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Philosophers, Theologians, and the Islamic Legacy in Dante: *Inferno* 4 versus *Paradiso* 4

BRENDA DEEN SCHILDGEN

In this essay I argue that the first *dubbi* (*Par.* 4.8)[1] that Beatrice answers for Dante in *Paradiso* 4 relate two issues that constitute a retrospective consideration of *Inferno* 4 and a recanting of some earlier philosophic positions found in the *Convivio*. These issues are the poet's relationship to the learned traditions and poetic practices of ancient Greek and medieval Arab philosophy. Whereas in the *Convivio* Dante had attempted to accommodate the differences about the relative influence of heavenly bodies on the human soul as outlined by ancient Greek and medieval Arabic philosophers, by the time of the *Commedia* he had clearly rejected this more pluralist position in favor of Christian revelation. Following the Christian synthesis developed by Thomas Aquinas, in which Christ is the means to unite nature and the transcendent, he endorses orthodox Christian views on the nature of the soul and the freedom of the will against the legacy of the Greeks and the Arabs.

In *Paradiso* 4, Beatrice directly acknowledges the role of poetry in expressing theological understanding, and thereby offers a key to interpreting what Dante sees before him. She rejects what to her are errors in the Greek and Arabic philosophical legacy, positions that emerged as a result of the study of Aristotle by Islamic thinkers from the eleventh century onward. But her endorsement of allegory to discuss theology finds explicit parallels in Islamic practices. Thus while Dante distances himself from Greek and Arabic philosophy, his use of allegory to express his theological beliefs reveals certain affinities with Sufism, that is, Islamic mysticism,

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although not exclusively, for these poetic practices also find parallels in Western allegorical practices.[2]

As is well known, the recovery of Aristotle in the West posed serious intellectual challenges to academic and theological practices and understanding, as it had earlier to Islamic thinkers. The commentary by Averroës (d. 1198) on Aristotle's *De anima* introduced ideas into Western intellectual circles that attracted significant ecclesiastical attention in the thirteenth century[3]—so much attention in fact that a papal interdiction at the University of Paris in 1277 forbade their being taught. Siger of Brabant (*Par.* 10.136), among others, expounded the concepts of Aristotle and his commentators. In his *Quaestiones in tertium De anima*, *De anima intellectiva*, and *De aeternitate mundi*, for example, Siger had promoted the heretical view that the soul was a separate entity, and that like the world, it was immortal and eternal, that is, preexisting the body into which it was born.[4] Aristotelian rationalism, through the medium of the Arab commentators, challenged theological methodologies and orthodox teachings in both the Islamic medieval world and the Latin West, provoking a clash between philosophers and theologians. Throughout the *Commedia*, but especially in *Paradiso*, Dante's incarnational poetry attempts a theological and aesthetic reconciliation of the opposing group of thinkers.

In the *Convivio*, Dante appears to align himself with the philosophical traditions of both the Arabs and the Greeks.[5] When he mentions Beatrice, "quella viva Beatrice beata," for the last time in *Convivio* (2.7.7), in fact, he enlists all the philosophers (Aristotle, the Stoics, Cicero), the gentiles, and the followers of diverse laws—Jews, Saracens, and Tartars—who find agreement in denouncing as wrong and pernicious the beliefs that the afterlife does not exist and that something eternal does not reside in us (*Conv.* 2.8.8–16). Later (*Conv.* 4.21.2–3), citing Avicenna, al-Ghazālī, Plato, and Pythagoras as his authorities on the nature of the soul,[6] he writes:

> Veramente per diversi filosofi de la differenza de le nostre anime fue diversamente ragionata: ché Avicenna e Algazel volsero che esse da loro e per loro principio fossero nobili e vili; e Plato e altri volsero che esse precedessero da le stelle, e fossero nobili e più e meno secondo la nobilitade de la stella. Pittagora volse che tutte fossero d'una nobilitade, non solamente le umane, ma con le umane quelle de li animali bruti e de le piante, e le forme de le minere; e disse che tutta la differenza è de le corpora e de le forme. Se ciascuno fosse a difendere la sua oppinione, potrebbe essere che la veritade si vedrebbe essere in tutte.[7]

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Several points in this passage illustrate Dante's relationship to Greek philosophy and its preservation, commentary, and further development by the Arab philosophers and Sufis. First, he does not separate classical Greek learning from Arab learning: for example, he names Avicenna (980–1037) and the Sufi al-Ghazālī (1058–1111) alongside the Greeks.[8] Second, he clearly considers them all thinkers who, in a debate, could point to the common truths in their ideas, even though in *Convivio* 4.8, with due reverence for the philosopher, Dante reformulates Aristotle's system of knowledge to bring it into accord with the Christian dispensation, which demonstrates that Aristotelianism, uninformed by revelation, is ultimately blind.[9] Third, here he presents the classical philosophers' ideas about the soul and the role of the heavenly bodies in their predilections as somehow all capable of being reconciled.

First addressed in *Purgatorio* 4, this debate recurs in *Paradiso* 4, but by the time Dante writes *Paradiso*, he emphatically endorses Christian views on the question of the soul (tripartite, that is, vegetative, sensitive, and intellective—the last of these being specifically human)[10] and its destiny, whereas in the *Convivio* he is less emphatic.[11] In fact, as a palinode for parts of the *Convivio* and as a retrospective gaze on *Inferno* 4, *Paradiso* 4 addresses why Plato, Aristotle, Avicenna, and Averroës find themselves in Limbo. Dante had not condemned Averroës and Avicenna for any personal sins, but in a radical intellectual and theological gesture, he had placed them among the virtuous pagans in Limbo, together with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (*Inf.* 4.143–44, 129). Averroës, in fact, "che 'l gran comento feo" (144),[12] received special attention for his intellectual achievement. But in *Paradiso* 4, Beatrice's answer to Dante's question about whether the soul returns to the stars, as Plato had expounded in the *Timaeus*, corrects the *Convivio*'s failure to distinguish between the various thinkers on the topic of the human soul:

> Ancor di dubitar ti dà cagione
> parer tornarsi l'anime a le stelle,
> secondo la sentenze di Platone
> (*Par.* 4.22–24)

The answer comes twenty-five lines later, after a related question about the apparent hierarchical tiers in Heaven (*Par.* 4.25–48) has been addressed:

> Quel che Timeo de l'anime argomenta
> non è simile a ciò che qui si vede,
> però che, come dice, par che senta.

