

The Marvelous in Stories

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Torquato Tasso wrote one of the most famous poems of the Renaissance, the epic *Gerusalemme liberata* (*Jerusalem Delivered*), which, though loosely based on Godfrey of Bouillon's efforts in the First Crusade, on the "pious arms and captain / who liberated the great sepulchre of Christ," is mostly taken up with subplots steeped in romance and magic.¹ The poem became both infamous and beloved for its fantastical events, its enchanted forests, knights turned into beasts, prophesying shields, and for its love stories; the latter, in particular, were incredibly frequent subjects of paintings, plays, and operas for centuries to come. (Even as late as 2005, over 400 years after the epic's publication, another opera was written based on the romance between the Christian knight Rinaldo and the Saracen sorceress Armida.)² With how great an emphasis the epic had on the fantastic, one would think Tasso's poetic philosophy eschewed the historical and was enraptured by the wild Orlando fantasies of Boiardo and Ariosto.³ Yet this was not so: Tasso took the criticism of his poem to heart and attempted a complete revision of the poem, entitled *Gerusalemme conquistata* (*Jerusalem Conquered*), released near the end of his life, which removed most of the fantasy and some of the romance. The end result was hated by all—by audiences for its lack of fun, by critics for its lack of style in the revised verse—and promptly ignored; yet this fallen poem was, perhaps, closer to Tasso's ideals.

The Renaissance was the age of zeal for the classics of ancient Greece and Rome; though some had been rediscovered through archaeology, most of these works were not—contrary to popular opinion—lost, but simply not as copiously studied and imitated as they became during the Renaissance. In those years, the classical revival, beginning in Italy, spread throughout Europe, so that everyone stuffed their works with mythological references and debated how much a play needed to stick to Aristotle's three unities.⁴ Thus Spenser's *Epithalamion* can bounce between talk of marriage at the high altar, while letting "the roving Organs loudly play /

¹ Torquato Tasso, *La Gerusalemme liberata*, ed. Lodovico Magugliani (Milan: Rizzoli, 1950), l.1.1-2, p. 9

² Judith Weir, *Armida* (2005). Being a modern work, it moves the action to the contemporary Middle East, presumably during the Iraq War, and the sorceress becomes a journalist (perhaps an apropos transformation).

³ Matteo Maria Boiardo (1440-1494) wrote *Orlando innamorato* (1483-1495), borrowing material from medieval romances, particularly centered around Orlando (Roland), a knight who served under Charlemagne. It had a convoluted structure of cavalierly episodes, but it ended unfinished, due to Boiardo's death. Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1533) decided to remedy this lack with his massive *Orlando furioso* (1516-1532), which, though it does continue Boiardo's story, also gloats the work with the stuff of myth and fantasy, like hippogriffs, orcs, sorceress, and riding Elijah's chariot to the moon to gather Orlando's wits in a bottle and return them to him (since, of course, everything lost on earth is found on the moon). Renaissance readers appeared to like fantasy more than realism, though, as Boiardo's work was completely dwarfed by Ariosto's, which is still at least somewhat popular today.

⁴ In the *Poetics*, Aristotle states that a tragedy (the part of the work discussing comedy was either never completed or is lost) should follow three unities: unity of place, unity of time, and unity of action. The plot should take place in one location, in twenty-four hours, and should have one plot-line, with no sub-plots. The ideal became widely emulated and debated throughout Renaissance Europe; some particularly famous fights happened in France, such as the *Querelle du Cid*, regarding the 1636 play *Le Cid* by playwright Pierre Corneille (1606-1684), which ignored the unities.

The praises of the Lord in liuely notes” and calls to “thou great Iuno, which with awful might / The lawes of wedlock still dost patronize,” along with “thou fayre Hebe, and thou Hymen free.”⁵ Thus even an epic on the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Christ speaks of how, after the Ascension, “With the Father, God accepts the ruling of Olympus.”⁶ Along with the three unities in drama, though, many Renaissance writers also took from Aristotle the ideal of art as imitation, which often came to be described as the principle of verisimilitude, that is, that art should accurately reflect life. This led to a conflict, though: how could one reconcile the desire to use the newly-beloved classical mythology while still keeping to the principle of imitation? Another way of putting the problem—via abstraction—is this: how does one reconcile the love of the miraculous with the desire for verisimilitude?

