *super natural phenomena*, independent from any imitative study of foreign models. This is a prejudice.]

Asín Palacios's examination of Islamic eschatological traditions acquires its full significance when understood within a specific trend of comparative studies, which developed at the end of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. In his search for precursors and models, Asín Palacios based his work on the method of scientific comparison. To better understand this scholarly orientation, it is perhaps advisable to also consider the number of titles of Asín Palacios's works in which the words "precursor" and "original" occur: *El original arabe de la disputa del asno contra Fr. Anselmo Turmecla* (1914),³⁹ *Los precedentes musulmanos del "pari" de Pascal* (1920),⁴⁰ *Un precursor hispanomusulman*

38 Miguel Asín Palacios, *La escatología musulmana en la Divina Comedia* (Madrid: Imprenta de Estanislao Maestre, 1919), 3.

39 Miguel Asín Palacios, "El original árabe de la disputa del asno contra Fr. Anselmo Turmeda" *Revista de Filología Española* 1 (1914): 1-51.

40 Miguel Asín Palacios, "Los precedentes musulmanos del pari de Pascal," *Boletín de la Biblioteca Menéndez y Pelayo* 2 (1920): 171-232.

de Juan de la Cruz (1933).⁴¹ The recurrence of these words shows a process of collecting and comparing material, which is inspired by natural sciences and then translated into the domain of anecdotes, legends, and stories. In other words, narratives rooted in Latin and Western Christian traditions were compared with similar narratives found in Arabic and Islamic textual sources, which were often identified as “originals.”

Nevertheless, the contribution of Asín Palacios and other scholars to the study of the *Commedia* cannot be reduced to a positivist quest for the *original*. Along with other scholars of comparativism, like Antoine Ozanam, Alessandro d’Ancona and Arturo Graf, Asín Palacios tried to look for a wider concept of influence—one not merely retraceable through the texts, but also related to the realm of psychology and social science. In Asín Palacios’s perspective, the author is not considered as an individual actor independent from the collective dynamics of the culture in which he is embedded. Asín Palacios’s refusal of the *artista como fenomeno preternatural* (the artist as a super natural phenomena) means that for him, in order to study the *Commedia*, there is no need to single out Dante as the epitome of an individual genius. On the contrary, his work represents the final outcome of a cultural climate where Aristotelian, Averroism, and Islamic tradition merged. Likewise, the famous Italian comparatist Arturo Graf wrote in 1877 that the *Divina Commedia* was born:

dalla compenetrazione della coscienza di Dante con la coscienza de’ tempi suoi . . . Se dunque la *Divina Commedia* è l’opera di due coscienze, l’una individuale, collettiva l’altra, gli è chiaro, a parer mio, che io non potrò altrimenti coglierne il pieno significato che con istudiarle paritamento e comparativamente ambedue, e che pertanto io dovrò giovarmi dell’aiuto di due diverse psicologie . . . la psicologia individuale e la psicologia sociale.⁴²

[from the embeddedness of Dante’s consciousness in the consciousness of his time . . . If the *Divina Commedia* is the fruit of two consciousnesses, one individual and the other collective, it is clear, from my point of view, that I will be able to fully understand its meaning only with the

41 Miguel Asín Palacios, “Un precursor hispanomusulman de Juan de la Cruz,” *al-Andalus* 1 (1933): 7-79.

42 Arturo Graf, *Di una trattazione scientifica della storia letteraria* (Torino: Loesher, 1877), 4 in Epifanio Ajello, “Uno schedario tutto particolare: Graf e la letteratura comparata,” in *Storia letteraria e comparazione*, ed. idem., (Roma: Archivio Guido IZZI, 1993), 29.

comparative study of both. Two different psychologies will help me in this . . . the individual psychology and the social psychology.]

The absence of an argument for concrete textual transmission in Palacios's thesis made his work vulnerable to attack. The polemic following the publication of *La Escatología Musulmana* erupted immediately in the Western world. Despite his efforts to collect a wealth of eschatological material, the Spanish Arabist was accused surprisingly of not having provided enough evidence for textual witnesses. The book became a controversy, to the extent that in 1943 Asín Palacios decided to collect the reactions in a polemical pamphlet which he called *Historia y crítica de una polémica* (History and Criticism of a Polemic).⁴³ The objections to his thesis were all in various ways related to the refusal to open the field to research that would promote a multi-linguistic idea of the Mediterranean, a space which would encompass and go beyond the borders of Europe. Asín Palacios's search for forerunners, moreover, was interpreted as an attempt to destroy the original genius and the exceptionality of the Italian national poet. The opposition converged around two main questions: what was the *real* circulation of the texts available at the specific time of Dante? And how could Dante have read the Arab sources without knowing the language? The polemic took a different direction than the initial objectives posed by Asín Palacios, specifically concerning the centrality of Islamic and Arabic traditions within the cultural panorama of the Medieval Mediterranean. Asín Palacios aimed at reducing the impact of the authorial uniqueness, substituting it with a kaleidoscopic perspective of influences that radiates over a text and from it. The polemic that ensued his work, instead, concentrated on the search for effective textual influences, individual contacts, and the issue of the authorial creativity.