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Dice che l'alma a la sua stella riede,
credendo quella quindi esser decisa
quando natura per forma la diede . . .
(*Par.* 4.49–54).

Here Beatrice specifically states that Plato's view of the soul returning to its star of origin is wrong, as Dante can see ("che qui si vede"). Still, she is willing to concede that if Plato had meant that some influence emanates from the stars, there might then after all be some truth in his views:

E forse sua sentenza è d'altra guisa
che la voce non suona, ed esser puote
con intenzion da non esser derisa.
S'elli intende tornare a queste ruote
l'onor de la influenza e 'l biasmo, forse
in alcun vero suo arco percuote
(*Par.* 4.55–60)

But beyond this small concession, Beatrice holds that the Platonic view (found in numerous other ancient and Arab philosophers, according to Dante) once led "almost all the world" (*Par.* 4.62) into error. Clearly excepting the Jews, Dante here looks back to Limbo to attempt to explain why the virtuous pagans remained there following the Crucifixion and why the ancient Jews were liberated. As in *Purgatorio* 16, in a direct refutation of Averroistic ideas, Marco Lombardo responds to Dante's *dubbio* about the influence of the stars on the freedom of the will:

. . . "Frate,
lo mondo è cieco, e tu vien ben da lui.
Voi che vivete ogne cagion recate
pur suso al cielo, pur come se tutto
movesse seco di necessitate.
Se così fosse, in voi fora distrutto
libero arbitrio, e non fora giustizia
per ben letizia, e per male aver lutto."
(*Purg.* 16.65–72)

Marco's correction amounts to the poet's recantation of positions held in the *Convivio* regarding philosophic pluralism and a sharp delimitation of the philosophies of Plato, Avicenna, and Averroës, whose positions lacked the theological revelation that Dante receives through Beatrice. The doctrine of free will also undermines the notion that the stars could direct

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human souls. In stating the Christian view of the freedom of the soul, Dante suggests one reason why the ancient philosophers and their Arab followers might be domiciled in Limbo.[13]

Also in *Paradiso* 4 (40–45) Dante addresses the issue of "allegorical" representation of divine realities when Beatrice explains to him that the appearances in Heaven have been adapted for his intellect. She likens this process to the pattern of the sacred text that attributes human traits to the divinity:

> "Così parlar conviensi al vostro ingegno,
> però che solo da sensato apprende
> ciò che fa poscia d'intelletto degno.
> Per questo la Scrittura condescende
> a vostra facultate, e piedi e mano
> attribuisce a Dio e altro intende . . ."
> (*Par.* 4.40–45)

In this passage, Dante has Beatrice show how poetry functions to express the inexpressible. Specifically she explains how allegory uses "literal" language and images because they can communicate to his senses what later apprehension may convey to his intellect. To explain why Dante, through his deluded understanding, sees souls hierarchically arranged in specific Heavens even though they are really all in the Empyrean, Beatrice singles out the venomous notion that there is inequality in Heaven. Of course, this idea does find a place in the Greco-Arab philosophic traditions because they assign greater privilege to the superior intellect. This difference between the Greco-Arab philosophical position and the orthodox Christian belief also constitutes yet another retrospective look back at the philosophers who inhabit Limbo and why they might be housed there. The allegorical mode, Beatrice explains, suits his intellect because for Dante to see the souls, they must represent their spiritual state concretely, so that he can apprehend them through his senses.[14] Citing the authority of the Bible, which employs metaphoric language to speak about divine things, Beatrice here also elaborates the poetic system of *Paradiso*. In linking poetry to theology as the means to express the inexpressible while also connecting Dante's poem with the semiotic system of the sacred text itself,[15] Beatrice also suggests that theological truth can only be mediated through poetic language.

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The corrections here (the place of souls in the heavens, the influence of the stars, and the soul's trajectory) embrace an acceptance of fundamental and central tenets of Christian orthodoxy in which Dante's poem resides: that the soul and body are unified; that because the soul is beyond all finite influence, it is free and will survive after death rather than return to some form of a Neoplatonic ur-soul; and that the human will is free. Dante appears to have used Canto 4 in all three canticles to examine the issue of the nature of the soul as deliberated on by ancient Greek and Arabic philosophers: in *Purgatorio* 4, the poet specifically identifies the Platonic idea of multiple souls (in a hierarchical order) within one human as "quello error":

> Quando per dilettanze o ver per doglie,
> che alcuna virtù nostra comprenda,
> l'anima bene ad essa si raccoglie,
> par ch'a nulla potenza più intenda;
> e questo è contra quello error che crede
> ch'un'anima sovr' altra in noi s'accenda.
> (*Purg.* 4.1–6)

Like Aristotle in book 3 of *De anima*, Dante, following Thomas Aquinas, believed that the soul constituted a unity that was dependent on the body in this world and without which the soul could not survive. Averroës had taken the extreme position that the soul and body were so inextricably tied that the soul could not survive death.[16]

On the issue of allegory, earlier in his career, Dante had elaborated on the allegorical system he was applying to interpret *Convivio*'s second canzone:

> . . . questa esposizione conviene essere litterale ed allegorica. E a ciò dare a intendere, si vuol sapere che le scritture si possono intendere e deonsi esponere massimamente per quattro sensi. L'uno si chiama litterale . . . L'altro si chiama allegorico, e questo è quello che si nasconde sotto 'l manto di queste favole, ed è una veritade ascosa sotto bella menzogna . . . Lo terzo senso si chiama morale, e questo è quello che li lettori deono intentamente andare apostando per le scritture ad utilitade di loro e di loro discenti . . . Lo quarto senso si chiama anagogico, cioè sovrasenso; e questo è quando spiritualmente si spone una scrittura, la quale ancora [che sia vera] eziandio nel senso litterale, per le cose significate significa delle superne cose dell'etternal gloria . . .
> (*Conv.* 2.1.2–15)

