

Carlo Saccone

Muhammad's *Mi 'raj*: a legend between East and West

"I know a man in Christ who – whether in his body or out of his body, I cannot say, God alone knows – was plucked up to the third heaven... and heard inexpressible words..."

St Paul, *Letter to the Corinthians* 2, xii, 1-4

"For the star, when it goes down! Your companion does not wander, is not deceived, and does not speak his impulse. No, because it is revelation revealed, taught to him by a power of forces, wise, balancing itself high on the sublime horizon! Then it came down... came close... and revealed to his servant that which it revealed..."

Quran, lii, 1-10

One can say that the "rediscovery" in the West of the legend of the *mi'raj* – which lies at the heart of the *Libro della Scala* and of the mediæval Arabic writings inspired by it – justifiably constitutes one of the most noisy and controversial literary *causes célèbres* of the first half of the twentieth century. First, for what was at stake: the originality of the conception of the sacred poem par excellence in the Christian world, Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Second, for the literary "patriotisms" that were involved – the Italian and the Arabic – at the level of their greatest glories: Dante and Ibn 'Arabi, the great Andalusian philosopher-poet and mystic, who died twenty years before the Florentine poet came into the world.

The so-called "question of the Arab-Islamic sources of the *Divine Comedy*" or, in a broader sense, of the relationship between Dante and Islam, is in effect at the heart of a debate that has now been going on for two centuries. The original intuitions of the abbot Juan Andrés (18th century) were picked up by A.-F. Ozanam halfway through the nineteenth century and formulated in problematising mode by E. Blochet at the start of our century, but it was only in 1919 that the question exploded, with the publication by the Spanish orientalist Asín Palacios of a long essay with the eloquent title: *La Escatología musulmana en la "Divina Comedia"*. In this an impressive series of similarities and shared materials* – too numerous to be coincidental, according to the author – introduced to prove a knowledge, either direct or indirect, by Dante of Islamic mystical and philosophical texts on eschatology – in particular the otherworldly visions described in the works of the above-mentioned Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240) and of the Syrian satirical poet Abu'l-ala al-Ma'arri (d. 1057) which, each in their own way, reworked the pious mediæval legend of the *mi'raj* ("ascent") by the prophet Muhammad.

Put briefly, the legend of the *mi'raj* came into being around an obscure *Quranic* verse which says: "Glory to He who plucked up at night His servant from the holy temple to the ultimate temple, with the blessed precinct, in order to show him our signs. In truth He is the listener, the seer" (*Quran* xvii, 1). According to the prevailing exegesis, this refers to a secret night-time journey of the Prophet, "plucked up" from the mosque in Mecca to be taken to that in Jerusalem, or, according to a mystical-symbolic interpretation, to an immaterial temple, locatable within the heavenly spaces. Then, over many years, the popular imagination embroidered on this bare and mysterious verse, enriching it with numerous fantastical elements which were to appear in the multiple reworkings of the legend: a winged war-horse (the Buraq ridden by the Prophet); an angelic guide (the archangel Gabriel); the meetings of the Prophet with other angels and with prophets placed in guard over the seven heavens; the vision of the abyss of Hell, and so on. But in particular it would add a detail which would fire the imaginations of poets and Muslim artists of every age, a light-filled golden ladder – hence the name *Libro della Scala* which recurs in the Western translations of the legend – thanks to which the Prophet begins his celestial *ascensus*. All these elements find their first expression in the canonic *Life of the Prophet* by Ibn Ishaq (8th century) who, however, prudently limits himself to recording the various testimonies to the *mi'raj* event without attempting to place them in a narrative as such. There is also another passage in the *Quran* (liii, 1-18) which refers to an ecstatic seizure* of the Prophet, during which, next to the sacred Lote tree "[God] came down, hung in the air, came close to a distance of two bow-firings, and even less, and revealed to his servant [ie to Muhammad] that which he revealed. And the mind did not give

the lie to* that which it saw..." This is probably a second *ascensus*; however that may be, these bare descriptions were at the origin, in the Islamic world, of a deep and unceasing reflection which was concentrated in at least two directions. On the one hand it generated a very rich flowering of literature, which ranges from popular narrative to the more refined mystical epics, and on the other it gave rise to a large amount of commentary and exegesis by theologians and philosophers, a bit as would happen in the West with the account of the famous seizure to the third heaven of the apostle Paul, referred to in *Corinthians 2*). As regards religious history, the "imitation" of this visionary and ecstatic experience of the Prophet of Islam would go on to become a solid point of the highest expressions of Islam's spirituality, for which reason people have often spoken of the mir'aj as the fundamental archetypal image of the culture that has its roots in the word of the *Quran*.

Asín Palacios, a Spanish cleric and one of the greatest Orientalists of the twentieth century, has experienced a kind of ostracism in Italy: his most famous work, the *Escatología*, has been more often studied and summarily refuted than studied and discussed with sufficient detachment. To begin with, seventy years from its original publication, we still have no translation into Italian, nor, at the time of writing, has it been possible to find a single complete study of it in Italian. And yet the theses advanced by Asín Palacios were far from matters of little account, since it was precisely to his studies that we owe the first re-proposition in modern times of the Muslim legends of Muhammad's *Himmelsreise*, and in particular a new, stimulating reading of the aetiology of one of the fundamental themes not only of Dante, but of much literature in the West, from the Middle Ages to today. Leaving aside the validity of his theses, after the appearance of Asín Palacios's work – researches which ranged from literature and philosophy and comparison of religions, privileging the frontier territory that was Moorish Spain – Muslim culture was to come to occupy a central position in every serious and complete reconstruction of the intellectual environment of the mediæval West.

In Italy, to tell the truth, in the same period there had already appeared the first works of another great heterodox researcher of the Italian Middle Ages, Bruno Nardi, whose revolutionary ideas on the philosophical and "Arabising" eclecticism – who up until then had generally been considered a closely observant Thomist – were warmly appreciated by Asín Palacios in his *Escatología*. But he was precisely a pioneer, whose work was still only at the start, and in whatever way at the margins of the dominant Dantist criticism. The work of E. Gilson, which was to reconstruct carefully the trajectory within Scholastic thinking of some important Arab philosophical currents, had not yet arrived on the scene, as had not the studies and researches on the relations between Provençal poetry and the Arab poets of Spain or, to give another example, on the very well-attested trajectories of Averroism in Europe and in Italy (Bologna, Padova). In general, the intellectual environment within which the thesis expressed by Asín Palacios falls is still broadly conditioned by a powerful Eurocentric and Christiano-centric prejudice, and is characterised, at the academic level, by a broad incommensurability between mediaevalists of the various different historical-cultural areas which, in Italy, if anything, turned out to be even more accentuated. There was a symptomatic episode as told by the Orientalist Giuseppe Gabrieli, regarding a great researcher* who, in the years preceding the literary case that we have cited, opined: "We romanists do not think about the East; we leave it to one side, to the dreamer Orientalists, because for our studies it is of no importance"; or, even more explicitly: "the Orientalists should stay in their places", as one of his worthy colleagues suggested.

1. Asín Palacios opened his weighty essay with a careful description of the sources of the two legend cycles related to Muhammad's Other-Worldly experience: that of the "night-time voyage" (or *isra'*), and that of the "ascent" (or *mi'raj*), each of which culminated in the vision of the Beyond. The source for the first cycle was six *hadiths* datable to around the ninth century, which can be traced back essentially to two principal versions* (1a and 1b, according to the classification adopted by Asín himself). The source for the second cycle is other sacred traditions, no less ancient*, which come down in three principal versions (2a, 2b and 2c). The differences between 1a and 1b can essentially be reduced to the place where the voyage is located. To sum up briefly: in both versions the Prophet is awoken at night by men (or angels, Gabriel and Michael in 1b) and is carried far away, onto a mountain whose location is not specified (or Jerusalem in 1b), where he is able to observe the torments of Hell (in 1b he sees only the guardian angel of Hell). Here, on its summit (in a fine house in 1b) he has the vision of the Abode of the Blessed, and can contemplate Abraham, Moses and Jesus (in 1b he meets Abraham a short while previously at a tree whose crest touches Paradise). The second cycle, that of the mir'aj proper, has a more complex articulation.

In synthesis (here I describe the version 2a present in the collection of ninth-century *hadiths* by Bukhari and Muslim) Muhammad is awakened in his bed in Mecca by the angel Gabriel who, with the help of other angels, opens his chest and takes out his heart in order to purify it in the imminence* of his ascent to heaven. This is a very well-known episode in the life of the Prophet, on the basis of the dogma of his "sinlessness", which originates in a passage in the *Quran* (xciv, 1), which was subsequently picked up by Muslim mystics and poets of every age. The angelic "operation" having been concluded, then begins the ascent, which happens in three variants: the Prophet flies without any vehicle, or he goes up with Gabriel on a tree which grows with extreme rapidity until it touches the sky, or he goes up on the famous winged horse Buraq, a figure which will appear in innumerable cycles of sacred Islamic iconography. Here, compared with the first cycle, we have the introduction of a novelty which was to enjoy notable fortune in all the literary and popular reworkings* of the legend: the ascent happens through ten well-defined levels, and carries our Prophet well beyond the limit of the traditional spheres. The Prophet's nocturnal excursion thus becomes, with this second cycle, a very long journey which is broken by a series of intermediate stations, in an Other World which has an increasingly complex architecture. The distant prototype, according to some, can be identified in the Iranian tradition (perhaps in the voyage to the world beyond the grave of the Zoroastrian priest Viraz), and according to others to ancient Jewish eschatological traditions (*Enoch*, and hekhalotic literature), the closest model is undoubtedly the *Quran*, in which the celestial reality and the subterranean reality experience a stratification based on the number 7. The first seven levels of the *ascensus* correspond in effect to the "seven superimposed heavens", of which the *Quran* speaks (lxvii, 3), and in each of them Muhammad and Gabriel meet at least one prophet who are, precisely, in order, Adam, Jesus and John, Joseph, Enoch, Aaron, Moses, and Adam. The eighth level of the ascent is represented by the "Lote Tree", a *Quranic* motif connected to the second of Muhammad's two visions narrated in the text, as I said above, and here Muhammad is able to quench his thirst with wine, milk and honey, before reaching the ninth level, the "House" of the Blessed, or celestial Jerusalem. In the tenth level, Muhammad finally meets the Lord with whom, as a curious particular, he "negotiates" for a long time, at the exhortation of Moses, the number of daily prayers to be said by his faithful (see *Libro della Scala*, paras. 126-7).

