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# **1. A Whole Lifeworld in a Room**

## ***L'intero mondo in una stanza***

a cura di Magdalena Maria Kubas e Jenny Ponzo



# In My Solitude: Figurative Rationality and Axiological Inversion in Saints Barsanuphius and John of Gaza

Francesco Galofaro

**Abstract** – The paper focuses on the relationship between the hermit and his cell, considered as a semantic operator acting on the monk's experience. The monk's discourse presents figurative transformations of the cell (e.g. into a cemetery or temple) and an axiological inversion between life and death; it constructs a topological equivalence between the cell and the monk's soul. By acting on the monk's experience, the cell allows him to re-categorize the *semiotics of his world*. The case study consists of writings about early monks and nuns, focusing in particular on Barsanuphius and John of Gaza (6th century AD).

**Keywords:** semantic operator – estrangement – figurative transformation – semantic inversion – semiotics of the world

## 1. Introduction

The relationship between the hermit and the space of the cell seems to have been a necessary element of the monk's pursuit of the divine from the very beginning of the monastic movement. As attested by religious discourse about seclusion, ascetic space paradoxically attempts «to translate this process of annulling space into topologies, spaces, places ... The spatial discourse of asceticism attempts to rearticulate the shared grammar of places so that they translate an ineffable dislocation of the sacred»<sup>1</sup>. It is very interesting to explore the way in which the space of the cell gives rise to the effect described by Massimo Leone, as well as the relationship between ascetic discourse and the traces that ascetic experience leaves in its semantics. To this end, I will analyze the hermit's own discourse and discourses on hermits produced at the dawn of the anchorite movement to glean an insight into the semantic features that allow these monks to fill their days with meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> M. Leone, *Semiotica dello spazio ascetico*, in «Humanitas», 68, 2013, 6, pp. 937-947, here p. 941.

## 2. The First Hermits

Examining the ancient testimonies about the first hermits and nuns, these early writings present certain features. Specifically, they tend to:

- invert the usual values attributed to life and death. An untroubled, pure soul simply awaits the end of life without further concerns. The primary function of the cell is thus to serve as a sort of tomb for secular life and its imperfections.
- transfer values from space to the soul. The space of the cell is a lens for the hermit's spiritual focus on God.
- provide a space for conflict, manifesting as temptations affecting the body such as lust, or the soul such as vainglory. Such temptations become tangible, embodied by demons, in such a way as to make the space into a battlefield. The spiritual war can be either won or lost. It is mistaken to affirm that hermits sought solitude to avoid temptations; on the contrary, the cell, solitude, and loneliness amplify human passions such as acedia, restlessness, and desperation. Spiritual athletes practiced asceticism specifically to test themselves. As Mother Syncletica has said: «For the more athletes make progresses, the more they are matched with stronger opponents»<sup>2</sup>.

At the same time, the purpose of seclusion was actually to train ascetics to govern these conditions that often tested them severely, especially in the first phase of their trajectory of retreat as can be seen in the spiritual direction of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza.

Taking spiritual combat as our starting point, it is interesting to note the recommendations penned by Evagrius Ponticus in his *Treatise on the Practical life (Praktikos)*, dating back to the 4th century AD:

«You must not abandon the cell in the time of temptations, fashioning excuses seemingly reasonable. Rather, you must remain seated inside, exercise perseverance, and valiantly welcome all attackers, especially the demon of acedia, who is the most oppressive of all but leaves the soul proven to the highest degree. Fleeing and circumventing such struggles teaches the mind to be unskilled, cowardly, and evasive»<sup>3</sup>.

According to Evagrius, the demon of acedia, also known as the noon-day demon,

<sup>2</sup> Pseudo-Athanasius, *The Life and Regimen of the Blessed and Holy Syncletica. Part Two: A Study of the Life*, ed. by M. Schaffer, Eugene, Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005, p. 148.

<sup>3</sup> R.E. Sinkewicz (ed.), *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 102.

«... compels the monk to look constantly towards the windows, to jump out of the cell, to watch the sun to see how far it is from the ninth hour [3 p.m.], to look this way and that lest one of the brothers [has come]»<sup>4</sup>.

This short passage illustrates an important function of the cell: it is an arena for spiritual battles against the demons of temptation. These figurative, anthropomorphic actors embody non-figurative *logismoi*, a Greek word that can be translated as «calculating thoughts» that present obstacles in the elevation of the soul. Evagrius finds this notion in Origen of Alexandria, who in turn borrows it from Neoplatonic philosophy. Framed in this way, it has been grafted forever onto the monk's *Weltanschauung*. The spiritual fight is an anthropomorphization of the monks' interior struggle against the passions, that is, their efforts to control their impulses and thereby achieve a state of divine quiet.

As for the move to invert life and death, early collections of sayings by the Desert Fathers (*apophthegmata*) and their biographies, such as Palladius' *Historia Lausiaca*, reveal the environment in which early monks took refuge in order to pursue perfection and struggle against temptations. The *lavra* could be a hut or a space carved out of rock. It usually consisted of two rooms and a niche, called a «window», used to hold icons. It was surrounded by a wall, thus allowing the hermits to grow a garden. The encircling wall protected cells and monasteries from nomads and, in many cases, there was a tower used as a refuge<sup>5</sup>.

The first ascetics in the Egyptian deserts were mainly men, but female anchorites very often joined them. Female monasteries were located near cities so as to prevent possible violence against them. The writings about these ascetics confirm the above-mentioned themes of spiritual combat and the inversion of life and death. One such example is *Amma*<sup>6</sup> Sara of Egypt. Like many examples of Mediterranean architecture, Sara's house had a flat roof that served as a terrace:

«They also said of her that the same demon of lust was once attacking her menacingly, and tempting her with vain thought of the world. But she kept fearing God in her soul and maintained the rigor of her fasting. And once when she climbed up on the roof to pray, the spirit of lust appeared to her in a bodily form and said to her: 'You have beaten me, Sarah'. But she replied: 'It is not I who have beaten you, but my Lord the Christ'»<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 99.

<sup>5</sup> L. Cremaschi (ed.), *Deti e fatti delle donne del deserto*, Magnano, Edizioni Qiqajon, 2018, p. 145.

<sup>6</sup> *Amma* is the word for 'Mother' used by the Desert Fathers, corresponding to the male term *Abba*.

<sup>7</sup> O. Chadwick (ed.), *Western Asceticism*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1958, p. 63.

Amma Sarah thus encountered the demon of lust on a terrace like a former lover or an old adversary, and they spoke about their past battles. Other sayings provide further details about her hut: «They said of Abbess Sarah of blessed memory, that for sixty years she lived on the bank of a river, and never looked down to see the water»<sup>8</sup>. The houses near the Nile could have been tombs of the pagan era, re-used by the hermits. According to the pagan religion, the tombs were designed as homes to house the soul in the afterlife<sup>9</sup>. Imitating Anthony the Great, monks and nuns such as Amma Alexandra chose these tombs as a refuge. When asked by Palladius about her life, Amma Alexandra explained how she lived, fighting against acedia:

«I pray every hour from dawn to the ninth hour while spinning linen; the remaining hours I go over the holy patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs in my mind; then, when I have eaten my bread, I pass the remaining hours in perseverance, awaiting my end with gentle hope»<sup>10</sup>.

In the passage quoted here, the focus is on the cell as a ‘spiritual lens’ allowing the nun to concentrate on her thoughts.

As with many nuns and monks, Alexandra spent her time spinning linen, making rope, and weaving baskets. Monks also worked in the fields during the harvest. Cloistered life was not strict: hermits met in the Church for liturgy, were able to receive visits in the afternoon, and went on pilgrimages. Cloistered life was not an end in itself. In fact, as described by Pseudo-Basilus in *Ascetic Constitutions*, for the perfect monk the body itself constitutes the cell and refuge for the soul. Indeed, a monk can retreat into his own thoughts even when he is home alone, and can remain vigilant and focused on God even in the public square<sup>11</sup>. As Amma Syncletica stated:

«Many people have found salvation in a city while imagining the condition of a desert. And many, though on a mountain, have been lost by living the life of townspeople. It is possible for one who is in a group to be alone in thought, and for one who is alone to live mentally with a crowd»<sup>12</sup>.

This passage shows how the values associated with the cell are transferred to the individual: if this transfer takes place correctly, it is not important whether or not the nun lives in isolation, otherwise the an-

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 87.

<sup>9</sup> L. Cremaschi (ed.), *Deti e fatti delle donne del deserto*, p. 139.

<sup>10</sup> J. Wortley (ed.), *Palladius of Aspuna. The Lausiac History*, Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 2015, pp. 14-15.

<sup>11</sup> L. Cremaschi (ed.), *Deti e fatti delle donne del deserto*, p. 142.

<sup>12</sup> Pseudo-Athanasius of Alexandria, *The Life and Regimen of the Blessed and Holy Syncletica*, p. 24.

chorite would not find salvation in the desert. In synthesis, the cell acts as a *semantic operator* that performs different functions in terms of competence and performance and syntagmatically links them. In the case of the nun's competence, the *lavra* modifies this element from a modal point of view: it prevents her from seeing or perceiving and allows the nun to acquire spiritual vision instead. As noted above, Amma Sara does not look out at the outside world; the real 'window' is the niche holding the icons. Furthermore, the cell carries out a semantic inversion of valorization of euphoria vs. dysphoria usually equated by culture with the opposition life vs. death. Finally, the *lavra* serves to take the *afferent values*<sup>13</sup> (silence, peace) relative to spiritual concentration (*focusing*) and semantically transfer them from external space to the internal space of the body.

Having provided the monk with spiritual competence, the *lavra* becomes the space of performance in form of spiritual combat. In terms of narrative semiotics, it is a *utopic* space, «a place where the human doing surmounts the permanence of being, a place of performances»<sup>14</sup>. In this regard, Greimas observes that the performance of the hero in mythical tales is located outside the world of everyday experience: such performance is set in celestial or underwater spaces. In a similar way, the space of the cell narcotizes the ordinary features of the nun's experience.

### 3. Barsanuphius and John of Gaza

I will now present the case of Barsanuphius and John of Gaza (6th century AD). These hermits lived in complete solitude in a small cell outside the coenobium of Abba Seridus, in Palestine. Despite their state of reclusion, they were both spiritual directors and communicated with their brothers exclusively in writing. Their letters, collected by their disciples, represent a classic of spiritual literature. Barsanuphius and John speak very little about themselves and their hermitic experience. Nevertheless, their rare descriptions provide precious insight into the meaning of reclusion and, more generally, monastic life in a cell.

<sup>13</sup> Regarding the distinction between inherent and afferent semantic values (*semes*), see F. Rastier, *Meaning and Textuality*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1997.

<sup>14</sup> A.J. Greimas - J. Courtés, *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982, p. 181.

Below is a list of the main features conveyed by Barsanuphius' letters:

- the inversion of the value between life and death: the monk's self-annihilation allows for the manifestation of God. Furthermore, the analogy between the cell and the soul allows the monk to establish communion, a decisive step in the quest for perfection.
- estrangement (*xeniteia*). As a meaning effect, I have described estrangement as the subject's refusal to accept the action program of an anti-sender manipulator whose values are not shared by the subject<sup>15</sup>. This behavior can be observed in many different cases by adopting an ethnosemiotic point of view: I have observed it in psychiatric patients who do not share the program imposed by doctors; Edmund Husserl also writes about a form of self-estrangement from the past subject in that we no longer have the awareness of being a subject intentionally projected towards the future<sup>16</sup>.
- intertextuality and polyphony. When writing, the monk continuously bases the form of his life on the scripture. In so doing, he gives meaning to his everyday life in the cell. Barsanuphius conveys this meaning in his role as spiritual director, thereby producing meaning for directed souls who cannot find or have lost it, e.g. because of disease, solitude, pain and so on<sup>17</sup>. For example, many of Barsanuphius' letters are addressed to sick brothers: in these texts, everyday experience is taken up as a plane that manifests the meaning of the holy scriptures.
- in monastic language, the lexeme «cell» acquires a very special semantic value. It is part of a technical language that monks use to associate meaning with their experience: a *metalanguage*. Consequently, it is possible to reconstruct their experience by interpreting the semantic structure of their writings.

Beginning from the semantic value associated with the cell, in *Letter 74*, while suggesting that a sick brother rest, Barsanuphius writes:

«Believe me, brothers, [when I say] that vainglory has gained control over me. Never have I in sickness laid down to rest or put down my handiwork; and yet great illnesses have

<sup>15</sup> F. Galofaro, *Dopo Gerico: i nuovi spazi della psichiatria*, Bologna, Esculapio, 2015, p. 64.

<sup>16</sup> E. Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*, in *Husserliana*, L'Aia, Martinus Nijhoff, 1959, VI.

<sup>17</sup> A semiotic analysis I carried out in relation to epistolary spiritual direction can be found in F. Galofaro, *La scrittura come laboratorio mistico: le lettere di Padre Pio ai suoi direttori spirituali*, in J. Ponzo - F. Galofaro (eds.), *Autobiografie spirituali*, Roma, Aracne, 2021, pp. 135-170.

come to me. Recently vainglory has been tricky, ever since I have entered its cell, and it does not allow illness to come to me»<sup>18</sup>.

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Worth noting is the interesting expression «to enter the cell of vain-glory». Barsanuphius uses this phrase to express that he penetrated the intimate structure of vainglory's tricks. This element demonstrates the deep relationship between the experience of the monk and his technical language. The monk's technical language is not only the manifesting plane of his unique experience, the traces of which can be found in its semantic structures<sup>19</sup>; the meanings associated with the anchorite's cell become categories that he projects onto his everyday life in order to re-categorize it, consequently modifying the semiotics of his world.

Letters 141-142 are related to the theme of death. Barsanuphius' cell is figuratively transformed into a cemetery; in turn, John the Prophet explains:

«This is because he has found rest from all the passions there. For he has died completely to sin, and his cell, wherein he is enclosed as if in a tomb for the sake of Jesus' name, is the place of rest, where neither demon nor the devil, the chief of demons, treads. Indeed, it has become a sanctuary inasmuch as it contains the dwelling-place of God»<sup>20</sup>.

The cell is simultaneously a tomb in which to bury oneself and a sanctuary of God. The positive value granted to death is here associated with a classic mystical theme: self-annihilation, aimed at making room for God. Hence the equivalence between the tomb and the sanctuary becomes understandable. The semantic inversion of life and death is also related to the remembrance of death (called *meditatio mortis* in Latin monasticism), a technique used by hermits to abandon material concerns:

«The remembrance of death amongst those in the midst of society gives birth to distress and frivolity, and even more – to despondency. But amongst those who are free from noise it produces the putting aside of cares, and constant prayer and guarding of the mind. But these same virtues both produce the remembrance of death and are also produced by it»<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Barsanuphius and John, *Letters*, ed. and trans. by J. Chryssavgis, 2 vols., Washington DC, The Catholic University of America Press, 2006, I, p. 100.

<sup>19</sup> In a similar way, infants learn how to use language as they experience the world by projecting it on their environment and thereby categorizing their surroundings. For a discussion of the semiotics of the natural world, see A.J. Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, R. Schleifer (ed.), Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1983.

<sup>20</sup> Barsanuphius and John, *Letters*, I, p. 165.

<sup>21</sup> J. Climacus, *The Ladder of the Divine Ascent*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1959, p. 110.

Barsanuphius' *Letter 55* introduces another important function of the cell: this space allows its inhabitant to practice *xeniteia*, i.e. the experience of the stranger: the awareness of being a guest, a migrant. Responding to an Egyptian pilgrim who had written to him in Coptic asking to meet him in person, Barsanuphius wrote (in Greek):

«If I am your father as you write, I give you a commandment not to bother me about meeting. For I do not show favoritism to anyone in my life. If I open up for you, then I should open up for all; and if I do not open up for you, nor do I open up for anyone else»<sup>22</sup>.

The estrangement is based on a verse from the Bible: «Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee» (Genesis 12, 1, King James version). This is only one example of the kind of polyphonic writing that characterizes religious discourse in general.

To return to the focus of this section, Barsanuphius' letters allows us to delve more deeply into the relationship between the cell, as a semantic operator, and experience. In association with holy writings, the inversion of life and death in the form of the *meditatio mortis* is a technique that serves to transform the monk's self and his experience (estrangement). The cell itself thus provides the monk with a new set of categories which he then projects onto his world to re-interpret it.