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However, the system of allegory that Dante lays out here radically differs from that which Beatrice explains in *Paradiso* 4. Here, Dante explains that the literal is a "bella menzogna" that covers diverse other meanings that can be unveiled through interpretation. Beatrice asserts in *Paradiso* 4, however, that because of the limits of human language to reveal divine truths, metaphoric language must substitute for its referent. She also implies that the limits of the human intellect itself make revelation, exemplified by her own mediation of truth, necessary to enable him to understand divine truth. Here too Dante is correcting or adding to what he had said about interpretive reading practices in the *Convivio*. The difference is between a rather prosaic theory in the *Convivio* about how allegory functions, and the acceptance in *Paradiso* that the ineffable cannot be put into words, "Trasumanar significar *per verba* / non si poria" (*Par.* 1.70–71, my emphasis).

However, more is at stake here than straightening out the *Convivio*'s philosophical and poetic missteps (as well as the limitations of ancient Greek and Arabic philosophy); for Dante, through Beatrice's answers to his quandaries, approaches the heart of the debate about the relationship between philosophy and faith, and what poetry offers to this debate.[17] In the Heaven of the Sun, where the poet sees the theologians he admires, in a further elaboration of the ideas raised in *Paradiso* 4, Dante implies the interdependence of faith and reason, thus linking Dominic and Francis (the Dominicans and Franciscans), "principi . . . che quinci e quindi" (*Par.* 11.35–36). Furthermore, when interrogated on faith by Saint Peter in *Paradiso* 24, Dante makes the point that it is through scripture (and thus metaphoric language) as the foundation of logic that faith is unfolded.[18] Here faith is not sidelined in favor of reason, nor reason undermined, but both are necessary components of the visionary understanding that scripture reveals.

Turning to the Islamic tradition on allegory, we see some important parallels with Christian theologians and with Dante. The difference in the application of allegorical methods of the philosophers and Sufis in Islamic culture parallels the interpretive strategies of Albertus Magnus and Bonaventure in a pattern that differentiates between those under the influence of the Aristotelian recovery and those worried about its implications to orthodox theological understanding. In a previously published essay, I discussed how the Islamic commentary tradition on the *mi'rāj* (Book of the Ladder) reveals the diverse applications of allegorical reading strategies

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in the Islamic (High) Middle Ages (ca. 950–1150).[19] More particularly, I argued that the *mi'rāj* and its commentary tradition highlight a division in interpretive methods between the philosophers (*falasifa*) and the Sufis, a philosophical debate that was also occurring among theologians in the later Latin Middle Ages.[20]

The *mi'rāj* tradition can be considered a commentary on or expansion of sura 17.1 in the Qur'an, in which with God speaking, Muhammad is described as going by night from the sacred temple (Mecca) to the farther temple (Jerusalem).[21] Widely dispersed in many different versions, the *mi'rāj* is a combination of both the night journey and the vision of Heaven. In this vision, one night as Muhammad was sleeping in Mecca, the angel Gabriel awakened him and lifted him onto an exotic mount, a winged animal named Buraq.[22] Accompanied by Gabriel, Muhammad traveled through the seven Heavens, saw the marvels of Heaven and punishments of Hell, met all the former prophets, and, climbing the heavenly ladder, encountered God. Multiple versions of the *mi'rāj* are extant.[23] Besides various Arabic, Persian, and Latin versions, Old French and Castilian versions still survive. Closer to Dante is the *Contra legem Saracenorum* which includes a version of the *mi'rāj* and a commentary on it written by Friar Riccoldo of Monte Croce (1234–1320), a Florentine who had entered the Dominican order in 1267 and who lectured at Santa Maria Novella intermittently until he left for Asia in 1288, where he became a scholar of Islam. Riccoldo returned to Florence from Baghdad, where he lived for eight years, and from the Holy Land in 1300, so it is likely that Dante encountered him, especially since the poet frequented the Dominican *studium* at Santa Maria Novella.[24] Riccoldo's works also include an *Itinerarium* that was translated into Italian in the fourteenth century,[25] the *Confutatio Alcorani*, the *Libellus contra errores Judaeorum*, as well as his major work, *Contra legem Saracenorum*, all of which circulated in Florence in the fourteenth century.[26] In his commentary on the *mi'rāj*,[27] Riccoldo calls the "vision of Muhammad" ridiculous. The *mi'rāj* has many parallels with Dante's *Commedia*, and as a consequence, particularly since a Latin version was circulating, Dante's poem has often been linked with the earlier Islamic work.[28]

For some Islamic writers, such as Ibn Ṭufayl the *mi'rāj* was literally true. For the Sufis, like al-Ghazālī, it was a model for ecstatic experience. For the philosophers, such as Avicenna, it became a text to be rationalized. A version, attributed to Avicenna and written in Persian, allegorized the

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journey narrative and all that the pilgrim had seen to bring out its philosophical implications. Called "the first Scholastic," Avicenna's achievement as a philosopher and his influence on later philosophical developments cannot be overestimated. The recipient of the Hellenistic synthesis of Neoplatonism and Aristotelianism, Avicenna's discipline, energy, and intellectual force created the Aristotelian system as method and as philosophy, as it was understood for the next five hundred years both in the Latin West and Islam.[29]

Avicenna's text tells of Muhammad's ascent into Heaven, but the commentary that is the central purpose of the work uses allegory to accommodate the literal level of the text when it does not make sense according to rational apprehension. He writes, "A friend of ours has continually inquired about the meaning of the Ascension, desiring it explained in a rational way."[30] Thus by making the text a philosophical allegory he diminishes the text's visionary mode expressed in its literal words in favor of the philosophical meaning he finds hidden beneath the surface.

