

# SEPARATING THE HUMAN FROM THE DIVINE

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Myths are hard to die. One such myth concerns what happened with poetry in general, that is to say, imaginative literature or literary fiction, in the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and beyond. Its basic outline was developed during the nineteenth century. J. E. Spingarn, for example, echoes such a myth in his *History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance*, first published in 1899, which has gone through many editions and reprintings since then. In it we read the following:

The first problem of Renaissance criticism was the justification of imaginative literature. The existence and continuity of the aesthetic consciousness, and perhaps, in a less degree, of the critical faculty, throughout the Middle Ages, can hardly be denied; yet distrust of literature was keenest among the very class of men in whom the critical faculty might be presupposed, and it was as the handmaid of philosophy, and most of all as the vassal of theology, that poetry was chiefly valued. . . . The Renaissance was thus confronted with the necessity of justifying its appreciation of the vast body of literature which the Revival of Learning had recovered for the modern world. (3)

Speaking of Savonarola's *De Divisione ac Utilitate Omnium Scientiarum*, written about 1492, he concludes as follows:

In fine, as a reformer, he represents for us the religious reaction against the paganization of culture by the humanists. But the forces against him were too strong. Even the Christianization of culture effected during the next century by the Council of Trent was hardly more than temporary. Humanism, which represents

the revival of ancient pagan culture, and rationalism, which represents the growth of the modern spirit in science and art, were currents too powerful to be impeded by any reformer, however great. (14)

This general picture of the historical standing and the fate of literary fiction as we move from the Middle Ages into the modern era, is still very much with us, even though it is ill at ease with, or flatly contradicted by, undeniable historical facts. For example, the incredible notion of a "paganization of culture by the humanists" would have horrified somebody as profoundly Christian as Petrarch and, later on, Erasmus, who criticized the scholastics "in the name of a purer and simpler mode of piety and religious devotion" (Mazzeo 17). Or the mistaken idea that modern rationalism was much more hospitable to poetry than the old scholastic one. For from the seventeenth century on, as J. F. West has pointed out,

the whole tide of [scientific] opinion was running strongly against poetry, metaphor, and poetic prose. The philosophers generally saw them as an obstacle to truth. Hobbes regarded metaphor as one of the hindrances to straight thinking. Rousseau thought that the philosophy of Descartes had 'cut the throat of poetry'; and John Locke, late in the century, openly regarded poetry as made up of 'pleasant pictures and agreeable visions in the fancy,' but basically misleading. (114)

It is indeed true that in medieval scholasticism poetry occupies the lowest rank in the hierarchical structure of the arts and sciences. But it does have a place there. It would have never occurred to Thomas Aquinas, for example, to expel it from that position as something dangerous, something to be avoided. In fact, as he tells us at the beginning of the *Summa Theologica*, theology itself, the highest of the sciences, does not consider it below its dignity to make use of metaphor and other poetic devices *propter utilitatem ac necessitatem*.

And yet it is precisely that kind of violent expulsion of poetic fiction that will be attempted during the Renaissance. In the words of Russell Fraser, "it is in the Renaissance, and not the Middle Ages that the artist is driven from the commonwealth" (39). It was then that the "war against poetry" intensified to fever pitch.

It is, therefore, an error to imagine that those in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who bitterly attacked poetic fiction in general and the theater in particular as a very dangerous threat to religion and morality, were fanatic hold-overs from a medieval past. Quite the contrary, they were as

much a product of the advent of the new era as the simultaneously renewed admiration for the literary models of classical antiquity. Occasionally these two things may go explicitly together, as happens in the Index of forbidden books of the Council of Trent, published by Pius IV in 1564, the seventh rule of which reads as follows:

Books are absolutely forbidden which explicitly deal with, narrate, or teach lascivious or obscene things; for we must take care not only of questions of faith, but also of those having to do with moral behavior, which can be easily corrupted by the reading of such books; all those in possession of such books will be severely punished by the bishops. Nevertheless, writings by the pagan authors of antiquity are permitted because of their elegance and poetic propriety (*propter sermonis elegantiam et proprietatem permittuntur*); even though their reading will not be allowed to children. (Martínez de Bujanda 580-81)<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, admiration of the classical models has nothing to do with a purely imaginary "paganization of culture;" nor does it imply a greater tolerance of vernacular fiction.

