INTERDISCURITY, RELIGIOUS MYTH, AND CLAIMS TO TRUTH
IN THE LIBRO DELLA SCALA AND THE COMMEDIA

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the possibility of a richer reading of Dante's *Commedia* through the lens of the Islamic tradition of the *mi’râj*, the narratives of the journey of Muhammad through the spheres of the heavens and of hell. The analysis focuses on the relationship between the *Commedia* and the *mi’râj* text known to the West as the *Libro della Scala* regarding the question of a literary crafting of a truth claim. The thematic overlap between the *Libro della Scala* and the *Commedia* suggests that the two texts share similar concerns about the production of a truth-claim within a textual framework.

Departing from previous criticism on the indications of Dante's affinity for Islam, this study instead suggests a look at the ways in which the texts converge and diverge on various points that affect the claim to truth. This thesis does not assume that Dante had direct access to the *Libro della Scala*, and as such it approaches the analysis from the perspective of discursive parallels, rather than textual references. The discourses that shape the claim to truth of each text are the questionable relationship between dreams and truth, the nature of sight in a visionary experience, the presentation of the right path of faith to the visionary, and the necessity of the transition from visionary to guide. By understanding their mutual participation in these discourses, this study shows that the richest reading of the *Commedia* has an eye to the interdiscursive influence of Islam in the Christian world.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapters:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Historical and Critical Background</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Seeing God: Visions and Dream-Visions</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Keeping to the Straight Path of the Faith</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Conclusions: Reading Truth in Religious Myth</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Questions of intertextuality and the variety of types of textual influence in Dante’s Commedia seem to call forth an endless corpus of scholarship. As scholars begin to broach the question of Dante’s sources, influences, allusions, and contextual or cross-cultural references, the possibilities continue to broaden the scope of our understanding of Dante’s contextual frameworks. It is clear that Dante’s text is not purely from his own imagination, and in fact, in typical medieval rhetorical fashion, the poem often relies on references to authenticate its authority on certain poetic and theological matters. While the poet often seems to veil his sources in his manipulation of their rhetoric, he also finds it beneficial to drop names here and there. Dante’s poem exhibits a variety of relationships with the different sources – both direct and indirect – that inform his poetry, and his adaptable expression of these liaisons indicates an ambivalent relation to them. This ambivalence toward his predecessors elicits some specific questions regarding his usage of certain types of intertextual references. What is the specific relationship between Dante’s text and the reference in question? What kind of authority is being elicited from this text? What kind of truth does it claim, and what is Dante’s relationship to that truth? How is the text presented within the poem, and how does this presentation
affect its reading? In this introduction to my research, I will address the presence of a variety of myths in Dante’s account, and it is in light of the above questions that I will begin to interrogate Dante’s treatment of two types of mythic texts: literary and religious.

The use of the term “myth” to designate both literary and religious texts can carry some unintended connotations. I do not consider myth to be a mere falsehood, a simple fiction to be discounted in any discussion of truth narratives. In his *Glossary of Literary Terms*, M.H. Abrams writes of myth and mythology, “A myth is one story in a mythology – a system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group,” and, later, “It can be said that a mythology is a religion in which we no longer believe.”

While this is an effective definition of many types of myth, I would extend this definition cross-culturally, removing it from any temporal or geographical conditions. Abrams’ definition is consistent with this study in its insistence on the necessity of belief to the functioning of myth, and its location of mythic truth within a particular culture. He contends, however, that myths no longer hold any truth-value, indicating a culture’s former belief in the myth and subsequent progress beyond belief. Myths, then, are considered false expressions that one culture once held to be true. Neither multicultural nor contemporaneous myths are included in this diachronic understanding of mythology. For the purposes of the present study, I would like to consider myth as a story expressing certain beliefs that a particular culture holds to be true; stories that, considered cross-culturally, hold differing levels of validity and evoke different types of truths. It is through such a definition of myth that I will consider the myths investigated here – including Dante’s own.

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The consideration of myth in this study will approach mythic texts as those texts that have a particular relation to a claim to truth and to a belief in that truth. The use of the term myth here to designate a certain textual genre is specific to the nature of that claim and of the belief that follows from it. The myths present in Dante’s narrative aid in the construction of his authority as a true poeta-theologus, and it is for this reason that my discussion of Dante’s claims to truth will turn to the myths that help to authenticate the claim he makes.

Dante’s *Commedia* is clearly the work of an extraordinarily inventive mind, and questions of intertextuality in its composition are identifiable as primary tools for understanding the complex meanings intertwined in the poem. It is in this light that I wish to tease out a few of the threads that weave Dante’s intricate allegory. Indeed, this study seeks to identify some of the *Commedia*’s mythic pre-texts — those texts that directly or indirectly inform his claims to his own poetic and religious validity. That is, the claims to truth professed in his pre-texts serve to bolster Dante’s own assertion of truth. In identifying and analyzing these pre-texts, Dante’s differing relationships to his direct and indirect intertexts and his usage of myth to access particular types of cultural truths will come to light. I intend to explore in particular the highly disputed relationship between the Islamic religious myth of the *mi’raj*, Muhammad’s Night Journey recounted in the *Libro della Scala*, and the theological allegory of the *Commedia*. In this introduction to my research, I will first familiarize the reader with Dante’s use of images that are particularly evocative of the *mi’raj* literature. In the presentation of these corresponding images I will begin to examine the role of these images in Dante’s affirmation of the truth of his own account.
In a meditation on the crossover of imagery employed by the two texts, I will introduce the possibility of readings that remove Dante from a cultural context that stands as exclusively Christian, Italian, and Western. By considering Dante's *Commedia* within the cross-cultural and cross-religious discourses of medieval Mediterranean culture, new threads that include, rather than overlook, the complex relations of multiculturalism in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries will emerge. These new threads weave together a richer picture of the cultural context of the *Commedia*.

As stated above, Dante employs different types of myth to assert his claim to different types of truth in the *Commedia*. The primary type of myth that will be the focus of this investigation is religious myth, but it is notable that no discussion of myth in the *Commedia* can exclude a look at Dante's well-researched use of literary or poetic myth. A brief consideration of the use of literary myth will indicate the difference in function between the two kinds of myth.

Literary myth for Dante becomes a means for establishing himself as an authority on poetry: he stakes a claim to a certain authenticity as a poet through references to the classical tradition of poetry. Dante's use of the myths of the poets of classical antiquity does little to disguise its intent: clearly the vernacular poet wishes to insert himself into the tradition from which these Latin poets hail. Dante states this explicitly himself in his physical encounter with his poetic predecessors in Limbo: he is approached by such literary giants as Homer, Horace, Lucan, Ovid, and, of course, Virgil, and feels fit to consider himself "*sette tra contanti senso*" [*Inferno* IV.102: "sixth amid so much"]
wisdom]). \textsuperscript{2} Dante, too, asserts his status as the sesto tra cotanto senno in a less apparent yet still quite direct fashion in his most notable revision of Ovid's poetry. It is in Dante's very imitation of the Latin poet that he indicates his theft of his predecessor's crown, effectively rewriting the\textit{Metamorphoses} in\textit{Inferno} XXIV and XXV.\textsuperscript{3} His most direct associations are with Virgil, whose poetry is admittedly an inspiration and a model, and to whom he unabashedly announces his debt, referring to him as\textit{maestro} throughout the entire journey. Dante's direct contextual references to the poets from which he draws his literary inspiration make clear his affirmation of his own position within their tradition as producers of literary myth.

While he firmly and directly establishes himself as a poet of the tradition of Virgil and Ovid, Dante is not always so direct about his assertion that his own poetry should count him sixth amid this circle; often he must rely on allusion to reinforce the point. Dante's Virgilian and Ovidian allusions are perhaps too numerous to count, and certainly too countless to enumerate here. There are, nevertheless, several prominent moments in which the\textit{Commedia} places itself squarely in line with the Latin mythic tradition, decorating the fiction of the poem with classical poetic flourishes. Recent collections of articles have been gathered to examine Dante's specific usage of Ovidian and Virgilian myth in a variety of cases from each of the three canticles.\textsuperscript{4} The myths of these familiar


authors of the classical tradition serve to grant Dante authority within their tradition: his pilgrim is Aeneas, searching for his past and future in his encounters with the shades in Elysium. He is Orpheus, following his lady-love into the Otherworld, charming those who hear his song into staying a while from enacting their eternal sentences. The poet is Arachne, weaving tales together to create a bold picture, and he is Pygmalion, sometimes undone by the beauty of his own work. Dante’s authority as a weaver of poetic myths is established and reiterated in the contextual references he sets forth throughout the entirety of the poem.

This reading of the Commedia as a poetic myth does not, however, sufficiently explain the poem’s use of various types of myth. While firmly establishing himself a poet on a par with his pagan sages, Dante believes himself to surpass them, not only in his style and frame of reference, but also in his theme, which derives from his authority as a poet of religious myth. While he culls his poetic authority from these authors of classical myth, Dante must gather his theological authority from a variety of other sources. Obvious among these is the Scripture, and in particular the tradition of the rapture of St. Paul, a popular tradition deriving from Biblical verse. Dante makes reference to this particular journey in an indirect comparison: “Io non Éneâ, io non Paulo sono” [Inferno II.32: “I am not Aeneas, I am not Paul”], cries the pilgrim in the dark wood. These doubts are immediately dispelled by Virgil, vindicating the pilgrim as a new Aeneas and a new Paul. The tradition of Paul’s vision of the afterlife derives from his mention of an ascension to the third heaven in II Corinthians, as well as the early

medieval accounts within the tradition known as the *Visio Pauli*. Medieval Christian accounts of the heavens and of hell abound, and the traditions contemporary with Dante’s authorship of the *Commedia* often find a way into the poem in various references.

While I do not wish to detract from the significance of Dante’s use of Scripture as a source of his theological authority, I intend to suggest another religious myth that affects Dante’s prowess as a poet of the Church: the Islamic tradition of the *mi’raj*. The *mi’raj*, the narrative of the mystical Night Journey of Muhammad such as that related in the French and Latin translations of the *Libro della Scola* (1264), serves in the *Commedia* as a theological myth with which the Christian *poeta-theologus* is in conversation. Deriving primarily from a particularly obscure Qur’ânic verse and the *hadîth* that elaborate it, the literature concerning Muhammad’s Night Journey describes Muhammad’s bodily ascension through the heavens to the Throne of God in a dream-vision. The verse reads as follows: “Glory be to Him Who made His servant to go on a night from the Sacred Mosque to the remote mosque of which We have blessed the precincts, so that We may show to him some of Our signs; surely He is the Hearing, the Seeing.” The verse was elaborated in many cycles in the Middle Ages, with the first account recorded in Ibn Ishaq’s eighth-century work *Life of the Prophet*. The tradition consists of two journey narratives: the first is the *isra’,* which traditionally describes the

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5 Eileen Gardiner has reprinted a version of the fourth-century account of the *Visio Pauli* in her chapter “St. Paul’s Apocalypse,” *Visions of Heaven and Hell Before Dante* (New York, NY: Italica Press, 1989), 13-46. Both the Biblical references and Gardiner’s account of the *Visio Pauli* will be discussed in chapters three and four.

6 As I discuss in chapter 2, in 1949 Enrico Cerulli and Muñoz Sendino separately published findings which concluded in favor of the likelihood of Dante’s access to and use of the text of the *Libro della Scala* and *La Escala de Mahoma*, the title of Muñoz’s study. For a comprehensive discussion of the possibility of the influence of this work on Dante, see Philip F. Kennedy, “The Muslim Sources of Dante?,” in *The Arab Influence in Medieval Europe*, eds. Dionisius A. Agius and Richard Hitchcock (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1994), 63-82.

Muhammad from Mecca to the Temple of Jerusalem, and the second is the *mi'raj* itself, which follows Muhammad’s ascent through the heavens. The general narrative of the *Libro della Scala* follows Muhammad on the *isra’*, then on his ascent through the spheres of the heavens, followed by a discourse with God at his throne, a descent through the realms of hell, and concluding with an account of a sort of middle space that in some senses resembles the Christian Purgatory.  

The suggestion of the presence of the *Libro della Scala* in the *Commedia* provides for a provocative reading of the construction of spiritual truth in the *Commedia*. One of the poem’s basic premises is to in fact show Christians the *diritta via*, the right path, which has been lost by so many pilgrims, asleep on their journey before returning home to God. It is at precisely such a moment that Dante commences his own account:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita} \\
\text{mi ritrovai per una selva oscura} \\
\text{che la diritta via era smarrita...} \\
\text{io non so ben ridir com’i v’intrai,} \\
\text{tanti’era pien di sonno a quel punto} \\
\text{che la verace via abbandonai.}
\end{align*}
\]

([*Inferno* 1.1-3, 10-12: “Midway in the journey of our life I found myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost... I cannot rightly say how I entered it, I was so full of sleep at the moment I left the true way.”])

While the debate on the question of Dante’s “sleep” in the opening of the canto remains unsettled, the “sleepfulness” of the pilgrim in these verses constitutes both a figurative “sleep” in sin and a literal sleep, referring to the medieval tradition of the dream-vision. The convention of the dream-vision in medieval poetry serves to relocate the authority of

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8 It is interesting to note that the *Libro della Scala* does not describe the Islamic belief in the period of Barzakh—the stage of life after death in which the soul waits for Judgment Day when the soul will finally cross as-Sirāt Bridge to its final resting place. The temporal nature of Barzakh is remarkable in comparison to the idea of Purgatory Dante creates in the *Commedia*, although the specific parallels are outside the scope of my current project.
the vision outside of the author and in the hands of a higher – or lower – author, be this
author Fate, the Muse, a demon, the body, or, as is likely the case in a religious myth,
God. Several other medieval predecessors of the _Commedia_ employ this convention in a
secular setting: both the French _Roman de la Rose_ and the _Tesoretto_ of Dante’s mentor
Brunetto Latini are allegories that employ the convention of the dream-vision to establish
their poetic truth-value.

This also seems to be the convention of the _Libro della Scala_: the Prophet
Muhammad begins his account, “I had long lay awake thinking about Our Lord’s religion
and, thereupon, began to sleep a bit; at that moment lo! the angel Gabriel came and
revealed himself to me.” Muhammad’s visitation by the angels seems to occur in a
dream, as religious myth of the Middle Ages is wont to do. The constitution of the Night
Journey of Muhammad as a dream-vision lends itself to this paradigm: Muhammad’s
experience of the heavens becomes a truly super-natural phenomenon granted to him by a
higher authority – God. As I will show in chapter three, however, there is an ambiguity
in the _Libro della Scala_ on the question of its construction as a dream-vision. While the
opening suggests the journey’s constitution as a dream-vision, other references in the
narrative suggest that it is in fact a corporeal vision. In the _Libro della Scala_,
understanding the relationship between dreams and visions and the establishment of
authority is essential for understanding the verification of the journey’s revelation of the
“straight path,” as Gabriel refers to it.

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10 _The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder_, 191.
Dante's theological myth pointedly takes "another path," as it were, from the tradition of the dream-technique. If sleep is indeed to be read literally in the first canto, what effect does it have that Dante's "dream-vision" is not a dream at all, but a waking vision? For Dante emphasizes here the point of the pilgrim's wakefulness, noting that he "found himself" in the wood, having been "so full of sleep" upon entering it.

This crucial distinction affects a shift in the reading of the religious myth: Dante's awakening at the beginning of the poem renders his experience not super-natural but perhaps hyper-natural, more in accordance with reality, less a "mere myth." Dante's rendering of his own narrative as such forces a reevaluation of the motif from which it diverges, that of the dream-vision. The Libro della Scala suggests this same turn in its ambivalences toward the wakefulness of the Prophet.

Dante returns to this emphasis on the point of his wakefulness at the end of the Paradiso, immediately before the apotheosis, as the distinction between poet and pilgrim arguably becomes less clear. He writes:

\[
\text{Qual è colui che sognando vede,}
\]
\[
\text{che dopo 'l soggno la passione impressa}
\]
\[
\text{rimane, e l'altro a la menie non riede,}
\]
\[
\text{cotal son io...}
\]

[Paradiso XXXIII.58-61: "As is he who dreaming sees, and after the dream the passion remains imprinted and the rest returns not to the mind; such am I..."]

He is notably like one who has had a dream, but this is no dream: his experience of God is a waking reality. His conspicuous references to his sleeplessness and wakefulness during these episodes of his journey frame the narrative as a hyper-reality, differentiated from that which his readers had perhaps presumed was the truth while in their dream-state. The theological myth of the Commedia is rendered more authentic by its pointed
countering of the dream-vision technique, a turn that is visible as well in the *Libro della Scala*.

This reversal of one of the conventional motifs of medieval journey narratives becomes quite remarkable if one is to presume that the *Commedia* is in conversation with texts of the *mi'raj* narrative. I discuss useful frameworks for considering the precise nature of this conversation in chapter two, and I plan to show how the levels of contact between the cultures enhance the metaphors of Dante's narrative. Dante's use of the phrase *diritta via* and *verace via* in these passages likewise highlights the depth of this contact: Dante has "awakened" to find that the way he had thought was straight when he was *pien di sonno* has in fact left both the pilgrim and his road *smarrito*, the path itself being lost and hidden in the time of Dante's sleep.

As noted above, Gabriel refers to the journey of Muhammad with the same phrase. Specifically, as he departs from the Prophet, he counsels, "just as you saw all these things, tell and reveal them to your people so that they may know them and keep to the straight path of the faith and may consider and mind how to enter paradise and preserve themselves from hell."11 This admonition to remain on the faithful right road is the advice not only to the Prophet, but also to the pilgrim-reader who has followed his journey. While the epithet "the straight path" is frequently used to denote the way of proper religious life, it features prominently in Islam, not only here in the words of Gabriel, but also in the opening of the Qur'ān, which reads, "Keep us on the right path. The path of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed favors. Not [the path] of those upon

whom Thy wrath is brought down, nor of those who go astray.” 

The importance of this epithet for Islam will be further discussed in chapter four.

The term “the straight [or right] path” not only features in the opening lines of the Qur’ân, it occurs not once but twice in the opening lines of the Commedia: la diritta via in line three, and la verace via in line twelve. Dante has gone astray from the right road, as the Qur’ân has explicitly warned against, and has lost the straight way. Virgil, as his guide, shows Dante the faithful way, which leads Dante through the subterranean hell, to the center of the Earth, through a passage to the base of the mountain in the hemisphere of water, up the mountain of Purgatory, and leaves him at the top tier of the mountain in the Garden of Eden. As did Gabriel’s to Muhammad, Virgil’s parting words grant active control to the pilgrim over himself:

Non aspettar mio dir più né mio cenno;
libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio,
e fallo fora non fare a suo senno:
per ch’io te sovrà te corono e mitiro.

[Paradiso XXVII.139-142: “No longer expect word or sign from me. Free, upright, and whole is your will, and it would be wrong not to act according to its pleasure; wherefore I crown and miter you over yourself.”]

Just as Gabriel has bestowed on Muhammad sovereignty over his actions and freedom to act as a guide on the right way, so Virgil has assured Dante that his will is now dritto, here translated by Singleton as “upright,” and that he has the ability to be his own sovereign. In a metaphorical sense, the journey back to the right path has come to an end.

In Dante’s theological myth, however, his journey on the right path has just now begun: Dante has been set on the right road and will continue on his journey moving

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12 The Qur’ân, Sura I, 6-7.
directly in line with God—literally, no longer turning to right or left as he has been doing on his way up to this point. It is Beatrice that will take Dante the rest of the way along the right road, which will lead the pilgrim directly to God. Dante again presents a revision of the motifs employed by religious myths such as the Libro della Scala: where Gabriel has made Muhammad a guide for others to keep to the straight path, Dante must first straighten his will, then walk the right road to God, and can then become the reader’s guide. Dante's text is presented as an accurate and actual account that is to walk quite literally la diritta via che era smaritta.