In rationalizing the visionary metaphorical level of the text, Avicenna follows the classical dichotomy between poetry and philosophy that was first articulated by Plato. Avicenna, sweeping away the literal level, writes, "If a person thinks that a human body reaches a place where the intellect reaches, it is impossible. Because the intellect reaches through intelligibles; it does not reach through duration or instrument, nor does it go by means of time." As for "journeys," "destinations are of two types, either intelligible or sensible. The conveyor of the sensible is the senses; the conveyor of intelligibles is the intellect."[31] For Avicenna, Buraq, the creature on which Muhammad is seated, is "the Active Intelligence," the means by which an intellectual journey can be made. According to his interpretation of the ascent of the ladder, "The true sources of universal concepts . . . are the translunar Higher Principles, that is, the celestial Intelligences, beginning with the 'Active Intelligence' ascending through the other celestial Intelligences, and culminating with the Necessary Existent."[32] The angel Gabriel, his guide, the Angel of Revelation, leads Muhammad through Heaven. Buraq ("Active Intelligence") and Gabriel ("Revelation") make it possible for the pilgrim to transcend time and space intellectually.

Discussing the historical reality of Muhammad's night journey, Avicenna concludes that "Since the conditions of the Ascension of our prophet, upon whom be peace, are not in the sensible world, it is known

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that he did not go in the body, because the body cannot traverse a long distance in one moment. Hence it is not a corporeal ascension, because the goal was not sensual. Rather, the ascension was spiritual, because the goal was intellectual" (124). Thus, for Avicenna the meaning of the quotation from the *mi'rāj*: that "night when Muhammad was sleeping" becomes simply an explanantion for the fact that "at night humans are freer, for bodily occupations and sensual impediments are suspended" (125).

In contrast to Dante's physical journey to the other world, where his body radically distinguishes him from the disembodied souls he encounters, Avicenna separates the mind from body through allegory to interpret the journey as intellectual. Avicenna writes of Buraq, or "Active Intelligence," that it reaches the Intelligences before the world of the sensible and corruption; it is the mount that helps the one who is traveling intellectually and spiritually; of its dimensions, he says, "it is greater than the human intellect and lesser than the First Intelligence" (127), "First Intelligence" being the term he uses for God. Reaching the mosque (that is, coming from Mecca to Jerusalem) is reaching the brain. For Avicenna, the ladder is the means to go from "external senses" to internal senses (130), guided by the "internal faculties." This ascent can happen only when the five senses are properly disciplined (130). Muhammad's ascent up the ladder through the various Heavens is explained in terms of Ptolemaic astronomy and astrology. Avicenna gives power to the planets over human activities in contrast to Beatrice, who corrects Dante's mistaken views on this issue. Thus Mercury has two kinds of influence, auspicious and sinister, whereas Venus rules over joy and mirth (131). The sun "rules over the conditions of kings and great men" (131), but Mars "rules over the conditions of the bloodthirsty and sinful," Jupiter "over folk of rectitude, piety and knowledge" (132), whereas Saturn is again sinister and auspicious but perfectly so (132). Avicenna glosses the description of the throne of God and the encounter with God as follows: "Divine, holy Presence is free of body, substance, and accident, which exist in these worlds. It is above these categories. By necessity, it neither needs nor is connected to place, time, locality, how much, how, where, when, activity and passiveness, and the like" (135). Finally, to apprehend the intelligible is Paradise; therefore, the internal journey, if it achieves this end, reaches eternity: "The journey was intellectual. He [Muhammad] went by thought. His intellect perceived the order of existents until the necessary Existent. When cognition was complete he returned to himself," that is,

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to his bed in Mecca. In contrast to the *mi'rāj* text itself, Avicenna's allegorical reading is clearly intended for "rationalists." Awarding a privileged position to rational thinking, Avicenna argues in his conclusion that only rationalists should read his commentary because "sensual-minded outsiders" could not understand its meaning: "It is not possible to show the inner meanings of these words to one of the ignorant masses. Only a rationalist is permitted to enjoy the inner meaning of these words" (138). Constructing an intellectual (and implied social) hierarchy for encountering the divine, Avicenna's allegory represents the very kind of error for which Beatrice chastises Dante in *Paradiso* 4.

Avicenna's interpretive strategy is completely consonant with his discussion of the metaphoric mode in his commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which he distinguishes poetry from logic, arguing that the imaginative trait of poetry is the only feature that interests the logician: "It is the [proper] concern of the logician to examine poetry with regard to its being imaginative. The imaginative is the speech to which the soul yields, accepting or rejecting matters without pondering, reasoning or choice. In brief, it responds psychologically rather than ratiocinatively, whether the utterance is demonstrative or not" (*Poetics*, Intro. 2).[33] For Avicenna, metaphor is equivalent to imaginative syllogism,[34] a tool of the logical system that he makes the foundation stone of his intellectual project. In discussing how language should be used for imitation, Avicenna writes, "It is not proper to imitate that which is not possible, even though the impossibility is neither apparent nor famous. The best subject matter for [imitation] is morals and opinions." He favors morals and opinions because they belong mutually to the domains of the logician, rhetorician, and poet and are ruled by probability or possibility.[35] Avicenna's commentary on the *Poetics* of Aristotle reveals his position on metaphoric discourse, while his commentary on the *mi'rāj* demonstrates how this approach can be applied to a text. The *mi'rāj* is understood as logic hidden behind a visionary literary surface. In both works, he confers a privileged status on the rational to remake the poetic surface into philosophical meaning, and in the commentary on the *mi'rāj* he applies allegory to achieve these ends.