B. W. Ife has studied these antipoetic texts in the Spanish literature of the Golden Age. The following examples can give an idea of how virulent those attacks could be: "Jesuit Gaspar de Artete can refer to writers of fiction as cruel, shallow, loud-mouthed, deranged, indecent and without fear of God, or say that their mouths are full of blasphemy and obscenity, their throats stinking sepulchers belching forth every kind of foetid putrescence and their hearts sewers of wickedness" (11). Even a humanist like Benito Arias Montano, a good friend of Fray Luis de León, the man behind the multilingual translation of the Antwerp Bible, a very moderate counsellor of Philip II, could lose his restraint when speaking of novels of chivalry, "monsters, the offspring of stupidity, excrement and filth gathered together for the destruction of the age" (qtd. in Ife 12).

But nothing can compare with the sustained, relentless attack against the theater from the last quarter of the sixteenth century on. What Fraser said about this attack in England could also be said of Spain or France, by slightly modifying the dates: "From the 1570's forward, the reformer reserves his fiercest hatred for the drama: not as he hates poetry less but as he fears the drama more" (16).

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<sup>1</sup>All translations from Spanish and French are mine.

The theater could even be blamed for the plague, as it happened in London in 1577. It was then, according to Fraser, that "the first wholesale condemnation of the drama occurs [in England] ... on November 3 ... in a Sunday sermon delivered at Paul's cross. ... The cause of plague is sin [and] ... "the cause of sinne are playes: therefore the cause of plague are playes" (13). Something similar happened almost a century later in Sevilla, "on the occasion of the plague that was approaching from Málaga, a Jesuit preacher, Father Tirso González, publicly announced that the sickness would not enter Sevilla as long as [theatrical] representations were forbidden. The city council petitioned the King for the suspension of dramatic activities" (Arróniz 49).

We could go on and on accumulating testimonies to the intensity and the vast scope of this unprecedented attack against poetic fiction in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was something that no literary historian should ignore. Which raises an important question, were all these people crazy, a bunch of irrational reactionaries incapable of seeing the extraordinary value of such a poetic flowering as was happening all around them? There is, of course, no denying that beyond a certain degree of intensity the attack becomes clearly unreasonable. Obviously, nobody in his sober mind, today or then, could seriously believe that plays were the direct cause of the plague. And yet, this antipoetic irrationality was so widespread, transcending all kinds of doctrinal barriers (like the ones between rabid antipopish puritans and super catholic Spaniards), and so durable, generation after generation, that it would be, in turn, irrational to think that it had nothing to do with anything real, that it referred to nothing significant beyond itself.

My view of this irrationality is that it was indeed something marginal, but not in the sense of being meaningless or irrelevant; marginal, rather, in the sense of something happening at and as the edge of a very important phenomenon; the outward symptom of something happening at the center.

Then the question becomes, what is this marginal violence, this irrationality, related to, with what is it connected?

I would like to suggest that it is intimately connected to something crucial in the genesis and development of modern literary fiction, something that I have called the "allergic" reaction to the "mixing of the human and the divine," which, in Cervantes's words, "is a kind of motley in which no Christian understanding should be dressed" ("Prologue").

This "allergy" can be dated with a fair degree of chronological precision. It did not exist in the fourteenth century, but was already clearly visible by the middle of the sixteenth. One might propose as a symbolic date that of November 17th, 1548, when the Paris parliament issued an order prohibiting the *Confrèrie de la Passion* "to stage the mysteries of the Passion of Our

Saviour [which, of course, had been the traditional performance of the Confrèrie], or other sacred mysteries," although it could continue to play "mystères profanes, honnestes et licites" (Loukovitch 2).