This thesis will present the relationship between the two texts in terms of the production of their truth claims. Due to the long-standing controversy surrounding the precise nature of this relationship, chapter two will consider the history of this debate and its inability to provide conclusive evidence of intertextuality. In this chapter I will suggest a new framework for considering the textual relationship, moving away from intertextuality and toward an understanding of their mutual participation in discourses regarding sacred truths. Chapters three and four will consider how the claims to truth of the texts are shaped in light of the issues raised above: chapter three will focus on the nature of dreams, visions, and the visionary experience, and chapter four will turn to the image of the straight or right path and its relation to narratives of prophet-calling. In chapter five I will present the conclusions of my analysis, as well as avenues for future research on the relationship between the Libro della Scala and the Commedia.
CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL AND CRITICAL BACKGROUND

The discussion of the influence of Islamic literary and philosophical traditions in thirteenth century Europe is a comparatively recent development in the vast scholarship conducted on Dante’s *Commedia*, sparked in 1919 by Miguel Asín Palacios’ controversial work *La Escatologia Musulmana en la Divina Comedia*. Asín Palacios’ seminal work and the ensuing controversy have raised questions and concerns regarding the dissemination of Islamic thought in late medieval Europe, with some of the key discussions hinging on Dante’s presentation of Islam in the *Commedia*. In the first chapter I began to consider the ambiguous relationship between Islamic and Christian images, models, and characters in the *Commedia* and in the *mi’rāj* literature, the account of Muhammad’s ascent through the heavens and descent through Hell in the *Libro della Scala*. In this chapter I will present the historical and critical background to the debate, focusing on the conclusions of scholars based on the presentation of Muslims and Islam in the *Commedia*, and I will situate my own work and methodology in relation to the existing criticism on the subject.

Many *dantisti* remain wary concerning the authenticity of the theoretical chain of transmission by which Dante may have known the *Libro della Scala*, as I will in this

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13 Shortly after its original publication in Spanish, this work was translated into English and printed in an abridged version by Harold Sunderland under the title *Islam and the Divine Comedy* (London: Hazell, Watson & Viney Ld., 1926). It is this edition of Asín’s work that I have used in this project.
project. Leaving aside the question of the authenticity of the theoretical chain of transmission, I intend to deal specifically with the question of affinities that has become the thrust of assumptions of and arguments for influence, and then to present the position of my own work in relation to the previous scholarship. I do not wish to suggest a definite relationship of direct influence between the two texts; rather, I aim to present the relationship as a product of what Maria Corti has called *interdiscorsivitá*, or interdiscursivity.\(^{15}\)

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: PHILOSOPHICAL, POETIC, AND RELIGIOUS CROSSOVERS**

The recovery of Arabic translations and commentaries of several Aristotelian texts previously lost to Western Christendom established the role of Arabic culture as a radical influence on late medieval philosophical study in Europe. The philosopher most noted for his commentaries was Ibn Rushd, known to the Christian West as Averroes. Designated “The Commentator” to complement his Greek predecessor’s title “The

\(^{14}\) Although I will remain skeptical of the suggested chain of transmission in the project, the realities of intellectual exchange in the medieval Mediterranean region are quite clear, and will be assumed in this thesis. Many examples of the passage of intellectual material between Islamic and Christian societies in both the Eastern and Western regions of the Mediterranean exist, as evidenced by such widely-read works as the translations of Islamic texts commissioned by Alfonso X in Spain, the missionary texts of Ricoldo da Montecreco, Ramon Martí, and Raymond Lluí, and the crusade and pilgrimage narratives of both cultures. Because of the intersections between these cultures due to trade, pilgrimage, crusade, missionary efforts, and other motivations for travel, the boundaries distinguishing one culture from the other were not so clearly defined as to isolate either. Because of the reality and the extent of cross-cultural knowledge-transfer in the medieval Mediterranean, I find the suggestion of Dante’s familiarity with the *Libro della Scala* compelling. Nevertheless, in this analysis I will remain skeptical due to the lack of philological evidence and indisputable argument.

\(^{15}\) In an interview I cite below, Corti defines her understanding of interdiscursivity as the passage of words, ideas, and beliefs between cultures in a period of cultural overlap. The term will be discussed at length at the end of this chapter. See both Corti’s “La ‘Commedia’ di Dante e l’oltretomba islamico,” *Belagor*, vol.50, no.3 (31 May 1995), 301-314, and “Maria Corti: Dante e l’Islam,” *Enciclopedia Multimedialle delle Scienze Filosofiche*, (Rai Educational, 20 April 2000). This interview was retrieved 12 December 2005, online at the Rai Educational website: <http://www.emsf.rai.it/interviste/interviste.asp?id=490>.
Philosopher,” Averroes was considered by contemporary Christian philosophers to be “the father of the theory of the double truth, according to which philosophy and religion can stand in contradiction, although, in fact, he never subscribed to this view.”

Alfred Ivry notes in his article on Averroes and Averroism:

He was accused of holding a double-truth theory, in which religion had its own truths which could contradict, though not invalidate, the truths of reason; and accused as well of believing that our minds belong essentially, and return at death, to a single eternal intelligence, a doctrine known as monopsychism.

‘Averroism’ came to be synonymous with these views, though the ‘double-truth’ accusation is a distortion of his position. Averroes, however, cannot be faulted for the particular view of him that the Latin West had, which it chose to have, on the basis of the translations of his work that it privileged. For Christian Europe may be seen to have been so taken with Averroes as the disciple and interpreter of Aristotle, that it disregarded his indigenous Islamic identity.

It is in this light that Dante, as his contemporaries, likely understood Averroes: as a proponent of the existence of a philosophical truth, through reason, which is separate from religious truth. In this way Christian Averroists “redeemed” Averroes of his stance as a heretic, for, they believed, he subjected his Islamic religious beliefs to his belief in reason.

Averroes and his commentaries were introduced to Western intellectuals at the court of Frederick II of Sicily. Michael Scot, the resident translator and court astrologer, translated the Averroist commentary into Latin, making the Aristotelian treatises accessible to the Western world for the first time. As Maria Rosa Menocal writes in her background to the Islamic influence in the Middle Ages, “Scot became a symbol of the new knowledge and a mysterious cult figure whose lasting fame after his death was

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assured by Dante’s and Boccaceio’s literary characterizations of him several generations later.”18 Scot’s work established not only himself, but also Averroes, Aristotle, and Frederick II, as subjects of overwhelming interest in thirteenth century Europe.

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries were a time of great intellectual expansion not only philosophically but also poetically, due in great part to the pursuits of the Norman kings and Frederick II in Sicily. As Karla Mallette notes in her literary history of Sicily, the Norman monarchs had conquered Muslim Sicily as it entered the heights of its cultural development. She writes that the Normans “used Arabic, alongside Greek and Latin, as a language of bureaucracy and culture. They hired Arabic artists and artisans to build their monumental architectural projects. And they encouraged the composition of Arabic poetry in their praise.”19 Employing the already established cultural and governmental traditions of the former Muslim community, the Normans nurtured an atmosphere of multiculturalism in their courts.

King Frederick II, like his Norman predecessors, took an active interest in all forms of learning: various subject areas, discussed by various scholars, from various cultural backgrounds. Most notably, Frederick maintained at his court a number of Muslim poets whose style played a crucial role in the development of poetry in the initial stages of the Italian vernacular literary tradition. In her discussion of the scuola siciliana and the Arabic poetry from which it in part derives, Menocal notes, “Frederick’s court was, indeed, a haven for those following that other path, and its poets wrote in an

ambience literally saturated with every aspect of Arabic culture." Mallette, diverging from Menocal here, notes that Frederick’s court was less of a haven for Arabic culture than that of the Normans before him. Instead, she astutely describes Frederick’s court as the birthplace of Christian vernacular poetic articulation; poetry, which had under the Normans been the primary domain of literary production in Arabic, becomes under Frederick the first mode of literary production in the Italian vernacular. Thus, Mallette observes that, in retrospect, “The Sicilian Romance poets wrote toward the Romance vernacular traditions of the European mainland, but they wrote from a land with more complex cultural affiliations.” Menocal, Mallette, and others argue that the tradition from which Dante’s own poetry comes emerges in part from an Islamic root, and the relationship between the cultural production of each civilization traces out a common history.

Beyond its role in the philosophical and poetic spheres, a third significant result of the crossover of medieval Islamic and Christian cultures is the dissemination of the translated mi’rāj literature. As described above, the Islamic tradition of the mi’rāj stems from the obscure opening verse of Sura XVII of the Qur’ān, which reads, “Glory be to Him Who made His servant to go on a night from the Sacred Mosque to the remote mosque of which We have blessed the precincts, so that We may show to him some of Our signs; surely He is the Hearing, the Seeing.” The word mi’rāj itself originally referred to “a ladder” and then “an ascent,” and finally to the Prophet Muhammad’s ascension through the Heavens to the Throne of God. The various traditions of this

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20 Menocal, Arabic Role, 121.
21 Mallette, Kingdom, 6.
22 Qur’ān, Sura XVII:1.
Qur’anic verse all derive from the hadīth, the body of literature based on the sayings or traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. The basic account includes the ascent through the spheres of the Ptolemaic heavens ending with the discourse with God at His throne, followed by the descent through the realms of Hell, and it concludes in a middle space perhaps analogous to the Christian Purgatory.

As I noted above, when Miguel Asín Palacios introduced the possibility of a relationship between the mi‘rāj accounts and the Commedia, his work immediately ignited a polemical debate regarding the notion of the influence of the Islamic world on the Christian West. Asín Palacios notes striking resemblances between Dante’s schema of the afterlife and that discussed in the tradition of the mi‘rāj, examining versions of the story from three cycles of that tradition and providing a highly detailed analysis of similarities that suggest, for Asín Palacios, a familiarity of the Italian poet with the preceding material. He discusses the likelihood of Muslim influence on Christian legends of the afterlife that precede the Commedia, and wonders about the channels through which Dante may have known about these Islamic traditions of the afterlife. In this way his work speaks to a greater cultural overlap, rather than a specific case of textual borrowing.

Interestingly, Asín Palacios notes that the parallels he has drawn should already speak to a definite transmission, as Dante’s presentation of the afterlife does not derive directly from either of his two most predominant eschatological source texts: the Virgilian or the Pauline visions of the otherworld. In a moment of rather obvious concern about his inability to furnish the proof of transmission, he writes, “The burden of proof would thus be on the Dantists, and it would be for them to explain the enigma of the
coincidences.”23 It is notable that he did not have access to the work that is often regarded as the primary candidate for influence on the Commedia as his work predated its discovery by three decades.

Despite the influential nature of his argument, the conclusions Asin Palacios draws from his analysis are not consistent with my understanding of the poet and his intentions in the Commedia. He makes the claim that Dante borrows the imagery from Islamic literature to show sympathy toward the Arab culture because of their expansive knowledge and their advanced methods. He states:

Was the mentality of Dante, as revealed in his works, antagonistic to the ready assimilation of these models? For, obviously, no contact, however close, could beget imitation if diversity in language, religion, race, philosophy and art had inspired the Florentine poet with an aversion to the culture of the Arabs. In answer to this question, it may at once be said that all the evidence points to the contrary.24

Asín Palacios concludes that, in this circumstance, imitation is indeed the highest form of flattery.

Like many of the scholars who have presented a case for Dante’s use of the mi’raj material, Asín Palacios argues his case in regards to Dante’s affinity for Muslims and Islamic culture, rather than simply discussing matters of the transference of knowledge across cultural bounds. The conclusions at which these scholars arrive become a means for justifying considerations of Dante’s motives in this usage, not an analysis of discourses that speak to a greater cross-religious pervasion. The discussions of the presence of the mi’raj in the Commedia have led scholars to one of two conclusions: either Dante used the material to praise Muslim culture, as Asín Palacios suggests, or he

23 Asín Palacios, Islam... Divine Comedy, 238.
24 Asín Palacios, Islam... Divine Comedy, 256.
uses it to refute its message, thus disparaging Islam and its followers. To treat the analyses of Dante’s affinities for the Arab culture, which stand as the most prominent works regarding his use of the mi’raj literature, a consideration of Dante’s placement of Muslims in the Commedia is necessary. This consideration will indicate that the question of affinities leads only to ambiguity, and is beside the point in a discussion of the greater context that informs the overlap of these texts: the multicultural discourses of the late Middle Ages.

DANTE’S TREATMENT OF MUSLIMS IN THE COMMEDIA: AMBIGUITY IN A MULTIRELIGIOUS SPACE

As discussed above, Asin Palacios suggests that Dante’s relationship to the mi’raj literature speaks to his affinity for the Muslim culture. This assessment of Dante’s treatment of Muslims and their culture is an oversimplification of their presence in the Commedia, as a few textual examples will demonstrate. I will look first to a general cultural reference before examining the placement of individual Muslims in the infernal circles. Dante makes a pointed reference to Islamic culture as his pilgrim is taken from upper to lower Hell, and he crosses into the city of Dis. The episode in which Dante and Virgil cross the gates is particularly revealing of Dante’s feelings toward Islam: the entire skyline of the city of Hell proper is dotted with mosques. Specifically, Dante writes when he first glimpses the city:

Maestro, già le sue meschite
là entro certe ne la valle cerno,
vermiglie come se d’ foco uscite fossero.

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[Inferno VIII.70-73: "Master, already I distinctly discern its mosques there within the valley, red as if they had come out of the fire."]

The dark, loathsome city of lower Hell is, architecturally, held by the ‘infidel,’ as the brief yet striking mention of the word meschite, mosques, implies, and this description of the landscape of lower Hell conjures a fierce indictment of the religion that Asin Palacios wants Dante to praise.

As pilgrim and reader continue to traverse the lowest regions of Hell, those of fraud, one discovers Muhammad among the disseminators of discord. In Inferno XXVIII, Muhammad presents himself to the pilgrim in a speech cloaked in haunting imagery. Muhammad is cleft in two, from his chin to just below his waist, and he constantly and eternally tears open his own wound as it heals itself. Muhammad’s speech begins with him pointing to this very fact:

Mentre che tutto in lui veder m’attacco
guardommi e con le man s’asperse il petto,
dicendo: "Or vedi con’ io mi dilacco!
vedi come stortiato è Mûometto!”

[Inferno XXVII.28-31: "While I was all absorbed in gazing on him, he looked at me and with his hands pulled open his breast, saying, ‘Now see how I rend myself, see how mangled is Muhammad!’"]

Asin Palacios uses the depiction of Muhammad in Hell as a telling example of Dante’s sympathies toward the Islamic culture. Specifically, he writes, “even Mahomet is not punished as the founder of Islam, but as a sower of discord and an author of schism.... The leniency of this punishment is significant of Dante’s sympathies for the Arabic culture.”25 This is not an accurate description of the sentiments of the Commedia. The “leniency” Asin Palacios cites is slight: Muhammad is still in the second to last bolgia, in

25 Asin Palacios, Islam... Divine Comedy, 259.
the second to lowest circle of Hell. While it is certainly notable that he is positioned on equal footing with Christians in the circle, there is simply little room for harsher treatment of the prophet. The punishment is not so harsh as to suggest a particular denigration, but it is likewise not so lenient as to suggest a position of honor.

It is, however, unusual to note that Muhammad is depicted clef in two as a schismatic, a peculiar punishment for the founder of Islam, the religion of the "infidel." Often scholars discuss the nature of Dante’s knowledge of Islam: many medieval intellectuals in the West thought of Muhammad as a lapsed Christian who had turned from his faith in order to create Islam. Furthermore, in the eighth bolgia the pilgrim meets not only Muhammad but also Ali, his cousin and son-in-law who was responsible for the schism of the Shi’i movement from Islam. Ali is likewise depicted clef in two with the schismatics: Muhammad introduces him, "Dinanzi a me sen va piangendo Ali, / fesso nel volto dal mento al ciuffetto" [Ig.XXVIII.32-33: "In front of me goes Ali weeping, clef in the face from chin to forelock"]. Suzanne Conklin Akbari notes in her entry on Islam in The Dante Encyclopedia that Ali’s positioning in the canto suggests a deeper understanding of Islam on the part of the poet. She writes:

It is striking that Dante’s identification of Ali as a schismatic implies that Islam itself is a form of Christianity, albeit a perverted version of it: only if Islam is, in some sense, still a form of Christianity can Ali’s transgression be seen as schism. The contrapasso (Inf. 28.142) experienced by Muhammad embodies the split in the Christian community caused by schism; the contrapasso experienced by Ali embodies the split in the caliphate, or headship of the Muslim community, which resulted from his rule.

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Akbari goes on to note that the early commentators on the *Commedia* frequently gloss or even ignore the positioning of Ali here, and she concludes, “Dante’s own treatment of Ali, an enigma to the early commentators, illustrates the poet’s more subtle understanding of the theological relationship between Christianity and Islam.”

Akbari’s suggestions here point to the same type of cross-cultural knowledge transfer that Asín Palacios proposed, despite his tendentiousness regarding Dante’s intentions.

While Asín Palacios’ conclusions are not entirely compelling, his suggestion of an influence between the *Commedia* and the literature of the *mi‘râj* still serves to provoke discussion, and the controversy was revisited shortly after Asín Palacios’ death with the discovery of the *Kitab al-Mi‘râj*, or *Libro della Scala*. In 1949 Enrico Cerulli and Jose Muñoz Sendino each brought to light a version of the *mi‘râj* literature that may provide the missing link in Asín Palacios’ chain. Cerulli published an edition containing the two subsequent translations, the French and the Latin, with extensive notes and a discussion of Dante’s access to and usage of these versions of the text. While Asín Palacios takes pains not to suggest that Dante had a particular textual knowledge of the *mi‘râj*, Cerulli and Muñoz Sendino find explicit examples of a potential intertexts, as well as a chain of transmission that places the text directly in the hands of Dante’s friend and mentor, Brunetto Latini.

Cerulli argues that the Christian West was introduced to this literature through a Castilian version of the Arabic *Kitab al-Mi‘râj*, that was translated into French and Latin by the Toledan school, and it is this version of the text, if any, with which it is believed...

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Dante would have been familiar.\textsuperscript{29} Dante's own mentor, Florentine notary and intellectual Brunetto Latini, was sent as an ambassador to the Toledan court while a fellow Tuscan, Bonaventura da Siena, carried out the translation of the Libro della Scala. The environment of cross-cultural intellectualism at the court, it is argued, influenced Latini's writings that in turn influenced Dante's.\textsuperscript{30}

It has been suggested, primarily by Maria Rosa Menocal, that Dante regarded those courts that endorsed this cross-cultural intellectualism with great discomfort and anxiety. Menocal directly characterizes the anxiety caused by these various Islamic influences:

What would have seemed to a conservative such as Dante to be the seduction by Averroism or its like of the best minds of his generation (or indeed, of his primo amico Guido Cavalcanti) must have been a horrifying and discouraging scene for Dante, since for him ... this intellectual seduction would ultimately result in spiritual perdition and eternal damnation.\textsuperscript{31}

According to Menocal's argument, in the mind of such a "conservative" Christian as Dante, the world of the "infidels" was spreading to destroy the moral fabric of his society. His own best friend, Cavalcanti, was in danger of losing his soul to this evil force bent on corrupting his righteous people. According to Menocal, Dante felt he had to do something.

Menocal argues that Dante's response to this anxiety was the Commedia. The great didactic poem was written at a time of unprecedented spiritual crisis, at least in the eyes of the less powerful Christian world, and was a necessary device for instruction of the true diritta via, to which Dante alludes in the opening lines of Inferno 1, calling the

\textsuperscript{29} See Kennedy, "Muslim Sources," 76-78, as well as Menocal, Arabic Role, 123.

\textsuperscript{30} For more on the specifics of Hispanic-Arabic influences on Brunetto Latini's Li Livres dou Tresor, see Maria Corti, "'Commedia'... l'oltretomba islamico," 305-308.