That is the way Tasso put the question. In 1587, he published a series of *Discourses on the Poetic Art, and, in particular, on the Heroic Poem*; it is assumed that he wrote these while working on *Gerusalemme liberata*, published in 1581, though, when they were published, he was probably already at work on his revision, the *Gerusalemme conquistata*, which was published in 1592. The *Discourses* are divided into three, on, respectively, choosing the poetic material, the poet’s elocution, and the poet’s style. In the first discourse, he discusses how to choose material that is, “by its nature, capable of every perfection,” a choice which is in the hands of the poet, unlike the orator, to whom material is almost always offer “by case or by necessity.”⁷ The poet must also take the nature of the material in mind, so that he does not make “those things appear verisimilar, which, in reality, are not so...and those things miraculous, which will not bring forth marvels.”⁸ Whence does the poet take his material? According to Tasso, the only choices are either imagination or history.⁹ But there is really only one choice: “It is much better, in my judgment, that [the material] be taken from History, because, since the Epic ought to approach the verisimilar in every part (I presuppose this, as a most noted principle), it is not verisimilar if an illustrious action, like those in the Heroic Poem, be not truly written and passed down from the memory of the ancestors with the aid of some History.”¹⁰

So far, then, it seems, per Tasso, that poetry—especially epic or heroic poetry—must be based on verisimilitude, on reality, and thus must take its material from history. However realistically plausible some invented story is, for Tasso, it is never close enough to reality and

⁵ Edmund Spenser, *Epithalamion*, ll. 218-219, 390-391, 405, in *The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser*, ed. J.C. Smith and E. de Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 582, 584.

⁶ Marco Girolamo Vida, *The Christiad*, ed. and tr. Gertrude C. Drake and Clarence A. Forbes (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), VI.731, p. 274. This is my translation from the Latin original.

⁷ *Discorsi del Signor Torquato Tasso. Dell’Arte Poetica; et in particolare del Poem Heroico...* (Venice: Giulio Vassalini, 1587), 1v.

⁸ *Discorsi*, 1v.

⁹ The words Tasso uses for “to imagine” or “imagined” are *finzir* and *finzido*, which could, colloquially, also have the meanings of “to make up” and “made up,” to put them in a harsher light.

¹⁰ *Discorsi*, 2r.

verisimilitude unless it is *actually* taken from reality.¹¹ Yet Tasso, interestingly, restricts the subject matter even further: poetic material must be taken, not just from any history, but from the history of religions. (The rationale becomes clearer in a moment.) There are two types of religions: those which “we” (for Tasso, the unanimity of Christendom is strong) hold true, and those which we hold false. Yet, if poets takes their material from the history of religions held to be false, it will fail, as they will have to “want to recover, now, all the deity which the Gentiles had adored, or not want to recover it; if they do not recover it, the marvelous becomes absent, if they recover it, the Poem remains deprived, in some part, of verisimilitude.”¹² It is here that we finally see Tasso treat of the key conflict, that between the marvelous and the verisimilar. It might now be worth quoting a long passage from the *Discourses*—complete with its tortured syntax and run-on sentences—that treats of this point:

Truly, little delightful is that Poem which does not have, in itself, some marvels, which so move, not only the souls of the ignorant, but also those of the judicious—I speak of those rings, of those enchanted shields, of those flying coursers, of those ships turned into Nymphs, of those worms which are interposed among combatants, and of other such things, with which, like spices, the judicious Writer ought to flavor his Poem; because, with this, he invites and attracts not only the taste of vulgar men, without trouble, but also that of the more discerning, with satisfaction: but, those miracles not being able to be performed by natural power, it is necessary that we address them to some supernatural power, and, addressing them to some Gentile deity, verisimilitude suddenly ceases, because that cannot be verisimilar to us men which we hold, not only false, but impossible; but it is impossible that, by the power of some Idols, vain and without thought, that are not, and will no more be, there proceed things which so surpass nature and humanity. And as much as that marvelousness (if it truly merits that name) which the Joves and the Apollos and the other divinities of the Gentiles bear in themselves is not only far from all verisimilitude, but frigid, and insipid, and of no power, everyone of mediocre judgment will not easily bear its occurrence, reading those Poems which are founded on the falsity of the ancient Religion. Those two natures are very diverse, Signor Scipione,¹³ the marvelous, and the verisimilar, and in different guises, which are as if contrary to each other; nevertheless, the one and the other is necessary in the Poem,