The speed with which this "allergy" spread across national and doctrinal boundaries was amazing. Shortly after the Paris prohibition, similar ones were issued by other city parliaments in France, for example Bordeaux (1556) and Rennes (c. 1565), even though mysteries continued to be played occasionally in many parts of the country. The same attitude is found in the Spanish Netherlands, where a 1559 edict declares it indecent "to profane the divine mysteries and abuse Holy Scripture by mixing it with things profane and ridicule." (Lebègue 55). Lebègue mentions the attitude of Boucher, a member of the catholic League during the religious wars in France, who "takes the general opinion even further: he attributes part of France's misfortunes to the *Passion*, 'played in Paris and elsewhere in France, because of the irreverence committed there'" (55).

Meanwhile, across the channel, a rich tradition of religious parish drama was coming to an end in England:

Judging by the extant records, this parish dramatic activity reached its height in the 1520's. Just as the tradition achieved full bloom, however, the Reformation, the Dissolution, and the new Anglican Church's rejection of post-biblical saints resulted in a sudden curtailment of these productions. . . . In short, beginning at the Reformation and continuing until the actual banning of parish drama in the 1590's, a very widespread tradition of parish drama in England died a rather rapid and painful death from its height in the 1520's. (Wasson 73-4)

Without denying that specific national or local circumstances may have played a role in the sudden scandalized opposition to public displays of sacred "mixtures," it is important to realize that, as we have said already, the phenomenon appears to be pan-Western, it transcends local and national boundaries. In the arch-Catholic Spain of Philip II, Lupericio Leonardo de Argensola, a playwright who had turned against the theater, wrote to the king in 1598 in the following terms, to ask him not to lift a temporary royal ban on the performance of *comedias*, as had been requested in a previous plea by the Madrid municipal council. For a better understanding of the passage it should be noted that the council had pleaded in particular for permission to stage *autos sacramentales*, i.e. sacramental plays:

Even if Your Majesty were to permit them [i.e. *comedias*] it ought to be by maintaining absolutely the prohibition against these representations of sacred figures and things. Because in their dressing rooms [the actors] engage in drinking, swearing, blaspheming and playing while still wearing the clothes and exterior forms of Saints, Angels. Our Lady the Virgin, and of God Himself. . . . Certainly Your Majesty would not permit an actor to imitate your figure on the stage. Furthermore, you have justly forbidden them to represent the persons of noble members of the Military Orders by wearing crosses on their stage clothes, as they used to. And yet on these holidays called Corpus and other days in their regular plays, they come on the stage in priestly vestments, and what is more, with the wounds of our Redemption painted on those hands, which only a moment before were dealing cards or playing the guitar. (Cotarelo y Mori 67)

In spite of the *autos*' popularity at the time and during much of the 17th century (thanks, in large measure, to the exquisite mastery of Calderón, whose *autos* came to be almost the only ones in demand), the "allergic" opposition to them was there from the beginning, increased with time and eventually won out. In this regard, it is interesting to compare Argensola's argument with another one, almost two centuries later, by an influential publicist of the eighteenth-century enlightened and francophile establishment, Clavijo y Fajardo, who wrote the following in 1762, three years before King Charles III issued the decree that put an end to the traditional *autos*:

What Catholic with an average capacity for reasoning will fail to be disgusted at seeing the Host painted on the stage curtain as soon as he enters the playhouse? Without having a very low idea of his religion, who would suffer that such profane people represent the persons of the Holy Trinity? Or that a woman, who sometimes is probably not very chaste, represent the Immaculate Virgin? Another of the most common defects in the *autos* is the mixture of sacred and profane things. (Menéndez Pelayo, *Historia*, 279)

The two texts are using basically the same argument. Only its scope has changed. The 1598 text is against the performance of public plays in general, but is specially concerned with the performance of sacramental plays. Thus it is already anticipating the historical narrowing of the attack, focusing in the end on those plays in which the mixture of the sacred and the profane was particularly obvious. In spite of the comparatively longer life of sacramental plays in Spain, the "allergic" phenomenon was no different there from

elsewhere. It should also be pointed out that this longer life has nothing to do with Spain being more "Catholic" than other places, but rather, perhaps, with the fact that its popular culture has tended to be—for whatever reasons—more resilient and difficult to change than elsewhere. For the "allergy" of which we are speaking appears to develop particularly well among the better educated classes of society. What Lebègue said about the situation in France regarding the mysteries, should be taken into account when considering the comparatively longer life of poetic "mixtures" of sacred and profane elements in Spain:

In the old days men of letters delighted in composing mysteries or in going to their representation; in their boxes princes and nobles took as much pleasure as the crowd. In the sixteenth century, the elite of the population gradually began to look down on this dramatic genre: it was reproached for being badly played, for being unsophisticated, for moving and entertaining the crowds in unrefined ways, and for not resembling ancient theater. (48)

Both the Church and the civil authorities had frequently legislated against abuses in the performance of liturgical drama throughout the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, it had been much more tolerant. "For a long time—says Jean Delumeau—the medieval church resisted . . . elitism and closed its eyes to a certain 'folklorization' of Christianity which did not seem to be an obstacle to grace" (*Christianisme* 191). Or, as Kosta Loukovitch remarked, "public taste in the Middle Ages . . . was not scandalized by a certain mixture of piety and rather coarse pleasantries" (16). Of course, the change from the Middle Ages to the 16th century was much more than a question of taste. The modern opposition to sacred theatrical performances perceived a fundamental incompatibility between the Christian sacred and the non-Christian theater inherited from antiquity.

This is the case, not only among those moralists and theologians who were totally opposed to the theater in general, but also among many enthusiasts of modern drama. Saint-Evremond, for example, "asserts that 'from the holiest doctrine, the most Christian actions and the most useful truths one will only make world tragedies that will please the least'" (qtd. in Phillips 220). Even Corneille expresses similar views referring to his own *Théodore* (Phillips 220). Another defender of modern drama, the Abbé d'Aubignac, concurs.

The same can be said regarding other poetic genres, in particular the epic and the romances, for as Bernard Lamy tells us in his *Nouvelles réflexions sur*

*l'art poétique* (Pans, 1678), his book deals with the rules of both epic and dramatic poetry, "which are also common to those poetic stories called romances" (Phillips 8). In this regard, there are no essential differences between different poetic genres. In the eyes of many religious moralists there were no differences at all, "a maker of romances or a poet of the theater is a public poisoner," said one of them (Loukovitch 375).

Consider, for example, the following: in 1554 an obscure Valencian author, Jerónimo Sempere, published a book of chivalry *a lo divino* with the title, *Caballería celestial de la Rosa Fragante*. His purpose is explained in the prologue:

Realizing that those whose taste is accustomed to such lessons [as provided by fictitious books of chivalry] would not come willingly to the banquet of these other [profitable] lessons, having to cross from one extreme to the other, I decided to feed them the delicate morsel of this story spiced with the artifice of those to which they are used, so that they may be lured to liking these and lose their taste for the feigned ones. (Menéndez Pelayo, *Orígenes* 449)

Try to imagine the main characters in Sempere's book: Christ becomes the Knight of the Lion, Lucifer, the Knight of the Serpent; other characters include the old sage Alegorin and the wise maiden Moraliza.

The author's intention could not be blamed. Nevertheless, the inquisitorial reaction was not late in coming. Sempere's book is already included in the 1559 Index of Forbidden Books. What is even more interesting is that the Inquisition never banned any secular book of chivalry, and this in spite of a widespread clamor against this type of literature, which enlisted some of the most illustrious names in sixteenth-century Spain. Obviously the inquisitors were not amused by such a clumsy poetic attempt to play with the sacred, even with the best of intentions. It was one thing to use poetry strictly as a servant of the sacred, and quite another to dress the sacred in the servant's clothes to make it attractive and, thus, in some way, to bring it down to the servant's level. Two very different things indeed, both from the point of view of doctrine and of poetry, but the line between the two was, nevertheless, rather thin, the danger of *a faux pas* great. It took an excellent poetic intuition (such as Calderón's) to walk on such dangerous high wire without falling. For in this particular respect, the sharpest doctrinal instinct of the stern inquisitors totally coincided with that of the best poets; an amazing coincidence which, to the best of my knowledge, has never been given the attention it deserves.



When two hundred years later freethinking Voltaire said that "our saints who make so good a figure in our churches, make a very sorry one in our Epic Poems" (*Le Bossu* 129), probably he did not suspect that his poetic sensitivity echoed the doctrinal sensitivity of sixteenth-century Spanish inquisitors.