\textsuperscript{31} Menocal, Arabic Role, 125.
issue immediately to the reader's attention. In using the *mi'raj* as a countertext to his own work, Menocal claims, Dante presents his medieval reader with a binary choice: either take the path that I will show you or suffer damnation with the Muslims.

To examine the validity of Menocal's claims, I return to my consideration of the situation of some of the Muslims present in Dante's hell, as well as some of the more subtle cases of the aforementioned Christians who maintained close connections with Islamic thought and belief. The two most prominent Muslims who figure in Dante's hell are Averroes and Muhammad. The two represent the opposing poles of the positions that a Muslim can occupy in Dante's scheme of the *altretomba*: Averroes being in the first circle of Hell – Limbo, and Muhammad, alongside his cousin Ali, in one of the lowest regions. Muhammad and Ali have been discussed above: Dante's disdain for the division caused by both the prophet of Islam and his successor is evident and may suggest an anxiety felt by the Christian poet toward the founders of the two false "schisms" of Christianity.

A staunch devotee of Aristotle, Dante recognizes that he owes much of his philosophical study to the Muslim Averroes, and gives him a well-honored position: beside The Philosopher in Limbo, *Inferno* IV. In this sense, Dante shows great leniency toward this soul that should by all accounts be confined to some lower region for his belief in the religion of the "infidel." Averroes is in fact shown honor and credit, despite his involvement in the Islamic world, not only by being accorded a position in the highest sphere that a pagan can reach, but also by being granted a title befitting his work; Virgil introduces him as "Averois che 'l gran comentto feo" [*Inferno* IV, 144: "Averroes, who made the great commentary"]. Menocal emphasizes that despite the influence of his
work on Dante’s study of philosophy, Averroes is, ultimately, relegated to hell, however comfortable the situation and however good the company in which he finds himself.

Dante represents not only Muslim personages in his scheme of Hell, but also Christians who figure in the tale of the history of the Islamic influence on the West. The pilgrim witnesses, for example, Frederick II entombed among the heretics of *Inferno X*, Brunetto Latini scorched among the sodomites in *Inferno XV*, and Michael Scot twisted at the neck with the soothsayers and magicians in *Inferno XX*, all of whom have been previously noted for their role in the spread of Islamic thought. The personage of most interest to Menocal, however, is Guido Cavalcanti, Dante’s best friend who was influenced by Averroism, and whose father, in the realm of the heretics, recalls his memory in *Inferno X*. Menocal notes, furthermore, that within the poetics of the canto is interwoven Guido’s poem *Donna me prega*, written in the style to which Dante himself ascribed as a young man, the *dolce stil novo*. The effect of this intertextuality, according to Menocal, is to call into question the Averroist tendencies exhibited in the style which even Dante employed in his youth. Menocal explains:

The issue here, of course, is not the accuracy of any of Dante’s judgments or whether Guido really was an Averroist and “Donna me prega” an expression of the new faith in the power of Reason over the old faith. The point is that Dante clearly believed these things to be true and that he is pointing quite clearly at the mortal danger of belief in and admiration for a philosophy and a culture that in his mind (again the question of accuracy is irrelevant) embodied that new and false faith.\(^{33}\)

\(^{32}\) For further description of these characters and their punishments as a result of their ties to the spread of the Islamic culture, see Menocal, *Arabic Role*, 129-130.

\(^{33}\) Menocal, *Arabic Role*, 129.
For Menocal, the situations of these characters clearly reveal Dante’s anxiety about the spread of “that new and false faith,” that of Averroist ideas, throughout the Christian West.

There is, however, an important distinction that must be made here: Menocal ascribes to the view that Dante’s anxiety for Guido’s soul derives from his concern that Guido has turned dangerously close to Averroist philosophy, and not to the religion of Islam. “That new and false faith” of which she speaks is not Islam, but Averroist rationalism, which, as noted, had little to do with Islam in the medieval Christian perception, as Averroes had been “excused” of his religion by the theory of the double-truth. It is on this point that Menocal’s theory of the Commedia as an “anti-mi‘rāj” text hinges, and it is at this point that I find that her conclusion exceeds the evidence that she presents.

It is important to note here as well that the position Averroes holds is one of exaltation, the highest position possible for a nonbeliever in Dante’s schemata. Furthermore, in his company are two other famed medieval Muslims, Avicenna, another noted medieval Muslim philosopher, and Saladin, the twelfth-century Kurdish sultan of Egypt renowned in the Middle Ages for his magnanimity. 34 It seems unlikely that Dante would fear for the soul of Guido Cavalcanti, a possible Averroist, while holding Averroes himself on the same level with not only fellow Muslims and intellectuals, but also The Philosopher, Aristotle. Dante likewise places in Paradise a famed Averroist philosopher, Siger of Brabant, whose dispute with Thomas Aquinas brought about his

34 For further information, see Singleton’s Inferno, vol. 2, Commentary on Saladin, 66-67, and Avicenna, 72.
excommunication. Dante's affinity toward Averroism seems to make Menocal's thesis of overt, unambiguous anxiety problematic, if not overstated.

It is clear that Dante's relationship with Islam is in fact an enigmatic one, shifting as it does between viewing Muslims with admiration and with disdain, and between viewing Islam as an excusable offense and as an unforgivable transgression. The ambivalence with which Dante approaches the religion has led to many conflicting perceptions regarding the question of his use of the *mi'raj* literature: how the reader understands the position of Islam and Muslims in the text affects shifts in the conclusions drawn about the poet's intention with the material. Nevertheless, many of the primary players in the debate on Dante's indebtedness to the *mi'raj* literature have forced overstated conclusions regarding the affinities— or lack thereof—that Dante feels towards Islam, and by extension Muslims, based on insufficient evidence of transmission. There is no philological evidence that conclusively proves Dante's reliance on the *mi'raj* text as a structural or thematic intertext, and claims to chart the chain of transmission are based on suggestion and likelihood rather than proof. It is for this reason that it is necessary to shift the debate from one of affinities for Islam and Muslims to one of cross-religious discursive practices. Rather than approach Dante's use of the *mi'raj* as a marker of sentiment and motive, I will approach the interaction of the texts as an indication of a greater cultural *zeitgeist*—an overlap producing shared discourses of cosmology and eschatology that validates each religious myth according to its respective tradition. This interaction is based on a different consideration of the level of influence between the texts, which is more appropriately characterized as interdiscursive.

*35 Again, see Singleton's *Paradiso*, vol. 2, Commentary on Siger, 192, as well as Mark Musa's commentary, cited in Kennedy, "Muslim Sources," 74-75.
SHIFTING METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS: FROM DIRECT INFLUENCE TO INTERDISCURSIVE PARTICIPATION

Acknowledging the weaknesses in the argument for influence, I wish to approach the subject of Dante’s relationship with the mi’rāj text from an altogether different methodological framework. Recent scholarship by Maria Corti and Karla Mallette on Islamic intertextuality and influence on the Commedia has opened new avenues for framing the understanding of influence in this case. Corti, in particular, has articulated what she describes as “il concorso di tre possibilità metodologiche [the concourse of three methodological possibilities]” that she then characterizes as interdiscursivity, intertextuality, and direct influence. The three possibilities constitute a zone of cross-cultural knowledge transmission in which ideas pass freely from one culture to the other, either through direct or indirect processes. Corti distinguishes these three conceptions of influence from one another in terms of the access of the author to the source-text. Direct influence occurs when one text is a direct source for another; Corti writes, “in questo caso la derivazione deve essere provata attraverso una corrispondenza non solo tematica, ma formale, estesa, perché non sia casuale, e isomorfia [in this case the derivation must be proven through a correspondence that is not only thematic, but formal, extensive, such that it is not by chance, and isomorphic].” Intertextuality, she claims, is a more general textual sharing between two texts, in which one text becomes a model for another’s structure or theme, but, she notes, “ciò non significa che il testo x sia necessariamente una fonte di y, cioè che l’autore del secondo testo abbia avuto sotto gli occhi il primo [that does not mean that text x is necessarily a source of y, that is, that the

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36 Corti, “Commedia... l’otretomba islamico,” 301.
37 Corti, “Commedia... l’otretomba islamico,” 302.
author of the second text had had the first under his/her eyes]. 38 Both intertextuality and direct influence conceive of a particular text as a product of another specific text’s influence. Corti herself finds Dante’s *Commedia* to be a product of direct influence of the *Libro della Scala*.

Of most interest to my research, however, is Corti’s discussion of interdiscursivity, a term she borrows from Bakhtin. Corti outlines the interdiscursive influence as follows:

*Ci sono nella cultura processi di interdiscursività per cui è impossibile rinvenire la fonte diretta di una notizia o di un dato in quanto ormai quella notizia o quel dato circolano nella cultura, sono patrimonio comune in seguito a una compenetrazione interdiscursiva. Con la riflessione supplementare che Dante è un artista, cioè è un “dotto” in funzione artistica.*

[In culture there are processes of interdiscursivity through which it is impossible to find the direct source of a statement or a fact in so far as that statement or that fact is already circulating within the culture, they are a common heritage following from an interdiscursive co-penetration. And we should add the supplementary reflection that Dante is an artist, that is, he is a ‘scholar’ working artistically.] 39

In this sense we may understand interdiscursivity to refer to an overlap of ideas such that no particular direct textual influence can be identified, but in which multiple texts engage in the same plays of language and power. Each text positions itself in relation to other texts, but without any direct knowledge of the others with which it is in conversation. In a recent RAI (Radiotelevisione Italiana) interview, Corti restates her understanding of interdiscursivity:

*Quando due culture sono in stretto contatto, i vocaboli, le idee, i pensieri, i concetti di una cultura passano ovviamente all’altra e quindi non si riesce più a trovare la fonte diretta, perché quando un’espressione comincia a circolare non*

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38 Corti, “*Commedia*... l’otretomba islamico,” 302.
39 Corti, “*Commedia*... l’otretomba islamico,” 301.
si sa più chi l'abbia creata o chi l'abbia messa in circolo. Questo è ciò che avviene per Dante.

[When two cultures are in close contact, words, ideas, thoughts, and concepts of one culture obviously pass to the other and therefore one no longer succeeds in finding the direct source, because when one expression begins to circulate it is no longer known who had created it or who had put it into circulation. This is what happened for Dante.]  

Because of the overlap between Christian and Muslim societies, according to Corti, both cultures produced texts that engage in the same discourses – specifically in this case, in the discourses of monotheisms, such as the nature of the afterlife, of sin and punishment, of the rewards of heaven. Furthermore, this interdiscursive relationship speaks to similarities in the way truth is constituted textually, and, consequentially, in the means of the production of religious myth. If in fact both Dante's myth and the myth of the Libro della Scala participate in these overlapping discourses, similarities of language, ideas and beliefs, to paraphrase Corti, will emerge between the two.

It is in light of this interdiscursive influence that I will approach Dante's relationship to the mi'raj text of the Libro della Scala. While a lack of philological evidence has left those on the side of direct influence to conjecture about the chain of transmission that placed the Libro in his hands, the argument for interdiscursivity instead looks to the well-documented relationship between the cultures to address the productivity of reading the texts alongside one another. Because each religious myth is speaking to its respective monotheistic tradition to claim a truth that is necessarily exclusive of that other monotheism's truth, the two operate in conflict with one another. Nevertheless, an interdiscursive analysis reveals the thematic overlap of the myths and

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40 Maria Corti, "Maria Corti: Dante e l'Islam."
the structural similarity in their truth claims, and therefore draws out a meaning that is not exclusive one from the other, but that in fact overlaps in significant ways.

In a close reading of each text, I will examine the ways in which each religious myth establishes its own claim to a literal – in the sense of both “textual” and “actual” – truth. In the next chapter I will consider the nature of the vision in both texts, particularly in relation to the rhetoric of dreaming and waking. I will argue that the texts position themselves as waking, bodily visions, with an emphasis on the material sight of the visionary as he progresses on the journey. This emphasis reinforces the claim to truth within the text.

In the fourth chapter I will turn to the rhetoric of the “straight path” as a presentation of an exclusive truth. The image of the straight or right path is used by each text as an instructional tool for guiding the followers of the respective religious traditions to the true road to God, and the exclusivity of that road effectively undoes any other faith’s claim to the true way. The revelation of the right path to the visionary becomes, then, a call to prophecy, in which the guided pilgrim is to become a guide for others. Through an examination of the truth each text claims, the patterns of interdisciplinary influence become evident.
CHAPTER 3
SEEING GOD: VISIONS AND DREAM-VISIONS

Medieval discourses and the literature that reveals them preoccupies themselves with the discussion of visions and dream-visions, sights inspired by God or by demons, provoked by idleness or by meditation, that appeal to readers in their very ambivalence on these matters. Particular among these accounts of visionary experiences are those that treat the nature of life after death, and the otherworld in which this life is carried out. The understanding of the otherworld, another preoccupation of the Middle Ages, is not quite as ambivalent, composed according to the formulae of their respective traditions with variations that do not contradict one another, but build on the previous accounts in diverse ways.

The visions in medieval eschatological accounts differ, however, in the nature of the visionary experience itself. Perhaps the primary Christian model of the time, and certainly the most prominent Biblical version, is the tradition of the *Visio Pauli*. The rapture of Saint Paul derives from II Corinthians, in which Paul references the journey of one "caught up" into the third heaven:

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know – God knows. And I know that this man – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, but God knows – was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things
that it is not possible to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. (II Cor. 2:5)  

The experience, widely regarded in the Middle Ages to be that of Paul himself, is not narrated in depth, as Paul concludes that it would be a boast to describe that which he saw. Accounts exist, however, that describe the Pauline vision in great detail, and which were assumed in the Middle Ages to be authored by Paul himself, and then hidden away in his house in Tarsus only to be discovered by a later owner.  

Both the Biblical version of Paul’s rapture and the popular account of St. Paul’s Apocalypse will be important subtexts for the analysis of the nature of vision and visionary experience in this chapter.

In her collection of medieval Christian visions of the afterlife before Dante, Eileen Gardiner writes that the authors of the accounts that she considers “went to great literary lengths to prove that these visions actually took place and were not strictly literary works. In attempting these proofs, the authors often resorted to a whole array of literary conventions or topoi…. [F]ollowing the prescribed formulas is the best way to gain credibility.” Among these topoi she includes the presence of a guide, the use of fire and demons in the punishments of hell, the use of both urban and natural elements within landscapes, the hierarchical organization of the blessed, the separation of the soul from the body of the visionary and the near-death state of the body during the vision, and the emphasis on the faculties of the senses, particularly sight. It is on these last two points that the visions considered here are so striking: both Dante’s *Commedia* and the

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41 All Biblical citations come from the Holy Bible, New International Version (NIV) Compact Reference Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 1989).


Islamic _Libro della Scala_ employ the topoi regarding the body and sight in ways that distinguish them from many other medieval accounts of visionary experiences of the afterlife.

Neither account includes a separation of the soul from the body, implying that the journey involves both body and spirit together, rather than simply the spirit. The texts, however, play with the genre of visions as well, moving between a bodily journey in which the visionary sees with his own eyes, and a dream-vision, in which the mind receives the vision while in a dream-state. Both texts likewise use light and sight to elucidate the nature of the vision itself, and as the visionary ascends the condition of sight undergoes a process of renewal. The nature of the vision in each text is essential to understanding the nature of the truth that the text claims.

Because concerns of eschatology abound in nearly every religious tradition, the fact that accounts of eschatological journeys exist in both religions is not in itself striking. What is notable about the relationship between these two narratives is the presence of structural and thematic similarities between them. The structural similarities are many and well-documented: the series of realms in both heaven and hell through which the pilgrims rise, the punishments of hell as material manifestations of the sin committed, the presence of gigantic birds in paradise, and the temporal middle-space that separates the two realms are the most striking. The sights of the otherworld in both visions follow a similar framework, which has been viewed by many scholars as a clear indication of their intertextual relationship, and hence of Dante’s borrowing of the Islamic account of the afterlife to authenticate his vision.
Intertextual suggestion aside, the interdiscursive relationship roots itself not in the sights of the vision, but the process of vision. The two texts begin by locating themselves within the genre of the dream-vision, employing a rhetoric that suggests that the narrative describes a divinely-inspired psychological and spiritual experience. The texts, however, immediately depart from this rhetoric and the genre of the dream-vision altogether, turning the genre on its head in the process. Both texts signal a move away from the dream-vision, either ambivalently or directly, and it is this departure that both validates the truth that the text presents, and qualifies the truths of the dream-visions that precede it.

I will begin this chapter by considering other dream-visions in Western Christian literature that serve as important precursors for Dante’s understanding of the dream in literary myth. Turning to religious myth, I will examine the ambiguities of vision in the *Libro della Scala*, in regards to the Prophet’s sleep-state and his capabilities of bodily sight. The ambiguities of the *Libro* are resolved by the faith of its readers: in God everything is possible. These ambiguities are similar to those in the *Commedia*, but in Dante’s text they are systematized and augmented by other Christian accounts in such a way as to refigure dreams and sight altogether. The second section of this chapter will examine Dante’s process of systematization that allows him to make a claim to truth that does not need to be reconciled outside of the text itself.

**DREAMS AND VISIONS IN LITERARY MYTH**

Three particular accounts serve as primary examples of prominent literary myths of dream-vision: Book VI of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, in which Aeneas descends to the
underworld, the late-medieval French allegorical poem *Roman de la Rose*, and the *Tesoretto* of Dante’s own teacher and mentor, Brunetto Latini. Each text takes a different stance on the nature of the dream in relation to truth, and Dante’s relationship with the three texts reveals a clear difference in the treatment of the dream in each of the literary myths and Dante’s treatment of it in the religious myth of the *Commedia*. I will briefly consider the nature of the dream in each of the three texts, and then I will suggest several references that serve as indications of Dante’s departure from these texts.

One of the most prominent of the dream-visions that stand as a precursor to the *Commedia* is Book VI of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Although it stands as one of the most influential texts among journeys to the otherworld, the voyage of Aeneas to the Underworld in this book is not often cited among dream-visions, despite the clear indication of the text that it is such. As Aeneas and the Sibyl depart from the Underworld, Anchises accompanies them to the two gates that lead back to the world above. Virgil describes them both:

> There are two gates of Sleep, one said to be
> Of horn, whereby the true shades pass with ease,
> The other all white ivory agleam
> Without a flaw, and yet false dreams are sent
> Through this one by the ghosts to the upper world.
> Anchises now, his last instructions given,
> Took son and Sibyl there and let them go
> By the Ivory Gate.  
> 
> (VI.1211-1218)\(^44\)

The two gates indicate that the journey Aeneas has undertaken can be considered either a true dream, that is, one that has shown him actual events and given true wisdom, or a false dream, in which the sights and experiences of the vision are to be taken as deceptive.

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and fanciful. It is notable that Aeneas passes through the second gate, that of the false
dreams. Clearly Dante's pilgrim does not follow in the footsteps of his predecessor, for
the poet emphasizes to the reader in direct addresses throughout that the visions of the
journey, though seemingly fanciful, are indeed true.45

The Roman de la Rose, one of the most widely read works of the late Middle
Ages, is likewise explicit in its position as a dream-vision; in fact, the first section of the
poem is devoted to explication of the nature of the dream for the text. The poet begins
with a discussion of the debates on medieval dream-visions and positions himself
accordingly:

Many a man holds dreams to be but lies,
All fabulous; but there have been some dreams
No whit deceptive, as was later found.
Well might one cite Macrobius, who wrote
The story of the Dream of Scipio,
And was assured that dreams are oft-times true.
But as someone should wish to say or think
'Tis fond and foolish to believe that dreams
Foretell the future, he may call me fool.
Now, as for me, I have full confidence
That visions are significant to man
Of good and evil. Many dream at night
Obscure forecasts of imminent events. (I.1-13)46

The poet does not play with the genre or the ambivalences that are circulating in
philosophical circles. Rather, he states immediately that he will follow Macrobius,
whose dream theory entailed a hierarchy of truth that allowed for the existence of false

45 For some examples of the addresses to the reader, see Inferno XVI.127-129 and XXV.46-48, among
others.
46 Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, The Romance of the Rose, trans. Harry W. Robbins, ed. with an
dreams, like that of Aeneas, and true dreams or visions, granted directly by God.\textsuperscript{47} In directly stating that he will follow Macrobius, Guillaume de Lorris has offered the reader a pattern for understanding the allegory: this is a true dream, albeit secular, which corresponds to the third level of Macrobius' hierarchy of visions. It is a \textit{somnium} proper, a dream which "conceals with strange shapes and veils with ambiguity the true meaning of the information being offered."\textsuperscript{48} The \textit{somnium} offers a truth, that is embedded in a fiction.