#### 4. Conclusion: The Cell as a Semantic Operator

As a semantic operator, the cell performs a series of semantic inversions in reference to the value that the secular world ordinarily associates with a series of categorical oppositions. The following homology summarizes the effect of this operation:

Dysphoric : Euphoric = Passion : Quiet = Life : Death = Human : Divine = World : Heaven = Friend : Stranger

Each opposition gives birth to a coherent *isotopy* of the monk's discourse, i.e. a coherent level of reading of the text arising from the dissemination of an abstract theme or concrete figure. As a consequence, the monk's writing can be considered a case of the *figurative rationality* that characterizes religious discourse: «it happens sometimes that several figurative isotopies correspond to one single thematic isotopy. The Gospel parables, related as they are to a common theme, are a good illustration of

<sup>22</sup> Barsanuphius and John, *Letters*, I, p. 68.

the point»<sup>23</sup>. For example, in Matthew 13 the *kingdom of heaven* is associated with the figures of «a man who sowed good seed in his field»; «a mustard seed»; «the yeast»; «a treasure hidden in a field», and so on. In the anchorite's discourse, the cell becomes a tomb, a battlefield, or a space identified with heaven. Each figurative transformation corresponds to a re-functionalization of the cell.

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These semantic inversions are the traces, left in the monk's language, of the way in which the cell modifies the recluse's everyday experience (estrangement) beginning from the move to reduce his worldly perception so as to acquire spiritual sight. The monk recategorizes the world of life through the meanings associated with the cell, thus modifying the semiotics of his world<sup>24</sup>. According to Greimas' hypothesis, the world of our experience is a semiotic system whose figures and relations, sedimented in the semantics of language, express meanings associated with them by culture<sup>25</sup>. The cell proves this hypothesis in various ways, since the association in question is modified by operating on the ordinary experience of the world to suspend or modify it. In this way, the cell becomes a sort of ambivalent space, a gate between the earthly world and heaven capable of subverting the human world and its values in order to reach the divine.

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<sup>23</sup> A.J. Greimas - J. Courtés, *Semiotics and Language*, p. 164.

<sup>24</sup> Regarding the semiotic relationship between figures, themes, and the semiotic of the world in religious discourse, see P. Bertetti, *Lo schermo dell'apparire*, Bologna, Esculapio, 2013, pp. 100-109.

<sup>25</sup> A.J. Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, pp. 71-73.



# The Fourth Dimension. Christian Spiritual Experience and the Relationship with Space

Alessandra Pozzo

*Abstract* – In the age that has known *Flatland*, the movement of the Flat Earth Society, to whom the third dimension looks already excessive, seems to be gradually losing the memory of introspection that had characterized Christian spirituality from the beginnings. This field of knowledge, while not attaching any importance to the physical extent that allows us to consider the volumes of things, had offered human existence a further dimension, intimate but real and tangible. Precisely because the human body is elected to be the seat of experience, just as one would for the observation of a constellation in a distant galaxy or of an infinitesimal physical particle, the laboratory in which the experiment takes place needs the appropriate instruments and its structure acquires absolute importance. For this reason, some mystics have sought the means appropriate to their personality to pursue the objective. They have sometimes enclosed themselves amid small spaces, walled themselves up alive, withdrawn into a cave or a forest to experiment in solitary places, far from human society, the search for the spiritual dimension. Others, however, have preferred to display their spiritual quest for all to see, hoisting themselves up on a column, stylites for example, or using the various forms of asceticism as a means of persuasive communication, see manipulation, with the aim more of appearing than of being. This paper proposes a semiotic investigation of the four spatial dimensions convened by some representative examples from the history of Christian spirituality and the perspectives more or less in keeping with the evangelical message they are supposed to be inspired by.

Keywords: Christian spirituality – space – mysticism – religious imagery

## 1. The Spaces of Experience

This overview focuses on the identification of the space inherent in the exercise of Christian spirituality understood both as an inner dimension, motivated by experience, as well as the concrete setting where experience itself takes place. Regarding the first occurrence, which calls into question the human compound as the site of spirituality, we will observe how spiritual practices have been described in some samples taken from the witnesses of modern mystics. Since spatial configurations specific to the spiritual experience are mentioned in the historical sources, it is as-

sumed that the place designated for the exercise of spirituality is of particular importance in view of the outcome sought. Our analysis will start dealing with this aspect.

### 1.1 *Early Christianity*

When persecution against Christians ceased, a need was felt on the part of the Church for a moral equivalent for war; this the Church found in monasticism. About 305 the solitary life begun in the Egyptian desert firstly organized by Saint Antony, who is reckoned as the founder of Christian monachism. Through his efforts and those of his disciples, great colonies of monks arose, the most famous of which were at Nitria and Scete<sup>1</sup>. In this context the monk lived truer to the meaning of his name: *monos*, alone. Indeed, they lived in cells grouped round a central church, where services were held on Saturday and Sunday, devotions otherwise being said in the individual cells. The main feature of this type of monasticism was its voluntary character: each monk lived his own life, and the monastery had a number of solitary lives lived in common rather than a true common life that started later with coenobitism founded by Pachomius at Tabennisi sometime in the years 315-320.

The voluntaristic character and competition in the harshness of asceticism that each anchorite imposed upon himself was completely uncontrollable, but nevertheless unfolded under close scrutiny. Now, since the harshness with which the body was treated was considered meritorious, any new ascetic form invented for the purpose of subduing the body and psyche to the pre-eminence of spiritual experience was considered directly proportional to a person's holiness as long as it was not too extravagant or bloody. Indeed, although the monasticism inaugurated by the desert fathers was intended as a replacement for the martyrdom suffered by Christians during the persecutions of the first centuries, it did not consist in the exercise of a sterile self-damage. This is why it was renamed «white martyrdom», precisely because it did not consist in the shedding of blood. In spite of the fact that overseers supervised the various ascetic forms, a certain number of anchorites, less subject to vigilant control, underwent excesses of asceticism aimed at violently subjugating the body to the primacy of the spirit. Their excess has always been condemned, but the exhibitionism that characterised it has not been completely eradicated and numerous examples of self-harming ascetics have been recorded and saints can also be found among them.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. S. Headley, *Du desert au Paradis*, Paris, Cerf, 2018.

The monk's choice of place to live mirrored the ascetic program he proposed. Escape from human consortium could take the form of choosing a cave as a place to live. This is the case of Macarius of Egypt:

«Here is another example of his asceticism. He made in the course of time a tunnel running under the ground from his cell for half a stade and finished it off at the end with a cave. And if ever a crowd of people troubled him, he would leave his cell secretly and go away to the cave and no one would find him»<sup>2</sup>.

But also that of Dorotheus «a Theban ascetic who was spending the sixtieth year in his cave»<sup>3</sup> and that of «a certain Solomon, a man of very mild disposition and restrained and possessing the gift of endurance. He used to say that he had been fifty years in the cave. He provided for himself by the work of his hands and had learned by heart all the Holy Scriptures»<sup>4</sup>. Many other monks who lived in the Egyptian desert chose to realize their asceticism through life in a cave, a site that involves an important biblical reference: that of Elijah, who witnesses Yahweh's passage in front of the cave in which he hid<sup>5</sup>.

Others chose a tomb, like Alexandra: «who, having left the city and shut herself up in a tomb, received the necessities of life through an opening, seeing neither women nor men face to face for ten years»<sup>6</sup>. Sisinnius instead,

«after dwelling with Elpidius six or seven years, finally he shut himself up in a tomb and continued for three years in a tomb, praying constantly, sitting down neither by night nor day, neither lying down nor walking out. He was counted worthy of a gift (of power) over demons»<sup>7</sup>.

Symeon the Stylite<sup>8</sup> shows incomparable creativity in his choice of places and ascetic means. He first chose to live in a cistern in the middle of the desert, then settled on a pillar, designating it as a place for fasting<sup>9</sup>. Later,

«after procuring an iron chain of twenty cubits, nailing one end to a great rock and fixing the other to his right foot, so that not even if he wished could he go outside these limits,

<sup>2</sup> Palladius, *The Lausiack History*, ed. and trans. by J. Wortley, Collegeville MN, Liturgical Press, 2015, p. 76; Girolamo, *Vite degli eremiti Paolo, Ilarione e Malco*, Roma, Città nuova, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Palladius, *The Lausiack History*, p. 48.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 164.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Kings 19, 9-14.

<sup>6</sup> Palladius, *The Lausiack History*, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 156.

<sup>8</sup> Theodoret of Cyrhus, *Life of Saint Symeon the Stylite*, ch. 6, <https://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2017/09/life-of-symeon-stylite-theodoret.html>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, ch. 9.

32 | he lived all the time inside, thinking of heaven and compelling himself to contemplate what lies above the heavens – for the iron chain did not hinder the flight of his thought»<sup>10</sup>.

In this context, the space of life could be invested with sacred and, above all, effective powers, because of the role attributed to them. In the scanty biographies Palladius reports in the *Storia Lausiaca*, for example, one observes the effectiveness of the inside-outside spatial dynamic. Life within the chosen place is often a guarantee of security and divine protection even if it turns into the theatre of the struggle against the evil one. Leaving it meant exposing oneself to the attack of the devil and the temptations of the world, seen as agents external to man and of man's separation from God. In fact, although the ascetic's chosen place was the place of ordinary combat against the evil, this fight was carried out under divine protection supposed to be effective exclusively within the perimeter of his ordinary life. The interior of the cell is the guarantor of the monk's fidelity to God, a sort of matrix, the motor of spiritual progression. Leaving the cell is an indication of digression, diversion from the essential, yielding to temptation. An anecdote from the life of Nathanaël from the *Lausiatic History* confirms this tendency:

«Among other things, ... he seemed to feel a distaste for his first cell and went off and built another nearer a village. So, when he had completed the cell and occupied it, three or four months after the demon came by night, holding a whip of ox-hide like the executioners, and having the appearance of a ragged soldier, and began cracking his whip. Then the blessed Nathanael answered and said: 'Who are you who do such things in ray dwelling?' The demon answered: 'I am he who drove you from that cell. I have come to chase you out of this too'. Knowing that he was the victim of an illusion, he returned again to the first cell, and in a period of thirty-seven years in all did not cross the threshold, having a quarrel with the demon who showed him such wonders, trying to force him out, as it is impossible to relate»<sup>11</sup>.

## 2. Monasticism

In the course of time, the protective role of the cell was transmitted to the space of the monastic cloister to the point of making it forbidden to cross its threshold, under penalty of punishment. The severity of the sanction derives from the fact that the Benedictine rule implies a vow of stability, i.e., a commitment to live for the rest of one's existence in the space delimited by enclosure:

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, ch. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Palladius, *The Lausiatic History*, p. 71.

«But if anyone shall have thus presumed, let him be subjected to the punishment prescribed by rule. Similarly let it be done to him also who shall have presumed to leave the monastery enclosure, or to go anywhere at all, or to do anything whatsoever, however small, without the abbot's orders»<sup>12</sup>.

It is interesting to point out how, in the course of time and because of the rise of coenobitism, individual creativity as a penance idiolect with respect to spatial asceticism is diminished in favor of order and spatial security predetermined by a religious rule of life within a monastery which envisages tiny, uncomfortable serial cells for each monk. Thus, modifying the place of life, the spot of monastic penance is converted from the faith, expressed in facing the danger of a reckless life in the wilderness into the patience in enduring the neighbor living in the adjoining cell.

### 3. Space as a Sign

In light of more recent evolution in the field of Christian spirituality, we can see that Antiquity exalted spatial asceticism by privileging the choice of cramped and difficult-to-access places for the exercise of corporal penance.

The exit from the spatial rigor of the monastic cell with an opening to the social space is realized in the turning introduced by the preaching orders in the 12th century, Franciscans and Dominicans<sup>13</sup>. They inaugurated an open space for religious life as they were itinerant. This openness to the world as a place of asceticism is declined in various ways in the course of modernity until it leads to a spirituality less centered on the confines of the human body, such as the one inaugurated recently by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin with the topic of the Mass on the World<sup>14</sup>, which elects infinite spaces as the seat of a cosmic spiritual experience.

Analyzing this overview of austere spatial forms inherent to early Christian anachoretic or monastic life, we note that a specific spatial semiotics emerges and contributes to the making of a culture in which objects and practices take on a particular meaning and create a specific geometry. Here, objects, places, and forms deserve the expression plane of spatial codes invented by a closed society within the religious semiosphere of post-persecution Christianity. If we must take up Wittgenstein's statements regarding

<sup>12</sup> *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, trans. with an Introduction and Notes by C. White, London, Penguin Classics, 2008, ch. 67.

<sup>13</sup> J.-C. Guy, *La vie religieuse, mémoire évangélique de l'Eglise*, Paris, Le Centurion, 1987.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. P.T. de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*, New York, Harper and Row, 1961.

life forms in the *Philosophical Investigations*<sup>15</sup>, we can say that the monastic spatial language generates the life form itself, which harbors and allows it to exist as a reaction to the ordinary life forms in human society. That is to say, the place itself generates the corresponding form of life and the various options attached correspond to the creation of a new private social/religious code composed of various syntagms related and at the same time opposite to the society habits and historical periods in which it appears.

The current presence of monastic perspectives as well as the opening to the whole world as a place of spiritual experience, proposed by the theologian Teilhard de Chardin, allow us to observe how opposing tendencies can now coexist and offer their prerogatives to people who refer to one or another spirituality in a world that already announced itself as multi-religious at the end of the second millennium. The openness to the world since the modern era had in fact allowed Christian religious life to move out of the closed setting of monastic life focused on the primacy of prayer to concretize other aspects of the Gospel message in the proximity of people in need. In semiotic terms, this transformation could be defined as the overlapping of the Christian spirituality range with the entire earthly, or even cosmic, semiosphere, fact that entails a phenomenal enrichment of perspectives for the development of an appropriate spirituality.

We can therefore affirm that the monastic living space, whatever form it is shaped in, becomes an instrument with a performative function since, through divine or demonic influence, it makes the monk do something he had not planned to do but who suffers passively.

The voluntaristic character and competition in the harshness of asceticism, the escape from human consortium, the conferring of effective powers to the living space represent the «identification beliefs» (*croyances d'identifications*) typical of the period following the Christian persecutions, which, added to the common «regime of beliefs» (*régime de croyances*) relating to the Christian religion, provide what Fontanille<sup>16</sup> claims as necessary conditions for identifying a semiotic object, that is to say, the form in which spiritual experience is expressed in a specific form of life or in a specific theological perspective.

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<sup>15</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, New York, Macmillan, 1953, ch. 19.

<sup>16</sup> J. Fontanille, *Formes de vie*, Liège, Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2015, p. 30.

Regarding the hypothesis of a «fourth dimension» inherent in the human compound and revealed by spiritual experience, let us examine a series of testimonies taken from the biographies of some mystics. The account of Theresa of Avila's spiritual experience is spread through all her works. Here are a couple of examples:

«I was at prayer one day when suddenly, without knowing how, I found myself, as I thought, plunged right into hell. ... The entrance, I thought, resembled a very long, narrow passage, like a furnace, very low, dark and closely confined; the ground seemed to be full of water which looked like filthy, evil-smelling mud ...»<sup>17</sup>.

The *Memoriale*, a biography of Angela of Foligno (1248-1309), bears witness to the ecstasies that made her famous. Here is an account of this testifying to an experience similar to that of Theresa of Avila:

«While I was thinking, suddenly my soul was ravished and in the first ecstasy was placed at a table without beginning and without end. I, however, was not led to see the table, but what was on it, and I contemplated an unspeakable fullness of which I can say no more than that it was All Good»<sup>18</sup>.

We observe that the fruition of the inner space created by the vision mentioned by the two mystics is not accessible at will but that one is transported into it or one finds oneself without knowing how in this unknown place. The etymology of the term ecstasy is in fact derived from ἐξίστημι «putting out» and «coming out of oneself». This movement shifts the attention of the mystic towards an elsewhere, a spatial dimension towards which he cannot go alone but can only be transported by being into a condition of passivity.

The situation relates to an oneiric dimension and is settled in such a way. The difference with the dreamlike condition is that the attention of the mystic is constant and necessary: they consciously attends and is transported into the space designated by the vision. The structure of the described space come precisely from the imagery that the mystic has stored up throughout his life. In fact, here is how the kabbala specialist Gershom Scholem defines this phenomenon:

«Why then does a Christian mystic always have Christian visions and not those of a Buddhist? Why does a Buddhist see the figures of his own pantheon and not, for example,

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<sup>17</sup> Theresa of Avila, *Life*, ed. by A. Peers, New York, Doubleday, 1960, p. 181.

<sup>18</sup> Angela da Foligno, *Memoriale*, ed. and with an Introduction by E. Menestò, Spoleto, CISAM, 2015, p. 34.

that of Jesus or the Madonna? Why does a Kabbalist meet the prophet Elijah on his path to enlightenment, and not a figure from a world alien to him? The answer is, of course, that the expression of their experiences is immediately transformed into the traditional symbols of their own world, even when the objects of that experience are basically the same, and not really very different, as many explorers of mysticism, particularly on the Catholic side, readily admit»<sup>19</sup>.