¹¹ One side argument Tasso uses for this is that “the Poet ought to win Readers with the semblance of truth...which is easily done with the authority of History.” See *Discorsi*, 2v. That seems to imply that a fully-imagined story can never be wholly convincing: history’s authority is necessary to convince.

¹² *Discorsi*, 3r.

¹³ The *Discourses* were addressed to Cardinal Scipione Gonzaga (1542-1593), at the time the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, who was one of Tasso’s greatest patrons.

but it would be better if the art of the excellent Poet were that which couples them together.¹⁴

From here, he goes on to discuss a popular opinion that the verisimilar and the marvelous should, while both being present in a poem, be present in separate sections, divided from each other; Tasso rejects this, instead holding that, though imitation and verisimilitude is “proper and intrinsic to [poetry’s] essence,” yet that does not deny the marvelous: “on the contrary, I judge that one and the same action can be both marvelous and verisimilar.”¹⁵

Tasso’s argument is fairly simple: first, though the essence and deepest nature of a poem is imitation and verisimilitude, the marvelous is still useful for delighting and attracting readers. Second, the marvelous is not opposed to verisimilitude; the miraculous is real. Third, the marvelous, in its definition, exceeds human power and ability, so it requires a supernatural ability, which means non-religious history cannot be poetic material. Fourth, the deities of the Gentiles are false, so any marvels performed by their ability would nullify verisimilitude; their religious history is thus unfit as poetic material. Fifth, God’s supernatural powers, the preternatural powers of the angels and demons, and those who share in those powers are true; thus, the religious history of Christianity or Judaism is the only acceptable poetic material, at least the only one capable of every perfection.¹⁶

It is an interesting argument, and one that strives hard to defend the style of *Gerusalemme liberata*; one wonders, though, how much Tasso might have repudiated this at the end of his life, considering the stripped-down style of *Gerusalemme conquistata*. It is also interesting when compared with some of his earlier works, such as the fictional pastoral play *Aminta* (1573), with a nymph as the love interest, or the tragedy *Re Torrismondo* (1587), originally begun in 1573-1574 as *Galealto re di Norvegia* (*Galealto, King of Norway*), which is about a real pagan Norwegian king, Turismod, though the love story seems fictional. Perhaps he would have argued that tragedy is separate from the heroic poem in its choice of subject matter (though, in the *Discourses*, he decries modern tragedy for using fictional plots);¹⁷

¹⁴ *Discorsi*, 3r-3v.

¹⁵ *Discorsi*, 4r.

¹⁶ Tasso explicitly lists the various allowable supernatural entities: “the Poet attributes some operations, which far exceed the power of men, to God, to His Angels, to demons, or to those like God, or to whom is conceded the demon’s power, which are the Saints, the Magi, and the Fates.” See *Discorsi*, 4r. Since such powers are affirmed in Catholic theology, angelology, and demonology, at least to some degree, the use of them in a poem does not break verisimilitude. Earlier, Tasso allowed use of Jewish history because Judaism *was* held to be true in the past, even if Christianity has since superseded it; cf. *Discorsi*, 3r, 4v.