Some concrete responses to these specific questions came during the years immediately after the Second World War when groundbreaking positions stood out from the murmuring of the two crowds of the "supporters" of the Islamic theory and the "opponents" to it. In 1944, Ugo Monneret de Villard first discovered two medieval translations of an Islamic eschatological legend related to the Prophet's travelogue to the afterworld (*Kitāb al-mi'rāj*) into European languages.⁴⁴ Subsequently, in 1949, Enrico Cerulli in Italy and

43 Miguel Asín Palacios, *La escatología musulmana en la "Divina Comedia": seguida de la Historia y crítica de una polémica* (Madrid/Granada: imprenta de E. Maestre, 1943).

44 Ugo Monneret de Villard, *Lo studio dell'Islam in Europa nel XII e nel XIII secolo* (Roma: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1944).

Muñoz Sendino in Spain edited the Latin and old French translation of the legend, respectively the *Liber Scalae Machometi* or *Livre de l'Eschiele Mahomet*.⁴⁵ The text apparently offered a distinct textual link between the *Commedia* and the Islamic eschatological tradition. With a *coup de théâtre* that had a great impact on scholarship, the newly edited works claimed to present concrete evidence for the hypothesis of the dependence of the *Commedia*'s narrative upon an Islamic source. The source of the *Kitāb al-mi'rāj* probably reached Italy through the medium of Bonaventura da Siena's translations completed at the court of Alfonso X in the 13th century.

Cerulli's and Sendino's discoveries offered greater nuance to Asín Palacios's view of Mediterranean unity and substituted the core issue with a question regarding direct textual influences. It was in particular Enrico Cerulli's intuition and discovery that moved the focus of the scholarship on a different path. He devoted his large study *Il Libro della Scala e la questione delle fonti arabo-spagnole nella Divina Commedia* (The Book of the Ladder and the Question of the Arabic-Spanish Sources in the Divine Comedy) to forging a new sort of analysis. Building on the work of Asín Palacios, he intended to move toward a "terreno concreto" [concrete ground].⁴⁶ His work encompasses the edition of the *Libro della Scala* and an analysis of the various possible sources, direct and indirect, that could have influenced Dante. Cerulli shows a certain degree of certitude regarding the fact that Islamic philosophy could have influenced Dante through scholasticism. The circulation of translations and reformulations of the eschatological legend of the *Qiṣṣat al-mi'rāj* proves, according to Cerulli, that the material from which Dante drew his inspiration was not so much Ibn 'Arabī's corpus of mystical and Sufi literature, as it was proposed by Asín Palacios, but rather a text which he regards as part of a corpus of "popular" literature and folk piety. However, despite Cerulli's argument and the proofs that the narrative was circulating in Italy through translations and new renderings—as in Fazio degli Uberti's *Dittamondo*—no text could provide unquestionable evidence for direct influence on the *Commedia*.⁴⁷ The "battlefield" was still open.

45 Enrico Cerulli, *Il Libro della Scala e la questione delle fonti arabo-spagnole nella Divina Commedia* (Roma: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1949); Muñoz Sendino, *La Escala de Mahoma* (Madrid: Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, 1949).

46 See Cerulli, *Il Libro della Scala*, cited in Celli, *Dante e l'Oriente*, 45.

47 For an extensive analysis of the work by Enrico Cerulli on Dante in light of his biography and his political aims in Celli, *Dante e l'Oriente*, 19-69.

