Converting Knights: A Semiotic Reading of Spiritual Change in Four Italian Chivalric Poems

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ABSTRACT

This essay compares representations of religious conversion in four Italian chivalric poems: Luigi Pulci's *Morgante*, Matteo Maria Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato*, Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, and Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*. Semiotically read, they cast new light on the Catholic idea of the religious self in its development from the late Middle Ages throughout the early modern era. In this evolution, the Council of Trent represents a fundamental watershed.

We have changed our views on change.

—Kermode (1983, 39)

Initiated as a study of the meaning of systems of signs in society (Saussure) or, alternatively, as a hypothesis on the human fabric of signification (Peirce), semiotics soon turned to the analysis of literary texts, revered as the symbolical center of cultures.[1] Semiotics could prove its value in competition with other interpretative disciplines, it was contended, exactly by focusing on their traditional object of inquiry, literature. Structures of meaning in literary texts epitomized and were patterned on those in language, according to the specific semiolinguistic milieus. Literature was also the field in which to confront philosophy and above all aesthetics, probing their explanations and definitions of human judgment regarding beauty (Eco 1962; Barthes 1973). Most imporant, the semiotic analysis of literary texts was the epistemological terrain of a challenge to any theory of mystery, evoking categories such as "genius" or

1. See, e.g., Todorov 1967; Segre 1969; Avalle 1970; Hendricks 1973; Kristeva 1974; Köller 1975; Plett 1975; Corti 1976.

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"inspiration": literary meaning had its codes, tricks, and idiosyncrasies; its "effect of meaning" should not only be evoked through elegant paraphrases but disarticulated in its inner mechanisms (Barthes 1970; Greimas 1976; Segre 1985; Eco 1994). The semiotics of literature had considerable achievements: it detailed, better than any previous discipline with the exception of rhetoric—which semiotics integrated—the intimate gears of the poetic language, the narrative lures of prose, and the stylistic anatomy of the essay.

But after a good decade of enthusiasm and success, the semiotic branch was abandoned, with some notable exceptions. Semioticians were distracted by what they chose as their mission: expanding the explicative power of the discipline to nonverbal fields: cinema, the arts, social habits. In the process, much was gained but something was lost. The methodology had to comply with the fluctuating character of images, sounds, movements, and so on. It was somewhat enriched but also somewhat diluted. The shift from literature to other paths of expression was so radical that the discipline started to neglect a field (the semiotics of literature, indeed) whose capacity of acting as a forge of analytical instruments remains, up to the present, unmatched. Literature offered scholars an extraordinary repository of semiotic variety.

However, the development of cultural semiotics gave new pith to the study of literature as signification system (Lotman 1975). Among Lotman's texts, none are more prominent than the literary ones in explaining the semiotic functioning of a society and its culture. In keeping with his debated hypotheses on the primacy of verbal language as a "modeling system," Lotman (1972) mainly analyzed poetry and prose as mirrors of society, and he did this with unequaled elegance. The semiotics of literature redirected its focus from the creation and reception of narrative and aesthetic value to the task of contributing to a general inquiry about the semiosphere, with literature at its core. In partnership with other kinds of cultural scholarship (cultural history, the sociology of culture, cultural studies, and, of course, anthropology), cultural semiotics reads literature as the matrix and expression of the patterns of meaning that shape the collectivity.

This essay is intended to resuscitate an interest in semiotics as an interpretive method of literature, after the model set by Lotman and his followers. Four Italian chivalric poems are analyzed so as to pinpoint the evolution of a new "language of the soul" that took shape in Europe and its colonies in the passage from the late Middle Ages to the Renaissance until the cultural tipping point of the Council of Trent. The main hypothesis is that, from the anthropological point of view of semiotics, little in religion is "spontaneous" (Yelle

2013). Individuality exists but manifests itself through ineludible dialectics with a certain "spiritual language," a way of imagining and voicing the relation with transcendence (Leone 2013). Religious conversion, apparently the most intimate and subjective of spiritual phenomena, is no exception. Believers convert following patterns that they find not only in their souls but also, and perhaps mostly, in history. They truthfully recite a role. They sometimes improvise and create new roles, but always without escaping the crucible of culture (Leone 2014).

If religion is culture, and conversion is language, then what better than literary texts that narrate conversion offers a synthesis of the models of spiritual change that prevail in a culture? Literary narratives of conversion, be they fictitious or biographic, crystalize in words the religious rhetoric of an epoch. This essay focuses on a literary aeon, early modernity, whose impact in shaping the poetics of contemporary religious subjectivity is difficult to overestimate.

Luigi Pulci's *Morgante*: Religious Conversion and Irony

Luigi Pulci was born in Florence in 1432 and died in Padua in 1484. *Morgante*, considered by most his masterpiece, is a chivalric poem in octaves commissioned by Lucrezia Tornabuoni,[2] mother of Lorenzo de' Medici,[3] and written between 1460 and 1470. Pulci took the matter of the poem from an incomplete anonymous fifteenth-century text, the *Cantare d'Orlando* (Rajna 1869), and transposed its plot into twenty-three cantos. Read at the Medici's table as they were composed, they were subsequently published in three different editions during Pulci's life (Jordan 1986; Ankli 1993; Davie 1998).[4]

For the purposes of this essay, the most relevant passage of *Morgante* is in the first canto. Orlando, the Christian hero of the poem, comes across the Saracen giant Morgante, who is bothering the monks of a local abbey. Wishing to defend them, Orlando challenges Morgante to a duel. Yet, after being persuaded by a dream, the giant converts to Christianity; Orlando spares his life, ordering him to expiate his sins by serving the monks. After doing the penance, Morgante is knighted and begins a new life as Christian paladin, breaking evil spells, defeating infidel kings, queens, and monsters and converting them to Christianity, and so on. Morgante's religious conversion is, therefore, the main

2. Born in Florence, June 22, 1425, and died March 28, 1482.

3. Born in Florence, January 1, 1449, and died at Careggi, April 9, 1492.

4. *Ripolina*, a Florentine edition published between the end of 1481 and the beginning of 1482; a second Venetian edition completed on February 26, 1482, and a new Florentine edition, published on February 7, 1483.

narrative impulse of the poem. Placed at its beginning, it triggers all the vicissitudes that follow.

The first encounter between Morgante and Orlando is described in stanzas 39 and 40 of the first canto (Pulci 1998, 10–11):

> Blissfully all this time Morgante slept
> In the deep mansion that with his own hand
> He out of twigs and logs and mud had built:
> There every night he shut himself and lay.
> Orlando knocked, and kept on knocking till
> The giant he awoke out of his sleep.
> He comes to open—a pale ghost he seems,
> For he has had the strangest of all dreams.
> He had just dreamed that, having been bitten by
> A poisonous snake, he had invoked Mahound,
> But as Mahound could nothing for him do,
> He therefore Blessed Jesus' help invoked,
> Through which his life was presently restored.
> All the while grumbling, to the door he came.
> "Who's knocking there?" he asked, murmuring low.
> Replied Orlando, "You will quickly know."[5]

In the beginning, Morgante's conversion features a strange symbiosis between reality and imagination, wake and dream. The sharp, deafening noise that Orlando produces by violently knocking at the giant's door becomes part of his dreams (Caillois 1956). The ambiguity determines a triple *mise en abyme*. Even before the fight with Orlando begins, another duel has already taken place in Morgante's imagination: that between himself and a snake—an animal with evident symbolical meaning. Furthermore, a third metaphysical fight overlaps the first two: that between Muhammad ("Macometto" in Pulci's poem) and Jesus. In rapid succession, Morgante invokes them both as saviors in the imaginary duel against the satanic reptile. The ideology of the triple fight is Manichean: the outcome of the last one, that is, Jesus's supremacy over Mohammad, determines those of the combats at the other two layers; Morgante, helped by

5. "Morgante avea al suo modo un palagio / Fatto di frasche e di schegge e di terra; / Quivi, secondo lui, si posa ad agio, / Quivi la notte si rinchiude e serra. / Orlando picchia e dargli disagio, / Perché 'l gigante dal sonno si sferra; / Vennegli aprir come una cosa matta, / Ch'un'aspra visione aveva fatta. // E' gli parea ch'un feroce serpente / L'avea assalito, e chiamar Macometto; / Ma Macometto non valea niente, / Onde è chiamato Giesù benedetto; / E liberato l'avea finalmente. / Venne alla porta ed ebbe così detto: / 'Chi bussa qua?' pur sempre borbottando. / 'Tu 'l saprai tosto' gli rispose Orlando" (Pulci 1948); unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

Jesus, defeats the snake, this intermediary and fantastic victory being followed by a final and real triumph, that of Orlando over the giant, of Christianity over the "infidel."

Pulci does not represent the psychology of Morgante; he tries neither to understand nor to describe the intimate reasons for the giant's religious conversion. On the contrary, he voices a mechanical conception of spiritual change, which is determined neither by theological reflection (intellectual conversion), nor by the intervention of divine grace (supernatural conversion), nor by repentance (emotional conversion) (Leone 2004). Morgante converts to Christianity, for he realizes that the God of Christians has protected him more effectively than the God of Muslims, demonstrating the truthfulness of the former and the falseness of the latter.

Stanzas 41–43 of the first canto continue to narrate the story of Morgante's conversion (Pulci 1998, 11):

> "I came so that you, too, like your two brothers,
> of all your countless sins might now repent.
> I have been sent by the good monks below,
> Or rather by God's providence above.
> For all the ill you wrongly did to them,
> Heaven Itself has passed the sentence on you.
> Know, then, that just as cold as one pilaster,
> I've left both Passamonte and Alabaster."
>
> "O kindly Cavalier," Morgante said,
> "Spare me in Heaven's name such villainy.
> Tell me, I beg you, who you really are –
> And if you pray to Christ now let me know."
> Replied Orlando, "If but this you crave,
> I by my faith will sate your every wish.
> Christ I adore, Who is the only Lord,
> And Who should by you also be adored."
>
> Submissively the Saracen replied,
> "I have just dreamed the strangest of all dreams:
> A most fierce serpent had just bitten me,
> Wherefore I first invoked Mahound in vain;
> Then, as my prayer reached this God of yours
> Who was condemned to die upon a cross,

He aided me, and made me sound and free,
And so a Christian I would like to be."[6]

Morgante passes from his religion to that of his antagonist with a spiritual nonchalance that might surprise the contemporary reader, all the more since Orlando has just disdainfully announced to the Saracen giant the violent death inflicted on some of his fellows. The rapidity with which the Saracen, in the span of an octave, stops invoking his impotent god and starts begging the help of Jesus might sound equally puzzling. But the estrangement must encourage contemporary readers to ponder the distance between their conception of religious conversion and that embodied in the fifteenth-century poem. Nowadays, converting from one religion to another appears to most as completely revolutionizing the identity of the convert. The mutation is explained with reference either to the ineffable intervention of grace, or as the accomplishment of a slow and often painful process of spiritual ripening, or else as some kind of combination of the two. On the other hand, as Pulci's poem shows, in the remote past conversion could represent an almost "natural" event, fluid and perfectly logical, deprived of any dramatic component.

Several reasons might account for this difference. First, the relative secularization of customs and the rationalist and historicist interpretation of religions had not yet promoted a cultural ideology according to which all systems of beliefs are equally legitimate: in Pulci's time and environment, every conversion to Christianity was considered natural, while every spiritual change evolving in the opposite direction represented an error, an apostasy.