After unambiguously stating that the dream is true, the author reiterates his point as he introduces the specific dream of the rose in the following stanza:

\begin{quote}
As I was wont, one night I went to bed  
And soundly slept. But there came to me a dream  
Which much delighted me, it was so sweet.  
No single thing which in that dream appeared  
Has failed to find fulfillment in my life,  
With which the vision well may be compared. \hspace{1cm} (l.16-21)\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

Thus the reader sees that the dream here is meant to be considered true according to Macrobius' hierarchy, for it has had real prophetic effect on the life of the dreamer. Although it is a secular dream, it holds a truth about things to come, and this truth is verifiable in the life experiences of the dreamer, as he tells us.

Dante's theory of dream-visions is certainly not so clearly stated, and he does not seem to follow the same explicitly allegorical method employed by Guillaume de Lorris and, later, Jean de Meun. Dante's relationship to the dream is far more ambiguous, and

\textsuperscript{47} Stephen F. Kruger has outlined the theories of dreams and visions in the late Middle Ages in his book \textit{Dreaming in the Middle Ages}. For the section on Macrobius, see chapter two, "The doubleness and middleness of dreams," \textit{Dreaming in the Middle Ages} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 17-34.

\textsuperscript{48} From Macrobius (I.iii.10), cited in Kruger, 23.

\textsuperscript{49} De Lorris and de Meun, 3.
perhaps the most telling sign of this is in the Italian tribute to the *Roman de la Rose*, which has been attributed to Dante, entitled *Il Fiore*. *Il Fiore* follows the *Roman*’s verse account of the allegorical quest for the rose quite closely, but in this work the Dantesque poet has chosen to remove the frame entirely, positioning the narrative as a series of actual events not occurring in a dream. The curious removal of the frame suggests that the poet did not, in fact, place the same stock in dreams as both the poets of the *Roman de la Rose* and their author on dreams, Macrobius.

The ambiguity of dreams in the *Commedia* has perhaps more in common on the subject with the *Tesoretto* of Brunetto Latini than it has with these other literary myths that precede Dante’s own. The *Tesoretto*, like the *Roman de la Rose* and other allegorical dream-visions, is a journey-narrative that finds its author moving through a series of meetings with characters that represent virtues or vices, the arts or sciences, elements of the natural world and of the divine. Latini’s text is understood by scholars to be a dream-vision, although he is not so explicit as the authors of the *Roman de la Rose* before him. He positions it as a dream-vision as he sleepwalks off the “*gran cammino*” [I.188: “the great highway”]. The opening to the dream-vision is irrefutably similar to the opening of the *Inferno*, for, as Dante, Brunetto wanders off the road he has been following to enter “*una selva diversa*” [I.190: “a strange wood”] and then “*cornoando a la mente*” [I.191: “coming to my senses”], he turns toward the mountain he is near and sees numerous creatures. The scene recalls the first canto of the *Commedia* directly, down to some of the smallest details.

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Brunetto Latini’s *Tesoletto* is understood to be a dream-vision, positioning itself squarely in the genre. Dante’s opening has the same effect — he, too, has placed his *Commedia* within the genre of dream-visions. Dante, though, turns the tradition on its head, refashioning Brunetto’s phrases *tornando a la mente* and his *mi ritrovi* [ll.2896: “I refound myself”], \(^{51}\) which the reader finds later in the narrative as Brunetto re-enters the dream-landscape, as not a re-entrance into the dream or a continuation of it during sleep-walking, but as a moment of *waking*. Although neither text is as explicit as the others on the entrance into or exit from the dream, Dante’s text becomes explicit in its accounts of the nature of *waking* throughout, as I will discuss below. The process of vision for the pilgrim is very dissimilar to the visions of Brunetto in his allegorical dreamscape. Brunetto’s visions are presented in a straightforward manner; he approaches or is approached by characters that represent Nature, Philosophy, Virtue and her particular manifestations, Love, and so on. The nature of these allegorical visions, though, is not a straightforward description; while he has face-to-face encounters with these ladies, he occasionally describes his experience of them not as one of “seeing,” but one of “seeming.” In his account of the sights presented to him, he writes, “*Ed’ella mi sembrava / Come fosse incarnata*” [ll.216-217: “And it seemed to me / That she was incarnate”], \(^{52}\) “*Mi parve ch’io vedesse / Che gente s’accomogliesse*” [ll.505-506: “It seemed that I saw / That people were gathered”], \(^{53}\) and “*E dicèa, ciò mi pare*” [ll.1370: “And she said, it seemed to me”]. \(^{54}\) Although Brunetto’s visions are not all recounted in terms of a lack of surety at the sight, there seems to be an occasional uncertainty of

\(^{51}\) Latini, *Tesoletto*, 144-145.


\(^{54}\) Latini, *Tesoletto*, 70-71.
perception in his account. In one long passage, he notes the dubiousness of the scene before him:

Io giunsi in un bel prato
Fiorito d'ogni lato,
Lo più riccho del mondo,
Or mi parea ritondo,
Or avea quadratura;
Or avea l'aria scura,
Or e chiara e lucente;
Or veggio molto gente,
Or non veggio persone...(ll. 2201-2209)

I came to a beautiful meadow
With flowers all around,
The richest in the world.
Sometimes it seemed to me round,
Sometimes four-sided;
Sometimes the air was dark,
Sometimes clear and light;
Now I see many people,
Now I see no one...

The passage continues in this way, with the pilgrim's perceptions of the scene shifting.

Brunetto's pilgrim often finds himself in a difficult position to see the spectacle clearly, and doubt creeps in to the narrative.

Dante's pilgrim, on the other hand, remains quite sure of the sights he sees, even those that seem to be the product of fantasy. The surety of vision that the pilgrim experiences, as well as his account of waking as he rises into the heavens, turn Dante's account away from Brunetto's, and the other literary myths that have preceded his. The vision of the Commedia is not a false dream like the experience of Aeneas, nor is it a true dream like that of the knight in the Roman de la Rose. Dante's vision is neither precisely like that of the Tesoretto, for the certainty of perception does not waver: it is a true

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vision, witnessed by the pilgrim in body, the sights of which are authentic and verifiable.

For this reason, vision in the Commedia seems to be more closely related to the vision of
Muhammad in the religious myth of the Libro della Scala.

THE VISION OF MUHAMMAD

Eileen Gardiner decides to conclude her collection of visions of the Christian
otherworld with Dante because, as she writes, "The Divine Comedy was the culmination
of the entire body of medieval imaginative literature on the subject of the otherworld.
His systematization of the cosmology of the otherworld seems to have ended the
speculation of the medieval mind on the topic." However convincing this statement
may be regarding those visions that follow Dante's, there is certainly at least one
predecessor that shares in its cosmological vision: the Night Journey of Muhammad
recorded in the Islamic text known to the West as the Libro della Scala. The Libro della
Scala records in detail the realms of the otherworld shown to Muhammad in a vision,
dreamt or otherwise, and the hierarchy of blessings and punishments there witnessed.

The accounts of Muhammad's Night Journey describe the visionary experience of
the Prophet as he ascends to the throne of God and descends to the pits of hell.
According to the tradition, the journey is understood to be taken in body. But it is
unclear in the text of the Libro della Scala if this journey is to have taken place in body
or in spirit, and this ambiguity is rooted in the confusion regarding the nature of the
dream in the text. The ambiguity of the author on this point leaves open the question of

55 Gardiner, Visions, xii.
Muhammad's dreaming, but it is obvious that, like Dante's, this narrative operates within the tradition of the dream.

In this section I will explore the nature of Muhammad's visionary experience, particularly as it relates to light and sight. The question of whether it is to be understood as a divinely-inspired vision occurring in a dream, or a divinely-ordained journey accompanied by visions of the afterlife remains open in the text. The author of the vision is certainly God, and the truth of the vision is corroborated by this authorship. However, the truth of the vision is reinforced by the understanding that the journey takes place in body.

The narrative of the Night Journey is framed by Muhammad's presence in his bed: the first chapter finds Muhammad visited by the angel Gabriel as he dozes off, and the journey ends with Muhammad re-entering the bedroom and sitting at the edge of the bed. His wife, incorrectly called Omheni by the translator, remains sleeping soundly throughout the period of the vision. The narrative begins:

Let all those in the [four] parts of the world – namely, the east, west, north, and south – who see and hear this precious book know that while I, Muhammad, son of Abdillehe ['Abdallâh], born in Arabia in the city of Mecca to the noble lineage of Arabs called Quraysh, enlightened by the grace of God, was in my house at Mecca, and I lay in bed beside my wife, named Omheni [Umm Hâni']; and I had long lay awake thinking about Our Lord's religion and, thereupon, began to sleep a bit; at that moment lo! the angel Gabriel came and revealed himself to me in this form.\(^{57}\)

Like many prophetic narratives, Muhammad's journey begins in his bed: the Prophet has just begun to fall asleep when "lo," the angel arrives. This "lo!" is the only interjection the reader is given into the Prophet's sleep-state, and it may be speculated that the angel

\(^{57}\) Omheni, or Umm Hâni', was Muhammad's cousin, not his wife. See Reginald Hyatte's note to the passage in his edition of The Book of Muhammad's Ladder, 105.

\(^{58}\) The Book of Muhammad's Ladder, 105.
has in fact awakened Muhammad in his visitation. The interjection, though, is often the
dream of the dreamer, and the act of waking is often a perception built into the
dream.

Although it is unclear in this passage as to whether the experience of the Prophet
is to be understood as a dream or a bodily vision, the reference to sleep and visions here
in the first lines of the narrative at least places the Libro della Scala in conversation with
other narratives within the genre. This is, however, the last suggestion of dream-visions
that the reader finds in the account, until the Prophet returns to his bed and his sleeping
wife in the eightieth chapter. After departing from Gabriel, Muhammad arrives at his
house on the ass-like animal al-Burāq, here called Alborak. It is nearly dawn when he
returns: “Then I entered my house and found my wife Omheni still sleeping in her bed.
And when I sat down on the edge of the bed, she awoke immediately.” Muhammad
neither returns to his sleep-state nor lies back down on the bed, as a dreamer is wont to
do; rather, he sits on the edge of it and wakes his wife. Where the first passage was
ambiguous regarding Muhammad’s wakefulness, this one seems to suggest a waking
return from a long journey.

Omheni awakens to find her husband sitting on the bed, exhausted. After
Muhammad recounts his journey, she replies, “Ah, Messenger of God, since you are so
tired, I entreat you to lie down in this bed and rest until it is morning and broad
daylight.” The physical fatigue of the Prophet here again suggests a lengthy journey
undertaken in body and in time; had it been a dream-vision, surely the Prophet would find
himself better rested. There remains an ambiguity in the text about the nature of the

59 The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder, 192.
60 The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder, 192.
vision, as I will continue to explore, but the frame in its entirety seems to suggest
wakefulness and a corporeal journey.

The nature of another type of vision in the *Libro* again complicates this
suggestion: the capacity of vision in heaven is often presented as superhuman, as
Muhammad looks at sights that material human sight cannot behold. The brightness of
the light in heaven is beyond the level that the human eye can withstand, just as the sights
of heaven are beyond human descriptive capability. Muhammad often finds himself
blinded by the light and tongue-tied in his efforts to describe it. The loss of words occurs
even before the Prophet leaves the earth, as the magical ass-like creature Alborak carries
Muhammad from Mecca to Jerusalem. Alborak is described as "larger than an ass and
smaller than a mule; it had a man’s face; its hair was of pearls, and the mane, of
emeralds, and the tail, of rubies: its eyes were brighter than the sun; it had feet and
hooves like a camel's; and its color was of pure light."61 The description of the creature
is similar to that of Dante’s Geryon, the fantastic creature that becomes emblematic of
fraud in the *Inferno*. Like Alborak, Geryon serves the purpose of transport for the
pilgrim, carrying Dante and his guide Virgil to the lower regions of hell.62 Geryon’s
description seems to be a distortion of Alborak’s likeness: with the face of a just man and
the stinger of a scorpion, Geryon is not a traveling companion to be trusted. Like
Alborak, Geryon is brightly colored in his midsection, with complex designs that capture
the eye, but these colors are meant to be resisted rather than praised. The fantastic
creatures that transport the travelers share a purpose and a likeness, but not a symbolic

61 The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder, 106.
62 For a full account of the description of Geryon, see *Inferno* XVII.10-18.
meaning. This raises the question of Geryon as Dante’s invention, or a twisted reconsideration of a previous representation.

Alborak carries Muhammad a thirty-days’ journey in one night,\textsuperscript{53} a journey only possible in dream or in miracle. The travel is indescribable: “Alborak went out straightway, and it went so swiftly and so gently that mortal mouth could not recount it.”\textsuperscript{64} The Prophet finds himself unable to recount the passage on Alborak in human terms because of the superhuman nature of it. This inability of expression becomes characteristic of various aspects of the visionary experience, not only in the \textit{Libro della Scala}, but also in the \textit{Commedia}, as is discussed below.

In heaven Muhammad finds not only physical sensations but also sights indescribable. The brightness, colors, and beauties of heaven often overwhelm him, and he finds himself without human words. Muhammad sees an angel “whose being no one could describe or depict except God alone Who made and created him.”\textsuperscript{65} These things which are beyond description are also beyond imagination; Muhammad sees “pastures, meadows, and woods so beautiful and rich that the human mind could not conceive of it,”\textsuperscript{66} and “a great number of tents of so many different sorts on the river banks and houses, too, so beautiful and excellent that the mortal mind could not imagine it.”\textsuperscript{67} He sees hair “more beautiful and bright than mortal mouth could describe,”\textsuperscript{68} and tastes

\textsuperscript{53} The physical distance of the journey is given in chapter eighty-three, when Muhammad is questioned by the men of Quraysh: “and we know indeed that it is at the very least a month’s journey from here all the way to the said temple!” \textit{(The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder), 195.}

\textsuperscript{64} \textit{The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder}, 107.

\textsuperscript{65} \textit{The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder}, 122.

\textsuperscript{66} \textit{The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder}, 152.

\textsuperscript{67} \textit{The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder}, 140.

\textsuperscript{68} \textit{The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder}, 154.
water "so clear and delicious that the mortal mind could not imagine it." Human words cannot account for the visions of the otherworld that the Prophet encounters, and human imagination could never create them.

Description is not the only human faculty that falls short in Muhammad's Night Journey: the vision strains and often exceeds mortal capabilities of imagination, hearing, taste, and above all, sight. Sight is of primary concern for the dream or vision, as it is through the faculty of sight that the vision is known. Muhammad finds the light of heaven nearly blinding, and there are numerous cases in which he is barely able to withstand it. The ladder by which Muhammad ascends, for example, is surrounded by angels, and "the brightness was so intense that one could hardly look at it." Muhammad finds himself nearly blinded by the light of heaven, but unlike other visionaries such as Paul and Dante, who are blinded by divine light and later regain sight, he finds his abilities strained, but not overpowered.

In the first heaven, Muhammad encounters Jesus and John the Baptist, who are "seated on two thrones of light, and they were very handsome, marvelously well-formed with respect to their bodies and faces, and their hair was all white like snow, and their beards were large and white in like manner. Their clothes were so very white that one could hardly look at them, and an exceedingly great brightness surrounded their heads." The Prophet — and the reader — sees here the varying degrees of light in heaven: while the brightness of the thrones of light is bearable, that of the clothes is hardly so, and that around their heads is "exceeding." The encounter with Joseph in the next heaven is

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69 The Book of Muhammad's Ladder, 160.
70 The Book of Muhammad's Ladder, 199.
71 The Book of Muhammad's Ladder, 116.
similar: “I looked among them and saw a very handsome man wondrously well-formed in all respects, in the prime of life, not old, who was seated on a throne of light, and his hair and all his garments were of such pure light that one could hardly look upon him directly. He was so beautiful to behold that no one could describe him.”

Similar descriptions are found in the third heaven, with the sight of Enoch and Elijah, and of Aaron in the fourth, who “had on his head a diadem of light which shone so brightly that one could look at it directly only with great difficulty.” If one is to understand the Night Journey as a visionary experience in body, one sees here Muhammad rising to the height of his sensory capabilities.

The emphasis on the brightness of light is present throughout the vision of heaven, but the strain on Muhammad’s vision ceases for a time after the encounter with Aaron. When the Prophet ascends to the fifth heaven and stands before Moses, he gives a similar description of the sight without mentioning the effort it takes for him to look at Moses’ light directly. Moses is “a very handsome old man who was seated on a throne of light, and his head was wrapped in cloth consisting entirely of light, and he held a staff of light in his hand.”

Muhammad offers the same elements of description in his vision of Moses – throne and clothes of pure light, with a sign of regal authority also composed of light. There is a marked difference here in his ability, however: Muhammad does not here look with difficulty upon the same elements that before required effort of his vision. The same occurs in the sixth heaven when Muhammad meets Abraham: “I looked carefully and saw among the said angels a man seated on a throne of light, and he was

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72 The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder, 117.
73 The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder, 119.
74 The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder, 120.
completely enveloped in garments of light that shone more than the summer's sun, and he wore a crown of light on his head.”\textsuperscript{75} Again the elements of the vision are comparable to those earlier, but Muhammad finds himself seeing without effort. Using his mortal vision, Muhammad has adjusted to divine light as he passes up the ladder to the throne of God.

Even the throne of God is within the scope of human visionary capabilities. Despite Muhammad’s insistence that the throne is “the most resplendent object ever to be beheld,”\textsuperscript{76} a strong statement considering his previous visions of “intense” and “exceeding” objects of brightness, he does not strain to look at it. He states that it is beyond description, beyond measure, and beyond human conception, but it is not beyond vision. Likewise Muhammad finds one of the rivers of heaven to be even brighter than any of the sights previous to it, and in fact, brighter than everything in heaven save God: “the heaven where these angels stand is surrounded by four great rivers, of which one consists entirely of light so very bright that it surpasses every other sort of brightness except Our Lord’s.”\textsuperscript{77} Muhammad’s experience of the heavens’ brightness progresses toward God’s, understood to be the most luminous of all lights, but his faculty of vision remains the same.

As the Prophet progresses nearer to God, however, he does again encounter brightness that he finds difficult to behold. Gabriel and Muhammad arrive at the wall of paradise, of which it is said, “The wall threw off such great brightness that one could
hardly look at it directly."  

We find the Prophet struggling to use his sight as he had before, as the visions increase in their brightness. Muhammad’s human eyesight is subjected to new levels of light that he has not yet experienced, either on earth or in previous heavens. Shortly following this renewed struggle with light the authenticity of Muhammad’s actual sight of the walls and towers of paradise is underscored: “the first man to see them up to now is you, Muhammad.” The use of the Prophet’s name and the emphasis on the exclusivity of this vision is important here; it serves to invalidate all of the previous visionaries’ accounts of the heavens up to this point, stressing the particularity of this vision and the truth of this account.