In fact, John of the Cross specifies how the individual imagery elaborates precise images taken from religious tradition and stored in his memory, under the impulse of mystical experience.

«All the conceptions and forms which come through the five corporeal senses and become fixed in the soul by the natural way can also come to it by the supernatural way and be communicated to it without the help of any external sense. Indeed, this sense of imagination, together with memory, is like a kind of archive or reservoir for the understanding, in which all intelligible forms and images are received. Like a mirror, it keeps them within itself. Having received them through the five senses, or, as we say, through the supernatural way, and thus representing them to the understanding, the understanding then considers and judges them. Its power goes further: it can still compose and form other images similar to those which are supplied to it there. It must therefore be known that, just as the five external senses naturally propose and represent the images and forms of objects to the internal senses, so God can, we repeat, supernaturally and without the help of the external senses, represent the same images or forms, and much more beautiful and perfect ones»<sup>20</sup>.

We can first observe the spatial dimensions that the mystical experience seemed to induce by stating that the narrowness of the space predetermined for the practice of Christian spirituality following its most ancient tradition is inversely proportional to the psycho-physical «fourth dimension» that the mystic experiences and constructs through personal imagery during the exercise of his spirituality.

The deprivation of external stimuli brought about by the ascetic option of the mystic forcing himself into a cramped space, is motivated by an introspective search aimed at directing his need to relate exclusively to the divine sphere. Now, the goal sought is to focus one's attention exclusively on inner movements and to refine, not to say deviate, one's perception from that which the five senses provide for physical survival in order to develop an inner perception of both psychic and spiritual order. This operation has been described with great precision by Carmelite spirituality (John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila, Teresa of the Child Jesus and Elizabeth of the Trinity, for instance), which distinguishes the night of the soul and the night of the spirit as two phases of adaptation that initiation into Christian spirituality entails.

<sup>19</sup> G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, New York, Schocken, 1996, p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, ed. by D. Lewis, London, Baker, 1922, p. 324.

With regard to the semiotic glance to be laid on the phenomena, an above-mentioned sentence by Gerhom Scholem draws our attention: «the expression of their experiences is immediately transformed into the traditional symbols of their own world»<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, as de Saussure would say and Louis Hjelmslev<sup>22</sup> pointed out of the mental activity inherent in language, the plane of expression of mystical experience described in the previous quotations can be considered as composed in the disordered reservoir of images stored in the conscience as a 'matter' of expression. Those lie creating a kind of paradigmatic order of available images until the spiritual experience activates them and, choosing some of them, gives them a 'form' creating a visual syntagm that outlines the vision. As for the meaning to be attached to these forms, unlike a sentence formulated in any conventional language, it is up to the mystic who receives the vision to 'reread' the personal spatial experience and attribute a sense to what has been communicated to him.

The typical progression of the spiritual experience was effectively described by Theresa of Avila using the metaphor of the «Interior Castle»<sup>23</sup>. And indeed, just as with the Theatres of Memory that are shaped at approximately the same time and that furnish the mental space to be discovered by the Renaissance man, Theresa describes the discovery of the different spiritual rooms and progressively more and more effaced the closer they are to the seat of the divine presence. Our aim is not to describe the prerogatives of spiritual asceticism, but to investigate the spaces that affect the experience of the divine sphere. We can therefore conclude our investigation by stating that if the mystic undergoes an operation of deprivation of external stimuli, at first the spiritual experience draws on his personal imagination to express, as a dream would, the inner space in which he has chosen to move. A rich universe of perceptions and inner places, thus, offers itself for his enjoyment in one of the early stages of introspection, the night of the soul, as if to reward him for his harsh renunciations. But the traditional Christian inner trajectory, while presenting a clear vectorial dimension that points toward the inner space by foregoing the enjoyment of a physical aspect of ordinary life, is much more demanding and will eventually deprive him even of these points of

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<sup>21</sup> G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, p. 24.

<sup>22</sup> F. de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Paris, Payot et Rivages, 1916, p. 181; L. Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, Baltimore, Indiana University Publications in Anthropology and Linguistics, 1943, pp. 43-36.

<sup>23</sup> Theresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle, or The Mansions*, ed. by B. Zimmerman, Gastonia NC, TAN Books, 1997.

38 | reference to allow him to enjoy the presence of the divine sphere in the most inaccessible point of human interiority. This experience, the mystics teach<sup>24</sup>, touches the boundary between space-time and discovers a dimension whose qualities are impossible to describe coming back from spiritual experience to the human reality<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> M.-E. de l'Enfant Jésus, *Je veux voir Dieu*, Toulouse, Éditions du Carmel, 1949.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. 2 Corinthians, 12, 2: «I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago – still in the body? I do not know; or out of the body? I do not know: God knows – was caught up right into the third heaven».

# A Room for Herself: The Semiotics of the Interior and Exterior Space in the Mystical Imagery of the Cell

Jenny Ponzo

*Abstract* – In the writings of Christian mystics from the Middle Ages up to our days, there is a recurring need for a room intended as a place of intimacy and independence, of loneliness and freedom, in which to build one own's subjectivity, especially thanks to the construction of a relation to a transcendent Other. As the 20th-century culture has shown, this need of a space of oneself is particularly connected to the affirmation of feminine subjectivity: if Virginia Woolf wrote that a woman needs «a room of one's own» to write fiction, a similar concept seems to apply to female mystics across the centuries. This theme is analyzed through different concepts, such as the oppositions, and the related tensions, between inside and outside, proximity and distance, immanence and transcendence, which are in turn connected to the dynamic relationship between a limited possibility of perception and an unlimited potentiality of imagination and knowledge.

Keywords: mysticism – concentration – space – subjectivity – imagination

«... e della Cella si fa uno cielo»<sup>1</sup>.  
(Catherine of Siena, *Lettere*)

## 1. Introduction

In the writings of Christian-Catholic mystics from the Middle Ages to our days, there is a recurring need for a room intended as a place of intimacy, of freedom from the world, in which to freely and creatively experience transcendence, which is possible only in a condition of loneliness and stillness. This need of a space of oneself is particularly (even not exclusively) connected to the affirmation of feminine subjectivity: if Virginia Woolf wrote that a woman needs a room of one's own<sup>2</sup> to write fiction, a similar concept seems to apply to mystics across the centuries.

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine of Siena, *Lettere*, Firenze, Marzocco, 1939, letter CCIII. All translations, unless different specification, are my own.

<sup>2</sup> V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, London, Hogarth Press, 1929.

The condition of solitude granted by this personal space is an important premise to reach a state of mediation and concentration, a state for which contemporary culture still expresses a strong interest<sup>3</sup>. In this paper I will therefore firstly focus on the Christian-Catholic idea of concentration and show how it is strictly connected with the spatial imagery of the cell; then, I will concentrate on the distinction between the exterior and the interior cell, based on the writings of Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), Theresa of Avila (1515-1582) and Veronica Giuliani (1660-1727).

## 2. The Idea of Concentration in Christian-Catholic Tradition

In the Christian-Catholic tradition, praying is considered an act engaging *the whole person* and consisting in *a dialogue* with the divine. This act requires «to enter into oneself and take a distance from ordinary and daily things and, in the meantime, provokes a movement and an opening toward the Other»<sup>4</sup>. The condition of prayer is thus characterized by a typical tension between opposed poles combining motion and stasis, interiority and exteriority: the soul is required to exit from the movement of daily life and stand still and quiet, to reach a condition of solitude and silence; this condition is necessary to the spiritual movement, to the instauration of a dialogue which cannot take place if the soul is not available to listen.

Catholic theologians agree that concentration can be reached in different environments, for instance, in a church, in a garden, a field, or a desert. A widespread and crucial model is however praying alone inside one's room. This model finds a first formulation in Mt 6:6, where Jesus prescribes: «But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you».

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<sup>3</sup> And this often leads to re-elaborations of the traditional models, see e.g. the contemporary phenomenon of the 'urban hermits', who adapt the ascetic practices to the life in contemporary [cities](http://nuovieremiti.blogspot.com/search/label/Eremiti%20di%20citt%C3%A0) (<http://nuovieremiti.blogspot.com/search/label/Eremiti%20di%20citt%C3%A0>), or the combination of the Christian-Catholic tradition with the oriental traditions (a key contribution in this respect is that of Anthony De Mello).

<sup>4</sup> C. Laudazi, *Preghiera*, in E. Ancilli (ed.), *Dizionario enciclopedico di spiritualità*. Roma, Città Nuova, 1990<sup>3</sup>, vol. 3, pp. 1992-2009, here p. 1992.

Surely, the cell as a topologic configuration is particularly coherent with a *form of life*<sup>5</sup> based on the secret, intended as the regime of «being» and «not-seeming»<sup>6</sup>.

### 3. The Exterior Cell

#### 3.1 *Inside and Outside*

In the Catholic imagery regarding praying in a room, the relationship between physical and spiritual senses is crucial, and is connected to the topological distinction between inside and outside. From this perspective, «External silence ... is nothing more than the environmental premise of inner silence; it is necessary as recollection and solitude ...»<sup>7</sup>.

As a consequence, the creation of a closed personal space granting solitude and silence must be propaedeutic to concentration. The action of isolating oneself into a room can be defined as a secondary narrative program useful for the accomplishment of the principal one, consisting in reaching the concentration which makes prayer effective, or even as a *semiotecnique*, namely a practice producing the meaning intended by the subject<sup>8</sup>. What is particularly interesting is that this model of prayer is based on an analogy between the organization of the spatial environment and the inner disposition of the soul, so that the space of the room results as the material realization of the idea of concentration: the desired spiritual state is fostered by an analogous spatial organization, so that the whole person results centered on their own, concentrated. Reflecting on the organization of the ascetic space, Massimo Leone observes that any space or place is set up, like a scenography created more or less consciously, and plays a relevant influence on the ascetic's semiotic grip of the space, because there is a sort of echo between the plastic structure of the

<sup>5</sup> On this concept, cf. J. Fontanille, *Formes de vie*, Presses Universitaires de Liège, Liège, 2015. See also L. Ruiz Moreno, *La solitude comme forme de vie*, in «Nouveaux actes sémiotiques», 115, 2012, <https://www.unilim.fr/actes-semiotiques/2664>.

<sup>6</sup> A.J. Greimas - J. Courtès, *Semiotics and Language. An Analytical Dictionary*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982, p. 310.

<sup>7</sup> G. della Croce, *Silenzio*, in E. Ancilli (ed.), *Dizionario enciclopedico di spiritualità*, vol. 3, pp. 2308-2312, here p. 2310.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. F. Galofaro, *Come prestare attenzione a Dio: preghiera e semiotecnica*, in J. Ponzio - E. Chiaia (eds.), *Il sacro e il corpo*, Milano - Udine, Mimesis, 2022, pp. 133-151.

42 | spatial language and the plastic structure of the spiritual language<sup>9</sup>: these considerations well apply to the case under examination.

### 3.2 The 'atmosphere'

Both the religious discourse about prayer and the recent semiotic reflection<sup>10</sup> have devoted much attention to the ideas of *environment* and *atmosphere*, intended as a «resonance» of the lived space, which results filled with a «vibration», a feeling, a surplus of meaning which is more bodily and emotional than abstract and semantic<sup>11</sup>.

Atmosphere has therefore to do with the aesthetic and pathemic grip of the space. The environment, or atmosphere, surrounding the praying faithful is a relevant component of an effective technique of prayer. According to Theresa of Avila, for instance, the mental oration consists in a friendly and loving conversation of the soul with God<sup>12</sup>. Based on this consideration, theologian Carlo Laudazi observes that «saints not only define the main features of this kind of oration, but they also insist on the spiritual atmosphere»<sup>13</sup> in which mental oration should be practiced. Theresa describes an informal atmosphere, in which the affective elements prevail. The particular environment of prayer, therefore, results from the contrast between the material emptiness of the room and the fullness of the inner experience.

### 3.3 Sensorial Limits, Reflection and Imagination

A relevant idea informing this model of prayer is that sensorial limits trigger imagination, that a limited or impeded sight leads to explore with the eyes of the soul what is beyond. This idea is widespread in western culture. Its roots can be traced back to Platonism, and it influences not only the religious imagery and practice of mystics across the centuries, but also the artistic and literary imagery up to the modern and contemporary epoch. Just to mention one example, Marcel Proust writes:

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<sup>9</sup> M. Leone, *Semiotica dello spazio ascetico*, in «Humanitas», 68, 2013, 6, pp. 937-947.

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. the issue 9-10 of the journal «Lexia» (2011), edited by M. Leone and devoted to «Environment, Habitat, Setting».

<sup>11</sup> Cf. T. Griffero, *Amosferologia. Estetica degli spazi emozionali*, Sesto San Giovanni, Mimesis, 2017<sup>2</sup>, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Theresa of Avila, *Libro de la vida – La Vita*, in *Tutte le opere. Nuova edizione riveduta e corretta, testo spagnolo a fronte*, Milano, Bompiani, 2018, pp. 3-719, 106-107.

<sup>13</sup> C. Laudazi, *Preghiera*, p. 2003.

«When I was a child, the fate of no saint seemed so miserable to me as that of Noah, because of the flood that kept him locked in the ark for forty days. Later, I was often ill, and for many days I also had to stay in the 'ark'. I understood then that Noah could never see the world so well as from the ark, despite the fact that it was closed and it was night on earth ...»<sup>14</sup>.

This idea has to do with a concept which is fundamental in semiotics. Classic theories of the sign, such as Ferdinand de Saussure's, Charles S. Peirce's, and Umberto Eco's, have taught us that signs have an abstract and substitutive nature, that they can signify what is beyond sensitive experience (and can therefore be used to lie). Going beyond the limits of the matter, and also beyond pure referentiality, is a constitutive part of our semiotic capacity. From this perspective, the model under consideration stresses this tendency, since it entails that an individual voluntarily exasperates the limits of perception in order to stimulate their semiotic faculty – namely the faculty *to imagine beyond the sensual experience*.

This heuristic method often receives a positive *sanction* from the society in which the mystic acts. Indeed, numerous mystics across the centuries who professed – and practiced – the value of an isolated life have had the capacity of attracting crowds of people asking for advice for both mundane and spiritual issues.

### 3.4 *Self-Affirmation*

The practice of enclosing oneself into a room is not only part of a technique aiming to acquire concentration as the necessary condition of prayer: especially for feminine mystics, the desire to be able to close themselves in a room for their own has undoubtedly another meaning too, connected to their sociocultural environment and their personal condition.

According to Rudolph Bell, many important mystics, such as Catherine of Siena and Veronica Giuliani, were young women who strived for their self-affirmation, in a way which is similar under many respects to the rebellion that many young women still act today in relation to their family and the society they are part of<sup>15</sup>. This need of self-affirmation is not only expressed through fasting (the aspect on which Bell focuses more extensively), but also through the desire of a room for themselves, intended as a place of freedom from the prefixed roles imposed by the society and the standard models of behavior.

<sup>14</sup> M. Proust, *Les plaisirs et les jours*, Paris, Calmann Lévi, 1896, p. VII.

<sup>15</sup> R. Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, Chicago - London, The University of Chicago Press, 1985.

From this perspective, it is possible to draw a parallel between mysticism and art. Virginia Woolf, for instance, writes that the creation of a work is hard and is made more difficult by the material circumstances surrounding the writer, who will be distracted by a number of noises and interruptions depending on the environment in which they work, as well as by money and health concerns. Especially for a woman, Virginia Woolf claims, having a room of one's own means to be able to free herself from contingency, open her mind, think independently, and become creative and fully expressive<sup>16</sup>.

A further key to interpret the phenomenon under consideration can come from a dilemma proposed by Schopenhauer<sup>17</sup> and recently applied by Davide Sisto to account for the changes in the interpersonal relationships during and after the pandemics<sup>18</sup>. In this dilemma, in a cold winter day, some porcupines get close to warm each other, but they are hurt by the reciprocal spines, so they have to get distant again, but then again start feeling cold. In the end, they find a moderate distance balancing pain and cold in a bearable compromise. However, Schopenhauer also notes that there are rare individuals who are able to accumulate much inner heat. These individuals prefer renouncing to society so as to avoid giving or receiving unpleasant sensations. We could say that many mystics (and some artists too) are among these rare individuals, and that their capacity of renouncing to the world derives from a subjectivity which finds its realization in a quest which is independent from the dominating social schemes, and in a fervent intellectual, imaginative and spiritual life, which leads them to find satisfactory a situation of sensorial and social deprivation that for most part of the individuals would be unbearable. Indeed, as Jean de Saint-Samson claims, «to confine in the solitude the body only, without accompanying it with the solitude of the spirit, this means to put oneself, while still alive, in the hell»<sup>19</sup>. This kind of proxemics, therefore, is not only reserved to rare individuals, but is inseparable from the relationship to the spiritual dimension, so that the scarcity of social and sensorial stimuli is paralleled by an exceptionally rich spiritual life, overcoming the silence of the senses and annihilating the pain of loneliness.