In the versions examined thus far, what is missing, obviously, is the visit to Hell, which constitutes the principal difference between this version and the successive one, 2b, in which, furthermore, there is an attempt to fuse the two cycles, although with the mir'aj playing the preponderant part. Muhammad thus meets in the third heaven a gigantic, terrifying angel, the divine avenger of human insults and guardian of the abyss of Hell, of which he shows the Prophet the seven levels (*Quran*, xv, 44), who, however, steps back, with horror already at the sight of the first. There follows the description of each of the circles of Hell (and their respective sub-divisions), the detailed listing of the categories of the damned distributed through them, and their various punishments. Asín had no hesitation in saying that this Inferno, which was stratified and in the form of a funnel, which plunged away to the centre of the earth, was the model of the Dantean Inferno, underlining analogies of general architecture and of detail (retribution,* seriousness of sin proportional to depth, etc), which I do not intend to address here.

This now brings us to version IIc, minute, reckoned to be apocryphal, the one to which refers, albeit with some several variations and some *contaminatio* from 2a, the [lost] Arabic original of the *Libro della Scala*. This version, incontrovertibly the most flowery and luxuriant among those examined, led Asín to hypothesise that its author was a "musulmán contagiado del neoplatonismo", for its continuous recourse to images of light, geometric (circular) symbols "in order to exemplify metaphysical ideas". Here we have obvious similarities with the *Divine Comedy*: the immaterial nature of Paradise; the light which blinds the Prophet at every new heavenly stage; the choirs and heavenly harmonies which delight him; the role of guide, comforter and intercessor with divine grace, of Gabriel; theological explanations put into the mouth of this same angel-guide; and to the angel of Hell; the cockerel (which Asín compares with the Dantean eagle in the heaven of Jupiter); the concentric circles of angelic spirits, ordered hierarchically, which circulate around the divine Throne. But, according to Asín, the most astonishing similarities are those connected to the psychological which accompany the ecstasy of the Prophet who, before fixing his eyes on the divine light, feels for a moment his eyesight darkening over, and fears, as will happen to Dante, that he is about to become blind, but then realises that his eyesight has actually been strengthened and made more suitable for the vision that awaits him; as Dante, finally, the Prophet declares himself incapable of describing it, and remembers of it only a kind of ineffable suspension" of the soul.*

With the noted historian and exegete of the *Quran*, al-Tabari (9th century) who, furthermore, claims to be addressing established traditions, the two episodes of the *isra'* and the *mir'aj* were merged; thus Asín Palacios offers us the diligent description of a "single edition" (formed substantially by the juxtaposition of 1b and 2a), which I do not intend to go into here.

Thus the *Escatología* examines the "allegorical-mystical adaptations" and the "literary imitations" of the legend (Part 1) with which I shall deal below, and with the geography of the Dantean world Beyond in relation to various Arabic sources (Part 2). The conclusion of these first two parts of Asín's research hinges on the identification of three forms of major analogy between the *mi'raj* cycle and the *Divine Comedy*: of the architecture of the world beyond the grave; of the topographic decoration; and of a symmetry of conception, to which I shall make some reference below; and finally, minor similarities of episodes and single scenes, which would be too long to list here. Asín concluded the whole declaring on the one hand the fact that "Muslim eschatology as presented in the works examined were an essential part of the genesis of the *Commedia*, and on the other hand the economicity of his hypothesis when compared to the innumerable sources drawn from the classical, biblical and Christian-Romance world which up until that time had been considered by researchers into Dante.

That, in short, is the prehistory of our *Libro della Scala*.

The polemic which followed the publication of the *Escatología*, which involved mainly Italian and Spanish orientalist and Romance scholars, hinged essentially on two questions. First of all, in the *Escatología* a comparison is set up between the *Divine Comedy* and a range of Arab writings, through which, as several people were to maintain, the thousand discovered similarities, albeit relevant in number and quality, did not allow the establishment of a clear relation of derivation with any of the above-mentioned works considered *individually*. The argumentation, which appears correct in abstract, does not at all correspond to the method followed by Asín. He had not considered a range of Arabic writings chosen by chance, but had begun by comparing the original nucleus of the Other Worldly legend of Muhammad with the *Divine Comedy*; then he had pursued the comparison, examining progressively increasingly complex and literarily sophisticated of the *same* nucleus of legend, an operation in itself legitimate and methodologically unfaultable, tended* essentially to discover at what level of complexity the presumed Dantean imitation was eventually inserted. The huge literature on the study of Dante's precursors shows us, by way of confirmation, the legitimacy of making comparisons with a whole range of works, starting from the individuation of a thematic criterion (for example, the voyage); this makes all the more legitimate Asín's comparison with a whole range of works which shared not only the theme, but also the aetiology and the deep meaning.

The second question, however, was that which monopolised the attention of critics of the Spanish scholar, and had to do basically with finding the "missing link" of his admittedly learned and very wide research: the incontrovertible proof that Dante would have known, who can reasonably have been expected not to have known Arabic, of the above-mentioned texts. Aware of this difficulty, Asín Palacios had only be able to advance hypotheses: Dante, for example, could have had more or less precise news of these texts – perhaps actually handwritten copies which others would have deciphered – from Dominican or Franciscan friars coming from the still half-Arabised Spain of that time, or from Jewish merchants, or from travellers, or, finally, from Florentine diplomats returning from their missions. This was the case of Dante's own teacher, Brunetto Latini, who had been ambassador in Spain for several months in 1260, and upon whom Asín was to insist particularly. Even admitting that Dante did not know Arabic, he would still have been able to read certain summaries of the legend of the *mi'raj*, or explicit references to it, which could be found in various works written in Latin or in Spanish by Christian polemicists or historiographers in Spain in the ninth to thirteenth centuries; Spain still had an active academy of translators in Toledo, to which we owe the Latin versions of hundreds of Arabic scientific and philosophical works, and the cosmopolitan court of King Alfonso X ("The Wise") had continued this tradition; not forgetting, finally, the possibilities of transmission via centres of diffusion of Arabic-Muslim culture in Italy itself, such as the University of Naples (established in 1224), where there was to be found a rich fund of Arabic manuscripts, and in particular the Palermo court of the Norman kings, from Ruggiero II to Federico II, where poets and Muslim scholars had for long enjoyed protection, and lived together with the precursors of the "scuola siciliana" itself. These hypotheses seemed plausible to some, and too vague to others, and later there were some (such as M. Rodinson) who were to

re-evaluate Asín's hypotheses, particularly in the light of the importance of the oral tradition in the Middle Ages as a vehicle of intercultural transmission, and of the fact that Dante probably knew environments which could have served as channels, as for example the Jewish-Italian circles that were closely in touch with Arab-Spanish culture (Emmanuele Romano). However this may be, these different hypotheses seemed at the time to be awkward attempts to block up that which many of his critics saw as the most obvious flaw in Asín's work.

Literary patriotisms aside, it is not risky to think that the classical and "Christian-centrist" formation of the overwhelming majority of historians and Dantists of the epoch made them incapable of raising their eyes to the East, and allergic to the idea that works of the Muslim tradition might have influenced the genesis of the *Divine Comedy*. Today, probably, the hypotheses outlined above, formulated in part 4 of the *Escatología*, on the "probability of the transmission of the Islamic models to Christian Europe in general and to Dante in particular", could appear more than reasonable, particularly in the light of the great number of studies which from then until now have illuminated the relations between these two historical realities. Up until 1921, for example, the above-mentioned Giuseppe Gabrieli, although unhappy about accepting Asín Palacios's conclusions on the specific case of the relationship between the *Divine Comedy* and the *mi'raj*, in one of his writings on relations between Dante and the East opened a first broad panorama on the question of the relations between the two worlds, which did away with* many commonplaces on their presumed incommunicability. M. Rodinson, who at the start of the 1950s was denouncing this climate of incomprehension, was to show not only that the Western science of that epoch was a science that was "wholly Arab" and the Scholastics had been regenerated with Avicenna and Averroes, things that by now were known to all, but also that there existed a real and actual "Muslim fashion" in mediæval Europe, which ranged from story-telling* to clothing, from weapons to perfumes, from artistic glass to games, to gastronomic recipes etc.

To continue with our "prehistory" of the Libro dela Scala, Asín did not limit himself to analysing the legend of the *mi'raj* and its more or less learned versions; in order to prevent another possible objection, he had dedicated an entire, huge chapter of the *Escatología* (Part 3) to the discussion of the "Muslim elements in Christian legends that were precursors to the *Divine Comedy*". Using mainly the works of A. Graf, of the well-known Dantist A. D'Ancona and of others of French authors (Labitte, Ozanam), Asín had set about a wild hunt for Muslim details and themes present in Western mediæval legends, such as, for example, those of Tundal, of the Purgatory of St Patrick, of the Vision of Alberico, of the Navigation of San Brendano, of the Seven Sleepers, to cite just a few. He concluded boldly, after a thoroughgoing comparison with Islamic sources, that "Islamic literature explains the genesis of many Christian eschatological legends, that were precursors of the *Divine Comedy*." The thesis was something of an upheava;. Not only the *Divine Comedy*, but even many of its more or less probable Christian sources turned out to be "contaminated" by the Islamic element, as if to say that Asín was adding fuel to the fire, trying to shut down all possible escape routes for his probable critics – who were to insist, as he had easily foreseen, on the classical or mediæval, or at least autochthonous, origin of the presumed "Muslim motifs" of the *Divine Comedy* – and at the same time burned all bridges for any possible compromise.