Second, especially in less theologically sophisticated social groups, religion was not merely meant to favor the peace of the soul or to suggest an eschatological frame for human existence, but rather to exert a material impact on the life of human beings. It was expected to relieve believers of their sorrows, above all from the troubles of everyday material life. It was only as a consequence of the development of technology and medicine, which progressively replaced saints as the main addressees of human prayers, that the purposes

6. " 'Vengo per farti come a' tuoi fratelli; / Son de' peccati tuoi la penitenzia, / Da' monaci mandato cattivelli, / Come stato è divina providenzia, / Pel mal ch'avete fatto a torto a quelli; / È dato in ciel così questa sentenzia; / Sappi che freddo già più ch'un pilastro / Lasciato ho Passamonte e 'l tuo Alabastro.' // Disse Morgante: 'O gentil cavaliere, / Per lo tuo Iddio non mi dir villania; / Di grazia, il nome tuo vorrei sapere; / Se se' cristian, deh, dillo in cortesia.' / Rispose Orlando: 'Di cotal mestiere / Contenterotti per la fede mia; / Adoro Cristo, chè Signor verace / E puoi tu adorarlo, se ti piace.' // Rispose il saracin con umil voce: / 'Io ho fatta una strana visione, / Che m'assaliva un serpente feroce; / Non mi valeva per chiamar Macone; / Onde al tuo Iddio, che fu conflitto in croce, / Rivolsi presto la mia devozione; / E' mi soccorse, e fui libero e sano, / E son disposto al tutto esser cristiano' " (Pulci 1948).

of religion were increasingly confined to the realm of spiritual salvation and more and more separated from that of material well-being. In Pulci's epoch, medical technique regressed and became more abstract, and law superseded it as the ideal embodiment of the perfect equilibrium between contemplative and active life. Despite the relative diffusion of a humanist interpretation of religion, faith was still thought of as exerting influence on both the soul and the body, for what happened to the latter was considered a sign of what occurred to the former.

Third, as a comparison between Pulci's *Morgante* and later, post-Tridentine poems indicates, the Council of Trent promoted a religious evolution that played an important role in shaping the Catholic conception of spiritual individuality. Before the council's reaction to Protestant Reformation, the soul of converts was mostly represented as a quite simple mechanism, deprived of any interior articulations. After the council, the construction and progressive institution of a more complex language, able to precisely name and subtly describe all the movements and mutations of the soul, increasingly nuanced the monolithic conception. The Council of Trent and the dialectics between Protestant and Catholic Reformations were instrumental in the constitution of a "semiotics of the soul," a language of spirituality that still conditions contemporary perceptions of psychological identity and change.

In Pulci, the theological precision that will later be a foundational element of Tasso's poetry and even represent a matter of personal spiritual concern is still absent. The language of the soul displayed by *Morgante* is rudimentary. A plain metaphysical dynamics, which the characters' words express flatly, presides over the process of conversion. A dream suffices for Morgante to convert to Christianity, and, reciprocally, the naïve enunciation of a desire to convert suffices for Orlando to reprieve the giant. No wish to either describe the development of spiritual states and changes according to a logic of psychological verisimilitude or use the insights of literature and poetry in order to investigate the reasons for conversion ever animates the text of the poem. Morgante proposes, Orlando accepts, without any spiritual or material obstacle. This is even more evident in stanza 44 (Pulci 1998, 11):

> "O baron just and good," Orlando said,
> "If this true wish you keep within your heart,
> Your soul will soon possess that truthful god
> Who alone can bestow eternal grace;
> And if you so desire, my friend you'll be,

And I'll to you with perfect love be bound.
False are your idols, and most vain indeed:
Only the Christians' God is the true God."[7]

Orlando's words offer further indications on the *imaginaire* of religious conversion at Pulci's time. Conversion from Islam to Christianity rapidly modifies the status of the convert: Morgante, theretofore nothing but a brute and an enemy to be mercilessly crushed, after conversion miraculously becomes a just and pious *barone*. Orlando emphasizes the need that the wish to change (*voler*) remains constant and *un*changed. This is indeed the main concern of religious communities that agree to receive a convert: the heart that finds its way to a new religion must persist in it. The rapidity of Orlando's reception shows in the perfection of love that he promises to his new friend: if Morgante keeps his word, he will be perfectly loved, without any grudge vis-à-vis his past as infidel. True, Morgante has committed the sin of believing in some gods who were nothing but idols; nevertheless, if he chooses the faith of Christ, he will be completely redeemed.

At the end of the stanza, Pulci discredits Islam by accusing Muslims of venerating a multiplicity of useless and untrustworthy gods (while, in reality, Islam generally abhors as idolatry any exception to rigid monotheism). Orlando's two criteria for evaluating religions are, therefore, usefulness—for in Morgante's dream the God of Christians is demonstrated to be more effective than Mohammad—and truthfulness, which is a consequence of the first: if a god exists, it must be useful, and if a god is useful, it must ergo exist.

In a significant following passage Orlando catechizes Morgante by proffering a succinct compendium of the Christian dogmas. Chivalric poems seldom detail their characters' theology, especially if they are Muslims. The text does not disclose whether Morgante's previous knowledge of Christianity has favored his conversion or whether divine grace has prompted his desire for theological knowledge. Here, from stanza 45, is Orlando's brief catechism (Pulci 1998, 12):

"Our Lord and master with no sin was born
Out of His Virgin Mother's holy womb.
Oh, if your blessed Lord you only knew,
Without Whose might no sun or star can shine,

7. "Rispose Orlando: 'Baron giusto e pio, / Se questo buon voler terrai nel core, / L'anima tua arà quel vero Iddio, / Che ci può sol gradir d'etterno onore; / E s' tu vorrai, sarai compagno mio / Ed amerotti con perfetto amore; / Gl'Idoli vostri son bugiardi e vani, / E 'l vero Iddio è lo Dio de' cristiani" (Pulci 1948).

You would renounce Mahomet instantly
Together with his false and impious cult.
Turn to my God, if truly you repent."
Replied Morgante, "This is all I want."[8]

Islam is defined as "false" and "impious," and baptism is proposed as the miraculous sacrament by which the interior, invisible conversion that hides in the heart of Morgante can become exterior and visible. In Pulci, as in most chivalric poems, baptism is the sacrament (but also the narrative device) that triggers the definitive passage from "infidelity" to "fidelity." Morgante's conversion is rapid and straightforward ("Io son contento"). The new Christian hero chops off the hands of his "brothers," previously killed by Orlando, and gives them as a macabre token of conversion to the monks: when chivalric poems represent Saracen warriors converting from Islam to Christianity, their new spiritual ties prevail over any previous bonds, no matter if familial or chivalric.

In stanzas 58–59, Orlando draws a comparison between Morgante and Saint Paul. For those Christians who would witness with astonishment their enemies' conversion from Islam to Christianity, and their subsequent change of narrative role (from persecutors to paladins), the comparison with Paul was inevitable (Pulci 1998, 14):

"Even one of our apostles (Saul's his name)
Long persecuted the true faith of Christ;
But then one day the Holy Spirit made him
Heed Christ's own words, 'Why do you fight me son?'
Thus he repented of his every sin,
And went all over preaching Jesus Christ:
Of our true faith he's now the loudest sound,
Which on the earth will evermore rebound."
"The very same, Morgante, you will do:
For—as our Gospel says—a sinner who
Repents is feted more by God above
Than ninety-nine just souls that ne'er have sinned.
One thing I tell you—from now on you must
Devoutly raise your wishes to the Lord,

8. " 'Venne questo Signor senza peccato / Nella sua madre virgine pulzella; / Se conoscessi quel Signor beato, / Senza qual non risplende sole o stella, / Aresti già Macon tuo rinnegato, / E la sua fede iniqua, ingiusta e fèlla; / Battézzati al mio Iddio di buon talento.' / Morgante gli rispose: 'Io son contento' " (Pulci 1948).

And in great joy you will forever dwell,
Who had been lost and doomed to endless hell."[9]

Lines 2, 4, and 6 of stanza 1 end in the word *Cristo*. The repetitive rhyme mimics Paul's turning into a "trumpet" that enables the Christian message to resonate.[10] Paul's story is accurately narrated in order to present, as in a mirror, the image of an abrupt and violent conversion, transforming a persecutor into a defender, an executioner into a savior. Analogously, when Morgante persisted in the falsity of his "diabolical" faith, he was doomed to burn in hell, while after his conversion he becomes an object of divine joy. As is frequent in many representations of conversion in any epoch, unforeseen changes from evil to good are celebrated more than the permanent state of lukewarm acceptance of the Christian word. The comparison between Morgante and Paul emphasizes the type of light that Pulci casts on the religiosity of his main character: conversion manifests itself as a reversal of the equilibrium of forces between good and evil, leaving no space for an individual ripening of the soul. Moreover, the parallelism between one of the heroes of the Christian pantheon and the clumsy giant Morgante encourages the reader to detect, through the hyperbolical excess of the comparison, the veil of irony that Pulci draws over human religiosity.

Matteo Maria Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato*: Religious Conversion and Skepticism

Matteo Maria Boiardo was born in Scandiano (near Reggio Emilia) in 1441 and died in Reggio Emilia in 1494. His masterpiece, the chivalric poem *Orlando innamorato*, was to be composed of one hundred cantos in octaves, grouped into three parts; the author's sudden death interrupted the writing plan. The poem was first published in Reggio Emilia in 1483;[11] the third part was also printed separately, with the title *El fin de l'inamoramento d'Orlando*.[12]

As in Pulci's *Morgante*, in Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato* religious conversion is a keystone of the plot: Galaciella's spiritual change actually originates

9. "'Un nostro apostol, Saul già chiamato, / Perseguì molto la fede di Cristo; / Un giorno poi dallo spirto infiammato: / "Perché pur mi perseguì?" disse Cristo; / E si ravide allor del suo peccato; / Andò poi predicando sempre Cristo / E fatto è ora della fede una tromba, / La qual per tutto risuona e rimbomba. // Così farai tu ancor, Morgante mio; / E chi si emenda, è scritto nel Vangelo / Che maggior festa da d'un solo Iddio, / Che di novantanove altri su in cielo. / Io ti conforto ch'ogni tuo desio / Rivolga a quel Signor con giusto zelo, / Ché tu sarai felice in sempiterno, / Ch'eri perduto e dannato allo inferno'" (Pulci 1948).

10. Here Pulci implicitly subscribes to a poetic tradition of which Dante is the most illustrious example: in the *Divine Comedy*, no word rhymes with the name of Christ.

11. No copy of this edition has been preserved.

12. See Croce 1920; Contini 1939; Cavallo 1993; Cossutta 1995; Anceschi and Matarrese 1998; Praloran 1999.

the story. One of the protagonists of the poem is Ruggiero, Lord of Risa (Reggio) and mythical ancestor of the Este family.[13] Galaciella, Ruggiero's mother and a "pagan" warrior, converts to Christianity for the love of a man.[14] Galaciella's story follows a narrative topos of Italian chivalric literature. Before Boiardo, it had been narrated in *Aspromonte*, a thirteenth-century chanson de geste, transposed by Andrea da Barberino[15] into a poem composed of monorhymed, decasyllabic stanzas (Allaire 1997). This textual tradition, too, is centered on the idea of conversion: Agolante, king of Africa, seeks to force Charles the Great to surrender and to convert to the pagan faith. At the Christian emperor's refusal, Agolante's son, Almonte, invades Italy. But Charles defeats Almonte's army, mainly thanks to the Christian hero Orlando, and has the chiefs of the Saracen army killed. Galaciella, Agolante's widow, therefore, converts to Christianity and marries Florent, son of the Christian king of Hungary. Religious conversion occurs both at the beginning of the story (the intimation to convert addressed by Agolante to Charles the Great) and at its end (the widow's conversion: as in Morgante's spiritual change, here too old family ties are quickly superseded by a new religious affiliation).