In paradise, the reader learns, light is continuous and fixed. The light of heaven, which Muhammad witnesses, does not share temporal transitions as does the light of earth. Gabriel tells him that “there is neither day nor night nor sun nor moon nor stars, but the light there is so very great that the sun’s light compared with this brightness is similar to the brightness of a single star compared to that of the sun.” Unlike the light of earth, the heavens’ light remains constant, and Muhammad, surrounded by it, finds that it relentlessly challenges his eyes with its intensity. In fact, he is nearly blinded at the sight of some aspects of heaven: “All these things shone so brightly with pure light that I nearly lost my sight because of the brilliance.” Unlike many visionaries in the Christian tradition, most notably St. Paul, Muhammad never loses his sight in the brightness however close he comes. Again the question arises of the nature of vision in

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78 The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder, 135.
79 The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder, 138.
80 The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder, 152.
the *Libro della Scala*: either Muhammad’s corporeal sight has been changed for the sake of his visionary experience, or he has been given new powers of sight in a dream.

When Muhammad at last stands before God, a peculiar moment among medieval visions of heaven, he finds that he has direct sight of the Lord, without obstructions or aids. In fact, he says, “At that moment there stood between God and me no angel or man or any other thing; just He and I alone faced one another.” Muhammad does not have trouble looking directly at God, although he has already noted the extremity of God’s brightness, “the nature of which no one knows except Himself.” Vision has been changed here, however, not in the sense of an elevation beyond human capability, but as a relocation of vision outside of the eyes and into the heart. Muhammad is, in a sense, blinded, as “the curtains that stood between [God and Muhammad] rose, and then God took away the sight from my eyes and replaced it in my heart so that I saw with my mind, but not at all with my eyes.” Like the veils behind which a king would sit, God is to all other creatures veiled, but here the veils that stand between God and Muhammad disappear, and Muhammad is granted a vision of God that is pure, direct, and unobstructed. Muhammad still sees, but his eyes are blinded in order that his mind might see God, but not his body that could not withstand it. The moment is particularly interesting for the discussion of the nature of the vision. Muhammad’s material sight has been enough to sustain him until now, but at this moment human sight fails and the heart

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81 Gardiner notes that the visions in her collection, which represent many of the most predominant visions of the otherworld in medieval Christianity, are not mystical experiences, i.e. experiences of union with God; rather nearly all of the visions she records stop short of the vision of God and the visionary returns immediately to the earth. The only exception detailed in her collection is the twelfth-century vision of the Monk of Evesham, who sees Christ before he returns.

82 *The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder*, 157.

83 *The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder*, 157.

84 *The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder*, 157.
must do its work. For the first time in the text, Muhammad encounters a vision that his eyes cannot withstand. The reader does not see Muhammad struggle with vision, though: he does not fail to see, but rather sees through direct vision, without the mediation offered by the material and corporeal sight of the eyes.

The use of material sight in the vision indicates that the visions of heaven are visible to the human eye at the height of its power and with the help of divine intercession. Muhammad's Night Journey and Ascent are traditionally understood to be visions undertaken in body, like that of St. Paul in the *Visio Pauli*, but, also like St. Paul's, Muhammad's journey requires divine assistance to enable the body to make a supernatural journey of this sort. Like Paul, Muhammad must have his sight readjusted in order to see the visions of heaven, and, most particularly, the vision of God. In the *Libro della Scala*, though, material and bodily sight does not only occur through the mediation of the eyes, and it is not Muhammad's eyesight that sees, but rather his heart.

The question remains, then, why the author would frame the text as a dream-vision, only to turn away from the notion into an account of a corporeal journey that occurs during the night. I will return to this question after an examination of Dante's account, which leaves its reader with the same curiosity.

DANTE AND THE RE-VISION OF THE DREAM NARRATIVE

Dante's journey, like those of Paul and Muhammad before him, is a bodily journey ordained by God and made possible through divine will. Unlike the others, however, the journey of the *Commedia* is one conceived in earthly time, clearly not to be understood as a dream-vision. The pilgrim is bodily removed from the space of the living.
and enters the space of the dead, "caught up" like Muhammad and Paul, but he is not removed in time as his two predecessors in the vision are: time continues to pass normally as the pilgrim moves through the spheres. The emphasis on the passage of time throughout the Commedia is the first indicator that this vision is no dream.

Dante subverts this simple understanding of the journey as one of waking experience with an ambiguous frame that references the dream. Throughout the Commedia Dante plays with references to sleep and dreaming, waking and seeing. While making references to sleep and dreaming throughout the entire text, the dream metaphor serves primarily as a frame to the journey, as the most prominent references to sleep and dreaming occur in the beginning of the Inferno and at the end of the Paradiso. By establishing this metaphor as a frame to the journey, Dante sets his poem within the tradition, and commentators and critics often consider the Commedia alongside other great works within the genre of the allegorical dream-vision.

To consider the Commedia a simple dream-vision, however, is to overlook a fundamental aspect of his authorship of the dream: while Dante inserts his text squarely within the tradition of the dream-vision, he promptly turns the tradition on its head. He commences his account not with the pilgrim drifting to sleep and entering the dream-state, but with the pilgrim shaking off sleep to awaken in the dark wood. Specifically, he writes:

\[\textit{Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita mi ritrovai per una selva oscura che la diritta via era smarrita... Io non so ben ridir con’i’ v’intra, tant’era pien di sonno a quel punto che la verace via abbandonai.}\]
[Inferno 1.1-3, 10-12: “Midway in the journey of our life I found myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost... I cannot rightly say how I entered it, I was so full of sleep at the moment I left the true way.”]

Dante manipulates the metaphoric usage of sleep and dreaming here, the path of sleep standing as a metaphor for the sinful life, in which the sinner cannot even recognize his first steps onto the way of his damnation, but from which he wakes (mi ritrovoi, “I found myself”) before his soul is beyond reach on the sinful way. The metaphor functions on an allegorical level that aids the expression nostra vita in extending the moral of the journey to the reader.

The use of sleep and dreaming here does not function only on a metaphorical level: in the allegory of the poem, it is also to be understood as an actual sleep in which the pilgrim has been wandering through life, dreaming, only to find himself (that is, to wake up) in the dark wood, far from his path. The literal level of this sleep positions the text in relation to the other texts in its genre: the dream-vision. Dante has reversed the order, so his pilgrim does not fall asleep to hear the voice of God, but must in fact wake from his sinful, mortal state in order to have the experience that will set his path straight.

This modification of the traditional frame for the dream-vision genre renders Dante’s vision not real in the way that his predecessors in dream-vision are, but as a hyper-real vision, not shaped in sleep but experienced in waking life. The pilgrim sees the afterlife in body and in time, not merely in his mind’s eye, as do the dreamers. Dante effectively rewrites the tradition of the dream-vision: in presenting his account as an experience that occurred in both body and mind, Dante suggests a turn from the understanding of dreams that locates the authority of the dream in God and instead locates the authority of the vision in experience. This rewriting renders the dream-visions
that precede his own accounts of “false dreams,” as the *Aeneid* suggests of the journey of Aeneas to the otherworld in Book VI. By placing the poem within the genre of dream-vision, Dante has recalled the previous series of dream-visions and their claims to authenticity via divine authority, but by rewriting the dream-vision, Dante’s text becomes more authentic than its predecessors.

We see the effects of this literal level of hyper-reality profoundly in the *Paradiso*. As Dante nears the throne of God, his bodily vision is no longer equipped to see what is presented to him in the hyper-reality. If it had been a mere dream, Dante’s mind would be capable of this level of production. But Dante experiences new vision—a *novella vista* (*Paradiso* XXX.58)—that is both a new capability of sight and new sights, and his memory accommodates the vision to human conception and language. Dante’s body is purified in preparation for the paradisiacal vision: his human eyes simply cannot behold the visions of heaven. Dante finds his human vision veiled at moments, and as he moves higher in Paradise these veils that hinder his human sight must be removed, like the veils that had stood between Muhammad and God.

The pilgrim has this experience of unveiling at several key moments in his rapture. The first occurs in the Garden of Eden, as Dante prepares for his entrance to Paradise. Beatrice’s overpowering splendor momentarily blinds him, and he regains his sight when he looks away from her: he is not yet prepared for the vision of her. He is overcome, and turns to other sights and sounds, only to become drowsy and dreamy under the weight of the scenes and the heavenly music. The drowsiness he experiences here causes him to fall asleep—to which he refers as *l’assonnar* (*Purgatorio* XXXII.69: “slumber”), a word that becomes important again in the end of the *Paradiso*. Dante only
briefly describes the act of falling asleep, his senses overwhelmed, and passes quickly to
the act of waking, which is recounted in evocative terms:

\[
\text{Però trascorro a quando mi svegliai,}
\]
\[
e\ dico ch'un splendor mi squarcìò 'l velo
del sonno, e un chiamar: "Surgi, che fai?"}
\[
\]

[Purgatorio XXXII.70-72: “I pass on, therefore, to when I awoke, and tell that a splendor
rent the veil of my sleep, and a call, “Arise, what are you doing?”]

Dante is awakened by a bright light and a voice, both of which have significance in terms
of this discussion. The bright light that Dante sees penetrates his sleep, rending its veil,
and it is this act of unveiling the eyes that becomes symbolic of waking throughout the
remainder of the Commedia: it is a refinement of the faculty of vision – a re-vision in the
most literal sense. The many veils of sleep which cloud his vision from reality are lifted
as he moves higher, and with the lifting of each veil and the restoration of vision, he
“awakens” to a more real reality. Just as the veil is lifted from Muhammad’s sight,
permitting him a direct vision of God, so the veils are lifted from Dante’s eyes as he
awakens in paradise.

The use of the veil as a reference to sleep and, then, the unveiling as an
awakening to new visions has a pointed resonance here for the process of revelation, as
John Freccero has argued. In unpacking a notably obscure address to the reader in
Inferno IX, Freccero turns to the writings of St. Paul on the subject of the letter and the
spirit in relation to the Old and New Testaments. Citing a passage from II Corinthians,
Freccero glosses, “Paul here contrasts the letter of the Old Testament, written on tablets
of stone, with the spirit of the New, who is Christ, the ‘unveiling’ or re-velation.”

85 John Freccero, “Medusa: The Letter and the Spirit,” in Dante: The Poetics of Conversion, ed. with an

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ability to understand the Revelation of Christ is premised on a series of unveilings, which open the text of the New Testament to understanding and pure vision. Freccero returns to Paul again on the subject of sight and blindness; citing Paul, he begins:

But if our gospel is also veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case, the God of this world has blinded their unbelieving minds, that they should not see the light... while we look not at the things that are seen, but at the things that are not seen. For the things that are seen are temporal, but the things that are not seen are eternal. (II Cor. 4:3 ff.)

The familiar dialectic of blindness and vision, as old as Sophocles, assumes a special poignancy in the life of Paul, who was at successive moments blind: first to the truth of Christ and then, on the road to Damascus, to the things of this world... Above all, blindness and vision are in the Pauline text metaphors for interpretation, the obtuse reading of faithless literalists transformed, by unveiling, into a reading of the same text in a new light.\(^{66}\)

Revelation is a process of seeing anew in Paul’s text, as it is in Dante’s, and seeing anew can only be achieved by rending the veils that cover the eyes. Thus the process of revelation is a re-vellation in Freccerean terms, and that this veil is specifically a velo del sonno, a veil of sleep, implies that the unveiling of revelation is also a literal awakening.

Furthermore, the lines of Purgatorio XXXII above – as well as those that follow in the canto – echo a Biblical passage that has a particularly revelatory meaning. Dante sleeps, and is awakened by a voice that cries “Surgi,” an allusion to the command from God to Peter, James, and John after they cower at the sight of the transfigured Christ. If the allusion does not stand on its own, the poet drives home the point with a simile that follows, likening the pilgrim to the three disciples, who find themselves “vinti, ritornaro a la parola / da la qual furon maggior sonni rotti” (Purgatorio XXXII.77-78):

“overpowered, and came to themselves again at the word by which deeper slumbers were

\(^{66}\) Freccero, “Medusa,” 123.
broken”). Sleep here is an indication of a human physical inability to face visions of divine revelation without assistance. As the disciples “slept” at the sight of the splendor of the transfigured Christ, and “awoke” at God’s command to rise, so the pilgrim succumbs to sleep at the sight of the glorious Beatrice, and comes to himself at the command “Surgi.” The disciples’ earthly powers of vision were ill-equipped to gaze upon Christ in full glory, and when they rise they see only their friend, no longer wrapped in light and splendor. The pilgrim, too, is ill-equipped to see Beatrice in her heavenly splendor, and awakens to the voice of Rachel, of whom he asks, “Ov’è Beatrice?” [Purgatorio XXXII.85: “Where is Beatrice?”], his immediate and only concern. Unlike Muhammad, Dante experiences a failure of sight, like the disciples and St. Paul before him. His material sight cannot simply be removed to his heart: he must refine his eyes.

The pilgrim revisits the moment of Beatrice’s blinding beauty in Paradiso XXIII: his new vision has allowed his body to withstand the sight of Beatrice’s splendor, but only now does she find his process of re-vision complete enough to gaze upon her smile. She advises him to trust in his new capability:

“Apri li occhi e riguarda qual son io; tu hai vedute cose, che possente se’fatto a sostener lo riso mio.”
Io era come quei che si risente di visione oblita e che s’ingegna indarno di ridurlasi a la mente, quan’ io udii’ questa proferia, degna di tanto gravo, che mai non si stingue del libro che ‘l preterito rassegna.

[Paradiso XXIII.46-54: “Open your eyes and look on what I am; you have seen things such that you are become able to sustain my smile.” I was as one that wakes from a forgotten dream, and who strives in vain to bring it back to mind, when I heard this proffer, worthy of such gratitude that it can never be effaced from the book which records the past.]
Dante has not been able to withstand gazing on the smile of Beatrice until this moment, and as the poet lingers on it, "figurando il paradiso" [Paradiso XXIII.61: "depicting Paradise"], so too one may imagine the pilgrim gazing too long, and Beatrice rebukes him for it. In the passage it is notable that Beatrice tells the pilgrim that it this new vision he is being offered must be practiced: that is, his bodily eyes can withstand her smile because they have become accustomed to the sights of Heaven. Dante then uses the simile of the dreamer, a simile to which he returns several times in the Paradiso, to describe his process of re-vision – the refinement of his material sight. He is like a sleeper who wakes from his dream, and cannot remember the images of the dream: he cannot recall the visione oblita of Beatrice’s smile that he experienced in Purgatory when he was blinded by it, comparing the previous vision – both the image seen and the ability to see it – to the vision of dreams. Waking rends the veils on his sight, and as he tries to recall the glimpse of her smile caught in his old, veiled vision, he finds that he is offered a new vision that he may now sustain. As Dante’s ability to see is refined, he moves further out of the dream-state.

In the end of the Paradiso Dante again recalls the episode in the Garden of Eden and the blinding visions of Beatrice’s smile with a similar moment and another refreshed sight. Shortly before he begins his moments of rapture, he writes:

Come sùbito lampe che discetti
li spiriti visivi, si che priva
da l’auto l’occhio di più forti obietti,
cosi mi circunfusse luce viva
e lasciomi fasciato di tal velo
del suo fulgor, che nulla m’appariva.
[*Paradiso* XXX.46-51: “As a sudden flash of lightning which scatters the visual spirits so that it robs the eye of the sight of the clearest objects, so round about me there shone a vivid light and left me so swathed in the veil of its effulgence that nothing was visible to me.”]

Dante’s vision is again scattered; he is blinded momentarily in a veil of light. This veil corresponds to the veil of sleep in the first moment of re-vision; waking, Dante rends the veil and sees anew. Again, his previous ability to see is incapable of grasping the image, scattering the rays of his sight, and he is blinded in his efforts.

Dante’s language here specifically recalls that of Paul in his description of his conversion experience on the road to Damascus. As Paul, then still Saul, walks to Damascus, he witnesses a blinding light that overwhells him so as to blind him, and when his sight is restored he sees anew in God’s light. Singleton cites from Acts 22:6:

St. Paul’s words concerning his own experience of the blinding light that came to him on the road to Damascus: “Factum est autem eunte me et appropinquante Damasco, media die subito de caelo circumfulsit me lux copiosa.” (“And it came to pass that, as I was on my way to and approaching Damascus, suddenly about noon there shone round about me a great light from heaven.”) Also see Actus 22:11: “et cum non viderem prae claritate luminis illius” (“and as I could not see because of the dazzling light”). The poet’s phrasing here seems to echo deliberately Paul’s words, a fact which is highly significant, for St. Paul was the prime example of one who was “caught up to heaven” in the experience of rapture and is cited as such in most discussions of the experience of rapture, an experience which Dante is now beginning to have.\(^\text{87}\)

The Biblical passage goes on to describe the restoration of Paul’s sight in terms that are important for this reading: Ananias places his hands on Saul and says, “‘Brother Saul, the Lord – Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here – has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.’ Immediately something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized” (Acts

9:17-18). Paul has already been figured as an important predecessor for Dante in eschatological journey-narratives, to which the pilgrim calls immediate attention with his concerns in *Inferno* II.32, in which he cries that he cannot live up to the two primary journeys that prefigure his own, that of Aeneas in classical tradition and that of Paul in Christian tradition. Echoes of Paul’s words and references to his journey are scattered throughout the *Paradiso* as he becomes the primary model of Christian rapture whose experiences anticipate those of the pilgrim.

Here, as Paul, Dante “wakes” to new sights, and a new level of power in his sight; he knows he is being physically prepared for the blinding visions of rapture, and his heart communicates this to him. He writes:

Non fur più tosto dentro a me venute
queste parole brieve, ch’io compresi
me sornontar di sopra a mia virtute;
e di novella vista mi raccesi
tale, che nulla luce è tanto nera,
che li occhi miei non si fosser difesi.

[Paradiso XXX.55-60: No sooner had these brief words come within me that I comprehended that I was surmounting beyond my own power, and such new vision was kindled in me that there is no light so bright that my eyes could not have withstood it.]

Dante moves beyond human capability once again, surpassing the *virtute* that has granted him sight until now. As Paul, he is blinded and then sees anew in God, and the *novella vista* that is granted to him here is not only a new object of vision, but also a new ability to see. Dante follows the Pauline tradition of refining sight in order to see the sights of God. As Singleton mentions above, Dante here begins his rapture, in which he ascends to stand before God, just as Paul did before him. There is, however, a process of bodily

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88 This passage is cited and discussed in chapter 1 above.
purification that must occur before the vision can take place; human vision is not powerful enough for the vision of God, and its veils must be lifted.

As Dante progresses toward this vision, his process of purification leads him not from a waking state further into a dream-state, away from mortal realms and into the supernatural, but from dreaming into waking, from the natural into the hyper-natural – a reality that is more real because of its proximity to God. The process of the pilgrim’s visions and re-visions as he approaches his apotheosis is constituted in a series of unveilings of sight. Like Muhammad’s before him, Dante’s veiled human sight here is not enough, and both pilgrims are granted the gift of direct, unveiled sight of God. As each veil of sleep is rent, Dante wakes to new visions, and each new vision is a part of a more authentic reality than the last. As the pilgrim moves up the spheres, then, he tears the veils of sleep clouding his vision, and wakes to a hyper-real state. Sleep becomes a metaphor not only for sin, as it is conceived in the allegory of *Inferno* I, but also for human vision and earthly reality, as opposed to paradisial vision and divine hyper-reality. This metaphor of the veils of sleep that cloud human sight culminates in the final cantos of the *Paradiso*, as Dante reaches the ultimate vision of reality, God. The waking vision occurs within the frame of a dream; introduced in the first lines of the poem, it is recalled at the end of the poem once Dante is about to return to “sleep,” to human vision. Bernard of Clairvaux, Dante’s guide to the final vision, notes that the pilgrim’s time with God is limited: “perché ’l tempo fugge che l’assonna, / qui farem punto” [*Paradiso* XXXII.139-140: “because the time flies that brings sleep upon you, we will stop here”], he advises the pilgrim. The verb *assonnar* is again used, recalling the slumber (*l’assonnar* in *Purgatorio* XXXII.69, cited above) in the Garden of Eden, as Dante
prepared to leave the earth and ascend into the hyper-reality of God's heavens. The repetition of the word in the thirty-second canto of both Purgatorio and Paradiso sets up another frame, as the process of purifications of sight to the novella vista is contained within experiences of human assonnar. The transitory nature of the rapture as described by St. Bernard emphasizes that the change to the novella vista is not permanent: the veils of sleep will be restored upon Dante's return to the natural world. It is for this reason that the pilgrim must see God while his vision finds itself capable of hyper-natural sight.