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<sup>16</sup> V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*.

<sup>17</sup> A. Schopenhauer, *Parerga und Paralipomena: kleine philosophische Schriften*, Berlin, Hayn, 1851.

<sup>18</sup> D. Sisto, *Porcospini digitali*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Jean de Saint-Samson, *Les Contemplations et les divins soliloques*, Paris, Chez Denys Thierry, 1654, pp. 11-12.

As the term itself suggests, asceticism is a path, a progressive development of the spiritual experience. Many mystics describe several stages in this path, and generally the progression is towards a growing abstraction, in which the experience of the divine gets rid of reason, as well as of images and imagination, and is described as a full union, a communion. Having a room for oneself is a need characterizing in particular the first stages of the ascetic path, when the senses play a bigger influence on the spiritual performance. A more advanced level – even if one which is not yet fully devoid of images – is represented by the creation of an inner room or cell. The mystics able to create an inner space for their own are free to cultivate their spirituality even while they are acting in the world. Inside their inner cell, they keep the dialogue with the divine alive and safe from distraction.

In mystical literature, the use of the spatial metaphor of the inner cell provides a very coherent and effective figurative representation of the idea of concentration. This metaphor is developed in particular by Catherine of Siena. Her hagiographer Raymond of Capua narrates that, since her childhood she was fascinated by the Egyptian fathers and she wanted to imitate them, become a hermit and live in a cavern<sup>20</sup>. The young Catherine had to face the hostility of her family, who contrasted her religious vocation and her often extreme devout practices. When her parents deprived her of her room, she built an inner cell for herself:

«... she made herself a secret cell under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in her own mind, from which she decided to come out only for serious reasons. And so it happened that, while before she had a material cell, in which she sometimes entered and sometimes left, now she never left the inner cell, which could not be taken from her»<sup>21</sup>.

The doctrine of the inner cell is developed in numerous passages of Catherine's writings. Catherine calls this inner room the «cell of self-knowledge». In order to reach it, the soul must be perseverant in prayer, become conscious of itself, of its faults and sins, thus overcoming the love of its sensuality and gaining humility. In this way, the soul becomes aware of the bounty of God, and consequently desires the union with him. This inner cell is therefore the pivot of spiritual life<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> R. of Capua, *Vita di Caterina da Siena. Legenda Maior*, Milano, Paoline, 2013, p. 56.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 74.

<sup>22</sup> Catherine of Siena, *Libro della Divina Dottrina volgarmente detto Dialogo della Divina Provvidenza*, Bari, Laterza, 1928, chapters I, LXIII; C. of Siena, *Lettere*, II.

In Catherine's thought a constant analogy is proposed between the inner and the material cell, and she claims that the religious who get away from their cell and stay in the world, die, like fishes out of the water<sup>23</sup>. Acquiring the inner cell, however, requires a hard work and resistance to the attacks of the devil, which become particularly violent in the solitude of the material cell<sup>24</sup>. For this reason, remaining in the material cell is almost unbearable for the weak soul, incapable of paralleling the exterior solitude with the inner shelter in which the dialogue with the divine can take place; on the contrary, the more the soul progresses in the building of the interior cell, the more it loves staying also in the material one<sup>25</sup>.

In several passages (cf. epigraph) Catherine writes that «the cell becomes heaven». This metaphor well expresses the idea that for the mystic the room for herself becomes a whole *lifeworld*. The same idea can be found in other passages, in which Catherine speaks of the «city of the soul»<sup>26</sup>, and is further elaborated in the figure of a concentric inner room, when she says that inside the room of the self-knowledge, there is another room, which is the room of the knowledge of God<sup>27</sup>.

The virtually infinite expansion of the space of the inner cell finds its more articulated expression in Theresa of Avila's idea of the interior castle: «This Castle has ... many dwellings: some at the top, others at the bottom, others at the sides. In the middle, at its center, there is the main room, where the most secret things between God and the soul happen»<sup>28</sup>. For Theresa too, the door to enter the castle is constituted by oration and meditation<sup>29</sup> and the first room to be explored is the one of the self-knowledge:

«I would leave no doubt about the importance of self-knowledge, however lofty the spiritual heights you have reached. While we live on this earth, we are only interested in humility. I repeat that it is really very good to try to enter the room where this theme is addressed, before flying to the others»<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> Catherine of Siena, *Libro della Divina Dottrina*, CXXV; C. of Siena, *Lettere*, XXXVI.

<sup>24</sup> Catherine of Siena, *Lettere*, CLIV.

<sup>25</sup> Catherine of Siena, *Lettere*, XXXVII.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. Catherine of Siena, *Lettere*, II, CCCXV, CCCXIX.

<sup>27</sup> Catherine of Siena, *Lettere*, XCIV.

<sup>28</sup> Theresa of Avila, *Castillo interior – Il castello interiore*, in *Tutte le opere. Nuova edizione riveduta e corretta, testo spagnolo a fronte*, Milano, Bompiani, 2018, pp. 1092-1495, 1104-1105.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 1108-1109.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 1120-1121.

The doctrine of the interior cell enjoyed considerable success in the following centuries. Saint Veronica Giuliani, for instance, takes inspiration from Catherine of Siena. She also lives a retired life and starts to cultivate solitude since her childhood. However, in her account, her desire for the inner cell appears fulfilled by God, so that its obtention seems to derive more from the surrender of the personal will and from divine grace than from a long and patient work to build the cell of self-knowledge, as in Catherine:

It seemed to me that I needed a little retreat, feeling inspired to do like St. Catherine of Siena, to make a remote room in my heart, and there, in the midst of the turmoil, to make my posed retreat with God alone. With this good thought I was preparing for what I wanted to do. In this while, I heard an internal voice that was saying to me: *Do not take pain of not being able to withdraw a little, because I your Spouse will always make you withdraw into Me* ... Therefore, those who want solitude should leave their will ... This is what always keeps our minds raised in things from nothing. And it does not help to build rooms in our hearts, because, since there is a little of our will, soon everything falls on the ground. ... The conversations, the chores, the charity, the office I have, nothing takes me out of holy solitude. Oh! What peace my heart feels staying, continuously, placed in the divine will! Oh! how great is this divine chamber, in this divine will of my God, of my Groom!<sup>31</sup>

Saint Veronica's experience seems moreover more abstract than the one described by Catherine: while for the latter the inner cell is not only structurally analogical to the material cell, but also maintains a relation with it through the practice of the bodily isolation and confinement, Veronica's inner cell appears more independent from the material condition of the body.

## 5. Conclusion

The imagery of the cell is the core of a set of relevant semiotic issues. The first is that this imagery expresses with efficacy the idea, central to semiotic theory, that sensorial limitation is the first impulse for the semi-otization of the beyond, for the elaboration of signs that are abstract and substitutive in nature.

Another key concept is that the relationship between the inner and the material cell depends on a parallelism between the plastic structure of spatial language and the plastic structure of spiritual language. The metaphor of the inner cell also provides a figurative representation of a con-

<sup>31</sup> Veronica Giuliani, *Un tesoro nascosto (Diario)*, Città di Castello, Stabilimento Tipografico Editoriale, 1969<sup>2</sup>, vol. 1, pp. 264-265.

cept that has been widely explored by recent semiotic studies, namely that the imagination of transcendence and of the immaterial reality necessitates matter, so that the material world is the inescapable model for the imagination of the beyond and of what is immaterial<sup>32</sup>. In this sense, the imagery of the cell has an utopic character: the cell appears as the parallel or the extension of the body, when it becomes 'utopic' in the sense defined by Michel Foucault, namely a body (or a room) which in its materiality brings in all the space of the religious, of the sacred, of transcendence<sup>33</sup>.

At a narratological level, the room of one's own plays a crucial role in the subject's self-definition and self-affirmation: the 'solitary' person finds their full development in the cell, and in what Greimas would call «regime of the secret», in which a lively inner life is hidden inside the soul<sup>34</sup>. The form of life of the solitary mystic is therefore placed in a complex field of tensions, in which the body and the soul are engaged in an itinerary going from the exterior (characterized by limitation and closeness) to the interior (of infinite depth and openness), from taking the distance from the others to gain proximity to the divine Other, from the poverty of sensual stimuli and pleasure to growingly rich spiritual ones.

This quest can also be interpreted as a heuristic method, i.e. as a way to gain an improved knowledge of oneself, of the world and of the deity. If it is true that mystical and artistic-aesthetic experience are similar under several respects<sup>35</sup>, the imagery of a room of one's own undoubtedly constitutes one of these similarities, and proves how the solitary form of life and the heuristic technique it entails are central, at least in Western culture. Moreover, an interesting parallel between the cell of the mystic and the room of the artist is provided by the idea that these spaces are the result of a work, are built according not only to spatial principles, but also trying to realize a particular *atmosphere*. As a consequence, while the cell contributes to the progression of self-knowledge and affirmation, at the same time it is shaped by the self living inside it

<sup>32</sup> For bibliographic references on this subject, cf. J. Ponzo, *Approcci semiotici alle culture religiose*, in G. Marrone - T. Migliore (eds.), *Cura del senso e critica sociale. Riconoscimento della semiotica italiana*, Sesto San Giovanni, Mimesis, pp. 451-476, here pp. 460-462.

<sup>33</sup> M. Foucault, *Le corps utopique, les hétérotopies*, Paris, Nouvelles Editions Lignes, 2019.

<sup>34</sup> A.J. Greimas - J. Courtès, *Semiotics and Language*, p. 269.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. J. Ponzo, *Religious-Artistic Epiphanies in 20th-Century Literature: Joyce, Claudel, Weil, C.S. Lewis, Rebora, and Papini*, in J. Ponzo - R. Yelle - M. Leone (eds.), *Mediation and Immediacy: A Key Issue for the Semiotics of Religion*, Boston - Berlin, De Gruyter, 2020, pp. 149-164.

and molding it in its likeliness. A similar concept is expressed by Georges Didi-Huberman about the studio of the artist Parmiggiani:

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«Does this mean that the artist's studio – the place of work and at the same time the work of the place – should be thought of as ... the transformation of an environment (with the air, the fog, the atmosphere that are proper to it) into a landscape of psyche, in a stylistic character, in the imprint of intimacy?»<sup>36</sup>.

I think the answer to this question is yes. This consideration explains the fascination that our culture shows for the personal rooms of saints and artists, which are increasingly musealized (this is the case for instance of the room of Saint Pio of Pietrelcina, of Don Bosco, etc.)<sup>37</sup>. The role culturally attributed to the cell is one of parallelism with the person who lived, built its own subjectivity and had inside it the most important thoughts and experiences making them a great artist or a great saint.

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<sup>36</sup> G. Didi-Huberman, *Sculture d'ombra: aria, polvere, impronte, fantasmi*, Torino, Allemandi &C., p. 12.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. J. Ponzio, *The Saint's Room: Museums and the Management of Nostalgia*, in «Carte Semiotiche», Annali 9 (forthcoming).



# The Space of Sin and Salvation: The *Topos* of Mary Magdalene in Italian Prose and Poetry

Magdalena Maria Kubas

**Abstract** – The purpose of this paper is to consider the representations of Mary Magdalene in Italian literature. Using Juri Lotman's analysis of the cultural connotations of space, we will examine the opposition between open/enclosed space and its associations with the sanctity/sin and social acceptance/condemnation. Starting in the Counter-Reformation period, Magdalene is gorgeously represented in poetic and narrative works as both a sinner and a saint. By joining the bodily and spiritual, this representation becomes an ideal of femininity and Christian salvation. The following centuries witness a waning of interest in this figure but, starting in the twentieth century, we find renewed interest and various representations. The modern sensibility contextualizes the Magdalene in our time and society, representing her as a lover, a victim of violence, a mentally ill woman, an immigrant and prostitute, etc., her body serving as a space of either socially unaccepted behaviors or lifestyles.

**Keywords:** spatiality – sin – condemnation – violence against women – social stigma

*«Наготу твою перстами трону  
Тише вод и ниже трав.  
Я был прям, а ты меня наклону  
Нежности наставила, припав»<sup>1</sup>.  
(Marina Tsvetaeva, *Magdalene*)*

## 1. Preliminary Remarks

In early Christian iconography, Mary of Magdala is represented among the pious women who visit Christ's tomb. This kind of image is found, for instance, among the frescoes from Dura Europos or on the sarcophagus of the church of San Celso in Milan, which dates back to the fourth century. In these images, the pious women are depicted as having a similar appearance and displaying similar attributes. Eight centuries later, the Magdalene

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<sup>1</sup> [I will caress your naked body with my fingers / softer than water and lower than grass. / I was straight, and you made me tilt / distorted me with your tenderness]. In the second verse, the bodily dimension usually associated with this poem by Tsvetaeva is enriched by a spatial reference. All translations in this article are mine.

appears as the protagonist of the cycle of stained-glass windows in the cathedral of Chartres: this masterpiece presents an account that extends far beyond the narrative about Mary Magdalene we find in the Gospels. In the window cycle, this figure is instead endowed with individual characters and attributes of her own. In the second half of the thirteenth century, the most well-known Western hagiographic account of Mary Magdalene was written by Jacobus de Voragine<sup>2</sup>. Her life as a sinner before her conversion, beautiful and rich, is described in this text. De Voragine's narrative also includes the elements that appear in the Chartres stained glass depiction, including the French part of the *legenda* about the Magdalene.

Mary Magdalene is among the most important female characters of the Gospels, both canonical and apocryphal. In Mark (16, 9-10) and Luke (8, 2-3) alike, she is characterized as the person who has been cured of being possessed by seven demons. In the Gospels of Mark (16, 9-10), Luke (24, 9-10) and John (20, 2-3, 18), she is the one to whom Jesus first appears after the resurrection. Along with other women she witnessed both the crucifixion and Christ's death, and afterwards she took care of his body and visited his tomb (Mark 16, 1-2). Apart from the specific religious, historical, and theological aspects, a general cultural meaning associated with this character developed in Roman Catholicism during the Middle Ages and became particularly important during the Counter-Reformation. In the Gospels, the Magdalene's importance is sanctioned by her having witnessed Jesus' resurrection, and indeed this is known to have given her a more elevated rank among the disciples of Christ. Mary Magdalene's presence alongside Christ was an object of debate in early Christian communities as it raised questions on the role of women in assemblies, women's access to both the priesthood and leadership positions, etc.<sup>3</sup>.

As scholars have acknowledged, the traditional Western representation of Saint Mary Magdalene merges three different evangelical characters, namely three women named Mary<sup>4</sup>. The formulation and, successively, codification of this narrative occurred between the second century and the end of the sixth century, when Pope Gregory I fixed this specific im-

<sup>2</sup> Cf. I. da Varazze, *Legenda aurea*, Torino, Einaudi, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> For a historical and theological reconstruction, see E. Lupieri, *La Maddalena più antica*, in E. Lupieri, *Una sposa per Gesù: Maria Maddalena tra antichità e postmoderno*, Roma, Carocci, 2019, pp. 21-36; the conflict concerning women's priesthood is discussed in K. King, *Canonizzazione ed emarginazione: Maria di Magdala*, in «Concilium. Rivista internazionale di teologia», 3, 1998; see also *Le scritture sacre delle donne*, *ibidem*, pp. 13-18.

<sup>4</sup> See M. Mingozzi, *In bilico tra sacro e profano: l'iconografia di Maria Maddalena dalle origini al XV secolo*, in E. Lupieri (ed.), *Una sposa per Gesù*, pp. 129-154.

age of the Magdalene as Church of Rome's official one: in this vision, the woman possessed by evil spirits was identified with the sinner or the prostitute (who is not named in the Gospels) as well as with Mary of Bethany. The act of disseminating this particular depiction, and successively the influence exerted by Jacobus de Voragine's hagiographic account, left a mark that continued to influence representations of this figure up to the twentieth century. The reception of this canonical depiction in Italian literature can be seen beginning in the thirteenth century, when a lauda about the Magdalene was included in the most ancient collection of religious poetry preserved to the present, namely the *Laudario di Cortona*<sup>5</sup>.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on representations of Mary Magdalene in Italian literature beginning with the period following the Council of Trent. Specifically, I focus on spatial representations of the Magdalene based on the opposition of open versus enclosed space and explore the related distinction between this figure's sinful and holy existence, which in turn intersects with descriptions of perdition versus salvation. Finally, the overall analysis leads to a discussion about the Magdalene as a character who summarizes and conveys first religious and subsequently social standards of accepted or condemned behavior.