In *Orlando innamorato*, Boiardo elaborates on this chivalric tradition, transposing into verses the adventures of Galaciella, the woman who converted for love. Her Christian husband having been treacherously killed, Galaciella flees her brother's snares and seeks refuge in Africa. Here, just before breathing her last, she begets Ruggiero and entrusts him to the pagan magician Atlante. Endowed with the gift of prophesy, and knowing that Ruggiero's destiny is to convert to Christianity and be killed by his pagan enemies, Atlante hides the child in a secret castle, secluded from the world. But in chivalric poems fate cannot be avoided: Agramante, king of Africa, decides to make use of Ruggiero's fighting talent against Charles the Great, the Christian king.

Boiardo died before transposing Ruggiero's conversion into rhymes. The difficult task was left to Ludovico Ariosto. Nevertheless, *Orlando innamorato* contains descriptions of three conversions and as many subsequent baptisms. They are all key elements in the narrative structure of the poem, being triggered by the Christian heroes Orlando (two of them) and Rinaldo (one of them). The conversion of Agricane, the king of the Tartars, is particularly significant in relation to a *literary history of spiritual change*. Moved by love

13. Boiardo has him descend from the Homeric hero Hector, this imaginary genealogy having the evident purpose to praise the court in which Boiardo lived and wrote his poem.

14. A frequent situation in conversion tales: romantic love for a Christian leads to spiritual love for Christ.

15. Florence, 1370–1431.

for Angelica, he besieges the stronghold of Albracca. He engages in a duel with Orlando, but is defeated. Before dying, Agricane converts to Christianity. Canto 18, stanza 37 (bk. 1) describes in verses the beginning of the duel (Boiardo 1989, 257):

> Agrican watched his face and said,
> "If you're a Christian, you're Orlando!
> I would prefer to fight you than
> To be the king of Paradise!
> But let me give you some advice:
> Don't talk about the works of gods
> To me because you'll preach in vain.
> Let each defend his, sword in hand.[16]

The religious mentality that underpins these lines is not different from that shown by the episode of Morgante's conversion: chivalric duel replaces theological disputation. First, Agricane solemnly affirms that he would not exchange the happiness of fighting against his worst enemy, Orlando, with the privilege of becoming the king of Paradise. He subsequently rejects Orlando's attempts at converting him and encourages him to fight, to defend his faith with weapons rather than with words: "Diffenda in suo ciascun col brando in mano" (Let each defend his [faith], sword in hand).

After the bloody duel, which takes place within the poetical space of several stanzas, Orlando triumphs. The tone of the poem suddenly changes into elegiac. As he feels death seizing him, Agricane decides to convert. The dynamic of the spiritual change is not entirely clear: perhaps the Saracen warrior has kept Orlando's words in the depths of his soul; although he has rejected them so as to immediately begin the fight, they have secretly blossomed, giving rise to religious conversion at the exact moment when, the fight having ended with the Muslim's defeat, belligerence ceases to encumber his soul. A remarkable difference, though, subsists between the conversions of Morgante and Agricane: the former is instantaneous and does not coincide at all with the convert's death. It marks instead the beginning of a new life; in the latter, on the contrary, it is exactly through death that Agricane manages to purify his soul and convert to Christianity. The social position of the two characters is also different: Morgante is a comic persona, unaffected by any chivalric code, while

16. "Disse Agricane, e riguardollo in viso: / 'Se tu sei Cristiano, Orlando sei. / Chi me facesse re del paradiso, / Con tal ventura non lo cangerei; / Ma sino or te ricordo e dòtti avviso / Che non me parli di fatti de' Dei, / Perché potresti predicare in vano: / Diffenda in suo ciascun col brando in mano'" (Boiardo 1986).

Agricane is a real warrior. Furthermore, since the latter fights for the love of a woman, the tone of his conversion must be in harmony with the style of the literary context in which it takes place.

Boiardo represents, through an abundance of visual details, the end of the duel, the conversion, and the baptism. The text was, therefore, destined to nourish the imagination of both unsophisticated readers and visual artists. The graphic character of these representations will become increasingly evident in Ariosto and in Tasso: poetry borrows some of its representative means from the visual arts and, at the same time, enables further visual representations to be influenced by the literary text. Here is the passage of *Orlando innamorato*, canto 19, stanza 12, describing Agricane's conversion (Boiardo 1989, 263):

> From right to left, from side to groin,
> The king, who was so strong, was sliced.
> His face was white, his eyes grew blind.
> He's like a man about to die.
> And, though his soul and spirit fail,
> He calls Orlando, his words plain:
> He whispers in a low voice, "I
> Believe in your God, crucified."[17]

Graphic details and references to color (e.g., "la faccia bianca") allow readers to clearly visualize the action and above all to feel the extreme fatigue that the Saracen warrior superhumanly overcomes in order to announce his conversion. In the exact moment that Agricane is pierced by Orlando's sword, he receives the divine illumination, for he interprets his own defeat as the defeat of his god. Orlando's weapon and the darts of grace simultaneously wound Agricane's body, in a sort of baroque ecstasy; as he realizes that his death is imminent, he also understands the necessity for his conversion. The reference to Christ's death is not merely rhetorical: Jesus's sacrifice allowed the salvation of humanity, exactly as Agricane's death allows the salvation of his soul—and thus follows, in stanza 13, according to a traditional narrative scheme of chivalric poetry, Agricane's request for baptism (Boiardo 1989, 263):

> "Knight, at that fountain, baptize me
> Before I lose the power of speech.

17. "Da il destro lato a l'anguinaglia stanca / Era tagliato il re cotanto forte; / Perse la vista ed ha la faccia bianca, / Come colui ch'è già gionto alla morte; / E benché il spirto e l'anima li manca, / Chiamava Orlando, e con parole scorte / Sospirando diceva in bassa voce; / 'Io credo nel tuo Dio, che morì in croce'" (Boiardo 1986).

If I have led an evil life,
Don't let me lose God as I die.
The one who came to save mankind
May still receive my wretched soul.
That I've sinned much, I do confess;
God's mercy, though, is nothing less."[18]

In Agricane's as in Morgante's conversion stories, the poets attribute a surprisingly precise knowledge of the Christian liturgy to the same pagan warriors who, just few lines earlier, had been represented as totally careless vis-à-vis religious matters. Divine grace and the imminence of death instruct these souls: Agricane understands the need for baptism, the unjustness of his life, the necessity to conform at least the moment of his death to the principles of Christianity; he realizes that Jesus's sacrifice on the cross redeemed the sins of humanity and that, before dying, he must confess his own misdeeds and be confident in the mercy of God. The following stanza manifests a new element, which was not present in Morgante's conversion, but will be copiously represented after the Council of Trent: tears. Here are the first two lines of stanza 14 (Boiardo 1989, 263):

That king, who was so fierce, now cried
And kept his eyes toward heaven.[19]

This representation of contrition just before death probably follows a pictorial model, where the iconography of conversion often includes tears and the motif of the gaze addressing the sky.[20] At the same time, perhaps through the mediation of paintings, the poem absorbs the typical theatricality of medieval mystery plays, wherein the gestures and postures of characters were always meant to express their spiritual status.[21] Here is the end of the passage, stanzas 15–16 (Boiardo 1989, 263):

"I can't survive much longer. Wise
Cavalier, lift me from my saddle.

18. "'Batteggiame, barone, alla fontana / Prima ch'io perda in tutto la favella; / E se mia vita è stata iniqua e strana, / Non sia la morte almen de Dio ribella. / Lui, che venne a salvar la gente umana, / L'anima mia ricoglia tapinella! / Ben me confesso che molto peccai, / Ma sua misericordia è grande assai'" (Boiardo 1986).

19. "Piangea quel re, che fo cotanto fiero, / E tenía il viso al cel sempre voltato" (Boiardo 1986).

20. Tears allow the exteriorization of repentance as well as its visualization (McEntire 1990; Lutz 1999; Charvet 2000).

21. Literature on the relation between the examined chivalric poems and visual arts is abundant; on Ariosto, see Lee (1977); Wiggins (1986); and the bibliography in Rodini and Di Maria (1980); see also Bellocchi (1961); and Torti (1986); on Tasso, see Buzzoni (1985); and Careri (2003, 2005). For a general survey, see Leone (2012a).

Don't let my soul be lost forever.
Baptize me quickly. I am slain.
If you should let me die this way,
You'll suffer great distress, great pain!"
He said these words and many others.
How sad Orlando is, how sorry.

His eyes were filled with tears as he
Dismounted to the level field.
He took the gored king in his arms
And set him on the marble by
The fountain, weeping with him while
He asked for pardon for his deeds;
Then he baptized him with spring water.
He joined his hands and prayed to God.[22]

These stanzas are refined. They almost attain the level of sensibility and technical complexity of baroque literary conversions. The poet dwells on the relation between the impossibility of arresting the corporal demise and the willingness to avoid spiritual death. The purifying water emerging from the interiority of the soul (the warrior's tears) metaphorically parallels the external water of the baptismal source. Together they offer an effective image of the perfect coexistence, in conversion, of will and grace, whose relation theologians will unceasingly debate during and after the Council of Trent. Every detail in the stanzas subtly contributes to the semiotics of this spiritual change: even the contrast between the coldness of the marble where Orlando lays down Agricane's body, a thermic reference to death, and the tepidity of his tears, a symbol of a new state of the heart. The transformation of Agricane's soul occurs through this contact between contrasting temperatures, a new spiritual warmness compensating the coldness of the warrior's dying body. Stanza 17 marks the end of the episode and describes the convert's holy death (Boiardo 1989, 263):

He did not stay long when he found
The body and the face grown cold:

22. " 'Io non me posso ormai più sostenire: / Levame tu de arcio, baron accorto. / Deh non lasciar questa anima perire! / Batteggiami oramai, chè già son morto. / Se tu me lasci a tal guisa morire / Ancor n'avrai gran pene e di sconforto.' / Questo diceva e molte altre parole: / Oh quanto al conte ne rincresce e dole! // Egli avea pien de lacrime la faccia, / E fo smontato in su la terra piana; / Ricolse il re ferito nelle braccia, / E sopra al marmo il pose alla fontana, / E de pianger con seco non si saccia, / Chiedendogli perdon con voce umana. / Poi battizollo a l'acqua della fonte, / Pregando Dio per lui con le man gionte" (Boiardo 1986).

He knew, from that, the king was gone.
He left him on the fountain stone
As he had been, in all his arms,
His sword in hand, with his crown on.
Then the Count turned to view his horse
And he believed he saw Baiardo.[23]

A comparison between Pulci and Boiardo, between Morgante's conversion and Agricane's, reveals similarities and differences that lead to hypotheses about the evolution of the Christian *imaginaire* of spiritual change before the Catholic Reformation. Both poems offer quite a grotesque and demonized view of religious difference, mostly with Islam. On Boiardo's hostility toward this religion, Cossutta writes: "It has already been pointed out how in the whole poem hostility toward Muslims is strong. They are seen as mortal enemies of the Christian society and its values, first of all faith in the Redeemer and belief in the true God" (Cossutta 1995, 439).[24] Moreover, a "belligerent" conception of religion underpins both *Morgante* and *Orlando innamorato*: the Christian god proves his superiority over the Muslim one by securing the victory of the Christian knight over his Muslim enemy.

Besides these analogies, though, important differences distinguish the two poems. In *Morgante*, religion is the most decisive element for the determination of individual identity: the purpose of defending and spreading Christianity is predominant, and any nonreligious tie (political, social, even familial) becomes secondary. In *Orlando innamorato*, on the contrary, religion plays a background role for the shaping of identities; other ties (familial, military, chivalric) and above all other purposes (personal affirmation, love, military glory, power) become prevalent. In Boiardo's poem, Orlando, Grifone, and Aquilante even happen to fight against a Christian, Rolando, beside some Saracen heroes. Moreover, in book 1, canto 4, stanza 14, Charles the Great pronounces the following verses (Boiardo 1989, 77):

Marsilio is a Saracen:
That does not matter. He's our cousin.[25]

23. "Poco poi stette che l'ebbe trovato / Freddo nel viso e tutta la persona, / Onde se avide che egli era passato. / Sopra al marmo alla fonte lo abbandona, / Così come era tutto quanto armato, / Col brando in mano e con la sua corona, / E poi verso il destrier fece riguardo, / E pargli di veder che sia Baiardo" (Boiardo 1986).