¹⁷ See *Discorsi*, 3r. One work he might have in mind is the *Orbecche* (1541) of Giovanni Battista Giraldi (1504-1573), which, though heavily based on ancient models and utilizing entities from mythology, like Nemesis and the Furies, involves a plot and characters wholly invented by Giraldi. This would also explain why he complains that such modern tragedies cannot even fully commit to their novelty: though “the material and names are imagined, yet the tangle is so woven and so loosened as if it were found among the Ancient Greeks.” (Tasso uses the images of tangles and knots to describe conflict and resolution.)

perhaps, viewed cynically, he really only wrote the *Discourses* to defend *Gerusalemme liberata*, not as an actual explanation of poetic philosophy. At the least, we can say that his epic poems never deviated from this explanation of subject matter: the only other attempts were shorter works in his youth, the *Gerusalemme*, which he wrote at the age of 15 as an abortive start for what became the *Gerusalemme liberata*, and the *Rinaldo* (1562), which dealt with one of the main characters of his later epic.¹⁸

A key issue Tasso does not deal with is if a poem *can* be written with the marvelous; he starts by describing marvels as useful for delight and attraction, but, in the end, it seems to be a necessity of the epic or heroic form. If it is not strictly necessary, then most of his argument becomes null and void: as long as a poem does not include the miraculous, there is no need to take subject matter from religion, and there is no need to ignore Gentile or non-religious history as well. (Perhaps this explains his subject choice for *Re Torrismondo*.) Why is it necessary for Satan, “the grand nemesis of the human race,” to call a council of “a thousand unclean Harpies and a thousand / Centaurs and Sphinxes and pallid Gorgons” to “cause the final pain unto the Christians,” and then send them off, scattered across the world, to “begin to fabricate their traps / diverse and new, and to use their arts”?¹⁹ Couldn’t the Fatimids and Seljuks provide a suitable enemy to the Crusaders, without the need for demonic assistance? Why is it necessary that, only at Goffredo’s prayer, in the drought-ridden desert, “Suddenly, behold, clouds, and not from earth / Through power of the sun on high ascending,” that “impetuous rain” comes due to the “faithfulness of race that serves God well”?²⁰ Certainly rain can fall without the need of prayer and divine intervention. There seems no reason why such marvelous events are necessary to an epic, besides the fact of tradition. Obviously, the Renaissance epics were heavily influenced by their ancient counterparts (there were many –iads, like the *Christiad*, the *Davidiad*, even the *Columbiad*, and many poems of 12- or 24-canto length), and those were heavy with marvelous events, like gods on the battlefield, bleeding ichor, and the bestial transformations performed by Circe. The longest ancient epic—Nonnus of Panopolis’ *Dionysiaca*—was entirely the story of the twice-born god, Dionysius, and one certainly cannot tell a god’s story without miraculous events. Yet is so marvelousness strictly *necessary* for an epic? Though refraining from saying it, Tasso, at least in the *Discourses*, certainly seemed to think so, though his final revision belies the fact.

If we count the marvelous as simply optional, then, an epic could be written without utilizing it, which means it could reasonably take subject matter from any history—verisimilitude still, in Tasso’s view, requiring historical subjects—though religious history would be out. If the marvelous is involved, though, then Tasso’s argument has some merit, if

¹⁸ Tasso wrote some other poems as well—some assorted *Rime* inspired by Petrarch, a verse retelling of Genesis (*Le sette giornate del mondo creato*), and two little devotional works printed shortly before he died (*Le lacrime di Maria Vergine* and *Le lacrime di Gesù Cristo*)—but none aspired to the heroic or epic genre.

¹⁹ Tasso, *Gerusalemme liberata* IV.1.3, IV.5.1-2, IV.2.2, IV.19.3-4, pp. 81, 82, 86.

²⁰ Tasso, *Gerusalemme liberata* XIII.75.1-2, XIII.75.7, XIII.80.5, pp. 312, 314.

verisimilitude is held to as strictly as he does. Once the fictional is accepted, verisimilitude can still restrain the work: if the marvelous is used, we might have, for instance, new saints or new demons messing with events, but they would still have to have a Christian basis. Once even verisimilitude is thrown off, though, as in Ariosto, all bets are off: the wildest hippogriffs and moon-trips are perfectly acceptable. Using Tasso's understanding, we could break down various subject matters in this way:

- 1) Verisimilitude, marvelousness, non-fictional: Christian (or Jewish) religious history is required
- 2) Verisimilitude, marvelousness, fictional: history-like, still within the purview of Christianity and its supernatural and preternatural beings
- 3) Verisimilitude, non-fictional: any history, non-religious subjects
- 4) Verisimilitude, fictional: history-like, realistic, non-religious subjects
- 5) Marvelous, non-fictional: Gentile religious history
- 6) Marvelous, fictional: wild, no-holds-barred fantasy

Such might be a classification according to Tasso, if he even accepted any subject matter except the first: Christian religious history.