He certainly had his critics, and some criticised the weakness, some the unsustainability, some the slipperiness* of the evidential material adduced in the *Escatología*; certainly, the bold and assured slant* of the research did not bring him much sympathy. We have already seen the lack of generosity of these critics, at least in the light of successive progress made in the exploration of contacts between Islam and mediæval Christianity. We might remember that in 1943 Asín republished his reserch, backed by a substantial Appendix (*Historia y critica de una polemica*, which had already been published separately in 1924), in which he replied to his critics, among whom I shall mention merely the Italians: Bonucci, Busnelli and Pizzi (favourable), Levi della Vida and Mazzoni (cautious); Pietrobono, Rajna, Sanvisenti, Torraca and Vitaletti (against).

2. A new decisive chapter in the history of the legend of the *mi'raj* in the West opens after the Second World War, in 1949 to be precise. It was in that year that, contrary to all expectation, the "missing link" was discovered almost simultaneously by a Spanish Orientalist, J. Muñoz Sendino, and by an Italian, Enrico Cerulli – it appears that both men were working, almost up till the last, each unknown to the other. Cerulli, a

functionary in the colonial administration and then in the diplomatic sector, admitted that he had arrived at his discovery by researching into a bibliographical note of Ugo Monneret de Villard, who, studying the work of Alfonso X of Castille in favour of understanding Arabic culture, had already drawn the attention of scholars to two codexes in 1944 – lying respectively in the Bodleian Library in Oxford and the National Library of Paris – which, because of the circumstances of the war, it had been impossible for him to examine directly. This involved respectively a French version and a Latin version of our account of the *mi'raj* (deformed into *Halmaerig* and into *Halmahereig*), which was created in large part on the basis of Version 2c (according to Asín Palacios's classification) of the sacred legend. The story, which in some respects was crude and repetitive, had, in mediæval Christianity been taken for a sacred text of Islam, attributed by most people to Muhammad himself; for this, as is told on the first folio of both manuscripts, Alfonso X of Castille ("the Wise") had commissioned a Spanish version of it from a Jewish doctor, Abraham Alfaqim, which was produced in 1264, and from this latter his notary Bonaventura da Siena had then drawn the Latin version and the French version. The Latin version, particularly worthy of note, owes its conservation also to the fact that a copy was inserted in another codex (the Vaticano Latino 4072) containing the famous *Collectio Toledana*, or the collection of those Arab scientific and philosophical texts which had been translated in Toledo from the 12th century onwards, on the initiative of Peter the Venerable, and which was, as is known, at the base of that huge overspilling of knowledge between the Islamic world and the Christian world, which constitutes one of the highest moments in the intellectual history of the Middle Ages. The two versions cited translated the Arabic title respectively as *Livre de l'Eschiele Mahomet* and *Liber Scalae Machometi*. Of the version in Castilian, we have an almost contemporary "resumé" which follows it paragraph by paragraph, inserted by the Valencian Pedro Pascual (d. 1300), put into a small polemical tract he had written, *Sobre la seta mohametana* (already signalled by Asín, who, however, considers it to be a resumé carried out directly on the basis of Arabic sources).

The two derived versions had begun to be distributed in Europe after 1264, and had probably reached Italy between 1200 and 1300. The appearances closest to Dante, as discovered by Cerulli, were two. A straight quotation of the *Libro della Scala* was found in the encyclopaedic poem *Il Dittamondo* (Book V, Canto xii, vv. 82-102; Canto xiii, vv. 25-42), written between 1350 and 1360 by Fazio degli Uberti, a Tuscan poet from the generation following Dante's and nephew* of the famous Farinata; a second appearance related to the Dominican missionary Riccoldo da Montecroce, who went to Baghdad at the end of the thirteenth century and returned to Florence in 1301; he inserts a long section of the legend into one of his polemical works, *Contra legem Saracenorum*. But various divergences would lead one to assume that Riccoldo had acquired the segment not from the *Libro della Scala*, but from other sources unknown to us. Cerulli, in part picking up indications from Asín, further pointed out that between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance there were circulating in Europe various texts containing more or less extended resúmes of the legend, in addition to that contained in the polemical work cited by P. Pascual. Among these texts one can point to an Aragonese codex of the mid-thirteenth century; an *Historia Arabum* of Archbishop Rodrigo Ximenez de Rada (d. 1274); the *Cronica General*, a historical work commissioned by King Alfonso X; and finally a Pisan legend of 1300 and the *Lo specchio della fede* of Fra Roberto Caracciolo da Lecce, printed in 1495. All these, some more and some less, diverged from the literal text* of the *Libro della Scala*, from which it was easy to deduce that other sources of the legend had been transmitted, perhaps orally, in the West; in any event, these works bore witness to the widest distribution in Italy and in Europe of knowledge related to the Muhammadan *mi'raj*.

In this case too literary nationalisms got the upper hand. Muñoz Sendino, backed by many compatriots, believed that he had given the definitive proof of the correctness of the theses advanced by Asín Palacios. Therefore he had no hesitation in speaking of the relations between the *Divine Comedy* and the *Libro della Scala* in terms of copy and model. Cerulli, on the other hand, behind whom a majority of the Italian critics lined up, proposed a reductive thesis which, on the one hand, minimised the possibility of an Islamic contribution to the genesis of the Sacred Poem, and on the other sounded as a definitive uprooting* of Asín's more audacious theses.

Turning now to Cerulli's study, after having cited the original texts of the various versions and the summaries mentioned (Parts 1 and 2), he pointed to the many-fold detailed or structural analogies between this Islamic holy legend and Dante's poem: cosmographical descriptions; the role of the Angel-Accompanier; particulars

of the punishment of the damned, etc. In addition to this, in Part 3 – which is perhaps the most innovative and worthy part – Cerulli brought to light a huge series of documents, varied in nature, both literary and philosophical, cultured and popular, which proved the wide circulation of notions concerning Islamic eschatology in mediæval Europe (for example, in the theological debates at the School of Oxford, in the works of the *Collectio Toledana*, in those of Raimondo Llul, Ramon Martí, Guglielmo d'Alvernia, etc, but also in legends and stories in minor literature). In this respect he confirmed the validity of Asín Palacios's intuitions. The *pars destruens* of the *Escatología* was entirely implicit in the "downgrading" of Dante's assumed Islamic model: not the visions flavoured with refined metaphysical speculations of Ibn 'Arabi – the "terminal" and most sophisticated point of the development for the theme of the *mi'raj* – on which Asín had based a good part of his comparative work, but an account that was devotional and edifying in character, the description of which – in the various versions – had represented only the beginning of the broad study produced by* the Spanish scholar. And that is not all. Cerulli, particularly in the final chapter of his work, went to pains to demonstrate with notable critical acumen how it was possible to hypothesise, for many of the analogies that had been found, a contribution of different sources – some of them Islamic, certainly, but also biblical and classical. To take an example, the ladder of light which Dante finds in the heaven of Saturn could well have been a reminiscence of the biblical Jacob's Ladder, and not necessarily an image taken from the *Libro della Scala* (11-12) which, in the ultimate analysis, would probably also have derived from biblical sources. Or, in relation to the parallel drawn by Asín between the Dantean Eagle in the heaven of Jove and the Cockerel of the Islamic Paradise, which is found in the *Libro della Scala* (69), or other motifs such as the "Tree of Paradise", the Quranic *tuba*, or the "Bridge of Judgement" (the *sirat*), Cerulli busied himself putting forward a whole series of precedents ranging from the Bible to the mediæval novella. Again, our scholar argued that other eschatological details, connected, for example, with some of the immaterial punishments in the Dantean Inferno with the "metaphysics of light" might indeed have been derived from Arabic sources, but from those known to the Scholastics (Avicenna, al-Ghazali), and not from the Arab poets mentioned by Asín.

Cerulli's fire* was concentrated on another point. Asín had thought that he could deduce from Dante's numerous quotations of this or that Arab philosopher, of Muhammad, of Saladin etc, a particular inclination or curiosity on Dante's part regarding Islamic culture where, in reality, in Cerulli's opinion he simply reflected ideas and conceptions of the Muslim world that were widely diffused, the inheritance in the Middle Ages of every cultivated and curious man.

More in general, contesting the relationship pursued by Asín between Dante and learned Arabic literature (Ibn 'Arabi, al-Ma'arri), Cerulli stated that, if anything, one should speak of "relations between the *Divine Comedy* and texts of [Arabic] minor literature, and particularly with a work of popularising character and by its nature devoid of artistic ends, such as the *Libro della Scala*.. Having completed the operation of "declassing" of the model, he maintained himself prudently on a probabilistic position which, however, was powerfully reductive. It was undoubtedly likely that Dante had had before his eyes the Latin version or a Romance version of the Muhammadan *mi'raj*, and that single elements of this had been "integrated" into the broad architecture of the *Divine Comedy*; it was even more certain that more or less precise ideas about Islamic eschatology had reached Dante from numerous mediæval sources, but none of this could detract from the originality of the conception of the Dantean poem, or from the absolute pre-eminence of its Christian inspiration (something which, moreover, Asín had been very careful to avoid putting into doubt).

At the most, or so Cerulli argued, when one attempts to establish Dante's eventual debt for the genesis of his masterpiece, his hypothesised knowledge of the *Libro della Scala* could perhaps have constituted a further incentive towards composing an entirely Christian poem on the Other World, to counterpose to the presumed Islamic sacred text. This was subsequently taken up by Manfredi Porena who, deepening it, went so far as to hypothesise that individual aspects of the Dantean Other World* could have been conceived by Dante in conscious opposition to the Islamic Other World: for instance, the immateriality of Dante's Paradise, compared to the sensuality of the Islamic; the silence of God in the high celestial spheres, as opposed to Allah's loquacity in the Muslim models, and so on.