## 2. Corpus and Method

It must be noted that the corpus in which the above-mentioned oppositions and categories can be observed is extensive<sup>6</sup>, while the list

<sup>5</sup> See *Magdalena degna da laudare*, in A.M. Guarnieri (ed.), *Laudario di Cortona*, Spoleto, Centri Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 1991, pp. 220-230. The *laudario* was collected in central Italy during the thirteenth century and the above-mentioned lauda about the Magdalene lacks the «French part» of the legenda that is instead included in Jacobus de Voragine's account. The *laudario* is anonymous.

<sup>6</sup> The entire corpus includes: 1. Erasmo da Valvasone, *Le lagrime della Maddalena*, in *Poemetti italiani*, Torino, Michel Angelo Morano, 1979, vol. 1: it is a short poem written during the Counter-Reformation; 2. Anton Giulio Brignole Sale, *Maria Maddalena peccatrice convertita*, Parma, Guanda, 1996: a Baroque novel among the earliest Italian examples of the prose narrative; 3. Francesco Pona, *Maria Maddalena*, ne: *La Galleria delle donne celebri*, Roma, Perino, 1892: a short story from the seventeenth century; 4. Giovanni Domenico Giulio, *Le notti di Maria Maddalena penitente*, Roma, L. Contedini, 1814: an interior monologue from the last quarter of the eighteenth century; 5. Guido da Verona, *Sciogli la treccia*, *Maria Maddalena*, Firenze, Bemporad, 1920, a novel; 6. Alda Merini, *Maria Maddalena*, in *Mistica d'amore*, Milano, Frassinelli, 2008, a short poem in prose; 7. Carlo Maria Martini, *Maria Maddalena: esercizi spirituali*, Milano, Terra Santa, 2018; 8. Cinzia Demi, *Ero Maddalena*, Torino, Puntoacapo, 2013, a collection of poems; 9. *Maddalena bipolare*, Torino, Golem Edizioni, 2020, a novel; 10. Izabella Teresa Kostka, *Maria Maddalena*, in the collection *Peccati*, Antologica Atelier Edizioni, Pistoia, 2015. This is a sample of the literary works that explicitly touches on topics related to the figure of Mary Magdalene; it is a representative list rather than an

of works examined in this article – examples of both verse and prose, from the seventeenth century to the present – will necessarily be short. In the works addressed here, the Magdalene is placed in enclosed or open space, and this placement is the aspect through which her behavior is evaluated in the main stages of her life. The boundary between open and enclosed space therefore constitutes a rupture in relation to the universe of values – over time, this opposition connotes positive / negative meanings – while, at the same time, the Magdalene continues to perform a role of conveying what is acceptable or not in a specific spirituality and society.

The analysis of the cultural connotations of spatial positioning in literature was introduced by Juri Lotman in his article *On the Metalanguage of a Topological Description of Culture*<sup>7</sup>. Mary Magdalene's life can be divided into multiple parts: an earlier stage in which she is represented as a sinful woman, and the following phase in which she becomes one of the most important of Jesus' disciples (a late stage of her life is often added as well, such as the above-mentioned «French stage» or a period spent living an ascetic life in a cave). Given this distinction between sinful and sacred stages of her life, the analysis of the spatial connotations used in depicting her will aid in investigating what is represented as sin in specific historical moments, understood in a religious or social sense<sup>8</sup>.

### 3. Notes about Mary Magdalene in Italian literature

Between the Counter-Reformation and the present there has been a remarkable change in the way the Magdalene is depicted. Starting from gorgeous poetic and narrative representations in which she is both a sinner and saint and embodies both corporal and spiritual ideals, we find

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exhaustive one. It is drawn up considering the most relevant works of the centuries addressed here, gathering together religious and secular authors and both poetry and prose.

<sup>7</sup> J.M. Lotman, *On the Metalanguage of a Typological Description of Culture*, in «Semiotica», 14, 2, pp. 97-123.

<sup>8</sup> I propose a broader analysis of Lotman's framework applied to representations of the Virgin Mary in Italian poetry in a forthcoming article: M.M. Kubas, *The Spatial Representation of the Blessed Mary in Italian poetry at the Time of the Second Vatican*, in «Sign Systems Studies», 51, 2023, 2, pp. 280-300. Due to the limit of space foreseen for the present essay, that analysis is the theoretical framework also for the present study. In the mentioned study the relevant spatial division is between the earthly dimension (ground level) and the heaven (the high dimension). In the present analysis the space is divided into open *versus* close and to these categories correspond the spiritual values associated with the Magdalene, such as salvation (through the conversion), faith, meditation, prayer etc. The closeness is associated with sin, richness, material goods, external richness etc.

Anton Giulio Brignole Sale's *Maria Maddalena peccatrice convertita*<sup>9</sup> in which the protagonist initially occupies a charming castle, leading a sinful life in which she spends her youth immersed in vanity, wearing sumptuous clothes and rich jewelry and concerning herself only with her bodily appearance. Her conversion in this case is closely linked to her act of going outside, as well as her life among Jesus' disciples. As for the «French stage», included in this novel, the enclosed space of the cave is related to the act of meditating on her sins, while prayer and direct dialogue with Christ is placed in a bright, open space in that the Magdalene is lifted up to Heaven by the angels on a daily basis. A similar representation is developed in Francesco Pona's short story<sup>10</sup>.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, Giovanni Domenico Giulio, a writer almost wholly unknown to contemporary readers, wrote quite a long prose piece that is interestingly revealed to be an interior monologue<sup>11</sup> entitled *Le notti di Maria Maddalena penitente*. In this account, we hear the protagonist's thoughts during the last eleven nights before her death as she meditates on the way she used to live her life. The perspective mirrors in some ways the point of view adopted by Brignole Sale, who includes in the title of his novel the term «sinner». In the work by Giulio, the night is constructed as enclosed space and it connotes human life with its earthly concerns and sins. Its opposite is the brightness of daytime, which is represented as an open space of freedom and Christ's love. Mary Magdalene herself becomes a kind of container for the issues the author reflects on: both sin and Christ's love which corresponds to salvation, both the lack of faith and faith, etc. In the three above-mentioned works, the universe of reference is the religious sphere and the most important value is the salvation of the soul ensuring eternal life. Behavioral norms and the idea of transgression are thus calibrated on the basis of this metric: Magdalene's carnal sin somehow relegates the protagonist to closed spaces, but what really precludes the sinful woman from salvation is an interior factor, namely her rejection of divine love. Another element firmly linking the three works is their similar representation of the Magdalene in open space, that is, her life in the light of Christ's love.

<sup>9</sup> The novel was first published in 1636 in Genoa by Pietro Gio. Calenzano and Gio. Maria Farroni.

<sup>10</sup> *Magdalene*, the short story by Francesco Pona, is included in the collection *La Galeria delle Donne Celebri*, first published in Verona in 1632.

<sup>11</sup> The text is among the earliest examples of interior monologue prose, a technique of discourse that became popular between the 19th and early 20th centuries. *Le notti di Maria Maddalena penitente* has no longer been published after 1940. According to my research findings to date, the first edition dates back to 1779.

Direct interest in the figure of Mary Magdalene in Italian literature decreased during the nineteenth century, but from the twentieth century onward we once again find a number of representations, especially in literature. Modern sensibility contextualizes the Magdalene – one of the most ancient models of female sanctity – in our own time and society, representing her as a lover, a victim of sexual violence, a mentally ill woman, a victim of human trafficking, etc. Such representations do depict the space around her but, in contemporary literature as in Giulio's eighteenth-century vision, the Magdalene and her body become a space of either sin or salvation. Moreover, in twentieth- and twenty-first-century representations, the above-mentioned spatial oppositions connote Mary Magdalene in a secular society in which the meaning of sin shifts to refer instead to socially unacceptable behaviors and lifestyles. The profane space of Mary Magdalene in the novel by Guido da Verona separates the public life of the protagonist Madlen Green from the sexual sphere – the erotic scenes, both hetero- and homosexual, are set in luxurious hotel rooms and the space of the night. While this is real for the novel's male protagonist, at the same time such settings can be misunderstood as almost oneiric. In a diptych on the Magdalene<sup>12</sup> written in the twentieth century by Alda Merini, Mary Magdalene first defines her body as an empty shape into which men enter and from which they leave – her body is a closed and wounded space that can be sealed and healed thanks to Jesus' love, as the latter's domain is movement in open space, either geographical (Galilee) or defined in Christian terms (Purgatory, Heaven). In this poem, the Magdalene speaks to Jesus and in the following poem Jesus replies. For Merini's Magdalene, the men who intersect with her sinful life are «warriors of nothing» and «rapists»<sup>13</sup>, and this definition – together with the representation of the body as a passive container for male sin – links Merini's diptych with Izabella Teresa Kostka's poem entitled *Maria Maddalena*. The latter includes a further element that enriches the representation of Mary Magdalene: she is also the space of new life – this is what allows the woman to hope for the dawn and the future, the opposite of the claustrophobic night in which the prostitute Magdalene is currently imprisoned. Cinzia Demi's poems offer a similar interpretation of Magdalene's body, «wound humiliated (a) body ... not left to rot / ... / mangled torn from the pit / from the bones forcibly detached»<sup>14</sup>: together with Merini and

<sup>12</sup> This is related to the representation of Mary Magdalene provided by Marina Tsvetaeva, quoted at the beginning of this article.

<sup>13</sup> Alda Merini, *Maria Maddalena*, included in the *Cantico dei Vangeli*, cf. *Mistica d'amore*, Milano, Sperling & Kupfer, 2008 (Kindle Edition).

<sup>14</sup> *È un nome che cerco una*, from Cinzia Demi, *Ero Maddalena*.

Kostka, Demi also focuses on the violence inflicted on the body of Magdalene, a body that conserves the memory of male sin by interiorizing it, also in a physical sense, as a stigma that socially burdens her. Finally, in Ornella Spagnulo's novel *Maddalena bipolare*, the positive/negative values of these spatial representations are interpreted from the perspective of the protagonist's bipolar disorder. The novel, written in the first person, represents the enclosed space of the bipolar mind and the asylum in a euphoric manner, while open space is cast as negative and associated with social constraints that take the form of both dysphoric letters and notes on a self viewed, in some way, from outside. This vision mirrors the way in which space is represented in the twentieth-century asylum poetry written by Alda Merini<sup>15</sup>, a poet with whom Spagnulo feels affinity.

It is worth highlighting that the Magdalenes represented in contemporary literature do not experience redemption, and this is the most important difference between the sacred and profane, the old and new representations of Mary Magdalene. When the opposition between sacred and profane is lost, the Magdalene becomes a 'social' sinner. Such twentieth- and twenty-first-century Magdalenes are also the synesis of that which is considered taboo for women. Their 'sin' is interiorized through both bodies and souls or minds and, even when their act of sinning is forced on them by conditions of violence or exploitation, society stigmatizes them and prevents them from achieving redemption. This is particularly true in cases of female exclusion<sup>16</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusion

During both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, representations of the Magdalene were not separated from the sacrum<sup>17</sup>. Among the works from the period considered here, the main oppositions, such as (1)

<sup>15</sup> M.M. Kubas, *Superare la distanza con un grido: spazi di oppressione, manicomio e malattia mentale in Amelia Rosselli e Alda Merini*, in B. Garzelli et al. (eds.), *Idee di spazio. Atti del convegno del dipartimento di scienze dei linguaggi e delle culture. Università per stranieri di Siena (Siena, 4-5 novembre 2008)*, Roma, Guerra Edizioni, 2010, pp. 53-60.

<sup>16</sup> This conclusion is clear when analyzing Italian poetry written by women during the twentieth century and devoted to the asylum setting and mental illness. See for instance M.M. Kubas, *Essere come voi non è così facile: barriere spaziali, ostacoli mentali, confini sociali. Il disturbo mentale in Amelia Rosselli*, in «Between», 1, 2011. Available at: <https://ojs.unica.it/index.php/between/issue/view/7> (last accessed on January 20, 2023).

<sup>17</sup> This tradition, especially in novels, continues across the centuries to become a marginal topic of mass literature or para-literature.

enclosed space / (2) open space, correspond to the distinction between Mary Magdalene as the model of the female sinner (1) and woman saint (2). On this basis, her early earthly life aimed at both richness and pleasure is judged in negative terms, while Christian grace and divine love offer her complete redemption. In the literary works mentioned in the previous part of this article, a semi-symbolic system is created that operates quite stably during the post-Tritendine period. During the twentieth and twenty-first century, the opposition between open and enclosed space in depicting the Magdalene is still at work – what is missing is the sacred context. Consequently, this opposition becomes operative in a secularized culture. After religious meaning has been abandoned, the figure of Mary Magdalene becomes an element of the social context: in contemporary literature, for instance, she is an exemplary container of socially accepted/condemned behaviors and lifestyles. The renewed topos of Mary Magdalene conveys a set of values that are expressed through spatial oppositions linked to the social inclusion/exclusion of women.

As for the analysis of the most recent representations of Mary Magdalene, namely those in Merini's, Demi's and Spagnulo's works cited here, it seems obvious that contemporary engagement with the Mary Magdalene narrative is only partial in that it treats mainly the topos of the prostitute who is about to be stoned. While salvation in a profane, contemporary context is difficult (or not foreseen), however, according to the perspective of this analysis open space as a horizon of hope can be seen as a partial form of redemption – in the poem by Izabella Teresa Kostka examined here, for example, it is from sin that new life springs, and the Magdalene intends to protect this new life both bodily and morally.

# *Dissipatio Humani Generis. The Fuga Saeculi* according to Guido Morselli

Paolo Bertetti

*Abstract* – *Dissipatio H.G.* is the last novel by Guido Morselli, written shortly before he committed suicide. In it an unnamed narrator/main character, a former journalist who has left his job in Chrysopolis – the «Golden City» –, ekes out an isolated existence in the Swiss mountains to escape from a world based on ambition and greed. At the beginning of the novel, his escape from the world, which he refers to as his *fuga saeculi*, is amplified and overturned by a sudden and complete *dissipatio humani generis*: all human beings have disappeared into thin air, and the narrator has become the last man left on Earth. Transporting it into a cosmic dimension, Morselli draws a real anatomy of solitude. However, the protagonist's detachment from humanity affords only partly an occasion for a new and deeper look at society, and at human nature. If the withdrawal from the world connected with more intense spiritual or intellectual experiences can be understood as a form of life, in describing its solipsistic apotheosis, Morselli outlines its bleaker limits, tracing – through a lucid organization of narrative spaces – a passional trajectory that winds its way through euphoric and dysphoric states.

Keywords: escape-from-the-world – apocalypse – mysticism – Guido Morselli – solipsism

## 1. The Solitude of the Last Man

This essay is dedicated to Guido Morselli, a singular figure in twentieth-century Italian literature, and in particular to his last novel, *Dissipatio H.G.*, written shortly before he committed suicide in 1973<sup>1</sup>. The novel is generally considered to be his most personal book, the one that most reflects his existential parable.

In a journal issue like this focusing on the themes of self-reclusion and isolation from the world as a religious and artistic experience, Morselli's

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<sup>1</sup> The novel was published by the Adelphi publishing house (Milan, 1977), which edited the posthumous editions of all Morselli's major works. The novel has recently been translated into English by Fredrika Randall (*Dissipatio H.G.: The Vanishing*, New York, New York Review Books, 2020). All quotations from the novel are taken from the e-book edition of the volume. Where page numbers are not included I have indicated the chapter number.

biographical and existential story would already be interesting in its own right. From 1952 onwards, Morselli, in fact, led a reclusive life in a small cottage in the woods and hills surrounding the Lake of Varese, near the small town of Gavirate. In this self-isolation he wrote most of his works, all rejected at the time by publishers, only to be released, with great critical acclaim, after his death<sup>2</sup>.

In his partly autobiographical projection, the unnamed narrator and main character of *Dissipatio H.G.* is a self-recluse. He is a former journalist who has left his job in Chrysopolis (maybe a transfiguration of Zurich) and confined himself in an isolated hut in the Swiss mountains 50 minutes by pathway from the small village of Widmad, just like Morselli did.

At the beginning of the story, the protagonist – who is therefore already a recluse – decides to move further and definitively away from the world by committing suicide. But just before throwing himself into an underground lake deep in a mountain cave, he changes his mind and goes back home. In that short interval, all mankind has mysteriously and completely disappeared, as if evaporated. Everything else has remained intact: animals, trees, things etc. It is the *Dissipatio Humani Generis*, the vanishing of humanity, as Morselli defines it.