Sufi commentary on the *mi'rāj* represents another strand for understanding Muhammad's ascent as it provides the metaphoric model for Sufi mystical journeys.[36] Whether as dream or rapture, the Sufi interpretation describes the mystical approach to God. Since any Sufi can make the

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journey to God, the hierarchical journey upward becomes one of discipline and simultaneous reconciliation of faith and intellect, for the seeker must travel from the self by "not fostering the desires and lusts of the body which soon distract the soul from gaining any furtherance in its aspiration to God."[37] The ladder of ascent must be ruled by an intellectual and ascetic rigor, as al-Ghazālī writes in *Freedom and Fulfillment*: "I brought my mind to bear on the way of the Sufis. I knew that their particular way is consummated only by knowledge and activity [by the union of theory and practice]. The aim of their knowledge is to lop off obstacles present in the soul and to rid oneself of its reprehensible habits and vicious qualities in order to attain thereby a heart empty of all save God and adorned with the constant remembrance of God."[38] In *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, which takes up many philosophical speculations of his time, al-Ghazālī confronts the philosophers, particularly Avicenna, to argue about their interpretation of the resurrection of the body, which, like the rationalization of the *mi'rāj* text, sought to understand resurrection as a philosophical problem. For al-Ghazālī, the tie between rational philosophical traditions and Sufism was central to a healthy religious life.[39] On allegory, like Beatrice in *Paradiso* 4, al-Ghazālī explains that the law is revealed in parables to accommodate the understanding of humanity, but he nevertheless insists that "what has come down to us describing Paradise and the fire and the detailing these states has acquired a degree [of explicit statement] that does not [render it] subject to metaphorical interpretation." On the other hand, paralleling Dante, he insists that it is impossible to attribute "place, direction, visage, physical hand, physical eye, the possibility of transfer, and the rest to God . . . Metaphorical interpretation [here] is obligatory through rational proofs. What he has promised in the hereafter, however, is not impossible in terms of the power of God."[40] Thus al-Ghazālī separates what can from what cannot be subjected to allegory: that which pertains to the nature and appearance of God (allegory) versus the literal, the afterlife, and the physical resurrection of the body and soul (not allegorical).

In contrast to the philosophical approach of Avicenna, for the Sufis, the Prophet's ascension signifies that his soul was loosed from the fetters of phenomenal being, and his spirit lost consciousness of all degrees and stations, and his natural powers were annihilated, not of his own will, but through his inspired longing for God.[41]Avicenna's commentary on the *mi'rāj* reveals an intellectual disdain for the visionary rendering of "eternal

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things." He focused on the metaphoric transformative journey that he understood as philosophical, and he achieved this interpretation through allegorizing the text so as to make it consonant with reason, that is, understandable through the intellect.

Two thirteenth-century Latin theologians responded differently to the "rationalist" challenge posed by the recovery of Aristotle, and their responses parallel those found in Avicenna and the Sufis, respectively. The responses emphasize how the recovery of Aristotle provoked intellectual challenges in both the Islamic and the Christian worlds of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In terms of parallelisms, the works of Albertus Magnus and Bonaventure reveal interpretive practices similar to those found in Avicenna and al-Ghazālī. Like the Sufis, Bonaventure uses the ladder metaphor, whose origin for both Christians and Muslims is Jacob's Ladder (Gen. 28:12–13), to describe the mystical encounter with God. Describing his desire for peace, Bonaventure begins his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* with an interpretation of the meaning of Francis's vision of a winged seraph in the form of the crucified Christ. Clearly troubled about how to understand the saint's vision, Bonaventure, like al-Ghazālī speaking of Muhammad's ascent, interprets the seraph's six wings in a mystical-allegorical fashion as the six levels, or steps, of illumination by which the soul may be ecstatically elevated to God. Enriching his commentary with numerous biblical references, Bonaventure shares al-Ghazālī's effort to reconcile philosophical and mystical apprehension. His text rests on a hierarchy that arranges intellectual activities from observing, speculating, reading, and even knowing to Christian attributes of joy, love, humility, and union with God. It is not through the rational path alone, but through humility, love, and joy that the mind can ascend to God. The steps to God are through his vestiges (or signs in the world of nature that provide the opportunity for meditative discoveries)—some are within, some outside, some timeless, and some temporal. But to enter into the truth of God humans must go beyond the temporal to the eternal.[42] Like the Sufi mystics who see Muhammad's night journey as a symbolic/spiritual model to be emulated, Bonaventure interprets Francis's vision as providing the symbolic/allegorical pattern for the journey into the mind of God. He writes on the mystical ecstasy in which the human's affection encounters God that we enter into peace by passing the six considerations. Like the six steps of the true throne of Solomon, where the true man of peace resides we find the interior Jerusalem. This is neither the historical

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city nor the historical temple of Solomon, but the place of the inner vision of peace that Jerusalem symbolizes. The steps to reach this goal are like the six wings of Francis's seraph (*Itinerarium*, chapter 6). Here too we find parallels with Avicenna and al-Ghazālī, for whom Jerusalem represents allegorically the goal and end of the journey, whether intellectual or mystical.

Albertus Magnus offers an interesting counterpoint to Bonaventure. Albertus took the Aristotelian challenge in his stride as he set about writing his commentary on the Apocalypse of John,[43] which is particularly interesting in the context of the Islamic allegorical readings of the *mi'rāj*. Like the *mi'rāj*, the symbolic dimension of the Apocalypse of John, another visionary text, invites allegorical intervention.[44] To compare his approach to those of Bonaventure's and the Arabic philosophers, I will examine how Albertus allegorizes the vision of heavenly worship at Apocalypse 4:3: "Et iris erat in circuitu sedis similis visioni zmaragdinae" (And a rainbow just like an emerald was around the throne). He writes that the rainbow is a sign of Christ through whom mankind is reconciled to God (here represented by the throne). He seeks to explain the visionary elements of Apocalypse 4:5—"Et septem lampades ardentes ante thronum quae sunt septem spiritus Dei" (And seven flaming torches, the seven spirits of God were burning before the throne of God)—through a theologically informed allegorical reading of the text. He glosses the passage as follows: "The seven flaming torches, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, are burning with love of God." Like Avicenna, Albertus is interested in rationalizing the text under discussion, in other words, in eliminating the visionary elements of the literal level to discover the theological (or philosophical, as in Avicenna) meaning within. But Albertus, in contrast to Avicenna, does not apply an allegorical interpretive strategy to philosophize the text; rather, he accepts the visionary elements as symbolic, using them to explicate theological positions that conform to orthodox beliefs. For Albertus, theology becomes the intellectual discipline that aids him in interpreting the biblical text. He clarifies, and in a sense bypasses, the visionary aspects of the text by allegorizing them. Bonaventure, on the contrary, like the Sufis, uses biblical metaphor to expand on his own mystical theology, in which the contemplative ladder to God makes reason a necessary but lower step on the ladder.