The references to vision and the dream become even more prevalent in the final canto. St. Bernard prays, and Dante sees:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Da quinci innanzi il mio veder fu maggio} \\
&\text{che 'l parlar mostra, ch'a tal vista cede,} \\
&\text{e cede la memoria a tanto oltraggio.} \\
&\text{Qual è colui che sognando vede,} \\
&\text{che dopo 'l sogno la passione impressa} \\
&\text{rimane, e 'l altro a la mente non riede.} \\
&\text{cotal son io, ché quasi tutta cessa} \\
&\text{mia visione, e ancor mi distilla} \\
&\text{nel core il dolce che nacque da essa.}
\end{align*}
\]

[Paradiso XXXIII.55-63: "Thenceforward my vision was greater than speech can show, which fails at such a sight, and at such excess memory fails. As is he who dreaming sees, and after the dream the passion remains imprinted and the rest returns not to the mind; such am I, for my vision almost wholly fades away, yet does the sweetness that was born of it still drop within my heart."]

In this last in the series of unveilings, Dante feels his new vision, veder, strengthening to excess, oltraggio. The verbal form of the noun veder here emphasizes that the greater vision here refers not only to vision as the object of sight, but also to vision as the ability to see. His new veder exceeds not only his human faculty of vision, but also all of his other human faculties – his speech and his memory, for example – which become
ineffectual in the divine realm of the hyper-real. As Dante struggles to recall the sights that function outside of human experience, he loses his abilities.

Dante continues to play with the rhetoric of dreaming in this passage as well. In the simile he compares himself to one who has dreamt a sweet image, and only the sentiment of the image remains in his memory; the vision itself has faded. In the process of revelation described by Freccero, this is the moment when unveiling is complete: all the veils have been lifted, and the poet literally sees the divine revelation as he stands before God. Freccero describes this moment as one that unites poet and pilgrim; throughout the poem the pilgrim is characterized by a lack of knowing, but an ability to experience, while the poet is one who knows, but does not yet, in the narrative of the poem, exist. The moment of the apotheosis is one which unites the two in revelation: “Journey’s end, the vision of the Incarnation, is at the same time the incarnation of the story, when pilgrim and author, being and knowing, become one.”

This incarnation is figured prominently here, as the use of the present tense of the verb indicates: Cotal son io, writes Dante, as his vision now fades. It is important to note here, though, that the pilgrim is not simply the character in the poem that exists and experiences: the pilgrim is the one who sees. The distinction here that Freccero overlooks is that the poet, whose incarnation is witnessed here, remains one who is and knows, but becomes one who has seen, and no longer sees. The poet here is like a dreamer, but his experience of the divine revelation cannot be rendered by human faculties, just as the dream cannot be recalled once the dreamer returns to her human waking reality. The veils of sleep – that is, of human vision – have been restored, and this speaker is the poet returned from the vision.

89 Freccero, “Medusa,” 120.
of God, a return not described in the poem. Having returned from true vision to the earth, the poet must again see past the veils of this world, the veils of sleep that shroud divine revelation. It is the duty of the poet, knowing and having seen, to relate the true vision of God to those shrouded by veils of sleep on earth. In this way, Dante’s poem is framed by the dream-state – the dream-state created by the veils on human sight.

CONCLUSIONS

The emphasis on seeing and waking in the Commedia suggests a departure from its literary predecessors in the dream-vision genre that is perhaps more aptly considered alongside a text such as the Libro della Scala, a religious myth that stakes a claim to its own truth in the very act of the Prophet’s seeing. Both religious myths place an emphasis on the traveler as one who sees or has seen, and it is in the very act of this sight that the truth of the vision is verified.

The ambivalence of the two texts regarding the nature of visions and dreams is central to the understanding of the truth that each text presents. Both texts frame the narrative with references to a sleep-state of sorts that serves to position the text within the genre of the dream-narrative. Nevertheless, both texts depart from the genre in ambiguities that are perhaps characteristic of the shifting perspectives on dreams and their truth-value in the late Middle Ages. Dante’s shift from the revelatory value of dreams to an emphasis on waking is consistent with the Libro’s conception of Muhammad’s journey as bodily and framed by sleep. Furthermore, the Western “rediscovery” of Aristotle and his denial of the profundity of dreams, locating their source in the body and not in an external power, suggests a turn from the understanding
of dreams as divine phenomena. In his commentary on Aristotle’s *De divinatione per somnum*, Albertus Magnus proposes a detailed hierarchy of dreams and visions, beginning with bodily-produced false dreams and concluding with waking visions revealing truth. As Kruger notes of Albert’s hierarchy, “Dreams (1-7) are the lowest on the [13-point] scale, because it takes the least celestial power to affect someone who is asleep: sleep quiets sensory processes.”90 But the dreams produced in sleep are misleading and confused, relying on unclear images and requiring interpretation by an outsider. In waking visions, the next section on the scale, the senses prevent the direct transmission of truth, and the visionary sees true visions through obscure images. The highest places on the scale are reserved for those visions that reveal plain truth, for which interpretation is unnecessary: “In the last two stages of vision, true prophecy is attained, and in the final stage, the celestial signals are so strong that they display a clear message ‘etiam absque magna sensuum aversione’ [even without a great turning away of the senses].”91 The vision’s ability to communicate a message directly through the bodily senses – and without mediation of an interpreter – determines its truth-value, and dreams are treated as carriers of obscure messages that have little to no obvious truth-value.

Both the *Libro della Scala* and the *Commedia* indicate the post-Aristotelian turn in their ambivalence toward dream-narratives, and Dante’s subsequent systematization of his process of waking from the vision is very telling in terms of the contemporary discourse on dreams. The systematic approach Dante takes toward the process of seeing, the function of light, and the progressive waking incorporates the ambivalences present in

90 Kruger, *Dreaming*, 120.
91 Kruger, *Dreaming*, 121.
the *Libro* into a logic of sleep and dreams that draws the dreamer closer to a mortal state and further from the notion of the divine hyper-reality offered in a true corporeal vision.

Both texts hinge on the shifting perceptions of dreams to make a claim to truth through a narrative recounting a bodily journey. By showing the two travelers waking at the beginning of each text, however explicitly this waking is described, each text positions itself within the discourse that questions the validity of dreams, and uses this discourse to assert its own truth. In order to understand the ambivalences of Dante’s relationship to the nature of his vision, understood by some commentators as surely a dream, others as surely not a dream, a look at the *Libro della Scala* and its own ambivalences shows readers another level of Dante’s discursive engagements.
CHAPTER 4
KEEPING TO THE STRAIGHT PATH OF THE FAITH

The image of the straight path is central to understandings of many monotheistic religious traditions, and is particularly so for the traditions of Christianity and Islam. The straight path figures as a signifier to denote the proper way to conduct oneself according to the tenets of the faith, and to keep to the straight path remains an important designation for Catholics and Muslims alike. The idea of the straight path is in fact so central to one’s understanding of these religions that commentators on the Commedia rarely find the reference to la diritta via in the third line of the poem a necessary point to gloss thoroughly. In his commentary on the Inferno, Charles Singleton finds it suitable to cite Biblical echoes, two from the book of Proverbs and the third from il Peter. 92 For their part, Ronald Martinez and Robert Durling simply state that the straight path designates, “[t]he course of the just man, leading to God (see Psalm 23.3, Prov. 2.13-14, 2 Peter 2.15).” 93 Dante’s contemporaries found the straight path to mean simply the path of virtue, the path that leads men directly to God and heaven. In his gloss to Inferno 1.3, Giovanni Boccaccio writes, “Egli è il vero che le vie son moite, ma tra tutte non è che una che a porro di salute ne meni, e quella è esso Idio, il quale di sè dice nell’Evangelio:

‘Ego sum via, veritas et vita’ [‘It is true that the paths are many, but among all of them there is but one of them that leads to the gate of salvation, and that one is God Himself, as is said in the Evangelist: ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life’’]. 94 The reference seems to recall a straightforward presentation of the way of the virtuous man.

Because Dante has chosen to give the straight path such a prominent position in the text, citing it twice in the first twelve lines of the poem, it seems necessary to consider the phrase as thoroughly as possible, exploring not only the standard Christian interpretations of the epithet, but also examining the greater cultural and historical context out of which it derives its full meaning. The straight path was not a strictly Christian notion, and as understanding of the cultural interchanges of the time grows, scholars continue to find richer ways of reading even the most seemingly straightforward lines of the Commedia. Through an examination of the role of Islam in the medieval Christian intellect and imagination, a fuller picture of Dante’s diritta via emerges.

The straight path serves an even more prominent role in Islamic tradition than it does in Christianity. The straight path is the way of God’s favor, the course of righteousness, and those who stray from it fall out of God’s graces. The image is pervasive in Muslim culture, and is repeated in prayers five times daily by Muslims the world over. Because of its prevalence in Islamic culture, and, further, the levels of contact between Christian and Muslim societies in the Middle Ages, Dante’s use of the term “straight path” in such a position of distinction advocates a look at the full contextual significance of the phrase. An understanding of his use of the image of the

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straight path suggests a consideration of the various usages of the image in Islamic
culture.

The centrality of the image of the straight path for Muslims is evident in the Libro
della Scala, in which the straight path becomes both the path on which Muhammad
travels to God and the path that he is to show to his followers on earth. The image is
central also to Inferno I, and arguably remains so throughout the Commedia. A reading
of the meanings of the straight path for the Libro della Scala will illuminate the
importance of the image for Dante’s journey, as well as open up the reading of the
straight path in the Commedia to a richer reading within its cultural and historical
context.

As I have considered elsewhere in this study, Dante’s poetic predecessors offer
other examples of divergences from the straight path that enrich the use of the metaphor.
Brunetto Latini is foremost among these examples, employing the path image in his
dream-vision narrative. Brunetto, like Dante, claims, “Perdei il gran cammino / E tenni a
la traversa / D’una selva diversa” [ll.188-190: “[I] Lost the great highway / And took to
the crossroad / Through a strange wood”]. Both pilgrims turn off the beaten path,
wandering into the strange and unfamiliar spaces of dreams and visions. The use of the
words cammin and selva in the first lines of the Inferno directly recalls this passage of
Brunetto’s Tesoretto, and Dante’s pilgrim finds himself in medias res – he is in fact in the
moment that Brunetto’s dream-vision begins.

Unlike Brunetto Latini, who strays from the path into a strange wood that does
not inspire his fear, Dante’s wanderings have left him in a shadowy, unknown, and

frightening place. This is no simple wayward journey moving him astray into the arms of Nature herself; this sleep-walking has led him to the wrong path, the path of sin and damnation. While Brunetto meets a “turba magna / Di diversi animali” [ll.194-195: “a great crowd / Of different living things”], ⁶⁶ Dante meets three particular beasts, each of which renews his fear. The similarity of the openings to the two poems calls for a consideration of the two in terms of the understanding of movement off the familiar path, but the differences in affect produced by the pathless place draw attentions away from the parallels with the Tesoretto. Clearly there is another dimension of poetic intent in the reference.

It is through the lens of a religious – and specifically monotheistic – emphasis on the straight path that Dante’s own use of the epithet must be considered. The fear experienced by the pilgrim in Inferno I is a direct result of his having strayed from the right path in his sleep-state. Clearly there is one, straight, exclusive path which the pilgrim has lost, and the loss of the right road leads him into dark places that inspire fear. At this point in the text the straight path is not positioned against one which is not straight, but against a lack of paths altogether: when the pilgrim stumbles from the straight path he finds himself in an utterly pathless place, a selva oscura that cannot be mapped or navigated. Like Brunetto, Dante finds himself in a world lacking boundaries, direction, and laws, but unlike Brunetto’s selva, this territory represents a place of sin, darkness, and confusion. The implication in the Commedia is that this is an improper place for a Christian to remain. The question of where the impropriety comes from

cannot be found in such a text as Brunetto’s *Tesoretto*, which conceives of the wood as an unusual place, but not a wrong one.

Dante’s text, on the other hand, quite clearly positions a right way and a wrong way in several instances. In *Purgatorio* X, for example, Dante describes the sins that those in Purgatory will purge as a “*mal amor*” which “*fa parer dritta la via torta*” [*Purgatorio* X.2-3: “wrong love... making the crooked way seem straight”]. In this instance there is certainly a straight path from which one can stray onto a crooked and wrong path. The image of the right path as opposed to the wrong one is again used in *Purgatorio* XXX, when Beatrice rebukes the pilgrim for having turned from the right path of his love for her to the distracting love of another. I cite and discuss this passage in fuller detail below. The image again features in the *Paradiso*, as Dante nears the high vision and Beatrice prepares him for the last moments of his experience. She feels the time running out, and pressures Dante to move forward:

*Ma perché siamo digressi assai, ritorci*  
*t’occhi oramai verso la dritta strada,*  
*si che la via col tempo si raccorci.*

[*Paradiso* XXIX.127-129: “But since we have digressed enough, turn back your eyes now to the true path, so that the way may be shortened with the time.”]

Beatrice desires that Dante fix his eyes again on the *dritta strada*, here presented as the shortest and most direct route to his destination, the Empyrean. Again the *dritta via* is figured as the direct path to God, and the path of the righteous.

The reference to the straight path in *Inferno* I rarely leaves commentators puzzled as to its allegorical significance and its textual sources: it is clearly a Biblical reference to the way of the virtuous, and a formula used in previous openings of visionary accounts.
Nevertheless, there is another textual precedent that should be considered: the richness of religious meaning evoked by the image of the “straight path” here also draws from the use of this epithet throughout the *Libro della Scala* and Islamic religious literature on the whole. The straight path is the epithet for the religious way of life in the Muslim understanding, as it is in many traditions of monotheism, but it also appears in the text in several other important ways. First I will consider the prominent moments in which one comes to understand the particular significance of this epithet for Muslims, then I will turn to Muhammad’s direct ascent and descent during the *mi’raj* narrative, and finally I will look at the straight path as a metaphor for the injunction to prophesy that Muhammad receives several times throughout the *Libro*.

There are two immediately significant moments in which the straight path figures most importantly in Islam. The first arrives in the opening verses of the Qur’án, prayed by Muslims five times during the day: “Keep us on the right [or straight] path. The path of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed favors. Not [the path] of those upon whom Thy wrath is brought down, nor of those who go astray.”

97 The prayer of Muslims is to keep one’s eyes directed ahead, so as to not be led astray from the direct path to God. The path in the image is necessarily singular and exclusive: there cannot be more than one right path, and although it is subject to imitations, there is only one true straight path that leads to God’s graces. The image here functions as a designation of the correct way to comport oneself according to the traditions that Muhammad sets forth. It is the proper way of Muslim life, and the repetition of the phrase five times daily positions the straight

97 Qur’án, Sura 1.6-7.
path as the predominant code of conduct in the religion. The mind is and must be always fixed on following the straight path.98

The second example of a notable reference to the straight path occurs in the end of the Libro della Scala, when Muhammad receives his final commands from his guide Gabriel. Before the end of the journey Gabriel twice charges Muhammad with the task of directing others on the path he has been shown. At the end of the account of the punishments of hell, Gabriel turns to Muhammad and asks, "Muhammad, have you thoroughly committed to memory all that you saw?" I answered him, 'Yes.' 'Then go,' said he, 'and just as you saw all these things, tell and reveal them to your people so that they may know them and keep to the straight path of the faith and may consider and mind how to enter paradise and preserve themselves from hell.' Here the straight path is figured as the path to paradise, that which will keep its followers preserved from the flames of hell. Gabriel reiterates this injunction in his final words to the Prophet shortly thereafter: "Ah! Muhammad, may God aid and guide you wherever you go, and may He grant you the grace to be able to remember what you saw and explain it to people so that they may know how to recognize truth from error and keep to the right path and preserve themselves from the wrong one through the revelation that you will make to them."100 Again, the straight path is figured as the one that will keep its followers on the side of truth, and here it is positioned against a wrong path that will lead the people into error.

98 Although the straight path is necessarily an exclusive one, there are naturally differing ideas within the religion about what the correct straight path to God looks like. For example, the Islamic mystical literature of Sufism conceives of the path to God as a series of waystations along a road of pilgrimage, and the root for the word mi'raj itself actually bears a meaning closer to the idea of "zigzag." The various significances of the image of the path for Islam, although outside the scope of this particular study, encourage further exploration of the resonance of this image in the Libro della Scala.
99 Book of Muhammad's Ladder, 191.
100 The Book of Muhammad's Ladder, 192.
The straight path in the *Libro della Scala* is the path that readers will be shown through the revelation of the text itself, and it is inextricably connected with the ability of the Prophet to remember the vision and share it with his followers.

Within the narrative of the *Libro della Scala*, the straight path serves as a reminder of the journey of Muhammad himself through the afterlife, as well as the journey of Muslims through their lives on earth. Keeping to the straight path is the only means of reaching paradise and the divine vision, both literally in the text and figuratively in the moral scheme it offers. Supported by Qur’anic revelation and the revelatory vision offered to the Prophet in heaven, the image serves in the *Libro della Scala* to reinforce the principles of Islamic culture.

The reference to keeping to the straight path in the end of the *Libro* is prefigured throughout, most obviously in the very literal path of motion that Muhammad takes in his journey. Muhammad’s *isra*’ takes him on the back of Alborak directly to the temple and directly back, literally in a straight line from his house in Mecca. The *mi’raj*, as its translation – ladder – indicates, is a direct ascent through the heavens by means of a ladder that descends to the earth. Muhammad climbs the ladder straight from one heaven to the next in many accounts of the *mi’raj*, although the *Libro* itself only cites the presence of the ladder at the beginning of the journey. Muhammad describes the ladder as follows:

Gabriel took me by the hand and led me outside the Temple, and he showed me a ladder that extended from the first heaven all the way down to the ground where I stood. And it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. The feet of this ladder rested on the stepping-stone where I had descended earlier, and the rungs of the ladder were as follows: the first was of ruby, the second, of emerald, the third, of white pearl, and each of the others consisted of a different sort of precious stone decorated more richly with pure gold and pearls than man’s mind could imagine.
It was completely covered in green samite brighter than any emerald, and, moreover, it was surrounded by angels who guarded it, and the brightness was so intense that one could hardly look at it. Then Gabriel took me by the hand, lifted me from the ground, set me on the ladder’s first rung, and said to me: “Climb, Muhammad.” And I climbed in the company of Gabriel, and all the angels who had been stationed to watch over the ladder accompanied me.\(^{101}\)

Following the elaborate description of the ladder, the *Libro della Scala* leaves the material presence of the ladder behind, but its image continues to serve as a prefiguration of the rest of the journey upward through the heavens. The title itself – the *Book of the Ladder* – indicates the significance of the image of the ladder and the direct upward ascent of the Prophet throughout the *mi’raj* narrative. Muhammad literally follows a straight path directly to God.