The theme of the last man on earth has a long tradition, starting at least with J.B. Cousin de Grainville's *Le dernier homme* (1805) and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1824). It is a particular declination of the broader trend of post-apocalyptic fiction, which – beginning with the novels of Grainville and Shelley up to the most recent zombie apocalypses – has transplanted the apocalyptic tale into secular soil. In fact, in these works the mystical and religious significance is lost, and the catastrophes are no longer triggered by supernatural causes. They are instead described in their concrete occurrence, and the prophecy takes on, if anything, the value of romantic vision or rationalistic admonition, often linked to the risks of progress<sup>3</sup>. Studying the twentieth-century post-apocalyp-

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<sup>2</sup> On the life and work of Guido Morselli see, among others, V. Fortichiari, *Invito alla lettura di Guido Morselli*, Milano, Mursia, 1984 and M. Fiorentino, *Guido Morselli tra critica e narrativa*, Napoli, Eurocomp, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> P. Bertetti, *L'apocalisse quotidiana*, in P. Bertetti - A. Appiano - A. Zinna, *Fine del millennio*, Urbino, Centro Internazionale di Semiotica e Linguistica, Documenti di lavoro e pre-pubblicazioni, 1998, pp. 1-20. On post-apocalypticism in contemporary literature and imaginary see also: F. Muzzioli, *Scritture della catastrofe*, Roma, Meltemi, 2007; M. Lino, *L'Apocalisse postmoderna tra letteratura e cinema. Catastrofi, oggetti, metropoli, corpi*, Firenze, Le lettere, 2014; D. Comberiati, *Il mondo che verrà. Cinque ipotesi di ricostruzione dell'umanità nelle narrazioni distopiche*, Milano, Mimesis, 2021.

tic stories, Gary K. Wolfe<sup>4</sup> has identified a distinctive narrative scheme, made up of a series of functional elements. Chronologically, the first functional element consists in the experience or discovery of the cataclysm, followed by a journey through the scenario of destruction to learn about the extent of the catastrophe. In most cases the journey ends with a meeting with other survivors, and the subsequent establishment of a new community. The core of the stories is generally centered around a clash with other communities or between rival groups within the community over the founding values of the new society. This is the case, for example, in *Earth Abides* by George Stewart (1947), one of the paradigmatic texts of the genre, but also of the recent television series *The Last Man on Earth* (20th Century Fox Television, 2015-18). *Dissipatio H.G.* differs from the above in that the disappearance of humanity is absolute and definitive, leaving the protagonist utterly alone. This brings Morselli's novel closer to other solipsistic fantasies such as Matthew Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901), which contains some particularly strong affinities with Morselli's novel<sup>5</sup>.

In any case, adhering to the typical narrative structure of the genre, *Dissipatio H.G.* likewise begins with a journey into the scenario of the catastrophe: the protagonist descends from the mountains – just like Ish, the main character of *Earth Abides* – and drives to Chrysopolis before visiting other places on the plain to find out what has happened and search in vain for possible survivors.

After a first reaction of «thinking, reasoning fear»<sup>6</sup>, and then panic and anxiety when faced with the inexplicable, the return to his mountain hut brings with it a temporary acceptance of the extraordinary situation, in a pathemic state that we can define curiously *aphoric*.

It may seem strange, but in apocalyptic literature, the pathemic state of the last survivor is not necessarily dysphoric: rather we have an intersection of dysphoric and euphoric states (you can «have the whole world to yourself», or «start from scratch»). This is what happens in *The Purple Cloud*, in a sort of dream of omnipotence by the sole survivor, or in a

<sup>4</sup> G.K. Wolfe, *The Remaking of Zero*, in E.S. Rabkin - M.H. Greenberg - J. Olander (eds.), *The End of the World*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1982, pp. 1-19, now in G.K. Wolfe, *Evaporating Genres. Essays on Fantastic Literature*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2011, pp. 99-120.

<sup>5</sup> F. Sielo, «Niente da ridere»: le apocalissi ironiche di G. Morselli e M. P. Shiel, in «Between», VI, 2016, 12, pp. 1-22, see: <https://ojs.unica.it/index.php/between/article/view/2199/2286> (accessed February 11, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> G. Morselli, *Dissipatio H.G.: The Vanishing*, New York, New York Review Books, 2020, ch. 7.

sarcastic story by Alfred Bester, *They Don't Make Life Like They Used To* (1963), where the last surviving couple in a deserted New York indulge in a consumerist orgy in department stores and luxury goods boutiques.

There is little of all this in Morselli's novel. The condition of separation – better, of withdrawal – of the protagonist from the rest of humanity is already fulfilled before the Vanishing, consisting in self-isolation and culminating in the attempted suicide:

«A windy morning. The cave of the siphon, June 2, they were still in the future, and I was indulging in my usual pastime: parenthesizing the existence of my fellow humans, imagining myself as the only thinking being in an utterly empty universe. Empty of human beings, that is. Allow me to prettify my interior thoughts with some pedantry: Hegel dreamed of the Real in and for itself; for me the Real was of and for myself, where others take no part, because they don't exist»<sup>7</sup>.

There is no thymic evolution. The narrator's existential condition is not touched – if not accidentally – by the end of humanity. As Michele Mari writes: «For someone who has always been a prisoner of his own solipsism, [Morselli] seems to tell us, the condition of being the only survivor cannot introduce a real change»<sup>8</sup>. In semiotic terms, we could say that the thematic role of (last) survivor overlaps but does not influence that of «solitary».

Rather, the vanishing of humanity almost seems to be reality's way of adjusting to the psychic condition of the solipsistic subject. Note the great irony of Morselli: the last representative of humanity is the one who never wanted to be part of it, who shunned it and sought solitude.

## 2. The Experience of Solitude

Now, to what extent the narrator's desire for solitude (and perhaps of Morselli himself, if we admit that the work is strongly autobiographical) is connected to religious experiences?

The narrator defines his escape from the world as *fuga saeculi*. This expression is not accidental. It has its origins in the Fathers of the Church. *De Fuga Saeculi* is the title of a sermon by Saint Ambrose. It is an ascetic work that insists on the need to flee the world in order to obtain salva-

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> M. Mari, *Estraneo agli angeli e alle bestie (lettura di Dissipatio H.G.)*, in «Autografo», XIV, 1998, 37, pp. 49-58, here p. 54. My translation.

tion. The idea of *fuga saeculi* is at the heart of monastic life, which begins with a detachment from temporality and a flight into the desert – into the non-world – as a condition for accessing pure prayer and divine contemplation<sup>9</sup>.

However, in the words of the narrator there is no explicit reference to a search for a deeper experience – if not spiritual, at least intellectual or artistic – linked to his voluntary withdrawal from the world. Indeed, it seems voluntarily to diminish and reduce it to a fear of the other:

«I am, on and off, an Anthropophobe, I'm afraid of people, as I am of rats and mosquitoes, afraid of the nuisance and the harm of which they are untiring agents. This is not the only reason, but it's one of them, why I seek solitude, a solitude (in the modest limits of the possible) that is genuine, i.e., extensive and abiding»<sup>10</sup>.

If anything, in *Dissipatio H.G.* we can identify another spiritual attitude, which in Christianity – starting from the Middle Ages – is often associated with the *fuga saeculi*: it is the so-called *contemptus mundi*, the «contempt for the world», considered as a place of sin and perdition<sup>11</sup>.

In this regard, the description of Chrysopolis – the «Golden City» – is scathing:

«I don't like Chrysopolis much, in fact I can't stand it. For me it is the Biblical antitype, the triumphant consummation of everything I scorn, the epitome of all I detest in this world, my negative caput mundi. My fuga saeculi, my flight from this world, was even then an escape from this place, the precise material expression of our century»<sup>12</sup>.

The gaze from afar allows the narrator to show the life of the business metropolis in detachment that goes beyond the satirical gaze of bourgeois opulence to become more generally a nihilistic sarcastic criticism of the contemporary western world.

But is it really true that the narrator-protagonist's detachment – by now definitive – from humanity does not involve any inner experience, of an intellectual if not a spiritual nature?

Perhaps we should not pay too much attention to certain statements of

<sup>9</sup> R. D'Antiga, *Introduzione*, in Lotario di Segni, *Il disprezzo del mondo*, Parma, Pratiche, 1994, pp. 9-24.

<sup>10</sup> G. Morselli, *Dissipatio H.G.*, ch. 7.

<sup>11</sup> F. Lazzari, *Il contemptus mundi nella scuola di San Vittore*, Roma, Istituto italiano per gli studi storici, 1965; R. D'Antiga, *Introduzione*.

<sup>12</sup> R. D'Antiga, *Introduzione*.

the anonymous protagonist. Often he seems to be an unreliable narrator: he says he takes little interest in philosophy («it never has interested me much»<sup>13</sup>) and does not read anymore («I haven't opened a book, old or new, for years»<sup>14</sup>). Nevertheless, the novel contains many quotes and references to philosophy and literature that are profound. His reflections are actually the result of the type of thinking that belongs to someone who is observing the world from afar.

Throughout the novel, a vein of intolerance towards all intellectualistic attitudes and cultural constructions emerges: in an existential hypertrophy, the narrator repeatedly denies and stigmatizes his own culture at the very moment in which he manifests his erudition and raises profound and perceptive philosophical questions.

It is as if Morselli, in a disconsolate pessimism, felt that the very idea of withdrawal from the world to promote intellectual activity was nothing more than the umpteenth illusion, basically disavowing his own existential choice. Michele Mari perceives in Morselli

«a sort of irritation and intolerance towards his own intelligence and his own culture: like a Vichian dream of barbarism and naivety, in the mortifying certainty (the same that hovers in Pavese's *Business of Living*) that every intellectual refinement involves an impoverishment of vitality, an irreparable loss of meaning»<sup>15</sup>.

What the narrator does experience to the full in his solitude, is a broader and deeper experience of nature:

«I had managed to persuade myself that I really was alone. Alone in the world ... I was living this. I got up from the grass and embraced the larch trees, something I used to do as a boy and for the same reason: to allow myself to be penetrated by their life force»<sup>16</sup>.

It is an experience that, in the silence of human disappearance, becomes more intense and grandiose:

«The disappearance of the reverential fear that vast, uncontaminated nature once inspired in man is one of the vital impairments our age suffers from. Here there is no one between me and nature; the crags and the ice are sheer solitude and immensity, and I must salvage nature and taste it again»<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> G. Morselli, *Dissipatio H.G.*, ch. 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, ch. 18.

<sup>15</sup> M. Mari, *Estraneo agli angeli e alle bestie*, p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> G. Morselli, *Dissipatio H.G.*, ch. 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, ch. 13.

In the novel, nature and solitude (but also altitude) are closely related and are the basis of a lucid organization of narrative spaces, summarized in figure 1.

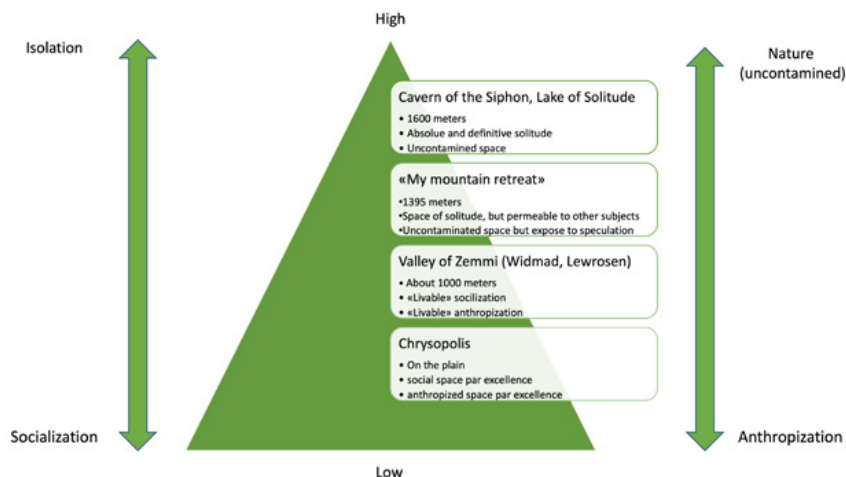


Fig. 1 The organization of narrative spaces in *Dissipatio* H.G.

As we can see the diegetic space is divided into a quadripartite structure, organized around three semantic categories: sociability vs isolation, high vs low, nature (uncontaminated) vs anthropization.

First of all, there are two completely opposite spaces:

a) Chrysopolis: the social and anthropized space par excellence, located on the plain (therefore below).

B) The Cavern of the Siphon (and inside it the Lake of Solitude), high up on the mountain at an altitude of 1600 meters, where the protagonist goes to commit suicide. It is the uncontaminated space of absolute and definitive solitude, corresponding to detachment from humanity through suicide. Or, vice versa, the mysterious disappearance of the latter.

There are two spaces in between. The first is the mountain valley of the Zemmi, «my valley»<sup>18</sup>, with the villages of Widmad and Lewrosen, inhabited by «mountain people ... who didn't consider emigrating ..., who were stubbornly loyal to their villages»<sup>19</sup>. Undoubtedly a place impacted by the work of man, but nevertheless still «liveable», a place where less «stifling» and more «acceptable» social relations occur.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, ch. 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

The second intermediate space is the narrator's house – «my mountain retreat (altitude 1,395 on d.m. level)»<sup>20</sup> – at the end of the steepest trail, 50 minutes walk from Widmad) and the huts of its neighbors, such as Malga Ross; it is still an uncontaminated space, but exposed to the risk of speculative development (there is a project to build a highway; and this is precisely what «triggers» the protagonist's decision to commit suicide). It is also a space of solitude, but permeable to the presence of other subjects: «The irruptions of Henriette, my ex; the boys from the school in Widmad out on a Sunday hike; books sent with appeals to review them; checkup visits by Dr. P.»<sup>21</sup>.

Conversely, the Cave and the Lake, as we said, are the spaces par excellence of Solitude. They represent an eminently symbolic space. For the narrator, not by chance, reaching them is tantamount to the disappearance of humanity and the transformation of the whole earth into a place of solitude.

While the Vanishing causes the whole diegetic geography to change from a factual point of view – all earth is a deanthropized place of solitude – the spatial organization we have described remains, thus allowing the only survivor to make sense of his experience. It transfigures itself into a geography of memory and regret: very soon in fact, humankind – now vanished – relives in the mind of the survivor through his memories and becomes crowded with his mental ghosts. In a significant scene, the protagonist fills Widmad's square with mannequins taken from a department store, building the illusion of the world that once was it. Above all, memories of his brotherly friend, the psychologist Karpinsky, run through his mind, he hears his voice, longs for his return.

However, the prevailing sentiment is a «nostalgia for the human», as Cesare Segre defines it<sup>22</sup>; «a frantic nostalgia, the harsh privation of and bitter regret for an irreparable loss»<sup>23</sup>, as we can read in the novel. According to Greimas<sup>24</sup>, the mechanism of nostalgia has its origin in the disjunction from an object of value that is now irrecoverable; this disjunction causes a pathemic state, that of regret (whether obsessive or not), which, in turn, causes another pathemic state: wasting, languor, melancholy.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, ch. 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, ch. 7.

<sup>22</sup> C. Segre, *Fuori dal mondo*, Torino, Einaudi, 1990, p. 86. My translation.

<sup>23</sup> G. Morselli, *Dissipatio H.G.*, ch. 18.

<sup>24</sup> A.J. Greimas, *De la nostalgie. Étude de sémantique lexicale*, in «Actes Sémiotiques (Bulletin)», 39, 1986, pp. 5-11.

Here there is an evident reversal of the object of value: before the Vanishing the subject aims to disjoin from humanity and to conjoin with solitude; in the course of the novel, however, the axis of desire is reversed: in the absolute and definitive lack of human beings, the survivor realizes that «a man is such only in the relationship with his fellow men»<sup>25</sup> («But now that they are playing hard to get, or are trying to, anyway, I'm beginning to reevaluate their importance»<sup>26</sup>).

The passionate trajectory of the character whose ups and downs take him through euphoric and dysphoric states (memory, loss, nostalgia) has its counterpart in his movements through the diegetic space: at the end of the novel, in an attempt to reunite at least illusively with humanity now lost – the survivor goes backwards through the different diegetic spaces: he leaves his home and moves first to Widmad and finally returns to Chrysopolis, in the hope of reuniting with his lost friend, Karpinsky.

### 3. Conclusion

If the withdrawal from the world and its connection with extraordinarily intense spiritual or intellectual experiences can be understood as a form of life – that is, as Paolo Fabbri summarizes, «a cultural model with its own style that participates in the semiosphere»<sup>27</sup> – the narrator and protagonist of *Dissipatio H.G.* (possibly Morselli himself) is well aware of how this is a cultural 'pattern' to which his own existential choice cannot fail to relate. Defining his isolation from the world as *fuga saeculi*, he lucidly compares his seclusion from the world with the form of life settled in culture and common sense – almost a stereotype. And he rejects it, just as he rejects any intellectual pose.

If, as we have said, in his now disconsolate pessimism Morselli questions his own intellectual activity – suggesting the emptiness of his own existential choices – even the isolation from the world and the human in his *buen retiro* is nothing but an illusion without meaning.

<sup>25</sup> C. Segre, *Fuori dal mondo*, p. 86. My translation.