From the 1950s onward, the issue of the conflict between inspiration and imitation in Dante's *Commedia* became central. Even those who supported the theory of Islamic contacts and influences showed special caution not to undermine the myth of the individual genius of Dante. Italian Arabist Giorgio Levi della Vida, in an article published in the journal *al-Andalus* in 1949 entitled "Nuova Luce sulle fonti islamiche della *Divina Commedia*" (New light on the Islamic Sources of the *Divina Commedia*), argued that Dante was fascinated by the reading of Islamic material in translation because of his vast knowledge and curiosity. Dante's curiosity is the most evident proof of the fact that his "supreme genius does not have limits" [genio sovrano non conosce limiti].⁴⁸ Enrico Cerulli was equally hesitant to speak decisively about drawing up a theory of influences that encompassed a whole Mediterranean civilization without hierarchies. The Islamic elements which imbued the *Commedia* should be, according to Cerulli, "historically judged not according to their original conceptual environment but according to the Christian geniality of Dante's mind, a construction which is antithetically distinctive from that of Muslims" [storicamente valutati non già nello stesso ambito concettuale in cui nacquero, ma in una costruzione, quella del genio cristiano di Dante, che dalla costruzione musulmana si distingue per antitesi].⁴⁹

The position of the coeval Arabist Francesco Gabrieli was similar to that of other Italian orientalists. Already in 1929, Francesco Gabrieli entered the debate with the article "La Risālat al-ghufrān di Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī e la moderna critica orientale" (The Risālat al-ghufrān by Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī and the Modern Oriental Critique).⁵⁰ In the following study of *Nuova Luce su Dante e l'Islam* (1950),⁵¹ Gabrieli returns to the issue and defines the Islamic influence as "materia" (material), which was forged by the exceptionality of Dante into a master work. The magnitude of the *Commedia* is indeed "in the poetic form impressed onto the material, a material whose origin is aesthetically irrelevant, as much as the quality of the metal or marble is irrelevant to the result of a wonderful statue" [nella forma poetica impressa ad una materia, la cui provenienza è esteticamente indifferente, come è indifferente la qualità del metallo o del marmo in un capolavoro della statuaria].⁵² Gabrieli moves

48 Giorgio Levi della Vida, "Nuova Luce sulle fonti islamiche della *Divina Commedia*," *al-Andalus* 14 (1949): 377-407.

49 Cerulli, *Il Libro della scala*, 549 in Celli, *Dante e l'Oriente*, 67.

50 Francesco Gabrieli, "La Risālat al-ghufrān di Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī e la moderna critica orientale," *Atti della Reale Accademia Delle Scienze di Torino* 64 (1929): 174-79.

51 Francesco Gabrieli, "Nuova Luce su Dante e l'Islam," *Nuova Antologia* 75 (1950): 48-59.

52 Gabrieli, "Nuova Luce su Dante e l'Islam" in Baccaro, "Dante e l'Islam," 22.

away from the bold idea of a unity of Islamic and Christian material proposed by Asín Palacios and his precursors. Even though he apparently acknowledges Islamic debts, Gabrieli reduces it to a matter of material, the crude substance, which will then be polished by the artist. Following the same path, the literary critic Umberto Bosco is even more cautious. He recognizes the possible analogies between “Eastern” and “Western” tales of travelogue to the Afterworld. Nonetheless, he points at the difference in the quality of the elaboration of these tales. He defines Dante’s travelogue as “the itinerary of a soul toward his freedom” [l’itinerario di un’anima alla conquista della sua libertà] and distinguishes it from other traditions where the travelogue to the Afterlife has no higher aim than ending in itself (*fine a se stesso*).⁵³

Other scholars of Dante took a more dismissive attitude and refused the possibility of literary contact altogether. According to Carlo Grabher, the absence of any reference in Dante to the famous book of Muhammad (*famoso libro di Maometto*) is sufficient proof to end all discussions over possible influences.⁵⁴ The Dante scholar Bruno Nardi, who in 1923 had shown sympathy for the thesis of Islamic influences, revised his position in 1955. He was decisive in his criticism of the theory of influences and claimed that the argument of Islamic influence is a scholarly fabrication meant to shed light on the otherwise unknown Islamic legend of the *mi’rāj*.⁵⁵

Beyond the differences between these various positions, it is worth noting that the polemic indicates the problematic relation of Romance scholarship in admitting and giving relevance to the Arabic role in the Medieval Mediterranean. It was probably only in the 1990s, with the studies of Cesare Segre⁵⁶ and Maria Corti,⁵⁷ that Italian scholarship openly manifested an attitude to receive and interpret the concept of “influence” in its broader meaning, without the fear of undermining Dante’s individual creativity. The theories of influences between cultural models proposed by Corti and Segre are, in a way, a structuralist translation of the magnificent reconstruction of

53 Umberto Bosco, “Contatti della cultura occidentale e di Dante con la letteratura non dotta arabo-spagnola (1950),” in idem., *Dante Vicino* (Caltanissetta-Roma: Sciascia Editore, 1966), 197-212.