24. "Si è già avuto modo di accennare quanto e come sia forte in tutto il Poema l'avversione per i Musulmani, visti come nemici mortali della società cristiana e dei suoi valori, primo fra tutti la fede nel Redentore e il credo nel vero Dio."

25. "Dico che se Marsilio è saracino, / Ciò non attendo; egli è nostro cognato" (Boiardo 1986).

This indicates that family bonds (Galienna, Charles's bride, is Marsilio's sister) prevail over religious principles. Another difference consists in Boiardo's attitude toward the conversion of female characters, whose spiritual semiotics appears as quite different from that of male converts. In *Orlando innamorato*, Flordalisa, Leodilla, and Doristella convert and are baptized, but Angelica, the main female character, remains a pagan. As Denise Alexandre-Gras points out in her essay on chivalric heroism in Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato*: "According to the tradition of *cantari*, it would have been unimaginable that a hero lived during several weeks, if not months, in companionship with a Saracen princess, being also in love with her, without trying to convert her" (1988, 139).[26] In *Orlando innamorato*, the Christian knight Grifone also contradicts this rule: he does not care at all about the religion of the Saracen Origilla, who becomes his companion; furthermore, Orlando plans to seduce the same girl without being bothered by her not being baptized.

Religion in Boiardo turns into an accessory element, looked upon with nonchalance and at times even with disdain. But whereas Pulci's irony toward the religiosity of his characters was mostly a consequence of the parodic literary genre of *Morgante*, Boiardo's attitude is rather due to a certain humanist skepticism. Although Agricane's conversion is overall convincing, it is nevertheless quite superficial in relation to that of Ferragus in the *Spagna ferrarese*, a poem that is much more steeped in religious references than *Orlando innamorato*. In the meantime, the religious ideology undergirding the two poems had changed. When Boiardo describes the conversion of another Saracen warrior, Brandimarte, Orlando's argument to persuade him is simply mentioned, not described. No evangelical desire animates the protagonist of the poem. The initiative of conversion is not his, but the Saracen's himself, marveled at the view of Orlando's prayers.

Boiardo's implicit conception of spiritual change is best represented in the third male conversion of the poem, that of the knights Prasildo and Iroldo. The two "Babylonians," astonished by the sword feats of Orlando, take him for Mohammad. In the beginning the Christian warrior is amused by their mistake, but then he starts talking with them about religion: if he must open their eyes to his truthful identity, why not take advantage of the misunderstanding in order to convert them? So at the end of the narrative sequence, Prasildo and Iroldo, converted by Orlando, proffer a sort of pastiche of Catholic prayers and

26. "Selon la tradition des *cantari*, il eût été impensable qu'un héros vivant pendant des semaines, sinon des mois, dans la compagnie d'une princesse sarrasine, dont il est de surcroît épris, ne cherchât pas à la convertir!"

liturgical formulae. The irreverent character of the scene reveals the mistrust, or even the contempt, of the poet toward religion.

The Council of Trent and the Catholic Reformation deeply modified the perception of religions and religiosities. The character of individual conviction that is currently associated with the idea of faith is partially a product of both the Protestant and the Catholic Reformations, which represented the reformulation of a past religious tradition as well as the attempt at reforming the Christian language of the soul. The ripening of the concept of individual spirituality is not uniquely a product of the Catholic Reformation and its dialectics with the Protestant denominations. On the contrary, as has been shown, Boiardo was able to describe the spiritual mutation of some of his characters in a detailed, articulated, and personal way. However, this praise for individuality remains, in Boiardo's epoch, hidden under the veil of religious skepticism. The capacity for representing spiritual individuality and the inclination to attribute to it an earnestly embraced faith will converge in the same literary creation only later, in Ariosto and especially in Tasso. In Boiardo, instead, the same semiotic ideology that brings about an awareness of the individuality of faith and its language paradoxically also exposes it to the risks of skepticism or even to the disintegration of beliefs through literary irony.

Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*: Religious Conversion and Humanism

Ludovico Ariosto was born in Reggio Emilia in 1474 and died in Ferrara in 1533. He began to write *Orlando furioso* probably between 1502 and 1503; he had it published in Ferrara first in a provisional version in forty cantos in 1516, then in a definitive version in forty-six cantos in 1532.[27] Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* plays a fundamental role in the literary, artistic and cultural panorama of both Italy and Europe: soon after its publication, the poem was quickly translated into several languages and met a vast success. This essay will study it from a specific point of view: the representation of spiritual change. Attention will be focused on the semiotic relation of Ariosto's religious *imaginaire* with sixteenth-century customs, mentalities, and culture.

Ludovico Ariosto narrates Orlando's story from the point where Boiardo's poem ends, unfinished because of the author's death. However, the two poets adopt quite different poetical means. Since the plot of the poem is complex (this complication being one of the features of Ariosto's narrative style), it is not convenient to summarize it entirely in the present context. It is more ap-

27. Javitch 1991; Finucci 1992; Ascoli 1997; Bologna 1999; Beecher, Ciavolella, and Fedi 2003.

propriate to concentrate on the part of the story that precedes Ruggiero's conversion, the same episode that Boiardo wanted to narrate and transpose into the lines of his own poem. In order to protect Ruggiero from his destiny, the magician Atlante has imprisoned him and some other knights in a magic castle, where they live in the illusion of being able to satisfy all their desires. Freed from this spell, Ruggiero, who is in love with the Christian Bradamante and has promised her that he will be baptized, decides nonetheless to help the Saracen army, for he does not want to disobey his king.[28] After killing in a bloody fight the knight Mandricardo, who had challenged him to a duel, Ruggiero faces the assault of Bradamante; having secretly entered the enemy camp and being jealous of the affection that Ruggiero shows for the Saracen princess Marfisa, she provokes him to fight. The intervention of Atlante's spirit disentangles this knotted situation and prepares Ruggiero's conversion: Marfisa, it is found out, is Ruggiero's sister. Nevertheless, the Saracen hero still cannot be persuaded to abandon his king. Ariosto unknots the conflict between individual will (which is not theological yet, but moved by purely profane love) and chivalric loyalty through a subtle narrative trick: he has Ruggiero shipwrecked, so that he finds himself on a desert island, inhabited by none except an old Christian hermit.

Two elements must be underlined in Ariosto's representation of Ruggiero's conversion: first, this spiritual change is not as sudden and inarticulate as those described by Pulci and Boiardo. On the contrary, the genesis of religious mutation is slow and gradual. Second, it shows many of the features that will characterize conversion after the Council of Trent: the intervention of grace (the shipwreck), the necessity to detach oneself from one's own existential milieu (the island), the encounter with faith (the hermit), and the importance of catechism before baptism. At the same time, the general context of Ruggiero's conversion is still that of the chivalric tradition. Although the mutation of his heart gives rise to a complete, aware, and responsible adhesion to the Christian faith, it is nonetheless chiefly motivated by destiny (Ruggiero's origins are Christian) and by profane love (he loves a Christian woman).

The poetical description of the wreckage ends in canto 41, stanza 50: the impetuous movements of the sea, the rhythm of the waves inexorably hitting Ruggiero's boat, and above all the oscillation that these impacts produce—a fluid but violent motion—prefigure and imitate the stormy spiritual motions that will lead the Saracen warrior to conversion (the stability of land discov-

28. Here, the main narrative issue lies in the contrast between profane love, which leads to holiness, and chivalric loyalty toward an infidel king.

ered after wrecking): "He gathered strength and, his spirit unflagging, he struck the waves and swept them aside. The waves followed hard upon each other; one raised him up, the next carried him forward. Thus, bobbing up and down, he struggled to the shore and finally emerged from the water, soaked through, at a point where the rock sloped most gently into the sea" (Ariosto 1974, 490–91).[29]

The almost romantic fight that Ruggiero wages against the overwhelming force of the waves metaphorically expresses the inanity of those who strive to oppose their destiny, but also the impossibility to contrast the descent of grace upon the heart and its consequent salvation. From this point of view, the two last adjectives of the stanza are remarkable: Ruggiero manages to save himself from shipwreck, but his struggle against the waves makes him "bagnato e molle" (soaked through—but literally "wet and supple"). Later on, a soothing of the soul will complete this softening of the body. The stanza indicates that what produces this appeasement is not the violence of waves as much as their unceasing rhythm, isomorphic to that of grace. As the waves hit Ruggiero's body, Ariosto seems to suggest, so the divine grace strikes his soul until it produces a breach.

In the following stanza Ruggiero's travel companions have disappeared, a further element that encourages his conversion: the death of the other knights having severed any previous tie of blood and chivalry, Ruggiero finds himself on an island, anguished by his physical and spiritual solitude. Isolation turns the warrior's soul into a white and immaculate page, where neither traces of the past nor infidel voices can oppose the writing of the Christian faith onto Ruggiero's heart: "All the others who had abandoned ship were overwhelmed by the waves and remained in the water; Ruggiero, however, climbed out onto the lone rock, as it pleased God in His great goodness. Once he was safe from the sea on the stark, barren rock, though, a new fear possessed him of being exiled within such narrow confines and of meeting his death here from privations" (Ariosto 1974, 491).[30]

Ruggiero survives the wreckage for "all'alta Bontà divina piacque" (as it pleased God in His great goodness): the passage explicitly indicates the divine

29. "Cresce la forza e l'animo indefesso: / Ruggier percuote l'onde e le respinge, / L'onde che seguon l'una all'altra presso, / Di che una il leva, un'altra lo sospinge. / Così montando e discendendo spesso / Con gran travaglio, al fin l'arena attinge; / E da la parte onde s'inchina il colle / Più verso il mar, esce bagnato e molle" (Ariosto 1964).

30. "Fur tutti gli altri che nel mar si diero, / Vinti da l'onde, e al fin restâr ne l'acque. / Nel solitario scoglio uscì Ruggiero, / Come all'alta Bontà divina piacque. / Poi che fu sopra il monte inculto e fiero / Sicur dal mar, nuovo timor gli nacque / D'avere esilio in sì strette confine, / E di morirvi di disagio al fine" (Ariosto 1964).

origin of the warrior's fate; at this stage of the plot, though, he has not yet realized that grace leads to his misadventures; rather, he is afraid at the impression of being alone on a desert island. He is therefore astonished when he finds out that another man, a hermit, inhabits the place. Encounter is an important element in the early modern Catholic *imaginaire* of religious conversion, not only because it embodies the presence and action of grace on the human soul, but also because it triggers the genesis of change. The encounter of the infidel with the Christian word is indispensable for the development of conversion. No conversion is possible if the convert does not come across this word, be it the living one of the preacher, the missionary, or the clergyman, or the written word of the scriptures and the fathers (Leone 2004). In Ruggiero's conversion, it is the character of the hermit that voices the Christian word: "Still, with indomitable heart and ready to endure whatever Heaven sent him, he set out boldly to climb the hard rock, making straight for the top of the cliff. He had not gone a hundred steps when he saw a man ravaged by years and abstinence; his dress and manner proclaimed him a hermit worthy of all deference and respect" (Ariosto 1974, 491).[31]

Even before speaking, the hermit manifests himself as a conglomerate of signs to be interpreted. The marks of fatigue, waking, and fasting on his exhausted body, covered by rags, are an immediate indication of secluded and spiritual life. To Ruggiero's eyes, this type of existence deserves respect and admiration beyond the specific religious beliefs the hermit ascribes to. In the spiritual universe inhabited by Ariosto's characters, the spirituality of anchorites has universal value, even beyond the details of a particular theology. In a way, the text suggests that the semiotic elements that differentiate the discourse of confessions at a certain level of their deployment are transcended at the level of spiritual practice. Here, the hermit, his conditions of life, and his body epitomize the struggle of individuality facing the overwhelming mystery of transcendence, the lack of any external support in engaging the path of religious perfection, but also the possibility of freedom, the openness of life to the option of seclusion and inner exploring.[32] Nevertheless, the following stanza reveals the hermit's confession through a cento of Biblical citations: "When Ruggiero was close by the hermit called out to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do persecute my Faith?,' just as the Lord has spoken to Saint Paul when He struck

31. "Ma pur col core indomito e costante / Di patir quanto è in ciel di lui prescritto, / Pei duri sassi l'intrepide piante / Mosse, poggiando invêr la cima al dritto. / Non era cento passi andato inante, / Che vide d'anni e d'astinenze afflitto / Uom ch'avea d'eremita abito e segno, / Di molta reverenzia e d'amor degno" (Ariosto 1964).