Cerulli came to the point of conceding, albeit with some embarrassment, that which for Asín Palacios had been one of the most relevant elements of imitation exposed in the course of his comparison between the *Divine Comedy* and the Arab legend. "The concept of the ascent of the individual soul into the kingdoms of

the Other World as being representative, by allegory, of the gradual purification of man from the earthly passions can, by analogy,** have appeared to the poetic genius of Dante in relation to his contacts with those notions or with those writings of the Arabs." This is no small admission: this "concept" notoriously represents a key idea of the structure of the Dantean voyage. The other two fundamental "general analogies" between the *Libro della Scala* and the *Divine Comedy*, this time explicitly, by Cerulli, have to do with "the guide who resolves doubts" and with the "cosmography". In the first, he recognises that in the precursors of Dante, the Guide fulfils a generic "function", rather vague, of showing him the way and the the scenes". In the *Libro della Scala*, quite the opposite, Gabriel "discusses and resolves Muhammad's numerous doubts not only on the ordering of the other-worldly kingdoms, but also on individual points of theology, of cosmography [...] He also explains to Muhammad the allegorical scenes that appear during the voyage", and Muhammad, like Dante, sometimes apologises to his guide for putting too many questions before him; so that, as Cerulli openly recognises, "this 'novelty' of the *Libro della Scala* in relation to Western works on the voyage to Paradise corresponds to the structure of the *Divine Comedy*. As to the second "fundamental similarity", having pointed out that the *Libro della Scala* is among the various versions of the *mi'raj* the one which is "richest in detailed discussions of cosmography", Cerulli concludes by saying that "the concern to situate topographically the realm of the Beyond within general cosmography and to analyse their internal geography is another singularity of Dante in relation to his Western predecessors".

In this case too one can not avoid pointing to the "weight" of the similarities that have been admitted; let us try to imagine a *Divine Comedy* devoid of minute cosmographic descriptions, or with guides who limit themselves to giving the pilgrim a few pointers on his route... In short, Cerulli seems to admit that not merely details, but two or three of the key structural ideas of the *Divine Comedy* Dante could not have found in his Western precursors, which is exactly what, with great emphasis and certainly with some exaggerations, Asín Palacios had said thirty years previously!

Cerulli's explicit conclusion, however, finished by accrediting, within Italian criticism, the idea that the discovery of the *Libro della Scala* meant the collapse of the edifice of Asín's research, which, as has been said, had perhaps staked too much on Dante's possible knowledge of the learned derivations of the legend of the *mi'raj*, in particular of the works of Ibn 'Arabi. Some Orientalists supported this conclusion, for instance Levi della Vida, for whom "...the *Libro della Scala* destroys the importance of the theses of Asín Palacios". A heavy and ungenerous judgement because, upon closer inspection,* the discovery of the two Western codexes of the legend, while it validated fully at least part of Asín's hypothesis, the knowledge in the West of the legend in its more "crude" version, also confirmed the validity of his principle intuition, on the possibility that Dante had had, of drawing on Islamic sources.

On this subject Cerulli, in a second essay with the title *Nuove ricerche sul "Libro della Scala"* (1972), returned to the crucial problem of transmission. He examined in particular the delicate question of Brunetto Latini's ambassadorship to Alfonso X "the Wise" in 1260, which Asín's research indicated as one of the strongest evidences for the possible transmission of the legend in its more or less cultivated versions in the West, and to Dante in particular. Now, according to Asín, the Castilian king had inserted explicit references to the legend of the *mi'raj* in the *Cronica General* or *Historia de Espanna*, picking it up from the aforementioned *Historia Arabum*, a text prior to 1247. Cerulli reveals that another incomplete work of Alfonso X, the *Settenario*, a project for an encyclopaedia, contains precise reference to the *Libro della Scala*, and cites a Spanish critic, Amador de los Rios, according to whom this work could perhaps have influenced the *Tesoro* (the encyclopaedia written in French by Latini and later translated also into Castilian), which points, among other things, to a not inconsiderable knowledge of Arabic things. In short, or so Cerulli seems to suggest, the contact between Latini and the Spanish sovereign could have been of a nature that was not exclusively diplomatic; as a minimum one could conclude that Asín's hypothesis, according to which Dante could have known the Islamic legend, even if only *viva voce* from his teacher, was not at all unfounded. However Cerulli seemed not particularly desirous of going into the question more deeply. He limits himself to considering the reciprocal influences between the *Settenario* and the *Tesoro*, thinking it improbable, and closes the discussion off by stating, a bit peremptorily,* that perhaps the diplomatic duties and the supposed literary exchanges represented "too many things for the short period of Brunetto Latini's ambassadorship". But he does not ask himself the most obvious questions: staying at the court of a sovereign who was a patron of belles lettres and was himself literary, how could the Florentine poet and encyclopaedist not have shown interest in the work which Alfonso X was carrying out, for the knowledge of and diffusion of Arabic

literature? In his successive stay in France (1260-65) Latini, exiled by the Ghibellines, became, as is known, an extraordinary agent of linking between French and Italian culture, and his future great disciple would amply have benefited from this; is it possible that while he was in Spain he would have remained totally inactive from this point of view? Asín asks himself these more than reasonable questions, and for him, leaving aside the question of the specific influences between the two quoted works, it is plausible that Brunetto "could have obtained his Islamic and Arabic culture, not like others, at second hand, but by living with those selfsame Toledan translators, knowing and negotiating personally with King Alonso the Wise". This hypothesis is far from implausible, given the curious personality and the encyclopaedic interests of Dante's teacher, and it seems to me that if anything is dubious it is the conclusion of our Cerulli.

After the discovery of the *Libro della Scala*, the long polemic ended up by settling* for what most people saw as the reasonable compromise, in the "reductionist" key suggested by Cerulli who, replying at a distance of time to Asín who had compared the *Divine Comedy* to the mosque at Cordova, a reconsecrated Christian church, argued that the Islamic elements, even if they had existed, reminded him more of "that Arab-Spanish column which is inserted and inscribes the name of its Islamic craftsman in structure of the cathedral of Pisa, which is historically and artistically Christian in toto and in its parts.

3. So, after the researches of Cerulli, the "reductionist" hypothesis, at least in Italy, takes the upper hand; some people (Manfredi Porena for example) even go so far as to criticise him for having conceded too much to the "fantasies" of Asín Palacios. However that may be, from that moment you heard no more about al-Ma'arri and Ibn 'Arabi as "precursors" of Dante. At this point I would like to return to the question precisely of the learned derivations of the legend of the *mi'raj*. All the commentators (*tafsir*) of the *Quran* dedicate to the first verse of *Sura XVII* that which, precisely, was the origin of the legend, a lot of reflection; they discuss its various aspects, citing the authority of learned men and theologians, and often accompanied the whole with the reproduction of one or other of the related *hadiths*. And it could not be otherwise, since the episode of the ascent of Muhammad was thought to have really happened, *in corpore et spiritu*, by the majority of Muslims, and was thus perceived as a historical fact and also the culmination of the human and religious experience of the Prophet. It seems that the problem which most tormented the Islamic commentators was that of harmonising between themselves the facts of the various versions of the *isra'* and of the *mi'raj*, which were often in conflict; in general they resolved it, as did al-Tabari for example (see above), by using into one single account the major part of the materials that could be taken from the *hadiths* (the sacred nature of which was, we should remember, beyond dispute), and not rarely adding new episodes taken from other sources. One of these episodes added subsequently is precisely the famous one of the golden ladder, which the Prophet sees going up from the Temple in Jerusalem to heaven, and on which ascend the spirits of the just, and it will be precisely this particular which gives the title to the Western versions of the legend. Some commentators even hypothesise that the Prophet had carried out several ascents, in different circumstances and with different "vehicles", of which the two referred to by the *Quran* would have been only the most important. Other problems confronted by the exegetes have to do, for example, with the discussion on the year when the voyage took place, on the interpretation to be given to the various stages, and to other minor questions such as the identification of the point of departure of the ascent; the real duration (a night? a moment out of time?); the meaning of the "operation" of the angels on the Prophet's heart by the angels etc.

After what has been said, it comes as no surprise that very soon poets* and writers took hold of the theme of the *mi'raj* and that it became one of the most recurrent *topoi* among Islamic writers and mystics. The very obscurity of many of the passages of the legend, the mysteriousness of the "how" and the "where" of this extraordinary experience of the Prophet, must have contributed in determining fashion to excite the imagination, the poetic drive and the exegetic acumen of dozens and dozens of interpreters. In mystic circles, markedly among the Sufis and the Gnostics, there soon imposed itself a desire to imitate this experience: Muhammad, in other words, would be perceived as the model of the mystic hero, and his *mi'raj* as the prototype of all ecstatic visions. Here I shall cite the name of Abu Yazid Bistami (9th century), a leading Sufi of the "Oriental school" of Khorasan, who attributed to himself an ascent *in spiritu* through the same stages as the Prophet; but one can hypothesise that many of the subsequent treatises of Sufism, in which there is a very detailed analysis of the mystic "stations" (*maqamat*) through which the soul progresses towards self-perfection, constitute a deepening in a symbolic and didactic sense of the prophetic *mi'raj*. Here an aside would be in order, on Avicenna (d. 1037), who was to take up the theme in his celebrated

visionary account *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* (*Vivens, filius Desti*). Here the great philosopher imagines that his visionary soul meets its own angelic counter-figure, precisely *vivens*, with whom he fulfils a voyage to the mystic East. In Avicenna's visionary epic we have an interesting "dimensional inversion": the voyage no longer takes place vertically, from the earth to heaven, but horizontally, from a West that is dominated by bestial forms, cataclysm and warring peoples to an East whose ten "lands" typify not only the angelic hierarchies of the Avicennan world, but also the steps of purification of the soul. In the Avicennan "*mi'raj*", which has not evolved towards the model of the "initiatory voyage", two other essential changes take place: the substitution of the Prophet with the mystic "hero", and the re-reading in allegorical-symbolical key of the stages of the voyage. Avicenna is also at the origin of another collateral development of the same theme, destined to notable literary fortune: namely the "voyage of the birds" – transparent symbols of the human spirit – through the mystic "seven valleys" which, in the new horizontal dimension of the "space" of the voyage, have replaced the traditional seven astronomical heavens. Avicenna's *Letter of the Birds* (*Risalat al-Tayr*) will be imitated in a similarly named letter by al-Ghazali, and then by Suhrawardi, and the motif thus "bounces" from one pen to another among legions of Islamic poets and writers of all time. All the researchers (beginning with Henri Corbin) have stressed the relevance of the Avicennian reinterpretation of the *mi'raj* in the development of certain strands of Islamic mystic literature, particularly in Persia; we could cite the mystical journeys developed in a *Mi'raj-name* attributed to an author close to Avicenna, or the *Voyage of the Servants in the Kingdom of the Return* of Sana'i (d. 1141) or the *Word of the Birds* of 'Attar (d. 1230), to come right down to the contemporary Indo-Persian poet M. Iqbal, whose *Celestial Poem* consciously takes the schema of the *mi'raj* and of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Passing across to Arabic literature, we recall a very fine "philosophical romance" romance by Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185), another Arab-Spanish poet and mystic who takes up the theme, the characters and even the title of Avicenna's *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, a romance which was known in the West from the Renaissance in both Hebrew and Latin versions. We also cannot avoid taking a look at the parody of the *mi'raj* contained in the *Letter of Forgiving* (*Risalat al-Ghufran*) of the above-mentioned Syrian writer al-Ma'arri, where that strange, mocking figure of the "free thinker" imagines that his interlocutor, a certain Ibn al-Qarih of Aleppo, himself also a writer, travels through a grotesque Beyond populated by poets, sages and grammarians, engaged in niggling* dispute among processions of fluttering* houris, pious personages and good-time devils who offer low insinuations about the pleasures of Paradise...

