

NEW LIGHT ON DANTE AND ISLAM

Thirty-four years have passed since the *Discorso de recepcion* of the then young Arabist, don Miguel Asin Palacios, was presented in the Spanish Academy; and I still recall the impression of astonishment, admiration and almost alarm which the first reading of the *Escatologia musulmana en la Divina Comedia* aroused in my father, one of the first to spread the ideas of Asin in Italy—such was the impact of the novelty, the audacity, and the wide range of his thesis and his conclusions. I vaguely recall the discordant voices of both Orientalist and Dante criticism in the heated atmosphere of the centennial celebrations of 1921, the enthusiasm of the neophytes, the scandalised consternation of the idolators, and the profound echo of agreement and disagreement which Asin's book aroused, as surely no other publication of the centenary. Then, everywhere to some extent but above all in Italy, the voices of dissent prevailed, from those of the more or less reasoning and reasonable disbelievers to those of the early believers whose faith began to vacillate, as was the case of my father. Asin answered these, with lively and often cogent dialectic, in his *Historia y critica de una polemica*. Then the dispute languished and expired, leaving on both sides, as usually happens in these cases, a whole series of

misunderstandings which had not been clarified. Among Asin's non-Orientalist critics—even among the most learned of them, and perhaps in the very measure of their learning—the initial prejudice against that strange world remained invincible: that world aberrant in language, custom, place, and civilisation, which the erudite Spaniard had brought into abrupt contact with the Christian-Latin world, the only background against which the figure of Dante had customarily been seen. On the other hand, the conviction was firmly planted in Asin's mind that the opposition to his theory, especially from the Italian point of view, was moved not only (as was indeed quite true) by mental laziness, by *horror novi*, by intellectual *vitalde* in the face of the bitter new truth he proposed, but also and above all, by cultural nationalism, by the set purpose of defending at any price a national glory whose originality and hitherto unquestioned greatness had been disparaged. He had been at pains to point out at the end of his book that the poetic glory of Dante was in no way compromised by the close, continuous, and fundamental dependence which he believed he had found between Dante's vision of the other world and Islamic eschatology; even so, Italian pride in the absolute originality of the sacred poem had been hurt, and this, Asin thought, more than any other motive, had inspired the Italian reaction.

If, then, there are those who consider Italian nationalism the fundamental obstacle to Asin's thesis, let them understand that it is Italian aesthetic thought itself, which has become famous all over Europe, that forbids us to greet so coolly a problem which does not concern the excellence and singularity of Dante's art. Even if Dante owed to Ibn Arabi all that Asin believed (as we shall see, it is rather in another direction that his divinations have proved true), we Italians and lovers of poetry should not think him a bit the less great in what he and he alone, irreplaceably, has given us—Dantean poetry. Dante the poet is not assailable—anything but, from the aesthetic point of view—and the great Spanish Arabist was the first to recognise and proclaim this simple truth. It was rather from other points of view than this one (which would have been illegitimate) that the most serious attacks were made on his thesis, and the gravest doubts formulated. Did Dante know enough Arabic to be acquainted with all the material which the learned Asin had been able to produce for comparison with the Poem? Was he really more familiar with the Arabic-Moslem world than the average of his contemporaries? How could he know the abstruse works of an Ibn Arabi or an Abu l-Ala al-Ma'arri? What proof is there that these, or any other Arabic eschatological works were translated

into Occidental languages? These are all strictly historical problems in the field of cultural history, and they must be solved if the analogies which Asin amassed between Moslem and Dantean eschatology are to prove valid. Asin responded by proposing the possibility that Dante himself knew something of Arabic (but it takes far more than 'something', as we Arabists know only too well, to understand the complications of an Abu l-Ala and an Ibn Arabi!), by pointing out or thinking he could point out in the work of the Florentine a special interest for Moslem history and culture, and by postulating the probability, even if it could not be documented, that Alighieri had come into contact with Islamic eschatological texts in some translation, probably brought back to Tuscany by Brunetto Latini from his embassy of 1260 to the Spanish monarch. It was precisely this last point, i.e., the means by which the Islamic vision of the other world had been transmitted to Dante, that remained vague; it was the missing link in the chain which Asin had constructed piece by piece, with incomparable acumen and erudition, between Arabo-Judaic-Christian Spain of the thirteenth century and Italy of the trecento.