32. For a semiotic study of monastic ascetism as metaphor of artistic withdrawal, see Leone (2012b).

him down, to his redemption. 'You expected to cross the sea without paying your passage, and to defraud another of his due. See, God has a long reach and grasps you when you think you are furthest from Him!'" (Ariosto 1974, 491).[33]

As in *Morgante*, so in *Orlando furioso*, Paul is mentioned as a model of sudden and revolutionary spiritual change. The former enemy of Christians, crushed and blinded by the divine power, then transformed into a champion of the same faith that he used to persecute, Paul was a perfect example to mirror the conversion of Muslims in *Orlando furioso*, and encourage all those who were scared at the idea of a radical change of life. The parallelism between the story of Paul and that of the Saracen convert is much subtler in Ariosto than in Pulci. In *Orlando furioso*, the knight's shipwreck corresponds to the *colpo salutifero* by which God had manifested his presence in Paul's life, thus subverting it. The Saracen knight, formerly an enemy of the Christians, therefore becomes their hero, exactly as the strike of grace transformed Paul from a persecutor of the Christian faith into its herald. The last four verses of the stanza are a pastiche of citations from the Gospels, affirming on the one hand the necessity to adhere to Christianity (the metaphor of the toll that has to be paid in order to cross a threshold, a passage, the sea) and, on the other hand, the omnipotence of grace, able to reach even those who believe that they are too distant from it.

Stanza 53 marks the beginning of a detailed description of the spiritual motions that lead Ruggiero toward religious conversion, what shows Ariosto's concern and sensibility for the psychological dynamics of his characters. This part of the poem implicitly seeks to answer the questions that frequently arise in those whose soul is willing to convert but still confused: What is the extent of divine powerfulness? When is the soul so remote from God that grace cannot reach it any longer? The two last lines of the stanza answer: there are no limitations to God's intervention. Furthermore, Ariosto contends that Ruggiero is predestined to salvation. The difficulties that theologians face in their attempt at reconciling divine omniscience with human freedom are poetically overcome in stanza 54, which introduces the theme of a miraculous vision: "The holy man had that night been sent a vision by God of how with His help Ruggiero was to reach this rock. God had given him a complete revelation

33. "Che, come gli fu presso: 'Saulo, Saulo, / —Gridò—'perché persegui la mia fede?'—/ come allor il Signor disse a San Paulo, / che 'l colpo salutifero gli diede. / 'Passar credesti il mar, né pagar naulo, / e defraudare altrui de la mercede. / Vedi che Dio, c'ha lunga man, ti giunge / Quando tu gli pensasti esser più lunge'" (Ariosto 1964).

of Ruggiero: all his past life, his future, his atrocious death, his sons, and grandsons, too, all his posterity" (Ariosto 1974, 491).[34]

A nocturnal vision becomes the narrative expedient by which the story of Ruggiero's conversion is presented as the accomplishment of predetermined destiny. However, in the following stanza, Ariosto immediately underlines the need that Ruggiero's spiritual choice be free and not simply induced by the force of destiny; as in the story of Paul's conversion, God violently strikes those who do not perceive the call of faith, but at the same time waits until the path of salvation is chosen by the free human will itself: "The hermit went on first to upbraid Ruggiero, then to console him. He chided him for having delayed placing his neck in the gentle yoke, for doing grudgingly, when he saw Christ threaten him with a whip, what he should have done when he was under no compulsion and Christ had called him with entreaties" (Ariosto 1974, 491).[35]

Here, as before, the story of Paul's conversion is a constant subtext (the *sferza* evoked by Ariosto recalls the evangelical metaphor of the horse that "kicks against the goads" of his knight and master). As regards the dilemma whether delaying conversion might be an insurmountable obstacle in the path toward spiritual perfection, stanza 56 answers by an evangelical citation: "Then he consoled him, saying that whether early or late, God does not deny Christ to those who seek Him; he told him the Gospel parable of the laborers in the vineyard who all received the same wage. With charity and devoted zeal the hermit instructed Ruggiero in the Faith as they walked slowly toward his cell, which was cut out of the hard rock" (Ariosto 1974, 491).[36]

The laborers referred to by the hermit are those of the eleventh hour, whose parable is told in Matt. 20:1–16. This quotation voices a conception of time that characterizes the Christian idea of conversion: there is no deadline, no time limit for those who wish to convert. However, in Ariosto's lines one has the impression that the more the potential convert delays his passage to the Christian faith, the more he is likely to receive the grace of a miraculously rapid introduction to Christian dogmas: there would be a sort of counterpoint be-

34. "E seguitò il santissimo eremita, / Il qual la notte innanzi avuto avea / In vision da Dio, che con sua aita / Allo scoglio Ruggier giunger dovea: / E di lui tutta la passata vita / E la futura, e ancor la morte rea, / Figli e nipoti et ogni discendente / Gli avea Dio rivelato immantinente" (Ariosto 1964).

35. "Seguitò l'ermita riprendendo / Prima Ruggiero; e al fin poi confortollo. / Lo riprendea che era ito differendo / Sotto il soave giogo a porre il collo; / E quel che dovea far, libero essendo, / Mentre Cristo pregando a sé chiamollo, / Fatto avea poi con poca grazia, quando / Venir con sferza il vide minacciando" (Ariosto 1964).

36. "Poi confortollo che non niega il cielo / Tardi o per tempo Cristo a chi gliel chiede; / E di quelli operarii del Vangelo / Narrò, che tutti ebbono ugual mercede. / Con caritade e con devoto zelo / Lo venne ammaestrando ne la fede, / Verso la cella sua con lento passo, / Ch'era cavata a mezzo il duro sasso" (Ariosto 1964).

tween the pernicious slowness of the human will and the lightening quickness of grace; in the Gospels as in Ariosto, the rapid intervention of the latter is somewhat meant to compensate the slowness of the former.

After describing the idyllic nature surrounding the hermit's lodging, which contrasts with the desolation of the landscape that Ruggiero discovered upon his arrival on the island (an opposition that metaphorically expresses the contrast between sin and grace), Ariosto recounts how, in a single day, Ruggiero learned the first rudiments of Christianity and was baptized: "Above the holy cell stood a chapel facing East; it was beautiful and convenient. Below it a wood stretched down to the water's edge, planted with laurel, juniper, myrtle, and fruitful palms; it was forever watered by a murmuring spring which cascaded down from the summit" (Ariosto 1974, 491).[37]

The monastic cell, the little church whose altar, according to tradition, faces East, the wood peppered with laurel, juniper, and myrtle—typical plants of the Mediterranean flora and mythology—the palm trees expressing the gaiety of conversion by their fecundity and the abundance of their fruits, and above all the stream, a clear reference to the purification of baptism, punctuate the landscape that hosts Ruggiero's conversion and manifests its spiritual joy. Even the orography of the fictional landscape turns into the significant scenery of Ruggiero's spiritual change: a stream of water constantly wets the wood surrounding the monastic cell, meaning the permanent presence of grace therein; the source of the stream is on top of a mountain, which further emphasizes the symbolism of water descending toward the valley, drawing an imaginary link between the place of Ruggiero's shipwreck, the sea, and the source of grace. The sophisticated literary device underlines once again the divine causation of the accident. The following stanzas briefly describe the solitary life of the hermit and the catechism he teaches to the pagan knight (Ariosto 1974, 491):

> It was almost forty years since the hermit had come to this rock, a place chosen for him by the Lord as suitable for leading the holy life of a solitary. He lived off the fruit of one tree and another and off pure water. Now he had reached his eightieth year—a healthy, robust existence free of worries. / The old man lit a fire in the cell, and loaded the table with an assortment of fruit, so that Ruggiero could restore himself a little once he had dried his clothes and hair. He learned here at greater leisure all the

37. "Di sopra siede alla devota cella / Una piccola chiesa che risponde / All'oriente, assai commoda e bella: / Di sotto un bosco scende sin all'onde, / Di lauri e di ginepri e di mortella, / E di palme fruttifere e feconde; / Che riga sempre una liquida fonte, / Che mormorando cade giù dal monte" (Ariosto 1964).

> great mysteries of our Faith and the next day the old man baptized him in the pure spring.[38]

Undoubtedly, the age of the hermit and the time he has been living on the island are not accidental: fruit of a mature decision, taken when the pious man was already forty (which is a sort of prefiguration of Ruggiero's conversion, also a "mature" one), the anchorite's choice to escape the world and its vanities falls exactly in the middle of his life: forty years elapsed before this decision, and forty years have passed since. The meaning of such a chronology is clear: Ariosto determines it so that his character lives exactly two lives. Thus, when Ruggiero encounters his spiritual guide, the old man is a completely renewed man, entirely steeped in the values and habits of his second existence. The choice of dividing the hermit's life into two periods of same length also designates his decision to retreat from the world as the existential turning point—and the narrative point of equilibrium—of a whole existence. The hermit's spiritual change becomes the epicenter around which the narration of his life is organized.

The religious instruction that Ruggiero receives from the hermit is sketchily evoked, not described in detail: the almost pictorial representation of the setting—the fire, the hermit's clothes, his hair—prevails on the mention of a corpus of theological ideas. Stanza 60, which marks the end of Ruggiero's spiritual training, adopts an analogous style and tone: "Ruggiero was most content to stay in this place, for the good servant of God declared his intention of sending him back in a few days to where he most wanted to go. Meanwhile they talked of many things—the kingdom of God, Ruggiero's own affairs, his posterity" (Ariosto 1974, 491).[39]

Orlando furioso voices a complex spiritual ideology, placed halfway between, on the one hand, humanist skepticism *à la manière de* Boiardo—often implying the tendency to cultivate an ethics totally detached from any theology, and even from any metaphysics—and, on the other hand, the remarkable display of a refined and detailed representation of the human soul and its

38. "Eran degli anni ormai presso a quaranta / Che su lo scoglio il fraticel si messe; / Ch'a menar vita solitaria e santa / Luogo opportuno il Salvator gli elesse. / Di frutte colte or d'una or d'altra pianta, / E d'acqua pura la sua vita resse, / Che valida e robusta e senza affanno / Era venuta all'ottantesimo anno. // Dentro la cella il vecchio accese il fuoco, / E la mensa ingombrò di varii frutti, / Ove si ricreò Ruggiero un poco, / Poscia ch'i panni e i capelli ebbe asciutti. / Imparò poi più ad agio in questo loco / de nostra fede i gran misterii tutti; / Et alla pura fonte ebbe battesmo / Il dì seguente dal vecchio medesmo" (Ariosto 1964).

