

## Prophet Muḥammad in Dante's *Divine Comedy*

### An anxiety of influence

Balqis Al-Karaki and Mahmoud Jaran

This article explores the century-long topic 'Dante and Islam' from the perspective of Harold's Bloom's theory of influence. It argues that Dante's placement of Muḥammad in *Inferno* 28 could have been caused by an 'anxiety' incited by the Islamic influence on the *Commedia* as first suggested by Miguel Asín Palacios in 1919. With the intention of complementing the close readings of Maria Corti and Karla Mallette, the article's analysis of the relevant verses in *Inferno* in light of Bloom's theory reveals that there could be more to the famous scene of torture than the medieval antagonistic or ambivalent positions from Islam. The article also tackles the history of European and Arab scholarship dealing with the topic, showing that it has been filled with religious, political and nationalistic anxieties, not ending with the censorship of the scene in most contemporary Arabic translations of Dante's *Commedia*.

**Keywords:** Dante, Islam, Muḥammad, Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*

### 1. Introduction: beyond academia

In his bestselling book *The Strange Death of Europe*, British neo-conservative writer Douglas Murray announces that "Europe is committing suicide" (2018: 1). The rest of the title is *Immigration, Identity, Islam*, all presented as the reasons behind the alleged suicide. At least twice in his book, and on several other occasions and interviews related to its launch, Murray presents the identity of his Europe through certain artistic figures which symbolize its 'spirit,' including Dante, Bach, Goethe, St Paul and Voltaire. The listing of names is repeated again in the book, when Murray quotes Oriana Fallaci in a chapter entitled 'Prophets without Honour:' "And I inform you that I like Dante Alighieri and Shakespeare and Goethe and Verlaine and Walt Whitman and Leopardi much more than Omar Khayyam" (Murray: 145). In *The Fear of Barbarians*, Tzvetan Todorov also quotes Fallaci and highlights her use of "proper names" to make her superiority case (Todorov 2010: 46). But instead of getting to the core of the problem, Todorov suggests that *The One Thousand and One Nights*, which Fallaci also likes much less than Dante's works, should not be compared to Dante in the first place, but rather to other

“folk tales” such as the tales of the Brothers Grimm (Todorov: 47). This is Todorov’s response to Fallaci’s claim that she kept “looking and looking” to find a list of proper names which could make the Islamic tradition even remotely comparable to its European counterpart, but could only find the Qur’an, Averroes and Omar al-Khayyam (Todorov: 47).

Perhaps the problem is in the nature of such ‘looking and looking.’ Scholars or general readers who are aware of the Islamic influences on at least two of these figures, Dante and Goethe, will certainly find it frustrating that some of the books which sell best, appear to be the least aware of the complications of intellectual history, and of the fact that Dante and the Islamic tradition has been the subject of a laborious scholarly controversy for more than a century. The problem with a Fallaci-Murray discourse related to Dante is that it seems to know very little about Dante scholarship, although the latter has indeed been quite guilty of mixing knowledge with politics.

It is quite ironic that a satirist like the French writer and self-described ‘Islamophobic’ Michel Houellebecq, could be credited for realizing the problem of such ‘looking’ in his 2015 bestselling novel entitled *Submission*, released – by coincidence – on the day of the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting. The novel imagines France in 2022 under Islamic rule, and it was described by Richard Flanagan as the best of the “the several *suicide notes* for the West Houellebecq has written” (2015; emphasis ours).<sup>1</sup> Although Houellebecq may be considered the French, artistic version of Fallaci and Murray predicting the ‘suicide’ of Europe, there is a slight, yet important, difference. Houellebecq’s protagonist, François, a professor of French literature at Paris III and an expert on Huysmans, acknowledges his ignorance in two instances in the novel. The first is in a conversation with his student/girlfriend Myriam who decides to immigrate to Israel and asks: “When a Muslim party comes to power, it’s never good for the Jews. Can you think of a time it was?” (Houellebecq 2015: 85). François does not answer: “I let this go. I didn’t really know much about history. I hadn’t paid attention at school, and since then I’d never managed to read a history book, at least not all the way through” (Houellebecq 2015: 85). The second is during a reception on the top floor of the Institute of the Arab world, welcoming a Saudi prince, the main donor behind the new Islamic University of the Sorbonne. François meets a former colleague who is a specialist in medieval literature: “I didn’t have much to talk to him about, the field of medieval literature being basically terra incognita to me, so I wisely accepted several mezes – they were excellent, the hot and the cold ones, too. So was the wine, a Lebanese red...” (Houellebecq 2015: 196). Houellebecq’s François is certainly more aware of the fact that he *has not looked*, especially into the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/books/ng-interactive/2015/nov/29/best-books-of-2015-part-two>. Retrieved 9/11/2018.

medieval world, than is Murray or Fallaci. The difference is that François is far too broken on a personal level to be battling for the preservation of a collective identity anyway.

It may be true that the topics “Dante” and “Islam” or “Dante and Islam” are as political in the academic world as they are in the world of bestselling works by journalists and novelists. The academic world has sometimes been as guilty of *not looking* as much as the world of right-wing journalism consumed by the fear of ‘Islam’ and of losing Europe’s spirit embodied in Dante. Although much more rigorous than the likes of Murray and Fallaci, academic scholarship after the thesis of Asín Palacios on Islamic influences on Dante committed many acts of ‘misreading’ or ‘misprision’ in Harold Bloom’s terms; suffered from certain anxieties related to their collective spirits; and subconsciously used several defense mechanisms against a figurative death or ‘suicide.’

Although this article tackles Dante’s anxiety of influence in relation to his Islamic sources (Section 3), revealing the necessity to introduce Bloom’s theory to the discussion, it also highlights in Section 2 the anxieties surrounding the topic ‘Dante and Islam’ beginning with its medieval roots, and passing through the anxieties of Dante’s post-Palacios scholars on both sides of the controversy in view of a continuously changing political atmosphere. Whether the anxiety is religious, political, nationalistic, or poetic, it has indeed been aggravated by the paradox: Dante placed Muḥammad in hell, and is said to have been influenced by the prophet of Islam and his tradition at the same time.

## 2. Dante and Islam in academia: political, religious and nationalistic anxieties

In his introduction to *Dante and Islam*, Jan Ziolkowski (2015: 14) uses the expression “romantic feelings” as he describes the gap – specifically the linguistic gap – between Orientalists and Romanists whose academic field is the Middle Ages. In another article in the same volume, Maria Frank (2015: 159-160) lauds María Rosa Menocal’s description of medieval Christian attitudes towards Muslims as a sort of “anxiety.”

The two expressions: “romantic feelings” and “anxiety” (be the latter political, religious, or nationalistic), describe most attitudes related to the study of Dante and Islam. Vincente Cantarino stated that Miguel Asín Palacios’s (1919) thesis on the influence of Islamic eschatology on Dante’s conception of the otherworld, in addition to the discovery and publication of the *Liber scale Machometi* in (1949) are the two *cornerstones* of the controversy, stirring a striking “polemic throughout the republic of letters” (Cantarino 2015: 31), and at times degenerating into “a crusade to defend the glory of the *altissimo poeta* (“most revered poet”) against allegations of Muḥammadan influence” (Cantarino 2015: 31). However, such polemic, fueled with anxiety and romantic feelings, can be traced back to the views of Islam in the European middle ages, passing through Dante and Dantean scholarship, and

continue to envelop the post 9/11 world where Islam – and Islam’s historic connections with the West – is as much a political issue as it is an expanding field of academic research.

Several examples and contexts surrounding the question of the Islamic influences on Dante clearly reflect the presence of anxiety and romantic feelings, and seem to have direct impact on the academic bias in the studies on the subject. The following does not claim to provide a comprehensive overview, but rather to stress the need for a *psychological* study that includes not only Dante, but Dantean scholarship as well.

## 2.1. Medieval Ambivalence and Ongoing Fear

### 2.1.1. Islam in Medieval Europe

Medieval Europe perceived Islam as both a “military threat” and “a spiritual menace” (Frank 2015: 161; Menocal 1987),<sup>2</sup> and depicted Muḥammad for mostly polemical purposes as “a false prophet; an anti-saint; a precursor to the Antichrist or the final manifestation of the Antichrist himself...” (Di Cesare 2013: 10). Such perceptions and anxieties have been passed on to Dante, whose *Commedia* “provided a singular opportunity for the formation of a new iconographic type of the Prophet...” (Coffey 2013: 33); the pejorative content of which remains faithful to the antagonistic rather than the occasional positive depictions of Muḥammad.

Despite the hostility towards Islam as an enemy of Christianity and the demonization of its prophet in Dante’s time, the two worlds “grew closer in *intriguing* ways after a *lively* period in which Arabic works were translated into Latin,” to use Maria Corti’s words (2015: 45; emphasis ours). This is why, for example, Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Rushd are not with Muḥammad in Dante’s *Inferno*. The seemingly contrasting situation is best described in the title of Dag Hasse’s (2016) recent book, *Success and Suppression*, although the book deals with the reception of Arabic sciences in the Renaissance.

The ‘lively’ translation of such works, including the Qur’an, was not always about ‘growing closer’ in the pleasant way in which Maria Corti’s words seem to imply. Similar to the ambivalent positions from Islam and Muḥammad, the intentions behind translations were so. Palacios points to a “prestige” enjoyed by Islam because of the Muslim victories over the crusaders, leading Roger Bacon for example, a contemporary of Dante, to attribute “the defeats of the Christians precisely to their ignorance of the

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<sup>2</sup> Chapter Five of Menocal’s “*The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History*” is entitled: “Italy, Dante, and the Anxieties of Influence” (1987: 115-135), but bears no reference to Bloom (1997) or his theory. Part three of this article will discuss the relevance of Menocal’s chapter and its title to the methodological approach of this article.