Indeed the basic problem that lay at the root of Sempere's clumsy attempt, was still there in the 18th century, when Samuel Johnson wrote that

poetry loses its lustre and its power, [when] it is applied to the decoration of something more excellent than itself. . . . The ideas of Christian Theology are too simple for eloquence, too sacred for fiction, and too majestick for ornament; to recommend them by tropes and figures, is to magnify by a concave **mirror** the sidereal hemisphere. (297)

What the Spanish inquisitors saw as bad for doctrine, Johnson sees as bad for poetry. Since the beginning of the modern era seldom have these two things combined successfully: "It has been the frequent lamentation of good men, that verse has been too little applied to the purposes of worship, and many attempts have been made to animate devotion by pious poetry; that they have very seldom attained their end is sufficiently known" (296).

This resistance to the mixing of poetry and religion has continued to be experienced to our own time, in particular by people of great religious sensitivity. "It was Lord David Cecil, introducing the *Oxford Book of Christian Verse*, who declared that in 'Christian Europe' religious emotion 'has not proved the most fertile soil for poetry'" (Gardner 122). The most illustrious example is perhaps that of such a Christian poet as T. S. Eliot, who "could easily fulminate for a whole hour against the men of letters who have gone into ecstasies over 'the Bible as literature,' the Bible as 'the noblest monument of English prose'" (225). And who also said that "for the great majority of people who love poetry, 'religious [i.e. 'devotional'] poetry' is a variety of *minor* poetry . . . What is more, I am ready to admit that up to a point these [people] are right" (225).

Up to the eighteenth century much of the theoretical argument against mixing poetry and the Christian sacred remains basically unchanged. Johnson is still arguing that the "essence of poetry is invention: such invention as, by producing something unexpected, surprises and delights. The topics of devotion are few, and being few are universally known . . . they can receive no grace from novelty of sentiment, and very little from novelty of expresión" (296).

The same argument had been used by Tasso in his *Discourses on the Heroic Poem*:

The argument of the epic poem should be drawn, then, from true history and a religion that is not false. But histories and other writings may be sacred or non sacred, and among the sacred some have more and some have less authority. Ecclesiastical and spiritual writings command greater authority. . . . The others doubtless have less authority. The poet had better not touch histories of the first type; they may be left in their pure and simple truth, since with them discovery takes no effort and invention seems hardly permitted. And whoever does not invent or imitate . . . would be no poet but rather a historian. (39-40)

Clearly the *Divine Comedy* could not have been even conceived from such a perspective. In fact, everything we have been saying about the characteristically modern "allergy" to the mixing of "the human and the divine" may acquire special relief against the background of Dante's poem, the poetic Christian masterpiece of the Middle Ages and perhaps of all times. Let us, therefore, reflect for a moment on this contrasting background, taking Eric Auerbach, one of the best Dante scholars, as our guide:

[The] *Divine Comedy* [is] a vision of the divine order of the universe, and into that transcendent order [Dante] gathered the entire living reality of his time, the here and now of Florence and Italy in 1300, with all its passions and tragic involvements. . . . [This] does not apply to the *Inferno* alone . . . Many of those atoning for their sins in Purgatory . . . move the reader because of their lot on earth, Sordello's greeting of Virgil, the recognition scene between Dante and Forese Donati. and many other passages. . . . Even in many of the blessed, the earthly drama is still discernible. (306-7)

The critic cannot help but wonder:

It is strange . . . that this triumph of autonomous humanity and of a specifically human will should in all sincerity have represented itself as a vision of the divine order of the world. . . . Many Christian visionaries have proclaimed God's will, but they have neither given so comprehensive a view of it. taking in the whole universe, nor given so concrete a version of divine judgement, applied so closely to concrete historical happenings. (310)

Dante's achievement was, indeed, unique. But being unique does not mean being out of place or time. The *Divine Comedy* fully belongs in the historical context of fourteenth-century Christian Europe. It is its highest poetic expression. But the point is that approximately two centuries later such an extraordinary "mixing of the human and the divine"—striking in Dante only for the vastness of its scope—would be totally out of place, indeed shocking and unacceptable. What was perfectly possible for Dante would be impossible, an intolerable embarrassment, for a Tasso and, even more so, for a Milton, whose choice of subject for *Paradise Lost* automatically eliminated the explicit inclusion of the living reality, the here and now of puritan England, in the poem.