39. "Secondo il luogo, assai contento stava / quivi Ruggiero; che 'l buon servo di Dio / fra pochi giorni intenzion gli dava / di rimandarlo ove più avea disio. / Di molte cose in tanto ragionava / con lui sovente, or al regno di Dio, / or agli proprii casi appertinenti, / or del suo sangue alle future genti" (Ariosto 1964).

mutations, wherein the Catholic ideas of conversion and grace are influential.[40] As Russell Ascoli points out: "He also has defined in extraordinary detail the ethical, political, metaphysical, and textual stakes at risk in understanding and practicing the virtue of faith and has exposed the contradictory and self-defeating of an ideology in a way that goes beyond even Machiavelli's brilliant if brutal analysis" (1997, 41).

Although some stanzas of the poem foreshadow the spirit of the Catholic Reformation, comparison with Tasso's main chivalric poem, *Gerusalemme liberata*, or with the readaptations of *Orlando furioso* by Ariosto's imitators during or after the Council of Trent, shows important variations. Ariosto's Angelica is quite different from the same character as she appears in Ludovico Dolce's *Sacripante* (1536), Pietro Aretino's *Lagrime d'Angelica* (1538), and Vincenzo Brusatini's *Angelica inamorata* (Ulrich 1953). The closer the date of publication of these poems to the Council of Trent, the more the story narrated by Ariosto is transformed for the sake of religious propaganda. Brusatini, in particular, as Ulrich points out, "the most faithful imitator of all his master's subjects, seems not to have had any other ambition than that of recounting, in the style of Counter-Reformation, what Ariosto had recounted in the style of Renaissance" (1953, 14).[41]

In *Orlando furioso*, religious ideals and conversion—the latter embodying and expressing the former at the highest degree—remain a function of the narrative structure of the poem; in Ariosto's post-Tridentine epigones, on the contrary, as well as in Tasso, the relation is subverted: the plot becomes a function of religion; the whole unfolding of the poem seeks to represent spiritual changes consistently with the dictate of Catholic Reformation theologians. An even deeper difference subsists between religious conversion as it is described by Ariosto and as it is recounted by his followers: while *Orlando furioso* constantly aims at a knowledge of the human soul as it is, chivalric poems written during the Catholic Reformation represent the soul as it should be. From this point of view, these last texts resemble more and more hagiographies. The figure of the knight (a profane hero) is gradually replaced by that of the saint (the sacred hero), the representation of individual lives by the

40. Italo Calvino intuited that a blend of narrative precision and moral detachment was the literary trademark of Ariosto, a trademark that Calvino sought to infuse in his own literature as a source of both aesthetic levity and moral stability: "L'ironia regna sovrana sia in Ariosto che in Calvino. Come afferma Pirandello ne *L'umorismo*, essa presuppone una certa distanza: 'Il campo dell'ironia . . . riduce la materia a una perpetua parodia e consiste nel non perdere, neppure nel momento del patetico, la coscienza dell'irrealtà della propria creazione' (*L'umorismo*, p. 74)" (Villa 2004, 117); see also Feinstein (1995).

41. "Continuatore più fedele di tutti i temi del maestro, non pare avere avuto altra ambizione se non quella di cantare, nello stile della Controriforma, ciò che da lui era stato cantato nello stile del rinascimento."

proposition of existential models. Ignatius of Loyola will be the most accomplished embodiment of this passage from chivalry to sainthood (Leone 2010).

Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*: Religious Conversion and Devotion

Torquato Tasso, who was born in Sorrento in 1544 and died in Rome in 1595, lived in the years of the Council of Trent and the systematization of the Catholic Reformation. His poem in twenty cantos, *Gerusalemme liberata*, was published in 1581 in Parma and Casalmaggiore. Two further editions, published in Ferrara in 1581 and 1585, eliminated most typographic imperfections of the first one. The poem exerted decisive influence on the Italian and European history of literature and the arts (painting, music, theater, etc.), as well as on the spiritual *imaginaire* of a vast readership. Many have studied the religiosity of Tasso, his works, and particularly *Gerusalemme liberata*, often with discordant conclusions. On the one hand, 1920s historicist literary criticism tended to devaluate Tasso's religiosity, as superficial, exterior, and rhetorical, mostly motivated by the poet's ardent desire to gain the moral support of the court and, as a consequence, literary glory. Francesco de Sanctis voices this interpretative trend. In a famous passage, often quoted by later commentators on Tasso's spirituality, the prominent historian of Italian literature contends: "What is religion then in *Gerusalemme liberata*? It is a typical Italian religion, dogmatic, historical and formal: the letter is there, not the spirit. Tasso's Christians believe, confess, pray, go on procession: this is the varnish. What is the ground? It is a chivalric world, fantastic and voluptuous, where people attend Mass and cross themselves. Religion is the accessory of this life, not the spirit" (1912, 2, 156).[42]

After de Sanctis, opinions of the same sort multiplied among historians and critics of Italian literature. So Eugenio Donadoni, some years later, followed his predecessor and affirmed: "Tasso never achieved a profound and lively sense of religiosity. He did never feel the invincible need to attain a life of purity and superior dignity. His will remains always stuck to earth" (1928, 513–14).[43] This interpretation was predominant at least until the 1960s, for example, in Banfi's view of Tasso's spirituality: "In all his works there is not a single thought,

42. "Che cosa è, dunque, la religione nella Gerusalemme? È una religione alla italiana, dommatica, storica e formale: c'è la lettera non ci è lo spirito. I suoi cristiani credono, si confessano, pregano, fanno processioni: questa è la vernice; quale è il fondo? È un mondo cavalleresco, fantastico e voluttuoso, che sente la messa e si fa la croce. La religione è l'accessorio di questa vita: non è lo spirito."

43. "Il Tasso non arrivò mai ad un senso profondo e vivo della religiosità. . . . Non mai sentì invitto il bisogno di elevarsi ad una vita di purità e di dignità superiore. La sua volontà rimane attaccata alla terra sempre."

act, figure whose morality arises from a religious feeling. . . . Religion indeed in Tasso's works is nothing but the Catholicism of Counter-Reformation, adopted—it is true—as a motive of poetic and civic unity, but only in its exteriority, in its renewed pomp, in its decoration of ceremonies and liturgical functions, in its preaching tone, in its abstract and gelid fanaticism; as a consequence, it is unable to substantially unify the multifarious poetic reality and to instill in it an organic sense of ethicality" (1957, 17).[44]

In this critical reading, Tasso's poetry is identified as a literary embodiment of the Catholic Reformation, but downplayed as instance of formal, exterior, and "fanatic" spirituality. Indirectly, the judgment pinpoints the decorative, pompous, and stereotypical character of the post-Tridentine Reformation as a whole. The devaluation of both its spiritual enterprise and the artistic forms that embodied it was common in Italian and European historiography at least from Benedetto Croce (1920) until the 1960s. However, in the following decades, several contributions on Tasso progressively nuanced de Sanctis's stance. Erminia Ardissino almost reversed it; Tasso's religiosity was by no means exterior or rhetorical but rather mirrored the uncertainties that characterized Italian religiosity during the "fall of Renaissance," at the beginning of a modernity wherein the old systems of social and cultural reference had been irremediably shaken: "Despite his apparent and conspicuous certainties, which the author seeks to render as homogenous and verifiable as possible, Tasso more than any other coeval writer manifests an interior labor that reflects not only the perplexities of the post-Tridentine Catholic world, but also the big spiritual crisis characterizing the 'fall of Renaissance'" (Ardissino 1996, 15).[45]

Within the context of this essay, only one specific aspect of Tasso's religiosity will be taken into account: representations of spiritual change in *Gerusalemme liberata*. The poet's religiosity and the spirituality that he bestowed on the characters of his poem must be kept apart. As Gaetano Firetto pointed out (1939, 76):

> First of all, a distinction is needed so as to understand the value of Tasso's beliefs, a distinction overlooked by those who specifically dealt with it.

44. "Non vi è in tutta l'opera sua un pensiero, un atto, una figura la cui moralità nasca da un senso religioso. . . . La religione invero nell'opera tassesca non è che il Cattolicesimo della Controriforma, assunto bensì come motivo d'unità poetica e civile dell'opera, ma solo nella sua esteriorità, nella sua pompa rinnovata, nel suo decoro di cerimonie e funzioni liturgiche, nel suo tono predicatorio, nel suo astratto e gelido fanatismo, e perciò disadatto a unificare sostanzialmente la multiforme realtà poetica ed imprimerle un organico senso di eticità."

45. "Nonostante le apparenti e vistose certezze, che l'autore cerca di rendere quanto più omogenee e verificabili, si evidenzia infatti nel Tasso, più che in altri scrittori suoi contemporanei, un travaglio interiore che riflette non solo le perplessità del mondo cattolico post-tridentino, ma anche la grande crisi spirituale che caratterizza l'"autunno del Rinascimento.'"

> On the one hand there are internal religious beliefs, on the other hand external acts of religion. The first ones have their natural site in the conscience, for they are either feelings, or cognitive affirmations, or both at the same time, according to the character and the degree of individual culture. The second ones unfold in the external world: they might correspond with beliefs, as they might not in the case where determined by agents external to the life of the spirit itself.[46]

Thus far, the best energies of literary critics have been spent to pinpoint, through the study of Tasso's life and works, correspondences between beliefs and literature. Seeking to establish the truth on Tasso's faith, though, is purposeless from the semiotic point of view. What matters, instead, is the verisimilitude of his discourse, that is, the issue of whether Tasso's text presents a consistent narrative embodiment of post-Tridentine Catholic religious values. According to this perspective, a semiolinguistic analysis of Tasso's poem, and not a historical study of his biography, must shed new light on his religiosity.

In this regard, canto 12 of the poem is particularly interesting. The Christian knight Tancredi, in love with the beautiful Saracen warrior Clorinda, mistakes her for a Muslim knight (the face of the girl is covered by a heavy helmet), challenges her to a duel, and fatally wounds her. On the verge of breathing her last, Clorinda, whose identity is going to be so tragically uncovered by Tancredi, asks him to baptize her. The narrative sequence of Clorinda's conversion begins at stanza 64 (Tasso 2000, 243):

> But now the fatal moment has arrived;
> Clorinda's life is hastening to the goal.
> Into her lovely breast he thrust his blade,
> Drowns it, eagerly drinks her blood. Her stole
> Beneath the cuirass, sweetly lined with gold,
> That held her breasts with light and tender pull,
> Now fills with a warm stream. She cannot stand;
> Her legs give way. She feels her death at hand.[47]

46. "Occorre, innanzi tutto, una distinzione per intendere il valore delle sue credenze: distinzione sfuggita a coloro che ne han trattato di proposito. Esistono convinzioni religiose nello spirito ed esistono atti esterni di religione. Le prime hanno sede naturale nella coscienza, o perché sono sentimento, o sono affermazioni intellettive, o l'una e l'altra cosa contemporaneamente, secondo il carattere e il grado di cultura individuale. Gli altri si svolgono nel mondo di fuori: e potrebbero avere corrispondenza con le convinzioni, come potrebbero non averne alcuna qualora fossero determinati da agenti estranei alla vita dello spirito stesso."

47. "Ma ecco omai l'ora fatale è giunta, / che 'l viver di Clorinda al suo fin deve. / Spinge egli il ferro nel bel sen di punta, / che vi s'immerge, e 'l sangue avido beve; / e la veste, che d'or vago trapunta / le mammelle stringea tenera e leve, / l'empie d'un caldo fiume. Ella già sente / morirsi, e 'l piè le manca egro e languente" (Tasso 1956).