Semitic languages and applied sciences, of which the Moslems were masters” (Palacios [1926] 2008: 506). Palacios adds that Albertus Magnus and Raymond Lull also believed in the superiority of Arab philosophers and recommended learning from them (Palacios [1926] 2008: 560), a clear way to that end was through translation. Arabic sciences and their translations into Latin would later suffer from a ‘suppression’ for ideological and scientific reasons (see Hasse 2016: 300-313), the former reflecting a European need to rid its intellectual history of its Arabic component.

### 2.1.2. Alfonso X

A clear example of such contrasting motivations relevant to this article, is the Arabic-Castilian and Arabic-Latin translations produced in the court of Alfonso X, or Alfonso the Wise. Alfonso ascended to the throne of Castile-Leon in 1252, having taken part, like his father, in the reconquests of Andalusia. Known for his intellectual pursuits, Alfonso was himself an author and poet. In his *Estoria de España*, the *Cantigas de Santa María* and the *Siete Partidas*, the position from Islam and Muslims is ambivalent (see Kusi-Obodum 2018; Procter 1951; O’Callaghan 1993). The *Siete Partidas*, a compendium of legislative writings overseen by the sovereign, stand as “Alfonso's proposal for a justice system that ensured the supremacy of Christianity and facilitated the conversion of Muslims,” yet at the same time “protected minorities and guaranteed their religious freedoms” (Kusi-Obodum 2018: 81). According to Kusi-Obodum, the *Cantigas*:

...reflect the historical reality of the thirteenth century, in which Christian-Muslim contact was at times hostile, and at other times co-operative. The Virgin is portrayed as the defender of Christianity; in other instances she is a friend to Muslims. Importantly, Muslims are repeatedly characterised through their devotion to Mary, offering a favourable portrayal of piety and a subtle reconciliation between Christian and Islamic theology (Kusi-Obodum 2018: 82).

Alfonso founded at Seville a general Latin and Arabic college, with Muslim and Christian teachers of medicine and science. Asín Palacios considered this achievement “eloquent of the close relationship between the two elements of the population in the first half of the thirteenth century” (Palacios [1926] 2008: 494). It was indeed a close relationship, yet never free from the realities of political conflict, religious anxieties and romantic feelings. This situation was quite similar to the earlier case of Frederick II, whose political ambitions resulted in acquiring the control of Jerusalem during the Crusades, and whose cultural ambitions included the diffusion of Arabic sciences and literatures in his court at Sicily. Dante’s position from Frederick II is itself ambivalent: while he praises the Emperor and

his son in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* for integrity, nobility, and for living “in a manner befitting man (humana secuti sunt), despising the bestial life” (Dante 1996, book I, XII, 4; Latin p. 28; English p. 29), he places him in the *Inferno* among the heretics (Inf. 10:119), influenced by the existing views of Frederick II by supporters of his enemy; the Pope.

### 2.1.3. *Kitāb al-Mi’rāj*

It is in the Toledo school of Alfonso X and under his patronage that *Kitāb al-Mi’rāj* (“Book of the Ladder” of Muḥammad) was translated from a certain Arabic original (or more) into Castilian, then to Latin and Old French. Alfonso’s Jewish physician, Abraham Alfaquím of Toledo translated the Arabic into Castilian, after which Bonaventura of Siena, an Italian notary, copyist, translator and secretary of Alfonso’s court, translated it from Castilian into Latin (*Liber scale Machometi*) and Old French (*Livre de l’eschiele Mahomet*) between 1260 and 1264. The *Liber* has been described as the “missing link” between Dante and the question of Islamic influences, probably transmitted to Dante via Brunetto Latini according to Corti (following Palacios), and it is a document that nearly proves Palacios’s thesis. The prologue to the Old French version is anxiety-filled. The translator Bonaventura of Siena states the motivation of his patron, Alfonso X, as follows:

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.<sup>3</sup>

This statement, according to Ziolkowski, reveals a “polemic motivation” and an “anti-Islamic impulse” (2015: 10-11). The translation of *Kitāb al-mi’rāj* into Latin and Romance has been considered part of Alfonso’s “Castilian project to provide fresh material for polemicists, theologians and political propaganda” (Echevarria 2012: 426), demonstrating along with the translations of the Qur’an and Hadiths “the falseness of Muḥammad’s prophetic mission” (Echevarria 2012: 426).

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<sup>3</sup> Translation in Hyatte (1997: 97). The Latin and Old French versions are in Cerulli (1949). For a full list of editions and translations, see Ziolkowski (2015: 256, endnote 37). For the Latin version, this article consults *Le Livre de l’échelle de Mahomet* (*Liber Scale Machometi*) translated by G. Besson and M. Brossard-Dandré (1991).

For Reginald Hyatte, the production of three translations of the *Liber* “requires an explanation” (Hyatte 1997: 21). Hyatte views this production as an extension of the translation project of Peter the Venerable in mid-twelfth century Toledo, which included writings on Muhammad that would reveal the errors of Islam (Hyatte 1997: 21-22). Commenting on Bonaventura’s prologue, Hyatte infers that the *Liber* translations in Alfonso’s court hoped to fortify Christians “against yielding in any way to Islam in this period of very frequent contacts – and conflicts – with the Muslim World” (Hyatte 1997: 23). Bonaventura stresses the fantastic, nonsensical nature of “unbelievable things” and “errors” in the *Liber*. So, if Dante was indeed influenced by the *Liber*, which was judged according to a measure of “truthfulness,” then Dante’s success has to do with the fact that he produced a work of *fiction*, which is not judged by the truth of facts. This is one instance where Bloom’s theory can be applied to Dante’s *Commedia*.

It is worth noting that the *Liber* anxieties and romantic feelings extend well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century in both European and Arabic scholarships. European *Liber* anxieties began at the very outset of Enrico Cerulli’s and José Muñoz Sendino’s simultaneous publication of the Latin and Old French versions of the *Liber scale Machometi* in (1949). Introduced as the missing link between Dante and Islam, Dante critics who had rejected Palacios’s thesis were forced to rethink their stance on Islamic influences on Dante, yet not without controversy.<sup>4</sup> Vincente Cantarino’s (1965) article “Dante and Islam: History and Analysis of the Controversy,” discusses in detail how the discovery of the *Liber* “caused the controversy to flare up again” (Cantarinos 1965: 39). Cantarino notes the difference between Levi della Vida’s, Francesco Gabrieli’s welcoming of the *Liber* as a confirmation of Palacios’s intuition on one hand, and Bruno Nardi’s, Manfredi Porena’s, Olschki’s and Silverstein’s skeptical views of the notion that the *Liber* is “proof,” following Cerulli’s cautious approach (Cantarinos 1965: 39-42), or his “extreme prudence” in Francesco Gabrieli’s words (1954: 68). Gabrieli’s (1954) article notes the effects of Italian cultural nationalism on the rejection of Palacios’s thesis (Gabrieli 1954: 66), and encourages a more welcoming, anxiety-free approach after the discovery of the *Liber* (72-73):

...let us accept the part on which we agree rather than insist on that about which we are divided. Now that it is brought to light by the parallel work of a Spanish and Italian scholar, let us hail this new mesh in a solid and elastic net of international medieval culture which in fact (be it said to our confusion) did not know severing iron curtains and traversed the greatest physical and spiritual distances with a cooperation of intellectual forces that

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<sup>4</sup> The difference between Cerulli’s and Sendino’s conjectures will be introduced in the discussion of the Italian-Spanish rivalry in the section on “European Anxieties.”

might well be the envy of our UNESCO. Let us think once more, for an instant, of this magic chain: an Arabic *miraq*, a Spanish king, a Jewish physician, an Italian Notary...; and the fantasies of the Beyond which had flowered obscurely in the heart of Arabic encircle the Mediterranean, penetrate to the sweet Tuscany of the Stil Novo, and contribute to enrich the fertile humus whence will spring the supreme power of the *Comedy*, the sacred poem upon which both Heaven and Earth have placed their hands.

Arab anxieties related to the *Liber* seem to be mostly religious, especially after 9/11. In 2008, Lwiis Saliba, a Christian scholar from Lebanon, produced an Arabic translation of the *Liber scale machometi*, despite the existence of a previous one by Ṣalāḥ Faḍl in his well-known book on the influences of Islamic culture on Dante's *Comedy* (Saliba 2016; Faḍl 1986). In his introduction to Saliba's book, the poet Saḥbān Muruwwa apologizes for Saliba's choice to translate the *Liber*, assuming that the religious *iftā'* institutions will have issues with translating such a document in "Dār al-Islām" (Saliba 2016: 15), given its differences from the standard Arabic *mi'rāj* narratives. This, again, ignores the fact that an Arabic translation has already been available for more than three decades, with several editions including a recent 2018 reprint, without stirring any problems. Muruwwa criticizes the medieval Christian polemical spirit, and praises Saliba's intentions and loyalty towards 'knowledge,' 'truth,' and 'religion' (Saliba 2016: 15-16). Saliba's introduction is even more apologetic, assuming that the Arab reader will be 'disgusted' by the *Liber's* fabrications reflecting the medieval 'Western' anti-Islam polemics (Saliba 2016: 17). More shockingly, Saliba uses a *fatwa* by the Saudi Salafi scholar Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-'Uthaymīn, in which he explains the saying *nāqil al-kufr laysa bi-kāfir* ("one who transmits blasphemy is not a blasphemer"), giving the transmission of the Trinity as an example (18). Moreover, Saliba states that his translation transmits some of the "old blasphemies (*kufriyyāt*) of the West regarding Islam" (Saliba 2016: 18). Saliba's anxieties leading him to describe the Western medieval view of Islam as *kufr*, using an Islamic term in an academic study, stem from a contemporary anxiety causing him to focus on attacking all anti-Islamic polemics, especially the Christian additions to the *Liber*, which he claims to address objectively.

