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FOUR KATABATIC JOURNEYS:
AL-MA‘ARRĪ, DANTE, HUGHES AND MASRŪ‘A

BY
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Four Katabatic Journeys:
Al-Ma‘arrī, Dante, Hughes and Maṣrū‘a

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Abstract

The descent into hell (or katabasis) has been a powerful theme in literature anywhere, anytime. What is “hell,” in the first place? Who goes there, and why? What does it look like? And especially, who comes back from “hell” and then feels the need to narrate this descent into the unnamable? Often, the struggle to return (anabasis) and to speak/write about it is more difficult than the descent itself. This thesis contributes to an understanding of the shift in the depiction of the theme of katabasis from medieval literature (Abū al-‘Ala’ al-Ma‘arrī’s Risālat al-Ghufrān and Dante’s Inferno to its modern form (Ted Hughes’s Birthday Letters and George Maṣrū‘a’s Daḥiyatān. This shift demonstrates how psychology rather than theology has come to determine the authors’ concept of “hell.”

Keywords: Katabasis, Modern, Ancient, Hell, Trauma
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Katabasis has always been a major concern in the Western imagination and its offspring were very famous literary works that are still discussed and interpreted nowadays. It can also be detected in ancient Arabic literature, although it did not attain the same prominence as in the West. Dante’s emblematic, descriptive, and symbolic Inferno, has been a major interest of critics for centuries. Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī’s Risālat al-Ghufrān¹ is marked by its philosophical, sophisticated, unique, creative, and brave depiction of al-nār. With the rise of psychological theories, a new form of katabasis was established inviting new means of interpretation, such as trauma literature. This modern form of katabasis can be detected in numerous works, including Ted Hughes’s Birthday Letters (1998) and George Maṣrū’a’s Daḥiyyatān (1943).

As a matter of fact, the resemblance of al-Ma‘arrī’s Risālat al-Ghufrān, to Dante’s Inferno can be perceived in the idea of descending to the underworld (afterlife), the power of imagination, and the creative imagery that is employed in both works. Interpretations and close reading of both works have invited many critics such as M. Palacios and A. ‘Abd Al-Raḥmān to write books explaining their poetic and philosophical significance. Thus, it is noteworthy to point out the religious occurrence and philosophical presence that allowed multiple revisions and studies. In fact, an interesting difference would be how both poets place people in hell: Dante according to traditional Catholic dogma, al-Ma‘arrī according to Islamic doctrines on the surface, yet philosophical in between the lines. Both poets had entirely different intentions and motivations for writing. Dante was inspired by the Catholic belief of hell and punishment and

¹ Often translated as The Epistle of Forgiveness.
wanted to vent his political frustration through this imaginary journey, while al-Ma‘arrī’s was inspired by his religious skepticism. Hence, both works were rich in their vivid imagery, picturesque style, and descriptive details. The power of imagination is present in both works since both of them imagined and described an unknowable place. It is very noteworthy that a scholar such as Miguel Palacios has implied that Dante’s *Divine Comedy* was somehow inspired by the ascent of Muhammad to heaven followed by his descent, what is commonly known as the *isrā’a* and *mi’rāj* in the Islamic world.

While both Dante and al-Ma‘arrī had different intentions for their work, these differences present a unique dichotomy of a religious-political set-up in Dante versus that of a religious-philosophical set-up in al-Ma‘arrī. As all works of literature can have multiple interpretations, so do *Inferno* and *Risālat al-Ghufrān*. However, the interpretations themselves are polysemous in the sense that the surface interpretation presents the authors with a layer of security against religious and political scrutiny, while at the same time providing cover for a deeper, symbolic meaning. This secondary level of interpretation reveals the true identity of the authors, both political and philosophical.

*Risālat al-Ghufrān* represents al-Ma‘arrī’s general codification of philosophical convictions concerning the ideas of doubt, hesitation, uncertainty, and atheism which he phrases as a reply to the famed poet Ibn al-Qāriḥ who asked al-Ma‘arrī for his opinion and perspective. In this work, al-Ma‘arrī takes Ibn al-Qāriḥ on a journey to the Islamic underworld, *al-nār*, mimicking Muḥammad’s *isrā’a* and *mi’rāj*, an idea similar to the katabasis in Greek and Roman literature.
Inferno represents Dante’s allegorical journey through hell, a necessary stage in his total journey through the Catholic in order to ultimately reach his lost love Beatrice in heaven and a mystical understanding of God through recognition and rejection of worldly pleasures and sins. Furthermore, Dante alludes to Florentine politics, which is to be expected since in that city he was persecuted and sent into exile. Where al-Ma’arrī sends a messenger to al-nār, Dante’s persona descends to hell guided by the Roman poet Virgil. By using Virgil as a guide, Dante is able to portray his point of view on matters of religion (such as the fate of the esteemed ancient poets and philosophers) and corruption (such as the fate of current and previous politicians). This representation provides a “contrapasso” or poetic justice for sinners with each type of sin punished in the most appropriate manner, thereby functioning as the fulfillment of a destiny chosen by each soul during his or her life.

As such, while al-Ma’arrī provides a description of hell, Dante’s Inferno provides a precise and well-organized representation of nine levels of hell, each filled with different sins and their unique punishments - providing true poetic justice. What is remarkable about both al-Ma’arrī and Dante is that both employed poetry and poets as means to glorify literature, an element continued in modern representations of katabasis.

The modern avatar of katabasis and its trace in trauma literature is, as Rachel Falconer claims, “hell acquiring two distinctive characteristics…[one is] a permanent, immanent condition (either universal or, for some, particularized). And somewhat conversely, it is temporally or spatially dislocated from the present – a past horror, a future threat or a disaster happening now but elsewhere” (29). As such, Birthday Letters and Daḥīyyatān present the re-establishment of this ancient theme as a continuation of an ancient topos. It is the revival of
memory and poetry in a 20th century envelope. Ted Hughes’s *Birthday Letter* and George Maṣrū’a’s *Daḥīyyatān* revive Orpheus’s *katabasis* and bring to mind Freudian psychoanalytic views of a spiritual descent of the self to retrieve lost emotions and to lament lost love - an element missing from al-Maʿarrī descent. *Birthday Letters* provides a lament by Hughes prompted by the suicide of his wife, the poet Sylvia Plath. This work represents a symbolic descent into his own hell, the Freudian Id, in the form of trauma literature, which can be defined as a literature which embodies or represents a traumatic event – i.e., an overwhelming experience of a sudden or catastrophic event², thereby providing cathartic release to the respective authors.

Where Freudian psychoanalysis studied a model of traumatic subjectivity, trauma theory developed into a means to interpret literary works “focusing on psychological, philosophical, ethical and aesthetic questions about the nature and representation of traumatic events” (497).³ *Birthday Letters* is a set of companion poems, in conversation and argument with Plath as a fellow poet of grief and as the irretrievable wife, Eurydice, to Hughes’s Orpheus. Interestingly, Hughes uses poetry as a means to help him overcome the feeling of guilt he had for his wife’s suicide. However, poetry is also present as a means of immortality. On the other hand, Maṣrū’a tries to deal with another kind of loss: the outcome of sectarian differences in a society that relies greatly on religion. Trauma literature is evident in the way the protagonist laments over the deprivation of his beloved and his escape to isolate himself from society where he writes his musings. It is another spiritual and symbolic descent to the self to retrieve lost love. Maṣrū’a’s *Daḥīyyatān* and Hughes’s *Birthday Letters* both provide a uniquely symbolic descent into hell in the sense that the hell is not a defined place as in Virgil, Dante, and al-Maʿarrī; instead their hell

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is their “self” - a hell of their own creation and occupied only by them in a continuing reminder of what they had lost.

In fact, Freudian psychoanalysis provides a keen scope of observation into the makings of the modern form of katabasis. This Freudian katabatic element is traced in the comparison between the unconscious mind and the Tartarus – a region in hell (Hillman 17). Indeed, Freud’s descriptions of the cracks through which the id escapes into consciousness is easily compared to the Classical Heroes descent into hell and eventual escape (Falconer 111 n6). As such, the transition of the motif of katabasis from its classical to its modern form is noticeable in the descent of Khālid into what can only be described as a form of mental illness, a clear embodiment of Freud’s conception of the human psyche (Falconer 119).

In chapter 1, I will examine the general concept of katabasis, its development through history and its importance in literary history. I will also examine the image of hell in ancient, Christian, and Islamic eras. Chapter 2 will cross-examine Dante’s Inferno in contrast to al-Ma‘arrī’s Risālat al-Ghufrān, while in chapter 3, I will read Ted Hughes’s Birthday Letters and Maṣrū‘a’s Daḥīyyatān in a katabatic framework.
CHAPTER TWO

HELL AND THE MOTIF OF KATABASIS IN ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS

Hell, the eternal place of damnation and suffering has always been a rich playground for writers and poets, especially in the ancient world. The very idea of hell causes one to imagine an extremely unpleasant place or situation to the point that the word has entered many languages in the form of idioms and metaphors to explain the extreme distaste of that place or situation, with phrases such as “all hell broke loose” and “come hell or high water”. It is the “absolutely horrific experience from which no one emerges unchanged” (Falconer 1). As such, poets and writers have used it as a setting for many works, primarily highlighted in epic literature with the motif of katabasis – the descent into the underworld becoming a staple feature of this genre of literature. Katabasis is found throughout ancient literatures and literary traditions, with each culture encompassing the previous one’s conceptions and beliefs, thereby developing both the idea of hell and the descent into hell into its modern form.

2.1 Hell

The understanding or defining of the term “hell” can be easily referred to as a place of everlasting torture or punishment in an afterlife. Ancient civilizations and the Judaic, Christian, and Islamic religions have studied this mysterious world from different angles. It is essential to highlight how each civilization and faith perceived the secrets of this unforgivable place through its literary works as it provides tentative insight into the realm behind the veil. The modern English word “hell” is derived from the Old English *hel, helhe*, reaching into the Anglo-Saxon pagan period, and ultimately from Proto-Germanic *halja*, meaning “one who covers up or hides something” (Barnhart 348). Alan Bernstein provides an interesting mechanism for understanding hell, it is “a divinely sanctioned place of torment for the wicked...because God (or, the Gods)
who established it could have refrained from creating it and could…demolish it” (3). The prevailing idea of hell nowadays, is a place of permanent and everlasting torture – whether physical or psychological. I will try to answer some questions that might be of concern to those who seek to such as: Is hell an intermediary period between reincarnations, as thought in Ancient Egypt? Is it merely an underworld where all souls except the predestined and the elected eventually wind up, as believed in the Greco-Roman tradition? Or, as mostly thought nowadays, is it only an abstract state of loss rather than a literally agonizing and torturing underground? To understand the idea of hell and of life after death, we have to trace its etymology diachronically with the evolution of human thinking, philosophy and religion.

The development of the concept of hell from ancient civilization to modern monotheistic religions occurred as a result of the interaction of civilizations and religions. In *The Formation of Hell*, Alan Bernstein traces the concept of hell to the Egyptians of the Middle Kingdom who were influenced by Mesopotamian understanding of neutral death⁴, and who developed this idea to reach a second concept of moral death⁵. Later, ancient Greeks created their own understanding of hell known as Hades. The concepts of neutral and moral death later inspired the Judeo-Christian conception of the afterlife.

In Judaism, the concept of hell did not exist; however, the concept of afterlife was present as evidenced in the Book of Daniel: “many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt”⁶ (12:2). This means that a distinction is created between the dead who shall awake: those who will enjoy an immortal bliss and those will endure shame and contempt. Although a specific doctrine of the afterlife is

⁴ The idea of neutral death incorporates death as a half-life without either reward or punishment (Bernstein 3).
⁵ The dead are judged by specific standard in a reward/punishment dichotomy (Bernstein 3).
⁶ The emphasis is my own.
not traced in Judaism, a mystical tradition of describing *Gehenna* is found. A distinction here should be drawn between *Gehenna* and hell, for the former, in early times, is referred to as a grave and in later times, a purgatory of sorts where one is judged according to one’s deeds. It is like an entryway for every single soul, regardless of that soul’s actions in life. The Christian doctrine of hell is derived from the New Testament and it uses the Greek words Tartarus, Hades, or the Hebrew word Gehenna. However, each of these terms has a different meaning. Hades is similar to the term used in the Old Testament, Sheol, which is understood as the place of the dead where both the righteous and the wicked end up eventually. Gehenna is used in two different ways: the first one refers to the “Valley of Hinnon” which was a dump outside of Jerusalem where garbage was burnt beside the bodies of the sinful, and the second one is from the New Testament where it is used as the final place of punishment for the wicked after the resurrection. Indeed, Tartarus occurs in The Bible as the place of incarceration of 200 fallen angels, “they shall be led off to the abyss of fire: and to the torment and the prison in which they shall be confined forever” (*The Book of Enoch*).

It is noteworthy to mention that the Roman Catholic Church defines hell as “a state of definitive self-exclusion from the communion with God and the blessed” (John Paul II, 2009). One finds oneself in hell as the result of dying in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God’s merciful love, becoming eternally separated from Him by one’s own free choice immediately after death. It is understood as the final destiny for those who were found unworthy after the universal resurrection and last judgment, where they are to be punished and

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8 Ibid. Pg. 414.
9 Catechism of Catholic Church, articles 1033, 1035: [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p123a12.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p123a12.htm).
permanently separated from God. In fact, the Bible does not clearly divide hell into levels unlike later Muslim doctrine, but clearly mentions various degrees of punishment. For example,

Truly I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Day of Judgment than for that city.

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation.

These verses indicate levels of punishment depending on the severity of the sin committed. The same idea can be found in John 19:11: “therefore he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin”.

In contrast to the previously mentioned beliefs concerning hell or Hades, Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that the soul ceases to exist when the person dies, so hell is a state of non-existence. Others believe that all human souls, including demons and fallen angels, will eventually be reconciled with God and admitted to heaven.

Jahannam is a term for hell used by Islam and is related to the Hebrew word gehinnom. Hell in Islam does not only exist but is literally described in the Islamic Holy Book, Quran; it is contrasted to Paradise or Janna, which is reserved for righteous believers. In Islam, a clear definition of the levels of hell becomes apparent. While the Quran includes similar references to greater punishment for some as seen in the following verse, it alludes to a specific level rather than an indication of greater or lesser punishment, “the Hypocrites will be in the lowest depths of the Fire” (Quran 4:145). Muslim scholars identified hell and its levels according to the deeds of

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11 Matthew 10:15, the emphasis of “more” is my own.
13 The emphasis of “greater” is my own.
14 What Does the Bible Really Teach? Published by Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 2005.
Muslims in this life. Actually, scholars have discussed the seven layers of hell as follows:

*Hāwiya*, translated as chasm or abyss, where the hypocrites are placed such as Pharaoh and his associates. *Jaḥīm*, i.e., fire, is the layer above *Hāwiya*, which includes the polytheists, and *Saqar*, a place of intense heat, is a place for atheists. This layer is located above *Jaḥīm*. The fourth layer, *Nātī*, lies above *saqar* and is reserved for Iblīs, i.e., Satan, and his associates. The Jews will be placed in the fifth layer, *Hatma*, which contains broken pieces of debris, while the Christians lie in the *Saah. Jahannam* is the seventh and the uppermost layer, which is meant for Muslim sinners.

From an Eastern perspective, Buddha gives extensive and vivid details about hell, which he calls *Naraka* or *Niraya*. Although these terms are the translation of hell or “hell realms” in the English language, the role of *Naraka* differs from that of hell in Abrahamic religions in two aspects: people are not sent to *Naraka* as a result of a divine judgment and punishment, and the period of one’s punishment there is not eternal, although it might be very long (Thakur 53).

More interesting than the images of hell themselves is the idea of a living soul descending to hell for some kind of purpose in a journey called katabasis.

### 2.2 The Motif of Katabasis in Epic Literature

Katabasis or catabasis is derived from the Greek root *kata meaning “down”*. It has more than one meaning: it can be the descent of some type, such as moving downhill or the sinking of the wind or sun, a military retreat, or a trip from the interior of a country down to the coast. However, I am concerned with its definition as the descent to the underworld, as seen in epic literature. In a classical epic, the hero inevitably goes through a journey to the underworld to retrieve something or someone he has lost. It takes place in a supernatural underworld, such as

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16 Merriam-Webster.
hell, or Hades, or Nekyia. The legendary Sumerian, Akkadian, Greek and Roman heroes who made such journeys include Gilgamesh, Orpheus, Theseus, Hercules, Odysseus, and Aeneas.

The idea of katabasis continued to exist during Christianity where it was linked to the descent of Christ into hell and his resurrection (anabasis). Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno*, along with John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, is no doubt one of the most influential katabatic epics in Western tradition.

The idea of katabasis in Islamic culture or literature is not so easily traced. In fact, we can refer to some pockets of Islamic katabatic thought since the idea of ascending (anabasis) and descending to the underworld (katabasis) was mentioned briefly in the Quran (17:1), and a *ḥadith* noting the *isrā‘a* and *mi‘rāj* of the Prophet Muḥammad. Another trace of katabasis in Islamic tradition that cannot be neglected is the *Risālat al-Ghufrān* by the blind Syrian writer, poet and philosopher ‘Abū al-‘Alā‘ al-Ma‘arrī, who takes his readers into an imaginary world where both the motifs of katabasis and Anabasis are revealed. Furthermore, another Islamized version of the descent to the underworld is found in the famous framed stories of *A Thousand and One Nights* (Fudge 1).

The motif of journeys of descent to the underworld has been granted its due in comparative mythology with attempts to highlight common themes and characteristics as scholars used the relationships between these myths to trace the development of religions and cultures. The motif of katabasis is found in a vast number of ancient literary works where the

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17 A *ḥadith* is a a saying or an act or tacit approval or disapproval ascribed either validly or invalidly to the Islamic prophet Muḥammad.