54 Carlo Grabher, “Possibili conclusioni su Dante e l’Escatologia Musulmana,” *Siculorum Gymnasium* 8 (1955): 164-182.

55 Bruno Nardi, “Pretese fonti della *Divina Commedia*,” *Nuova Antologia* 90 (1955): 383-398.

56 Cesare Segre, “Viaggi e visioni d’oltremondo sino alla *Commedia* di Dante,” in idem, *Fuori del mondo: I modelli nella follia e nelle immagini dell’aldilà* (Torino: Einaudi, 1990), 34.

57 Maria Corti, “La *Commedia* di Dante e l’oltretomba islamico” in idem, *Scritti su Cavalcanti e Dante: La felicità mentale, Percorsi dell’invenzione e altri saggi* (Torino: Einaudi, 2003), 365.

Andalusian and Mediterranean “interdiscursivity” proposed by Palacios and even before him by Arturo Graf. These theories developed the idea of the circulation of themes, motives, and inspirations without necessarily having to relate them to any direct contact between individual authors: that is, between an act of writing and another, subsequent act of writing.⁵⁸

Asín Palacios and Dante in Arabic

The Arabic contribution to the debate about the Islamic origins of the *Commedia* after the publication of the Spanish work by Asín Palacios is often neglected. However, looking at the scholarship in Arabic on the topic along with the European debate reveals interesting points of convergence and differences. In the first decades after the publication of *La Escatología Musulmana*, the already documented similarities between the *Commedia* by Dante and the *Risālat al-ghufrān* by Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī were still prevailing, as it is exemplified in some passages of the series of articles entitled *Bayna al-Ma‘arrī wa Dāntī* (Between al-Ma‘arrī and Dante), which were published in the journal *al-Risāla* by Maḥmūd Aḥmad al-Nashawī.⁵⁹ The article carefully compared the travelogue to the Afterlife as it is narrated in the two works, especially concerning their arrival in Paradise. In some cases, the search for analogies was transformed into a form of competition for primacy and a defense of Arabic sources over the Western *Commedia*.⁶⁰ However, this attitude remained marginal. Despite the absence of a translation of Asín Palacios’s work into Arabic, a wealth of scholarship received his thesis quite positively and began to support a close relationship between Arabic and European literatures in their common models. In this regard, one might argue that the idea of a Mediterranean literature born from the contact between Arabic and Romance traditions, which was difficult to establish in Europe, found in the Arab world a more fertile ground.

This is the case, for instance, of Abdul Laṭīf aṭ-Ṭībāwī’s chapter dedicated to the relationship between the 13th century sufi thinker Ibn ‘Arabī and Dante in his *Arabic-Islamic Mysticism* (aṭ-Ṭaṣawwuf al-Islāmī al-‘Arabī), published

58 For a recent overview on the issue, see the article by Leonardo Capezzone, “Intorno alla rimozione delle fonti arabe,” *Critica del testo* 14 (2011): 523-543.

59 Maḥmūd Aḥmad al-Nashawī, “Bayna al-Ma‘arrī wa Dāntī,” *al-Risāla* 40 (1934): 43-49.

60 See Francesco Gabrieli, “La Risālat al-ghufrān di Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī e la moderna critica orientale,” *Atti della Reale Accademia Delle Scienze di Torino* 64 (1929): 174-79.

in Cairo in 1928.⁶¹ Important contributions to this topic came also from the studies of the Italianists Ṭāhā Fawzī⁶² and Ḥasan ʿUthmān.⁶³ Both scholars were strongly influenced by the climate of interaction in Cairo with Italian Orientalists Carlo Alfonso Nallino and Umberto Rizzitano. Without taking into serious consideration the theories of direct derivation from Arabic sources, they considered Dante's work the outcome of a confluence of textual models. Most probably, according to both Ṭāhā Fawzī and Ḥasan ʿUthmān, the influence of the *Liber Scalae* was secondary or indirect and reached Dante through common knowledge or via oral transmission. Interestingly enough, as Ṭāhā Fawzī and Ḥasan ʿUthmān's contributions prove, the debate in the Arab world started—earlier than in Europe—to be reframed in terms that were no longer concentrated on the search for an original source. The medium of translations, translators, and oral circulation of frame narratives in the Mediterranean began to gain increasing importance. The discipline of comparative literature in the Arab world has been, in this sense, deeply shaped by the discourse over the *Commedia* and its possible Islamic influences. This is, for instance, the position of Ghunaymī Hilāl in his *al-Adab al-muqāran* (Comparative Literature)⁶⁴ and of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Badawī in his *Dawr al-ʿArab fī takwīn al-fikr al-ūrūbbī* (The Arabic Role in the Formation of European Thought).⁶⁵ In both works, the authors refer to the *Commedia* as a witness to textual encounters in the Mediterranean. In the context of this growing comparative interest, the well-known Egyptian historian Ḥusayn Muʿnis published *Tārikh al-fikr al-Andalusī* (History of Andalusian Thought)⁶⁶ in the mid 1950s. In the book the author devotes a large discussion to the Italian poem. Again, following the model of Asín Palacios, the *Risālat al-ghufrān* is not positioned at the centre of