#### 2.1.4. Brunetto Latini and Dante

If Corti (following Palacios) was right to assume that the *Liber* was transmitted to Dante via his teacher Brunetto Latini, then it could be useful to look at the latter's position from Islam. Little is known about Latini's diplomatic mission at the court of Alfonso X, yet his knowledge of Arab-Islamic sciences is clearly revealed in his *Trésor* (written around 1260 in Old French and translated into the Italian

vernacular as early as 1268).<sup>5</sup> The ambassador's interests naturally extended to political science, and Maria Luisa Ardizzone (2016: 275) claims in a recent study that Latini was indebted, in addition to Cicero, to the political philosophy of the Arabic philosopher al-Fārābī.

In the *Trésor*, Muḥammad is depicted as an evil preacher and a monk (Latini 1993: 48). The Italian verse translations of the *Trésor* include a biography of Muḥammad: he is also depicted as a monk, a cardinal, referred to as “Maometto,” “Machumitto,” “Pelagio,” “Pelasio,” and “Malchonmetto,” and worshipped by Christians and pagans as a saint (D’Ancona 1988: 176).<sup>6</sup> In an early 14<sup>th</sup> century version, ‘Pelagio’ even aspired to the papacy: “Pelagio adomandò a' chardinali il papato, / E perchè lo domandò, nolli fue dato” (Pelagio asked the cardinals for the papacy / and because he asked, nothing was given to him) (D’Ancona 1988: 176). His papacy is denied, the ‘Christian heretic’ goes to Arabia out of spite, and is torn to pieces by swine, causing his death: “I porci li dierono addosso / E tutto lo 'nfransono la chame e ll'osso” (The swine attacked him/ and broke all of his flesh and bones) (D’Ancona 1988: 177).<sup>7</sup>

Such was the position of Dante’s teacher, who was placed by his disciple in *Inferno* 15 of the *Commedia* for sodomy. Their encounter seems to reverse the hierarchical structure of master and disciple (see, e.g., Sarteschi 2007: 33-59; Verdicchio 2000: 61-81). This could easily fall within the psychological theory of Harold Bloom, but our focus here is on Muḥammad’s influence. However, if both Muḥammad and Brunetto Latini were considered father-figures in Dante’s eyes, or were at least viewed as threatening influences, then their placement in hell may be justified by a psychological struggle, rather than a moral judgement or a political or religious conflict.

For D’Ancona, Dante’s position from Muḥammad is quite similar to Brunetto Latini’s (1888: 217), and so is the acknowledgment of other Islamic figures which may seem like an ambivalence: Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Rushd are placed in *Limbo*; the first circle of hell (*Inferno* 4) alongside Aristotle, Homer and Virgil. Francesco Gabrieli noted that Dante does not pay homage to Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Rushd as Muslims, but as figures of universal knowledge (Gabrieli 1970). Those two figures in the Latin translations of their works were part of Dante’s intellectual world, and were perhaps neither ‘Muslims’ nor ‘Arabs;’ in the sense that they were not in Dante’s eye, along with the Saracens, ‘barbarians’ (see Gabrieli 1970). Dante’s *Convivio* reveals his knowledge of the works of philosophers and astronomers such as Ibn Sīnā, Ibn Rushd, al-Ghazālī, al-Biṭrūjī, Abū Ma’shar al-Balkhī, and al-Farghānī (see, e.g.,

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<sup>5</sup> See D’Ancona (1888).

<sup>6</sup> On the negative connotations of “Malchonmetto,” see D’Ancona (1988: 177, footnote 1).

<sup>7</sup> The legend has literary precedents such as *La Chanson de Roland*: “E Mahumet enz en un fosset butent/ E porc e chen le mordent e defulent” (v. 2590).

Antoni 2006). Ironically, almost all of these figures which he mentions in *Convivio* were believers in the prophecy of Muḥammad, whom Dante places in the ninth *bolgia* of the 8<sup>th</sup> circle of hell. And if Dante's problem with Ibn Rushd was indeed about his conception of the separate intellect, then it cannot be connected in any way to Muḥammad's carnivalesque torture in hell, thus making the situation less about ambivalence and more about a medieval European separation between 'Maometto' and the philosophers with latinised names. Compared to Petrarch for example, who rejected everything transmitted from Arabs: science, medicine, philosophy and literature, Dante may even strike us as pro-Arab and much more tolerant toward 'Islamic' sciences, and closer to Boccaccio's moderate position than to Petrarch's.

## 2.2. Palacios and beyond: re-stirring nationalistic and religious anxieties

### 2.2.1. European anxieties

The contrasting positions of Petrarch and Boccaccio seem to echo in the following centuries.<sup>8</sup> Some authors, like Elisabetta Benigni, have demonstrated that the question of Islamic "influences" may go back to 16th century Italy, anticipating the modern controversy about Dante and the Arabs (2017: 111-138). In mainstream Dante scholarship, however, the discussion of the relationship between the *Commedia* and the Islamic world did not arise, except for some studies of secondary importance, until the thesis of Miguel Asín Palacios was released in 1919. The thesis shook, as the Spanish Arabist already predicted, the academic milieu and the specialists in medieval studies; Italians in the first place. Palacios expressed his worries in the introduction: "The greater equanimity of the modern school of Dantophiles encourages me to hope that they will not be moved to ire by suggestion of Moslem influences in the *Divine Comedy*" (Palacios [1926] 2008: 22). In an introduction to the (1925) English translation, the Duke of Alba was no less attentive to the anxiety that such publication could cause among Italian Dantists, who "particularly could with difficulty bring themselves to recognize that Moslem sources should have formed the basis for the *Divine Comedy*, the poem that symbolizes the whole culture of mediaeval Christian Europe" (Palacios [1926] 2008: 13). The Duke praised Palacios for facing the criticism, intervening in the controversy, and reversing the balance of opinion "in his favour" (Palacios [1926] 2008: 13). He concluded by explaining that that this victory and the advice of

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<sup>8</sup> A similar case is seen in the 16<sup>th</sup> century; in the difference between Ludovico Ariosto who was tolerant of Saracen enemies, and Torquato Tasso, who saw Muslims and Saracens as barbarians.

his friend Lord Balfour are what that encouraged him to publish the book and make it available to English-speaking readers (Palacios [1926] 2008: 16).

The two introductions reveal an all-European, especially Italian-Spanish, contest, in which the Arabs remain a mere, distant object of study. This is demonstrated by the words of Palacios who, in a seeming attempt to alleviate the anxiety emerging from this competition, argues in defense of any nation's right to participate in the glory of a masterpiece like the *Divine Comedy*. In addition to Italy, there is obviously Spain:

...if not merely the neo-Platonic metaphysics of the *Cordovan* Ibn Masarra and the *Murcian* Ibn Arabi, but the allegorical form in which the latter cast his Ascension may have exercised an influence as models, as they certainly existed as forerunners, of the most sublime part of the *Divine Comedy*, Dante's conception of Paradise, then *Spain* may be entitled to claim for her Moslem thinkers no slight share in the worldwide fame enjoyed by the immortal work of Dante Alighieri. And again, the absorbing influence exercised by the latter over *our* allegorical poets, from the end of the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, from Villena to Garcilaso, not to mention Francisco Imperial, Santillana, Mena and Padilla, would be balanced in a measure by the antecedent influence of *our* Moslem mystics in the complex genesis of the *Divine Comedy* (Palacios [1926] 2008:19-20; emphasis ours).

Palacios's eagerness to claim 'Spain's' right to participate in the Dantian glory; his insistence on the use of the adjectives 'Cordovan' and 'Murcian'; his use of the possessive 'our' before Spanish poets and Muslim mystics, while referring elsewhere to Ibn 'Arabī as a 'Spanish Sufi' (rather than 'Andalusian' for example),<sup>9</sup> could all be viewed as part of a nationalistic battle filled with anxiety. This is further supported by the fact that his book was published with the support of the *Dirección general de Libro y della Biblioteca* of the Spanish Ministry of Culture, which implies, as Stefano Rapisarda claims, that the book was considered "a representative of a national culture, indeed as one of the highest products of Spanish humanistic culture" (2016: 162). In view of such a nationalistic duel, it is no coincidence that Enrico Cerulli, after the discovery of the *Liber*, chose to add the adjective 'Spanish' attached to 'Arabic' in the title of his book: *Libro Della Scala and the Question of the Arabic-Spanish sources of the Divine Comedy*.

Palacios had expected the anxiety-filled reaction of the 'Dantisti' (Giovanni Busnelli, Francesco Torraca, Ernesto Giacomo Parodi), and the Orientalists (mainly Giuseppe Gabrieli) to his work. The

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<sup>9</sup> One out of many examples: "As a follower of the school of Ibn Masarra, he [Ibn 'Arabī], like other Spanish Sufis, conceived hell to have the external aspect of a serpent" (Palacios [1926] 2008: 213). Interestingly enough, the phrase "like other Spanish Sufis" is omitted in the Arabic translation of the book, which will be discussed in the next section.

reaction is not surprising: Italians were preparing in those years the celebrations for the sixth centenary of the *Sommo Poeta*, around the time when a wave of nationalism hit the Peninsula in the two decades following the publication of Palacios's book. Controversy, skepticism and finally rejection prevailed in this first phase commonly called *scoppio della polemica*. The rejection was based on a set of common points: that the parallels mentioned by Palacios are very generic and of a Christian derivation; that it is impossible that Dante knew Arabic and Arabic literature or that he encountered the Arabic works claimed as possible origins by the Spanish scholar;<sup>10</sup> and finally, and most importantly, that Palacios was unable to precisely identify the missing link or *l'anello mancante*, i.e. the exact means of transmission between the Florentine poet and Islamic eschatology.