Stanza 1 offers many clues to Tasso's religiosity and religious aesthetics. The prominence of ideas like the fatality of death and the inexorability of destiny stems from a precise cultural epoch, remote from that of Ariosto's poetry and all the more from that of Pulci's and Boiardo's literary *imaginaire* ("il viver di Clorinda al suo fin deve" [Clorinda's life is hastening to the goal]).[48] So does the erotic description, characterized by centrality of the body—chest, blood, breasts, feet—and systematic reference to the five senses (the taste of blood, "drunk" by the sword; the golden color of clothes; their gentle touch on Clorinda's body; the warmth of blood drenching them). Through the blade of a sword, the force of destiny, as well as that of grace, pierces Clorinda's limbs and bestow upon her, simultaneously, bodily death and spiritual salvation. Clorinda's death must be compared to Bernini's Therese of Avila transfixed by the dart of ecstasy, a truthful emblem of baroque aesthetics (Careri 1991). In Tasso's poem, as in Bernini's sculpture, eroticism expresses a revolutionizing grace and a revolutionized spirituality (Bastide 1996; see fig. 1).

The stanza quoted above deserves closer attention. "L'ora fatale è giunta" (the fatal moment has arrived): this sentence introduces the same semantic ambiguity of the word *fin*, *fatale* being an adjective that refers both to bodily death and to the destiny that determines it (*fato* 'fate'). The verb *deve* (in the second line: "Che 'l viver di Clorinda al suo fin deve" [Clorinda's life is hastening to the goal]) further underlines predetermination and the inexorability of fate. Action is underlain by a deontic modality: Clorinda's life must proceed toward both its end and its finality. Again, given the duplicitous meaning of the word *fin*, the deontic modality can be interpreted both as an expression of the ineluctability of death and as a manifestation of the powerfulness of grace: Clorinda is not said to want to die, so regaining the salvation of her soul; according to the line, instead, she must encounter both bodily death and the life of her soul. The nuance is highly significant if read in relation to post-Tridentine theological disputations over grace (Leone 2010).

In the following lines, Tasso describes how Tancredi's sword wounds to death Clorinda's body ("spinge egli il ferro nel bel sen di punta" [Into her lovely breast he thrusts his blade], etc.). Here the poem offers a masterpiece of fervidly erotic baroque imagination. Every detail metaphorically foreshadows the moment of conversion. Clorinda's skin and clothes turn into a threshold between the woman's chivalric identity and her soul (her religious self). Once this frontier is transpierced, the consubstantial inclination to salvation that

48. *Fin* here means both "end" and "purpose," that is, both narrative term and teleological aim.

Figure 1. Gian Lorenzo Bernini. 1647–52. *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. Life-size marble sculpture. The Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome. Per gentile concessione della Soprintendenza Speciale per il Patrimonio Storico Artistico ed Etnoantropologico e per il Polo Museale della città di Roma.

hid in Clorinda's body is able to emerge. The trickling of blood from inside to outside, through the wound opened by Tancredi's sword, produces the first moment of revelation. Blood is an evident symbol of the bodily life that is lost in the same instant as the life of the soul is secured. Tasso evokes this first sparkle of spiritual change through the opposition between the eroticism of Clorinda's wounded body and the brutality of her war attire (the cuirass, the sword). Blood is a *caldo fiume*, a warm river, opposed to the coldness of weapons. Through the wound inflicted by Tancredi's lethal blow this river suddenly pours outside, crossing the frontier between the interiority of the body and its exteriority. The shedding of blood transmutes the embroidered fabric that clothes Clorinda's body, a vane and mundane cloth ("veste, che d'or vago trapunta / le mammelle stringea tenera e leve" [Her stole / . . . sweetly lined with gold, / That held her breasts with light and tender pull]) into a sort of "second skin": the red color replaces the golden one. The membrane that used to separate interiority from exteriority disappears.

In the following stanza, the sword-grace achieves its penetration into the body of the Saracen warrior. The lines easily lend themselves to psychoanalytical interpretation, which would suggest that Tasso's poetry manifests a sexual subconscious. Often, however, mystical discourse adopts the lexicon of corporeal love as a powerful metaphor of spiritual union. Mistaking the expression of this metaphor for its content could lead to wrong conclusions. Correctly, Giovanni Careri has identified in stanza 64 a subtext composed of three Virgilian citations: Sulmon's death in book 9 of *Aeneid* (the "warm river" of blood); Lausus's death in book 10 (the precious golden fabric stained by blood), and Camilla's death in book 11 (the sword that avidly "drinks blood"). According to Careri, Tasso would use these Latin formulae in order to add pathos to a passage he excerpted from a previous poem by Trissino (published in 1547), also about Tancredi and Clorinda (Careri 2003, 2005). Less convincing is Careri's identification of Clorinda with the image of a raped woman. The spiritual eroticism of Tasso's poetical image, indeed, immediately reveals itself in the following lines (2000, 244):

> He rails against the virgin on his sword,
> Pressing against her in his victory.
> But as she fails she speaks her life's last word,
> In a voice broken with extremity,
> And a new spirit in her proclaims that word,
> Spirit of faith, and hope, and charity.

Rebel in life, on her such grace is poured
That she may die the handmaid of the Lord.[49]

In comparison with Ruggiero's conversion in *Orlando furioso*, Clorinda's conversion in *Gerusalemme liberata* looks, at first reading, quite simple and even rhetorical (according to de Sanctis's derogatory acceptation of the term). The Saracen warrior completely ignores the dogmas of Christianity and receives no religious training before converting. Her spiritual change is a gift of divine grace. However, the new role of grace in triggering conversions is a characteristic of post-Tridentine spirituality. Three elements in Tasso emphasize the power of the Holy Spirit and the grace it instills into hearts: the mention of the theological virtues; the equilibrium between individual will and divine intervention; and the relation between conversion and death.

As regards the first element ("spirto di fé, di carità, di speme" [spirit of faith, and hope, and charity]), the three theological virtues, whose object is God, are instilled in the soul by the Holy Spirit, which is the truthful protagonist of stanza 65.[50] As regards the second element, the semiotics of religious discourse—which includes the analysis of how signs signify spiritual states and changes—points out that each epoch of Christianity represents the relation between grace and the soul, between the soul and the Holy Spirit, in a different way. The sinful soul is imagined as surrounded by a sort of membrane, which hampers any direct communication with divine grace. The consistency of the membrane, its resisting and eventually yielding to grace—when the membrane is pierced, and the sinful heart touched and mutated—vary in representations of conversion depending on their cultural epoch and religious *imaginaire*. In Tasso, the force of divine grace is such that it succeeds in penetrating the soul of the Saracen warrior even beyond her own will. The sword that shatters the integrity of the body becomes the most suitable metaphor of this spiritual dynamics.

The whole history of the *imaginaire* of conversion could be rewritten from the point of view of the equilibrium that representations choose to establish between individual will and divine grace. In Tasso's poem, the determination of this balance, one of the most important and debated issues of sixteenth- and

49. "Segue egli la vittoria, e la trafitta / Vergine minacciando incalza e preme. / Ella, mentre cadea, la voce afflitta / Movendo, disse le parole estreme; / Parole ch'a lei novo un spirto ditta, / Spirto di fé, di carità, di speme; / Virtù ch'or Dio le infonde, e se ribella / In vita fu, la vuole in morte ancella" (Tasso 1956).

50. As regards the relation between the three theological virtues and baptism, the seventeenth-century theologian Pasquier Quesnel (July 14, 1634–December 2, 1719) argued (1693, 20) that "faith, hope, and charity are like the three indispensable vows which tie us to Jesus Christ's religion" (La foi, l'espérance et la charité sont comme les trois vœux indispensables qui nos attachent à la Religion de Jésus-Christ).

seventeenth-century Christianity, gives rise to a literary representation that exalts the force of grace (the *parole estreme* are *dittate*, almost imposed on Clorinda).

Finally, as regards the last element, that is, the relation between death and conversion, the weakening of Clorinda's body (its feeble languor) allows grace to more easily pierce the barrier between belief and disbelief. The narrative of Clorinda's death contains a double turning point: Tancredi uncovers Clorinda's truthful identity, while she discovers her truthful religion. Clorinda's conversion is a return to origins more than a conversion: although she believes to be a Saracen, she is, in reality, a Christian, miraculously born "white" from black parents.[51] The flowing of blood from the interior of the body toward its exterior becomes a metaphor of religious conversion, since Clorinda's spiritual change is nothing but a return to her ancestors' religion. Her predestination to conversion underlines all the more the importance of baptism as a sign and sacrament able to sanction the new faithful's entrance into the Christian community, albeit *in articulo mortis*.

A structural analysis of the following stanzas pinpoints the differences between the conversion of Clorinda and that of Agricane, both *in articulo mortis*. Tasso dwells more than Boiardo on the opposition between life and death, between a life of rebellion and a death of submission ("in vita rubella, in morte ancella" [in life rebel, after death handmaid]); he also insists more on the dramatic contrast between body and soul, subscribing to the religious aesthetics of the Council of Trent. Moreover, whereas Agricane's conversion was the stereotypically manly spiritual change of a warrior, some more clichéd sentimental womanly nuances resonate in Clorinda's spiritual change (she is a warrior too, but at her death she reveals herself to be passive and languid; her conversion is reminiscent of that of the Magdalene [Leone 2004]).

Tancredi has not yet recognized his beloved one, for Clorinda's face is still covered: her baptism will reveal her countenance. The moment of conversion coincides with that of recognition. However, even before the visual revelation, Clorinda's feminine voice already inspires him tenderness. The text is ambiguous, for the cause of Tancredi's tears is not certain: whether his enemy's state of weakness, his conversion, or a reminiscence of Clorinda's voice. The last hypothesis seems to be supported by Tasso's use of the verb *risuona* (resonates), which refers to the sound of Clorinda's voice more than to the

51. The semiotic ideology of this pigmentocratic *imaginaire* would deserve a separate essay; on the pigmentocracy of religious conversion in early modern Catholicism (with regard to Japanese converts), see Leone (2010).

meaning of her words. Tancredi's response to the conversion of Clorinda is far from stereotypically virile: the abundant tears that he sheds over the enemy's body, wounded to death, emphasize the sentimental aspect of her conversion. They introduce another "purifying" liquidity, that of the baptism invoked by Clorinda. It is one of the most famous passages of the whole Italian literature (Tasso 2000, 244):

> "Friend, you have won . . . I forgive you . . . forgive
> My body, no . . . has nothing more to fear,
> But spare my soul. For that I pray, and give
> Me baptism, to wash my soul and clear
> All of my sins away." In her frail voice
> Something sweet, something to summon a tear
> Sank into his heart and put all scorn to sleep,
> And drew him on and forced his eyes to weep.[52]

From the beginning of the stanza, Tancredi is not an enemy anymore but an *amico*, a friend, that Clorinda forgives and from whom at the same time she begs forgiveness. She insists on the difference between a body *che nulla pave* (that fears nothing) and a soul that longs for baptism. It is the keystone of the whole narrative: baptism sanctions the truthfulness of Clorinda's conversion. The relation between conversion and baptism, characteristic of the whole history of Christianity and increasingly relevant during the Catholic Reformation, permeates Tasso's narrative of Clorinda's conversion. Painters and other artists will subsequently transpose into iconic versions of Tasso's poem the many figurative elements contained in the following stanzas (2000, 244):

> Not faraway in the bosom of a hill
> A little stream was trickling. There he went
> And from the murmuring water he filled his helmet,
> Sadly returning to the great sacrament.
> His hands were trembling as he undid her laces
> And over her face, her unknown face he bent;
> He saw her, knew her. And he could not move
> Or speak. Ah, thus to see and know his love!

52. "'Amico, hai vinto, io ti perdón . . . perdona / Tu ancora, al corpo no, che nulla pave, / A l'alma sì: deh! Per lei pianga, e dona / Battesmo a me ch'ogni mia colpa lave'. / In queste voci languide risuona / Un non so che di flebile e soave / Ch'al cor gli scende, ed ogni sdegno ammorza, / E gli occhi a lagrimar gli invoglia e sforza" (Tasso 1956).