<sup>26</sup> G. Morselli, *Dissipatio H.G.*, ch. 18.

<sup>27</sup> P. Fabbri, *Postfazione. Supplemento a Claude Zilberberg*, in C. Zilberberg, *Giardini e altri terreni sensibili. Sulle tracce delle forme di vita*, Aracne, Roma, 2019, pp. 119-126, here p. 120. On the forms of life see also J. Fontanille, *Formes de vie*, Liège, Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2015.



# A Room of Nature's Own: Mario Rigoni Stern's Household between Mind and Meadow

Paolo Costa

*Abstract* – Nature – more particularly wilderness – often takes on a salvific role in modern consciousness. In view of the malaises caused by the acceleration, discipline, and complexity of modern sociality, the natural world appears to many today as an oasis of simplicity and peace. This nostalgia, however, is not an immediate desire. Rather, it is the product of an internalization of nature realized in the privacy of a room whose essentiality resonates with the consoling candor of natural environment. In this essay, such interpretative framework is tested against Mario Rigoni Stern's writings and the role played by nature in them as an agency of «counter-terror». The major question I focus on at the end of the essay is whether this semiosis of nature is tantamount to a betrayal of it or not.

Keywords: Mario Rigoni Stern – nature – storytelling – moral resilience – house

## 1. A Spiritual Conundrum: The Paradox of the Nature Storyteller

Those who write about nature *for the sake of nature* experience a significant paradox. For, in most cases, they cannot do so – and probably would not even want to do so – *in the midst* of nature, but are forced to do it in a secluded place, in some kind of «house», in a building, that is, raised specifically to serve as a bulwark *against* nature (or at least against part of it).

I do not think that this paradox represents, so to speak, a «performative» contradiction (as it happens when the behavior of the speaker contradicts its semantic content, its assertion), making any form of literature that puts natural environment at the center of its creative efforts in principle inauthentic. The tension, however, is meaningful.

Given that, in this case, the source of inspiration seems to be at odds with the deeper meaning – the *pointe* – of the very practice of writing, why would a lover of nature feel the urge to write about it, rather than simply immerse himself or herself in it? Hence, it makes sense to ask whether nature is not treated here instrumentally by the writer for the by no means «natural», in some respects even «anti-natural» purposes of their literary vocation. But is this not always the case in any «spiritual» exercise worthy of the name, be it intra- or ultra-mundane?

Broadly speaking, the mental habitat of those who see nature as a crucial element of a spiritually uplifting life has something deeply enigmatic about it<sup>1</sup>. For how can an entity that in the eyes of moderns embodies the ultimate exteriority be at the same time the access point to a most intimate experience? In what follows, I want to gesture towards a tentative account of this crucial junction in the contemporary Western way of life. My end goal is to show that there can be a mutually empowering relationship between the quintessential solitary gesture of artistic writing, and the pull of wilderness, which is regarded by many today as a saving power in a world often seen as morally out of joint.

In order to articulate and understand the major characteristics of this creative spiritual tension, I will devote the rest of my paper to a thoughtful reflection on a key aspect of the work of the Italian writer Mario Rigoni Stern<sup>2</sup>. In the context of Italian literature, which unlike American poetry and prose, is generally distrustful of any epic of wilderness, Rigoni is one of the few writers who deserves to be called a «Nature Storyteller», in the dual meaning of the term, as long as he tells stories about nature and for nature's sake. Apart from the dramatic experience of war and a few rare cases of urban storytelling, Rigoni Stern has written mainly about woods, forests, mountains, seasons, plants, hunting, animals, and human activities that take place in close contact with nature, in a dialectical harmony with it<sup>3</sup>. And he did so with a language that fits the subject matter like a glove: essential, sparse, almost photographic. The senses, by the way, are very important in his prose, particularly the sense of sight – the vigilant, receptive, stereoscopic gaze of the hunter – and Rigoni's main effort as a writer is to systematically make them prevail over their intellectual sedimentations.

<sup>1</sup> On nature as an axis of resonance in the modern age, see C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1989, chap. 20; C. Taylor, *Poetiche romantiche*, in *Modernità al bivio. L'eredità della ragione romantica*, ed. by P. Costa, Bologna, Marietti, 2021, pp. 23-127; H. Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of our Relationship to the World*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2019, pp. 268-279.

<sup>2</sup> Mario Rigoni Stern (1921-2008) is universally celebrated as the «accidental» writer of the wartime memoir *The Sergeant in the Snow* (original Italian edition, 1953, trans. by A. Colquhoun, Evanston IL, The Marlboro Press - Northwestern, 1998). In this essay, however, he is treated as an exemplary «Nature Storyteller», that is, as a vocational writer who sees nature as a powerful attention arouser and an endless source of true tales. In this respect, his most important texts are collected in *Le vite dell'Altipiano. Racconti di uomini, boschi e animali*, Torino, Einaudi, 2008. All translations of Rigoni Stern's quotes, except where indicated, are mine.

<sup>3</sup> A self-interpreting account of his own attitude to «nature» can be found in M. Rigoni Stern, *La natura nei miei libri. Vestone 16 settembre 1989*, in A.M. Cavallarin - A. Scapin (eds.), *Mario Rigoni Stern. Un uomo tante storie nessun confine*, Scarmagno TO, Priuli & Verluccha, 2018, pp. 15-26.

In short, nature must speak for itself. That is, its expressive power should be protected as much as possible from being stifled by non-natural devices. Only in this way, it will be able to play its role as «counter-terror»<sup>4</sup>, by exerting that munificent consolatory power, which Rigoni tacitly ascribes it and which accounts, at least in part, for the enduring success of his books, well beyond the narrow circle of lovers of Alpine environments.

From this point of view, writing appears as the repository, the inscription in individual memory of an overflowing sensory experience, which was gratifying beyond all expectations. The inscribed memory, we might even say, is the «house», the abode, within which nature can continue to exert its invigorating influence after the experience has fully consumed the energies of the Nature Storyteller. In writing, put otherwise, nature continues to resonate even after the subject has lost, through exhaustion, the ability to deal directly with it.

Through scripture, hence, nature, so to speak, doubles up. It is simultaneously inside and outside the house, as if knocking on the writer's doors and windows to bring them back to the source from which their memory, intelligence, creativity have drawn inspiration. The Nature Storyteller's house is therefore by definition porous, and the window, the attic, the cellar, the woodshed are liminal spaces where nature continually makes its presence felt.

It is no coincidence that these home environments constitute crucial places in Rigoni Stern's creative space. It is in front of the window that Mario sits down to write, and it is thanks to the window that what is put down on the page never belongs entirely to the page. Accordingly, all it takes is a small sign for the outside world to re-assert itself, reclaiming its ontological priority, so to speak, over any inwardness.

Giorgio Bertone articulated this point with enviable clarity:

«Mario Rigoni Stern writes in front of the window. With the window open. If the window, ever since it became the generative core of perspective painting, the original entry of the landscape into our modern culture, has taken upon itself the whole symbolic load of the relations between inside and outside, inwardness/outwardness, private world/public world, meditation/action, uniqueness and solitude of the individual/multitude of individuals, self/nature, what will an *open* window mean? What will it mean to write in front of it? 'As is my habit, I was working with the window open to the meadows, woods and *contrade* [districts]'. In short, the

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<sup>4</sup> Retrieving an insight by René Char, Francesco Biamonti has aptly described «nature» as the counter-terror that Mario Rigoni Stern «continually creates for himself» and «serves him on all occasions when life gets into tragic knots». See F. Biamonti, *Mario Rigoni Stern*, «Sentieri sotto la neve», in F. Biamonti, *Scritti e parlati*, Torino, Einaudi, 2008, pp. 99-103. Both quotes are from p. 102.

window is the other doorway, the true threshold: it stands *in limine*. Through it, the wholeness of the surrounding world is housed within the writing. Invisible membrane of a permanent and indispensable osmosis. Those who enter and leave as both hosts and guests are curiosity, wonder and thoughtful attention, conscious action, which cannot occur in the all-in or all-out. As soon as the seated man hears the sounds of a coming thunderstorm, he gets up, leaves the table (he never says 'desk') and looks out of the window 'to watch the lightning over the woods and bell towers'; when the heather blossom comes, 'working with the window open', he hears the flight of the bees and gets up from the table; when it rains, he immediately opens the window to hear the 'voice of the rain'. Just as the gesture of getting up is actually a bow of regard to that which is superior to the papers spread out on the table, so access to the window is a tribute to something without which the house that structurally supports the window itself would not exist. Something that may even represent salvation»<sup>5</sup>.

This in-front-of-the-window writing habit also accounts for the restraint that saturates Rigoni's language. Nature, looming over the blank page, operates in his texts as an anti-lyrical stronghold, vigilant against any expressive abuse, for example against any attempt to sentimentally flatten its ambivalent profile.

## 2. Four Houses

Rigoni Stern spoke of the houses that deeply affected his existence in a famous short story entitled *Le mie quattro case* [My Four Houses], first published in *Amore di confine* [Border Love], 1986. His list is quite interesting.

The first one is the house in which he was not born: «his non-lived before»<sup>6</sup>. For the corner house, guarding the central Kantàun vun Stern in Asiago, was razed to the ground a few years before Mario was born by the attacks and counter-attacks of the Austrian and Italian armies during the First World War. This is the building that will turn up in some of his most beautiful stories, particularly in *Storia di Tönle* and *L'anno della vittoria* [The Year of Victory]<sup>7</sup>. It can be legitimately seen as the household, which embodies his visceral bond with his homeland/Heimat: the Asiago Plateau<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. G. Bertone, *Le case di Mario Rigoni Stern*, introduction to M. Rigoni Stern, *Le vite dell'Altipiano*, Torino, Einaudi, 2008, pp. 11-12 («Dello scrivere con la finestra aperta/ On Writing on an Open Window»), here p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. M. Rigoni Stern, *Le mie quattro case*, in *Le vite dell'Altipiano*, pp. 310-314, here p. 310.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. M. Rigoni Stern, *The Story of Tönle*, trans. by J. Shepley, Evanston IL, The Marlboro Press / Northwestern, 1998; *L'anno della vittoria*, Torino, Einaudi, 1985.

<sup>8</sup> On this, see U. Sauro, *Mario Rigoni Stern tra mistica cosmica ed esperienza dell'Heimat*, in A.M. Cavallarin - A. Scapin (eds.), *Mario Rigoni Stern*, pp. 181-196.

The second house is «somewhere between old and new»<sup>9</sup>. It is the house where Rigoni Stern actually grew up. Located less than a hundred meters from the previous one, it was rebuilt immediately after the First World War (it actually dated back to 1910 and had been commissioned by his grandfather because it promised to be «bigger and more modern»)<sup>10</sup>. Here, young Mario's favorite places are the hearth («where I used to dry my clothes and shoes after spending the afternoon playing in the snow»)<sup>11</sup> and, besides the cellar («very cool in summer and warm in winter»)<sup>12</sup>, the large attic, which is described as a lively edge between indoors and outdoors, that «was filled with the flight of swifts and the air was all vibrating; for them we left the only window open, which faced south»<sup>13</sup>. This house is not only the repository of childhood memories, but is also doomed to be a place of decline and abandonment: «The crisis of the 1930s came, and with it the deaths, the family layoffs came, and the big house began to empty out, to become silent. And I found myself a soldier in the war»<sup>14</sup>.

With an unexpected image, the third house is presented by Rigoni Stern as «a refuge of the unconscious»: a place never physically inhabited, but psychologically vital<sup>15</sup>. (And, with this, the houses lived less in physical reality than in memory and imagination are already two). It is the house fantasized and designed in the concentration camp in East Prussia where Mario had been imprisoned by the Nazis after the armistice of 8 September 1943. In such inhuman context, intoxicated by hunger, endless abuse of power, and a lingering sense of prostration, Rigoni finds less a refuge than a vital foothold in a future that, in those terrible circumstances, could at best be imagined as nature's victory by a narrow margin over the impotence of civilization to counteract the degrading effects of human greed, cowardice, and mean-spiritedness.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. M. Rigoni Stern, *Le mie quattro case*, p. 312. For another take on the issue, see P. Cognetti, *Baite, isbe, tane. Le case di Mario*, in G. Mendicino (ed.), *Mario Rigoni Stern. Cento anni di etica civile, letteratura, storia e natura*, Dueville VI, Ronzani, 2022, pp. 103-111.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. M. Rigoni Stern, *Le mie quattro case*, p. 312.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 313.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 312.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 313.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

This is his eloquent account:

«On a piece of paper I had found, I meticulously and patiently drew the house I would build on my return. The place I had chosen was far from other dwellings, in a forest I knew very well and at the junction of two cart tracks, on a small rise. But this house was like an underground den, with a place to sleep, a place for a fire, a place for about twenty books; I would live off hunting and the wood by-products, and a small vegetable garden in a clearing. In this basement house, made of logs and stones, rammed earth and moss and bark, everything necessary for my life was within reach, and after what I had seen and experienced, it seemed to me the only possible solution to my existence. It was not meant to be, of course, but then and there, the project of this house kept my thoughts occupied and quenched my hunger»<sup>16</sup>.

The fourth one, finally, is the house in which most of Rigoni's books were actually written. It is a house designed and built by himself,

«as simple as a beehive for bees: comfortable and warm; silent to the distant disturbing noises and close to the sounds of nature; with windows that look far away, the woodpiles on the walls in the sun and, today, with snow on the roof, on the birch and fir trees in the orchard, on the beehives, on the kennel. And inside, in the warmth, my wife, my books, my pictures, my wine, my memories ...»<sup>17</sup>.

Mario, thus, ended up living on the border «between forest and meadow»<sup>18</sup>. Through the windows, the woodpile, the *orto* (vegetable garden), the beehives and the *arboreto salvatico* (his sacred grove: simultaneously redemptive and wild), his final house keeps a direct contact with nature. At the same time, however, it creates the conditions for states of grace that, with the support of personal relations and their supply of human warmth, bodily and spiritual pleasures, memory, succeed in transmuting nature's outer bark without betraying its substance<sup>19</sup>.

### 3. A Room of Nature's Own

Even during the Second World War, both in the terrible and chaotic Albanian campaign and in the tragic retreat from the Russian front, people's 'home', if respected, symbolizes in Rigoni Stern's writings the threshold between the decency of common human *compaesanità* [paisanità] and the unleashing of the most senseless violence. Conversely, warfare, by

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 314.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. M. Rigoni Stern, *Una stagione di vita in compagnia ...*, in M. Rigoni Stern, *Le vite dell'Altipiano. Racconti di uomini, boschi e animali*, p. 232.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. M. Rigoni Stern, *Arboreto salvatico*, Torino, Einaudi, 2021.

upsetting any natural balance, brings out nature's «wild-salvific» force, without however concealing its harshness and moral ambivalence<sup>20</sup>.

As an agency – probably the most important agency – of counter-terror, the «nature» narrated by Rigoni Stern in his «wild tales» becomes thus the sign of something else. In particular, it is the contrastive sign of that «brave new world», which modern men, by denaturalizing themselves, have repeatedly shown to be capable of turning into a hell on earth. In order to fulfill its consolatory function, though, nature can only be a sign in a secondary sense, that is, as a side effect of its autonomous expressive power. In fact, the resonant bond with nature is so original, so constitutive of the Nature Storyteller's personality that it ends up dismantling the very distinction between inside and outside, performing the feat of crossing, at least for a moment, the boundaries on which the human form of life is ordinarily based<sup>21</sup>.

The spiritual power of nature surfaces precisely here. Thus, Rigoni's mirror immersion in seemingly antithetical forms of attention and care for the inner and outer world – mind and meadow, so to speak – poses a genuine challenge to anyone concerned about the distinction between what really matters and what has only the semblance of something of import. Put concisely, the question is whether studiously moving back and forth between home and nature may not be the best way to try out the humanly inescapable distinction between appearance and reality. Cannot be the case, then, that the art of the essential is best practicable in the porous boundary between the self and the non-self, fullness and emptiness, mastery and dispossession? And might not be the country household precisely one of such liminal spaces?

With this background in mind, it may be claimed, I think, that the house in which Rigoni Stern actually lived after his journey to the end of the night is precisely the one that, with a last burst of imagination, he had

<sup>20</sup> An emblem of the sacredness of the house is the famous episode recounted in *The Sergeant in the Snow* (p. 88) of Rigoni Stern's entry into the *isba* during the Nikolajewka battle, where three Russian soldiers had already taken refuge, who nevertheless let the woman who hosted them to feed him with a dish of millet and milk. According to Rigoni, his own candid, «natural», gesture of knocking on the door before entering even in the heat of combat encapsulates the deeper moral meaning of the story. See also M. Rigoni Stern, *Quota Albania*, Torino, Einaudi, 2022. For a full-fledged account of the issue, see my forthcoming essay *Moral Resilience: Endurance, Faith, Belief, Commitment*.