However we should make a more detailed reference to the mystic works of Ibn 'Arabi (Latinised as Abenarabi) inspired by the *mi'raj*, which, as I have said, played such a role in the comparative analytical work carried out by Asín Palacios. Let us begin with the *Book of the Night Journey Towards the Majesty of the [Most] Generous* (*Kitab al-isra' ila maqam al-asra*), in which the Arab-Spanish mystic tells the tale of a *mi'raj* of his own, carried out *in spiritu*, and written, as he himself declares in the prologue, in a mixed style of allegory and literal truth. Setting off from the land of Andalusia in the direction of Jerusalem, our poet-pilgrim states that he adopted Islam as a horseride,* the ascetic life as nutrition, and renunciation as nourishment.* As he goes along, he meets a young man of divine aspect sent to him by the High One as a guide and mentor who, before the beginning of the ascent through the celestial spheres, is replaced by a second guide, a new envoy of Divine Grace. Ibn 'Arabi's statements at the beginning of the tale are interesting: "The Sufis, or mystics, the heirs of the Prophet, are the imitators of his life, fleeing all worldly things... panting after ecstasy in the sight of God". Consequently* it is the entirely symbolic reading of the prophetic *mi'raj* which exalts its paradigmatic value for every mystic: "The speedy horseride that transports him is divine love, symbolised by Buraq"; the holy city of Jerusalem, "mystic symbol of light and of certainty, represents the first stage of the voyage; the Lote Tree is the "symbol of faith and of virtue, with its fruits the mystics are sated and thanks to it all the most sublime human faculties are perfected", and so on. Asín felt bound to note "this new and surprising coincidence" regarding the "allegorical intention" and the "symbolic character" which, leaving aside the many basic similarities"*, bring together the *Book of the Night Journey* and the *Divine Comedy*.

However, this is not the *mi'raj* of Ibn 'Arabi that interests us most, which is another, contained in his more famous work *The Meccan Revelations* (*Al-futuh al-makkiya*), and entitled *The Alchemy of Happiness* (a title which immediately recalls an identically-named work written in Persian by al-Ghazali (d. 1111). This is another, more complex allegorical voyage, in imitation of the prophetic *mi'raj*, and this time its protagonists are a theologian and a philosopher, the one the perfect type who accepts faithfully the dictates of Revelation, and the other of whom entrusts himself exclusively to the light of human reason. The stages prior to the

ascent through the heavens symbolise for Ibn 'Arabi the journey towards natural perfection obtained by the two with the correction of passions and the mortification of the instincts (see the "practical use" of the intellect of which Dante speaks in the *Convivio*) At this point, Ibn 'Arabi suggests, theology and philosophy coincide perfectly, since both reason and faith lead to the same result: liberation from the human passions. The two of them begin their celestial ascent. The philosopher uses the famous Buraq, who is here the symbol of human reason in its "speculative" use, as Dante would say, while the theologian uses the famous light-filled garland,* the sign of divine Grace (already met in version 2c, with which the Prophet was able to reach the divine Throne. At the same speed, the usual astronomical heavens are traversed. However in each of these the two experience a different welcome. The theologian is received with full honours by the prophets who reign in each sphere and their related band of the Blessed; the philosopher can only pass his time conversing with their humble servants, in other words the angelic heavenly Intelligences, which, according to the neo-Platonist and Avicennian cosmology received by* Ibn 'Arabi, preside over the motions of each sphere. This is a cause of terrible frustration for the philosopher, who is denied access to the mysteries which the prophets progressively communicate to his more fortunate companion. The learned discussions of natural philosophy and of cosmology which he undertakes with the heavenly Intelligences cannot conceal from him the fact that the Theologian is succeeding in penetrating the same problems with greater clarity. Thus, through this ingenious literary device, Ibn 'Arabi has a way of introducing into his work the fundamental questions of his own theological and philosophical system, putting everything that he wishes to discuss now into the mouth of the prophets and the angelic Intelligences, and now of the two travellers. I shall briefly summarise the characters encountered en route, and the arguments dealt with in each sphere (which are the same for both the Theologist and the Philosopher):

– The Heaven of the Moon: Adam. Creative influence of numbers for Ibn 'Arabi the prototypes of all created substance, physical phenomena of the sub-lunar world.

– The Heaven of Mercury: Jesus and St John. Divine aetiology of the *Quran*. Qabbalistic virtues of certain words such as the creationist "Let it be!" (*kun*, in the Arabic of the *Quran*) and the esoteric* mechanism of the miracles of Jesus.

– The Heaven of Venus: Joseph (celebrated in the *Quran* for his good looks*). Beauty, harmony and order in the cosmos, poetic art, interpretation of dreams.

– Heaven of the Sun: Enoch. Astronomical causes of the alternation of day and night, and its mystical significance.

– Heaven of Mars: Aaron. The rightful government of peoples, its fundamental norms, benignity of the *Quranic* code.

– Heaven of Jupiter: Moses. Explanation of Ibn 'Arabi's mystical system, beginning with the exegesis of the miracle of Moses' rod when it changed into a serpent. Conclusion: only forms and accidents change, while substance (God) remains unchanged.

– The Heaven of Saturn: Abraham. Future life, or the eschatological theme.

Having arrived at this point, the Philosopher in vain seeks from Abraham the explanations which he cannot obtain from the celestial Intelligences of this sphere, and while the biblical prophet accompanies the Theologian into the "inhabited house" of the Blessed (see above, versions 1b and 2a), our poor Philosopher remains stranded* at its door.

The three following stages are, in order, the Lote Tree, the Heaven of the Fixed Stars, populated by angelic choirs and holy spirits, and finally the ultimate sphere, the Heaven of the Zodiac, which, with its influence, presides over the phenomena of the celestial Paradise. The light of the divine Throne here is so strong as to blind our Theologian, who falls into a state of ecstasy (see version 2c). Finally he arrives in front of the Throne, which appears to him held up by five angels and three prophets (Adam, Abraham and Muhammad). But the voyage is not yet finished. Now begins the mystical-speculative part, in which the Theologian contemplates raptly the world of elementary Platonic ideas, emanations of the creationist One; thus the

Other-Worldly adventure finishes in the midst of a mysterious cloud, a symbol (rather "modern") of the primordial matter which in Ibn 'Arabi's "neo-Empedoclean" philosophy, is conceived as a substance common to both Creator and the created. Once the final Mysteries have also been penetrated, our Theologian is satisfied, comes back down, once again "picks up"* the poor Philosopher who is still standing at the frontier of the celestial kingdom, and convinces him once and for all to convert himself to belief and to Islam.

I have thought it opportune to summarise this visionary work of Ibn 'Arabi, because in it the legend of the *mi'raj* reaches the peak of its development in mediæval Arabic literature. Everyone can understand, as Asín observed, that "it does not take much commentary to highlight in this allegorical-mystical journey* the points of contact which it offers with the Dantean voyage". The voyage as symbol of the moral life of the individual; super-natural happiness as a conquest reserved for the believer, since philosophical reason can only travel through the first stages; the geometric, numerological and general architectural motifs, etc; the distribution of the souls among the various spheres according to an astrological-moral criterion; the wide recourse to a "metaphysics of light"; and most particularly the instrumental character of the many dialogues and discourses of the various characters, in relation to the exposition of the philosophical and religious conceptions of the author, whose rather complex and sometimes abstruse system of ideas has always formed a chapter apart, of the great vast critical literature that related to him.*

The point of greatest differentiation between this sophisticated re-elaboration of the tradition of the *mi'raj* and the *Divine Comedy* lies certainly in the fact that Ibn 'Arabi has conceived two distinct voyagers; but upon looking closer, precisely that which from the outside seems most to differentiate the two works, in Asín's eyes is seen as a further aspect of their similarity: Virgil and Beatrice, Dante's two guides, who symbolise the two great ambits of mediæval knowledge – philosophy and theology – hand on from one to the other precisely at the start of the final phase of the voyage, to signify precisely that which the Andalusian mystic had wished to say when he left the Philosopher – in other words Reason – outside the gate of Paradise.

Here it would be worth restating Asín Palacios's conclusion: "If to all these coincidences of undertaking, action, allegorical finality, principal and episodic characters, architecture of the astronomical heavens, didactic curiosity* and literary artifices to syncretise an encyclopaedia of an entire people, one adds the abstruse, intricate, difficult, enigmatic style of both literary pieces [...], it will easily be understood why we have considered this allegorical ascent, written by the Murcian Ibn 'Arabi in the thirteenth century, as a Muslim type which comes close to the Dantean Paradise in particular, and to the whole of the *Divine Comedy* in general, considered, at least, as a didactic-moral allegory."