For some time scholars have recognized that by the late Middle Ages the uses of allegory had been transformed. Here, of course, as the above

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examples make clear, I am not using the term *allegory* as a literary mode to denote a single didactic moral purpose underlying the literal meaning of any text, as did Bernard F. Huppé and D. W. Robertson Jr., in the 1960s.[45] Indeed, Erich Auerbach's excursus on how Dante's figural imagination uses allegory to turn the poem's characters into "*figurae* of the fulfilled truth that the poem reveals,"[46] does not exactly apply here. Also inappropriate is Lee Patterson's idea that allegory was transformed from a "radically depersonalized and transcendentalizing" form, as in Prudentius or the *Roman de la Rose*, to the dramatic subjective representation of later medieval writers.[47] Likewise, Hans Robert Jauss's catalog of allegorical genres does not apply.[48]

Rather, although linked to the glossing tradition of biblical commentary—inspired by the symbolic and just plain difficult elements of the sacred text itself—for Albertus, Bonaventure, and Dante, allegory is a reading (and writing) strategy designed to convey theological insight or understanding. For Albertus, allegory is a reading strategy to make the visionary elements of the text into rational theology; for Bonaventure, allegory is the literary means to unveil the visionary images, making the words themselves the symbolic means to unfold the mystical journey. Jauss's and Auerbach's understanding of allegory can and have been applied to the *Commedia*, for its discursive allegories are moral, political/historical, social, and theological. But in *Paradiso* 4, Beatrice seems to be saying that allegory is the only means to accommodate the visionary mode of *Paradiso* because of the insufficiency of our intellect and of language itself, which must compromise with our sensual imagination.

In *Paradiso* 4, Dante addresses two concerns of his poem. First, in straightening out his intellectual understanding, he must come to terms with how classical (i.e., Greek and Arab) learning differs from Christian revelation. Second, in figuring Paradise, he must confront the inadequacy of language to make this grand leap (*Par.* 23.61).[49] As al-Ghazālī did for Islam, Dante provides a poetic theology—for through the mediation of Beatrice, Dante offers a great synthesis of all of the schools of thought in the service of Christian truth.[50] The limitations of the philosophical schools represented in Limbo are once more revealed, as is Dante's inability to see Paradise as it really is or to describe it for us.

In considering "Dante and Islam," one might want to ask how all of this directly addresses the questions often posed about the Italian poet's use of Islamic learning and texts and his general attitude toward Islam. On

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the political front, as I have argued, although it cannot be denied that Dante (like Thomas Aquinas) condemned Muhammad and Ali as schismatic (*Inf.* 28),[51] he did not endorse crusade politics, a papal and mostly French sponsored inner-European policy from 1096 onward. Dante's political focus was on Europe and its multiple corruptions (whether ecclesiastical, political, or social), against which he raged throughout the *Commedia*. Europe's political and religious schisms and their consequences to civic and moral life, not the schisms within Islam, as he understood them, were what brought him near despair.[52]

On Dante's intellectual indebtedness to Islamic learning, I concur with Cerulli and Miguel Asín Palacios and therefore do not doubt that he knew and used Arabic learning and textual resources. (Indeed, since al-Ghazālī's theology is much closer to Dante's than either Averroës' or Avicenna's, even though it lacks the Christian Trinitarian and incarnational element, one might wonder why al-Ghazālī does not appear in the *Commedia*.) However, more productive perhaps in understanding the poet's relationship to this inherited learning, is to highlight the parallelisms between the two geographically and culturally contiguous cultures—they shared the same Greek legacy and often shared the same lands. Discovering how individual authors made use of this legacy during this time of intellectual ferment in the wake of the rediscovery of Aristotle perhaps yields greater understanding than just a recognition that it exists. For example, in Bonaventure's deploying allegory to focus on the spiritual implications of the texts he interprets and Albertus's using allegory to reach the rationalized theological meaning veiled by the visionary surface, we see a parallelism with the rationalizing approach of Avicenna and the spiritualizing approach of al-Ghazālī. The rationalizing approach to knowledge of divine things led to fierce confrontations within Christianity and Islam, respectively, as the inherent danger of heresy or apostasy emerged. It was anxiety about this danger from the recovery of Aristotle that prompted much of al-Ghazālī's and Bonaventure's theological work. This discussion of the approaches to classical learning in the Islamic and Christian cultures of the period provides yet another avenue for understanding what was at stake in the religious and intellectual controversies of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries for both Islam and Christianity. Although Dante may have embraced the philosophic schools when he abandoned Beatrice for Lady Philosophy in the *Convivio*, by the time he was writing *Paradiso* he had

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sharpened the intellectual distinctions between Greek and Arabic philosophy and Christian revelation informed by theology. He allows Beatrice to invalidate the venomous Platonic and Avicennan ideas that the soul returns to its origins and that the stars possess complete power over human behavior. Finally, like al-Ghazālī and other Sufi writers, rather than explaining visionary elements away as in the rationalist approach, Dante shows that metaphoric language, as a kind of incarnational linguistics, is his chosen, and perhaps only, means to integrate philosophy and theology, or reason and faith.

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NOTES

I wish to thank Christian Moevs for his careful reading of this essay. He helped me straighten out theological or philosophical errors, imprecise expression, and other egregious missteps. Any errors that remain are mine alone.

1. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy,* trans. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970–75).
2. Although not within the scope of this essay, examples of Dante's allegorical approaches can be found elaborated in, for example, Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana,* ed. Joseph Martin, CCSL 32 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1962), 1–167; Hugh of Saint-Victor, *De arca Noe morali, PL* 176:617–80, and Hugh of Saint-Victor, *Commentaria in hierarchiam coelestem S. Dionysii Areopagitae, PL* 175:923–1154.
3. For passing observations on citations of Averroës in Bartolomeo da Bologna's *Tractatus de luce,* see Maria Corti, "Dante and Islamic Culture," in this volume, 69–70.
4. See Pierre Mandonnet, *Siger de Brabant et l'averroïsme latin au XIIIme siècle* (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1976); and Fernand van Steenberghen, *Maître Siger de Brabant,* Philosophes médievaux 21 (Louvain: Publications universitaires, 1977).
5. For Dante and the Arabs, the reception of Miguel Asín Palacios through 1965 is covered by Vicente Cantarino, "Dante and Islam," in this volume, 37–55. More recently, María Rosa Menocal, *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), continues these debates, taking up Western censorship of Islamic influence by "Eurocentric" cultural historians; see chapter 5, 115–35. Maria Corti, *Percorsi dell' invenzione: Il linguaggio poetico e Dante* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993) considers the influence of Averroës and Averroism on Dante.
6. For other information on Avicenna and al-Ghazālī in Dante, see Corti, "Dante and Islamic Culture," in this volume, 65.
7. *Convivio,* ed. Cesare Vasoli and Domenico De Robertis, in *Opere minori,* vol. 1, pt. 2 (Milan-Naples: Ricciardi Editore, 1979).
8. As R. W. Southern wrote in *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), for the learned in the Middle Ages, Arabic philosophy was considered "classical learning."
9. Larry Peterman, "Reading the *Convivio,*" *Dante Studies* 103 (1985): 135.
10. For a thorough discussion of Statius's discourse on the origins of the human soul in *Purgatorio* 25, see Howard Needler, "The Birth and Death of the Soul," *Dante Studies* 122 (2004): 71–93.

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11. For a nuanced view of the complex issues at stake in the *Convivio*, see Richard Lansing, "Dante's Intended Audience in the *Convivio*," *Dante Studies* 110 (1992): 17–24.

12. Averroës was known in the Middle Ages as "the commentator" because he wrote commentaries or summaries of all of Aristotle's major works. See Harry Austryn Wolfson et al., eds., *Corpus commentariorum Averrois in Aristotelem*, Publications of the Medieval Academy of America 54 (Cambridge, Mass.: Medieval Academy of America, 1953–56).

13. For Avicenna, for example, and the influence of the stars on human actions, see Peter Heath, *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna (Ibn Sīna) with a Translation of the Book of the Prophet Muhammad's Ascent to Heaven* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 131–32.

14. Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 187.

15. John Freccero, "The Dance of the Stars: *Paradiso* X," *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 221–23.

16. See Anthony Esolen's notes to *Purgatorio* 4 in *Dante: Purgatory* (New York: Random House, 2003). This issue of the status of the soul is critical for Aquinas because "he wishes to avoid having to see the human being as a soul imprisoned in the body, as Plato sometimes suggests it is—for that would contradict the doctrines of the Incarnation of Christ and the resurrection of the body. At the same time, he must avoid seeing, as the Arab philosopher Averroës did, the human soul as so determined by the body that it cannot, as an individual entity, survive death." 421.

17. For a thorough discussion of this issue in Dante, see Giuseppe Mazzotta, "Logic and Power," chapter 5 in his *Dante's Vision and the Circle of Knowledge* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 96–115.

18. For these points I am indebted to Christian Moevs's cogent discussion in "Miraculous Syllogism: Clocks, Faith and Reason in *Paradiso* 10 and 24," *Dante Studies* 117 (1999): 70–72.

19. "Allegory, Time, and Space in the *Mi'raj* and its Commentary Tradition," *Allegorica* 22 (2001): 31–46. The discussion of Avicenna's and al-Ghazālī's commentaries on the *mi'rāj* come from this essay. For other perspectives on Islamic commentaries on the *mi'rāj*, see, in this volume, Vicente Cantarino, "Dante and Islam: History and Analysis of a Controversy," 37–41, and Corti, "Dante and Islamic Culture," 65–67.

20. For Dante's response to this controversy and his expansive synthesizing project, see Mazzotta, *Dante's Vision and the Circle of Knowledge*. For further information on the *falasifa* (though without specific reference to the Sufis), see Gregory B. Stone, "Dante and the *Falasifa*: Religion as Imagination," in this volume, 133–56.

21. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., s.v. "*Mi'rādj*." For an overview of *mi'rāj* and its influence on Islamic culture, see Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), especially "The Prophet's Night Journey and Ascension," 159–75; Étienne Renaud, "Le Récit du *Mi'râj*: Une version arabe de l'ascension du prophète, dans le *Tafsîr* de Tabarî" in *Apocalypses et voyages dans l'au-delà*, ed. Claude Kappler (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1987), 267–90; and Angelo M. Piemontese, "Le voyage de Mahomet au Paradis et en Enfer: Une version persane du *Mi'râj*," in *Apocalypses et voyages*, 293–320.

22. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., s.v. "Al burak." In the *mi'rāj*, Buraq is described as an animal larger than an ass but smaller than a mule, and with a man's face; its hair is pearls, the mane emeralds, and the tail rubies; its feet and hooves were like a camel's, and its color pure light.

23. For the history of the translations in the Latin Middle Ages, see Corti, "Dante and Islamic Culture," in this volume, 65–66. Also, see Reginald White, *The Prophet of Islam in Old French: The Romance of Muhammad (1258) and the Book of Muhammad's Ladder (1264)* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997), 19–25, 78–80. The Latin and French versions of the *mi'rāj* are printed in Cerulli, *Il "Libro della scala" e la questione delle fonti arabo-spagnole della Divina Commedia*, Studi e testi 150 (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1949), 24–247. See also *Le Livre de l'Échelle de Mahomet*, which provides the Latin text with a modern French translation, trans. and ed. Gisèle Besson and Michèle Brossard-Dandré (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1991). E. Blochet, *Les sources orientales de la Divine Comédie*, deals with parallels between the *mi'rāj*, which he traces to Persian origins, and the *Commedia*.