It is by now well known that today, at a distance of more than thirty years from the original presentation of the problem, the missing link has been found. A Spanish and an Italian scholar, working at opposite ends of the chain—quite independently, and, it appears, ignorant of each other's work until almost the end—have published during these years the Latin and the French versions of a Spanish-Arabic eschatological text. It has been proved that the translations were known in fourteenth-century Italy, and the problem of Dante and Islam thus appears in an entirely new light. I have called this text *Liber Scalae*, *Livre de l'Eschiele Mahomet*, or *Libro della Scala*, according to the various titles of the curious work in Latin, old French, or Italian. It arose, as was to be expected, in the court of Alfonso at Seville, by order of the ruler himself, true 'king of the men of two (or three) religions', even more so than his grandfather, the conqueror of Toledo. Not long before 1264, Abraham Alfaquin, the Jewish physician and scholar already known to us as the translator of Ibn al-Haithjam and Az-Zarqali, had translated by order of the king, from Arabic into Castilian, this popular version of the *Miraj*, or voyage of Mohammed through the realms of the other world; and on this Castilian version of Abraham, which is lost, the Italian Bonaventura of Siena, also by order of the king, based both of the parallel versions in French and Latin, one of which is preserved in a manuscript at Oxford, the other in manuscripts in Paris and the

Vatican; these have been published simultaneously by Enrico Cerulli in Italy and by José Muñoz Sendino in Spain.¹

Except for the brief introduction of Bonaventura of Siena, which explains the origin and the justifying purpose of his work (*ut Machometi non minus abusiva quam derisoria contra Christum temere attemptata notescant et quibus Christi fidei veritas comparata mendaciis delectet . . .*), here we have before us a faithful and literal version, according to the methods of translation of the time, of an Arabic eschatological work, of which the original is probably lost, but which must have been very popular in thirteenth-century Spain. This original must have had affinities with other oral eschatological texts reproduced or summarised by Asin in his book, but it surpasses them all in its fulness and its sustained co-ordination, and, here and there, in a certain literary patina which is not without effectiveness. The plot is well known: Mohammed is awakened from his bed in Mecca by Gabriel, made to mount the winged steed Buraq, led to Jerusalem, and thence made to ascend the shining stairway which gives the title to the book of the otherworldly realms. He sees the angel of death, then the angel in the form of a cock, and the one half fire and half snow, he crosses the eight heavens, encountering in each a prophet, and finally comes to the throne of God; then he visits Paradise, with its delights of nature and of love, and receives from God the Koran and the precepts of daily prayer and fasting which are later mitigated by his supplications; he then goes on to the inferno, traverses its seven lands and contemplates its various torments, while Gabriel explains the Day of Judgment and the trial of the bridge of As-Sirat. When he has returned to earth, he tries in vain to persuade the Coreisciti of the truth of his vision, which at his request is transcribed and authenticated by Abu Bekr and Ibn Abbas. The character of the original is here faithfully preserved, not only because of the literal style of the version, which reproduces, albeit with distortions, a great quantity of names and places, and whole Arabic phrases of eulogy and prayer, but also because of the absence of any comment or apologetic gloss from the Christian point of view; and thus the text of popular Islamic faith, if stripped of its Romance linguistic vestments, remains in all its ingenuous and always a bit crude integrity.

Now this work, which the king made accessible to the Christian Occident in no less than three versions, perhaps more because of his

¹E. Cerulli, *Il Libro della Scala, e la questione delle fonti arabo-spagnole della Divina Commedia*, Citta del Vaticano, 1949.

J. Muñoz Sendino, *La Escala de Mahoma*, Madrid-Barcelona, 1949.

known cultural curiosity than his apologetic zeal, was effectively diffused via numerous routes, and we can gather its reflexes in Spain, France and Italy. According to Cerulli, it was from the Castilian version of Abraham, which has not come down to us, that San Pedro Pascual derived his broad summary of Mohammed's journey to the other world, in the treatise, *Sobre la seta Mahometana*, to which Asin had pointed as a possible source for Dante. On the basis of precise data or plausible conjecture, the three known manuscripts of the version of Bonaventura, all from the beginning of the fourteenth century, carry us to Brittany (the Latin of Paris), to England (the French of Oxford) and to Provence (Vatican Latin), and demonstrate that the *Liber Scalae* had soon pushed beyond the Pyrenees. And as for Italian knowledge of the work, if the date 1264 for the translation makes us abandon the theory of a transmission by Brunetto Latini, whose embassy to the court of Alfonso X was earlier by four years, still two explicit citations by Italian writers, one of whom broadly summarises it, show that it was known in the mid-fourteenth century and at the end of the fifteenth. The apologetic work of the Apulian Franciscan, Roberto Caracciolo, was already well known; under the Aragonese dynasty at Naples, he had inserted into his *Specchio della Fede* a summary of a 'book called by the Saracens *Helmaerich*, or, in the vernacular, the Stair of Mohammed', and beyond the shadow of a doubt this is our book, known to the writer in the Latin text. But the Tuscan poet Fazio degli Uberti brings us much closer in time and place to Dante. Describing in his *Dittamondo* of about 1350 the Moslem paradise, he cites, and indeed by its title, our *Libro della Scala* (to Cerulli goes the credit for having first pointed out this very important passage):