This phase lasted until the end of the Second World War, when two scholars, the Italian Enrico Cerulli and the Spanish Muñoz Sendino, working separately, discovered and published in the same year (1949) their editions of the *Liber Scalae Machometi*. Reactions in this phase – to Cerulli's work – ranged from supportive (see Giorgio Levi della Vida 1949, fasc. 2: 337-407, Umberto Bosco 1966: 197-212) to skeptical (see Bruno Nardi 1955: 383-89 and Carlo Grabher 1955: 164- 82). Prudence and scientific rigor were the features of the Italian's publication, while enthusiasm for “the discovery” characterized the edition of the Spanish Orientalist. The difference between Cerulli's and Sendino's positions is certainly political, and may indeed be considered an extension of the Italian-Spanish anxiety-producing rivalry since Palacios. It is no coincidence that their editions of the *Liber* were issued by institutions bearing political values: the work of Cerulli by *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana*, Sendino's by *Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores* (Sendino 1949).

The assiduous works of Dantists and Orientalists on the Islamic sources in the *Divine Comedy* in the post-war period can also be viewed in the context of an ideological-political debate which was characterized by an attempt to rebuild the major cultural systems of the world: Europe and its fragmented unity (e.g., the case of Leo Spitzer and Ernest Kantorowicz; see Celli 2013a), the reinforcement of the relationship between West and East, and the reconstruction of a Mediterranean unity. The latter aim is explicit in Cerulli, for whom the study of the cultural exchanges between the Islamic world and Europe is important for the “renewal of Western thought” towards a cultural unity of Mediterranean countries (1972: 322). This is not surprising, given the fact that in addition to being a

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<sup>10</sup> Gabrieli writes: “Della esistenza di una letteratura propriamente araba o musulmana, che non fosse quella di semplice e casuale tradizione e trasmissione della cultura antica filosofica e scientifica, penso che Dante non ebbe alcun sentore o sospetto, nonchè conoscenza diretta” (Gabrieli 2013: 85). Gabrieli (2013: 94-95) casts this severe judgment on Palacios: “l'Asin ha errato anche lui nei suoi passi anticipando frettolosamente e perciò falsando i risultati, quasi – diremmo volgarmente – legando i buoi dietro al carro.”

scholar of Semitic languages, Cerulli was a diplomat and colonial envoy to the Horn of Africa. In his study on the interactions between Cerulli's scholarly and political-diplomatic careers, Andrea Celli (2013b: 37) notes that Cerulli's two roles and natures tend to merge in his research on Dante. Indeed, Cerulli's historical-literary studies usually begin with an undeclared practical purpose: they are symbolically destined to modify and broaden borders or unite and connect worlds (Celli 2013b: 37).

Interestingly, Cerulli is among a cross-centuries list of politicians who were directly or indirectly involved in the 'Dante and Islam' scholarship: not beginning with Brunetto Latini, Guelph ambassador to the Toledan court, and not ending with the Duke of Alba, ambassador of Spain to London, who published the English translation of Palacios's book upon the request of another politician who enjoyed international fame; Arthur Balfour. This is in addition to the political and nationalist function entrusted to Palacios himself, who once occupied the positions of the president of *La Real Academia de la Lengua Española* and *Procurador en Cortes*. No wonder that his book on Dante and Islam was initially a lecture he presented on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January 1919 at the *Real Academia Española* on the occasion of his inauguration as a member of this "solemn and official" assembly.<sup>11</sup>

It is indeed curious that one of the most famous works in the twentieth century on the politics of knowledge and academia, i.e. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), does not tackle the controversy surrounding 'Dante and Islam,' although it does discuss the famous scene in *Inferno* 28 to highlight Dante's 'Orientalist' perspective of Islam (Said 2003: 68-71, see also Coggeshall 2007:133-51). The decades following the publication of *Orientalism* may be characterized by what Rapisarda describes as "political correctness in literature" (Rapisarda 2006: 162), and it is in the mid-1990s that the Italian translation of Palacios's book finally came out. The controversy took a new shape in the 1990s, especially by the intervention of an academically-authoritative figure like Maria Corti who took the debate to a new stage; to an Italian acceptance of the Islamic influences on Dante and to a celebration of multiculturalism. Although Corti's attitude is free from the political tones found in the scholarship of the first stage of the controversy, her very acceptance at times did nothing but raise further doubts and anxieties among younger scholars.<sup>12</sup> In the most recent book on the subject, Massimo Campanini's *Dante e l'Islam* (2019), the author writes that "it is not his intention" to discuss whether or not

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<sup>11</sup> Rapisarda (2006: 163) stresses the high prestige of the *Accademia* as a developer of cultural policy. Karla Mallette cites the patriotic response of Julià Ribera to Palacios's lecture: "I repeat (and will repeat until satiety, since justice requires it) that the Muslims of the Peninsula were Spaniards: Spaniards in race, Spaniards in tongue, Spaniards in character, taste, tendencies and genius... and we should consider the merits of this Spanish Muslims to be our own national, Spanish wealth" (cited in Mallette 2010: 57).

<sup>12</sup> Among the Italian scholars who contested Corti's position is Massimiliano Chiamenti (see Chiamenti 1999: 45-51).

Muḥammad’s voyage was a source for Dante, despite the “amazing parallelism,” for the problem of influence is not yet definitively solvable due to the current state of documentation (Campanini 2019: 86).

### 2.2.2. Arab anxieties

The Arab reception of Palacios’s thesis has been two-fold: a celebration of the argument for the presence of Islamic influence on Dante, and a complete suppression of the scene of Muḥammad’s torture in *Inferno* 28. The anxiety in the Arab context is quite different from its European counterpart, primarily because Palacios’s thesis, as it were, sides with the Arabic-Islamic tradition. Another difference is political: the masterpieces of Arabic literature – other than the Qur’an – do not enjoy, like the *Commedia* in Italy, an official, institutional support by the state(s) to help promote a national, unifying identity, especially after the demise of Arab nationalism. It is quite ironic, as noted by Abdelfattah Kilito, that the Arabs’ very interest in al-Ma’arrī masterpiece *Risālat al-ghufrān* (“Epistle for Forgiveness”) came *after* Palacios’s claim that it could be a possible source for Dante’s *Commedia* (Kilito 2000: 19). This, if true, could be caused by some sort of inferiority complex, which makes the anxiety cultural or civilizational in part. In another, it is definitely religious: while the Spanish theorist insisted on the existence of Islamic influences on the Italian poet, the latter placed the Prophet of Islam in his Christian hell, in a scene which was never – until 2021 – fully translated into Arabic.

In the decades following Palacios’s book, hundreds of academic and non-academic essays appeared in Arab journals, magazines, and newspapers, mostly supporting Palacios’s claim enthusiastically. However, a curious case of rejection is found—ironically— in the works of the most celebrated editor of al-Mā’arrī’s *Risālat al-ghufrān*; the Egyptian scholar ‘A’isha ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (Bint al-Shāṭi’). The latter accused Palacios of partiality towards Spain and its Islamic past; of being driven by passion; of not understanding al-Mā’arrī’s purposes; and of the lack of real ‘freedom’ (‘Abd al-Raḥmān 1954: 334- 37). In her attempt to address the “alleged similarities” between Dante and al-Mā’arrī (332), the reader gets the feeling that she favours the former. The reason she gives is quite bizarre: in her eyes, al-Mā’arrī’s paradise is too earthly, unheavenly, imagined by a “deprived blind poet,” far from the celestial, spiritual, and theological prospects found in Dante’s *Paradiso* (‘Abd al-Raḥmān 1954: 333). She writes praising the *Commedia* and its distinction from *al-Ghufrān*, by describing the former as a “great poem which glorifies love and immortalizes it” (‘Abd al-Raḥmān 1954: 333): “[The *Commedia*] is a warm, flowing, human sentiment, while *al-Ghufrān* is passions depicted in bitterness, cynicism, and hidden mockery of some people’s beliefs and dreams” (‘Abd al-Raḥmān 1954: 333). The Muslim scholar

refrains from mentioning Muḥammad's torture in the *Commedia*; otherwise her praise will be interrupted by unease and religious anxiety.

The most well-known book in Arabic is Ṣalāḥ Faḍl's (1986: 21) *The Influence of Islamic Culture on Dante's Divine Comedy*, where the author paraphrases much of Palacios' thesis, introducing it to the reader as belonging to the field of comparative literature, and praising it for stirring intercultural dialogue and interaction.<sup>13</sup> Another lesser-known book is the aforementioned Lwiss Saliba' *Mi'rāj Muḥammad*, the introduction of which is filled with religious anxiety as discussed in a previous section on the *Liber*. It certainly differs from Faḍl's 'dialogue and interaction' position as it expresses anger towards the medieval Christian views of Islam. The similarity, however, between – as it were – the *Muslim* Faḍl and the *Christian* Saliba is the extreme caution. The former, though discussing the Islamic sources in the ninth *bolgia* of the 8<sup>th</sup> circle of *Inferno*, simply skips the part on Muḥammad and 'Alī, although his source is Palacios who discussed the Islamic influences in this particular scene (Faḍl 1986: 125-26). Saliba, whose book discusses the Christian additions to the Islamic *mi'rāj* narratives in the aim of producing a negative image of Muḥammad, and although he discusses the *Liber's* influence on Dante, he also refrains from linking the two subjects together and tackling the part on Muḥammad's torture (Saliba 2016: 62-66). Such intentional omission, caused by religious anxiety, is also present in the Arabic translation of Palacios's book by Jalāl Maḥzar (1980). The latter deleted entire lines in which Palacios mentions the torture of Muḥammad and 'Alī, with neither a mention of this omission nor an explanation for not translating Palacios's book in full accuracy.<sup>14</sup>

The same applies for the several translations of Dante's *Divine Comedy* into Arabic, beginning with the Jordanian Christian Amīn Abu al-Sha'r's translation in 1938, who translated the *Inferno* part of the *Commedia*. Abu al-Sha'r, like Bint al-Shāṭi', dismisses any possibility of Islamic influences on Dante, and like many scholars and Arab translators, Abu al-Sha'r insists that Dante's *Inferno* sources are the classical Virgil and the Christian Bible (1938: 15-16). Abu al-Sha'r avoids translating Canto 28 in full, rephrasing the part on Muḥammad as follows: Dante arrives in the ninth *bolgia*, and 'someone' talks to him about shattered souls that suffer from bitter pain, without mentioning anywhere that this 'someone' is Muḥammad being tortured next to 'Alī (Abū al-Sha'r 1938: 162). The most well-known translation is Ḥasan 'Uthmān's (1959-1969), and according to the Italian scholar, Giuseppe Cecere, is to

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<sup>13</sup> In his interesting study, which collects the most important Arab contributions on Dante, Bartolomeo Pirone asserts the non-originality of Faḍl's work (Pirone 2011: 106).