While analyzing the view of a 16th-century poet might be interesting (at least to some), it begs the question: why does this matter? Who speaks of verisimilitude anymore? Certainly, the word is little used, and our literary discussions are no longer based around Aristotle: so much now is based around Derrida and his ilk. Yet Tasso's discussion does bring up a conflict that is still present, even if under different names: the conflict between the realistic and the fantastic.

The genre of epic poem is currently extinct, or at least severely endangered; perhaps the last major poem to even strive for a somewhat-traditional narrative epic (as opposed to the modern, disjointed "epics," such as Ezra Pound's *Cantos*) would be Nikos Kazantzakis' *Odyssey* (1938).²¹ To be useful today, we would have to apply the conflict, and Tasso's thoughts on it, to literature in general, though I think it would be remiss to ignore films as well.

Certainly, verisimilitude is now understood in a much looser way than it was by Tasso. Now "realistic" more commonly means "plausible" rather than "actual" or "historical." Tasso's understanding of verisimilitude might still apply to historical fiction—such as Henryk Sienkiewicz's great *Trilogy* (1884-1888) or recent popular books like Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2009)—but not to the general realm of fiction. Generally, realistic modern fiction strives to be plausible, to represent reality (and thus to truly be "verisimilar," "similar to the truth"), often with a basis in actual people or events—Upton Sinclair certainly based *The Jungle* (1906) on observation of the real meatpacking industry; his *Oil!* (1926-1927) was based on oil tycoon

²¹ The English subtitle accurately explains the contents: *A Modern Sequel*.

Edward L. Doheny—but it typically has no attempt to be as tied to history as Tasso would like. Such realistic works are devoid of miraculous events; events may be severely implausible—such as in any of the rags-to-riches stories of Horatio Alger, Jr.—but they still have some basis in normal, non-supernatural reality.

On the opposite side, we have full-blown marvelous works, complete fantasy, channeling Ariosto far more than Tasso. Tolkien's books would certainly be a keystone, as would the countless sword-and-sorcery works derived from them. But fantasy can take many forms, such as the popular genres of cyperpunk or steampunk. It also applies to the main film franchises that dominate box offices today: *Star Wars* and Marvel Comics. The Marvel movies have the real world as a general setting, while *Star Wars* has a completely separate universe, yet both are predominately marvelous.

There is a middle ground between these two, though, the ground that Tasso aimed for. It is also the area that can be most controversial. A pure realistic work or a purely fantastic one may not arouse much ire—except for debates about fantastical worlds not following their own rules—but mixing marvelous elements into a predominately realistic work can be perilous. This is easily seen when a realistic work doesn't even include something specifically marvelous or supernatural, simply something horrendously implausible or improbable: hence the phrase “jumping the shark.”²² Often this might occur as a *deus ex machina*, as a device used to get a character out of a tight spot. In those cases, if such an event occurs only once, maybe twice, in a work, it feels inconsistent; it almost feels like the work is not marvelous *enough* for those elements to be acceptable. If such implausible events are more common, they are often more acceptable, such as the feats of typical action heroes, particularly in the '70s and '80s; there the implausibility, the almost-fantastical abilities, are woven into the character as a whole, while not reaching the full fantasy of a superhero.