*Ancor nel libro suo che Scala ha nome
dove l'ordine pon del mangiar loro
divisa e scrive quivi d'ogni pome . . .*²

What Asin would have given for that tercet!

Thus the chain is completed. Occidental Europe, and more precisely fourteenth-century Italy, possessed an ample, faithful, and detailed version of the Islamic vision of the other world, a version which any and all could read, without knowing a word of Arabic, in Spanish, French, or Latin. Fazio certainly read it, and this he recorded in his mediocre poem, an historic-cosmographic-legendary *mélange* which in itself is an evident

² Yet in his (i.e., Mohammed's) book, called the Stair,
Where he places the order of their (i.e., the Blessed's) eating,
Devises and writes there of each apple (i.e., the fruit of Paradise) . . .'

Dantesque imitation. Even if his great countryman and model did not cite it in so many words, can we deny the likelihood, suggested by the identity of the subject matter, by so many specific analogies, and by a means of transmission which has now been historically ascertained, that Dante had seen the *Liber Scalae*? Cultural nationalism—or, as I prefer to interpret it, mental laziness put together with diffidence and the lack of positive proof—can no longer deny that the brilliant hypothesis of thirty years ago has at last a splendid confirmation, at least in the intuition on which it was based.

But the clearing up of a positive fact is one thing; its evaluation, its correct place, and its importance in the whole body of this material, are problems of quite another nature. How are we to evaluate the probability, now almost a certainty, that this *summa* of Islamic eschatology was not unknown to the author of the *Commedia*? What conclusions are to be drawn from this comparison, substantially made already by Asin himself (inasmuch as most of the separate elements of this *miraq* were already present in the other Arabic materials collected and studied by Asin); what conclusions can justly be drawn from a comparison of the oriental ‘source’ and the poem of Dante? Here, I repeat, purely aesthetic considerations are out of the question, but there is the whole problem of psychological, moral, and cultural affinities, in which the comparison is not only legitimate, but opportune and obligatory. If what, and how, Dante took from these models has no importance for the judgment of Dante as a poet, it is of great importance in clarifying the intellectual genesis of his conceptions, the fundamental religious position of his spirit, and the processes of selecting and maturing these foreign elements within his assimilative culture. In other words, what was the extent and what the limits of this contact between Islamic eschatology and the ‘content’ (aesthetically speaking) of the Dantesque vision? What and how many specific reactions did it arouse in the genesis of the poem? Can one speak of direct, material, and almost mechanical derivation; of equalities in concept if not in aesthetic quality; of the exclusive or prevalent influence of the earlier Arabic on the Vision of the Italian poet?

This more profound and delicate aspect of the poem has engaged only one of the two scholars who have published the *Book of the Stair*. For the other, Muñoz, the relation between the *Scala* and the *Commedia* is simply that of ‘model and copy’, a copy of course improved, embellished, spiritualised, but always a direct and unequivocal copy, inconceivable without that precedent. In other words, the existence of the *Liber Scalae*

and its proved transmigration into the world of Dante suffice to establish automatically, almost mechanically, the direct dependence of the latter on the former in the whole long series of analogies which Asin had already enumerated in his time: analogies of structure, of ethical and theological concepts, of images and of episodes; from the architecture of the three otherworldly regions, to the system of punishments, to the delights of the terrestrial paradise, and to the dazzling visions of the celestial paradise. Muñoz considers that the 'chain' of Asin, as established by the similarities and the dependences, cannot be disputed; only one link was missing, the proof of the actual, historical vehicle of transmission; now that this is found in the *Liber Scalae*, the question is closed, and every element of the Islamic vision even vaguely resembling the Dantesque vision constitutes a direct nexus between original and imitation, source and derivation—almost cause and effect. In this case the Divine Comedy would indeed recall the great mosque at Cordova, where the forest of moorish columns has been adapted to the cult of the Christian Trinity.