18 The *isrā‘a* and *mi‘rāj* journey of Muḥammad is believed by some scholars to have inspired Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

19 His name is Abū al-‘Alā‘ al-‘Alā‘īn son of ‘Abd Allah Ibn Sulaymān al-Tanukhī al-‘Arā‘īn, and he was given the nickname al-Ma‘arrī as a reference to his birth place, *Ma‘arrat al-Nu‘mān* near Aleppo, Syria. He was born in 336 (937 AD) and died in 449 (1057 AD). He was a blind poet known for his sophisticated language and style. For more information, refer to chapter 3, section 3.2 “Abū al-‘Alā‘ al-Ma‘arrī.”

20 This is discussed in Chapter 3.
topic of judgment is at hand. Who goes to the underworld and why? Indeed, these questions apparently cannot be answered unless in the context of religion. The supremacy of the epics and myths lies in their power of inventing a world beyond the conception and judging human beings according to deeds committed during their lives. However, it is essential here to state that each faith or religion understood sins according to its own criteria. As such, what might be a sin in one tradition or religion may not be one in another.

In the religious life of ancient Egypt, the idea of life after death was paramount. Scholarly interpretations of drawings of the judgments rendered by Osiris\textsuperscript{21} engraved on the walls of the tombs of the Pharaohs try to decipher the real meaning of this art and relate it to this ancient culture. Ancient Egyptians believed that in order to enjoy everlasting life after death, the deceased needs the Ka and Ba where the former stands for the soul and the latter for the physical part left behind.\textsuperscript{22} In fact, religion and the metaphysical world were given great attention the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom and the Last Kingdom. Osiris was considered a merciful judge of the dead in the afterlife as well as the underworld agency that granted life (Budge 259). He was described as the “Lord of Love” and the “Lord of Silence” (Wilson 302). After his death, the Pharaoh must embark on an amazing journey to attain his ultimate goal of becoming one with the sun god Ra. The underworld is depicted through the jury that took place under the known earth where the goddess of Truth, Maat, would make a verdict where the Pharaoh or later the person would be either convicted or relieved and blessed with eternal merging with Ra. As such, the idea of immortality is a fundamental reason for the visit or descent to the underworld. Seekers of eternal existence would strive to gain immortality even after physical demolition of the body.

\textsuperscript{21} Osiris was as the ancient Egyptian god identified with afterlife, the underworld, and the dead.
\textsuperscript{22} A good reference to study the Ancient Egyptian religion would be The Book of the Dead and the myth of the Egyptian god Osiris.
The brilliant foundation of such a virtual, even if not intended, journey signifies ancient Egyptian mythology and ancient cultures, for their creation of the rituals that helped them to accept death as an open gate for good souls and a place of punishment for wicked souls and sinners.

The average ancient Egyptians of the Old Kingdom would hold that wrongdoers were judged according to their confessions as presented in the *Book of the Dead* (Budge 38). These confessions were connected to the Maat who was considered the goddess of Harmony, Justice, and Truth (Budge 416). The Middle Kingdom introduced a democratization of religion (David 158). After death, a person was expected to face judgment by a tribunal of forty-two divine judges. If a person had led a life in conformance with the precepts of the goddess Maat, he would live eternally, whereas if found guilty, the person would be thrown to a “devourer” and consequently would not share in eternal life (David 158). The sinner was subjected to severe punishment and then annihilated. In fact, it has been said that these depictions of punishment may have influenced medieval Western perceptions of the hell, and inferno, via early Christian and Coptic texts (Van Dijk 161). Those who were found to be righteous believers, were given the privilege of conquering evil and the ability of rebirth, while the doomed ones incurred utter annihilation—but without a suggestion of eternal torture, however (Griffiths 233).

In Greek culture, katabasis can be traced through the epic heroes who underwent these journeys to the underworld for various reasons. The literature around the theme of katabasis provided the ancient Greeks with a means of understanding the concepts of death and afterlife in via the descent to the underworld. The Romans also had their own way of dealing with life and death along with the motif of katabasis. After the Romans defeated the Greeks, they absorbed the Greek gods into their own pantheon and changed their names, for example, the Greek god Zeus became the Roman god Jupiter, and the Greek goddess Hera became the Roman Juno and so on.
The Ancient Greek and Roman cultures were rich in mythological characters who made visits to the underworld. Robert Garland, among others, described Hades as being either at the outer bounds of the Ocean or beneath the depth or ends of earth (49). Robin Hard states that the place of Hades was considered to be somewhere far underground, although some Greeks were inclined to place the abode of the dead in the far west (22). In fact, this place was inimical to all life and was hated by both gods and men. Yet, it was commonly believed that if the funeral rituals were not properly performed a worse fate would ensue: the spirit would not be able to reach the dreaded underworld, take the shape of a ghost and haunt the upper world. Hades, the brother of Zeus and Poseidon, was the Greek god of the underworld, the Kingdom of Death. He was like a jailor who kept the souls in his dark kingdom, not allowing them to escape to the light of sun. Hades’ realm contained a section with actual punishment strategies called Tartaros, which was reserved for those who had gravely offended the gods or for those wicked people from previous beliefs who had been singled out for torment and correction in the afterlife (Hard 107).

In this section of Chapter 2, I am strictly concerned with the heroes of the Greek myths who visited Hades while they were still alive, such as Hercules, Theseus, and Orpheus. We cannot ignore Odysseus’s journey in the Odyssey in which he visits the underworld, an upper level of hell. The myth of the demigod Hercules has tragic, heroic, and human aspects. His katabasis was aimed at stealing Cerberus, the three-headed, serpent-tailed dog of Hades, and bring it to the world of the living to his taskmaster King Eurystheus as well as to rescue Alcestis, the noble wife of King Admetus who had sacrificed herself for the survival of her husband. Hercules underwent the descent into hell as part of his penance for his madness and the unacceptable murder of his six sons. Later, when he regained his sanity, he regretted this horrible
action and asked for repentance. The gods asked him to perform twelve labors for Eurystheus\textsuperscript{23}, the god of Tiryns, so that he would earn immortality and be relieved from the agony of his guilt.

Walter Burkert interprets Hercules as an influential and spiritual force because he is the prototype of the ruler who by virtue of his divine right to decree acts for the good of mankind and finds his place or position among the gods. He is the model for the common man “who may hope that after a life of drudgery, and through that very life, he may too enter into the company of the gods” (211).

Odysseus was a legendary Greek king of Ithaka and the protagonist of Homer’s epic poem \textit{The Odyssey}, which begins in medias res in the tenth year of the wanderings of Odysseus as punishment for insulting Poseidon, the god of the Sea. Previously, Odysseus had played an important role in Homer’s epic \textit{The Iliad}, given his instrumental idea of the Trojan horse. Odysseus’s original, ostensible reason for visiting the underworld in Book 11 of the \textit{Odyssey}, a task imposed on him by the minor witch and goddess of magic Circe, was to gain information from Teiresias, the dead seer, on how to reach Ithaka. Michael Grant introduces Odysseus as an “amazingly resourceful, yet recklessly ferocious character who has battled with various storms of life and won” (77). Odysseus was afraid at the beginning but eventually submitted to this demand. Actually, this underworld is not actually described as being under the earth, but rather as a place where the light of Helios never shines. To accomplish his mission successfully, Odysseus had to follow Circe’s advice and warnings to make the appropriate animal sacrifices, pour out votive offerings of milk, wine and water, and fend off the shades of the other dead until

\textsuperscript{23} The twelve labors of Heracles were to Slay the Nemean Lion, Slay the nine-headed Lernaean Hydra, Capture the Golden Hind of Artemis, Capture the Erymanthian Boar, Clean the Augean stables in a single day, Slay the stymphalian Birds, Capture the Cretan Bull, Steal the Mares of Diomedes, Obtain the girdle of Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, Obtain cattle of the monster Geryon, Steal the apples of the Hesperides, Capture and bring back Cerberus.
Teiresias appeared. Then Odysseus offered the blood that would allow the ghosts to speak and listened to their advice on homecoming and on appeasing the gods. Among the shades he saw in Hades was his mother’s; after he gave her the blood, she told him that his wife, Penelope, was still waiting for him. He tried to hold his mother but failed; she explained that since the bodies of the dead are burned to ashes, the shades become substantial shadows. After that, he proceeds to fulfill the aim of his visit to the Underworld and rather unexpectedly he leaves this somber deadly world in a hurry, fearful of meeting the dreaded petrifying Gorgon. In fact, Odysseus never enters Hades properly and thus does not effectively enter either a katabasis or an anabasis; he stays on the edge and performs a shamanistic ritual of conjuring up spirits which come to him rather than he going out for them on their own territory. This motif in ancient literature is known as *nekyia*, and its modern equivalent is known as the séance.

Orpheus is one of the most renowned mythological characters; he journeyed to Hades to rescue his wife Eurydice after she was killed by a poisonous snake’s bite. According to Burkert, the *Derveni Papyrus* now might prove that at least in the fifth century a theogonic-cosmogonic poem of Orpheus was in existence (296), although these Orphic poems are now generally considered medieval forgeries. I will briefly summarize the version of the Orpheus story by the poet Virgil in his *Georgics*, Book IV. When the bees of the shepherd Aristaeus died of hunger, he became angry and asked his mother, Seline, a minor sea goddess, for help. To remedy his misfortunes and as a result of his anger towards Orpheus, Aristaeus decided to expiate a grave offence. Aristaeus had chased Orpheus’ fiancée, Eurydice, along a riverbank on the day of her wedding where she suffered the fatal snakebite and died. Orpheus was devastated by this tragedy and was ready to do anything to regain his beloved. His music would soften all hearts, even that of Pluto/Hades, the god of the underworld and Persephone, his half-mortal wife. The Furies and
the three-mouthed Hell-Hound Cerberus were lulled and even Ixion’s wheel ceased to turn.

Pluto/Hades and Persephone promised Orpheus that he could regain his beloved, but on condition that he should not look behind him until they were both safe in the world of living. Unfortunately, the excitement of the fact he could be united one more time with his dead beloved blinded his thoughts, and he forgot the condition. Before both of them reached the living world of sunlight, Orpheus looked back. At this moment, she says,

‘Orpheus,’ she cried, ‘we are ruined, you and I!
What utter madness is this? See, once again
The cruel Fates are calling me back and darkness
Falls on my swimming eyes. Goodbye forever.
I am borne away wrapped in an endless night,
Stretching to you, no longer yours, these hands,
These helpless hands,’” She finished, and suddenly
Out of his sight, like smoke into thin air.24

As a result, all his labor was wasted. For seven months, Orpheus wept as he roamed the northern snows of Thrace and as a punishment for his neglect of them, and all other women, the orgiastic Maenads (Bacchantes) tore him apart and threw his head nailed to his lyre in the river Hebrus. The head still called out “Eurydice” and the riverbanks echoed her name. Other versions of the myth add that Orpheus’ head-on-the-lyre, still singing, reached the island of Lesbos, and there inspired the renowned antique poetess Sappho to found her school of poetry. In his dialogue Symposium, Plato condemned Orpheus for being a bad singer and a moral coward.

Virgil deals with another katabatic journey in Book VI of the Aeneid; the purpose in this epic is the quest for a new home, somewhere in Italy, by Aeneas and his group of defeated Trojans,

By night, by day, the portals of dark Dis
Stand open: it is easy, the descending
Down to Avernus. But to climb again,

24 Virgil, The Georgics IV, 141
To trace the footsteps back to the air above,
There lies the task, the toil. A few, beloved
By Jupiter, descended from the gods,
A few, in whom exalting virtue burned,
Have been permitted²⁵

Aeneas’ reason for the katabasis is to meet his recently deceased father Anchises, who is supposed to give him advice on the rest of his difficult journey and, especially, a pep-talk by revealing to him the glorious future of the Empire that he will found. These are the words of the Sibyl of Cumae; she tells Aeneas that his descent to the underworld might be managed easily, but his anabasis will be hard. He begs her for admission to the Underworld so that he can meet his father Anchises and take his advice (Grant 328). Burying the body of his faithful crewman Misenus, Aeneas plucks the Golden Bough, the needed talisman, as he had been told by the Sibyl who descended with him into an opening of the earth beside Lake Avernus (close to Virgil’s birthplace, in reality). When they crossed the stream, they started to hear the loud wailing of those who had died in infancy. Also, they passed by the ghosts of men who had been condemned on a false accusation, and others who had killed themselves, among which his previous beloved Dido, who had committed suicide because of Aeneas had abandoned her in Book IV of the epic. After passing through different sections where dead souls are tortured, Aeneas meets the spirit of his father. Anchises reveals to his son the workings of the universe and the purifications through which men could be admitted to Elysium. So, he assures his son about the nearby river Lethe, the river of forgetfulness, on the other side of which multitudes of spirits are waiting to be born on Earth; these include Aeneas’ future descendants and those who would later construct and inhabit the future Roman Empire, such as Romulus, Camillus, Fabillus, and the Caesars. After he gives his son this prophecy about the greatness of the Roman Empire to come, the Roman way of life,

and its mission in the world, he leads him to the ivory gate, one of the two gates of “Sleep”, by which they return to Earth (Clarke 48).

The idea of katabasis was also present in Mesopotamia where we can find a number of epics that dealt with this topic such as the Myths of Dumuzi and Innana; in Babylonian culture, there exists the Descent of Ishtar into the Nether World; and Akkadian culture produced the Epic of Gilgamesh, one of the earliest surviving works of literature. The origin of this epic is to be found in five independent Sumerian poems that were combined later in the Akkadian period. This epic was first discovered by Hormuzed Rassam, a native Assyrian Assyriologist, in 1853 and was translated by a number of writers and novelists. The most definitive translation is the two-volume critical edition by Andrew R. George whose translation was published by Penguin. Several revised versions based on new discoveries have been published, but the epic remains incomplete. The aim of the katabasis in this epic is the quest for immortality. Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, was two-thirds god and one-third man. In the beginning of his kingship, he was a cruel man who raped women and satisfied his selfish interests. The gods heard stories about Gilgamesh and wanted to keep him in check, so they created the wild man named Enkidu who became a close friend to Gilgamesh. Among the many adventures of Gilgamesh and Enkidu is a trip to steal sacred cedar trees from a distant cedar forest which was forbidden to mortals and as a result, with the help of the sun God Shammas they killed its Guard, Humbaba. Ishtar, the goddess of love, had previously been angered by Gilgamesh’s refusal for her love. When she heard of Gilgamesh’s actions, she became vindictive and asked her father Anu, the god of the sky, to send the Bull of heaven to punish him. Gilgamesh and Enkidu killed the Bull of heaven, so the gods met in a council and decided that they should get rid of Enkidu. Indeed, a new phase of tragedy, sadness, and misery changed the life of Gilgamesh in that his request for immortality
became his primary concern. He made many journeys among which one was guided by Urshanabi who took Gilgamesh on the boat journey across the sea and through the Waters of Death to Utnapishtim. After his conversation with Utnapishtim, Gilgamesh insisted on finding any means that would give him immortality. Utnapishtim told him about the plant of life, but after he had passed through many miseries to find the plant, a serpent stole it and ate it.

Gilgamesh returned to Uruk emptyhanded but reconciled at last with his mortality. This katabatic journey to the Underworld is in a way different from the previously mentioned epics in its target and aim. Instead of descending to hell to regain a beloved or a precious lost person or even to gain knowledge, Gilgamesh selfishly descends to secure his everlasting immortality, a concept that is uncommon in the Greek, Roman, or later Christian epics, all of which have some element of selflessness attached to the idea of katabasis.26

In terms of modern katabasis, the events of the two World Wars resulted in the transformation of the idea of descending into hell into its modern understanding. In the early twentieth century, the entire world was thrown into an international, devastating war: World War I. In fact, at the height of the war more than 70 million people were mobilized in what was the grandest war to date. With the devastation that followed, literature and psychoanalysis flourished to catch up with the events and people’s perceptions of the events that took place. The greater injury to people’s psyche, however, came from the horrific events of the World War II and the Holocaust. In fact, the modern forms of katabasis present an image of hell that is intertwined in “modern secular thinking as in modern literature” (Falconer 28). During these traumatic events, the people and the literature that represents them was fraught with the uncertain and, indeed,

26 Orpheus, however, has been negatively interpreted by some such as Plato, Ovid, and later commentators, for not being truly interested in retrieving Eurydice, but rather for mainly wanting to showcase his virtuosity on the harp to a new audience, i.e. the rulers and inhabitants of Hades.
hellish nature of the war. One such example of the traumatic literature produced during this era is *The Diary of a Young Girl*, written by thirteen-year-old Anne Frank while she was in hiding in Amsterdam from the Nazis over a period of two years.

As a matter of fact, the events of WWII were hellish to the extent that the century it occurred in was dubbed “an infernal century” (Falconer 29). Many katabatic narratives were published in the immediate aftermath of the WWII including works such as *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison and the re-imagined version of *Doctor Faustus* by Thomas Mann (both published in 1947). It is arguable that these narratives of descent were a direct result of the events of WWII and the Holocaust, representing a twentieth century view of hell (Ibid.).

### 2.3 Concluding Remarks

By and large, the motif of katabasis was a popular one in ancient times and many believed that volcanoes, pitch-black caverns twisting beneath jungles, and fiery lakes were entryways to the dimension of hell, such as the Boca do Inferno, or Mouth of Hell\(^{27}\). The katabasis in the epics serve as connecting bridge between the worlds of the living and the dead to establish a connection between the past and the present. The heroes descending into the underworld go there to repent the sins they committed in the past and to retrieve what they lost to create a better present for themselves and their loved ones. The theme of katabasis travelled to the Christian and Islamic traditions through the translations of the classics resulting in the blend of classical and religious inheritances.

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CHAPTER THREE
KATABASIS IN DANTE’S INFERNO AND AL-MA’ARRI’S RISALAT AL-GHUFRAN

The katabatic motif in epic poetry was projected in different ways in the Christian West and the Islamic East. The definition and elements of the Western epic, namely as a lengthy narrative poem basically concerning a serious subject containing details of heroic deeds and events significant to a culture or nation, differ from that of the Arabic epic poem (Meyer 212). The word epic is derived from the Ancient Greek adjective epikos or epos, meaning “word, story, or poem.” Harmon and Holman identified ten major elements of Western epic poetry as follows: it begins in medias res; its setting is vast; engulfing many nations, the world or the universe. An epic always starts with an invocation to a muse, a statement of the theme, including the use of epithets, long lists, features and long, formal speeches, which shows divine intervention in human affairs. An epic also typically involves heroes who embody the values of civilization, and these heroes often descend into the Underworld or hell. Therefore, the hero participates in a cyclical journey, faces adversaries who try to defeat him in his journey and returns home significantly transformed by his journey.