The idea of straightforward motion is again articulated in the descriptions of the bridge of Judgment Day, as-Sirāt, or Azirat as it is called by the translator. One of the first references to Azirat is a foreshadowing of it in one of the gardens of paradise: Gabriel describes the words of God on Judgment Day as he invites Muhammad’s people into the garden reserved for them: “He will say to them: ‘Advance, dear friends, and cross mightily Azirat halmuçakin [as-Sirāt al-mustaqim]’ – and Azirat is a bridge about which you will hear later.”\(^{102}\) The note that accompanies the Arabic phrase transliterated here indicates that the bridge’s complete name means “the straight path,”\(^{103}\) and indeed Azirat is described as such in later chapters. As souls are collected at the Last Judgment, Gabriel describes, they will be required to cross the Bridge of Judgment, razor-sharp and perfectly straight, suspended above a dangerous mountain pass over the pits of hell.

Gabriel tells the Prophet:

\(^{101}\) *The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder*, 109.

\(^{102}\) *The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder*, 143.

\(^{103}\) See Hyatte’s note in his edition of *The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder*, 143.
Know, Muhammad, that Azirat is a bridge that Our Lord made as a test to determine who believes firmly in your religion or, likewise, who does not. This bridge is situated on high above hell, and it is finer than a hair from the head and sharper than any sword blade. Both sides are quite thick with pincers and hooks and iron spits longer than large lances and more pointed and trenchant than anyone could describe.  

Those who will be judged at the end of time will be forced to, again, quite literally keep to the straight path of the faith. Whereas on earth the possibility of straying from the right path led the wanderer away from God and to potential damnation, drifting from this path leads precisely and immediately to the downfall of the sinner, into the actual pit of hell. The straight and narrow path of Azirat is a trial to assess the literal ability of the soul to follow the path that each is supposed to follow figuratively in life.

With the example of Azirat bridge the complete significance of the injunction to follow the straight path is felt: only with practice in life can one accomplish this in the afterlife. Shortly after the account of the bridge Gabriel passes the responsibility of guide to the Prophet, with his words regarding the keeping of the straight path. The Prophet’s memory is not the only one charged with recalling the vision at this point in the narrative, for the reader has only just seen the effects of not keeping to the straight path in the example of Azirat. The metaphorical phrase that is repeated numerous times a day suddenly takes on a much more apparent meaning.

The difficult path of Azirat has a resonance in the Purgatorio, as Dante and Virgil ascend the mountain slopes on an arduous and rocky path. The seven bridges that compose Azirat each represent a trial for a particular sin, as do the seven ledges of Purgatory. Both Azirat and the mountain of Purgatory find the traveler on a difficult path.

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104 The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder, 186.
journey that involves very carefully watching one's step, and the gates of Purgatory are notably difficult moments of passage for Dante's pilgrim. While the sinners in Purgatory, importantly, do not have the fires of hell to fear as they tread their path, they too are spurred on by the love and desire of God that keeps them advancing toward the end. The pilgrim and Virgil know this well; on his ascent the pilgrim notes:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\textit{qui convien ch'om voli;} \\
&\textit{dico con l'ale snelle e con le piume} \\
&\textit{del gran disio, di retro a quel condotto} \\
&\textit{che speranza mi dava e facea lume.} \\
&\textit{Noi salavam per entro 'l sasso rotto,} \\
&\textit{e d'ogni lato ne stringeano lo stremo,} \\
&\textit{e piedi e man volea il suol di sotto.}
\end{align*}
\]

[Purgatorio IV.27-33: "here a man must fly, I mean with the swift wings and the plumes of great desire, behind that leader, who gave me hope and was a light to me. We were climbing within the cleft rock, and the surface on either side pressed close on us, and the ground beneath required both feet and hands.]

Passing through the gates of the mountain of Purgatory is for the souls as the test of the straight path of Azirat is for its own wayfarers, but here there is no chance of failure. The difficulty of the passage is part of the process of purgation for these sinners, not a display of virtue to be judged. Dante's pilgrim, however, struggles through the climb and feels fear at the possibility of his own failure. He must step carefully up the mountain and keep to the right path so that he does not lose either his footing or his way.

Dante continues to describe the difficulty of the climb as he and Virgil ascend to higher ledges. As soon as they have passed through the gate of Purgatory proper, Dante writes:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\textit{Noi salavam per una pietra fessa,} \\
&\textit{che si moveva e d'una e d'altra parte,} \\
&\textit{si come l'onda che fugge e s'appressa.} \\
&\textit{"Qui si conviene usare un poco d'arte,"}
\end{align*}
\]
cominciò 'il duca mio, "in accostarsi
or quinci, or quindi al lato che si parte."
E questo fece i nostri passi scarsi,
tanto che prìa lo scemo de la luna
rigiunse al letto suo per ricorarsi,
che noi fossimo fuor di quella cruna.

[Purgatorio X.7-16: "We were climbing through a cleft in the rock, which kept bending
one way and the other, like a wave that goes and comes. ‘Here we must use a little skill,’
my leader began, ‘in keeping close, now here, now there, to the side that recedes.’ And
this made our steps so scant that the waning orb of the moon had regained its bed to sink
to rest before we came forth from that needle’s eye.’"]

The reference to the needle’s eye, quella cruna, in the last line of the passage recalls a
Biblical verse significant here for the comprehension of the difficulty of the journey. In
his notes to these lines of the Purgatorio, Singleton notes:

The account of this climb through the very narrow passageway (ending so
significantly with the rhyme word “cruna”) stresses the fact that beyond the portal
itself this narrow way marks a kind of entrance to Purgatory proper and, unlike
the gate of Hell, which is very wide (see Inf. V, 20) and is “denied to none” (Inf.
XIV, 87), the gate here is narrow. The whole passage, indeed, would call to mind
precisely the “angusta porta et arcta via,” and the few who enter, of the Gospel.
See Matt. 7:13-14: “Intrate per angustam portam, quia lata porta et spartiosa via est
quae ducit ad perditionem, et multi sunt qui intrant per eam. Quam angusta porta
et arcta via est quae ducit ad vitam, et pauci sunt qui inveniunt eam!” (“Enter by
the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to
destruction, and many there are who enter that way. How narrow the gate and
close the way that leads to life! And few there are who find it.”) For “cruna,” see
the “foramen aces” in Christ’s words to the disciples (Matt. 19:24): “Et iterum
dico vobis, facilius est camelum per foramen acus transire, quam divitem intrare
in regnum caelorum.” (“And further I say to you, it is easier for a camel to pass
through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of
heaven.”) 105

As Singleton’s note indicates, the Biblical subtext of the passage suggests the ease of the
way into hell, and the width of the path to damnation, but the way of heaven — and of
Purgatory before it — is painstaking and narrow. It takes time and careful steps to pass

105 Singleton, Purgatorio, vol.2: Commentary, 199.
into heaven, a passage that is visible for the reader both in Dante’s account of Purgatory and in the Muslim description of Azirat bridge.

Both traditions understand the way to God as a path that is narrow, long and arduous, and one from which many stray and fall into sin and death. Few will make it on the right way into paradise, and only those who have properly kept to the path of God in life will find themselves able to make the journey in the afterlife. The metaphor serves, for both texts, as a reminder of the proper way to comport oneself in this life, in order that the later journey, after life, may be made without serious trial.\footnote{In this way the texts exhibit characteristics of mystical traditions, and specifically of Sufism. The relationship between both texts and the traditions of mysticism is notable and remains to be explored in further scholarship.}

The Commedia, however, takes an interesting departure from the metaphorical straight path in the literal motion of the pilgrim through his journey. The pilgrim’s path in the Commedia is pointedly not straight, taking a spiral motion through hell and Purgatory, and a circular motion in paradise, as Dante wheels with the circles of heaven. John Freccero’s article “Pilgrim in a Gyre” has famously discussed the curved path of the pilgrim throughout his travels. Describing the motion in terms of Dante’s philosophical reasoning, Freccero looks to the Aristotelian cosmos to account for Dante’s left and right turns through hell and Purgatory, respectively. Considering the spiral turning a process of unwinding disordered will and then rewinding it to come into harmony with divine circling, Freccero sees the spiral motion of the journey as central to the philosophical layers of the poem’s allegory. He accounts for the necessity of spiral and circular motion – as opposed to straight ascent – through neoplatonic writings on the three movements of the intelligences, and well as those on the Itinerarium mentis, which describes the process
of conversion as a rectification of the movement of the soul. He cites the problem of the prologue scene not as one of an attempt to return to the straight path, but as one of trying to use the straight path to get to God in the first place. “In terms of the moral allegory,” he writes, “no progress can be made in the prologue scene, for this is erratic wandering extra nos [that is, linear]; Augustine had warned that Truth was not to be found in this way.”

The error of the pilgrim in canto 1, then, is not the loss of the straight path at all, as the poet himself says, but that the direct path to God as such cannot be achieved. The wanderings of the pilgrim were disordered from the start as he tried to walk the straight path on his own before even reaching the selva oscura. Direct and straight passage to God is not the path that the pilgrim will follow.

The problem with this direct ascent is seen again in Inferno 1, as the pilgrim attempts to make a direct ascent up the mountain towards the sunlit summit. The way is barred; three beasts prevent him from moving in such a way, and Virgil comes to his rescue:

“A te convien tenere altro viaggio,”
rispuose, poi che lagrimar mi vide,
“se vuoi campar d’esto loco selvaggio.”

[Inferno 1.91-93: “It behooves you to go by another way if you would escape from this wild place,” he answered when he saw me weep.”]

Virgil must conduct Dante by another path if he is to get out of the savage forest. He cannot take the path that leads directly up the mountain, not only because the way is barred by the three beasts, but also because it is not the path willed by God. Here the reader sees the inherent problem with direct ascent: God does not approve of an ascent.

without first taking the spiral path. The spiral path is the one that can set disordered will right again, and the descent in humility, in the footsteps of Christ, is necessary before ascent is possible. One cannot ascend directly to God in Dante’s narrative, a pointed departure from such narratives as the *Libro della Scala*.

Freccero also discusses the neoplatonic doctrine concerning the motion of angelic intelligences in order to explicate the significance of spiral motion. Citing the neoplatonist pseudo-Dionysius, he writes:

> He tells us that the angelic intelligence moves in three ways: circular, when it adores God; rectilinear, when it ministers to man; spiral, for even though it ministers to the world below, it never ceases adoring God. Man, who is at least in part an intelligence, and in the great scale is a little less than the angels, is capable of three intellectual movements as well: circular, when the human mind enters within itself and contemplates the Supreme Being; linear, when the human mind concentrates on external things; spiral, when “the knowledge of divine things illumines it, not by way of intuition or in unity, but thanks to discursive reasons and, so to speak, by complex and progressive steps.” One could hardly find a gloss better than this for the meaning of the spiral path in the itinerary of the mind of God.⁹⁸

Thus, Freccero holds that the straight path is the worldly way, the circular path the divine way, and the spiral is the progressive road toward contemplation of the divine. In Freccero’s reading of the metaphors of motion in the *Commedia*, Dante does not and should not return to the straight path.

Freccero’s important reading cannot be overlooked in a discussion of the straight path in *Inferno* I. The poem notably ends without a return to earth or any earthly motion: the pilgrim’s journey ends as he circles around with the divine, his will and desire following its circling in perfect harmony. The poem concludes as follows:

> Ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l velle,

⁹⁸ Freccero, “Pilgrim,” 81.
The pilgrim's return to earth is only understood because of the authorship of the poem itself, which attests to a necessary physical departure from the realm of the Empyrean to the earth. In the metaphor, however, the reader is to understand the end of the *Itinerarium mentis* here, as the mind has found its home and will not turn away again.

Circular motion becomes the literal path of the pilgrim's travels, and it serves as a spatial reference for the direction of the path.

Dante's literal, spatial turn from the straight path to a circular one may be read as an engagement in the philosophical discourses of its time. Nevertheless, the *diritta via* remains a prominent metaphor for Dante, one that follows from a long Biblical tradition and that gains even more centrality in the Muslim mind. As the commentary tradition shows, the straight path remains a metaphor for the righteous path, despite Dante's spatial mapping that suggests otherwise. The *diritta via* that is lost in the opening lines of the *Commedia* is never spatially regained: it is lost and remains so, having been undone by Christian truths which have set it right, that is, *not* straight. But the *diritta via* remains metaphorically significant, as it implies the existence of one correct way to God. The loss of the right path is the explicit reason for Dante's journey in the first place, as Beatrice makes clear in her rebuke of the pilgrim in the earthly paradise. She explains:

*Aucun tempo il sostenni col mio volto: mostrando li occhi giovanetti a lui,*

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109 It should be noted here that *diritta* can be translated in a few ways: as the citations in this chapter show, for example, Singleton variously uses "straight," "upright," and "right" to translate *diritta* and its textual variants.
meco il menava in dritta parte vólto.
Si tosto come in su la soglia fui
di mia seconda etade e mutai vita,
questi si tolse a me, e diesi altrui.
Quando di carne a spirito era salita,
e bellezza e virtù cresciuta m’era,
fu’ io a lui men cara e men gradita;
e volsi i passi suoi per via non vera,
imagini di ben seguendo false,
che nulla promession rendono intera.
Né l’imperare ispirazion mi valse,
con le quai e in sogno e altrimenti
io rivocai: si poco a lui ne calse!
Tanto giù cadde, che tutti argomenti
a la salute sua eran già corti,
fuor che mostrarli le perdute genti.

[Purgatorio XXX.121-138: “For a time I sustained him with my countenance: showing him my youthful eyes I led him with me turned toward the right goal. So soon as I was on the threshold of my second age and had changed life, this one took himself from me and gave himself to others. When from flesh to spirit I had ascended, and beauty and virtue were increased in me, I was less dear and less pleasing to him and he turned his steps along a way not true, following false images of good, which pay no promise in full. Not did it avail me to obtain inspirations with which, both in dream and otherwise, I called him back, so little did he heed them. He fell so low that all means for salvation were now short, save to show him the lost people.”]

Beatrice explains that the pilgrim, here identified as a specific individual named Dante, had been following her toward the dritta parte, the right goal, but turned away onto the wrong way, volsi i passi suoi per via non vera. She tries to turn him back toward her in dreams and other displays of obscured or veiled truth, but realizes that the only way to direct him back to the right way is to mosrarli le perdute genti, to show him the lost people of hell. The journey through hell is thus a final attempt to turn Dante back to the right path, in Beatrice’s account. Although this straight path for Dante may not turn out to be literally straight, there is a return to the diritta via – the right way – at the poem’s end, for Dante has reset his eyes on the correct goal.
The narratives of these journeys and their relationship to correct motion and narrow, exclusive paths are tied to the understanding of prophecy: the ability to be a guide for others to the right road. This connection is made explicit in the *Libro della Scala*, which relates Muhammad’s own direct road to God to his ability to tell the narrative of the journey in order to show others how to reach God as well. Both of Gabriel’s injunctions to the Prophet regarding the straight path, cited above, hinge on the necessity of Muhammad’s passing the message on to other Muslims. Once the Prophet is privy to the truth regarding the right way to find God, he is obliged to share that information with his fellows.

Dante’s mission, too, depends on his ability to be a guide to the right road, whether this road is to be a literally straight path or not. This injunction is felt in several places in the text, and particularly in the departure of Virgil at the top of the mountain of Purgatory, and in the encounter with Cacciaguida in the heaven of Mars. In the final words of his first guide, Virgil, Dante is informed that he may take active control over his own journeying now:

\[
\text{Non aspettar mio dir più né mio cerno;}
\text{libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio,}
\text{e fallo fora non fare a suo senno:}
\text{per ch’io te sovra te corono e mitiro.}
\]

*[Purgatorio XXVII.139-142: “No longer expect word or sign from me. Free, upright, and whole is your will, and it would be wrong not to act according to its pleasure; wherefore I crown and mitre you over yourself.”]*

After his spiraling through the first two realms of the afterlife, Dante’s will has been set right — made *dritto*. His will may now serve, according to Virgil, as its own guide. This is not entirely correct, however, for it is important to note that Virgil’s crowning of Dante
over himself is premature: Beatrice must take Dante through the circles of paradise
before his will and his desire are in perfect alignment, as they are in the end of the poem.

The episode with Cacciaguida in the heaven of Mars also discusses Dante’s path,
this time in terms of his future, in which he can expect exile and poetry. Cacciaguida
explains that Dante is shown the sights that are revealed to him for the purpose of writing
them down, which is in effect the same instruction given to Muhammad by Gabriel.

Dante is shown true visions, which he recognizes as a salve for so much earthly misery:

Giù per lo mondo senza fine amaro,
e per lo monte del cui bel cacume
li occhi de la mia donna mi levaro,
e poscia per lo ciel, di lume in lume,
ho io appreso quel che s’io ridico,
amolt la fia sapor di forte agrume;
e s’io al vero son timido amico,
temo di perder viver ora coloro
che questo tempo chiameranno antico.

[Paradiso XVII,112-120: “Down in the world endlessly bitter, and upon the mountain
from whose fair summit my lady’s eyes uplifted me, and after, through the heavens from
light to light, I have learned that which, if I tell again, will have for many a savor of great
bitterness; and if I am a timid friend to the truth, I fear to lose life among those who shall
call this time ancient.”]

Dante knows that the true path that he has been shown will provide succor to those who,
like him, know the harshness of life on earth. He knows that he should show this truth to
others. and Cacciaguida’s response makes it plain that this is the higher purpose of the
vision. As Gabriel had mandated of Muhammad, so Cacciaguida calls on Dante to reveal
the truth to the world below, just as he has seen it:

Ma nondimen, rimossa ogne menzogna,
tutta tua vision fa manifesta;
e lascia pur grattar dov’è la rogna...
Pero ti son mostrate in queste rote,
nel monte e ne la valle dolorosa
pur l’anime che son di fama note,
che l’animo di quel ch’ode, non posa
né ferma fede per esempio ch’ain
la sua radice incognita e ascosa,
né per altro argomento che non paia.

{Paradiso XVII.127-129, 136-142: "But none the less, all falsehood set aside, make manifest all that you have seen; and then let them scratch where the itch is... Therefore only the souls known of fame have been shown to you within these wheels, upon the mountain, and in the woeful valley; for the mind of him who hears rests not nor confirms its faith by an example that has its roots unknown or hidden, nor for other proof that is not manifest."}

Cacciaguida tells Dante that the encounters he has had have been designed with intent: that he then make this true path manifest to those on earth. The point of the entire journey is not only to show Dante the right path, but to make him a prophet who will conduct others to this same path by his example, which will be shown in his poem. Because the diritta via is smarrita, lost and maddened by various other paths claiming to be straight, Dante is shown the true path, the spiral path, with the intention that he reveal it to others who believe the straight path to be the right path. The authorship of the Commedia is thus a divine mandate, as was the authorship of the book of the mi’rāj.

The two narratives emphasize the path not only in terms of the spatial mapping of the journeys themselves, but as a metaphor for the call of a prophet who will guide others to the right way of life. This call to prophecy through writing is remarkably dissimilar to the Pauline tradition, for example, which places Paul’s own visionary experience into a third person narrative in its Biblical version, as Paul does not see it fit to boast of the experience. Speaking of the man he knows who was caught up to the third heaven, Paul says, "He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. I will not boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses" (II
Cor. 12:4-5). The sights of heaven are not to be described, and certainly not by the man who saw them himself. Even in the tradition of the *Visio Pauli* presented by Eileen Gardiner in her book *Visions of Heaven and Hell Before Dante*, the account written by Paul was hidden in his house in Tarsus, and not “discovered” until centuries after his death. The Pauline tradition has no call to authorship, or to sharing the vision with others. Paul does not willingly share his knowledge of the right path to God. That Dante’s own visionary experience necessitates a written account in order to fulfill its mission suggests a direct engagement with the same discursive sensibilities as that of the *Libro della Scala*, and not those of the *Visio Pauli*.