61 Abdul Laṭīf aṭ-Ṭībāwī, *aṭ-Ṭaṣawwuf al-Islāmī al-ʿArabī* (Cairo: Dār al-ʿAṣr li-l-Ṭibāʿa wa al-Nashr bi-Miṣr, 1928).

62 On Ṭāhā Fawzī's studies on Dante, see Laura Vecchia Vaglieri in *Oriente Moderno* 10 (1930): 522-24.

63 Ḥasan ʿUthmān was Professor of History at Cairo University. In addition to his famous Arabic translation of the *Commedia*, which I will shortly discuss, he also published a scholarly work on Dante in *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī* 7 (1948): 31 and on the characters of Francesca da Rimini, Farinata degli Uberti, Cavalcante Cavalcanti and Ugolino della Gherardesca in *Majallat Kullīyyat al-Ādāb* 11 (1949): 1-2 and 12 (1950): 2. See also Ḥasan ʿUthmān, "Dante in Arabic," *Annual Reports of the Dante Society, with Accompanying Papers* 73 (1955): 47-52.

64 Ghunaymī Hilāl, *al-Adab al-muqāran* (Cairo, Dār al-Hilāl, 1953).

65 ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Badawī, *Dawr al-ʿArab fī takwīn al-fikr al-ūrūbbī* (Cairo: Dār al-Qalam, 1963).

66 Ḥusayn Muʿnis, *Tārikh al-fikr al-Andalusī* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqāfah al-Diniyyah, 1955), 551-576.

the comparative discourse. Rather, what Mu'nis calls *al-ustūrah al-shā'i'ah* (the common heritage) represents the most important element of contact. After having offered a summa of the comparison between the "common heritage" and the *Commedia's* Hell and punishments, Mu'nis concentrates on the representation of Paradise. Here, following the comparative method of Palacios, he draws parallels with Ibn 'Arabī and his cosmology and compares it with textual excerpts taken from the *Commedia*.⁶⁷ Finally, he recognizes that, despite the difficulty to trace clear common textual sources in this *ustūrah al-shā'i'ah* (the common heritage), the influence of Islamic literature is clear from the borrowing of themes. Moreover, on the level of intellectual history, the influence of Averroism on Dante is corroborated for Mu'nis by the fact that Dante places the Averroist Sigieri da Brabante in Paradise.⁶⁸

The growing attention devoted to the Islamic legends related to the *mī'rāj* and the relation between Dante and Ibn 'Arabī did not eclipse the topic of the possible dependance of the *Commedia* on the *Risālat al-ghufrān*. The Egyptian literary scholar, 'Ā'isha 'Abd al-Raḥmān, who produced in 1954 a critical edition of the *Epistle of Forgiveness* by the title *al-Ghufrān min Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī*,⁶⁹ engaged extensively with the theme. In the following decade, the literary scholar Luwīs 'Awaḍ also did the same in his *'Alā hāmīsh al-Ghufrān* (On the Margin of the Epistle of Forgiveness), published in Cairo in 1964. He devotes three chapters of his work to three canti of the *Divina Commedia*.⁷⁰ The comparison with al-Ma'arrī was debated again in 1975 by Ibrāhīm 'Abd al-Raḥmān in *Dirāsāt muqārīnah* (Comparative Studies), where the author also advances the hypothesis of psychological affinities between al-Ma'arrī and Dante.⁷¹ Other studies in the 1970s and the 80s continued with a double line of discussion: on the one hand, the possible Sufi link between Dante and Islamic mysticism⁷² and, on the other, the affinities with the corpus of Islamic legends and with al-Ma'arrī's *Epistle of Forgiveness*.⁷³ In a study published in 1980, *Ta'thīr al-Thaqāfah al-Islāmiyyah fī al-Kumūdiya al-Ilāhiyyah lī Dāntī*

67 Ibid., 569.

68 Ibid., 573.

69 'Ā'isha 'Abd al-Raḥmān, *al-Ghufrān min Abū 'Alā' al-Ma'arrī* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1954).