Cerulli, on the other hand, has a more cautious historical sense (he certainly has no nationalistic bias); he does not maintain that the proved knowledge of a Moslem eschatological text in Italy, and the probability that Dante knew it, suffice in themselves to provide the key to, not the poetry, but the spirituality, and indeed to the degree of inventiveness, of Dante. To the specific problem of 'Dante and Islam' he turns, for the rest, only at the end of a whole imposing research on 'Moslem eschatology and Medieval Occidental writers', in which he has assembled and analysed every trace, even independent of the *Liber Scalae*, of the knowledge of Islamic conceptions of the other world among Christian writers of the Occident: from Eulogius and Alvarus of Cordova to Pietro Alfonso and to the *Collectio Toletana*, from Guglielmo d'Alvernia to Jacques de Vitry and Guglielmo da Tripoli, from Ramon Marti to Lullo, from Thomas of York to Roger Bacon. The resulting picture is extraordinarily complete, and extends from the crude apologetic of a popular sort, in which the worldliness and sensuality of the paradise of the Koran run wild (from the Christian point of view it would have been far more difficult to attack the hell), to the philosophical speculation which is perhaps confused by, but is not unconscious of, the strength of Moslem thought for the spiritualisation of the punishments and joys of the other world, for the conciliation of orthodoxy and a superior conception of the Beyond. The limit of this medieval Christian interpretation of Islamic thought is attained by the school of Oxford, which examines and senses with considerable exactness

the struggle of an Avicenna and an Averroes to put philosophical beatitude *in intelligibilibus* alongside the eschatology of the Koran, and, of course, by Raimundo Lullo, the great thirteenth-century interpreter of the Arabo-Islamic world who went directly to the sources and was able to offer to his contemporaries a most genuine and complete picture of Moslem thought, and, in particular, of Moslem eschatology.

But let us descend from this vast general inquiry (which would suffice to make Cerulli's work exceptionally valuable) in order to re-examine the direct relation between Dante and Islam, as a prelude to a concrete evaluation of the influence of the *Scala* on the *Commedia*. In considering the complex of Dante's knowledge of Moslem religion, science and civilisation, we arrive at a much more modest level. Historically, the episode of Mohammed in the twenty-eighth canto of the *Inferno* is not very significant; here he does not emerge from the traditional figure attributed to him in the medieval Occident; infrequent, and for the most part indirect—they are taken from Albertus Magnus and St. Thomas—are the citations, in Dante's doctrinal works, of such Moslem authors as the astronomers Albumasar, Alfragano and Alpetragio, the philosophers Algazel, Avicenna and Averroes (in any case available to him only in Latin versions). We are, in short, forced to deny the special familiarity with or interest in the Arabo-Islamic world which some would point out in Alighieri, whose acquaintance with that world seems no more than average for the informed man of his time. Even so, and just because he was the 'great clerk' (i.e., scholar), the highly cultivated intellectual of his time, certain Islamic philosophical and ethical concepts, especially eschatological ones, seem to have filtered through to Dante quite independently of the *Liber Scalae*; for example, Avicenna's theory and terminology of light, expressly mentioned in the *Convivio*; or the passage of the *Collectio Toletana* about the spot on the brow of the newly come soul, washed away by the angels when he enters Paradise, which immediately recalls the seven P's of sin (*peccato*) gradually erased from the brow of Dante as he ascends the precipices of Purgatory. But to come at last to the *Liber Scalae*: Dante, it is now most probable, knew it. How did it serve him as a general inspiration? What particular influence did it have?

Cerulli has answered this question with extreme prudence, out of deference not to Dantists, but to the truth itself. He thinks that reading the Islamic Vision can have constituted for Dante *one* ulterior incentive to oppose to the supposed sacred text of Islam (for such the *Scala* was thought to be) a Christian poem about a voyage into the Beyond, 'surpassing