Arabic epic poetry as characterized by Abū Zayd al-Qurashī in his book Jamharat al-‘Arab includes poets such as al-Farazdaq, Jarīr, al-Akhtal, ‘Ubayd al-Rā’ai, Dhū al-Rimma, al-Kumayt, and al-Tirimmāh. A typical Arabic epic poem deals with topics about heroes and depends on imagination and exaggerations; it is a very long work of art that discusses heroic actions with supernatural elements. However, the element of katabasis is not found to be a major component of epic construction, unlike in Western epic literature. As far as my thesis is concerned, the grounds of comparing katabasis in Dante’s Inferno and al-Ma’arrī’s Risālat al-Ghufrān are not be based on the genre of epic literature, but rather on the idea of descent to the
Underworld and the approach that each poet used to present his stylistic, religious, philosophical, and personal beliefs and convictions.

3.1 Dante Alighieri

Dante Alighieri was an Italian statesman, poet, and language theorist. He was born in Florence and the exact date of his birth is not confirmed, yet it is believed to be sometime in late May or early June of the year 1265. He died in Ravenna in 1321. He was the major Italian poet of the High Middle Ages. In fact, it is clear from Dante’s writing that he received a careful education, although not much of it is known. It is suggested that he might have attended the Franciscan lower schools, and later the schools of philosophy (Musa, Introduction 17). He came from a modest social family standing, but his writings show that he was familiar with the ways of the country as well as city life. It is also believed that he studied for a time under the supervision of the distinguished teacher, scholar, and statesman Brunetto Latini who was the author of an encyclopedia in French, The Tresor. Dante was married to Gemma Donati, a gentlewoman who was never mentioned in his literary works. He had two sons, Pietro and Jacope, and one daughter, Antonia. His friend Guido Cavalcanti, a wealthy aristocratic poet, encouraged him to develop his poetic skills and distinguish himself from other writers. Although both poets shared their interests in the topic of love, each one handled this topic according to specific interest. Guido was more concerned with natural philosophy and the psychology of love, while Dante favored the study of theology and Latin poetic models. Dante was mostly influenced to study Virgil, whom he later chose to guide Dante ‘the Pilgrim’ in inferno and purgatory (Musa, Introduction 19). In fact, another major influence on his life and work was his exile from his

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28Brunetto Latini wrote his Italian Tesoretto and in French his prose Li Livres douTresor, both summaries of the encyclopedic knowledge of the day.
beloved Florence due to political differences with the powerful Black Guelph family and his opposition to the Church of Rome at that time.

As for his noteworthy works of literature, the most elegant and mysterious early work was the *Vita Nuova*\(^{29}\) in which he gathered all the poems he had written to the love of his life, Beatrice. She is portrayed in his poem as a lady and a model of virtue and courtesy and he goes farther to speak of her as a “miraculous gift given to earth by God to enoble and enrich all those who were able to appreciate her superior qualities” (Musa, *Introduction* 20). As such, his great affection and at the same time lamentation for the early death of Beatrice urged him to produce the *Vita Nuova*, which Musa claims was the introduction to the *Divine Comedy*, the crown jewel of Dante’s literary works. *Convivio, Monarchia*, and *De vulgari Eloquentia* are other remarkable works by Dante that dealt with various topics such as political philosophy, religion, and love.

### 3.1.1 The Divine Comedy

The *Divine Comedy*, in Italian: *Divina Commedia*, is an epic poem written between c.1308 and the author’s death in 1321, and it is considered by many scholars and critics as one of the supreme works of world literature\(^ {30}\). It is divided into three parts: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. In fact, the work’s title originally was *Commedia* but the qualification “divina” was later added by Giovanni Boccaccio (Musa, *Introduction* 43). It is composed of 100 cantos or ‘songs’ as such: 1 for a general introduction, 33 for the *Inferno*, 33 for *Purgatory*, and 33 for Paradise with the length of each cantica set at three\(^ {31}\). This epic is written in the first person and describes Dante’s visit through the three realms of the dead. The beginning situation takes place

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\(^{29}\) Translated as ‘New Life.’

\(^{30}\) Refer to: *Encyclopedia Americana*, vol. 30, 2006. Pg. 605.

\(^{31}\) Others considered that the first two cantos serve as a unitary prologue to the entire epic (Hollander 43).
in the night of Thursday, April 7, 1300, when Dante is at the age of 35\textsuperscript{32} and continues throughout Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday. The significant point that is going to be discussed later in this chapter is Dante’s choice of guides: Virgil, the Roman poet in hell and Purgatory, and Beatrice, and later Saint Bernard, in heaven. Indeed, this journey was understood to be a symbol of one man’s journey to God as seen in how Dante chose to end the last canto in Paradise,

\begin{quote}
But as a wheel in perfect balance turns
I felt, my will and my desire impelled
By the love that moves the sun and the other stars (Musa, \textit{Introduction} 44)
\end{quote}

Interestingly, the final word of each section of the epic is ‘stars:’ our, and Dante’s, ultimate destination. The main action of this journey is to be one with the Universal Will. Dante exemplifies all human beings; “Dante the pilgrim becomes Everyman, who is the reader” (Musa, \textit{Introduction} 44). \textit{The Divine Comedy}, as a great poetic work of literature, hides in its lines a spiritual message of great importance and significance, which resembles the poet’s deep theological beliefs and social doctrines. Indeed, Dante appears as a great writer, poet, philosopher, thinker, scientist, lover, and theologian. His work also has the typical high-Medieval impact of the encyclopaedic mind, for example in his great range of similes. Dante himself indicated in his “Letter” to Can Grande Della Scala that he expected his text to be read as a ‘polysemous’ work on at least four different levels: the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical\textsuperscript{33}. This four-fold system of interpretation was, in fact, the standard European way of thinking, promoted by Thomas Aquinas in the High Middle Ages. Besides Virgil, Thomas Aquinas was one of Dante’s great role models, together with the 6\textsuperscript{th} century late Roman

\textsuperscript{32} Halfway the biblical allotted span of threescore and ten (i.e., seventy).
\textsuperscript{33} The letter of the text; the truth hidden beneath the fiction; the hidden moral and spiritual messages; and the purely spiritual, also related to matters of the afterlife respectively.
Boethius, the Arab medicinal scientist Avicenna, and the Arab philosopher-mathematician Averroes.

3.2 Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī

Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī, son of ‘Abd Allāh Ibn Sulaymān al-Tanūkhī al-Ma‘arrī, was born at Ma‘arrat al-Nu‘mān, a village in Syria in 973 AD, where he died in 1057 AD. He lost his eyesight at the age of four as a result of smallpox infection. However, his blindness did not hinder his poetic excellence. His father worked in the judiciary field and educated him in the domain of Arabic philology and literature. He was first educated in Ma‘arrat al-Nū ‘mān and Aleppo, then in other Syrian cities. He spent a year and a half in Baghdad, center of learning or ‘the house of wisdom’ at that time, where he participated in literary salons. He returned to his native town of Al- Ma‘arra, in about 1010 because he did not have enough funds to stay on in Baghdad and because he had heard of his mother’s illness—she died, however, before his arrival. After that, he remained in Al-Ma‘arra, living an ascetic life characterized by abstinence from various worldly pleasures and following religious and spiritual paths (Bakrī 30).

Many of his works did not survive, but from those what did, these are notable: Saqt al-Zand, which was translated into English by Arthur Wormhoudt in 1972 as The Tinder Spark in which his early poems were collected. Another remarkable collection of poems was compiled in the book Luzūm mā lā Yalzām, translated as Unnecessary Necessity by Henery Baerlein in 1909, in which al-Ma‘arrī sums up interpretations of life and living. A third famous work is Risālāt al-Ghifrān, or The Epistle of Forgiveness, which is the subject of this study. Al-Fuṣūlwa al-Ghāyaī,
or Paragraphs and Periods, which is a collection of homilies, is also a notable work that cannot be ignored.

3.2.1 Risālat al-Ghufrān

In Arabic, Risālat al-Ghufrān literally means a ‘letter of forgiveness.’ It is considered one of the major works in the Arabic literary canon. Written in prose, it describes the life in heaven and hell “supposedly” according to Islamic religious dogma. It is written as a reply from al-Ma‘arrī to the contemporary poet Ibn al-Qārīh, who requested al-Ma‘arrī’s esteemed opinion concerning zandaqa, i.e., atheism or the questioning of the existence of God, in Islamic tradition. The work is divided into two parts: a visit to heaven and hell, and a direct reply to Ibn al-Qārīh. Interestingly, al-Ma‘arrī makes Ibn al-Qārīh a hero of an imaginary journey where he speaks to the deceased poets in heaven and in hell. Using an ingenious methodology, al-Ma‘arrī uses the poets’ work as the means to judge them and place them either in heaven or in hell. This means that if the poetry of a non-Muslim poet was admired by al-Ma‘arrī, he would place the non-Muslim in heaven in direct opposition to Islamic doctrine. The same is also true for Muslim poets whose poetry al-Ma‘arrī finds lacking; he places these “unworthy” poets in hell. As such, it is clear that he is quite a subjective judge. Interestingly, unlike Dante’s Inferno, the major characters in Risālat al-Ghufrān are poets. There are some other characters including jinn36 and Satan, but for the most part, it is a series of conversations with poets. Many scholars including Yūḥannā Qumayr believe that this work cannot be interpreted on its surface meaning; rather any true attempt at understanding the work must take into consideration the hidden symbols and connotations that reflect al-Ma‘arrī’s thoughts and beliefs about various topics such as religion.

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36 Jinn, in Arabic الجن: are spirits mentioned in the Quran and Islamic religion who inhabit an unseen world in dimensions beyond the visible universe of humans.
poetry, and philosophy. Thus our method of reading should, ideally, approximate Dante’s concept of the ‘polysemous’ text.

### 3.3 The Influence of Isrā’a and Mi‘rāj on Divine Comedy and Risālat al-Ghufrān

A long debate exists on the origin of the idea of descending into the underworld in the Divine Comedy and Risālat al-Ghufrān, mainly whether Dante was indebted to al-Ma‘arrī in his idea in composing the Divine Comedy. This debate has resulted in a sharp division between scholars, with some arguing that the Islamic nocturnal journey of Isrā’a and Mi‘rāj directly influenced both works, while others argue in favor of the influences of Classical Hellenistic epics. Indeed, intertextuality, imitation, or inspiration have a solid place in the field of literary criticism. This tradition is long established in literary criticism, beginning with Plato and the idea of mimesis. Miguel Asín Palacios, a catholic priest and professor of Arabic at the University of Madrid, in his book Islam and the Divine Comedy (1968) attempts to trace the influences of the Isrā’a and Mi‘rāj narrative on Dante’s Divine Comedy presenting as witnesses or evidence numerous scholars such as Ozanam, who writes that,

> It is now admitted that the essential trait of genius does not lie in the absolute novelty or originality of the work of art neither can it consist in the power –the prerogative of God alone- of creating both Form and Matter out of nothing (Preface xv).

In other words, Ozanam is trying to confirm that poets and writers can be inspired by one another since creating something completely new is God-like. The inspiration that poets find from their interaction with other poets does not lessen the power of their creativity. I agree with this idea because the ingenuity and excellence while composing works of literature is not restricted only to the ideas portrayed but rests more in the way the poet approached his creation. As such, there are universal topics such as love, hate, betrayal, misery, and tragedy that were
discussed by hundreds of poets, yet each one is granted his place and recognition. A work of literature does not lose its significance if inspired by other texts; on the contrary, it might gain from adopting the idea and creating a new way of approaching it, by emphasizing new motifs of age-old themes, or by exploring new alienating, highlighting methods of presentation. Was Dante inspired by such an Islamic concept as the Isrā’a and Mi’rāj while he was composing The Divine Comedy? Might he possibly have been aware of Risālat-Ghufrān and its katabatic element?

The influence of Isrā’a and Mi’rāj on Risālat al-Ghufrān is easier to trace than its influence on Divine Comedy. Al-Ma‘arrī lived for most of his life in Aleppo, a Muslim city, or in Baghda, the center of Islamic learning. Given his traditional Muslim background, he was undoubtedly aware of the story of Muḥammad’s nocturnal journey as part of his education, and it is quite possible that the story inspired the structure of Risālat al-Ghufrān, but not necessarily the content. The common ground between the Risālat al-Ghufrān and the Isrā’a and Mi’rāj is the fact that both of them take place in heaven as well as in hell; however, Muḥammad’s mission was to portray Islamic religious doctrines while al-Ma‘arrī’s target was to mock this unknown world.

3.3.1 The Isrā’a and Mi’rāj in Islamic Tradition

The story of Isrā’a and Mi’rāj is briefly mentioned in the Quran. However, details have been discussed in the supplemental traditions to the Quran known as hadith. In the Quran, the nocturnal journey is referenced in only two sūrās: (17:1)\(^37\), (17:60)\(^38\), (53:13)\(^39\) and (53:18)\(^40\),

\(^{37}\) سُبْحَانَ الَّذِي أَسْرَىُ بِعَبْدِهِ ﷺ ﻟِلَيْلٍ مِّنَ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ إِلَى َالْمَسْجِدِ َالْقَصِّي ﷺ ﻓِي آيَاتِنَا إِنَّهُ ﻟَهُ ﻣِنْ َالْيَمِينِ أَيُّهَ َالْيَمِينُ َالْيَمِينُ

\(^{38}\) إِذْ قُلْنَا لَكَ إِنَّ رَبِّكَ أَحَاطَ بِكَ أَحْدَاثَ الْمَآءِ ﻓِي َالْقُرْآنِ ﻛَتِبَ ﻓِيهِ ﻣِنْ أَيَاذَ كَبِيرٍ

\(^{39}\) وَلَقَدْ رَأَيْتُ نَزْلَةً أَخَرِيَّةً

\(^{40}\) إِذْ يُضَحِيِ السَّرَّةُ ﻣَا يُضَخَّسُ

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while in the *hadīth*, the details of the journey are elaborated upon. Briefly, it is the journey of 
Muḥammad from Mecca to Jerusalem by means of the traditional heavenly steed, *al-Burāq*. It is 
believed that when the Prophet was asleep, Gabriel the Archangel awakens him and asks him to 
follow him. In this journey, Muḥammad had the chance to visit the seven circles of the Muslim 
heaven, where he speaks to such earlier prophets as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus⁴¹. Furthermore, 
*Muḥammad* is given the opportunity to look into hell and see the different ways of punishments 
and tortures of the sinners, such as “men and women with lips torn asunder, others whose eyes 
and ears are pierced by arrows, women hanging by their heels while vipers sting their breasts” 
(Palacios 4). Finally, Muḥammad is taken to *Sidrat al-Muntahā*⁴², a holy tree marking the spot 
beyond which Gabriel was not allowed to pass.

3.4 Imagination and Creativity

The afterlife as an idea has always occupied a large portion of philosophical and religious 
debates. Religions preach about the life after death, the severe punishments in hell for those who 
sin in rebellion and the rewards of heaven for those who obey faithfully. For Dante and al-
Ma‘arrī, the question at hand here was not the consideration of the fundamental concept of the 
afterlife itself, which they must have believed was fixed, but rather how to represent it, and that 
on various levels of intellectual, moral and aesthetic interpretation, through their imagination. 
Al-Tabbā’ claims that the idea of undertaking the journey to the underworld has been part of 
human consciousness since the dawn of time (48)⁴³.

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⁴¹Ibrāhīm, Mūsā and ‘Isā respectively
⁴²That is, Lote tree. It is a metaphorical Islamic concept concerning the highest level of knowledge a person can gain concerning Allah. A Lote tree marks the end of the seventh heaven, the boundary where no creature can pass. It is noteworthy then, that only Muḥammad makes it past this tree but not his companion Gabriel.
⁴³For more details on the idea of visiting the afterlife, refer to his book Abqariyat al khayal.
Regardless of what has been said about their origins, the two works powerfully demonstrate the elements of creativity and imagination. However, unlike Dante’s, al-Ma’arrî’s description of his hell and heaven does not follow a clear methodology whereby the reader is unambiguously guided through the topographical aspects of the journey. The images that al-Ma’arrî conjures up represent a chaotic, shattered vision of life after death. He does not dive deeply into the spiritual realms of the afterlife world; rather he describes a sensual world that does not greatly differ from his present world\(^4\). Although he tries to imitate the *Quran*, he represents sarcastic worldly images that assure his skeptic belief in the existence of such a sensual-present world. Al-Ma’arrî presents his readers with images of dead poets who are suffering severe punishments for their sins in hell but who are somehow still able to maintain a conversation with al-Ma’arrî’s pilgrim, Ibn al-Qarih. Instead of feeling the repentance of the doomed sinners, ironically, we are forced to eavesdrop upon what seem to be ordinary dialogues between Ibn al-Qarih and the sinners, where the latter, in an almost mocking manner, nonchalantly answer questions posed by Ibn al-Qarih. For example, when Ibn al-Qarih converses with a seeing Bashshâr ibn Burd\(^4\) about some of the latter’s poetry, he “criticiz[es] a solecism in his prosody” in one of his verses. This single “error” seems to be the paramount reason for al-Ma’arrî’s decision to place Bashshâr in hell, for “the whip for the slave, for the freeman rebuke, refusal is best for importunate folk” (Brakenbury 127).

الحر بلحى والعصا للعبد وليس للمحلف مثل الرد
Understandably, Bashâr is angered by Ibn al-Qarih’s insolence at questioning a man who is being tortured in hell for the sole reason of the rhyme structure of his poetry, so he asks Ibn al-

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\(^4\) Refer to section 3.1 “Religion and Philosophy,” especially page 41.