Auerbach tried to explain:

[This] direct association of historical existence with the kingdom of God is also a Christian heritage: from the outset Christianity was never a mere doctrine or myth but was deeply involved in historical existence. . . . On the one hand Christ became flesh in a definite historical situation, an earthly here and now. . . while on the other hand, by thus atoning for Adam's guilt, he restored man's share in the kingdom of God, which Adam had lost.... [It] was no longer so easy to look upon earthly concerns with the indifference that had been so dear to the philosophers of late antiquity, or even to strive for their equanimity. (307-8)

Quite true, but Tasso and Milton were as Christian as Dante, and yet they could no longer do what he did. Indeed, it could be said that, regarding the poetic possibility of "mixing the human and the divine" without scandal, there was less of a difference between Dante and Virgil, for example, than between him and the Christian poets from the sixteenth century on.

The problem is even more puzzling, because the Christian consciousness of the author is deeply involved in both cases. What made possible for Dante to link his "vision of the divine order of the universe" to the here and now may have been his profound understanding of the meaning of Christianity, as Auerbach suggests. But it was also the Christian consciousness of the sixteenth- or seventeenth-century poet that prevented him from doing the same thing.

One cause, two apparently opposite effects. However, since these effects do not occur at the same time but in historical sequence, it should be possible, at least in principle, to postulate some sort of logical development between the first and the second.

For example, it is generally acknowledged that the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance involved an increase in historical awareness. In fact Dante has been placed at the start of this process. Thomas M. Greene has said that Dante was the first medieval poet fully aware of the gap, the cultural discontinuity, between his time and the Graeco-Roman past (17). An awareness which continues to deepen in Petrarch, Valla and the humanist movement in general and then in the Renaissance.<sup>2</sup>

This being the case, it is not impossible to imagine that such a progressive deepening of the historical consciousness could have resulted in, or simultaneously fostered, the realization that historical events in general are fundamentally human events, that human history is the responsibility of man. That is to say, the realization that God does not intervene directly in those events, that it is not proper for man to mix "the human and the divine."

Without denying that something like that may be an aspect of the historical process we are trying to understand, something is clearly missing in such an explanation. In a sense, the problem with it is its own strictly rational character. It contemplates a logical, basically unproblematic evolution of the historical consciousness; which is not exactly how things happened. It was a rather quick and radical change in attitude. The old, sincere mixing in poetry of the human and the divine becomes, almost all of a sudden, a source of profound uneasiness. What had been accepted as being in accordance with a Christian vision of the world becomes a scandal, an embarrassment, the "kind of motley in which no Christian understanding should be dressed."

So it was not exactly as if people finally realized that it was illogical or contrary to reason to mix the human and the divine and then, as a result of that realization, would develop an "allergy" to such a mixture. It was clearly the other way around. What brings together on this issue such a diverse array of people as Parisian parliamentarians, Spanish inquisitors, novelists, dramatists, English puritans, Roman Catholics, freethinkers, poetic theoreticians, etc., etc., generation after generation, across national boundaries, is not their powers of logical deduction, but something far more primary, even primeval, something at the core of the immemorial human experience of the sacred.

"All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex," said Durkheim in his classic work on *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*,

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<sup>2</sup> See Jean Seznec (290 and passim) and Delumeau (*La civilisation* 137).

present one common characteristic: they presuppose a classification of all the things, real [or] ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words profane and sacred (*profane sacré*). . . . In all the history of human thought there exists no other example of two categories of things so profoundly differentiated or so radically opposed to one another. The traditional opposition of good and bad is nothing beside this; for the good and the bad are only two opposed species of the same class, namely morals, just as sickness and health are two different aspects of the same order of facts, life, while the sacred and the profane have always and everywhere been conceived by the human mind as two distinct classes, as two worlds between which there is nothing in common. (52-4)