<sup>14</sup> Compare for example Palacios, *Islam and The Divine Comedy* (Palacios (1926) 2008: 70, 225) with Maḥzar, *Āthār al-Islām*, (Palacios 1980: 31, 110-111).

be considered a milestone in the history of scientific translation (Cecere 2022: 75).<sup>15</sup> ‘Uthmān does mention the possibility of Islamic influences without giving an “anxious” opinion (‘Uthmān 1988: 59-61). However, ‘Uthmān translates the problematic Canto in full, omitting the verses about Muḥammad and ‘Alī, and he justifies the omission by saying that the deleted verses “are not worthy of translation” (‘Uthmān 1988: 371). He reprimands Dante for his “grave mistake” in the deleted verses, without explaining the exact nature of this mistake, and moves cautiously to the idea that Dante and his contemporaries were indeed appreciative of the fruits of the Islamic civilization (‘Uthmān 1988: 371).

The same approach is present in the more recent Arabic translations. Ḥannā ‘Abbūd in his 2002 translation belittles the importance of possible Islamic influences, especially al-Ma‘arrī’s, invites his readers to taste the poetry of Dante before considering Arabic influences (Dante 2002b: 29), and omits the names Muḥammad and ‘Alī from his translation of *Inferno* 28, without any mention in the footnotes of who these tortured characters are (Dante 2002b: 264-265). Kaẓim Jihād’s 2002 translation is no different. He denies the existence of any Arabic influences (Dante 2002c: 110-111), translates the famous scene, omits the names of the prophet and his cousin, and cautiously mentions in a footnote that the omitted is a name of “a fundamental Islamic figure” (Dante 2002c: 366; see footnote 1). Paradoxically, Kaẓim Jihād calls for an open, non-anxious, unbiased reading of the Comedy, yet deals with these lines with sheer caution and anxiety (Dante 2002c: 130). The most recent (2019) translation is guilty of the same, decades-long *Inferno* 28 translation anxiety: ‘Abdullah al-Najjār and ‘Iṣām ‘Alī Sayyid (2019: 55-57) write in their introduction that Dante made an ‘unforgivable’ mistake in his approach to Islam and Muslims, and in placing Muḥammad in Hell. They devote many pages to defending Islam, arguing that Dante’s mistake could not be attributed to his ignorance of Islam for he was aware of the importance of Averroism (see Dante 2019). Expectedly, they deleted the entire lines concerning the prophet and his cousin from the translation, but added a footnote, explaining that in these lines Dante ‘spoke inappropriately’ about the prophet, blinded by hate and rage that filled the Western world against Islam (377-78; see footnote 2). They repeat the phrase ‘unforgivable mistake’ in the footnote, in an attempt to deal with the anxiety. A recent 2021 edition of ‘Uthmān’s celebrated

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<sup>15</sup> Cecere praises ‘Uthmān’s profound knowledge of Dante and the European Middle Ages as follows: “Una tale ricchezza di prospettive e una tale finezza di analisi sono rese possibili non soltanto dalla personale sensibilità del ‘traduttore’ e dal suo sentimento di affinità elettiva nei confronti di un poeta pur così lontano nel tempo e nello spazio, ma anche e soprattutto dalla vastità e profondità della cultura storica, linguistica e filologica di Ḥasan ‘Uthmān: competenze che gli consentono di colmare, almeno in parte, la distanza storico-culturale dall’uomo-Dante e di addentrarsi con strumenti affidabili nell’esplorazione di quella sterminata “selva,” oscura e insieme luminosa, che è la *Commedia*” (Cecere 2022: 57).

translation, revised by Mu‘āwiya ‘Abd al-Majīd, offers a full translation of the originally deleted lines in a footnote (‘Uthmān 2021: 406-407; footnote 52).

In his article about the Arabic translations of Dante and the problems of censorship, Jeffrey Einboden tackles two of these translations (Einboden 2008: 77-91). The opening of his article, however, may summarize the religious causes of the anxiety. Einboden refers to the alleged motivation behind the 2002 plot to blow up Bologna’s Basilica di San Petronio; i.e. the latter’s “housing of Giovanni da Modena’s *Il Giudizio Finale*, a 1415 fresco which explicitly locates Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, in Hell. Da Modena, elaborating upon an episode recounted in the twenty-eighth canto of Dante’s *Inferno*, portrays this religious founder unclothed, suffering, and in the clutches of a demon” (Einboden 2008: 77). And if the *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoons controversy in 2005 and the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings in 2015 are also considered, then the anxieties of Arab scholars and translators, who have a Muslim audience in mind while writing and translating Dante, are understood and perhaps even justified.

### 3. Muḥammad, Dante, and Bloom: the need to misread the theory

Maria Corti outlines three methodological possibilities for studying Dante’s approach to the Arabic-Latin context of his time; interdiscursivity, intertextuality, and tracing a direct source through literary history. The first addresses the circulation of a piece of information between cultural words; the second deals with an “analogical relationship” between two texts which may have been made possible through an oral summary for example; the third attempts to prove that an Arabic-Latin text enjoyed a familiarity in Dante’s literary context (Corti 2015: 46).

Corti does not mention psychology as a methodological possibility, perhaps because it should rely on one of the methodologies she sketches anyway. However, the second methodology, ‘intertextuality,’ which was based on the idea of the ‘death of the author’ in its structuralist and post-structuralist approaches, was rebelled against by Harold Bloom in his work *The Anxiety of Influence* where the author is very much alive. Relying on Freudian defense-mechanisms, Bloom deemed it necessary to address an author’s psychological struggles during the process of influence. He relied on an Oedipal model of a family Romance, using terminology borrowed from the Hebrew Kabbalah and Christian Gnosticism.

Bloom’s theory has not been used as a critical tool in the context of ‘Dante and Islam’ as far as we know, although many scholars in this particular field have hinted to the existence of psychological struggles especially in *Inferno* 28. The author of *The Western Canon* considered Dante to be an ephebe of Virgil, though without any anxiety. The theory has, indeed, been used to research Virgil’s influence on Dante (see, e.g., Lombardi 1992: 233-243), but not Dante’s anxiety caused by the assumed influence of

Muḥammad or the Islamic tradition of *mi'rāj*, perhaps because this could stir further anxieties and destabilizations in the 'Western Canon' itself. Harold Bloom may have been aware of Palacios's thesis, but he chose to write about Dante and the Prophet of Islam as 'separate' geniuses rather than follow Palacios's claim of the existence of Islamic eschatological influences on Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Although a chapter by María Rosa Menocal is entitled "Italy, Dante, and the Anxieties of Influence" in her book *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History*, thus alluding to Bloom's theory, the chapter itself does not make any reference to Bloom or his works. She does, however, refer to Dante's relationship with Brunetto Latini in Canto XV as an "oedipal struggle" (Menocal 1987: 129). And although Menocal does not apply the same description to Muḥammad, she does hint to the existence of a psychological struggle. She describes the *Commedia*'s relation to the *mi'rāj* narratives in terms very close to Bloom's *Tessera* like "countertext," "challenge," and "anti-*mi'rāj*" (Menocal 1987: 130-31), and even uses the phrase "consciously or not" when writing about Dante's case for the benefits of fundamental Christianity and his choice to write "a countertext to the *mi'rāj*" (Menocal 1987: 30), while being aware of "an omnipresent danger" of an "Arabic origin," namely the influence of Averroist thought in Northern Italy (Menocal 1987: 127). The present article takes Menocal's implied suggestion one step further: it discusses Dante and Islam through the detailed analysis of Bloom's "Anxiety of Influence," suggesting for the first time the existence of an "oedipal struggle" between Dante and Muḥammad.

### 3.1. The theorist's anxiety: the absence of Muḥammad as father

In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom states that one of the reasons for excluding Shakespeare from his theory is historical; for Shakespeare belongs to an age "before the giant flood, before the anxiety of influence became central to poetic consciousness" (Bloom 1997: 11, 30). Dante also belongs to the previous age extending from Homer to Shakespeare, where influence was generous, and in this "matrix" stands Dante's relationship with his precursor Virgil, for the latter "moved his ephebe only to love and emulation and not to anxiety" (Bloom 1997: 122).

In "Harold Bloom and the Post-theological Dante," Paul Colilli (1990: 132) addresses the "sketchiness" of Bloom's depiction of Dante. Colilli remarks that Bloom later corrected his view of influence as belonging to post-enlightenment poets, and acknowledged in *A Map of Misreading* that "influence as antithesis is an aesthetic condition hailing back to antiquity" (Colilli 1990: 136). In our view, however, this correction is filled with anxiety. In *A Map of Misreading*, Bloom reveals how he feels about Homer being a precursor to all Western poets:

It remains not arbitrary nor even accidental to say that everyone who now reads and writes in the West, or whatever racial background, sex or ideological camp, is still a son or daughter of Homer. As a teacher of literature who prefers the Morality of the Hebrew Bible to that of Homer, indeed who prefers the Bible aesthetically to Homer, I am no happier about this dark truth than you are, if you happen to agree with William Blake when he passionately cries aloud that it is Homer and Virgil, the Classics, and not the Goths and Vandals that fill Europe with Wars (Bloom 1975: 33).