\(^4\) Bashâr Ibn Burd (714-784) (Arabic: بَاشَر بن بَرَد) nicknamed "al-Mura’ath" meaning the wattled, was a blind poet in the late Umayyad and the early Abbasid periods.
Qārīḥ to “spare me your nonsense; I have no time for you!” (Ibid.). Is this spoken like a whining soul suffering in Hell, or is it the reaction of an ordinary man in the worldly life? The statement “I have no time for you” implies that Bashār is busy doing something more important than having a conversation with Ibn al- Qārīḥ about poetry and rhyme schemes.

This instance presents an excellent example of al-Ma‘arrī’s imagination and creativity in portraying an image of hell that is as far away from the traditional fiery conception of hell popularized by Dante’s Inferno. In Dante’s hell, only the sounds of weeping and the screams of agony resound as sinners are eternally punished for their sins. For Dante, hell is a place without hope, without mercy and without future. It is the everlasting and just retribution (contrapasso) for sins, as seen, for example, in the following lines about the “undecided” who are in the first circle yet not in hell proper:

These wretches, who had never truly lived,
went naked, and were stung and stung again
by the hornets and the wasps that circled them
and made their faces run with blood in streaks;
their blood, mixed with their tears, dripped to their feet,
and disgusting maggots collected in the pus (Canto III, 64 – 69).

These damned souls were being punished for their sins to the point that they have no place in Hell, Purgatory, or Heaven—because they led insignificant lives without ever making a choice. In fact, God must reject them precisely because of His mercy, for it is stated in the inscription above the entrance gate to Inferno that one of God’s attributes—and thus one of the factors responsible for the creation of hell—is Love. How can Love be responsible for hell? In Dante’s conservative and medieval Christian view, God expressed His love toward humans by endowing them with Free Will, thus raising them above the plants and the animals. But Free Will, the gift of Love, comes with choice and responsibility. If humans abuse Free Will by
choosing to disobey, having been informed of the reality of punishment ahead of time, it would be hardly fair to blame God for being unmerciful. In fact, it would be even worse to not choose at all!

More interestingly, hell itself rejects the particular sinners in the above quotation as well. They are not in Limbo, nor are they in hell proper. They are doomed to suffer in “the middle of nowhere” for all eternity due their cowardice in life by not making decisions: hell would become, ironically, less ‘perfect’ in receiving them, as Virgil explains to Dante the pilgrim. In fact, the punishment on this particular level is the most severe of all. This is in direct contrast to the punishments delivered in al-Ma‘arrī’s hell, where sinners are in a fiery pit, yet they are calm enough to maintain a conversation with his pilgrim Ibn al- Qārīḥ.

The genius of both Dante and al-Ma‘arrī in presenting their imagined hell is found not in their inspiration for such a journey, but rather for the unique employment of their own religious and philosophical ideologies. In the sarcastic musings of al-Ma‘arrī, the poets are punished for simple mistakes in poetry, which nobody might read, while in Dante sinners are punished for their deeds in life as these affected themselves and others around them. Indeed, the punishments for the sins are so grave that even Virgil occasionally turns pale, claiming,

The anguish of the souls
that are down here paints my face with pity-
which you have wrongly taken to be fear (Canto IV, 19-21).

As such, the key to understanding the creativity of al-Ma‘arrī and Dante lies in decoding the style and structure of the Divine Comedy and Risālat al-Ghufrān.
3.5 Style, Structure and Language

Although both Dante and al-Ma‘arrī present their images of heaven and hell from a religious perspective, the construction of Dante’s hell strictly alludes to the Christian religious presentation of the sinners’ punishments in the afterlife. In contrast, al-Ma‘arrī’s presentation appears to be unorganized, lacks a consistent means of association and contains many digressions where one story leads to another to the point that the reader is confused.

The most lucid explanation of *Inferno* is provided by Virgil to Dante the pilgrim in Canto 11, and the surface structure of the whole *Divine Comedy* already seems to appear in the first cantos where Dante the poet maps the path of Dante the pilgrim and foreshadows the construction of his whole work, an element that is not found with al-Ma‘arrī. The commencement with the “dark wood” symbolizes hell, which the pilgrim must pass through to be introduced to the sins and ways of punishments. This ‘dark wood’ is of course open to modern, psychological explanations related to trauma literature, and such derivations. Being able to pass from this agonizing atmosphere, the pilgrim proceeds through the “barren slope,” which is a connotation of Purgatory, or as Musa explains it as the middle ground between evil and good (*Canto I*, 29). Finally, after God purifies the soul, it rests in the “blissful mountain,” Paradise (*Canto I*, 77).

In the tradition of the Western epic, Dante begins the first volume of his trilogy with the classical epic invocations of the Muse, “Oh Muses! O high genius! Help me now” (*Canto II*, 7). *Canto IV* presents Dante’s Limbo, or the first circle of his *Inferno*, which contains in addition to the great scientists and philosophers of pre-Christian times, the great pagan poets such as Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucian, along with Virgil himself. These souls reside in the *nobile castello* of
In the serene Castle of Wisdom with its seven walls and its seven gates. However, Dante’s placement of such remarkable poets is more consistent and justified than that of al-Ma‘arrī. The structure of Inferno allows Dante to present dialogues between Dante the pilgrim and his guide Virgil, smartly woven into the journey itself. In these dialogues, Dante the poet provides the answers for his placement of the great pagan poets in Limbo rather than in hell, an element missing from al-Ma‘arrī’s Risālat al-Ghūfrān. While Dante the pilgrim proceeds through the eight remaining circles of hell, Dante the poet marvelously describes specific details of the punishments of the damned souls to the extent that many visual artists have illustrated his detailed depiction of the various ways of retribution, the most famous being Gustave Doré in the late 19th century.

For Dante, the sinners are the different types of people who did not follow the path of Christ. They are punished in a contrapasso fashion, “either resembling or contrasting with the sin itself” (Musa 94). This contrapasso form of punishment can also be seen in popular films such as Seven in which a sadistic serial killer murders people in an exaggerated form of one of the seven deadly sins. On the contrary, al-Ma‘arrī’s sinners are mostly poets from the pre-Islamic Jāhiliya period, in addition to Iblīs, namely Satan. Through his pilgrim, al-Ma‘arrī converses with them strictly on matters that are connected to their poetry, not to their actions. As such, the concept of hell for al-Ma‘arrī was not that of an institutionalized domain, where sinners line up to receive their punishment. Indeed, al-Ma‘arrī’s hell does not contain a division based on types of sin, despite the existence of a classification of sins in Islamic doctrine.

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46 The only source of light in hell.
47 Representing the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance, intellect, science, and knowledge.
48 Representing the 7 liberal arts: the trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and the quadrivium of mathematics, geometry, astronomy, and music. Its structure was also like a traditional medieval castle, protected by a moat or rivulet, representing the desire for knowledge, or eloquence.
The katabatic element is strongly found throughout *Risālat al-Ghifrān*. Where Dante sends himself on a pilgrimage, al-Ma‘arrī’s sends Ibn al-Qāriḥ. Dante the pilgrim’s journey begins as this Dante appears lost, suffering from an existential crisis, “for I had wondered from the straight path...Leaving the path of truth” (*Canto I*, 3-12). Dante the poet aims for Dante the pilgrim to find self-awareness via the guidance of the poet Virgil in Inferno and Purgatory, and then that of Beatrice and Saint Bernard in Paradise. On the other hand, al-Ma‘arrī the poet sends Ibn al-Qāriḥ, his so-called pilgrim, on a sarcastic journey to please him, to assure his religious surface convictions, and to mock rigid contemporary beliefs. For example, an ironical image is portrayed through the dialog between Ibn al-Qāriḥ and ‘Udayy ibn Zayd when the latter invites Ibn al-Qāriḥ to a hunting journey in heaven. The irony here rests in the fact that these two men are in paradise but enjoying earthly pleasures; however, the animals remind them that they should not be doing so because God has rewarded these animals the perpetual life, so Ibn al-Qāriḥ gives them a piece of advice: “you must set yourselves apart for any of you who have been in the world below must not mix with the beasts proper to paradise only” (Brackenbury 43). The reply of the ass was more cynical, as he spoke: “You have given us kindly advice, and we shall carry it out” (Brackenbury 43).

Dante the poet organizes his journey according to an almost mathematical formula. Indeed, the exactness of his description provided modern mathematicians with the capacity to build algorithms based on his construction (Palacios 172). Interestingly, in terms of poetic style, *Divine Comedy* follows a rhyme scheme known as tertiary rhyme (*rima terza*), which follows an aba/bcb/cdc… scheme. As such, in both style and content, *Divine Comedy* presents a

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49 Traditionally interpreted as the voice of Reason.
continuation of Dante’s fascination with the number three and its multiple nine that began in the *Vita Nuova* and that may have an autobiographical basis in his relationship with Beatrice. He first saw Beatrice Portinari when he was nine, which resulted in a conventional courtly romance with her although he did not actually greet her until he was 18, and which remained distant until she died, upon which occasion he finished the *Vita Nuova* when he was 27, thus concluding the 3 x 9 cycle. In *Inferno* as with the rest of the *Divine Comedy*, Dante relies on poetry as a means of communication, with the major episodes divided into cantos. These cantos add up to one hundred, each stanza written in parallel of three, a clear reference to the Christian doctrine of Trinity. Dante the poet uses straightforward language from his native Tuscan dialect to present the readers with the means of understanding his moral journey. Indeed, like most works in the traditional genre of comedy, the language of the *Divine Comedy* is humble, unlike tragic works (Musa, *Introduction* 42). In his *Vita Nuova*, Dante claims the noble desire of writing a work for his lady Beatrice “that which has never been written of any lady” (Musa, *Introduction* 43).

A haphazardly difficult and sophisticated language in al-Ma‘arrī opposes the clear and structured style found in Dante’s *Inferno*. Al-Ma‘arrī’s language portrays his excellence in Arabic; however, it hinders the readers from deciphering his real intentions and beliefs. Through his pilgrim, al-Ma‘arrī does not simplify his language for the readers to be able to follow his hidden skeptic visions of religion and philosophy. Truly, this work is dedicated to a specific group of readers: those who are capable of deciphering the difficult language and its concealed messages. Al-Ma‘arrī’s language and rhetoric were complex and rich in alliteration. This style is in contrast to Dante’s, who sets up a serious religious pattern using not the

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51 While Dante’s work is interpreted on four different levels, the language he uses makes at least the first level understandable.
sophisticated Latin but a regional dialect, Tuscan. This is not to imply that the Divine Comedy is simplistic. As mentioned, it, too, abounds in metaphors, similes, alliteration, and numerous stylistic masterpieces. What Dante achieved is bridging the schism between the sophisticated concept and construction of hell on the one hand, and its accessibility for the everyman reader.

3.6 Religion and Philosophy

Critics and scholars, digging through al-Ma‘arrī’s religious identity, have struggled to understand this poet’s beliefs and convictions. Was he a true Muslim who accepted the teachings of Muḥammad and the Islamic Holy Book, Quran? Was he a sūfī who followed a meditative path to be united with the Ultimate Truth? Or was he skeptical and an atheist who rejected all religions and denied the divine books and their beliefs? As a matter of fact, to understand his katabatic journey, it is essential to identify his concepts on life after death. ‘A’isha ‘Abd al-Raḥmān points out the political atmosphere of the period that al-Ma‘arrī lived in and its consequences for religion. It was an era of political conflicts and personal interests led by religious parties. The struggle between the Sunni Abbasid and Shi‘ite Fatimid families over religious dominance and ancestors of Muḥammad divided the Muslims and opened the gates of war between them. Witnessing these divisions, al-Ma‘arrī criticized both parties that used religion as the means to gain power. According to him, the explanation and interpretation of religion were identified according to sectarian considerations rather than as deep theological interpretations (‘Abd al-Raḥmān 30). However, his rejection of using religion as a means to an end and his refusing to use religion as a call for power do not make him an atheist. For a thoughtful intellectual and skeptic man like al-Ma‘arrī, blind acceptance or dogmatization cannot be forced on him.

52 Later, this dialect, through the influence of his own work and that of his fellow Florentine Boccaccio, grew into modern standard Italian.
Al-Ma’arri’s concepts can be better understood through his verse,

ملّ المقام فكم أعاشر أمّة أمرت
بحضور صلاحها أمورها
حكموا الرعية واستجازوا كيدها
وعدوا مصارحها وهم أجراؤها

These lines indicate al-Ma‘arri’s contempt for leaders and his belief that they are corrupt and careless about the essence of religion and that they stand opposed to the real message of religion. Ignorance dominates the minds of people who should be pious, honest, righteous, fair and good followers; however, they are blindly misled. Living in such a fraudulent environment, al-Ma‘arri chose to isolate himself within three prisons: blindness, isolation, and a soul imprisoned in an ill body, writing:

أراني في الثلاثة من سجنين
فل تسأل عن الخبر النبيث
فكون نفسي في الجسد الخبيث
لفقدي ناظري ولزوم بتي

In the first verse, al-Ma‘arri is telling his readers poetically not to ask him about his pessimism and gloomy situation. He gives the details in the second verse where he refers to his blindness, which is, in addition to his political and religious frustration, the main reason of his isolation.

The rage that al-Ma‘arri showed to the religious dishonesty was the reason that some critics and scholars accused him of “zandaqa,”\(^{53}\) while others went beyond that to accuse him of “mazdakkyia”\(^{54}\) like al-Dhahabi (al-Tabbâ’ 19). Through his poetry, al-Ma‘arri leaves a difficult trail to follow. It is hard to conclude whether al-Ma‘arri was a skeptic or believer, confused or sarcastic, satisfied or raging, or a combination of all these dichotomies (Hindāwī 10). Al-Ma‘arri

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\(^{53}\)Zandaka: (Arabic: زندقة) meaning free interpretation, free thinker, atheist or heretic. The new encyclopedia of Islam By Cyril Glassé, Huston Smith P491 "Zindiq from Persian zand."

\(^{54}\)An ancient Persian religion founded by the preacher Mzduk. The religion is founded on two dichotomies: good/evil and light/dark. The religion also agreed on the idea of a society sharing money and women freely.
was a unique poet of his time who refused to use poetry as means of flattering the people in power. He rejected blind and unquestioning acceptance, regardless of what others might think of him, as seen in verse such as,

إلا في سبيل المجد ما أنا فاعل
ولأ ذنب لي إلا العلي والفضائل

This distinguished poet was not after fulfilling his own desires; he was a seeker of poetic glory. In the first verse he claims that his own target is to get true knowledge through searching and learning. In the second line, he expresses the idea that some people think of him as a sinful person, yet he confidently perceives himself as the man of knowledge and virtue. In other words, Others’ opinion is not a matter of importance to him. Even if some find him a sinner, he feels indifferent about this matter where only his merits and education might be of great concern (Bakrī 6). Other evidence of al-Ma’arrī’s conception of religion and his refusal to accept all that is being imposed by others in matters of religion and beliefs would be summarized through these verses,

العقل يعجب لل مشروع Tümجسس
واقترح وتهوود وتتصرى فاعتر
وابترح بقلب مفكر منصر

His emphasis is on the power of the human mind; not on enforced beliefs and doctrines. He is telling people that the mind is the center of all matters where the human being can weigh things and accept what he believes in, not what is forced on him (Ibid 165). An important verse that shows his opinion about life after death reveals his confidence of mind rather than unproved metaphysical connotations and religious views:
He assures through these lines that people are incapable of understanding the metaphysical issues, which remain undetermined since they cannot be proved through our senses. His admiration and belief in the power of the mind explain his rejection to taking for granted what interpreters of religion decide with regard to the afterlife. Thus, al-Ma‘arrî’s religious status remains controversial; it depends on the background and the intentions of who is judging him.

As a matter of fact, a corrupting political environment along with the schism of the religious institutions has affected the posthumous construction of al-Ma‘arrî’s Risalât. It is clear that the writer’s work is not an open book that can be read easily. Like Dante, his katabasis projected the conflict that the writer had concerning religion and human nature. Despite the sophisticated language, his katabasis can be interpreted as a reflection of the poet’s own doubts regarding what comes after death. It is a work that hides beneath its well-rhymed words a deep sarcastic contemplation of the unknown metaphysical world. There are no common criteria or scheduled plan to his placement of the poets either in heaven or hell. The sinners project al-Ma‘arrî’s profound admiration for, or his sincere criticism of, poetry and poets as well his conception of the divine judgment. He does not refer to the deeds or sins committed by “everyman” as would be predicted when discussing the realms beyond of the earthly world, as opposed to a Dante who punishes the sinners through the contrapasso of their sins. The journey that al-Ma‘arrî lets Ibn al-Qâriḥ take through hell might well conceal the bitterness and rejection that al-Ma‘arrî holds for the human race in its struggle to please God and the religious institutions.
Al-Ma‘arrī’s journey to hell begins at the very edge of heaven with Al-Khansā’ s voyeuristic peeping at her brother Ṣakhr who is being tortured in hell. This placement questions the common belief that heaven and hell are widely separated. Indeed, even if the geography is neglected, how could this blessed woman enjoy eternal life in heaven while hearing her brother’s screams of agony? The irony reaches its peak when Ibn al-Qāriḥ reminds her of a verse that she had once composed lamenting the loss of Ṣakhr—but not in the context he suggests. When al-Khansā’ wrote this verse she was not predicting that her brother’s destiny would be hell, but she was mourning the loss of such an exceptional brother:

وَأَنْ صَخْرًا لِتَأْتِمَ الْهَدَايَةِ بِهِ

After his dialogue with al-Khansā’, Ibn al-Qāriḥ leaves heaven and moves to hell where he has a more ironical conversation with Iblīs. Although he explains that Iblīs is being severely punished, the dialogue that takes place between them does not reveal an atmosphere of particular suffering. Ibn al-Qāriḥ says to Iblīs:

الْحَمْدُ لَلَّهِ الَّذِي أَمْكَنُ مَنْكَ يَا عَدُوُّ اللهِ وَعَدُوُّ أُولَيَاتِهِ! لَقَدْ أَهْلَكْتُ مِنْ بَنِي آدمَ

طَوَافَ عَلَى عَدَدَهَا إِلاَّ اللَّهُ

However, the way Iblīs answers appears to be more shocking, “who are you, man?” (125). Despite his supposed misery, Iblīs the filthy sinner is able to communicate with others as if he were in a regular meeting. The cynicism does not stop here but increases when Iblīs is able

55 Tamaḍur bint ‘Amr Ibn al-Ḥarīth al-Sharid al-Sulmiya, 7th century Arabic poet. She was a contemporary of Muhammad, and eventually converted to Islam. She was known for her brothers Ṣakhr and Mu‘āwiyyah who died in battle.
56 Translated as: “Let Sakhr be a guide and a leader outstanding; Like a mountain-top girdled in with flame” (Brakenbury 124).
57 Iblīs is the Arabic name for Satan.
58 Be to Allah, who has taken revenge on you, you enemy of God and his holy men. You have brought to perdition hosts of the sons of Adam that God alone can number! (Ibid.124).
to give his opinions on literature, poets and poetry. He mocks Ibn al-Qārīḥ’s job as a poet and says,


bīns al-ṣanā‘a‘a ‘thāb ʿafā‘a ʿmān al-‘a‘sh, lā yītṣasū bīna al-ʿa‘yāl, wānāhā l-mīzāh bīn al-qardām wākār l-ahlākt

Mīthkā? Fīnīnā lillāk ‘iḏ nūjūt

There is more than one level of satire in these words. Instead of feeling the flames of hell and everlasting pain, Iblīs appears to be a stoic philosopher and a phlegmatic critic of poetry and poets. In fact, this speech might lead us to al-Ma‘arrī’s own perception of the poets of his own time. Poets used to write in favor of those in power to gain money and a social position, a mode of conduct that was totally rejected by al-Ma‘arrī who refused to write anything that he personally did not staunchly believe in. Therefore, al-Ma‘arrī is not criticizing poetry itself, but he is pointing to some of his contemporaries who thought of this profession as an ideal means of gaining wealth and social advancement. Iblīs continues his conversation with Ibn al-Qārīḥ, claiming that

‘in al-ḥarrāmūt innākum fī al-dinī a‘āhlīt l-kam fī l-‘akhirah, fīlī fījlī al-lujn bīl-wuludān

Ahlul-lāhīn fūq Aḥlul-‘arqātān.