by the truth of faith and the mastery of art, in this greatest argument of the religious epic, the picturesque images of the Moslem paradise and hell'; without forgetting for an instant, however, the primary part played in the genesis of the poem by the *Vita Nuova*, or rather, by the *new life* itself, by transfigured love and the desire to say of his Beatrice 'what had never been said of anyone'. Also under this general influence we may attribute to the Moslem precedent the patient and benign guide, interpreter of all the queries and doubts (Virgil and Beatrice with Dante, as Gabriel with Mohammed); the frequent and precise questions of cosmography; and the 'local colour' of the exotic utterances of Pluto and Nembrotte, which recall Arabic phrases in the Romance versions of the *Scala*. But let us face the volley of particular analogies. In reviewing the most relevant, Cerulli never forgets to underline the importance of each of them, not separately, but as uniting with the other multiple sources of inspiration which were accessible and familiar to the culture and fantasy of Dante; the classical, Biblical and Christian sources of his spiritual formation (since any special familiarity with the Arabo-Islam world on his part is, as we have seen, only an illusion), which could often furnish the same suggestion as the *Scala* for this or that detail of his vision. Such is the case with Dante's eagle of Jupiter, where the well known classical and Biblical motives can be integrated and fused with the Moslem image of the vast angelic cock which stands in the seventh land but holds his head and comb close to the throne of God and sings his glory. Thus the divine stair of Saturn, the ladder of the colour of gold, is obviously inspired first of all by the Jacob's Ladder of the Bible, but this does not exclude the contributory inspiration of Mohammed's stair that stretched from Jerusalem to paradise, the stair that gives the *Liber Scalae* its name. Thus the trial of Sirat, the slender bridge before paradise, under which yawns the abyss of hell, seems to Cerulli to have a parallel in the trial by fire which Dante undergoes for accession to the terrestrial paradise, in the depiction of which Moslem motives appear more perceptible and suggestive, though we must not forget the part played first by the Biblical legends of Eden, and the classical one of the innocent and blessed pristine state of humanity:

*Quelli che anticamente petaro
l'eta dell'oro e suo stato felice
forse in Parnaso esto loco sognaro.*³

³'They who in ancient times proclaimed in song
The golden age, and its auspicious state,
Perhaps on Parnassus dreamed of that place.'

Dante himself points out to us in these verses the images which fluctuated before his high fantasy, when he created, in immortal tercets, 'the divine forest, thick and live'; and yet one cannot wholly deny that suggestions were evoked, in the course of that creative process, by the recollection of the 'Paradise of Delights' of the *Libro della Scala*, with its rather cold and infantile splendours, with the double fount which in Dante becomes the Lethe and the Eunoë, with the episode of the arrival of the new groups of the souls of men and the beautiful predestined brides who amorously await them. But even in this case the possible Islamic 'component', combining with so many elements far more alive and present in the mind of the poet, is not to be exaggerated beyond reason or probability, nor urged upon us as the determinative motive of inspiration. Did Dante have to read in the *Scala* of the houris of Mohammed in order to dream of seeing again in the glory of the terrestrial paradise her who had been the supreme spiritual experience of his youth, the polar star of his life? Thus Cerulli runs lightly over the whole gamut of analogies (not because of superficiality; rather, delicacy and finesse of treatment), testing each against his fundamental principle, that, we repeat, of admitting the possible combination of the Moslem motive with a multitude of other sources which always had precedence in the mind and spirit of Dante, even if he almost certainly knew the singular text which opened the door to a world that remained otherwise wholly marginal to his spirit, foreign and actually opposed to the basic values of his Latin and Christian soul.

Thus, in the last analysis, when we judge the relationship of Dante to the *Liber Scalae*, or to any other element of Moslem eschatology which, by whatever means, can have reached the poet (and here we are thinking especially of the polemic and apologetic tracts of the *Collectio Toletana*), we must not forget what Cerulli clinches in his particularly fine last pages; namely, that 'such motives of inspiration and such narrative details as can be traced back to Arabic sources have entered into the *Commedia* as part of a construction totally and exclusively inspired by a different and unique ideal motive: the Christian one'. And of this basic difference of ethos—the establishment of which has all the obvious naturalness but also the problem-solving effectiveness of Columbus's egg—he illustrates only an aspect: the absolute importance of *faith* for Moslem soteriology as opposed to that of *works* in the Christian-Dantesque; the stress on charity and love in Christian conception (*regnum coelorum violenza pate . . .*) as opposed to the indisputable and arbitrary will of God in Islam; or the different value of prayer: Islam's heavy ritual of obligation, Christianity's live force of love that

works together with divine justice. We cannot speak of model and copy, even if we accept as possible the material transposition of certain images and concepts; nor of simple 'spiritualisation', in the presence of a fundamental inspiration and attitude so radically different. The Italian editor of the *Liber Scalae* therefore concludes that the sacred poem cannot be compared to the mosque at Cordova, consecrated today to a different cult from the one for which its admirable structure arose. To express more aptly with an architectural symbol Dante's relationship with the Moslem world, we may turn rather 'to that Arabo-Spanish column which is inserted, inscribed with the name of its Moslem artisan, into a structure historically and artistically Christian, both in the whole and in every detail—the cathedral of Pisa: the testimony of another glorious art, taken up episodically in the formal realisation of a different formal and religious ideal'.