The anxiety is clear, and could be described as religious. When Dante is mentioned in this book, he is a precursor to poets like Milton, along with Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Lucretius and Tasso, and at times with Isaiah and the Hebrew Bible (Bloom 1975: 125, 131, 135). In *The Western Canon*, Bloom (1994: 89) speaks about a need to recover Dante's "strangeness" and his "perpetual originality," for the theorist observes that Dante "regarded himself as an authentic prophet, and gives us his *Commedia*, in effect, as the Third Testament, at least as much an authority as the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament" (Bloom 2001: 9).<sup>16</sup> An equal of Isaiah or Jeremiah, Bloom (2004: 1, 5) insists that "Dante is Dante," meaning that he is inexplicable by historicizing him. Bloom's Dante is indeed gazed upon through some sort of anxiety, and Bloom himself notes in the context of commenting on Dante's *Paradiso*, that "being of the Jewish persuasion, I am not going to end anyway" (Bloom 2004: 7).

There appears to be no link between Dante the prophet and Muḥammad the prophet of Islam in Bloom's work, apart from their existence in separate chapters in Bloom's book *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* (2002). Using the Kabbalistic concept of *Sefirot* to divide the book, Bloom places Dante in the first *Sefirah*: *Keter* or "the crown," in the second lustre (based on influence) with Lucretius, Virgil, St Augustine and Chaucer, while the first lustre contains the "comparable" figures of Shakespeare, Cervantes, de Montaigne, Milton and Tolstoy. Muḥammad is placed in the second *Sefirah*: *Hokmah* or "wisdom," in the third lustre with The Yahwist, Socrates, Plato and St Paul (see Bloom 2002, xi-xii for an explanation of the arrangement).

Bloom (2002: 144) lauds Muḥammad's "shattering spiritual and imaginative originality," despite his "literary debts" to Jewish and Christian texts. He confidently claims that God alone is the speaker in the Qur'an, and because of that, he adds an anxiety-filled remark: "We can never relax as we read it,

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<sup>16</sup> In a chapter on "Pound and "Dante Profeta," Louis Lohr Martz explains that that subject of Dante and the Hebrew prophets has been "extensively studied" by Italian scholars of the Divine Comedy, and since the notable works of Nardi (1942), Mineo (1968), the fourth chapter of Sarolli (1971), and Morghen (1983), the term "Dante Profeta" has become "increasingly familiar" (Martz 1998: 44 and footnote 2).

or when we recite it, alone or with others” (Bloom 2002: 144). The group whom the theorist refers to by “we” is unclear, but the anxiety is. He writes about the Qur’an’s anxiety of influence, with reference to the Jewish tradition:

For me, the Koran has a particular fascination, because it is the *largest instance* I know of what, during the last quarter-century, I have been calling “*the anxiety of influence*.” Strong prophet as Muhammad was, the Koran manifests an enormous (and overtly triumphal) struggle with the Torah and with rabbinical additions to the Five Books of Moses (Bloom 2002: 147, emphasis ours).

The theorist continues to write about the Qur’an’s “stroke” in “its contest with the Torah,” using the same framework of his theory in *The Anxiety of Influence* (Bloom 2002). In Bloom’s mind, Muḥammad went through such an anxiety in his contest with the Jewish tradition, and emerged triumphant.<sup>17</sup> Although Bloom (2002: 143) in the first lines of his chapter on Muḥammad includes the Qur’an as one of the three texts which the Western world emerges from spiritually, alongside the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament, he is shocked by the fact that “few have attempted to read the Koran.”

It would have been extremely interesting had Bloom commented on Palacios’s thesis. His model fits perfectly within the controversy over Dante’s Islamic sources, which is why we are choosing to ‘misread’ his theory: Dante suffered from an anxiety of influence, and one of his precursors was Muḥammad. The Oedipal father-son struggle reached its peak when Dante placed Muḥammad in hell and tortured him to an extent that Arab writers who admire Dante tend to avoid discussing this scene. It may not be a “family Romance”<sup>18</sup> in Bloom’s terms because of the still-existing division between “Western” and “non-Western” literary canons. Still, Bloom’s theory makes perfect sense, especially in the part of psychological drama where feelings of *admiration* of the precursor’s work are mixed with *hostility*, and when the desire to *imitate* is mixed with the desire to rebel and become *original*. Bloom’s influence comprises “doing just the opposite” of what the precursor did or wrote, and this is evident in *Tessera*; Bloom’s second revisionary ratio. Against the threat of Muḥammad, Dante appropriated

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<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, Bloom’s idea and choice of words may not be accepted in today’s post 9/11 world, including the world of academic scholarship. The power of political correctness may even invite an author to emphasize that quoting Bloom does not mean promoting his opinions.

<sup>18</sup> This idea exists in the classical Arabic literary tradition. Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1239) wrote in *al-Mathal al-sā’ir*: “The thoughts of minds do not procreate on their own, and their aim is to mate in order to beget their children, and I mate my thought with another as in mating between kins, and I do not fear the debilitation of my child and incline towards foreignness” (Ibn al-Athīr 1995: 143, vol. 1).

many Islamic components for his *Commedia*, and became himself the dominating influence, to the extent that such influence went unnoticed for centuries.

In the next two sections, we will discuss two instances of influence in *Inferno* 28; one with reference to the *Liber scale* as noted by Maria Corti; the other with reference to Mark of Toledo's Latin translation of the Qur'an or *Liber Alchorani* as noted by Karla Mallette. Bloom's six revisionary ratios, which are strategies of *deviating* from the precursor in order to defend the poet against the precursor's threats, are almost all evident in the examples given, along with their analogous Freudian defense mechanisms. The first two ratios, *Clinamen* and *Tessera*, are, however, the most prevalent in the following discussion.

### 3.2. The poet's anxiety: two examples from *Liber Scale* and *Liber Alchorani*

The two examples are from the ninth *bolgia* of Malebolge, the 8<sup>th</sup> circle of the *Inferno*, where Dante tortures Muḥammad. Interestingly, Palacios had hinted to Dante's psychological defense, but chose to describe it as sarcasm: "Here [in *Inferno*], indeed, *in sarcastic vein*, he places Mahomet, the very protagonist of the legend upon which he probably based his work" (Palacios [1926] 2008: 70, emphasis ours). María Rosa Menocal (1987: 130-31) proposes that Dante's poem is, "consciously or not" a Catholic *countertext* to Muhammad's *mi'rāj* (emphasis of "countertext" is ours; see also Hyatte 1997: 26). The term "countertext" is certainly closer to Bloom's theory, esp. *Tessera*, than "sarcastic vein," but Palacios is still credited with precedence and intuition.

Both examples discuss the Islamic influences in this part of the *Inferno*:

Mentre che tutto in lui veder m'attacco,  
 guardommi e con le man s'aperse il petto,  
 dicendo: «Or vedi com' io mi dilacco!  
 vedi come storpiato è Mäometto!  
 Dinanzi a me sen va piangendo Alí,  
 fesso nel volto dal mento al ciuffetto.

tutti li altri che tu vedi qui,  
 seminador di scandalo e di scisma  
 fuor vivi, e però son fessi cosí.  
 (*Inferno, Canto 28: 28-36*, Dante 1985: vol.1)

While I was caught up in the sight of him,  
 he looked at me and, with his hands, ripped apart

his chest, saying: ‘See how I rent myself,  
‘see how mangled is Mohammed!  
Ahead of me proceeds Alì, in tears,  
his face split open from his chin to forelock.  
‘And all the others whom you see  
sowed scandal and schism while they lived,  
and that is why they here are hacked asunder.  
(Dante, Hollander’s translation 2002)

### 3.2.1. The *Commedia* and *Liber Scale*

Maria Corti (2015: 55) is convinced that the *Liber scale Machometi* is a direct source for Dante. Its descriptions of the Muslim Hell “might have struck Dante for their bloody and violent concreteness.” In discussing one example where influence is sheer; where Muḥammad speaks of the ‘sowers of discord,’ Corti writes that “Dante seems to be *amusing* himself in *Inferno* 28 as he puts into Muḥammad’s mouth the words that are spoken by Gabriel in the *Liber*” (58; emphasis in “amusing” is ours). Corti explains:

Gabriel speaks to Muḥammad about those “qui verba seminant ut mittant discordiam inter gentes” (Liber par. 199 “who sow words to cause discord among people”). The appearance of the metaphor of *seminare* (to sow) is certainly not a casual coincidence (compare Inf. 28.35 “seminator di scandalo e di scisma,” “sowers of scandal and of schism”). As often occurs, a certain feature, such as a metaphor, is able to generate thematic and formal patterns through Dante’s exceptional imagination (Corti 2015: 58).<sup>19</sup>

In a popularized old Arabic version of *mi’rāj* attributed (perhaps wrongly) to Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 687), the word *fitna* is used, and it is probably the word translated into *discordia* in the *Liber*; and later to *scisma* in Dante.<sup>20</sup> In the two contexts; the Muslim and the Christian Hell, there are those who cause such *fitna*.

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<sup>19</sup> Hyatte’s English translation from Old French is: “... and then I asked Gabriel who they were. He told me that they had spread talk in order to put people at odds” (Hyatte 1997: 97-198; see Chapter 79: 190-191). The word “spread” is not as faithful to the metaphor as in Corti’s translation. The Old French version is almost identical to the Latin: “il me dit en guise de réponse que c’étaient ceux qui sèment des mots pout mettre la discorde entre le gens” (*Le Livre de l’échelle de Mahomet* 1991: 320-21).