Al-Ma‘arrī is making fun of this paradox: what is forbidden in the world would be allowed in heaven? This is an interesting element, for Iblīs questions the very foundations of heaven by focusing on the sexual desires of those in heaven. If they could resist temptation in earthly life, should they not be rewarded with their desires for “bejeweled boys” in heaven? The unrepentant Iblīs continues to tease Ibn al-Qārīḥ by praising Bashār Ibn Burd61 who once

59 “What a rotten trade! It only brings in a wretched pittance, not enough to keep a family on. It is a slippery path, and how many like you has it brought to perdition! Lucky for you if you were saved” (Brakenbury125).

60 “Wine has been made unlawful to you in the world, and has been made lawful to you in paradise. Do the people of paradise do to the bejeweled boys there what was done by the people of the Cities of Plain?” (Brakenbury125).

61 He himself is in hell, see above.
composed verses of poetry in which he praised Iblīs over other poets, and indeed, over Adam himself,

Although he is supposedly suffering in hell, Iblīs is judging the validity of various subjects in the realms of earth, heaven, and hell. It is an awkward parody that highlights al-Ma'arrī’s vast imagination and intelligence in manipulating his characters to portray his own ideas. This image of Satan is in direct contrast to Dante’s Satan/Lucifer who is placed in frozen Cocytus, the very center of hell’s pit. Satan is forever trapped in the continued suffering for his slights against God, ironically trapping himself evermore since his three pairs of beating wings keep chilling the air and freezing the newly arriving tears that were shed as the result of sin and that have been trickling down perpetually to Cocytus via the Statue of the Old Man of Crete.

Another character whom al-Ma’arrī employs to project his personal points of view is the poet ‘Alqama. It seems that al-Ma’arrī admired ‘Alqama for his ability to understand the supposedly ‘evil nature’ of women – as al-Ma’arrī himself was a misogynist (Qumayr 20). However, he detested ‘Alqama’s religious indifference. It is noteworthy that al-Ma’arrī’s Ibn al-Qārīḥ does not cite any of the verses that would have doomed ‘Alqama to hell. Rather, he chooses to utilize what he refers to as a “string of pearls:”

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62 Iblīs I hold in honor, Adam I despise; (Give heed, ye wicked to the words I say); Iblīs’s element is fire, Adam’s clay; Clay must sink, but fire ever rise” (Brakenburry 126).
As the journey continues, Ibn al-Qariḥ meets with poets from different tribes such as ‘Amr Ibn Kulthūm. Ibn al-Qariḥ criticizes this poet’s false rhymes in this verse,

eczefqra rbiya  ida jriina

Ibn Kulthūm answers him again in unrepentant tones and advises Ibn al-Qariḥ to go back to praising Allah in order to be spared the torments that some of his colleagues-poets are already suffering in hell. Once again, the actual nature and details of the torture of the poet are not noted in the dialogue. Amusingly, Ibn Kulthūm defends his own poetry, claiming that he was able to compose hundreds of beautiful verses and that if one has a rhyming error, then it is not the end of the world. Indeed, Ibn Kulthūm is not repentant at all and feels no remorse for being in hell. Ibn al-Qariḥ meets also with Aws Ibn Hajar and he asks him about the resemblance of one of his verses to a verse composed by the poet an-Nābighah; suspicious, he requests information about this coincidence. Again, mockingly, Ibn Hajar answers that it is worthier to get the true information from an-Nābighah since he is in heaven and Ibn Hajar is in hell. As such, through Ibn Hajar’s dialogue with Ibn al-Qariḥ, al-Ma’arrī clearly mocks the idea of afterlife: “Yet people wickeder than I have entered Paradise, but the distribution of forgiveness is nothing but a lottery like distribution of wealth in the world” (136). Ibn al-Qariḥ shows more irony in his answer where he promises the poet that he will mention this dialogue to the people in heaven.

Unlike in the conversations with previous poets, here al-Ma’arrī presents some details on the

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63 “Women’s ills I’m wise to diagnose; If a lover ages or his money goes; So ends their love. It’s money they adore, where’er it be; In youth and strength alone they greatness see” (Brakenburry 132).
64 Died AD 600. He belonged to the tribe of Taghlib, and slew ‘Amr Ibn Hind, the king of Hira to avenge an insult to his mother. He is said to have drunk himself to death. He was a grandson of Muhalhil, a famous poet.
65 “Their blades were like a brook that flows; Shimmering neath the winds that blow” (Brakenburry 133).
66 Famous for his verse in praise of chivalry and his description of weapons of war, notably the bow.
67 Real name is ZiyadibnMuawiyah; he was one of the last Arabian poets of pre-Islamic times. Al-Nābigha means “genius” in Arabic. Al-Ma’arrī places him in heaven.
torture of Ibn Hajar, who is suffering to the point that his thirst is never quenched—reminiscent of the sufferings of Tantalos in the Hades of Homer and the hell of Virgil but even worse, since Ibn Hajar, whenever he attempts to drink from the illusionary stream, receives “a roaring fire” (136). In the case of Tantalos, the water just recedes beyond reach.

Another character of hell is al-Akhtal al-Taghlibi. Ibn al-Qāriḥ addresses him as the specialist of love and wine and points to this poet’s remarkable verses and popularity among people of that time. Indirectly, al-Ma’arrī shows a parody in this situation. At first, al-Akhtal appears to be repentant and wishes that he had converted to Islam; however, he directly nostalgically laments the good days of wine and lust in the Ummayyad court: “I can smell their perfume mixed with the joys of true friendship” (139). This contradiction of remorse and lamentation over worldly sins shows al-Ma’arrī’s confusion of hell and heaven. Another criticism is portrayed through this dialogue, namely of the Ummayad Caliphs whom al-Ma’arrī shows as behaving in ways opposite to Islamic beliefs and doctrines. It is very intelligent strategy of al-Ma’arrī to discuss through a Christian poet the contradictory ideas of Caliphs who are supposed to be a role model to piety since they are ruling in the name of Islamic faith. However, this point might be an indirect way of showing the equality between Muslims and Christians: it is not religion that allows or forbids, but it is the man himself.

Amusingly, at this point, Iblīs begins a conversation with the angels of hell, telling them to keep Ibn al-Qāriḥ in hell as he is involving himself in issues that are not his concern. It seems as though all the residents of hell are sitting in a large traditional Arabic dīwān, with Ibn al-Qāriḥ moving from one to the other, striking up conversations in congenial social fashion. Al-Ma’arrī’s

68 A Christian poet under the Umayyed Caliphs, who were liberal to other religions and winked at wine-drinking and voluptuous poetry.
sense of poetic irony presents itself when the argument between Iblīs and Ibn al-Qāriḥ turns childlike, with Ibn al-Qāriḥ cursing and fuming at Iblīs: “you abused Adam first and the one who begins is the more in the wrong” (142). Ironically, Iblīs’s answer is one that criticizes all humanity as he informs Ibn al-Qāriḥ that Godly people should not curse others, but “you [humans] have never been forbidden any sin but you have committed it, - thank God!” (142). Iblīs is happy that mankind cannot live up to its godly standards. Here, al-Maˈarrī expounds on the nature of humanity: never to accept the boundaries of God and to commit sin even though it is forbidden. It is in episodes like these that the religious beliefs of al-Maˈarrī become muddled. On the one hand, he is extremely sarcastic of all the characters, of their placement and, to some extent, of hell itself. On the other hand, he places people like him, people who question God, in hell.

Unlike Dante, al-Maˈarrī does not describe in detail how his characters are being tortured, nor does he clearly record why they were brought to this scornful and disgraceful place to start with. Every now and then he tries to quote from the Quran in an attempt to misguide shallow readers from getting the real meaning of his philosophy and hide his confusing beliefs. He was skeptic, pessimistic, and sarcastic. He was living an isolated life that did not oppose the ideas of a true believer but that, on the contrary, reflected a mind of wisdom. The complexity of his language, along with his choice of characters, suggests the presence of a thinker who refused just to follow the herd or to strive for social status and wealth. He believed that only the mind could be his leader. However, hell according to him was the place to judge poetry rather than the deeds of human beings. The pilgrim’s dialogue with the sinners always refers exclusively to his predetermined opinions on the power of poetry and not to earthly misdeeds such as adultery, theft, prejudice, or murder (as in Dante).
Dante’s *Inferno* is infinitely richer in its scope of characters and its organization than al-Ma‘arrī’s *Risālat*. It is an allegory that has occupied untold numbers of scholars, critics, philosophers, and theologians ever since it was written. Though he was not a priest, Dante appears to be as well as a poet and a philosopher. Each canto of the *Inferno* takes the reader to the well-imagined unknown place. It is the vivid prosperous images that ignite the reader’s imagination, thus taking him/her to the different nine levels where each level represents a sinful deed in the worldly life. The political and religious atmosphere of Dante’s time, as well as the autobiographical circumstances of his exile, contributed much to the composition of such a significant work of art.

In 1289, Florence was suffering from the Guelph- Ghibelline clash, and Dante, aged twenty-four, participated with the Guelph side of his family, even fighting personally in the battle of Campaldino. Though interested mostly in politics and poetry, he had to study pharmacy since the rules and laws of year 1295 obliged the young male members of the noble class to be enrolled in the *Corporazioni delli Arti e dei Mestieri*. He worked in one of the apothecaries, which helped him in acquiring much book knowledge since at those times books were sold at the apothecaries. His political interests did not develop much but he faced many political problems after the victory of the Guelphs clan led to the division of this party into the White Guelphs (Dante’s party) and the Blacks. The split along clan lines created a deeper problem, regarding the role of Papacy in Rome. The aristocratic and conservative Blacks were with the rules and tradition of the Pope while the commercially oriented and more progressive Whites wanted more freedom. After long battles, the Blacks took domination over Florence; Dante who had been an official for the Whites was accused of corruption was sent into lifelong exile (on pains of burning at the stake if he was caught again on Florentine territory) and was also sentenced to pay the
huge fine of 5,000 florins (which he refused to pay because paying would amount to confessing guilt). He lived in various places, separated from his family, wife, and children, for the rest of his days, depending on the hospitality of friends and patrons throughout Italy and in France (and maybe even in Oxford, England). Dante’s development of personality appeared to be well tested through his exile where his day-to-day business stopped to concern him. In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante represents his personal observations of human beings referring to his personal experiences as well as referring to Catholic dogmas.

The construction of his *Inferno* in nine levels is well structured and vivid in its imagery. Dante’s political observations appear clearly in his judgment. Dante’s religious standing is the basis of his sentences and verdicts, unlike those of al-Ma’arrî, which were, more or less, haphazard. His katabatic journey symbolizes the descent of the self into the depth of human conscience. Only the repentant souls who experience genuine contrition can walk on the path of salvation, while the damned ones rest in the agonies of the cold mud, the hurling tornado, the darkness of the stinking ditches, the burning desert where it rains flames, the forest of dead thorny bushes, and the frozen lake of Cocytus. Musa considers this journey as the journey of Everyman to God; however, he does not deny that this work of art can be read as an autobiography of the writer himself (45). As such, it is important that this duality between the writer and the protagonist be distinguished. Dante, through his *Inferno*, reminds us with the teachings of the Bible in terms of how Dante wants his readers to believe in the “historical truth of the literal level.” However, Dante’s hell “is a much more sophisticated symbolic allegory” (Musa 44). In fact, Auerbach believes that Dante introduced, through his *Divine Comedy* man as “the concrete individual in his unity and wholeness” (174). He is not like figures presented in legends, but he is a real human being away from sketchy illustration. Dante’s *Inferno* reflects his
“philosophical, theological, literary, and psychological” profound culture and background (Jacoff 74).

Dante’s journey in *Inferno* begins in the Limbo, with his guide Virgil who shows Dante the “castle” of the pagan poets and pre-Christian sages. It is the first circle of hell, the residence of the un-baptized and virtuous pagans who did not have the opportunity to recognize Christ. The significant element in this circle is the castle and green fields for the poets of antiquity. Actually, this castle includes the wisest men, philosophers, scientists, and mythological characters. Interestingly, he meets Saladin who was respected by Westerners despite him fighting the Crusaders and regaining Jerusalem from the Frankish Crusader states. Although this is within the realms of hell, no images of torture are presented here.

The second circle is for the sinners of lust. Among the many characters of this place are Francesca de Rimini and Paolo Malastesta. Unlike al-Ma’arri’s sinners who seem to be indifferent about their situation and not hesitant to remember the good sinful moments, Dante’s suffering soul Francesca says, “there is no grater pain than to remember, in our present grief, past happiness” (*Canto V*, 121-123). As a matter of fact, the sinner is remembering because she is asked to do so, not because she wants to. In a sense, the memory itself is torture. This is another direct contrast to al-Ma’arri’s characters who remember from their own will and seem nostalgic but unrepentant. Dante, the pilgrim, feels pity for her and shows his sympathy, an understandable element at this early stage of the journey but a theological problem, since showing sympathy for those justly punished by God is in itself a sign of weakness and a form of sin. Francesca’s poetically expressed regrets seduce Dante the pilgrim, like the poetical romance that she was reading with her lover, seduced them into sin.
The gluttons are punished in the third circle. Sinners of this circle are punished because of their over indulgence in food and drink and all other kinds of addiction. It is the cold sphere with overflowing dirty water and snow, guarded by Cerberus, the three-headed hell dog. The detailed description of Dante’s descent to the underworld continues through the forth circle, the circle of greed. Interestingly, Dante indirectly alludes to the political and religious life of Florence, the city he admired the most but was exiled from. He criticized the institutions of the Christian religion, but not the religion itself. In this circle he placed many clergymen, cardinals, and popes, those officials of the Church who abused their office and God to hoard wealth. His vivid images transport the reader from ordinariness to the extraordinary:

They fought each other, not with hands alone,
but struck with head and chest and feet as well,
with teeth they tore each other limb from limb (*Canto VII*, 112-114).

This is a very dehumanizing portrayal that shows the fate of those who used religion for their own interests. The political connotation is reflected here where Dante’s exile was as a result of the struggle with the Roman Papacy. Such pressure of political power over religion’s concepts and dogmas resembles the distorted and corrupted atmospheres of al-Ma‘arri’s period of time, which greatly affected his concepts and led to his skepticism.

Dante’s virtual revenge on those who, for personal and political reasons, deprived him of his property and his family life in his beloved city Florence continues to be depicted in the fifth circle: the circle of anger. After weeping in the previous circles, Dante the pilgrim starts to recognize the fact that pity for such sinners is a sin by itself. The personality of a more confident pilgrim begins to develop, one who is able to push the sinner into the dirt and say,

May you weep and wail,
stuck here in this place forever, you damned soul,
for, filthy as you are, recognize you (*Canto VIII*, 37-39).
Dante the poet as well as Dante the pilgrim are happy to know that Filippo Argenti, the one who stole Dante’s property, is suffering severely. Dante’s own grudge over this person appears clearly; since he could not take revenge in his actual life, he is fulfilling his earthly desires in this virtual place. Descending more deeply, Dante is introduced to the city of Dis. It is the place that marks the division between the upper and the lower strata of hell.

The sixth circle contains the Heretics who are imprisoned in flaming tombs, a critical warning for those who believe that the soul dies with the body—such as Epicurus. Furthermore, in this circle, Dante the poet utilizes his political savvy and conveys his own political ideas by pinpointing Farinata degli Uberti⁶⁹, a Ghibelline, and Cavalcante de Cavalcanti⁷⁰, a Guelph. The selection of such figures does not lack the personal bias that Dante the poet felt in worldly life.

The seventh circle is divided into three rings: the outer, the middle, and the inner ring. It is the place of sinners who were very violent. The outer one is the residence of those who committed violence against other people and their property. Their contrapasso is to be submerged in a river of boiling blood, and whenever they try to emerge arrows are shot at them by Chiron, mythological Greek superlative centaur, and Pholus, a wise centaur. Alexander the Great is dunked up to his eyebrow in this ring. The middle ring is for the suicides and for homosexual profligates such as Piero della Vigne—Dante’s own former beloved teacher; Dante plays no favorites in this poem. The inner ring is for the blasphemers who have committed violence against God, and for the sodomites who have committed “violence against nature.”