70 Luwīs 'Awaḍ, *'Alā hāmīsh al-Ghufrān* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1964), 139-169.

71 Ibrāhīm 'Abd al-Raḥmān, *Dirāsāt muqārīnah* (Cairo: Maktabat al-shabāb, 1975).

72 See Rajā' 'Abdul Mun'im Jabr, *Riḥlat ar-Rūḥ bayna Ibn Sīnā wa Sanā'ī wa Dāntī* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Shabāb, 1977).

73 Maḥmūd 'Alī Makkī and Suhayr Qalamāwī, *Athar al-'arab wa-l-Islām fī an-naḥḍah al-ūrūbiyyah* (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyyah, 1970).

(The Influences of Islamic Culture on the Divine Comedy by Dante),⁷⁴ the author Ṣalāḥ Faḍl retraces the entire history of the debate in the West and in the Arab world, relating the question to the emergence of comparative studies in Arabic literature. He investigates carefully the various stages of Dante's travelogue and, following Asín Palacios's ideas, he finds similarities with Ibn 'Arabī and dwells upon the fascinating theory of Dante as a Sufi, influenced by Neoplatonism and illuminist (*ishraqī*) philosophy.

Translating Dante into Arabic

The growing interest in the *Commedia* in the Arab World was coeval with the emergence of the first Arabic translations.⁷⁵ The first complete translation appeared in Tripoli by the teacher of Italian language 'Abbūd Abī Rashīd in 1930.⁷⁶ It was followed a few years later, in 1938, by a prose translation offered by the Palestinian Amīn Abū Sha'ar,⁷⁷ limited solely to the *Inferno*.

The first version of the *Commedia* which obtained widespread recognition—also mediated by the distribution through the important publishing house Dār al-Ma'ārif—is a prose translation by the already mentioned Cairo University Professor of Italian Ḥasan 'Uthmān.⁷⁸ His *Kūmīdīyā Dāntī Alīghīrī* was published in Egypt in three volumes between 1955 and 1969. Despite the circulation of the other translations already in the previous decades, the translation of Ḥasan 'Uthmān received widespread acclaim. There are many reasons behind the success of this work such as the translator's reputation and his recognised rigour. However, I suggest that the main reason behind the success of the translation is to be found also in the process of the domestication of Dante in the simultaneously imagined and real literary space of the Mediterranean.

74 Ṣalāḥ Faḍl, *Ta'thīr al-Thaqāfah al-Islāmiyyah fī al-Kumīdiya al-Ilāhiyyah li Dāntī* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1980).

75 On the translations of the *Commedia* into Arabic, see Elisabetta Benigni, "La Divina *Commedia* nel mondo arabo: orientamenti critici e traduzioni," *Critica del testo* 14 (2011): 391-413.

76 'Abbūd Abī Rashīd, *al-Riḥla al-Dāntīyya fī al-mamālik al-ilāhiyya: al-Jaḥīm, al-Maṭhar, al-Na'im*, 3 vols. (Tripoli: Plinio Maggi, 1930-1933).

77 Amīn Abū Sha'ar, *al-Jaḥīm* (Jerusalem: Maṭābī' al-Arḍ al-Muqaddasah, 1938), 184.

78 Ḥasan 'Uthmān, *Kūmīdīyā Dāntī Alīghīrī* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1955-1969). For the references in the article, see: *al-Jaḥīm* (1st ed. 1955), *al-Maṭhar* (2nd ed. 1963 2nd ed. 1969) and *al-Firdaws* (1st 1969).