Such isolated implausible, nigh-marvelous, events are frequently criticized justly, arising from poor plotting on the part of the creator. But there are other ways in which the marvelous can be more deeply interwoven into a work. The style of magical realism comes to mind. Here, so much of the story is realistic, yet marvelous events will occasionally intrude, enough to feel like part of the world, but still jarring to the uninitiated. Often the marvelous aspect of these works draws on folk religion and mythology, instead of the official theology of religions; such is often the case in Latin America or in Japan. It is not necessary that magical realism draw on any religious basis, but it often does. A religious system—whether codified in an official theology or percolating on a more dispersed level—can provide some form of consistency to magical

²² The phrase describes a scene in the long-running sitcom *Happy Days* (1974-1984) in which a character literally jumps over a shark while riding on water skis. Originally it was used to describe something which, to stop a loss of popularity, resorts to gimmicks or strange attempts at popularity; more recently, it has also become used to describe moments of complete implausibility which shatter the style of the work.

realism, provided the reader knows the background. For instance, in the film *Wolf Children* (2012), a woman marries a man who is also a wolf, and their children have the ability to shift between the two forms as well. Taken on its own, it might seem quite strange and out of the blue; but, against the background of Japanese mythology, such as the *kitsune*, the shape-shifting foxes, it seems perfectly acceptable. Contrast that with Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915): as far as I know, there is no basis in German or Jewish folklore for a man to awaken as a giant vermin. Hence, instead of being dubbed "magical realism" for its insertion of a single marvelous event into an otherwise realistic story, it is typically classed under absurdism or surrealism. Perhaps that could be considered the dividing line between surrealism and magical realism: though both are predominately realistic stories with a few fantastic elements, in the latter, these elements have a basis in some greater system, which they do not have in the former.

Interestingly, a work like Tasso's might, in modern times, fit more under the banner of magical realism: after all, it has a basis in the real world, but it includes supernatural elements drawn from a greater system. In this case, though, it comes from a more codified system—Catholic theology—rather than a more dispersed one like Shinto. It also has a much greater number of supernatural events compared to most magical realist works. It also has some connection to the genre of historical fiction—at least, that is the level of verisimilitude Tasso claims to be aiming at. In truth, his book has far more fictionalized characters than he admits; the historical basis of the *Gerusalemme liberata* is quite small.

The strange thing is how little a work like Tasso's fits into modern genres. Dispensing with the poetic form, and even the loose basis in history, it is the prevalence of the supernatural, and supernatural elements from one of the major religions, that breaks the mold.²³ I do not know if I've come across any recent work that includes copious supernatural influence from the Christian God, the angels, the saints, the demons, or anything similar for Judaism or Islam either. It seems modern literature can accept purely fantastical worlds; it can accept super-powered humans; it can even accept some level of mythology or supernatural horror (such as in H.P. Lovecraft): but it draws the line at the use of major religions. The question is why such a thing occurs. It would be easy to chalk it up to anti-Christian sentiment; after all, it seems that Christianity—particularly in the Middle Ages and some Renaissance works, like Tasso or Milton—has the most-developed tradition of such works, though certainly one could look at, for instance, the tales of the Hasidim or stories about the deeds of djinn.²⁴ For a time, these types of

²³ Typically, the religions classified as "major" are Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, though there are numerous forms of each of these. In general, the claim of "major" is based on the number of adherents, as well as the codified nature of its thought; thus something like animism, no matter its number of adherents, would probably never be considered "major," as it is really a catch-all term for various local religions that share similar characteristics, without being joined in any theological or institutional way. Judaism is considered major less due to its adherents—currently about 15 million, less than Taoism or Sikhism—and more due to its historical influence, particularly its role as an ancestor of Christianity, the most populous religion in the world.

²⁴ Interestingly, Jewish works in this vein might still be permitted; I have not read enough modern Jewish literature,

stories were prevalent in Christian literature: just think of the countless stories of the saints, with their daring miracles. Even the single story of St. Francis has multiple supernatural elements: a leper revealing himself to be Christ in disguise, rosebushes losing their thorns, birds listening to preaching, wolves obeying orders and aiding villages, stigmata miraculously appearing during a vision of a seraph, among others. Such stories were prevalent both on the popular level and in the works of scholars; from simple collections of stories, such supernatural events migrated and entered into more polished, literary works, with Tasso and Milton as representative exemplars.