⁶⁹Farinata degli Uberti (1212 – November 11, 1264), real name Manente degli Uberti, was an Italian aristocrat and military leader, considered by some to be a heretic.
⁷⁰Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti (flourished c. 1250; died c. 1280) was a Florentine Epicurean philosopher and father of Guido Cavalcanti, a close friend of Dante.
The eighth circle involves the fraudulent. Dante subdivides their kind in ten *Bolgie*, or ditches of stone linked by high arched stone bridges. These ten *Bolgie* are consecutively for the seducers, flatterers, simonists, sorcerers, barrators, hypocrites, thieves, fraudulent advisers, sowers of discord, and finally various sorts of falsifiers. The last circle includes the Biblical giants who symbolize pride and other spiritual defects that are demonstrated by treachery. This circle is divided into four rounds where many classical characters are placed such as Cain, Antenor, Ptolomey, and Judas Iscariot. In fact, the way Dante places such figures in the depth of hell reflects his detestation and rejection to all kinds of deception. It appears through his *Inferno* that Catholic doctrine of his age and personal encounters with corrupted figures of his time, combined to develop his ideas and judgments.

The center of hell, the coldest place ever, is reserved for Satan, who suffers in the most painful ways a mortal can imagine. Satan/Lucifer is portrayed with three faces: red, black, and yellow. His six eyes are always weeping and he is desperately flapping his three sets of wings in an attempt to escape, but the continuing icy winds keeps locking him. Satan is portrayed as powerless, ignorant, and full of revulsion as opposed to the all controlling, all knowing, and all-loving nature of God. As a matter of fact, Dante’s depiction of Satan in his *Inferno* is so vivid in its torturing description that the reader can feel the coldness and chilliness of such a place. Unlike al-Ma‘arrī’s Iblīs, Satan doesn’t involve himself in the dialogues or conversation and his agony distracts him, all the time, from thinking of his previous life.

By contrast, Iblīs appears as if he is moving from place to place to share in the conversations that pilgrim Ibn al-Qāriḥ carries on with other sinners. As such, Iblīs interferes to give his opinion and, even worse, to give judgment on the pilgrim himself (142). The fact that al-

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71 Prophet Muhammad is placed in the ninth Bolgie.
Ma‘arrī’s hell does not graphically show the intense suffering of its sinners does not underestimate the writer’s target because this style is intentionally imposed by al-Ma‘arrī to reflect his own conviction of the idea of the afterlife. Of course, Dante, a true Catholic from the High Middle Ages, is personally influenced by Church doctrine, yet his imagination of hell by far transcends, metaphorizes, and brings to an extreme the few references to hell found in Biblical and Catholic teachings. Is this maybe because Dante also imposes his own political and religious views, especially when he relegates to very specific sites his own enemies, regardless of their positions in the Church or State hierarchy?

3.7 Concluding Remarks

By and large, al-Ma‘arrī’s Risālat and Dante’s Inferno are remarkable works that reflect a background of classical tradition, each within the scope of its composer. In Dante’s case, it is to some extent the katabasis of a Western poet who deals with loss in his current world by sublimating into a world of his own creation heavily inspired by his Catholic background. On the other hand, al-Ma‘arrī’s katabasis reflects his illness, doubts, suspicions, and sarcastic attitudes towards religion, poetry, politics, and faith. Al-Ma‘arrī had faith only in the power of reason, and in its importance in interpreting the human self and its outer surroundings. It was possibly the cruelty of the life he lived that formed his confusion and brought out his philosophical concepts. He built new bridges between blind minds of the past and new, illuminated ones. He believed that the person’s mind is the basic and only means to guide him in accepting and understanding everything around him.\textsuperscript{72} In fact, this alludes to Aristotle’s own concept and belief that reason

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should control the other elements that constitute a well-formed human being. Dante also believed in the power of reason, hence his choice of Virgil as the guide of Dante the pilgrim, yet he mixes reason with other elements by which the human soul can be purified (Yearly 131). Dante’s *Inferno* is, indeed, an “encyclopedic work” that reflects the mind of a man who saw himself “as a poet, a mystic, theologian, a prophet, a political counselor, and an exile in both the social and religious senses of that term” (Yearly 133). The *Inferno* is a poetic treasure with its richness of metaphors and similes; partly because of this, and also because of its ethical codes, it remains one of the truly outstanding works of Western literature. As for the *Rīsālat*, it contains in its organized chaos the means through which we can look at the world and the afterlife a little less seriously.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE MODERN KATABASIS OF TED HUGHES AND GEORGE MASSROU’A

With the advent of the twentieth century, the elements that define traditional katabasis shifted. With the rise of psychoanalysis, a new form of katabasis was established. Rachel Falconer highlights a new form of hell as not only the place that tortures and punishes the sinful souls, it is “the idea of transformative passage, the destruction and rebirth of the self through an encounter with the absolute Other” (1). This awareness of the self cannot be ignited or understood without the help of psychoanalysis, mainly through the way how it deals with trauma literature. Trauma is originally a Greek word meaning “wound” which refers to an injury inflicted on a body. Freud, thus, differentiates between the wound of the body and the wound of the mind. According to him, the wound of the body is easily healed whereas the injury of the mind is more complicated; the wound of the mind resides in the unconscious and becomes available to consciousness when it forces itself continuously in the nightmares of the wounded character (18: 69). In her book Unexplained Experience, Cathy Caruth refers to Freud’s theory of trauma and claims that,

Trauma seems to be much more than a pathology or the simple illness of a wounded psyche, it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in an attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, is in its delayed appearance…cannot be linked only to what is known but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language (4).

Another perspective of understanding katabasis in terms of trauma is provided by Kali Tal, who suggests that “literature of trauma is written from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it ‘real’ both to the victim and to the community” (21). What Tal claims here opens the gates to interpreting literature keeping in mind the effect of disorders on the characters, the writers, as well as the readers. Trauma, then, lies in the buried wound of the
mind and its interpretation can be possible when this concealed defect or melancholy screams out, asking for salvation. It resembles the journeys to the underworld in quest of lost love, yet the modern journey is within and lies in the inner self of poets. In this chapter, I will discuss how modern katabasis can be deciphered through the Birthday Letters by English poet Ted Hughes, and Daḥīyyatān by Lebanese novelist George Massroua’a.

4.1 Ted Hughes

Edward James Hughes was born on 17 August, 1930 in Mytholmroyed, Yorkshire and died on October 28, 1998. He was an English poet and children’s writer, and was considered one of the best poets of his generation. He was a poet Laureate, an honorary position selected by the Monarch of the United Kingdom, from 1984 until he died. He was granted the membership of The Order of Merit which is a dynastic order which recognizes distinguished service in the armed forces, science, art, literature, or the promotion of culture. He was married to the American poet Sylvia Plath who committed suicide in 1963 (Moulin 17).

4.1.1 Birthday Letters

Birthday Letters has gained the attention of many poets, critics, feminists, and journalists both positively and negatively. In fact, this collection of poems was notably recognized not only because of its poetic significance but also mostly for unveiling the secrets of the life of its writer. Why did Hughes write these poems 35 years after the death of his wife Sylvia Plath? From a modern psychoanalytical perspective, I will try to interpret the motivation that urged Hughes to break his long silence and communicate the tragedy of his life. In fact, this modern katabatic journey alludes to the classical epics based on two important elements: the search of the lost beloved and the use of art, specifically poetry, to reach salvation or redemption. Ovid in
Metamorphosis allows Orpheus to descend to the Underworld to retrieve his lost beloved wife, Eurydice, but failing to do so, he surrenders to the power of music as a means of art to compensate for his great loss. Hughes’s means of salvation is also art, yet it is the art of poetry, the descendant of Orphic music. Hughes descends into his own deep world in an attempt, maybe, to mourn his beloved wife and to relieve himself from the burden of guilt that might have haunted him through all these years. Finally, his motivation might have been a desire to free himself from the burden of his trauma.

If literature of trauma is the telling and retelling of the story to relieve oneself, then Birthday Letters would be Hughes’s version of the story; retold by him in order to overcome his personal problems as well as those of his community after the death of his wife. Birthday Letters is the confessions of a tortured soul, yet I don’t know how accurate it is to use the word “confession” because the context of Hughes’s letters can be interpreted from different points of views depending on how the reader judges Hughes’s relationship with his wife Plath; was he her murderer, or was he the victim?

The journey that Hughes chooses to end his pain commenced when he decided to publish Birthday Letters, not when he started to compose the text. When he kept these particular poems imprisoned in his own papers for 35 years, he was not yet able to unleash his sorrows and lamentations, and thus he remained trapped in his traumatic situation. Although he continued his life producing poetry, and although he was capable of marrying other women, he appeared to be haunted by the soul of his deceased wife Plath. Unlike Ovid’s Orpheus who abandoned all pleasures and women, Hughes could compartmentalize his sadness and misery, yet could not get rid of it. Both Hughes and Orpheus tried to escape their personal tragedies through the charm of art. Where Orpheus used to roam the Thracian mountains playing his lyre, Hughes descended
into his own self and produced poetry rich in hidden meanings. Hughes’s own descent into his suppressed emotions was triggered in the composition of the great poems of *Birthday Letters* that might be considered autobiographical.

In fact, the title of these poems suggests the birth of a new “self.” As Freud suggests, “the fact is…that when the work of mourning is completed, the ego becomes free and inhabited again” (*Mourning and Melancholia* 166). The first poem of his collection is entitled “The Fulbright Scholar”\(^73\), and the title hints at the fascination that Hughes held for education and excellence. However, the poem contains a nostalgic essence in which a mature writer tries to recall a phase of his youth. The language Hughes uses shows uncertainty, for example he uses the word “maybe” twice, indicating his confused perception. It is this confusion that struggles inside the adult Hughes, not the youthful one. This poem presents a flashback of incidents in an attempt to comprehend or analyze the remote past. Hughes is giving a double interpretation because he wants to show that what once seemed clear, noble, magnificent, and breathtaking might be just the misinterpretations of a fascinated, 25-year-old. Also, he addresses his wife’s double personality in an attempt to accuse her:

> And your grin
> Your exaggerated American
> Grin for the cameras, the judges, the strangers, the frightener (3)

He is suggesting that her real personality is hidden behind this smile which she shows to the public which in turn accused Hughes of driving her to suicide. Then, he moves to give a symbolic image alluding to Eve’s apple that deprived Adam of Eden. The peach that he describes as the “first fresh” fruit he ever tasted resembles the first impression of love that later dragged

\(^{73}\) Refer to Appendix for full text.
him to his hell. Finally, the full-grown Hughes confesses the misinterpretation and ill judgment of the 25-year-old lover he used to be:

   At twenty-five I was dumbfounded afresh
   By my ignorance of the simplest things (3).

Hughes continues to analyze Plath’s psychiatric disorders and unstable personality in a way to relieve his own sense of guilt. He is not only screaming out loud his innocence but also blaming her for his own misery. In “Sam”\(^74\), he juxtaposes himself with the horse that once belonged to Plath. In the poem, Hughes claims that the horse “decided he’d had enough” of Plath antics (10). Indeed, this line shows that Hughes, like her horse, cannot sustain the befuddled woman who lost her “rein,” her “stirrup,” and her “seat.” Hughes refers to her unstable condition by indicating to her the polar opposites of her personality: “incredulity” and “certainty.” All these images combine to show that Hughes understands Plath’s mental illness which led to her suicide. He reveals his admiration of her poetry and he claims that her talent as a poet was the only sober part of her brain. Later, Hughes asks Plath a rhetorical question, “How did you hang on?” This question reflects Hughes’s astonishment as to how this vulnerable, fragile creature could save herself from a brutal unhorsing, yet put an end to her life later on? Hughes ends his poem with the lines:

   When I jumped a fence you strangled me
   One giddy moment, then fell off
   Flung yourself off and under my feet to trip me
   And tripped me and lay dead. Over in a flash (11).

These closing lines appear to function as a self-defense mechanism not only for the benefit of his accusers but also for his own self and consciousness. The choice of his vocabulary in this stanza presents him as a mad woman’s prey rather than a murderer.

\(^{74}\) Refer to Appendix for full text of poem.
As for “The Tender Place,” Hughes continues to highlight Plath’s psychological disorders and suffering. He explains the deep damage to Plath’s brain after she was treated with electroconvulsive therapy after her first suicide attempt. In this poem, Hughes is continuing his katabasis into the self to point out that it was Plath’s disease and ill health that created her mental illness. The title of the poem and its opening line indicate how fragile and tender Plath’s body was. He describes how “somebody” wired her up and “crashed the thunderbolt” into her skull. The incident happened even before they met, so Hughes is trying to prove that her insecurity and disorders started a long time before he became a part of her life. Significant and appealing imagery is portrayed when Hughes discusses her voice; a voice that “dived inwards” to reveal the misery and intense suffering. This voice might be a signifier of her poetry that flourished out of catastrophe. Hughes is presenting a dual psychological disorder: the first is for the misfortunate, remote Plath and the second is for the present Hughes. In fact, this must be understood in accordance with what Freud pointed out about the traumatic event. E. Ann Kaplan interprets Freudian theory as arguing that the way a person reacts to a traumatic event depends on “one’s individual psychic history, on memories inevitably mixed with fantasies of prior catastrophes, and on the particular cultural and political context with which a catastrophe takes place” (1). In remembering the old incident, Hughes is indirectly reacting to the traumatic event caused by Plath’s life with him and her suicide later. Plath is portrayed as suffering from traumatic events that she could not overcome, and they eventually led to her death.

In “The Shot,” Hughes’s represents his own inability to help Plath overcome her mental disorders. In this poem Hughes provides the reader with a glimpse of Plath’s relation with her deceased father, Otto Plath. Hughes suggests that the death of her father, when she was only

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75 Refer to Appendix for full text of poem.
76 Refer to Appendix for full text of poem.
eight, left untreatable scars in her soul, thus creating a confused and distressed adult. He starts pointing to Plath’s personal relationships with men. He addresses her as a goddess to be worshiped; however, he stresses how her father’s death negatively affected her relationship with the other sex since she was always haunted by the patriarchal image of her father. This poem is rich in its metaphorical images and at the same time the reader can sense the contradictory feelings of love and blame he held for Plath. The last stanzas of the poem show the awareness of the mature Hughes, who now can understand what was used to be vague in the past:

Till your real target  
Hid behind me. Your Daddy,  
The god with the smoking gun. For a long time  
Vague as mist, I did not even know  
I had been hit,  
Or that you had gone through me-  
To bury yourself at last in the heart of the god(17).

Here, Hughes admits that his understanding of Plath at the time he fell in love with her was misty since he was blinded by his lust and passion. However, after 35 years the “vague mist” has cleared and he is able to admit that he failed as a lover. He was helpless and even the doctors could not rescue his beloved from the haunting memory of her dead father. He concludes his poem by showing how paralyzed his hand was and how fruitless his efforts to save her. All he could manage was “a wisp of your hair, your ring, your watch, your nightgown” (17). Throughout the whole poem, the reader is exposed to memories and interpretations of Hughes’s ideas when he was still young and composing these poems. As a matter of fact, Freud’s theory of “afterwardness” can be understood in this context, more or less, for both Plath and Hughes. Freud suggests a constructivist model in which trauma is produced retroactively by the remembering consciousness (King 20). Falconer illustrates this theory by explaining that the “primal scene” or the incident does not become a traumatic issue unless other or further incidents
ignite this feeling of terror and bring back the past scene. From Plath’s point of view, the death of her father and her everlasting search for someone comparable to him keeps interfering with her unconsciousness and messes up her entire life. As for Hughes, his suppressed emotions and silence towards the suicide of his beloved are triggered later on when he decided to unveil the concealed poems addressed to her, whereas these are obviously meant more for himself, to allow him to overcome his trauma through poetry and confessions.

In “18 Rugby Street,” Hughes continues to recall the memories of his relationship with Plath and he points to their first sexual encounter in the eponymous 18, Rugby Street. He portrays the setting in interesting descriptive images of the four floors where the “love-struggles” begins. He explains that at that period of time, he thought of his love for Plath as an ordinary love affair, just another exciting adventure. However, as he grows up and becomes mature, he reaches the truth that their love is unusual, or unordinary. In this poem, Hughes reveals his admiration for the ancient Cretan site of Knossos and interestingly identifies Plath with legendary images:

    Whoever enters it [the house] enters a labyrinth
    A Knossos of coincidence! And you are in it (20).

The image of the labyrinth is introduced to elaborate on his idea of ‘amorous agon.’ As the convoluted, elaborate and almost inescapable structure of a labyrinth, their love was also doomed to fail. Hughes is trying to convey that entering this labyrinth, he became possessed and this possession provoked him to write this poem and other poems on his relation with Plath. The house he recalls as having his first intimate relation with Plath in is identified as the labyrinth. It is a cursed place because Hughes presents the depressing fate of the two other women who used

77 Knossos is the largest Bronze Age archaeological site on Crete and considered as Europe's oldest city. The name Knossos survives from ancient Greek references to the major city of Crete.
to live in that place. The Belgian girl Hughes mentions is one whom he did not take much notice of at that time, gassed herself just like Plath would. As for Suzan, the other woman, she died of leukemia.

The image of Plath’s father is recalled in this poem to stress the idea that the real conflict of Plath’s disorder was the image of her dead father, and not Hughes’s relation with her, claiming, “your journal told me the story of your torture” (21). In this line, Hughes continues to convey that Plath was a mysterious person and that it is obvious that he could not understand her at that point in time. Her trip which he “guessed” to be to a “euphoric American Europe” was in fact a fleeting visit to London on her way to Paris to see Richard Sassoon with whom she had a love affair (21). This information was mentioned in her journal. The significant point here is that Hughes always seems to misunderstand his wife at that time.

As a matter of fact, the image of love as labyrinth or a metaphorical place that is inescapable reappears in his poem “Your Paris”78:

Was a desk in a pension  
Where your letters  
Waited for him unopened. Was a labyrinth  
Where you still hurtled, scattering tears.  
Was a dream where you could not  
Wake or find the exit or  
The Minotaur to put a blessed end  
To the torment (38).