A number of choices made by the translator provide evidence of this process of domestication. In his carefully articulated introduction, ‘Uthmān provides the reasons for translating the *Commedia* into prose. In discussing the problems related to language in translation, he evokes the words of Dante, in *Convivio*: “Therefore, everyone should know that nothing harmonized according to the rules of poetry can be translated from its native tongue into another without destroying all its sweetness and harmony.”⁷⁹ As for the language, in his introduction ‘Uthmān shows awareness of the challenges posed by the multi-layered language of Dante. He conceives the translation as a way to disseminate “a common” knowledge “by approaching Dante’s language through the family (*ahl*) of the arrival language.”⁸⁰ In this sense, he adapts Dante’s Florentine to modern Arabic enriched with quotations from the Qur’ān and from classical Arabic poetry and prose. The structure of the verses is converted into a fluid modern Arabic prose, preserving an echo of the original form by summarizing each *terzina* in a separate sentence of the length of a verse. ‘Uthmān reverts into Arabic the names of philosophers Averroes (*Ibn Rushd*) and Avicenna (*Ibn Sīnā*) and of the famous Saladino (*Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn*).⁸¹ Furthermore, when confronted with words which imply a negative connotation toward Islam, he tries to alleviate the possible impact on the readers. This is the case for instance of *Arābi* and *Saracin*, Arabs and Saracens. *Arābi* appears in canto 6 of *Paradiso*, when Justinian narrates the history of Rome and establishes Hannibal’s defeat as a stroke inflicted *a l’orgoglio de li Arābi* (on the Arab’s pride). ‘Uthmān revisits the expression replacing the Italian *Arābi* with the Arabic *al-Qartājiniyyīs* (Carthaginians), an interpretation that aims at avoiding any possible defamatory hint toward Arab readers.⁸² The term *Saracin* appears in two different contexts of the *Commedia*. In *Inferno* 27, with reference to Pope Bonifacio VIII, *lo principe d’i novi Farisei, / avendo guerra presso a Laterano / e non con Saracin né con Giudei* (The Leader of the modern Pharisees Having a war near unto Lateran, And not with Saracens nor with the Jews). In this case, ‘Uthmān translates Saracens as ‘*Arab*.⁸³ However, in *Purgatorio* 23, the term refers to the immorality of Florentine women: *Quai barbare fuor mai, quai saracine / Cui bisognasse, per farle ir coperte, / o spiritali o altre discipline?* (What savages were e’er,

79 “Sappia ciascuno, che nulla cosa per legame musaico armonizzata si può della sua loquela in altra trasmutare, *senza rompere tutta sua dolcezza e armonia*.” See *Convivio* I, VII, quoted by ‘Uthmān, *Kūmidīyā*, I, 68.

80 *Ibid.*, 69-69.

81 The names appear in Dante *Inf.*, IV, 129 e 143-144. In ‘Uthmān, *Kūmidīyā*, I, 118.

82 ‘Uthmān, *Kūmidīyā*, III, 142.

83 ‘Uthmān, *Kūmidīyā*, I, 358.

what Saracens, Who stood in need, to make them covered go, Of spiritual or other discipline?). In this context, rather than adopting a solution like the previous 'Arab, 'Uthmān translates Saracens as *wathaniyyāt*, or "pagan," "infidels," "idolatry."⁸⁴

Finally, in the verses of *Inferno* 28 where Dante describes Muḥammad and 'Alī as "seminator di scandalo e di scisma," 'Uthmān omits the whole episode where the two appear to be dismembered and tormented, skipping directly from verse 22 to 64.⁸⁵

To better appreciate this process of domestication, it is important to underline the milieu in which the translation was produced, namely Egypt in the 1950s. During 'Abd al-Nāṣir's revolution, which brought to an end the local monarchy and the British mandate, even the literary enterprise of translation was loaded with political and nationalist ambitions, appropriating the discourse of the struggle toward liberation and progress.⁸⁶ For this reason, 'Uthmān essentially enhances romantic and political aspects, presenting Dante as a cantor of political engagement, exile and suffering. Certainly, in highlighting the political involvement of the poet, he aims at creating a recognizable figure, relying on emotions and aspirations shared by his audience. This form of domestication of the text within the national canon is even clearer in the dedication of his translation "to my family, my nation and my country" (*ilā 'ashīratī wa qawmī wa bilādī*).⁸⁷

This erudite attempt at offering a systematic Arabic exegesis on Dante's cultural world remains exemplary in the field of modern Arabic translations. About fifty years later, another Arabic translation appeared which demonstrates equal philological rigor and linguistic sensitivity. The translator is the Iraqi literary scholar Kāzīm Jihād, whose *Kūmīdīyā al-Ilāhiyya*⁸⁸ was published in 2002 by the publisher *al-Mu'assasah al-'arabiyyah li-l-dirasāt wa al-nashr* (Beirut-Amman), co-funded by the UNESCO initiative for translations. Despite the fact that a certain conceptual continuity could be seen in undertaking the project, the aim of Jihād was quite different from that of 'Uthmān. He offers a verse translation that courageously attempts to retrace and reproduce the

84 'Uthmān, *Kūmīdīyā*, II, 308-9.

85 'Uthmān, *Kūmīdīyā*, I, 365 and 371.