He did not die, not yet, but summoned all
The courage of his heart to stand on guard,
Holding his pain at bay. He gave her life
With water, who had slain her with the sword.
And while he uttered the sound of holy prayers
She was transformed with joy, and smiled; appeared
To say, as filled with life at life's decease,
"The heavens are opening—I go in peace."[53]

As in *Orlando furioso*, so in *Gerusalemme liberata*, the source of baptismal water is natural, to underline the continuity between the exterior landscape and the spiritual one; the gerund *mormorando* (murmuring) adds to the anthropomorphizing of the stream. The position of the source, on top of a mountain, confirms the Christian axiology of grace: its origin is situated in a superior, transcendent space, whence it descends upon the immanent one to wet and therefore save the human souls.

The prosodic structure of stanza 1, lines 3–4, mimics, through a sort of phonetic symbolism, the rhythm of Tancredi's motions: he runs to the source, stops there to draw water, then sadly returns to the dying knight. The moment of agnition, when Tancredi finds out that the knight is in reality the woman he is enamored with, is represented so as to emphasize the intensity of the unveiling: the trembling hand, the reference first to sight ("la vide" [he saw her]), then to knowledge ("la conobbe" [knew her]), followed by as many exclamations of sorrow ("Ahi vista! Ahi conoscenza!" [Ah, thus to see and know his love!]): Tancredi's astonishment is such that every word is aborted, every movement paralyzed. He might die from this bitter revelation, as the following stanza suggests. He survives only for he has a task to accomplish, a purpose even more important than his love for the dying body of Clorinda: he must save her soul through baptism.

Tasso adopts military metaphors to voice the efforts of Tancredi to overcome sorrow and the necessity of the baptismal ritual. The stylistic choice induces a chiasm between this narrative moment and that of the duel with Clorinda: whereas the chivalric fight had occasioned her lethal wound, Tancredi's fight against himself will guarantee Clorinda's spiritual survival. Hence

53. "Poco quindi lontan nel sen del monte / Scaturìa mormorando un picciol río. / Egli v'accorse, e l'elmo empié nel fonte, / E tornò mesto al grande ufficio e pio. / Tremar sentì la man, mentre la fronte / Non conosciuta ancor, sciolse e scoprío. / La vide, la conobbe; e restò senza / E voce e moto. Ahi vista! Ahi conoscenza! // Non morì già; che sue virtuti accolse / Tutte in quel punto, e in guardia al cor le mise, / E premendo il suo affanno, a dar si volse / Vita con l'acqua a chi col ferro uccise. / Mentre egli il suon di sacri detti sciolse, / Colei di gioia trasmutossi, e rise; / E in atto di morir lieto e vivace, / Dir parea:—S'apre il cielo, e io vado in pace" (Tasso 1956).

he summons all his spiritual forces ("sue virtuti accolse / tutte in quel punto" [but summoned all / the courage]) exactly as the leader of an army gathers his soldiers to defend the weak point of a fortress; he buttresses his heart ("e in guardia al cor le mise" [of his heart to stand on guard]) exactly as a captain would do it with a stronghold; and finally he represses his sorrow, as though it was a rebellion ready to explode ("premendo il suo affanno" [holding his pain at bay]).

Through a typically baroque procedure, a series of oppositions, triggered by Tancredi's *sacri detti* (holy prayers)—the ritual formulae of Christening—evoke the sacrament of baptism: after a contrast between water and iron, the former giving life, the latter (a synecdoche for the sword) death ("a dar si volse / vita con l'acqua a chi col ferro uccise" [He gave her life / With water, who had slain her with the sword]), the poem introduces the oxymoron of "lively death," a death of the body that allows the life of the soul ("atto di morir lieto e vivace" [as filled with life at life's decease]). Tasso's choice of the word *sciolse* (disclosed) to refer to Tancredi's utterance of the baptismal formula is not coincidental. By the same word, the poet had previously designated the gesture of Tancredi removing Clorinda's helmet. In both cases, the Christian hero's acts (a motion in the first instance, a "performative act" in the second) facilitate disentanglement: the unknotting of agnition, when Clorinda's helmet is unlaced, the unknotting of conversion, when the formulae of baptism are released.

The syntax of Clorinda's conversion in Tasso is the following: Tancredi wounds her to death without knowing her real identity; then, when she begs to be baptized, Tancredi is touched by her voice, but he does not identify it; he goes to a nearby source to draw some water, and only upon his return, when he unveils Clorinda to christen her, he finds out who she is. Subsequent pictorial representations of the poem will subvert the structure of the sequence: unable to clearly represent within their semiotic limits the consecution of actions, they will often revolutionize it, also transforming the internal logic of Clorinda's spiritual change.

Tasso's representation of Clorinda's conversion ends by a stanza that hints at its "cosmic" value (2000, 244):

> Her cheeks were beautiful and pale, as if
> Violets mingled with the lily's white,
> And she fixed her eyes on heaven; in pity and love
> It seemed to shine on her its rising light.

> And in the place of words she tries to move
> Her cold and naked hand toward the knight,
> Giving a pledge of peace. It seems she lies
> Sleeping: for so the lovely woman dies.[54]

The first line of the stanza is almost an invitation to paint: through a botanical metaphor, Tasso seeks to evoke the colors that Clorinda's visage displays at the peak of her conversion. It is an oxymoronic instant: the death of the body merges with the life of the soul. To Tasso, no metaphor was more suitable to represent such a paradoxical fusion than a mélange of flowers, wherein lilies, whose immaculate candor symbolizes purity but also recalls the paleness of death, merge with violets, whose hue refers to both Lent (and therefore the Passion of Christ) and the last drops of blood in Clorinda's cheeks. Thus, four layers of meaning juxtapose and intertwine so as to represent the mutation of a heart: the material (the colors of Clorinda's visage), the metaphorical (the colors of flowers), the conceptual (their symbolism), and the spiritual (the transfiguration of Clorinda's face after baptism).

From the third line of the same stanza on, Tasso plays with the multiple meanings that the word *converso* had in the seventeenth-century Italian lexicon. He describes Clorinda's spiritual change in two movements: first, her transfigured face searches for the source of grace ("e gli occhi al cielo affissa" [and she fixed her eyes on heaven]); then, the sky and the sun, astronomical attributes of God, are mirrored in the Clorinda's face ("e in lei converse / sembra per la pietate il cielo e il sole" [in pity and love / It seemed to shine on her its rising light])—on the one hand a human movement toward God, and, on the other hand, a divine movement toward humanity.

The stanza ends not with words, but with a gesture that supplants all verbal expression. Mere words would have been inadequate to render the ineffable peak of mystical transfiguration, when Clorinda's face, touched by the grace of the sky and the sun, ecstatically unites with the divine source of her new joy. The poet yields to the painter, or to the sculptor, so that Clorinda's ecstasy, her last gesture toward Tancredi, and the expression of perfect peacefulness appearing on her dead face (the peacefulness of a sleeping beauty) compose a last, harmonious final image, which artists will afterward transpose in the colors of their artworks.

54. "D'un bel pallore ha il bianco volto asperso, / Come a' gigli serian miste viole: / E gli occhi al cielo affissa; e in lei converso / Sembra per la pietate il cielo e 'l sole: / E la man nuda e fredda alzando verso / Il cavaliero, in vece di parole, / Gli dà pegno di pace. In questa forma / passa la bella donna, e par che dorma" (Tasso 1956).

Did Torquato Tasso sincerely adhere to the religious conception of conversion voiced by *Gerusalemme liberata*? Answering this question is impossible. A detailed analysis of the text, combined with a certain familiarity with its historical and cultural context, rather answers the question: "did the religious *imaginaire* of Catholic Reformation influence Tasso's poetry, and precisely his representation of Clorinda's conversion and baptism in *Gerusalemme liberata*?" It did, given the themes, the signs, the narrative structures, and the lexical choices that the poet adopted and displayed in his masterpiece, especially if he is compared with his predecessors. The Council of Trent instilled in Tasso, as well as in the other poets of the same epoch, a new language for the representation of spiritual change.

But the influence of Catholic Reformation on the early modern *imaginaire* did not concern only the choice of themes and stories. It was exerted at a much deeper level. *Gerusalemme liberata* is the highest embodiment of Tasso's ability to transform the literary forms of chivalric epics and the narrative structures of erotic poetry into semiotic patterns to praise the renewing of the Catholic spirituality after the crisis triggered or emphasized by the Protestant Reformation. From this point of view, a parallelism between Tasso's Clorinda and Bernini's Saint Therese of Avila is even more pertinent (indeed, the former's final transfiguration is closely reminiscent of the latter's ecstasy): in both cases, profane representative forms (those of chivalry, those of eroticism) are reinterpreted so as to communicate the encounter between divine grace and individual will through the post-Tridentine, baroque modalities of spiritual love. Like every operation of translation or transposition, the two daring experiments with forms also involved a risk: the audience might overlook the metaphorical value of profane love and immanent eroticism and fail to perceive them as the highest image of mystical union. The issue whether Tasso's and Bernini's ambiguity lies in their works or in the souls of readers and in the eyes of spectators remains to be settled. But indeterminacy turned Clorinda's baptism and Saint Therese's ecstasy into icons of an epoch full of contradictions, marked by the Catholic effort to transmit new spiritual values through old literary and artistic signs.

The Council of Trent influenced Tasso, but Tasso, in his turn, influenced the post-Tridentine spirituality, which often drew images and metaphors from *Gerusalemme liberata* to represent other mutations of the heart. As Kates puts it in her essay on Tasso and Milton: "Tasso, in full awareness, grappled with the 'problem' of Christian epic—the need to create a recognizably epic narrative, while transforming such heroic poetry into a vehicle for the exploration

of the innerlife, the truly significant life for a Christian. *La Gerusalemme liberata*, in my reading, shifts the arena of epic heroism inward, toward the moral and psychological, and yet preserves an allegiance to classical form" (Kates 1983, 9).

However, by transforming the genre of chivalric epics (by "converting" it), Tasso did nothing but bringing it back where it had originated, that is, closer to medieval hagiography, a genre from which it had stemmed, afterward differentiating its forms through a process of progressive secularization. Tasso reversed the process and initiated a desecularization of epic forms that would culminate in the early modern flourishing of epic hagiography. As Sergio Zatti writes, "Conversion had been for sometime an authentic ritual topos, whose original ideological significance lost vigor and meaning as its function as a narrative expedient grew" (2006, 36). Tasso's Clorinda, as Zatti points out, accomplished a tragic recovery of this significance, but this return from the profane heroicness of knights to the sacred heroicness of saints implied a major consequence: saints acquired the existential individuality that Renaissance poets like Ariosto or post-Renaissance poets like Tasso had bestowed upon their knights. As Kates affirms in her study, the two Italian poets composed their masterpieces "at moments which the clarity of insight now reveals to have been crucial in the radical alteration of consciousness that we call 'modern' and perceive as beginning in the Renaissance" (1983, 9).

Comparing and contrasting the poems of Pulci, Boiardo, Ariosto, and Tasso has highlighted some central features in the evolution of the semiotic ideology of spiritual change from the end of the fourteenth century until the end of the sixteenth, at least as it is mirrored by Italian chivalric literature. The focus of inquiry should be extended to chivalric literature in other languages (French, Spanish, and Portuguese). However, even the limited corpus analyzed, singled out for it exerted a remarkable influence on the European arts and literatures, indicates that Pulci, Boiardo, Ariosto, and Tasso represented spiritual change according to an evolving conception of the religious self, its limits, and the agency of internal and external forces that induce its mutation, a conception where the modern *imaginaire* of inwardness gradually emerges from the dialectics between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance first, then between the Protestant and the Catholic Reformations.

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