Indeed, in this poem Hughes reveals his own perception of how Plath perceived Paris. Apparently, Hughes was not convinced of Plath’s perception of Paris because he writes, “I kept my Paris from you” (36). It should be noted that at that time Paris was recovering from the carnage of WWII and the Nazi occupation. Indeed, Hughes is trying to present that Plath was living in an illusionary world far from reality. He intently presents the image of the “Hotel des

78Refer to Appendix for full text
Deux Continents”⁷⁹ in an excellent metaphorical way to hint at the duality of Plath’s personality. Hughes’s Paris was more real because he could see the damaged buildings and could feel the impact of devastation on its citizens where he says “I was a ghost watcher” (37). The people were really traumatized by the war, so it was as though they turned into ghosts. However, her Paris was “anecdotal aesthetic;” a distorted image out of her unstable psychological condition that urged her to see what she believed, not the real world (37). Hughes continues to justify himself and proposes the image of the dog as a symbol of him being the loyally protective and true lover regardless of her distorted images and illogical perception.

The haunting of Plath by her father’s death is raised again. Hughes calls her father “your torture” in an implication of her deep attachment to a past long gone (37). This vision is presented to understand why Hughes describes her as “what walked besides me was flayed” (37). Hughes wants to stress the idea that she was like a ghost in his life and he did not understand this fact until he had matured. As a result, he accuses her of using misleading language:

\[
\text{Into a language, utterly new to me} \\
\text{With conjectural, hopelessly wrong meanings} \\
\text{You gave me no hint how, at every corner, (37).}
\]

He is deceived by her calm appearance and her strange language that became clear after her death. The image of the Minotaur is represented again towards the end of the poem, yet this Minotaur represents her everlasting search for her father since a labyrinth was first designed to hold a Minotaur in constant search for an exit. The last lines of the poem show the lamentations and misery of Hughes caused by Plath and his sympathy for her situation because he knows that she was not enjoying her schizophrenic condition.

⁷⁹ French for “Hotel of Two Continents.”
In his last poem, “Red”\(^{80}\), Hughes continues his self-justification and descent journey by showing the dichotomies of Plath’s personality. He starts with setting the ground of Plath’s dual perception and mental disorders:

Red was your color
If not red, then it is white. But red
Was what you wrapped around you (197).

Hughes pictures Plath as full of contradictions. Red, the color of blood, lust, and love is portrayed as her favorite color; a color she liked to decorate her house with. In fact, Hughes is pointing to her suicide attempts and to the problematic image of her father that haunted her. She always wanted to identify her husband with her father, but when she failed to do so, she chose to put an end to her life. Hughes is trying to defend Plath’s obsession with the color red, which resembles the color of death by showing the readers her interest in the color white – the color of purity and sanity. He praises her poetry indirectly, stating “only the bookshelves escaped into whiteness” (197). In this line, Hughes hints to her excellence when things are connected to books or poetry. The color white suggests purity; it is the color of innocence. Again, her love of these two contradicting colors resembles her dual personality where Hughes writes,

Everything you painted you painted white
Then splashed it with roses, defeated it (198).

Here, Hughes appears to be defending the real Plath who liked to have her life associated with white and its all symbolic connotations, yet the disturbed part of her perception was stronger or louder, so she was defeated by her own self. Finally, Hughes chooses to add another color but this time not the color she preferred but the color she lacked: “but the jewel you lost was blue” (198). Blue is the color of calmness, spirituality, inspiration and sincerity. It is the color of the

\(^{80}\)Refer to Appendix for full text of poem.
sky and the sea with their wide symbolic meanings and connotations. It is the color of meditation and relaxation. When Hughes ends his poem and his book with this color, he is directly trying to get rid of the hell that haunted him for years, and he is able at last to show that Plath’s psychological disorders doomed her to die in this inescapable fate.

Hughes’s *Birthday Letters* resembles a katabatic journey towards one’s inner self to relieve it from the burden of guilt in a profound poetic style. It is the imprisoned trauma that needed to be healed and set free. Psychoanalytic theories suggest that when the wound is buried in our unconscious, it haunts us and prevents us from understanding it. However, when it is spoken out loud, the life becomes ready to proceed. As Derrida suggests in his book *Specters of Marx*:

> If I am getting ready to speak at length about ghosts, inheritance, and generations, generations of ghosts, which is to say about certain others who are not present, nor presently living, either to us or to outside, it is in the name of justice. And this being- with specters would also be, not only, a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations (xviii).

After burying his emotions for 35 years, Hughes wanted to speak about that ghost that haunted him in order to be loyal to the memory of his beloved, yet more to his own self. His publication of the poems freed himself from a very long descent and it succeeded to help him overcome the scars that overwhelmed and trapped him for years. *Birthday Letters* resembles the anabasis of Hughes that was achieved just a couple of years before his death. Whether the truth was revealed in Hughes *Letters* or not remains a mystery since what I have quoted reflects only a single side of the story. However, whether his ideas were true or not, his poetic excellence is clearly observed. In fact, it can be the katabatic journey for those who suffer secretly and eventually are saved by the telling of their tragedy.
4.2 George Maṣrūʿa

This Lebanese writer was born in 1910 and died in 1998. An employee of the Ottoman Bank of France in Aleppo; he submitted to magazines articles about scientific as well as literary issues. He participated in literary seminars and lectures at the Catholic Club, but he did not participate much in the political writing. His famous works include Hanībaʾl, Ibn Zekar, Amīra Fī Lubnān, and Rafidūn.

4.2.1 Daḥiytan

His novel Daḥiytan is rich in symbolic connotations and hidden meanings about various aspects of Lebanese culture and the period of time it was written in. It represents a dual katabasis in the modern understanding of the term. It is a descent into the self by two lovers who suffered from their separation, escaping real life, imprisoning their tortured selves, and destroying their future. As discussed earlier, the aim of katabasis was to regain a lost lover or lost knowledge, and this novel does the same when studied from a modern perspective. It is the search of lost love through a virtual descent to the human’s self, which represents the Underworld.

The novel was written in Lebanon in 1942, in the context of the sectarian conflict between Muslims and Christians. Briefly, it is the story of Wīdād, a Christian girl who, while studying medicine in one of Beirut’s universities, falls in love with Khālid, a Muslim medical student. The author through the voices of his protagonists describes the cultural conflicts between these two religions and portrays the traditions of this country. Massrouaʿa presents many themes but focuses on the dichotomy between the religious and the secular. The choice of his characters represents the various perceptions of a very delicate and critical subject such as
religion in a country that evaluates human beings according to their religious belonging rather than their deeds.

The characters are compared to their religious environment and analyzed accordingly. Widād challenges traditions and concepts through her intellectual abilities that symbolize the author’s appreciation of education. She comes from a Christian family that used to be rich. However, the economic situation at that period of time had a drastic effect on her family. Her brother Habīb chooses to travel and work in Africa after finishing his university studies. He was a responsible mature man who appreciated education and encouraged his sister to pursue her studies, supporting her spiritually and financially.

On the other hand, Khālid comes from a Muslim family which is well off. His father, a successful businessman, allowed his son to study medicine but always thought that a real job is in business. Khālid’s personality develops through his love for Widād. The tragedy occurs when Widād’s pride and Khālid’s weakness prevent them from marrying even after both families accepted their marriage. Widād was strong enough to convince her parents to bless this relationship regardless of the traditions. She could stand against the old customs with the power of reason and love. Although Khālid could convince his parents to agree to his marriage, he did not succeed in his mission because he was indirectly passive in accepting others’ views. The problem reached its peak when Habīb showed some interest in Khālid’s sister, a Muslim girl, and this idea was totally rejected by Khālid’s family. When Widād discovered this rejection, she felt insulted and her pride prevented her from proceeding in her relationship with Khālid; she felt betrayed by the love of her life because Khālid did not react against traditions unlike the battle she fought and won. Widād felt that Khālid should have rebelled against all the traditions like she did. The idea that his family did not accept that their Muslim daughter be married to the
Christian Hābīb made her feel inferior. She decided that this relationship should cease because she could not accept the idea that what was accepted by her family was considered shameful according to Khālid’s family. Widād’s pride and Khālid’s weakness resulted in a tragedy that neither could escape. The aim of this section is to show how each of the protagonists descended to his/her own version of hell and spent their life in a hell of their own creation.

The punishments and tortures presented in the mythical epics are not less intense than the hell that both characters suffered. As Orpheus roams the mountains of Thrace to mourn the loss of his Eurydice—due to his own error and weakness—, Khālid abandons his worldly pleasures and social life to lament the loss of the only love in his life—also due to his own error and weakness. Rather than playing his lyre to mourn his lost love, like Orpheus did, Khālid isolates himself with a pen and writes of his feelings of despair and sadness. His way of presenting his miserable feelings indicates the kind of hell he passed through.

4.2.1.1 Death and Void

As discussed earlier in this chapter, in trauma literature the wound or injury of the psyche is difficult to heal or treat. Caruth suggests that the time when the trauma starts to be observed might not be when the incident takes place, but rather when it manifests itself later in one’s unconsciousness:

The pathology consists, rather, solely in the structure of experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event (4).

Based on Caruth’s observation of traumatized characters, Khālid can be perceived as a victim of trauma. His trauma starts when he loses his beloved the first time and develops for years, leaving serious scars in his soul. Instead of moving on in his worldly life, Khālid becomes
trapped in the agony of his lost love where he abandons worldly pleasures and jails himself to write his catastrophe in the form of autobiographical musings, or *khawātir*.

أود أن أقوم بأشياء، وأن أجاب الحياة، وأن أنظر إلى الإمام.
لي في الدنيا حقائق، وعلي واجبات.
ولكن هيهات (152)

He appears to be a philosopher who questions the justice of this life; a psychoanalyst who digs in his unconscious trying to overcome his trauma: aware of his depression, yet incapable of defeating it.

What is significant about this modern katabasis is that one of the victims is healed psychologically through the suffering of the other victim. It is Khālid’s love shining through his book, which he dedicates to her, that saves Widād from her psychological suffering, although the tuberculosis she contracted during her descent to the “land of death” (بلاد الموت) was stronger (18). In other words, what Khālid wrote was the means for Widād’s survival and anabasis from hell. The irony of fate interferes in the fact that, when Widād’s pride and stress is solved, her physical sickness prevents her from meeting with Khālid who had been able to overcome his trauma and regain his worldly life. Widād’s death drags him again to a hell, an everlasting hell.

Khālid’s trauma or descent into the self is epitomized in his book “The World of Pain,” (دنية الألم), which he dedicates to Widād, using red as a color to symbolize love and blood. He confesses the hell he is living in and the suffering of his dying soul. He expresses his surrender to depression and frustration,
In the first line, Khālid described Widād as the one who ripped out hope from his chest and left him a corpse riddled with pain and despair. Indeed, these lines are reminiscent of Dante’s famous opening of the gates of hell in *Inferno*, “ABANDON EVERY HOPE, ALL YOU WHO ENTER” (89). Khālid continues to describe Widād in a melancholic tone as the torch that simultaneously enlightened his path and trapped him in darkness. All what is left of his soul is his story as a dying dreamer. In his musings, Khālid is at once trying to find cathartic release from his pain and justifying his role in the relationship, much like Ted Hughes in *Birthday Letters*.

Khālid’s thoughts are portrayed as shattered symbolizing his tortured soul. He does not title or date his verses but divides them numerically. Each division presents a snapshot into his soul and Khālid appears almost catatonic. When he emerges from his semi-comatose state, he is as though under the effect of drugs, able only to confess his misery before retreating back into his unconsciousness. Indeed, the effect of losing the love of his life, and his role in this loss, was too much for him to bear. Although he uses very simple language, his words and images are vivid and rich in symbolic connotations, an element he shares with Dante’s *Inferno*. Yet, in terms of his organization, it is haphazard much like the organization of al-Ma’arrī and Hughes. Khālid discovered that his life before he met Widād was silly, useless, and lacking the true meaning of existence. However, a strong light pure as crystal, refreshes his boring dull life and elevates him to reach a divine feeling. This image symbolizes that divine feeling he experienced by meeting Widād. Nevertheless, his language descends from optimistic metaphorical connotations to a state of darkness where everlasting torture dominates his soul. He writes,
The verses are rich in contradictory images reflecting the struggle in Khālid’s soul. He uses the word “نور”, light, and its antonym “الظلام”, darkness, to mirror his anxious and devastated soul and the dichotomy between his previous and current state. He appears as a person who is incapable of accepting the reality, so he tries to escape in dreams, yet dreams do not last and the bitter reality appears to take him into isolation:

هلمت حلمًا ودعت لو أنه يطول.
رأيتني عند الفجر أفتح عيني على وجه وداد.
وأساعدني على النهوض، فتبسم لي شاهدة.
وترمقي بنظرة أبدي من الصباح، وأعمق من الأزل.
ثم أفتقت لأهبط إلى عزلتي الباردة (153).

The reader cannot but observe the lamentation and misery of Khālid who lives a distorted life and whose dreams give him a small fraction of fleeting happiness. The dream itself reflects his unconscious desires in meeting with his beloved who is portrayed as deeper than eternity itself. The dream is an interesting image that alludes to his psychological willingness to escape hell, but he directly opposes it when the dream is over and the lover is dragged back into his cold isolation. The image of a cold hell, “عزلتي الباردة”, is clarified especially with the use of the word “هبط”, derived from the root word “هبط”, meaning descent. What is interesting about this image is that Khālid equates the state of consciousness or waking, noted by the use of the word “أفتقت”,

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with the descent to begin. Once again, the image of a cold hell is reminiscent of Dante’s *Inferno* and the cold center of hell.

His separation from Widād is further portrayed in concise and simple words that indicate the emptiness and void he feels at her loss. The word “فراغٌ” meaning emptiness or void, is repeated three times to emphasize his numbness and helplessness. More poetically interesting is Khālid’s use of the adjective “صامت” meaning silent compounded with the empty void to stress the complete and utter state of despair he is in,

حولى وفي نفسي، وإلى ابعد مدى تبلغه تأملتي.
فراغ صامت، وخلاة موحش!
أهده هي بوادر العدم؟(157)

Khālid’s depiction of agony continues through his fragmented verses and his severe depression results in insomnia. He wishes he could sleep so that he can escape the unending pain that is burning inside his sorrowful soul, which he describes as full of enough toxins and venom to destroy the whole world. "لِو إنْفجَرت سَمُوم نَفْسِي لَمَلَات الْعَالَم كَوَارِث وَنَكِبَات". This exaggerated image resembles the devastating state he is passing through (155). The contradictory image of death and survival haunts him, and he rhetorically questions the reason for his survival to express his longing to finish this agonizing unsettled life. This preoccupation with death and survival can be seen as a foreshadowing element to Widād’s own untimely demise and Khālid’s survival, and possible fall into insanity, at the end of the novel.

ما الذي أنتظره من الحياة؟
لبيت الزمان ينطوي بسرعة لمح البصر، لأصل إلى النهاية، لعلي أعرف الاستقرار (156).
Indeed, it appears that Khālid wishes for his death, “الأصل إلى النهاية” in order to find true peace. This obsession with finding peace and settlement resulted in his metamorphosis from a deeply sensitive and human student of medicine into a man who envies a criminal his sentence of hard labor as seen below.

4.2.1.2 Metamorphosis

The depth of Khālid’s somber feelings acts as a catalyst for his metamorphoses. The doctor who once believed in his noble mission starts to justify hatred and criminal acts. He is no longer the tender man who used to argue with his father about his need to the humane nature of his calling rather than materialistic profits (Maṣrū‘a 46). Actually, this transformation in his personality is evident in more than one division of Khālid’s “World of Pain.” For example, in section 14, he starts to rebel against his sorrow where he wishes to be a violent and brutal person. Khālid writes that the pain that befell him was severe to the extent that he wished he were despicable, brutal and lethal – a far cry from his original passive and tender nature.

In section 19, his idea of cruelty provides a glimpse into the dark side of humanity in terms of criminal acts and evil deeds that invite distrust and suspicion, as seen in his use of the word “ظنون.” This is in stark contrast to the trusting and optimistic nature of Khālid before his descent to hell where he notes,
In section 71, Khālid’s vicious new identity expands and becomes more sadistic. Hurricanes wreck havoc on his soul, yet these storms reach nowhere nor do they find a target or purpose. These bitter feelings turn to grudge and malice overflowing with poison and gall on all his surroundings. His pessimistic view of the world he lives in develops to the extent that the joy of others becomes his own agony and their beauty hurts him as if he were suffering from a deformity.

Khālid’s ferocious soul and new vicious identity reach their peak in section 74 where the worst images of human evil are portrayed. In these lines, he conveys his understanding of the transformation of the human spirit and values. He accepts how people become murderers and butchers rebelling against every system and hating all former friends. His chest is full of raging resentment to the extent that he feels capable of throttling an innocent child with his own hands and able to stab a sleeping virgin and watch her die without the least feeling of guilt.
Khālid’s psychological transformation and need to inflict pain on others can be viewed as a means through which he takes back control over his life. Whereas he was once a passive partner in the relationship with Widād, he now wishes to inflict pain on others in order to become active. Subconsciously, Khālid is aware that Widād’s dumping him was a direct result of his own passivity and escapist nature, and as such, his metamorphosis should be understood as a means of regaining control.

4.2.1.3 Blame, Hate, Love

Khālid’s distorted feelings of love and hatred towards Widād, and unconsciously towards his own reaction to their relationship, reflect his continuous descent into his own hell. This hell is formulated by his opposing feelings of love, hatred, and accusation. In his musings, there is much evidence of a lost man whose obsession with his unsuccessful love relationship haunts him and imprisons him in a vicious circle, alluding to an inescapable maze resembling the Minotaur’s. He does not know if he hates Widād or loves her because his emotions keep shifting from lamentation to blame mirroring his dilemma in accepting his great loss.