It may be that this conclusion is not found pleasing (and in Italy it was certainly not found pleasing); however, one cannot deny the Spanish scholar an extraordinary talent, seriousness of method and the plausibility of his conclusions. The key word of this initial conclusion is obviously that "approximates"*, in which the great Spanish Arabist prudently synthesises the scientific result of his enquiry. Perhaps even more disturbing, however, for many critics, would be Asín Palacios's second conclusion, in which having summed up all the obvious similarities with the voyage described by Ibn 'Arabi to those already highlighted in the primitive versions of the legend of the *mi'raj*, "it will be obvious that only one religious literature, the Islamic, in only one of its themes, the eschatological, developing this principally as a function of one single mystical legend, that of the *mi'raj*, offers the investigator a more abundant source* of ideas, images, symbols and descriptions, equal to those of Dante, than the whole of religious literature that has come down to us, consulted thus far by Dantists in order to explain through them the genesis of the *Divine Comedy*."

As we have seen, Cerulli had tried brilliantly to refute these theses. On the one hand he had diluted the extent of the presumed "Muslim imprinting" of the World Beyond of the *Divine Comedy* onto a vast spectrum of possible sources – historical and hagiographic texts, Arabic philosophical treatises on eschatology, texts of Christian polemicists, written or translated into Latin – with the obvious aim of denying the probability of a direct relation between Dante's poem and any single Arabic work; on the other, he had minimised the exemplarity of the only presumed literary model known to have been known in the West, in other words the *Libro della Scala*. This is a stance entirely opposed to that of Asín – who did not live long enough to know of the *Libro della Scala* – who had, rather, emphasised the role of numerous literary models developed around a precise theme, the prophetic *mi'raj*, in the conviction that in some way Dante "must have" known about it.

The problem of the transmission to the West of the overall "cycle of the *mi'raj*", as we have seen, has been resolved solely in relation to the part of it which is in literal terms less noble and sophisticated, of which the Italian reader finally has the possibility of having a direct idea with this first edition translated into Italian of the *Libro della Scala*. However, the merit of the broad and highly documented work of Asin is not in any sense tainted by the lack of an identification of a precise channel of transmission of the learned derivations of the legend of the *mi'raj*; this does not in any sense affect the substance of his conclusions, as outlined above, even though it undoubtedly leaves a problem open.

4. At the conclusion of this brief overview of the question of the relations between Dante and Islam, it would be appropriate to refer to another interesting European offshoot* of the legend of the *mi'raj*, far less known than the work presented here, but perhaps in some respects of crucial importance in defining the trajectory of its voyage to the West. I am referring to a Christian work to which M.T. D'Alverney gave an exhaustive description some years before Cerulli's researches, in *Les Pérégrinations de l'âme dans l'autre monde. D'après un anonyme de la fin du XIIème siècle* (1940-2). It was written in Latin in the 12th century, probably in Spain (or perhaps in Sicily, as Cerulli maintains), by an author who surely had a great familiarity with the neo-Platonic *Liber de Causis* and with Avicennan texts such as the *De anima* and the *Metafisica*, and perhaps also with the works of al-Ghazali and of the Jewish-Spanish philosopher Ibn Gabirol. It represents "one of the most typical examples of the collusion of Arabic neo-Platonism and Christian neo-Platonism", historically concretised in the theological-philosophical currents of Latin Avicennism, and later of Avicennising Augustinianism, broadly explored in the researches of scholars such as P. De Vaux and E. Gilson. This work, a treatise dealing with eschatology, has notable interest for us from two points of view. First, as Henri Corbin pointed out, it provides the proof of the "fructification" in Christian lands (with original modalities and with all the easily imaginable adaptations imposed by the religious beliefs of the author – probably a cleric of rather eclectic views, but very catholic in spirit – of the "*mi'raj*" model; second, it testifies to a profound "re-reading" of the original model, of an evolution which seems powerfully marked by the influence of Avicenna. After having stated the aims of the Treatise – a description of the future life and of the ways to assure oneself the best sistemazione – the author deals with different questions related to the various aspects of man, with the Trinity, with the relation between the visible world and the archetypal world, continuously revealing his debt to Arabic neo-Platonism. Reaching the heart of his exposition, the theme of eschatology, he proposes an ascent to Paradise of the *post mortem* soul in two stations of ten steps apiece, each of which, as M.T. D'Alverney noted, finds its clarification in passages from various works of the cited Arabic and Jewish-Spanish philosophers. However, the real surprise is contained in the fact that in the astronomical heavens, our anonymous of the "Christian *mi'raj*" substituted, in the first station, ten grades that were not spatially locatable – which, however, typify the moments of a progressive internal purification – followed by ten angelic choirs corresponding to the Avicennan schema of the ten Intelligences (*Metafisica*, ix, 4). In substance, the first part of the voyage to Paradise consists of a long process of singing the praises* of the passional elements which still weigh on the defunct soul, while in the second part it can participate, going up step by step in the joys of the angelic hierarchy. The descent into Hell in turn contemplates ten stages, in which we again find the astronomical spheres, which have here become unexpectedly* the places of so many "malebolges", and this is probably an echo of the old Gnostic theory, impregnated with cosmic pessimism, of the "descent of the soul" through the spheres – Avicenna had sung the same motif in an ode which speaks of the descent of the white "dove" – which presupposes the "negativity" of the entire world created below the limit of the Fixed Stars.

With this text, as can be seen, we are already a long way away from the geography of the Beyond, and from the ascensional schemes that are typical of the legend of the *mi'raj*; but this work seems to retain essential aspects from the Islamic models, as for example, the notable complication of the structure of the Beyond; the angelic hierarchies presiding over each step of Paradise; the minute listing of the retributions (which are, however, immaterial in character, as in Avicenna). And furthermore, which brings us back to the relation with the learned derivations, the identification of the pilgrim in the world of the Beyond with the noble part of the soul, in other words the *anima rationalis*. But here is another more interesting aspect. Cerulli recognises that if, "in the Western predecessors of Dante, the telling of the voyage to the Beyond is poetically an end in itself, and this "not only in the popular singers* or in the crude versions of the 'visions' of the Middle Ages, but also, and obviously, in the great poets of antiquity", here, on the other hand, we have "an itinerary of the soul in the kingdom of the heavens and hell*", with a value which is exclusively of philosophical allegory:

Cerulli's cautious conclusion is that perhaps this work was not an immediate source for Dante, but that nevertheless it signals how "from the knowledge of Arab metaphysics already existing in Italy (or in Catalonia) in the early 13th century one had arrived at a conception of a philosophical voyage of the soul in the Beyond which was entirely different from the modest discoveries of the popular singers* who tend to be listed as precursors of Dante". Once again, we have an umpteenth admission, on a point of crucial importance, of the groundedness of the theses of Asín Palacios; it has furthermore been observed that the idea of the voyage to the world Beyond as a "philosophical allegory" finds its most complete development, before Dante, in the learned derivations of the legend of the *mi'raj* that flourished in the Spain of the thirteenth century, from which most probably derives the anonymous author of the treatise in question. The interest of this text consists definitively in the fact that, alongside the translations of the *Libro della Scala*, it testifies to an indirect transmission, through ways that are traverse and with characteristics that are not entirely autonomous and Christianised, of an eschatological model which relates to the Islamic legend of the Beyond; this treatise, one might say, has as its subject, a Christian *mi'raj* and presents, at least in broad outline, some of the essential characteristics of the Dantean voyage.

5. Coming now to more recent researches, I shall refer briefly to the contribution of I.P. Culianu (*Psychanodia* I, 1983). In the margins of a deeper inquiry into the universal theme of "celestial voyages", Culianu inquires into a well circumscribed problem: the possible sources of the *mi'raj*. But his observations may indirectly contribute to situating within a more correct perspective also the problem of the relation between this legend cycle and Dante. So, according to Culianu, "Arabic traditions related to the 'night journey' (*isra'*) and the 'heavenly ascent' (*mi'raj*) of the Prophet Muhammad are derived directly from Jewish apocalyptic writing; this is not an entirely new idea, because Asín Palacios had talked about this possibility, without however going into it more deeply. The texts in question, in which the motif of the voyage to the heavens appears, are principally the Slavic version of the *Book of Enoch* (or *2 Enoch*), the Jewish version of the *Apocalypse of Baruch* (or *3 Baruch*), the *Testament of Levi* (the third of the *Testaments of the XII Patriarchs*), the *Apocalypse of Abraham* and the *Ascent of Isaiah* (the latter two were reworked by Christian authors), all texts which were not accepted within the canon of the Hebrew Bible. In this apocryphal apocalyptic literature, which however draws life* from the canonic apocalypses inserted in various of the prophetic books (*Daniel*, *Ezekiel*, *Isaiah*, etc), the motif of a voyage through the heavens (generally not identifiable with the planetary spheres) is a commonplace. It is imagined that the prophet-seer in question has a vision during which he is transported from heaven to heaven, in some cases with one or two angels as his guide; for example, in the first of the texts cited, *Enoch*, guided by two "light-filled beings", he undertakes a heavenly ascent during which he sees, in the first Heaven, the Angel-Guardians of snow, ice and frost* (the "higher waters"); in the second he sees the "fallen" angels; in the third the Paradise of the just and the place of torments; in the fourth the Angel-Custodians of the stars*; in the fifth, the watching angels led by Satan; in the sixth, the angels that preside over natural forces; and in the seventh and final heaven the archangels with God seated on the Throne. The same schema, with various bands of angels in each heaven (see in particular version 2c of the *mi'raj*) is also repeated in the mediæval *Revelation of Moses* which, albeit post-dating the Islamic *mi'raj*, probably relates back to older Hebrew texts.