<sup>20</sup> Ibn ‘Abbās, *Mi’rāj al-nabī* (n.d.: 18). The text in Arabic is:

"ورأيت رجالاً ونساءً سفافيدُ النارِ تدخُلُ في أدبارهم وتخرجُ من أفواههم فقلتُ من هؤلاء يا أخي جبريلُ: قال هؤلاء  
الهَمَّازونَ اللَّمَّازونَ الغَمَّازونَ ورأيتُ رجالاً يُرمونَ بشهبٍ من نارٍ فتقعُ في أفواههم وأبصارهم وتخرجُ من أفتيتهم  
فقلتُ من هؤلاء يا أخي جبريلُ قال هؤلاء الذين يبتهونَ الناسَ ويرمونَ بينهم الفتنَةَ".

In Muḥammad’s hell, he appears as a curious prophet, an observer guided by Angel Gabriel who explains that the tortured they are seeing are sowers of scandals. Dante, however, puts the words in Muḥammad’s mouth, while his chest is ripped apart, and his cousin ‘Alī is also being tortured and is in tears. Corti described this as having been “amusing” for Dante: to have Muḥammad use the same metaphor in the absence of the original speaker, Gabriel, and in the presence of Virgil and Dante. Dante’s Muḥammad is now among the condemned with causing discord and schism, confessing that he is so. Dante is faithful here to some medieval views of Muḥammad being a false prophet or a Christian priest; an evil preacher who divided the church, and perhaps also to the idea that his cousin ‘Alī was responsible for dividing Islam.

It is definitely not a case of ‘amusement’ according to Bloom’s theory. Graham Allen accurately summarizes the core of the poet’s drives in Bloom’s framework (though post-Miltonic poetry in that context): “the first concerns the desire to *imitate* the precursor’s poetry, from which the poet first learnt what poetry was. The second concerns the desire to *be original*, and defend against the knowledge that all the poet is doing is imitating rather than creating afresh” (Allen 2000: 134; emphasis ours). The desire to imitate is clear: Dante uses the same metaphor, and almost the same scene of torture.<sup>21</sup> However, his anxiety and desire to be original makes him execute the change: the protagonist of the narrative he is imitating, or even the original author, is the one being tortured, a damned soul addressed by the Roman poet Virgil, and uses Gabriel’s metaphor to speak about *himself* while addressing his ephebe, Dante. And if Dante indeed knew the *Liber*, and considered himself a prophet, then his anxiety may have been aggravated by the opening lines of chapter 197 in the *Liber*: “ego Machometus, propheta et nuncius Dei” (Besson and Brossard-Dandré 1991). Dante reads the reason for punishment in Gabriel’s words: “qui verba seminant ut mittant discordiam inter gentes,” and driven by a desire to be original despite the imitation, he executes the first of Bloom’s (1997: 14) ratios:

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It is worth noting that “*hamz*” and “*lamz*” are acts condemned in the Qur’an. (See Q.104: 1) “Woe unto every backbiter, slanderer,” and (Q. 68:11) “backbiter going out with slander” (Arberry’s translation). Mark of Toledo’s translation does not hint to a direct influence: “Heu omni stimulate et oculis insinuati derisori”; “qui iurat assidue stimulatori atque accusatori” (Pons 2006), hereafter *Liber Alchorani*. However, Mark frequently translates *fitna* into discordia (See Q.9: 47 “Se enim uobiscum exirent, conturbacionem uobis accumularent et into uos componeret discordiam...” (“Had they gone forth among you, they would only have increased you in trouble, and run to and fro in your midst, seeking to stir up sedition between you...)).

<sup>21</sup> Corti notes that Dante (in the 8<sup>th</sup> *bolgia*, where “there is a veritable pandemic of slashing and cutting) also imitates the scene in this part of the *Liber* where sinners find “their lips being cut off or their tongues being pulled out with fiery pincers (*forcibus igneis*)” (Corti 2015: 55). Lwiss Saliba traces the Arabic original to al-Mundhirī’s (d. 656 AH) *al-Tarḡīb wa al-tarḥīb*, where Gabriel also answers that the sinners whose lips and tongues are cut with iron pincers (*maqāriḍ min ḥadīd*) are “the orators of discord” (*khuṭabā’ al-fitna*; Saliba 2016: 295, footnote 1).

*Clinamen*. In this ratio, Dante “swerves” from his precursor in a “corrective movement:” “The poet confronting his Great Original must find the fault that is not there” (Bloom 1997: 31).

The corresponding psychic defense is the Freudian ‘reaction-formation’ against the destructive anxiety-producing impulses of the id. Bloom (1975: 71) considers influence, especially at this stage, “a trope of rhetorical irony,” which corresponds to Palacios’s ‘sarcasm’ and Corti’s ‘amusement.’ The “intolerable presence” of the precursor drives the ego to protect and master the poet’s impulses, by voiding the original poem: “the new poem starts in the *illusio* that this absence can deceive us into accepting a new presence” (Bloom 1975: 71). It certainly took centuries for the original poem and the original metaphor to become ‘present’ again. While in this ratio, Dante’s reaction-formation made him exaggerate the contradiction and the irony: the prophet guided by an angel is being tortured, and is using the angel’s metaphor against himself: “*tutti li altri che tu vedi qui, / seminatore di scandalo e di scisma / fuor vivi, e però son fessi così.*” The metaphor is “swerved” from its original utterer and given to the mouth of the original addressee. The latter is addressing Dante who in turn is attempting to become original through this corrective movement.

Bloom’s second ratio, *Tessera*, where the poet is inclined to complete his precursor antithetically (see Bloom 1997: 14, 66), may apply to this example if we consider Dante’s switch from addressee to addresser, from a prophet to a sinner who caused discord, to be an antithesis. This, however, is clearer in the example to follow, the discussion of which will again involve “sowers of scandals and schism” and the supposed antithesis.

### 3.2.2. The *Commedia* and *Liber Alchorani*

In “Muhammad in Hell,” Karla Mallette discusses a possible influence of the Qur’an on the very scene in which Muhammad is tortured in *Inferno* 28. Mallette acknowledges the lack of sufficient documentary evidence for her claim, and bases her thesis on “informed speculation” which, in her view, “can advance the philological argument” (2015: 180). Mallette suggests that an event in Muhammad’s life, which is only hinted to in the Qur’an, may have contributed to his personification in Dante’s *Inferno*; namely the Islamic tradition of *sharḥ*: the opening or expansion of Muhammad’s chest (181). God opens the prophet’s chest, removes his heart and purifies it, through angels in some versions or birds as divine agents, sometimes removing something dark and sometimes washing it with water from the Zamzam well of Mecca (181).<sup>22</sup> The purification was either a preparation for prophecy and

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<sup>22</sup> Mallette refers here to Harris Birkeland’s (1955).

revelation, or for the *mi'rāj* itself in other versions (Mallette 2015: 181-82). Although Mallette has no evidence that these narratives were transferred to the Christian world, she sees in Mark of Toledo's translation of the Qur'an, especially the verses of *surat al-inshirāḥ*, a possible source for Dante, especially as Mark's translation "heightens the physical drama of the episode," contrary to the more popular translation of Robert of Ketton (182-183). The table below explains Mallette's framework:

The Qur'an	Mark of Toledo's Translation	Inferno 28
<p>”أَلَمْ نَشْرَحْ لَكَ صَدْرَكَ * وَوَضَعْنَا عَنْكَ وَزْرَكَ * الَّذِي أَنْقَضَ ظَهْرَكَ ”* (الانشراح 3-1)</p> <p>”Alam nashraḥ laka ṣadraka * wa-waḍa'nā 'anka wizraka * alladhī anqaḍa zahraka” (Q.94:1-3)</p> <p>”Did We Not Expand thy breast for thee/ and lift from thee thy burden, the burden that weighed down thy back” (Arberry's translation)</p>	<p>”1. Nonne adaperui cor tuum/ 2. et removi a te peccatum tuum/ 3. quod tibi disruptit dorsum?/” (Mark of Toledo, Liber Alchorani, 1210-1211)</p> <p>”1. Did I not throw open your heart/ 2. and remove from you your sin/ 3. Which asunder [or shattered] your back?” (Mallette's (2015: 182) translation)</p>	<p><i>Mentre che tutto in lui veder m'attacco, guardommi e con le man s'aperse il petto, dicendo: «Or vedi com' io mi dilacco! vedi come storpiato è Mäometto!</i> (Inferno 28:28-31)</p> <p>While I was caught up in the sight of him, he looked at me and, with his hands, ripped apart his chest, saying: 'See how I rent myself, 'see how mangled is Mohammed! (Hollander's translation)</p>

Mallette emphasizes Mark's use of the verb *adaperio* to translate the Arabic *nashraḥ* which roughly means "lays bare" (in contrast to Robert of Ketton's *fecit amplum*); and Mark's *disruptit* to translate the Arabic *anqaḍa zahraka*, which means "the burden that weighs heavily upon your back" (in contrast to Robert of Ketton's *turgusque graue fecimus*) (Mallette 2015: 183). Mallette suggests that Mark's

translation is informed by extraneous material from theological works and Qur'anic commentaries, which made it depict the word *nashrah* "as a corporal ordeal" (Mallette 2015: 183).<sup>23</sup>

What makes Mallette's article extremely interesting for our discussion is her psychological analysis of Dante's influence. She views Dante's Muhammad as a "psychological nullity, a character whose emotional response to his eventful life is of little interest to his creator" (Mallette 2015: 178). Dante, however, punishing Muhammad as one of the "sowers of schism and scandal" for his rupture of the church by having his chest ruptured, opened from front to back echoing the *sharh* episode, undergoes, as can be deduced from Mallette's analysis, a psychological struggle evident in his use of crude vocabulary (Mallette 2015: 183). Although Mallette does not refer to Bloom's theory, her analysis is strikingly similar to Bloom's ratios, especially *Tessera*. Dante did not copy Mark's terminology, and Mallette suggests another, *Bloomian* evidence of influence:

If there is a response to Mark's translation in *Inferno* 28, it is found in the *dissonance* between the significance of Muhammad's ruptured body in the two texts. Like Mark's Muhammad, Dante's Muhammad is riven by God's touch, his body opened from chest to back. In Mark's translation, God shatters Muhammad in order to exalt him; the opening of Muhammad's chest serves as a preparation for prophecy in general or Muhammad's mystical journey to the next world in particular. God recalls this episode in the sura *al-inshirāh*, in order to comfort Muhammad, as if to say, "where you find my awesome power, you will also find my mercy." In the *Inferno*, in contrast, when Muhammad displays his wounds, he seems at once shamed, scandalized, and self-pitying. God has split his torso not to exalt him but rather to humiliate him. The opening of Muhammad's chest in the *Inferno* reverses the significance of the expansion of Muhammad's chest in the Qur'an. Recall the words that Muhammad speaks to Dante, in childish horror at his own mutilation: "Or vedi com' io mi dilacco! vedi come storpiato è Maometto!" [...] The scene is a grotesquerie, a carnivalesque *inversion* of an episode recounted with awe in the Islamic popular tradition (183-184; emphasis ours).

