

CARLOS EIRE: *They Flew: A History of the Impossible*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2023; pp. xx + 492.

“Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” Carlos Eire’s new book about miracles does not quote Lewis Carroll, but perhaps it ought to. Carroll’s point, voiced through the Red Queen, is that faith fires innovation. A similar observation lies at the crux of Eire’s argument too, even if he would not express it so nonsensically in this charming, if ultimately mistitled, tome. *They Flew* – possible alternative titles, “They Flew?” and “They Flew!” – is a history not of the impossible as such but rather of two specific miraculous phenomena, levitation and bilocation, as practised during the Catholic Reformation. Eire uses eyewitness accounts of saints engaged in both as a point of departure for much broader questions, including how the historian should engage the supernatural in his or her writing. Eire reminds us that formulating our position vis-à-vis supernature requires us to take two views. One concerns ontology: did the things described actually take place? Ought there not to be a basis on which we do or do not accept the testimony of real individuals who claimed to have seen things with their own eyes? If nature’s “laws” were not really suspended then how do we explain it (and must we decide what we think about that before writing about it)? Eire’s second quandary is epistemological. The fact of an historical actor’s sincere belief in miracles inevitably changes the way that we read both his or her mentality and his or her words. The question again is how should it do so? As Eire points out, our approach to studying miracles remains somewhat disingenuous, even self-defeating. After all, if the miracle claim was true then it would “change pretty much everything we thought we knew about human consciousness and its relationship to physics, gravity, and material reality,” he notes, quoting Jeffrey Kripal (p.374). Historians of religion need to be acutely sensitive to issues of methodology and interpretation, in part precisely because we cannot hope to separate our own *a priori* beliefs about the unknown from how we approach them. Eire does the field a service by directing attention to this.

Eire’s evidence base for this book draws on the tales of three saints – and, for balance, three disgraced nuns (from a Counter-Reformation scholar’s perspective this makes it extremely interesting, although it may or may not ultimately limit the wider applicability of, or, indeed, attention paid to, his arguments). Teresa of Ávila (1515–82), a regular, if reluctant levitator, is surely the best known of Eire’s subjects. Joseph of Cupertino (1603–63) was another accidental showman who performed his feats in public in front of local townspeople, and even once before the pope. María de Jesús de Ágreda (1602–65), the “Lady in Blue”, constitutes Eire’s most startling and/or wondrous case. So distressed by visions of indigenous peoples who did not know Christ was she that – *mirabile dictu!* – she began to teach them transcendently, trans-oceanically via those visions. Of the three miscreants, Magdalena de la Cruz (1487–1560) is the most interesting: her promising career as a mystic in Córdoba was cut short after she admitted in 1546 to having entered into a forty-year pact with the devil. María de la Visitación (María Lobo de Meneses, 1551–1603) endured – or was that engineered? – a growing repertory of visions, levitations, and even stigmatisation during the 1570s and 1580s. However, hostile detractors then exposed her as a clever trickster. Luisa de la Ascensión (1565–1636) was less lucky. Also rendered suspect during her own lifetime, she was subsequently exonerated by the Inquisition twelve years

after her death – gratifying perhaps for posterity, and even for her eternal soul, but not soon enough to save her previously promising cult.

Eire takes his reader through texts which discuss each of these fascinating individuals – and this book holds significant value simply as a result of how well he tells their assorted stories. Joseph hovering high above Urban VIII at a papal audience, and of the pope declaring that he would testify at any canonisation process as an eyewitness, is (unsurprisingly) a personal favourite. But Eire tries to shoot straight with his storytelling, presenting his “tall tales” deadpan and refusing to be drawn on their basic truthfulness or mendacity. This even-handedness, neither confirming nor denying, may be, as Eire argues, a useful corrective to what he identifies as the dominant methodological paradigm: “bracketing” any such question simply as unhistorical. However, the distinction is a subtle one, perhaps, and any difference between his approach and the bracketer’s is also potentially moot. As Eire admits in his introduction, we cannot really know the truth of miracle claims. All we can do is make ourselves more aware of their choices involved in how we respond to them (which makes his choice to be “open-minded” about them but not to reach any certain conclusion, it would seem). Eire seeks to situate our historic professional indifference – or is that lack of awareness? – to miracles in traditions of Protestant scepticism and in post-Enlightenment processes of “disenchantment”. That too is very plausible – but it does not necessarily follow that we would be better off for having historicised our current consensus on what is real and what is not. What follows?

A further objection to Eire’s approach might be said to be this: something is surely lost when we revert to being too “open-minded” about miracles, as per Eire’s advocacy. To give one example: if we accept that a story of levitation may be true, we surely must necessarily diminish the legitimacy, or at least explanatory power, of reading the story as a political claim. Friar Joseph may really have flown high above Urban VIII, but the account is far more *piquant*, even plausible, as satire – a subversive critique of Urban’s newly empirical approach to canonising saints. One might also object that many scholars quite deliberately read miracle stories as constructed texts not because they are or are not believers but just because the interpretative possibilities are far richer (“bracketing” is not necessarily either or, and this is a more positive way to view it). Eire’s stories, and others like them throughout the hagiographic spectrum, could also be said to reinforce a view that pre-modern societies operated vast economies of social status and credit in which saints and their miracles were also situated. Whether a putative saint’s claims *were* true – or is that *were treated as* true? – depended on where he or she stood within the complex hierarchies of credibility which that economy of trust created. How this worked is potentially a far more interesting question than whether or not a miracle story is true because, unlike in that other case, we have established means and methods to answer it and a wider debate to which it contributes. Is it not telling – and, again, does it not make the texts about her more interesting – that Maria de Jesús de Ágreda, the nun who was believed, also achieved the status of advisor to King Philip IV? Saints could, indeed, make their own reality when they persuaded others to follow them. The varied fates of Eire’s six “high fliers” would seem to underline not so much that people will believe anything as the ubiquity of hierarchy, even in whose beliefs were followed and whose were not.

MILES PATTENDEN
University of Oxford