There is a telltale sign, a clear indication that we are in the presence of this most basic human differentiation. I call it "sacred allergy," Durkheim spoke of an "irresistible" refusal of the mind:

The opposition of these two classes manifests itself outwardly with a visible sign by which we can easily recognize this very special classification, wherever it exists. Since the idea of the sacred is always and everywhere separated from the idea of the profane in the thought of men, and since we picture a sort of logical chasm between the two, the mind irresistibly refuses to allow the two corresponding things to be confounded. or even to be merely put in contact with each other; for such a promiscuity, or even too direct a contiguity, would contradict too violently the dissociation of these ideas in the mind. The sacred thing is par excellence that which the profane should not touch, and cannot touch with impunity. (55)

And yet, strangely enough, this most basic of all distinctions is also the most fragile. It can disappear instantly, for as soon as anything touches the sacred, the sacred flows into it, it becomes sacred itself. Therefore, extraordinary precautions must be taken at all times to prevent the spread of the sacred, to keep it within its own bounds. "What makes these precautions necessary—said Durkheim—is the extraordinary contagiousness of a sacred character. Far from being attached to the things which are marked with it, it is endowed with a sort of elusiveness" (358).

This being so, the following conclusion is unavoidable: the sacred, that which is worshipped or revered as the ultimate guarantor of stability in the community is also the very source of instability or undifferentiation. The

sacred is only good if it can be kept at a distance from everything else, otherwise it becomes a terrifying danger.

But, clearly, this is just another way of saying that the power of the sacred is the power of undifferentiation itself. If you manage to keep it away from everything else, everything is differentiated, there are clear differences everywhere. If you do not, "impurity" spreads all over, all cultural differences are threatened with imminent collapse. What can this mean, in purely rational terms, except that the notion of the sacred is inseparable from that of chaotic undifferentiation, or that the only thing that can contain the spread of undifferentiation is the fear of undifferentiation itself?

It can be said that René Girard's theory of the sacred starts where Durkheim's left off. Girard's theory involves the collective mechanism whereby the primitive sacred as the fundamental principle of differentiation in human society is generated out of violent undifferentiation; the mechanism whereby that which is on the verge of destroying the community becomes the means to save it.

The crucial difference between Durkheim and Girard is the latter's introduction of the victim in what might be called the sacred equation. That victim is the central hinge on which the entire edifice of the sacred turns. The "absolute" difference between the sacred and the profane is itself a result of the violent expulsion of undifferentiating violence through the victim. If the difference between the sacred and the profane is, as Durkheim said, the first, the "absolute," the irreducible difference, then prior to or apart from that difference there is only unnameable, unspeakable, undifferentiation. The elimination of the victim is the event capable of accounting for the original gap, the breathing space absolutely necessary to make the first and most important difference, the difference, literally, between life and death. The "absolute" difference between the sacred and the profane is that gap. Outside the violent, sacred-making mechanism of the victimizing expulsion, the difference between the sacred and the profane collapses, for they have no independent existence. Given the fact that the victim emerges from among the contending parties in a random, uncontrolled manner, in principle anything at all can play the role of the sacred or, in consequence, of the profane. Such roles are as violently incompatible as they are exchangeable. The only thing necessary for such an "absolute" difference between them to take hold of the human mind, thereby instilling in it an "irresistible refusal" to merge the two, is the victimizing process. No victim, no difference between the sacred and the profane.

When the "allergic" reaction to the mixing of the sacred and the profane appears across the cultural horizon of Western society during the Renais-

sance, it must be taken, I think, as a sign of the depth of the transformation which that society was undergoing. Something was obviously happening at the roots, or at any rate at a level far deeper than could possibly be accounted for in terms of conscious beliefs or ideas.