The most recent and thorough-going study of the old problem first posed by Asin and now re-examined in the light of the most recent discovery carries us to this point. As we have said, the two editors of the *Liber Scalae* are far from agreeing in their conclusions, and in the use that they have made of their text. Which of the two to follow in attitude and direction (it would be superfluous to point out which of the two seems in the right to the writer of these lines) will depend on individual critical and common sense, reinforced, we may add, by immediate familiarity with the work, the thought, and the art of Dante, a familiarity which the great Asin most certainly had, unlike some of those who have returned to the thesis. But even in their anithetical conclusions, the two worthy editors of the Alfonsine *miraq* have gone an important part of their road together. In fact, precisely that common stretch of the road, imposed by positive facts beyond any differences of interpretation, indicates the extent and the limits of Asin's posthumous triumph.

Alone in the face of the indifference and hostility of the incredulous, the master of Madrid had affirmed that the Moslem eschatological beliefs he had collected and analysed in the most disparate fields of Arabic literature—traditionalist and theological, mystic and edifying, learned and popular—had not been hidden, by an iron curtain of different language and civilisation, from the curiosity of the Latin Occident. He had traced to the outermost limits then known the filtering of this Oriental patrimony into the Romance world, and, clearing with a bound of intuitive faith every lacuna, he had seen it crop up, often with astonishing analogies, in the greatest work of art of the Christian Middle Ages. This vein of Arabic

eschatology, like the course of the mythical Alpheus, seemed to disappear underground in Spain only to re-emerge later in Italy, moulded into immortal forms. The course of this subterranean passage seemed a mystery, aggravated by the fact that one could not know which of the various sources investigated by the scholar could have reached by unknown paths this unexpected destination. Today the problem is at once clarified and simplified. Such abstruse and untranslated texts of high Arabic literature as those of an Abu l-Ala al Maarri or an Ibn Arabi did not come directly to the attention of Dante; but probably under his very eye, and certainly into his immediate environment and into the cultural atmosphere which he breathed, there had come a product of popular Arabic literature, at once pleasant and edifying, broadcast in these Romance language versions by the creative curiosity of the Spanish king. By these means, and probably by them alone, we may speak of an indirect contact, otherwise inconceivable, between Dantesque culture (by which I mean both that of his society and that of the poet himself) and the huge mass of Arabic materials assembled by Asin, the very vastness and variety of which was an obstacle to the acceptance of his thesis; in short, an indirect contact over a path now perfectly identified. Up to this point and in these terms, the intuition of Asin appears to all of us today luminously confirmed. Beyond that point, there are various and varying opinions about what Dante scholarship is to make of such facts as have been established; there are those, as we have seen, who consider that the demonstrated contact fully confirms the preponderant and decisive part claimed by Asin for Islamic eschatology in the greatest Christian poem; but there are also those who, on the other hand, inquiring and comparing more subtly, admit generic suggestions and specific contributory motives and images—but these to a spirituality, a culture, and a fantasy not only 'superior' but radically different.

Be that as it may, let us accept the part on which we agree rather than insist on that about which we are divided. Now that it is brought to light by the parallel work of a Spanish and an Italian scholar, let us hail this new mesh in a solid and elastic net of international medieval culture which in fact (be it said to our confusion) did not know severing iron curtains and traversed the greatest physical and spiritual distances with a co-operation of intellectual forces that might well be the envy of our UNESCO. Let us think once more, for an instant, of this magic chain: an Arabic *miraq*, a Spanish king, a Jewish physician, an Italian notary. . . .; and the fantasies of the Beyond which had flowered obscurely in the heart of Arabia encircle the Mediterranean, penetrate to the sweet Tuscany of

the Stil Novo, and contribute to enrich the fertile humus whence will spring the supreme flower of the *Comedy*, the sacred poem upon which both Heaven and Earth have placed their hands. Heaven and Earth of Christian civilisation, we repeat, but not without some reflection of the starry Heaven traversed by the mysterious Buraq on the holy night of the Moslem Ascension; and of the Earth of Islam, and of Spain in particular, where two civilisations met and mingled in marvellous symbiosis, and where a solitary scholar divined, thirty-five years ago, the fascinating transmigration which is now documented.