To these texts we need to add others which go back to the rich "hekhalotic" literature (from *hekhal*, "temple"), developed between the third and sixth centuries AD, which relates to speculation on the primitive vision of the "divine carriage" (*merkaba*) contained in *Ezekiel* 1. Here the seer, following a ritual of ascetic practices, goes through the seven celestial temples, through to the temple of God, of which that of Jerusalem is considered to be the earthly replica. Regarding the origin of this recurrent subdivision according to the number seven, one need only recall that already in Babylonian culture we have the division of the cosmos into the seven heavens, which replaced the threefold division of the older Iranian models. Celso, in *Alethes logos*, reminds us of the so-called "Mithraic symbol" of the mystic* Mithraic religion in fashion in imperial Rome, a stairway with seven gates connected to the seven planets and the various metals, which according to Celso would have represented the voyage of the soul through the spheres; researchers have seen this as a symbolic replica of the seven-level temple of Babylon (the *ziqqurat*), as described by Herodotus. What is controversial, on the other hand, is the question of the origin of the motif of the voyage of the soul through the heavens. Here, there is a clash between the traditional Iranian or Iranian-Babylonian hypothesis (Bousset, Kroll), with the Greek hypothesis (Rhode, Dieterich) and the Pythagorean (Méautis, Rougier), which in some ways were then overtaken by more eclectic hypotheses which begin with Cumont and come down to Culianu.

The Hebrew apocalyptic literature is "succeeded" by the Christian, and often recycling or interpolating (see the two examples cited above) the same texts, but more often creating new texts, which were conventionally attributed either to the Old Testament or to the Apostles. As is known, out of the whole vast apocalyptic literature, only one text, the *Apocalypse of St John* (one of the rarer apocalypses in which the author does not conceal himself behind the name of a biblical prophet or other authoritative personality) is accepted in the New Testament canon, of which it constitutes precisely the final book. The other Christian apocalypses, all apocryphal, as for example that of *IV Esdra*, *Thomas*, *Peter*, or that (derived) of *Paul*, etc, nevertheless had an enormous influence also in Church circles. The latter two in particular turned out to be determining in the formation of that complex of conceptions of the Beyond and its retributions which form the Christian "vulgate" regarding life beyond the grave. Christian apocalypses effectively accentuate, alongside the traditional speculation on the "last days", the interest in the Beyond and for the system of Other Worldly punishments and rewards, an element which is little developed in the Jewish apocalyptic literature. In particular, the apocalypses of *Peter* and of *Paul* (2nd-3rd century), of which there are attested versions in Arabic, take up the tested schema of the vision of the Prophet associated to a voyage through the seven heavens, and furthermore contain details descriptions of the punishments of Hell and the pleasures of Paradise.

The question which we have to ask at this point is what may have been the real extent of the debt of the Islamic *mi'raj* to these Jewish and Christian apocryphal texts. In my commentary on the text of the *Libro della Scala*, I have not hesitated to underline aspects and motifs which relate back more or less explicitly to this or that apocryphal text, and sometimes directly to the *Apocalypse of St John*; there is nothing strange in this, since the *Quran* itself, seen from the viewpoint of comparative literature, is a putting-together of motifs, characters and episodes freely inspired by the Old and New Testaments, together with rabbinic literature and the apocryphal Gospels, which mix in together with the preponderant "autochthonous" material. One example of this, which I regard as significant, I have proposed in the "Sura of the Steps", in which God is called the "Lord of the Steps" (*ma'arij*, plural of *mi'raj*), through which the angels and the spirits ascend to Him in a day which is equivalent to 50,000 years (lxxx, 3-4); a passage which recalls practically with the same images the biblical verses related to Jacob's Ladder. But now let us look more closely at the elements which bring the two traditions together, that of the *mi'raj*, and the Jewish and Christian tradition, particularly the apocryphal going back to the origins.* Leaving aside the original schema of the voyage (the travelling through the seven heavens), and the ineliminable presence of the trio Destination (God), Helper/Teacher (Angel Accompanier) and Protagonist (Seer-Pilgrim) and the central argument (the description of the end of time and/or of the World Beyond) there are often also landscape details (for example the description of the celestial city, or of the gardens of Eden, as well as descriptive elements (the form of the angels of the Throne, the Tree of Paradise, the apocalyptic beast, etc), thematic themes (warnings to the Seer to reveal or not to reveal the content of the vision, the announcement of "new heavens" and "new earths"). If we then go on to consider the later apocalypses (Peter, Paul and Moses) and our *Libro della Scala*, we note the greater amount of space reserved to dialogues between the Seer and his guide, the growing specialisation of the Beyond in function of retribution, a certain attention to the taxonomy of the punishments and the description of the torments, the emphasis on topometry and numerology (here one thinks of the overdone* calculation of the cosmic and ultra-earthly distances, or to the particular of the angels of the angels with the seventy thousand eyes, seventy thousand tongues, seventy thousand heads, etc, which are common features, particularly between the *Libro della Scala* and the *Revelation of Moses*.. All this argues indisputably for a "continuity" between the Hebrew-Christian literature and the Islamic: one can say that this latter is inserted between an ancient and well-tested literary genre, which had penetrated into the Arabic world with many other elements of the biblical, rabbinical and Christian-apocryphal tradition, right from the times of the Hellenistic diaspora.

However, having said this, one cannot avoid underlining other aspects which configure an element of discontinuity, of breakage, between the two traditions; peculiar aspects which, obviously leaving aside the different religious context, make the Muslim *mi'raj* a model of ecstatic voyage that is not reducible to the Jewish ones correctly highlighted by Culianu, and to the Christian ones examined here, and which, in our opinion, make them already the anticipator of the "modern" voyages of an Ibn 'Arabi or an Avicenna.

First of all let us remember that, against the background of the Hebrew apocalyptic literature, which has its

highest point of development between the second century BC and the second century AD, there is the recurrent tragedy of the conquest or destruction of Jerusalem by foreign peoples (the Babylonians, the Hellenistic kings, the Romans, with the latter responsible for the killings of 63 BC and 70 AD, and the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem. The oldest Hebrew texts are in effect profoundly oriented by an "eschatological-national" perspective, in which the future advent of the Messiah and of the kingdom of God on earth is tied up inextricably with the desire for national restoration* and for liberation, with a thirst for justice (or for revenge) against the pagan and foreign oppressors. The Christian apocalyptic literature develops, as I have said, in a perspective that is already different, which is more "universalistic" and "individualistic" (Moraldi) and which, moreover, was already to be seen in the more recent Hebrew apocalypses. And it is the cosmopolitan people of Christianity, and at the same time every believer considered singularly, who has to await the truth* of the "final days"; but at this point it will be the advent of a new era, a *seculum novum*, of a new "aeon" dualistically counterposed to the present one, which will settle the accounts of divine justice, since the kingdom of God is not of this world. In each case, we always have the story of a "people of God" in struggle with the Satanic enemy who is master of the present "aeon", and we always have the "martyrs of the faith" as the final triumphers of every Christian apocalypse, in which, in fact, an obligatory theme is the "final persecution" which will precede the appearance* of Christ. The Hebrew and Christian texts both, however, show* this ancient substratum constituted by the climate of persecutions, by cosmic pessimism, by the present undervaluation*, which is concretised in the waiting for a justice which can come *only* at the end of time or in the Other World. There rules uncontested the certainty that the curtain is about to come down on the *spectaculum mundi*, which is bound for inexorable degeneration, so that one only has to "wait".

The scenario changes in no small way with the old Islamic apocalyptic literature, essentially reducible to the vision of Muhammad. First of all, the epoch of composition of the various canonic *hadiths* on the *isra'* and on the Prophet's *mi'raj* is marked by the already consolidated triumph of the faith of Muhammad from North Africa to the Indian sub-continent. The Islamic community had, it is true, known schisms and intestine struggles of every kind, but the climate of "persecution" had already finished some years prior to the death of the Prophet (AD 632), with the complete winning-over of Arabia to the new faith. If Hebrew and Christian apocalyptic literature is, as I said above, to varying degrees, a "literature of crisis" (Garofalo), the Utopian-religious expression of oppressed communities which wait for their definitive triumph in "another" world (and time), the cycle of the Islamic *mi'raj* appears rather as a celebration of a man of God and of a religious community which has seen its own triumph in this world already in their own time. Thus the psychological situation is profoundly different. But this is not the only issue. At the centre of the Hebrew-Christian apocalypses stands the expectation of final justice for the "flock of God", carried to the butcher of history, as we see from the well-known New Testament apocalypse of St John; here the true protagonists are the community persecuted by the present aeon, and its God or Saviour, while the prophet-seer is a pure go-between.

The central focus of the Muhammadan *mi'raj* is entirely different: it is true that the theme of the advent of the *seculum novum* is not ignored (see paras. 151-2 and 190 in our *Libro della Scala*), nor is the description of the Final Judgement (see para. 182 seq.) in a way that is not dissimilar to what happened in the Hebrew-Christian models, but in the various versions it is always the encounter between the Prophet and his Lord and the handing over the Book of Revelation, which marks the high point of the account (see here paras. 123-9). St John also received a book from the angel, the "Eternal Gospel" (*Revelations X*), but this is only one episode in a narration which runs headlong towards the final vision of the "new times". In the *mi'raj*, on the other hand, the whole account pivots on this culminating episode, which not only describes the mysterious moment of the transmission to Muhammad of a divine law, amplifying the scanty Quranic references, but also separates in paradigmatic mode the apotheosis of the man who, through a patient ascent through the symbolic stations of the seven heavens, arrived at the point of acquiring a heavenly wisdom, a higher knowledge. In the *mi'raj* of Muhammad, albeit certainly in embryo, we have contained the whole later speculation on the "perfect man" or "universal man" (*al-insaan al-kaamil*) which is at the basis of so much of the mystical and philosophical reflection in mediæval Islam, from Avicenna, Suhrawardi, or Ibn 'Arabi, down to their later descendants in modern times. The true protagonists of the Muhammadan *mi'raj* are, on the one hand, a "perfect man", in fact the prototype of all "perfect men", according to the mystics of Islam, and on the other, a heavenly Guide; the community here remains in the background, or, more accurately, it is fully "summed up" in its seer-hero. Thus the prophet here is not only a narrator in the first

person, a humble go-between between God and the faithful; he is the central personage, the protagonist of an "initiation".