Furthermore, if we accept that the "absolute" difference between the sacred and the profane is rooted in the victimizing process, we know where to look for the cause of the "allergy." For such an "allergy" is only the existential manifestation of the sacrificial mind. A sudden heightening of the sensitivity to the "mixing of the human and the divine" could only mean that **the** sacrificial mechanism, society's oldest and most basic line of defense against violent breakdown, was not working as smoothly as it used to. When the breathing space between the sacred and the profane is felt to be in danger, in need of restoration, we must assume that the effectiveness of the sacrificial expulsion of the danger is also at stake. Perhaps the process no longer commands the solid unanimity it used to; the implicit assigning of blame may have become less sacred, less untouchable, and as a result instead of being a reassuring process it becomes, in turn, a source of anxiety; its sacred character weakened, the expulsion becomes less focused and, to the same extent, blame, instead of being clearly concentrated on one source, spreads dangerously over everybody.

I believe this the social and existential context in which the following observation by Delumeau should be understood:

It might easily be thought that any civilization—in this case Western civilization from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries—which was besieged (or believed itself to be besieged) by a multitude of enemies—Turks, idolaters, Jews, heretics, witches, and so on—would not have had time for much introspection. This might have been quite logical, but exactly the opposite happened. In European history, the 'siege mentality'... was accompanied by an oppressive feeling of guilt, an unprecedented movement toward introspection, and the development of a new moral conscience. The fourteenth century witnessed the birth of what might be called a 'scruple sickness,' a global phenomenon that soon reached epidemic proportions. It was as if the aggressivity directed against the enemies of Christendom had not entirely spent itself in incessant religious warfare, despite constantly renewed battles and an endless variety of opponents. A global anxiety... discovered a new foe in each of the inhabitants of the besieged city, and a new fear—the fear of one's self.  
(*Sin and Fear* 1)

It should be pointed out that this process of "culpabilisation," which, according to Delumeau, begins in the fourteenth century, becomes particularly acute in the sixteenth and the seventeenth. From our point of view the two aspects of the phenomenon, the outer and the inner, can only be the two sides of the same thing, the erosion of the sacrificial mechanism, which is supposed to channel "aggressivity" toward the outside. What makes this erosion specifically Christian in character is that it leads to individual introspection, to the turning of the blame from the publicly recognized enemy toward the questioning self.

The failure of the sacrificial mechanism exacerbates the sense of anxiety, which again triggers the sacrificial mechanism, and so on and so forth. In a primitive society, this feedback acceleration might lead to a general breakdown of the system, to the kind of ultimate crisis in which spiralling mimetic violence will either trigger the original victimizing process or cause the annihilation of the community.

Obviously this was not quite the case in Renaissance European society. But this view of the crisis goes a long way in explaining what Jonas Barish has described as "the fears of impurity, of contamination, of 'mixture,' of the blurring of strict boundaries, which haunted thousands in the Renaissance as they had haunted Plato and Tertullian. . . the fear of total breakdown" (87). And needless to say, among those thousands were certainly those who so violently attacked poetic fiction.

But the point I would like to make is that the difference between the violent attackers of poetic fiction, the somewhat irrational fringe, and the widespread experience of an "allergic" reaction to the "mixing of the human and the divine" is only a difference of degree, even though, with regard to the historical development of literary fiction, that difference of degree clearly made all the difference in the world.

We could also put it this way. A fundamental questioning, a profound crisis, of the sacrificial mechanism characterises the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, triggering an "allergic," that is to say, a sacrificial, reaction to the mixing of the sacred and the profane. In its extreme manifestation this reaction attempts to drive poetic fiction out of the republica, echoing the Platonic expulsion of the poets. But this extreme sacrificial reaction does not have the power to take the entire community with it in its expelling effort. It cannot even move the power of the Inquisition to any significant degree. Thus, in the community at large what you see is a weakened sacrificial reaction, something of the same nature as the primitive violence of the victimizing mechanism, but watered down as it were, reduced to what, for lack of a better word, I have called "allergy."



However, this sacrificial weakness will become a great source of strength for the development of modern poetic fiction. For it will afford poetic fiction an unprecedented opportunity to discover and to analyze its own sacrificial underpinnings without becoming scandalized. It was a rather unique and delicate situation. Almost all of a sudden poetic fiction is shaken enough at its sacrificial core to bring such a core into view, but without its terrifying power, tamed enough to be looked in the face by the best poets and prompted to reveal some of the oldest secrets of humankind.

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