In section 31, Khālid is presenting his rage at the woman he adored and worshiped. He is describing her as a murderess who knocks him down without any mercy. He presents his feelings in only two lines as if his passionate obsession with her prevents him from imposing an accusation on her.
However, he admits that Widād’s picture gives him pain rather than comfort. Indeed, the image of the picture occurs on more than one occasion, suggesting multiple connotations. Although in the above lines he shows that her image invokes nostalgic emotions and sensations, he regrets this in section 46 where he admits that regardless of the rage and despair he feels towards her, he still cherishes her picture, “رغم نقمتي وياسي، ما أزال أنظر الى صورة وداد”. He continues to elaborate on this picture, describing it as the bitter taste of an addicted drunk man, "سكران، ضائع وليمان" who is roaming in his own dreams: "فتأتى نفس ملء صدري بشيء من اللذة المرة... في تعيم أحلامه" (165).

His anger keeps mounting in one situation and going down in another. In section 34, he curses her through blaming all women who break the hearts of their lovers: "الويل للمرأة إذا هدمت قلباً “بجها”. Then, in section 39, his tone calms down and changes into a more tempered voice where he wonders about her life without him. He is curious to know if she had found another lover and moved on, or is suffering emptiness just as he does (163). His inconsistent feelings continue to sizzle in section 55 where he wonders how those innocent eyes can hide such cruelty under the veil of pure beauty. This deceived lover doubts the whole of existence including his own “self” (167). As his musings develop, he admits that regardless of the pain and agony Widād has caused him, his original imprinted image of the woman he fell in love with did not change (171).

Through his main protagonist Khālid, whose name in Arabic symbolizes “immortality”, Massrou‘a’a, presents an image of struggle and pain through a hellish journey. In fact, Khālid’s descent is two-fold. His first descent in which he writes “World of Pain” is a journey from which he recovers via the publication of his musings. The second descent into hell is after Widād succumbs to illness and dies at the end of the novel, after which Khālid retreats into his shell (i.e., his hell) once more, emigrates to a farm in a remote area of Brazil and lives the remainder
of his life as a hermit in constant, despair and quiet. These words indicate the irreversible state that Khālid found himself in after losing Widād for good. Indeed, at the very end of the novel, Khālid is presented as a madman, lost in his own world.

Widād, on the other hand, suffers her own version of hell as epitomized in her longing for Khālid. Even when she moves to the land of death and misery, she tries to escape her hell but to no avail. She only finds true release when she reads Khālid’s “World of Pain” and decides to ignore her pride and reunite with Khālid. Ironically, death took her before she could enjoy their sweet reunion.

4.3 Concluding Remarks

In both Birthday Letters and Daḥiyatān, the theme of unrequited love is evident. In fact, both the real poet Ted Hughes and the fictional character of Khālid find an escape with the publication of their works. The written word, printed and made public, presents the means of release from the misery of their invisible and private hell. Where Plath was passive in her acceptance of Hughes’s cathartic Birthday Letters on the account of her death 35 years before publication, Khālid’s beloved was alive. She received the work and reacted to it. Yet, like Plath, she too died. In terms of the modern katabasis, the descent into hell of both Hughes and Khālid began with the loss of a loved one. The aim of the katabic journey, whether consciously or not, was to recover and regain the beloved by whatever means necessary. This idea is shared with Dante whose aim is to reach Beatrice. Indeed, whether in the fiery pits of hell or the emptiness of the soul, the katabatic journey is marked by suffering, loss and pain.

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81 Wadad’s family uses this phrase to describe Africa, "بلاد الموت" (18).
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Classical epics form a treasure in the world of literature for their significant symbols that cross the time boundaries and have survived firmly to our present time. Epics are rich in their multi-cultural, religious, social and political significance from which I have chosen katabasis to be the bridge that connects the ancient times to the modern world of elucidation. Surviving Arabic classical literature, too, was rich. Regardless of the critics’ debate over the relation or origins of al-Ma’arrī’s *Risālat al-Ghufrān* and Dante’s *Inferno*, I tried to highlight how those masterpieces our times providing deep insight into the past and at the same time alluding to the present understanding of religious, social, and philosophical themes. However, my understanding of katabasis in the modern notion of literary studies inspired me to compare a virtual descent of human’s self into its own psyche’s labyrinth in an attempt to retrieve lost love and dead ambitions.

With its sophisticated language and symbolic imagery, al-Ma’arrī’s *Risālat al-Ghufrān* challenged the understanding of the idea of heaven and hell in the Muslim doctrine. Rather than accepting the traditions and customs despite of their pointlessness, al-Ma’arrī rebels against the established forms and norms. Since he could not effectively change the status quo, al-Ma’arrī chose to mock it instead. Interestingly, considering al-Ma’arrī’s life and tragedies with him being blind, isolated, and pock-marked-his view of life and death, heaven and hell presents his theme of injustice and doubt that is understood via the placement of the characters in hell. On the other hand, Dante’s *Inferno* presents an image of lost hope regained in the possibility of finding paradise. His katabatic journey is part of a larger picture: his anabasis to Paradise. It provides the
readers with hope of a better possibility and a warning of dire punishments in hell. Indeed, it is a direct contrast to the message of al-Ma’arrī where the dwellers of both heaven and hell are nonchalant. At some point, the humorous retorts of the supposed tortured souls in hell allow the readers to forget that they are being punished as they speak.

In terms of the modern katabatic journey, Ted Hughes and George Maṣrū’a’s character of Khālid present a shift from the ancient conception of the journey to hell. Both Hughes and Khālid find their hell in their own existence after losing their beloved. They both find their escape through the publication of their work. Whereas Hughes had already lost his wife 35 years previously, the shock of Widād’s death sends Khālid into a second, more permanent, katabasis. The poems of Ted Hughes all revolved around the theme of life, blood, love, conflict, and representation of the self. Although presented in a different light, these themes also find ground in Maṣrū’a’s Daḥīyyatān.

In fact, modern katabasis finds parallelisms with the ancient understanding of katabasis. The image of sadness due to lost love meets Ovid’s Metamorphosis protagonists in the unsatisfying end to their love. As Hughes and Khālid could not regain their love of life, Ovid had Orpheus spend the remainder of his life wandering in the lost woods.


King, Nicola. *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP,


Rustomji, Nerina. *The Garden and the Fire: Heaven and Hell in Islamic Culture*. New York:


APPENDIX OF SELECT POEMS FROM BIRTHDAY LETTERS

Fulbright Scholars
Where was it, in the strand? A display
Of new items, in the photograph.
For some reason I noticed it.
A picture of that year’s intake
Of Fulbright Scholars. Just arriving-
Or arrived. Or some of them.
Were you among them? I studied it,
Not too minutely, wondering
Which of them I might meet.
I remember that thought. Not
Your face. No doubt I scanned particularly
The girls. Maybe I noticed you.
Maybe I weighed you up, feeling unlikely.
Noted your long hair, loose waves-
Your Veronica lake bang. Not what it hid.
It would appear blond. And your grin.
Your exaggerated American
Grin for the cameras, the judges, the strangers, the frighteners.
Then I forgot. Yet I remember
The picture: the Fulbright Scholars.
With their luggage? It seems unlikely.
Could they have come as a team? I was walking
Sore-fooled, under hot sun, hot pavements.
Was it then I bought a peach? That’s as I remember.
From a stall near Charing Cross Station.
It was the first fresh peach I had ever tasted.
I could hardly believe how delicious.
At twenty-five I was dumbfounded afresh
jBy my ignorance of the simplest things.
Sam

It was all of a piece to you
That your horse, the white calm installion, Sam,
Decided he’d had enough
And started home at gallop. I can live
Your incredulity, your certainty
That this was it. You lost your stirrups. He galloped
Straight down the white line of the Barton Road.
You lost your reins, you lost your seat-
It was grab his neck and adore him
Or free- fall. You slewed under his neck,
An upside-down jockey with nothing
Between you and the cataract of macadam,
That horrible hard, swift river,
But the propeller terrors of his front legs
And the chanour of the iron shoes, so far beneath you.

Luck was already there. Did you have a helmet?
How did you cling on? Baby monkey
Using your arms and legs for clinging steel.
What saved you? Maybe your poems
Saved themselves, slung under that plunging neck,
Hammocked in your body over the switchback road.
You saw only blur. And a cyclist’s shock-mask,
 Fallen, dragging his bicycle over him, protective.
I can feel your bounced and dangling anguish,
Hugging what was left of your steerage.
How did you hang on? You couldn’t have done it.
Something in you not you did it for itself.
You clung on, probably nearly unconscious,
Till he walked into his stable. That gallop
Was practice, but not enough, and quite useless.
When I jumped a fence you strangled me
One giddy moment, then fell off,
Flung yourself off and under my feet to trip me
And tripped me and lay dead. Over in a flash.
The Tender Place
Your temples, where the hair crowded in,
Were the tender place. Once to check
I dropped a file across the electrodes
Of a twelve-volt battery- it exploded
Like a grenade. Somebody wired you up.
Somebody pushed the lever. They crashed
The thunderbolt into your skull.
In their bleached coats, with blenched faces,
They hovered again
To see how you were, in your straps
Whether your teeth were still whole.
The hand on the calibrated leaver
Again feeling nothing
Except feeling nothing pushed to feel
Some squirm of sensation. Terror
Was the cloud of you
Waiting for these lightnings. I saw
An oak limb sheared at a bang.
You your Daddy’s leg. How many seizures
Did you suffer this god to grab you
By the roots of the hair? The reports
Escaped back into clouds. What went up
Vaporized? Where lightning rods wept copper
And the nerve threw off its skin
Like a burning child
Scampering out of the bomb-flash. They dropped you
A rigid bent bit of wire
Across the Boston City grid. The lights
In the Senate House dipped
As your voice dived inwards.
Right through the bolt-hole basement.
Came up, years later,
Over-exposed, like an X-ray-
Brain-map still dark-patched
With the scorched- earth scars
Of your retreat. And your words,
Faces reserved from the light,
Holding in their entrails.
The Shot
Your worship needed a god.
Where it lacked one, it found one. Ordinary jocks became gods –
Deified by your infatuation
That seemed to have been designed at birth for a god.
It was a god-seeker. A god-finder.
Your Daddy had been aiming you at God
When his death touched the trigger.

In that flash
You saw your whole life. You ricocheted
The length of your Alpha career
With the fury
Of a high-velocity bullet
That cannot shed one foot-pound
Of kinetic energy. The elect
More or less died on impact -
They were too mortal to take it. They were mind-stuff,
Provisional, speculative, mere auras.
Sound-barrier events along your flightpath.
But inside your sob-sodden Kleenex
And your Saturday night panics,
Under your hair done this way and done that way,
Behind what looked like rebounds
And the cascade of cries diminuendo,
You were undeflected.
You were gold-jacketed, solid silver,
Nickel-tipped. Trajectory perfect
As through ether. Even the cheek-scar,
Where you seemed to have side-swiped concrete,
Served as a rifling groove
To keep you true.

Till your real target
Hid behind me. Your Daddy,
The god with the smoking gun. For a long time
Vague as mist, I did not even know
I had been hit,
Or that you had gone clean through me –
To bury yourself at last in the heart of the god.

In my position, the right witchdoctor
Might have caught you in flight with his bare hands,
Tossed you, cooling, one hand to the other,
Godless, happy, quieted.

I managed
A wisp of your hair, your ring, your watch, your nightgown.
**18 Rugby Street**

So there in Number Eighteen Rugby Street's
Victorian torpor and squalor I waited for you.
I think of that house as a stage-set -
Four floors exposed to the auditorium.
On all four floors, in, out, the love-struggle
In all its acts and scenes, a snakes and ladders
Of intertangling and of disentangling
Limbs and loves and lives. Nobody was old.
An unmyysterious laboratory of amours.
Perpetual performance - names of the actors altered,
But never the parts. They told me: 'You
Should write a book about this house. It's possessed!
Whoever comes into it never gets properly out!
Whoever enters it enters a labyrinth -
A Knossos of coincidence! And now you're in it'
The legends were amazing. I listened, amazed.

I lived there alone. Sat alone
At the hacked, archaic, joiner's bench
That did for desk and table,
And waited for you and Lucas.
Whatever I was thinking I was not thinking
Of that Belgian girl in the ground-floor flat,
Plump as a mushroom, hair black as boot polish:
The caged bird and extra-marital cuddle
Of the second-hand-car dealer who kept
The catacomb basement heaped with exhaust mufflers,
Assorted jagged shards of cars, shin-rippers
On the way to the unlit and unlovely
Lavatory beneath the street's pavement.
That girl had nothing to do with the rest of the house

But play her part in the drama. Her house-jailor
Who kept her in solitary was a demon
High-explosive, black, insane Alsatian
That challenged through the chained crack of the door
Every entrance and exit. He guarded her,
For the car dealer, from all, too well finally.
Not, seven years in the future, from her gas-oven.
She was nothing to do with me. Nor was Susan
Who still had to be caught in the labyrinth,
And who would meet the Minotaur there,
And would be holding me from my telephone
Those nights you would most need me. On this evening
Nothing could make me think I would ever be needed
By anybody. Ten years had to darken,
Three of them in your grave, before Susan
Could pace that floor above night after night
(Where you and I, the new rings big on our fingers,
Had warmed our wedding night in the single bed)
Crying alone and dying of leukaemia.

Lucas was bringing you. You were pausing
A night in London on your escape to Paris.
April 13th, your father's birthday. A Friday.
I guessed you were off to whirl through some euphoric
American Europe. Years after your death
I learned the desperation of that search
Through those following days, scattering your tears
Around the cobbles of Paris. I deferred for a night
Your panics, your fevers, your worst fear -
The toad-stone in the head of your desolation.
The dream you hunted for, the life you begged
To be given again, you would never recover, ever.
Your journal told me the story of your torture.

I guess how you visited each of your sacred shrines
In raging faith you'd catch him there, somehow,
By clairvoyance, by coincidence -
Normally child's play to a serious passion.
This was not the last time it would fail you.
Meanwhile there was me, for a few hours -
A few pence on the fare, for insurance.
Happy to be martyred for folly
I invoked you, bribing Fate to produce you.
Were you conjuring me? I had no idea
How I was becoming necessary,
Or what emergency surgery Fate would make
Of my casual self-service. I can hear you
Climbing the bare stairs, alive and close,
Babbling to be overheard, breathless.
That was your artillery, to confuse me:
Before coming over the top in your panoply
You wanted me to hear you panting. Then -
Blank. How did you enter? What came next?
How did Lucas delete himself, for instance?
Did we even sit? A great bird, you
Surged in the plumage of your excitement,
Raving exhilaration. A blueish voltage -
Fluorescent cobalt, a flare of aura
That I later learned was yours uniquely.
And your eyes' peculiar brightness, their oddness,
Two little brown people, hooded, Prussian,
But elvish, and girlish, and sparking
With the pressure of your effervescence.
Were they family heirlooms, as in your son?
For me yours were the novel originals.
And now at last I got a good look at you.
Your roundy face, that your friends, being objective,
 Called 'rubbery' and you, crueller, 'boneless':
A device for elastic extremes,
A spirit mask transfigured every moment
In its own séance, its own ether.
And I became aware of the mystery
Of your lips, like nothing before in my life,
Their aboriginal thickness. And of your nose,
Broad and Apache, nearly a boxer's nose,
Scorpio's obverse to the Semitic eagle
That made every camera your enemy,
The jailor of your vanity, the traitor
In your Sexual Dreams Incorporated,
Nose from Attila's horde: a prototype face
That could have looked up at me through the smoke
Of a Navajo campfire. And your small temples
Into which your hair-roots crowded, upstaged
By that glamorous, fashionable bang.
And your little chin, your Pisces chin.
It was never a face in itself. Never the same.
It was like the sea's face - a stage
For weathers and currents, the sun's play and the moon's.
Never a face until that final morning
When it became the face of a child - its scar
Like a Maker's flaw. But now you declaimed
A long poem about a black panther
While I held you and kissed you and tried to keep you
From flying about the room. For all that,
You would not stay.

We walked south across London to Fetter Lane
And your hotel. Opposite the entrance
On a bombsite becoming a building site
We clutched each other giddily
For safety and went in a barrel together
Over some Niagara. Falling
In the roar of soul your scar told me -
Like its secret name or its password -
How you had tried to kill yourself. And I heard
Without ceasing for a moment to kiss you
As if a sober star had whispered it
Above the revolving, rumbling city: stay clear.

A poltroon of a star. I cannot remember
How I smuggled myself, wrapped in you,
Into the hotel. There we were.
You were slim and lithe and smooth as a fish.
You were a new world. My new world.
So this is America, I marvelled.
Beautiful, beautiful America!
Red
Red was your colour.
If not red, then white. But red
Was what you wrapped around you.
Blood-red. Was it blood?
Was it red-ochre, for warming the dead?
Haematite to make immortal
The precious heirloom bones, the family bones.

When you had your way finally
Our room was red. A judgement chamber.
Shut casket for gems. The carpet of blood
Patterned with darkenings, congealments.
The curtains - ruby corduroy blood,
Sheer blood-falls from ceiling to floor.
The cushions the same. The same
Raw carmine along the window-seat.
A throbbing cell. Aztec altar - temple.

Only the bookshelves escaped into whiteness.

And outside the window
Poppies thin and wrinkle-frail
As the skin on blood,
Salvias, that your father named you after,
Like blood lobbing from a gash,
And roses, the heart's last gouts,
Catastrophic, arterial, doomed.

Your velvet long full skirt, a swathe of blood,
A lavish burgundy.
Your lips a dipped, deep crimson.

You revelled in red.
I felt it raw - like the crisp gauze edges
Of a stiffening wound. I could touch
The open vein in it, the crusted gleam.

Everything you painted you painted white
Then splashed it with roses, defeated it,
Leaned over it, dripping roses,
Weeping roses, and more roses,
Then sometimes, among them, a little bluebird.

Blue was better for you. Blue was wings.
Kingfisher blue silks from San Francisco
Folded your pregnancy
In crucible caresses.
Blue was your kindly spirit - not a ghoul
But electrified, a guardian, thoughtful.

In the pit of red
You hid from the bone-clinic whiteness.
But the jewel you lost was blue.