So also, the very perception of the Beyond changes, and in the *mi'raj* is certainly still powerfully influenced by the "materiality" and the "sensuality" of the Quranic model; here we are not in the presence of a Beyond which has to make good historic injustices committed against a chosen people, but what we have is in more "secular" terms, a Beyond in which an "ordinary" justice is administered, with its meticulous taxonomy of punishments and crimes.* In the *Libro della Scala*, furthermore, which refers to the apocryphal version 2c with the postposition of the vision of Hell, and for the final part (universal judgement) also the other sources, the story-telling and imaginary element is further accentuated. We find a Beyond which sometimes seems to be travelled through by our Prophet more with the "curiosity" of the traveller than with an anxiety to bring back a message of salvation. In particular, it is the Beyond in which the glittering of gold, silver and precious stones, the magnificence of sumptuous palaces and of marvellous women, the abundance of rewards for all good believers, seems to reflect it mirror-fashion – not "overthrown"*, but, one might say, rectified and led to ideal perfection – a *seculum* which could not appear to the followers of a triumphant fate* in the same sinister light known by the old communities of Jews and Christians, and which, therefore, could very well supply a "backlit"* "image" of Paradise.

In conclusion, the Muhammadan *mi'raj*, also in this version of the *Libro della Scala*, seems to me to be radically extraneous to the spirit of the old Judaic apocalyptic literature and its Christian continuation, from the stock of which, however, it developed, taking over from it a fair number of forms; in many aspects it constitutes already the most mature preparation of the imminent and very rich flowering of heavenly voyages and ecstatic visions which were to take place in Islamic literature from the eleventh century onwards. Its dimension is already, potentially, the more "modern" eschatological-personal dimension of an Ibn 'Arabi or an Avicenna, who need only substitute their own person for that of the Prophet in order to give us their refined *Himmelsreisen*; who will then need only to "perfect" the crude Quranic Beyond, developing its more obvious symbolic values, in order to show us the sure grounding* of their more personal and perhaps even more "secularised" angst. "We [God] have proposed the Token to the heavens, and to the Earth, and to the Mountains, and they refused to carry it, and were in fear of it. But Man took it upon himself..." In this highly dense and mysterious passage of the *Book Revealed to Muhammad* (xxxii, 72), which has been the object of innumerable commentaries over the centuries, there is perhaps a key to the *mi'raj*: Muhammad, the "Seal of the Prophets" is, par excellence, the "Man" who takes upon himself the Token (*amanat*) of divine law which is, according to the mystics, an esoteric law, the "secret of the heart" (cf. *Libro della Sacala*, para. 160). But he is only the first. His "imitation", as I have said, is at the centre of Muslim spirituality. The protagonist of the *mi'raj* is not a distant, unapproachable prophet who is posed as a naked intermediary with heaven, as a simple instrument of communication of a divine design; rather he is seen, almost *immediately* in Islam, as the potential "perfect man" who is housed in every soul. His "ascent" to heaven is imposed as a recognised prototype of every mystical flight, and his heavenly stages mark* symbolically the progresses of every internal search for God, beginning with the "night of the senses" into which Gabriel breaks.

On this theme I would like to underline a further Quranic reference, which is often undervalued in the explanation of the genesis of the cycle of the *mi'raj*. The vision of Muhammad begins in sleep, which, according to the *Quran* is where "[God] takes away life from us" (vi, 59-60) in order to call back momentarily to himself the souls of men. This "temporary death", which one goes to meet in the darkness of night, thus prefigures actual death, and the voyage of the soul towards its eternal seat, and it is not accidental that it is in sleep that the stories of the "Beyond" of countless Islamic visionary poets and mystics of all times have their beginning.

In the night of the senses, the "perfect man" is given the opportunity of an anticipated vision of his Lord, to get a foretaste of final happiness: this is the reading of the *mi'raj* which the poets and mystics of Islam have always given. Was this also the reading of Dante, if ever, as appears probable, he had had the possibility of knowing a version of the *Libro della Scala*?

Conclusions

At the end of this brief reconstruction of the Oriental and European trajectories of the legend of the *mi'raj*, I

would like to ask a question. For a long time people have recognised that one of the "founding elements" of mediæval culture was the overspill of Arabic philosophy into Scholasticism. There is broad recognition of the debt which Western science owed the Arab treatises, many of which (eg Avicenna's *Qanun*) were studied in the university faculties of Europe down to our own Renaissance and beyond; at the University of Padova, still in the fifteenth century, a dispute between Avicennans and Averroists over the problem of the unity of the intellect reached such levels of "dangerousness" that Bishop Pietro Barozzi was obliged to intervene with a decree (6 May 1489) to prevent the resurgence of others. Anyway, I would like to ask whether, in this climate which was marked, virtually on the threshold of the "modern" era, by a "thirst" of the West for Islamic culture, it is so strange to think that from Moorish Spain there should have travelled into the Christian world, scattering fecund seeds, also this extraordinary legend of the *mi'raj*, which certainly finds its deep grounding in a great human and religious myth, common to a great part of humanity, but which, we can now see, finds its first great and refined singer in the semi-Arabised Spain of the thirteenth century.

To think that in the field of philosophy and natural sciences Arab-Islamic culture had, between the twelfth and fourteenth century, exercised a thoroughgoing "hegemony" while nothing, or almost nothing, would have been its influence on the great and forming literatures of Western Europe, seems frankly to run against historical common sense. For example, we know the numerous studies produced (we could cite, among other, those of Nykl, Ribera and Menendez Pidal) on the contact between Arab-Spanish poetry and Provençal poetry (and perhaps indirectly with the "scuola siciliana"); this is a territory which remains in part unexplored, but which is no longer considered as being "off-limits". According to these studies, rhythmic schemas (particularly of the *muwashshah* or Arabic strophic song), poetic themes (for example idealised love of the woman), etc, could have come, adapted and in original ways recreated, to the West from Moorish Spain. We also know of a strange letter (*Seniles* xii, 2) of Petrarch to Giovanni Dondi, in which our pet declares, among other things: "...*Arabes vero quales medici tu scis. Quales autem Poetae scio ego, nihil blandius, nihil mollius, nihil enervatius, nihil denique turpius!*" An indication at the very least of a non-superficial knowledge of this poetry in the West. A great French Orientalist of our own era, L. Massignon, had no hesitation, on this front, in noting his wonderment that every time he went from the reading of the collected poems of certain Arab poets (from Ibn Daud to Ibn 'Arabi) to those of Provençal or the *Dolce Stil Novo*, the presence of an affinity of poetic atmosphere, of a certain consonance of *Stimmung*, even of "convergences in their key ideas". Now, we know that Arabic literature was to reach its height on Spanish territory between the twelfth and thirteenth century (I am thinking here of the above-mentioned Ibn Tufayl, our own Ibn 'Arabi and the pre-picaresque poetry of Ibn Quzman, not to mention the philosophical work of one such as Averroes) and, in general line of principle, there is nothing to stop us thinking that it, through ways that are still in large part unknown but far from inconceivable, could have had an influence on the constitutive phase of some of the greatest European literatures; an idea which, for Asín Palacios was much more than a simple hypothesis – rather, we might say, an "operative postulate"...

Supported by an unchallenged competence and driven by a Castilian passion, he came to the point of assuring himself, thirty years prior to the discovery of the *Libro della Scala* that it was "morally impossible" to attribute the numerous similarities found by him between the overall legend of the *mi'raj* and the *Divine Comedy* to mere casual coincidences. With the publication of this present edition, Italian readers has an opportunity to form their own idea on the subject; as far as I am concerned, it is at least "reasonable" to concede that the Muslim contribution to the great architecture of the *Divine Comedy* cannot be considered to be limited, as our own Cerulli cautiously asserted, to that of a small ornamental "column"; perhaps, to remain within the same architectural metaphor, it would be legitimate to think that the very Christian edifice of Dante's masterwork hides, buried beneath the luxuriating decoration, more than an architrave deriving from Moorish origins (on this, see also the recent contribution by C. Segre in *Fuori dal mondo*, 1990). The ardent theoriser of the "Islamic eschatology" of the *Divine Comedy* would in any event peaceably have* subscribed to the affirmation of the indisputable Christian inspiration Dante's masterwork, which Cerulli exemplified, by taking as his example the argument of salvation:* the pre-eminent value of faith in Islamic soteriology against that of the works in Christian-Dantean soteriology; the arbitrary and unarguable* will of the Quranic God counterposed to the power of charity and love of the evangelical God: differences which undoubtedly configure a "fundamental difference of ethos" and of inspiratory ideality,* or of "*intention maitresse*", as L. Massignon would say. Both would then have peaceably agreed on what the Orientalist Francesco Gabrieli affirmed in Crocean terms on the poetic greatness of Dante, which, in his opinion, "is all to be found [...] in the poetic form stamped onto a material whose provenance is aesthetically undifferentiated, in the same way

that the quality of the metal or the marble in a masterpiece of statuary is undifferentiated.

For some time now there has, correctly, been a tendency to contest the classicist stance taken by a large part of historiography in relation to Western civilisation; through the initiative of some non-conformist researchers, we have now recovered for the complex identity of the West categories such as "exodus" or "rootlessness", which are not strictly ascribable to the Greco-Roman Roman-Christian tradition. Perhaps the moment has arrived to take a further step, to look, for example, also to the world of mediæval Islam, considering it not simply as a passive instrument of transmission of the philosophical heritage of the classical world. Here, needless to say, I am not proposing to embark on dubious propositions;* I am not proposing to set alongside the (today highly fashionable) "Jewish roots of modernity" a notion of improbably "Islamic roots". Rather we should be prepared to continue researching – with fewer ethnocentric prejudices and with greater determination – into the driving role of Islamic culture in many aspects of the mediæval West. Always bearing in mind that the Islamic world too, for many centuries perceived as being external to and radically opposed to the West, has a large part of its grounding in the Judaic-Christian tradition – beginning, as is known, with the many episodes and biblical characters which are found in the *Quran*, or with the identification of Jesus, the announcer of the "Hour" (*Quran* xlii, 61), of the common *Resurrector*.

The presentation of the first Italian-language version of the *Libro della Scala*, which is a sure testimony of the Western pilgrimage of the legend of the *mi'raj*, should be seen as a small contribution in this direction.

English version by Ed Emery