Yet such a trend did not continue, even in strongly Christian books; direct supernatural influence became greatly subdued, if present at all. (Typically, if supernatural events were reduced to a minimum, what remained was not the works of God, His angels, and His saints, but Satan and his demons; a prime example is William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971), and its 1973 film adaptation.) What caused this change? It is not strictly an anti-Christian view among literary critics, as there have still been Christian works far more recent than Tasso that are hailed as classics—think of many of Dostoyevsky's novels, or Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* (1940). It is not a reticence about or opposition to Christianity in general; instead, the issue is explicitly supernatural events. Instead of a mere change in the literary world, I think this trend reflects a change in the Christian world.

Medieval Catholicism was awash in earthiness, in rituals and processions, in feasts and fasts, in “smells and bells.” It recognized that Christianity was centered around a God made flesh, so it had a love of the flesh. Certainly this love was tempered, but it was quite present. Not only did God become flesh once, long ago, but He, in a way, did so at every Mass as well. For medieval Christians, though, there was much more: God could intervene through visions, through disguises, through the deeds of His saints and angels, made visible and acting miraculously, while Satan and his demons prowled about, seeking the ruin of souls. They believed the tales of Francis of Assisi, and they believed in witches as well. The lone woman on the street might be Mary in disguise, and to aid her is to aid Christ's Mother; yet she might also be a succubus, seeking the corruption of unsuspecting men. The world, one might say, was porous: Heaven and Hell both intersected Earth, and beings could pass between the realms, to interact with them. Thus visionaries could go down to Hell, to see the torments of the damned, and then to Heaven, to see the joys of the blessed; the demons could stalk around the town and be stopped by saints or by the angel's avenging sword. Supernatural events *could* happen at any time, and many certainly believed they had experienced them. (The long lists of miracles attached to saints' lives attest to this.)

but I actually wouldn't be too surprised if they included stories of the miraculous deeds of Hasidim or strange feats linked to Kabbalah, or even reincarnation, as some say occurred with Isaac Luria.

Then what changed? A certain “de-enchantment” of Christianity. Modern theologians—mainly beginning, if I recall correctly, near the end of the 1800s—described Christianity as having “de-enchanted” the pagan world: where once a river was the home of a god, or maybe a god itself, like Scamander, now it was simply a river.²⁵ (Though such theologians seem to miss the fact that a river can be blessed and become, in a sense, enchanted again.) There are certainly grand stories of Christians striking down pagan nature shrines, such as the felling of Donar’s Oak by St. Boniface or Irminsul by Charlemagne: there we clearly see the de-enchantment of nature, or, perhaps better, the de-deification of nature. Yet modern theologians believed that Christianity had not yet gone far enough in this vein. Surely, it had wiped out the ancient gods and animism, but it had not cleansed itself. Original Christianity was time-bound, wrapped in mythological concepts drawn from strains of Judaism, pagan mystery religions, and Gnosticism: it must be cleansed of this ancient dross, interpreted anew. We must have a new Christianity for a new time, a Christianity which, quite frequently, resembles existentialism. Rudolf Bultmann, for instance, distinguishes “theological statements”—such as traditional doctrinal formulae—from “kerygmatic statements,” which contain “God’s word which encounters [man] in the proclamation of Jesus Christ.”²⁶ Instead of focus on traditional doctrine, the focus of Christianity is, instead, entirely in faith, which “can be nothing else but the response to the kerygma, and...the kerygma is nothing else than God’s word addressing man as a questioning and promising word, a condemning and forgiving word. As such a word it does not offer itself to critical thought but speaks into one’s concrete existence.”²⁷ God’s word, through Jesus, is a call for a decision, the simple of decision of *for* God or *against* Him, for *God* or for *the world*. Jesus’ message “‘de-historized’ God and man; that is, released the relation between God and man from its previous ties to history”; instead, “God, who stands aloof from the history of nations, meets each man in his own little history, his everyday life with its daily gift and demand.”²⁸ If Jesus preaches God de-historized, though, that implies that any focus on Jesus’ own history is an erroneous accretion to the basic Christian faith; Bultmann thinks the early Church followed this, caring so little about Jesus Himself, historically, that “the tradition of the earliest Church did not even unconsciously preserve a picture of his personality” and they “did not ponder over *the uniqueness of the place in history and the historical influence*” of Jesus.²⁹ Modern theologians frequently postulate a major division between the original Jewish Christianity and the later, Hellenized (and, for Bultmann and others, mythologized) Pauline Christianity—Ferdinand Christian Baur is often cited as the first major proponent of this antithesis. For Bultmann, then, the original teaching of Christ and the early Church seemed a form of existentialism, though

²⁵ The Scamander is a river (now called Karamenderes) which the Greeks also held to be a god; in Homer’s *Iliad*, Books XX and XXI, he fights on the Trojans’ side, after Achilles insulted him.

²⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, tr. Kendrick Grobel, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951-1955) II:239.

²⁷ Bultmann, II:240.

²⁸ Bultmann, I:25.

²⁹ Bultmann, I:35.

with a focus on God; anything else added to Christianity—its focus on history, its doctrinal statements and their accompanying imagery, its “Hellenistic sacramental magic”—is something that must be cleansed from it through demythologization.³⁰

This form of Christianity is devoid of imagery, of saints and their activities, of angels, of supernatural events; it is a call to existential struggle, a demand that man, thrown into the world, choose between God and the world.³¹ While not many have read Bultmann or other modern theologians, their thought still seeps into the general culture; it leads to a Christianity that is internal, a psychological struggle with God, without external doctrine or trappings. This does not necessitate pure solipsism and ignorance of the other—even Bultmann emphasized the commandment to love and described how “de-historized man...is guided into his concrete encounter with his neighbor, in which he finds his true history”—but it does mean that one no longer meets saints and angels.³² It is a road devoid, not of earthly neighbors, but of heavenly ones.

When such an internal, psychological, existential struggle is the key of Christianity—even if one doesn’t take demythologization as far as Bultmann and others—then it makes no sense for the miraculous to appear in stories. This existential God is Pascal’s “God of the philosophers,” not the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” the God of the armchair, not of the army, the God of the smoking jacket, nor of the sea parting, the God of the cross reference, not of the Crucifixion, the God of reflection, not of the Resurrection.³³ It is this mental, bodiless Christianity that has taken over culture and its art. Perhaps some of the physical aspects of Catholicism might be used as cultural coloring or as powerful art or symbols, but you won’t see a miraculous healing or the appearance of an angel or saint. Encounter is the old Christianity: angst is the new.

In Tasso’s day, there was still enough acceptance of these elements, these miraculous events, so that they could be worked into a poem. Nature was no longer divine in itself, but it could be used by the Divine; the gods were no longer messengers from above, but angels and saints could be. Christianity overthrew the ancient religions, but it did not destroy the underlying truths, the porosity of the world. It was a culmination of religious sentiment, not an annihilation of it.³⁴ To make a poem like Tasso’s work again, its readers would need to accept its

³⁰ Bultmann, I:144.

³¹ The concept of being “thrown into the world” is a key one for Heidegger.

³² Bultmann, I:25-26.

³³ The reference is to Blaise Pascal’s “Memorial,” a short, ecstatic exclamation he wrote during a mystical experience; he then carried the paper sewn into his coat until the day he died. The opening lines are: “Fire, ‘God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,’ not of the philosophers and of the scholars. Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace. God of Jesus Christ.” See Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Léon Brunschvicg and Dominique Descotes (Paris; Garnier-Flammarion, 1976), 43.

³⁴ I have heard modern theologians go so far as to say that Christianity is not even a religion at all, because it is so

basic premises, the interactions of heaven, earth, and hell. With these accepted, then the truly miraculous could re-enter stories; it is only in this way that we can return to the synthesis of Tasso, between the joyful, entertaining marvels and the firm grasp on verisimilitude. Without an acceptance of the miraculous porosity of the universe, art must be split between pure fantasy (only marvels) and pure reality (only verisimilitude). If the two are united through a Christian view, one that reflects what the ancient saints beheld, then there can be a united work, one that appeals to both love of excitement and love of truth. Someday, perhaps, such a view and such a work will appear again; beholding it, we might then stand, as Godfrey at Gabriel's departure,

dazzled in his eyes, astonished in his heart.³⁵

different from any other—and that difference is often demythologization.

³⁵ Tasso, *La Gerusalemme liberata*, l.17.8, p. 14