Dissonance, reversal, inversion, are all indicators of Bloom's *Tessera*; completion and antithesis: "a poet antithetically "completes" his precursor by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms, but to *mean them in another sense*" (Bloom 1997: 14; emphasis ours). The term means in ancient mystery cults "a token of recognition," where a fragment reconstitutes a vessel with other fragments (Bloom 1997: 14). The corresponding psychological defenses are "turning-against-the self" and "reversal:" the first is "a turning of aggressive impulses inwards;" while the second is "fantasy in which the situation of

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<sup>23</sup> It is worth noting that Mark in *Liber Alchorani* does not emphasize the physical aspects of *sharh* in his translation of the 25th verse of *surat Tāhā* (Q.20: 25): قال ربّ اشرح لي صدري (Lord, open my Breast); as he translates it into "Dixit: "Creator, aperi mihi cor meum." This is probably because God is being addressed by Moses, and Mark was probably aware of the *sharh* episode as an event in Muhammad's life.

reality is reversed so as to sustain negation or denial from any outward over-throw” (Bloom 1975: 72). So, are these the subconscious reasons for Dante’s aggression and metamorphosis of Muḥammad; of reversing the episode and its meaning from purification to punishment? The strong poet’s imagination in Bloom’s theory is unable to see itself as perverse, and this applies to Dante, whose debasing of Muḥammad (he is ripped from his chin to his torso, his chest cut, his organs visible, his entrails dangled between his legs),<sup>24</sup> would not strike him as perverse (Bloom 1997: 85). For Bloom this would be described as an instance of “*self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, wilful revisionism*” (see Bloom 1997: 30; Bloom’s emphasis), “a disciplined perverseness,” a “misunderstanding,” “misinterpretation” or “misalliance” (Bloom 1997: 95). Melancholic for his lack of priority and for his failure to have begotten himself (Bloom 1997: 96), the metamorphosis of Muḥammad was a necessary defense mechanism for Dante to turn imitation into originality; to give the initial admiration of his Muslim precursor and his narrative the mask of contempt. In *Intertextuality*, Mary Orr elaborates:

Beyond any Barthesian bruising as mark of pleasure, texts in the Bloom mindscape can therefore be raped, assaulted, disemboweled, violated, or cannibalized to any degree. Is the cover on the real perversity, even pornography of Bloom’s ‘anxiety of influence’ now blown? Is this the return of a repressed Sadean homoerotics of the mind, a belated ‘disrememberment’ of Orpheus, to grasp his vital spark as strongest poet of them all? (Orr 2003: 80).

Dante’s anxiety made him execute a tessera as to the Islamic episode. He reverses the meaning in order to achieve a poet’s strongest desire according to Bloom (1975: 12): to become an influence. He saw himself as a prophet, and was influenced by a prophet, and therefore had to turn him into a tortured sinner, and sower of schism, and to place himself in *inferno* 28 exactly where Muḥammad was in *Liber* scale, an observer next to Virgil, as Muḥammad was next to Gabriel. The more the anxiety, the more the reversal, the more the violation and scandalization. The poetic father in Bloom’s theory is the voice of “the other, “the daimon”; a voice that cannot die because it has already survived death (Bloom 1975: 19). Bloom’s poet rebels against being spoken to by the precursor, a dead man “outrageously more alive than himself,” who had the same vision as his ephebe who cannot find a substitute for his literary choice (Bloom 1975: 19).

Dante’s rebellion is clear in that he does not speak directly to Muḥammad in *Inferno* 28, despite the latter addressing him. Could Dante be executing here, in addition to *Tessera*, Bloom’s (1997) third

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<sup>24</sup> *Inferno* 28: 22-27.

ratio, *Kenosis* (“breaking device”) where he accepts reduction from his “imaginative godhood” to human status by Muḥammad, who thinks Dante is one of the sinners? (see Bloom 1997: 14-15). Bloom explains that in *Kenosis* the ephebe protects himself against repetition-compulsion by emptying out himself and the precursor and by humbly ceasing to be a poet (Bloom 1997: 14-15). Dante does not answer Muḥammad question: *Ma tu chi se' che 'n su lo scoglio muse/ forse per indugiar d'ire a la pena/ ch'è giudicata in su le tue accuse?* (“But who are you to linger on the ridge/ perhaps you put off going to the torment/ pronounced on your own accusation;” *Inferno* 28: 43-45).<sup>25</sup> The poet does not answer, but awaits Virgil to answer on his behalf. Dante does not explain why he has Virgil mediate, and merely watches his own poetic creation, perhaps undergoing Bloom's fourth ratio, *Daemonization* or *Counter-Sublime*, where he reacts to his precursor's Sublime by daemonizing himself and humanizing the precursor, stressing the latter's “relative weakness” in preparation for his own transformed being (Bloom 1997: 15, 100). After all, Dante, the poet, is the “daemon” creating the scene with his own powerful, crude words, not only emphasizing his precursor's weakness but his pitifulness and shame.

Again, this happens while Dante is silent. He “curtails” or limits his presence as in Bloom's fifth ratio, *Askesis*, a “movement of self-purgation” (Bloom 1997: 15). In such a state of solitude, the poet “knows only himself and the other he must at last destroy, his precursor, who he may well (by now) be an imaginary or composite figure” (Bloom 1975: 121). Bloom elaborates on this ratio, arguing that *clinamen* and *tessera* correct the dead; *kenosis* and *daemonization* repress the memory of the dead; “but *askesis* is the context proper, the match-to-the-death with the dead” (Bloom 1975: 122). If this match is primarily about ‘curtailing,’ then most of the controversy can be understood within this framework: Dante goes to solitude and does not speak directly to Muḥammad, and has Virgil mediate between them: between the influencer and the influenced. Virgil, Dante's guide and mentor: *tu duca, tu signore, e tu maestro* (*Inferno* 2:140),” is Dante's announced choice of influence, curtailing Muḥammad's. Throughout the history of Dante scholarship, Virgil's Book Six of the *Aeneid* was considered the clearest source for Dante's *Inferno*, and it still stands between the *Commedia* and the *Liber*; between Dante and Muḥammad, especially after Palacios's thesis.

How does this match end with the poet curtailing behind his master? Virgil answers Muḥammad: *Né morte 'l giunse ancor, né colpa 'l mena»./ rispuose 'l mio maestro, «a tormentarlo;/ ma per dar lui esperienza piena,/ a me, che morto son, convien menarlo/ per lo 'nferno qua giù di giro in giro;/ e quest' è ver così com' io ti parlo* (“Death does not have him yet nor does his guilt/ lead him to torment,” replied my master/ ‘but to give him greater knowledge’/ ‘I, who am dead indeed, must shepherd him/ from circle to circle,

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<sup>25</sup> Hollander's translation.

through this Hell down here/ And this is as true as that I speak to you;” *Inferno* 28: 46-51).<sup>26</sup> While Dante curtails himself, Virgil explains to Muḥammad why Dante is there, that *death has not reached him*, completely effacing the Islamic original where Muḥammad himself was guided through hell by Gabriel “*per dar lui esperienza piena*,” after his chest was opened and his heart purified with Meccan water. The precursor is about to die, and the ephebe, Dante, comes to life in his solitude.

In Bloom’s final ratio, *Apophrades*, “the return of the dead,” the poet holds his poem wide open to the precursor (Bloom 1997: 15-16). The effect is that the new poem, here Dante’s, asserts its originality despite all the anxiety and all the influence, and seems to us as readers, “as though the later poet himself had written the precursor’s characteristic work” (Bloom 1997: 16). For centuries, Muḥammad’s influence on Dante was left unnoticed, unheard of, unthinkable. Dante won the war of influence and proved his originality, until Asín Palacios said otherwise in 1919, and stirred the anxieties of Dante scholars for decades to come.

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<sup>26</sup> Hollander’s translation.

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Balqis Al-Karaki holds a PhD in Oriental Studies from the University of Cambridge, 2007. She is Professor of Classical Arabic Literature at the University of Jordan. Her publications focus mostly on the epistemology of poetry in Classical Arabic and Comparative Poetics. She is also a writer, essayist, and author of two literary books. She can be reached at: [b.alkaraki@ju.edu.jo](mailto:b.alkaraki@ju.edu.jo)

Mahmoud Jaran holds a PhD in Literary Science from the University of Udine and is Associate Professor in Italian Literature, History and Civilization at the University of Jordan. He has several publications and studies on Pier Paolo Pasolini, Antonio Gramsci and Medieval Literature. He can be reached at: [m.jaran@ju.edu.jo](mailto:m.jaran@ju.edu.jo)