86 See Aḥmad 'Iṣām al-Dīn, *Ḥarakat al-tarjama fī Miṣr fī al-qarn al-'ishrīn*, (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyyah al-'Āmmah li-l-Kitāb, 1986).

87 Ḥasan, *Kūmīdīyā Dāntī Alīghūrī*, 6.

88 Kāzīm Jihād, *al-Kūmīdīyā al-Ilāhiyya* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasah al-'arabiyyah li-l-dirasāt wa al-nashr, 2002).

poetic architecture of Dante's "terza rima" (the interlocking three-line rhyme scheme invented by Dante and first used in the *Commedia*).

Jihād, in other words, intends to restructure Dante's poetry by maintaining the concatenation of three verses. This is extensively discussed in his introduction, where he criticizes 'Uthmān for his transition "from the poetic to prose."⁸⁹ In several passages, he draws attention to the risk of losing the "musicality" of the poem.⁹⁰ Indeed, he considers the "fluidity" (*al-suyūla*), the "simplicity of language" (*basāṭat al-lughā*), the "flow of rhythm" (*tasāru' al-īqā'*), the "rhyme" (*qāfiya*) and the "meter" (*wazn*) as central to his translation project.⁹¹ As a result, all lexical and syntactical choices are justified in the name of a "poetical elaboration" (*ṣiyāgha shi'rīyya*)⁹² of the Italian language. Unlike 'Uthmān, Jihād succeeded in rendering Dante's "terza rima" not simply because he respects the formal subdivision of the verses, but also, and more importantly, because he reproduces the logical structure of the *terzina*. However, in Jihād's translation the conceptual unity of the three verses is not modulated by rhyming words.

Compared to 'Uthmān's introduction, Jihād presents Dante as a far less political figure, concentrating more on him as the inspired poet. He refers repeatedly to essays by Jorge Luis Borges, Jacqueline Risset and Giuseppe Ungaretti, which led him to interpret the *Commedia* as an ascetic journey of Dante, proposing evocative interpretations that stress the bonds with Sufism and the possible similarities with the travel to the afterlife of Ibn 'Arabi—aspects that are only briefly alluded to by 'Uthmān.⁹³

Regarding the disputed topic of the Islamic influences, both 'Uthmān and Jihād in their introductions manifest a conception of literature that is inclusive, which has helped to understand Dante as part of a shared cultural space. In pursuing this perspective, both translators put aside their quarrels over derivative source models, and examine the more fascinating possibility of cultural interdiscursivity and intertextuality.

Conclusion

The debate about Dante's use of Islamic sources among Spanish, Italian and Arab literary scholars emerged in the context of the formulation of national

89 Jihād, *al-Kūmidīyā*, 15.

90 *Ibid.*, 128-129.

91 *Ibid.*, 124.

92 *Ibid.*, 14.

93 *Ibid.*, 100.

identities and the articulation of national literatures. The quest was governed by a positivist principle, according to which truth is to be excavated in the origins: *in principio veritas*. Particularly in Europe, the philological debate echoes an old dispute about Arabic origins of versification in courtly and vernacular poetry and about the influence of Arabic and Islamic literature on South European literature. With the benefit of hindsight, this long-standing debate shows how Dante became the contested symbol of the unity of the Mediterranean cultural space, or the lack of it.

The 20th century attempts to integrate Dante in the Mediterranean cultural space reflect a movement of the various national philologies from regional frames to a broader conception of spatial unity. In the course of the 20th century, the search for literary connections continued, but only as one aspect of the broader argument that Dante appropriated Islamic philosophy and cosmology and eschatological narratives for the composition of his poem. Accordingly, the *Commedia* was interpreted as an agent of cultural negotiation between the various spheres that constituted the Mediterranean epistemic unity.

Nevertheless, this idealized Mediterranean unity was imbued with nationalistic rhetoric, eurocentrism and colonial ambivalence. The difference in approaching the theme of Dante and his possible Islamic sources by Arab and European scholars epitomizes this ambivalence. In contexts marked by colonial legacy, like Egypt and other emerging nation states, 20th-century Arab scholars easily integrated in their “national canon” the Italian “national poet” through the imagined geography of the coherence and uniqueness of the Mediterranean. In Europe, on the contrary, the process of assimilation of national literatures into a transnational space was for a long time not accepted. Despite the controversies, however, and perhaps as a result of them, the contested image of a shared Mediterranean culture has become the frame through which Dante is read, translated and integrated in the larger spectrum of World Literature.

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