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24. For Riccoldo's history, see Riccoldo of Monte Croce, *I Saraceni: Contra legem Sarracenorum,* ed. Giuseppe Rizzardi, Biblioteca medievale 13 (Florence: Nardini, 1992), 7–24. For Riccoldo, see also Ugo Monneret de Villard, *Il libro della peregrinazione nelle parti d'Oriente di frate Ricoldo da Montecroce* (Rome: ad S. Sabinae, 1948), 84, 104–18. For Dante and Riccoldo, see F. Gabrieli, "Dante e l'Islam," *Cultura e scuola* 13–14 (1965): 194–97, and Thomas Burman, "How an Italian Friar Read His Arabic Qur'an," in this volume, 90. For Santa Maria Novella and Dante, see Charles T. Davis, "The Florentine Studia and Dante's 'Library,'" in *The Divine Comedy and the Encyclopedia of Arts and Sciences,* ed. Giuseppe Di Scipio and Aldo Scaglione (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1988), 339–66.

25. See Riccoldo of Monte Croce, *Pérégrination en Terre Sainte et au Proche Orient,* Latin text and French translation (Paris: H. Champion, 1997); and Riccoldo of Monte Croce, *Viaggio in Terra Santa di fra Ricoldo da Monte di Croce, volgarizzamento del secolo XIV* (Siena: A. Mucci, 1864).

26. Riccoldo, *I Saraceni: Contra legem Sarracenorum,* 7–24. On Riccoldo's activities and writings, see Burman, "How an Italian Friar Read His Arabic Qur'an," in this volume, 93–109.

27. Ibid., the section on the vision, see 149–53; Cerulli, "*Libro della scala,*" 346–57.

28. For a recent discussion of this, see my "Middle Eastern Apocalyptic Traditions in Dante's *La Divina Commedia* and Muhammad's *Mi'raj* or Night Journey," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History* 4, ed. Roger Dahood and Peter E. Medine (New York: AMS Press, 2007), 171–93. For classic earlier studies, see Asín Palacios, *Dante y el Islam*; Asín Palacios, *La escatología musulmana en la Divina Comedia*; Cerulli, "*Libro della scala*"; and Enrico Cerulli, *Nuove ricerche sul Libro della scala e la conoscenza dell'Islam in Occidente* (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1972). On the history of scholarly responses to the relationship between Dante's poem and the Islamic work, see in this volume Cantarino, "Dante and Islam," 45–49, and Corti, "Dante and Islamic Culture," 65–73.

29. On Avicenna's life and intellectual contribution, see Heath, *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna,* 24–27.

30. Ibid., 111.

31. Heath, "The *Mi'raj* Nâma," in *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna,* 123. For further insights into intelligibles as well as Avicenna, see Gregory B. Stone, "Dante and the *Falasifa*: Religion as Imagination," in this volume, 148–50.

32. Ibid., 64.

33. Ismail M. Dahiyat, *Avicenna's Commentary on the Poetics of Aristotle* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), 34, 61–62.

34. Ibid., 42.

35. Ibid. (*Poetics* 26.6), 119.

36. *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings,* ed. Michael A. Sells (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 47.

37. Qassim al-Samarrai, *The Theme of the Ascension in Mystical Writings* (Baghdad: National Printing and Publishing, 1968), 187–88.

38. Al-Ghazālī, *Freedom and Fulfillment: An Annotated Translation of al-Ghazali's al-Munqidh min al-Dalal and Other Relevant Works of al-Ghazali,* trans. Richard Joseph McCarthy (Boston: Twayne, 1980), 89–90.

39. Al-Ghazālī, *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife: Book XL of the Revival of the Religious Sciences,* trans., intro, and notes T. J. Winter (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1989), xvi–xvii.

40. Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers,* trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1997), 218–19.

41. Qassim Al-Samarrai, *The Theme of the Ascension in Mystical Writings* (Baghdad: National Printing and Publishing, 1968), 183–244.

42. *Itinerarium mentis in Deum,* in *Opera omnia* 12, ed. A. C. Peltier (Paris: Vives, 1866–71), 1–24. See also Bonaventure, "The Soul's Journey to God," in *Bonaventure,* trans. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 53–116.

43. Albertus Magnus, "In Apocalypsim B. Joannis Apostoli," in *Opera omnia* 38, ed. Auguste Borgnet and Émile Borgnet (Paris: Vives, 1899), 465–796.

44. For a brief discussion of his commentary style, see my *Power and Prejudice: The Reception of the Gospel of Mark* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), 79–82.

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45. See Bernard F. Huppé and D. W. Robertson Jr., *Fruyt and Chaf: Studies in Chaucer's Allegories* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963); and D. W. Robertson Jr., *Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962).

46. Erich Auerbach, "Figura," *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 70–71.

47. Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1991), 10, 280–321.

48. The genres Jauss identifies include those breaking loose from biblical exegesis, whose purposes tend to be strictly religious didacticism directed at individual reform; transformations of *Physiologus* and the bestiaries, which can be political, moral, and satirical; apocalyptic and other world visions; allegorical epics with a wide range of veiled purposes. See Hans Robert Jauss, "La transformation de la forme allégorique entre 1180 et 1240: D'Alain de Lille à Guillaume de Lorris," in *L'humanisme médiévale dans les littératures romanes du XII au XIV siècle*, ed. Anthime Fourrier (Paris: Klincksieck, 1964), 107–46; Jauss, "Entstehung und Strukturwandel der allegorischen Dichtung," in *La Littérature didactique, allégorique, et satirique* 1, ed. Hans Robert Jauss (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1968), 146–244; and Jauss, "Genèse et structure des genres allégoriques," in *La littérature didactique, allégorique et satirique* 2, ed. Hans Robert Jauss (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1970), 203–280.

49. Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy*, 226–27.

50. For an expansive discussion of Dante's achievement in this regard, see Mazzotta, *Dante's Vision and the Circle of Knowledge.*

51. On Muhammad and Ali as schismatics, see Jan M. Ziolkowski, "Introduction," in this volume, 21–22.

52. On Thomas Aquinas and Muhammad, see *Summa contra Gentiles* in *Opera omnia*, ed. Roberto Busa (Stuttgart: Günther Holzboog, 1980), 2, 1.6.7. See also my *Dante and the Orient* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 55–57.

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