The path then serves in both texts as a metaphor for proper comportment according to the principles of the faith. Although only Muhammad’s path in the afterlife is quite literally straight, Dante finds himself being called back to the right path throughout the vision, and the straight path continues to serve as a figuration for the path he is taking, albeit only in a metaphorical sense. Both texts likewise use the revelation of the true way to the visionaries as a means of presenting them with the duty of prophecy: the revelation of the true path carries with it an injunction to become a guide to others. Each work then uses the image as a display of the way of righteousness, which others are to follow, and the texts themselves serve as roadmaps, in a sense, to the straight way.

It cannot be overlooked, however, that while the two texts place similar metaphorical emphases on the image, the notion of the right path is necessarily an exclusive way. There is one right path, one correct route to God, and the path claimed by each text inevitably diverges from the other— not only in the spatial construction of the path, but also in terms of the text’s exclusive claim. Each path is described as the
absolute and singular road, and each text uses the claim to the right path as a claim to
truth, to the one true road to God. The competition of truth claims constructed along the
same discursive lines reveals the simultaneous overlap and antagonism between the two
traditions, a historical and ideological engagement on many fronts, that plays out on the
pages of these two texts.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS: READING TRUTH IN RELIGIOUS MYTH

The emergence of a moment that allowed the Islamic *Libro della Scala* and the Christian *Commedia* to so similarly put forth claims to an exclusive truth makes a remarkable statement about the real interaction between two cultures that have historically and theoretically been pitted against each another. The suggestion that Dante had access to the *Libro della Scala* is not unfounded, although as yet unproven, and as scholars continue to reconsider the relationship between the Muslim East and the Christian West the realities of the interchange that occurred become more concretely understood. From the Crusades to the marketplace, the regal courts to the translation efforts, the levels of interaction between the cultures produced a moment in which both real dialogue and real animosity could develop; regardless of one’s relationship to Muslim culture, the medieval Christian could not help but admit its presence in the conversation.

It is through this lens of intercultural exchange that Dante’s *Commedia* must be read. The richness of the *Commedia* can only be appreciated with an eye to the cultural and historical moment from which it derives. This moment was affected by the real presence of cross-cultural intellectual and political exchange: the movement of Muslims in the Christian world and of Christians in the Muslim world created both points of
overlap and of tension between the two cultures, and Dante's text does not shy away from the conversation. Revealing the anxieties and the exchanges between two so historically opposed religious traditions, the Commedia provides some measure of the relationship between Christians and Muslims in the late medieval West.

Because of the political realities of interchange, both cultures shared a desire to create and reinforce a community of believers that was to be under the domain of their respective religious tradition. This interest shaped concerns for political and imperial growth, which in turn motivated concerns of assimilation and conversion of those of other religious traditions. In order to affect these processes, the two cultures had to present the truths of their religion within a framework that was relatable for the others, while illustrating the predominance of this truth over the others. Religious narratives of the medieval period often emerge from these competing discourses of truth, and both the Libro della Scala and the Commedia bear indications of this.

The Libro della Scala and the Commedia both present a narrative of true vision of the afterlife and of God in which a prophet is called to reveal this vision and the means to reach it. They employ similar structures and language in order to express competing and mutually exclusive versions of the truth. They also use corresponding strategies to express that truth, and each participates in the contemporary discourses regarding the nature of the afterlife, the inability of a dream to produce true visions, the process of visionary experience, the appropriate conduct for a believer, and the necessary transition from visionary to guide. Although the two occasionally come down on different sides of the debate, the similarities are striking, and the cross-cultural discursive engagement and ideological competition is visible in the patterns of the texts.

93
The two texts share an interest in verifying the truth claims they present by means of material sight of the visions of God. The corporeal journey of the narrator is essential to the validity of the account, and material sight is the marker of the embodied act of seeing. Each text frames the account with sleep, but the journey itself is not intended to be understood as a dream; in fact, the texts make a pointed departure from the rhetoric of dreaming, and the language of the Commedia in particular places an emphasis on the vision of the divine as a process of waking. The use of this rhetoric of waking expresses a shift in the ideas regarding the nature of dreams and the truth-value of the visions they produce, as the texts rely on the waking process to verify the reality that the vision presents.

The process of waking accompanies a process of refining material sight. As the visions of heaven increase in brightness, it is necessary for the visionary to readjust his sight to accommodate the celestial images. This readjustment makes evident the corporeal nature of the journey, as only embodied vision requires refinement; in a dream, vision is as powerful as the mind can conceive. The use of light in the two narratives becomes essential to the nature of vision, which is itself essential to the understanding of the very truth of the experience.

Having established the truth-value of the experience by the emphasis on material sight, the two texts also take on the task of establishing the exclusivity of the truth that the visionary sees. Both texts deny the truth of other visions through the metaphor of the straight or right path, a metaphor that serves to counter all examples of paths presented by other faiths. The presentation of one true path necessarily precludes the existence of other routes to God: the right way is the only way to God, and all other roads that claim
to lead to God are in fact crooked, wrong, or lead the traveler to hell instead of paradise. In the case of the *Libro della Scala*, the straight path does not only serve as a metaphor: Muhammad walks the straight path as he travels, both on earth and through the heavens, and the straight path becomes quite literally the road to God. Dante's use of the straight path becomes more metaphorical: for Dante, the "straight path" in fact turns out to be first a spiral, and then a circle. Dante, though, uses the "straight path" as a metaphor for the exclusivity of the journey: the straight way signifies the right way, the only true road to God, which is spatially constructed as a spiral. Regardless of its spatial structure, though, the path to God remains singular, exclusive, and demanding. The one way that leads to God is shown in both texts to be an arduous ordeal involving distress and trials for God's elect. The right path is neither an easily discernible nor effortless passage.

The difficulty of the journey on the right path underscores the importance of knowing the proper way to follow it, and both texts are presented as maps to the road of salvation. By correctly following the instructions of the text, the reader should discover the way to comport oneself according to the precepts of the faith: the text serves as a guide on the true path to God. It becomes an exclusive guidebook, and as there is only one correct path, it stakes a certain claim to an irrefutable truth. It authenticates its own truth by describing the role of the text and of its narrator in the journey to God. It also invalidates other texts in their claims to truth, for if this text presents the one true way, all others are mere imitations and false paths. The claims to truth made in the texts are both strikingly similar and mutually exclusive.

As religious myths interested in producing and reinforcing the truths of their respective faiths, the texts have an interest in presenting themselves as sacred. Dante
does this explicitly, calling the poem both "io sacro poema" and "l' sacro poema" [Paradiso XXIII.62 and XXV.1: "the sacred poem"] at two points in the Paradiso, where revelatory truth is entirely unveiled. The claim to the sacredness of the poem authenticates its role as a spiritual guidebook.

The Libro della Scala also presents itself as a sacred text, inspired by true visions, spoken by the Prophet, and recorded word-for-word by his trusted companions, who testify on behalf of the truth of the account at the end of the narrative. Before the final translator's note, the testament of the transcribers is given: "We, Habubekar and Abnez [Abû Bakr and Ibn 'Abbâs], attest with true heart and pure conscience that the matters which Muhammad related above are completely true, so that all those who will hear them told ought surely to place their trust in them as regards each particular just as we have written them down and shall do henceforth."¹¹⁰ The attestation of the transcribers serves to validate the text and all the details contained therein, and, aside from Bonaventura da Siena's notes at the beginning and end of the translation, it is the only passage of the text that is not in the voice of the Prophet himself. The Libro della Scala, like the Commedia, clearly states its own validity, authenticating its truth on its own accord. The self-authenticating¹¹¹ nature of both texts creates a claim to truth that is enabled by the very words of the text itself.

Ultimately, this presentation is a study of the Commedia and the layers of discourse in which it is engaged. I have focused here primarily on how one may better read the Commedia according to its discursive positioning in relationship to competing

¹¹⁰ The Book of Muhammad's Ladder, 198.
truth claims. The truth constituted within the text is fueled by its rhetorical and stylistic choices, and these choices speak to the variety of texts that Dante used in order to create and frame his religious myth.

This study does not present a thoroughly comparative approach that gives equal weight in its analysis to both the Islamic and the Christian texts. It is a reading of the richness of Dante’s narrative and the truth that it creates with respect to the context from which it emerges. The study of the Commedia’s discursive engagement with the Libro della Scala – and the truths of Islam in general – helps the reader to understand the extent of the interplay between medieval Islam and medieval Christianity, as well as the multilayered meanings of the language and the images that Dante employs.

This study raises further questions regarding the relationship between the Commedia and the Libro della Scala, and I would like to propose several avenues for future research on the matter. The most enticing possibility for most scholars will remain the desire to find conclusive evidence for a closer textual relationship between the two, a matter that would, of course, open many other possibilities for research. Although it is not necessary to prove intertextual influence in order to see that Dante’s text speaks within similar frameworks as that of this preceding religious myth, proof of the closeness of the relationship would certainly open up many new avenues for interpretation.

In regards to the question of truth claims, one interesting avenue for research that depends on proof of Dante’s access to the Libro della Scala would be to consider Dante’s interpretation of the truth claims that the Libro makes. The question of the reception of the Libro’s truth claim by Dante in particular and Christian audiences in general would be important not only for the understanding of Dante’s specific use of the text, but also for
understanding the Christian response to Islamic truth claims on the whole. How was the *Libro della Scala* received by Christian audiences? For that matter, how did Muslim audiences receive it? The question of the reception of the truth claims of the *Libro* in particular would give a future project insight into the weight Dante might have placed on the text in crafting his own truth claim.

Without intertextuality as a framework, truth reception remains an important avenue for research in terms of the shared stake the texts have in the other’s ability to establish and maintain its truth. Because of the dialogical nature of their relationship, the reception of one’s claim to truth could be important in the consideration of the truth claims of the other. In my consideration of Dante’s engagement with the truths of the *Libro della Scala*, I noticed some peculiarities in the situation of the *Libro*’s reception among Christians and Muslims, which raised questions regarding the *reading* of truth, rather than the production of it. Although outside the scope of the present project, these peculiarities could extend the project to a deeper reflection on the understanding of the truth of religious myths in the Middle Ages. Turning briefly to the question of truth-reception, I will present the distinctive situation of the *Libro*’s reception and describe the challenge this may present to a strictly comparative study of the texts.

The *Libro della Scala* was perceived by the Christian community to be an integral part of the dogmatic belief system of Muslims, but was more likely a popular account based on a Qur’anic truth. That is, the narrative is a folk account based on an Islamic doctrinal truth, placed in the voice of Muhammad but not precisely expressing the irrefutable truths of the religion. That Christian readers perceived the narrative to be essential to the dogmatic structures of Islam can be seen in the medieval translator’s
introduction to the text. Bonaventura da Siena clearly states the purpose of the translation:

And I translated the book most gladly for two reasons: one is in order to fulfill my lord’s commission, and the other is so that people may learn about Muhammad’s life and knowledge and so that after they have heard and become acquainted with the errors and unbelievable things that he recounts in this book, the legitimate Christian religion and truth which is in [Christ] will thus be more fitting and pleasing to embrace and keep for all those who are good Christians.  

As he states, the translations of this and other Muslim texts were commissioned by his lord, Alfonso X el Sabio of Spain. In the middle of the thirteenth century, the court of Alfonso the Wise produced translations of a collection of Muslim works, including the Qur’an, with the intention of assisting Alfonso’s imperial project. In his study on the perception of Islam in the Western political environment, John Tolan discusses the project of Alfonso the Wise as a Christian monarch overseeing subjects of the three predominant monotheisms of Spain: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Of Alfonso’s cultural program, Tolan notes, “If he often presents himself as ‘King of three religions,’ surrounded by dutiful Muslim, Christian, and Jewish subjects, it is precisely because he affirms… that there can be no legitimate non-Christian polity in Spain.” In legal and historical documents Alfonso concerned himself with the assimilation of Muslims and Jews into the Castilian Christian context, and his translation projects were largely efforts to highlight the errors of the other religions in light of Christian truth. Tolan describes the very political nature of Alfonso’s intellectual pursuits as follows:

In this schema, a key role is played by the affirmation of the superiority of Christianity and the denigration of Judaism and Islam. In the latter, the polemical biography of Muhammad is central: because Muhammad fails to show the signs

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112 The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder, 97.
of prophecy, because he fabricated a false religion as "an insult to God" there can be no political legitimacy under Muslim rule, and Muslims must recognize the political superiority of Christian rulers. The "proof" of this is offered not only in the biography of Muhammad in the Estoria de España [a historical chronicle produced under Alfonso’s supervision] but also in the Castilian translations of the Mi’raj and of the Koran, undoubtedly conceived as tools in the polemical confrontation with Islam.\textsuperscript{114}

According to Tolan, the translations were executed specifically in order to combat the truths of the other religions and delegitimize them in favor of Christian supremacy. Bonaventura da Siena’s introduction to his translation attests to this very fact, and it is this attestation that offers a clue to the ideological usage of the text.

In the case of the Libro della Scala in particular, the translation into French was, as Bonaventura states, to reveal the errors of the Muslim religion. He claims not to have made any intentional changes to the text, save for his own "limited knowledge"\textsuperscript{115} of the French language, enabling him to present only the narrative of "Muhammad’s ascent, how he went up into heaven by means of a ladder, as you will hear hereafter, and saw all the wonders that God revealed to him, just as he himself tells and the book details."\textsuperscript{116} Reginald Hyatte, the English translator and editor of the volume—which includes another thirteenth-century French translation of an Islamic narrative of the life of Muhammad—notes in his introduction that these two texts, among others, were directed "at the same end, with respect to French Christian audiences—discrediting Islam’s foundations.

Although neither work had any clear value in an attempt to convert Muslims or challenge them directly, they might have served, nevertheless, a limited function as anti-Islamic

\textsuperscript{114} Tolan, Saracens, 193.
\textsuperscript{115} The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder, 97.
\textsuperscript{116} The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder, 97.
propaganda on the ‘home front.’

Christian readers of the *Libro della Scala* would evidently have understood the text as heretical, and would have discounted the “truths” presented therein as characteristic of an illegitimate faith. The characterization of Islam as illegitimate and its truths as invalid serves the purpose of such political projects as that of Alfonso the Wise: those that meant to utilize texts like the *Libro della Scala* for the purpose of spreading Christianity to the “heathen” masses.

Interestingly, Bonaventura also calls attention to the necessity of the project in the end of his note on the translation. He writes, “And if my translation into French has any fault, so that it is not rendered as correctly as it should be, I indeed ask all those who know proper French to pardon me for it, since it is better for them to have it thus than not to have it at all.”

It is considered beneficial to French Christian audiences to have the full account of the ascent of Muhammad in order to underscore the errors of the Muslim faith. On this note, it is important to consider what exactly the Christians thought they were competing against: Bonaventura clearly places a certain stock in the text as a bona fide Islamic document, although Hyatte points out in his introduction to the English translation that the text did not hold equal weight in the minds of medieval Muslims. Of the original Muslim author of the text, Hyatte notes that he “was probably a Muslim, since he appears to support Islam unequivocally, and he appears to write for Muslims.”

Hyatte goes on, however, “But for the most part, he compiles and elaborates on Muslim and post-Koranic sources, some of which assimilated Jewish and Christian traditions,

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118 *The Book of Muhammad’s Ladder*, 97.

other night journey and ascent narratives, various cosmologies and works on the
otherworld, hadith of doubtful authenticity, and popular tales which he joins in a
continuous, chronological narration. The anonymous Muslim author of the original
text was another product of a shared cultural interchange, and his account is not strictly a
representation of Muslim beliefs. The Libro della Scala appears to be a compilation of
many sources, including some non-Islamic and non-traditional sources, and this presents
a problem for the truth that the text claims.

This would bring the issue of truth-reception to an important point: the narrative
of the Libro della Scala, taken as truth by the Christian community of translators and
readers, was not necessarily taken as such by its own community of readers. Hyatte
notes:

Although medieval Western, non-Muslim readers might easily mistake
Muhammad’s Ladder for the genuine document that it declares itself to be, such is
not the case with Muslim readers. Islamic theologians and scholars give little or
no credit to the popular tradition of al-mi’râj accounts, like the present book,
which derive in large part from sources – to say nothing of abundant artistic
imagination! – other than the canonical record Muhammad’s life and words.
Informed Muslims of any period would recognize The Book of Muhammad’s
Ladder for the most part as pious popular fiction worthy of believers’ respect for
its piety, but not of their credence. The Libro della Scala, according to Hyatte, “declares itself to be” a “genuine document”:
it presents itself as a verifiable account of Muhammad’s experience, and by certain
recognizable means it authenticates the truth that it claims. The means of constituting
truth claims employed in the Libro della Scala are familiar to Christian and Muslim
audiences alike, although the claims themselves would also be rejected by both groups.

If French Christian audiences read the French translation of the Libro as indicative of the

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erroneous beliefs of Muslims, would Dante and Italian audiences have read the Latin translation in the same way? Would they have read the narrative simply as a sign of an invalid belief system, or would some suggestion of truth have fueled production of competing truth claims, incorporating the discourses of the former into the latter?

The question of the reception of truth claims would be an interesting one for further study, particularly in terms of the ideological and political motivations of the authors, translators, and audiences of the texts. If each text produces a claim to truth that is to be taken as a verifiable and exclusive truth of the respective religious tradition, the reception of that truth stands as a measure of the success of its production. Regarding both the Libro della Scala and the Commedia, questions arise in terms of the truth-reception each text presents to each side of the religious divide. Where this study has considered the production of truth claims by means of discursive patterns, further scholarship might consider the reception of truth within and outside of the tradition that produces it.

From the perspective of this suggested future study, it would matter whether the Christian reader – such as Dante, if indeed the opportunity had arisen for him – would have read the Libro della Scala as an expression of the truths of Islam, and whether or not the Muslim reader would have approached it as such. Hyatte writes, “The implication here is that for Christian readers, the translations prove the exclusive truth of their faith.”122 Christian audiences might have read the Libro della Scala and understood that it was presenting itself as a verifiable account of a visionary experience, but they would have recognized within it certain inconsistencies in the philosophical or theological

frameworks of the text. The inconsistencies may in fact be present in the text, but Hyatte suggests that they would have been just as noticeable to a Muslim reader as they would to a Christian. This would make a comparative study that places the truth claims of the texts on an equal footing difficult and problematic, as one narrative is taken to be a popular account based on truth, and the other is considered a stylized and philosophically rigorous account creating truths. Despite the challenge to a thoroughly comparative study, the question is nonetheless significant to an understanding of the function of truth-claims within the texts. This study, however, has tried to see how the way in which the two mutually participate in religious discourses – and in particular the means by which they create truth claims – allows for a fuller account of Dante’s own quite rigorous philosophical and theological framework.

In the Commedia, Dante presents a systematic and philosophically sound poema sacro, engaged with multiple literary, religious, mystical, Biblical, political and poetic predecessors. He has systematized an enormous number of poetic, philosophical, and theological traditions into a coherent worldview. The Commedia creates a carefully constructed cosmos, an orderly world governed by clearly defined and regimented systems of law and a keenly hierarchical organization. The obsessive nature of Dante’s construction of the Commedia’s world, and his eager consumption of every text circulating in his dense intellectual environment suggests a wide range of intertextual and interdiscursive possibilities that have all been consolidated in the poem.

In terms of the interdiscursive relationship between the Libro della Scala and the Commedia, scholarship remains to explore the matter of the reception of the truths claimed by the texts, as well as their ideological usage. At this point, though, my reading
of the two texts together provides for a richer understanding not only of the Commedia’s relationship to the discourses of the Libro, but also of the intercultural exchange from which they emerge. The Commedia does not radically denounce Islam in favor of Christianity, nor does it rewrite the precepts of the religious myths that precede it. Rather, it engages in the same discourses, operating dialogically with the truths that it meets – not countering them but reorganizing and reshaping them to fit a Christian model. It is my intention that this reading will enable a clearer understanding of the discourses of the medieval Mediterranean, and their ability to create both tension and cohesion among the cultures that made up the region.
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