<sup>21</sup> The best evidence of this is the consoling role that nature plays even on the war front. This is a key aspect of Ermanno Olmi's reading of the *Sergeant in the Snow* in the script of the film that was never meant to be. Cf. E. Olmi - M. Rigoni Stern, *Il sergente nella neve. La sceneggiatura*, ed. by G.P. Brunetta, Torino, Einaudi, 2008. For a more detailed discussion of the ethical role of nature in Rigoni Stern, see my *Forza e fragilità nella vita etica. Un caso speciale di resilienza morale*, in M. Leone (ed.), *I discorsi dell'oltre: fascino e pericoli della polarizzazione*, Trento, FBK Press, 2023, pp. 11-22.

76 | designed not against, but within nature, and to which his residual fortitude had clung in the darkest moment of his life. 'Natural', after all, is also a synonym for 'essential', and essential is what stands in principle on the side of being<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> On the existential meanings of mountain landscape, see P. Costa, *L'arte dell'essenziale. Un'escursione filosofica nelle terre alte*, Udine, Bottega Errante, 2023.

# When my Body Becomes my Room: Lifeworld and Illness Experiences

Lucia Galvagni

*Abstract* – From a phenomenological perspective, the body represents our space in the world and the body defines our way to enter into a relationship with ourselves, to deal with others, and to interact within the world, as Merleau-Ponty and Husserl underscored. In conditions of serious disease and disability, as in confined situations, we are more aware of our body and its limits. The body can become and represent a room in which to stay and live, sometimes feeling ourselves to be confined in it, or locked in it, as happens for people suffering from severe disabilities and illnesses. The lived body and the lifeworld in this and similar conditions reflect a distinctive phenomenological experience of space, time and (inter)subjectivity. The article will present the story of a man, Piergiorgio Cattani, who can provide lived testimony of resistance, resilience and ‘bodily’ spirituality, as he recounts his lived experience of illness and healing.

Keywords: lived body – disability – phenomenology of illness – intersubjectivity – bodily spirituality

## 1. The Body: Our Room in the World

From a phenomenological perspective, the body represents our space in the world. People with disabilities or in a borderline situation perceive their bodies and their limits more. More particularly, in a condition of physical disability, the body can be lived and perceived as something that does not allow a free, spontaneous or intentional movement, and for this reason it can be experienced as a form of physical and bodily border and confinement.

In such a condition, reflexivity and self-consciousness increase, since the non-immediacy of bodily movement and negotiation with the body are constant and continuous. Perception and inner experiences also seem to acquire a different, more intense form. This condition may require and activate a person’s ability to improve, transform and empower herself, within her more general repositioning in the world. This repositioning is also – and first and foremost – bodily-mediated.

A disability, and the ‘confinement’ it implies, can also induce a desire for transcendence, a need to transcend and go beyond this bodily condition:

this desire is expressed in different forms and on different levels<sup>1</sup>. There is certainly a psychological dimension, which is manifest in the disabled person's need to review and to restructure her self-perception and balance; there is a relational dimension, in which she perceives the need to relate with others and to renegotiate this relationship in the light of the condition experienced and lived at a bodily level; there is also a spiritual or religious dimension, which reflects a desire to go beyond and implies an openness, an orientation towards something or someone else, be it an object, a situation, a person or an 'Otherness', understood in a more properly spiritual and religious sense.

An essential need in this condition – maybe more essential than for persons who do not experience a demanding bodily condition like disease and disability – is to enter and live in a relationship: a relationship may seem necessary because bodily limitations can reduce abilities and restrict capacities, but it is necessary above all because in this condition people can perceive more clearly what being relational – as human beings – can mean<sup>2</sup>, what autonomy means in relational and reciprocal terms<sup>3</sup>, and what can be the value and role of living in an interpersonal and communitarian dimension<sup>4</sup>. This dimension can become a community of care in which reciprocity, interconnection and interdependence represent the moral parameters of encounter, confrontation and exchange<sup>5</sup>.

How does the lifeworld change in a condition of disease and disability? How can this condition represent a form of bodily confinement, which can be anyway overcome? What role is played by the social and political representation of the body and disability in the perception we have of them?

In a disability condition, as in a situation of temporary difficulty such as confinement, each of us can find ways and means – simple or more

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<sup>1</sup> R. Lemieux, *Psychisme et spiritualité: là où se noue la condition humaine*, in G. Jobin - A. Legault - N. Pujol (eds.), *L'accompagnement de l'expérience spirituelle en temps de maladie*, Louvain-la-Neuve, Presses universitaires de Louvain, 2017, pp. 55-69.

<sup>2</sup> P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> J.-F. Malherbe, *Sujets de vie ou objets de soins? Introduction à la pratique de l'éthique clinique*, Montréal, Fides, 2007, pp. 43-65.

<sup>4</sup> C. Mackenzie - N. Stoljar (eds.), *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, New York - Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> J. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries. A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, New York, Routledge, 1993; W. Lesch, *Respect, réciprocité et reconnaissance. L'éthique face aux personnes en situation d'handicap*, in M.-J. Thiel (ed.), *Les enjeux éthiques du handicap*, Strasbourg, Presses universitaires de Strasbourg, 2014, pp. 185-194.

structured – to overcome a limited condition, temporarily or permanently. These ways also include a words exchange, in the form of a dialogue and of a conversation<sup>6</sup>, and in the written form of a narrative of lived experiences: these writings, these testimonies can become also ways to share, confront and enter in a dialogue with others in a broader community<sup>7</sup>.

Some forms of existence can transform and become forms of R-existence – ‘R-esistenza’, in Italian – and healing can be read and interpreted through different categories: self-understanding, self-knowledge, or the «know thyself» of ancient Greece – understood as a search for the meaning of life, for a «healing of the soul» – can represent a deeper form of healing, for some the only authentic one.

Let us try to listen to the narrative with which a disabled person recounted his experience of hospitalization and a long convalescence, and the reflections he matured about it, and about himself, bearing witness to how the lifeworld and existence are redefined in a critical condition and during healing.

## 2. Our Body, Our Room: Boundaries, Limits and Re-Adaptation

Since he was 17 years old, Piergiorgio Cattani had lived with a degenerative neurological disease. After studying philosophy and religious sciences, he worked as a journalist and a commentator in his hometown. Over the years he was hospitalized many times. After a severe crisis, he decided to write his story, and chose the title *Recovery. A Disabled Person with a Red Code* to recount his experience<sup>8</sup>.

On starting to tell his story, Piergiorgio wrote: «For 30 years I have been a ‘licensed’ disabled person. I have always been ill. I look like a person who cannot move anything ... My genetic, degenerative, muscle-destroy-

<sup>6</sup> A. Benmakhlouf, *La conversation comme manière de vivre*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Besides direct written testimonies in the form of narratives and books, we can find many examples of blogs dedicated to the narration of illnesses, where people recount their experience and describe the therapeutic value that narratives can have. See for example the Blog ‘Digital Health’, edited on the ejournal «Nòva - Il Sole 24 Ore» by the anthropologist Cristina Cenci: <https://cristinacenci.nova100.ilsole24ore.com/> (accessed on July 3rd, 2023).

<sup>8</sup> P. Cattani, *Guarigione. Un disabile in codice rosso*, Trento, Il Margine, 2015. All translations are my own. The style and language are very authentic and – in many passages – very poetic. In a later phase, Piergiorgio decided to share and discuss the book and his story with clinical professionals and members of his community.

ing disease is Duchenne muscular dystrophy. When I was diagnosed with it – in the late 1970s – I should have lived to the age of 25 at most. Now I am almost 40 ...»<sup>9</sup>.

In every life experience, and more particularly in experiences of health and wellbeing, disease and illness, ability and disability, the body tends to be at and return to center stage: it is the space of one's living in the world, and it requires attention and care. The condition where a person «cannot move anything» could be seen and interpreted as a form of bodily confinement.

In phenomenology, the body has been considered a «geometrized projection»<sup>10</sup> because it always mediates the relationship between ourselves and others, as well with the world, determining who we are and how we know reality and how we deal with it. It thus becomes the pre-condition for our experience and capacity to know ourselves, others, and the world<sup>11</sup>. «We are our body and through the body we can close or open ourselves to others», writes Piergiorgio<sup>12</sup>. If the body represents a medium, this mediation implies that there can be forms of encounter, of intimacy and recognition mediated by the body, whilst at the same time our bodily condition can generate times and situations of dis-attention, dis-respect and non-recognition. Sometimes it is possible to experience forms of estrangement as well: «you are giving your body to someone else who decides for you. You have to be intimate with strangers»<sup>13</sup>. The phenomena of shame and respect towards the body are two main ethical dimensions of how people enter into and live relationships<sup>14</sup>: in illness and in disability conditions, as well as in love dynamics and interactions they assume a distinctive intensity<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> P. Cattani, *Guarigione*, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, London - New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 77.

<sup>11</sup> See V. Melchiorre, *Corpo e persona*, Genova, Marietti, 1987.

<sup>12</sup> P. Cattani, *Guarigione*, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> See M. Scheler, *Shame and Feelings of Modesty*, in M. Scheler, *Person and Self-Value: Three Essays*, Dordrecht, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987, pp. 1-85; M. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity. Disgust, Shame and the Law*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> W. Lesch, *Respect, réciprocité et reconnaissance. L'éthique face aux personnes en situation d'handicap*, in M.-J. Thiel (ed.), *Les enjeux éthiques du handicap*, Strasbourg, Presses universitaires de Strasbourg, 2014, pp. 185-194; V. Melchiorre, *Metacritica dell'eros*, Milano, Vita e Pensiero, 1977, pp. 41-60.

The interactions and relationality involved in the therapeutic relationship require time to devote to patients and attention to the experience they are living. Temporality is a very specific dimension, and it assumes a different meaning when and where we experience difficult conditions, as when we are ill or disabled or in confined situations<sup>16</sup>. Time cannot be reduced simply to its chronological dimension: the meanings and forms that time can take are very different, and this is relevant especially in hospitals and in care institutions<sup>17</sup>. From his experience, Piergiorgio stated: «The *time* variable tends to disappear in hospitals»<sup>18</sup>. The lived dimension of time and temporality can become especially intense for patients and for people coping with a profound change – as many of us experienced and perceived during the pandemic outbreak and the confinement it entailed.

In a situation of illness and severe disability, there are many limits and boundaries that people tend to experience, and sometimes they are bodily and temporal. In our biological attitude and from an evolutionary perspective, as humans we tend to maintain our ability to find strength and adaptation in situations that can represent extremes and extreme conditions. In a disabled and limited condition, some extraordinary forms of adaptation and re-adaptation can likewise occur. As Piergiorgio observed: «My body readapted itself. It searched and went back through geological times until the Devonian period, when the first amphibians appeared and were about to conquer land from the sea. Within me some prehistoric footprints awoke»<sup>19</sup>. Also for this reason, it may happen that existence becomes a form of resistance: '(R)-Esistenza' in Italian<sup>20</sup>, or – we could say – a form of 'Resilient Existence'.

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<sup>16</sup> J.B. Brough, *Temporality and Illness: A Phenomenological Perspective*, in S. Kay Toombs (ed.), *Handbook of Phenomenology and Medicine*, Dordrecht - London, Kluwer Academic, 2001, pp. 29-46.

<sup>17</sup> J.-F. Malherbe, *Elementi per un'etica clinica. Condizioni dell'alleanza terapeutica*, Trento, FBK Press, 2014, pp. 31-33. Illness can bring a modification of the sense of time: this modification can regard the way we perceive time in our life story, our awareness of time, and the way we perceive social temporality and sociality itself.

<sup>18</sup> P. Cattani, *Guarigione*, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 122.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 95.

### 3. Symbolic Languages and Communication: A Need for Transcendence?

The extraordinary condition of restriction that a person in a disabled, limited or confined situation can experience does not exclude the desire to move beyond – to transcend – this bodily and temporally demanding existential condition. There are different levels where these needs for transcendence are experienced: we may identify them as a psychological and personal level, an interpersonal and relational level, and a properly spiritual level.

At the first level, there is a physical and psychological need and necessity to deal with limits and borders. The interaction with ourselves requires a deep understanding of our limits and our potentialities, and an ability to deal with the feelings, emotions, desires and passions that inhabit us<sup>21</sup>. Most of all, when as human beings we experience demanding conditions, we generally start to learn how to listen to our bodies so that we can progressively better interpret and manage them. In the words of Piergiorgio, we should «accept limits»<sup>22</sup> and consider our borders and in order to do so we could follow the ancient Greek maxim *gnòthi seautòn* or «Know thyself!»<sup>23</sup>.

At a second level, as already observed, there are relational needs, and among the many needs that we have, they tend to be primary. In a condition of illness, the need for relationships, the necessity to find and meet a community of care, are generally very important<sup>24</sup>. Whilst some clinicians maintain a certain distance from patients, and can show a lack of attention and respect, some others instead pay close attention to and take great care of them: Piergiorgio observes: «Physicians try to ‘encourage’ me: a verb not always present in the ward»<sup>25</sup>. In this sense, physicians and nurses can become ‘unrecognized allies’ in the process of dealing with the disease because they help the patient to find ways to cope with the situation. Among the different forms of creativity which can be deployed to overcome the limits experienced and enter into a relationship, describing our own ex-

<sup>21</sup> S. Kay Toombs, *Reflections on Bodily Change: The Lived Experience of Disability*, in S. Kay Toombs (ed.), *Handbook of Phenomenology*, pp. 247-261.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 52.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 149.

<sup>24</sup> H. Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016 and F. Svaeneus, *Phenomenological Bioethics. Medical Technologies, Human Suffering and the Meaning of Being Alive*, London - New York, Routledge, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 124.

perience in writing can be a way to convey it and to share it: this process can become a form of treatment and therapy, and it can be a testimony as well<sup>26</sup>. Sharing this written reflection with professionals and with people who can read it, also through public lectures, as Piergiorgio did, may improve the recovery process.

At a third level, the need for transcendence can entail reference to a spiritual and religious dimension – a dimension that has been and could be called ‘interiority’, or ‘soul’, or ‘spirit’, depending on personal and communitarian beliefs, references and resources, and on the specific context considered. Even if in recent years interest to this dimension has been increasing<sup>27</sup>, in hospitals and in healthcare facilities forms of attention to the spiritual and/or religious life of the patients, to their interiority, are not so usual, or still rare. However, in this regard, Piergiorgio realizes that «You can meet physicians and nurses who do everything they can to go beyond the appearance by listening to the interiority of the patient»<sup>28</sup>.

In difficult, demanding and extraordinary conditions, in uncertain situations, through imagination and creativity it is possible to find different ways to act and interact, as many experienced the power of gestures and bodily communication during pandemic confinement, when interacting required people to identify, imagine or invent new forms and modes of expression. In a silent condition and with a temporary inability to use ordinary verbal language, symbolic and bodily gestures and languages can be meaningful resources as well. From his hospital experience, Piergiorgio notes: «Closing eyes can mean a negative reply, opening them vice versa an affirmative reply»<sup>29</sup>.

In conditions of severe illness and disability, the impossibility to move the body as the person would like, or to apparently force this limited condition and to ‘move’ it, can be perceived and considered as a form of physical and bodily confinement<sup>30</sup>. In this sense, a person’s body can

<sup>26</sup> H. Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, Ithaca - London, Cornell University Press, 2001. As Piergiorgio states: «Writing can become the best therapy to ‘recover’», in P. Cattani, *Guarigione*, p. 124.

<sup>27</sup> See G. Jobin - A. Legault - N. Pujol (eds.), *L’accompagnement de l’expérience spirituelle en temps de maladie*, Louvain-la-Neuve, UCL, 2017 and M. Cobb - C. Puchalski - B. Rumbold (eds.) *Oxford Textbook of Spirituality in Healthcare*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> P. Cattani, *Guarigione*, p. 154.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 74.

<sup>30</sup> Despite the physical immobility in which he lived, Piergiorgio found and maintained ways to move around in the world: he was surrounded by his family and his community, had a very active social life

become his/her 'room'. Sometimes a way to deal with this condition can be to search for means to transcend these limits: material and technological devices are essential resources in this regard and they can help support and improve personal, relational and spiritual needs and resources<sup>31</sup>. They can also become supports in performing forms of resistance in extra-ordinary conditions which – as humans – we can experience<sup>32</sup>. Reflecting on his own experience, Piergiorgio talked of a form of healing which reflected a mode of recovery concerning the spiritual dimension of his condition as well as the bodily one<sup>33</sup>.

#### 4. The Centrality of the Body and a Reposition in the World

If the body represents our space in the world, when we cannot move it, and when we should consider the boundaries that our body imposes on us, it may symbolically become our 'room'.

As human beings experiencing a bodily and temporal condition, we can say that we are a space, a situated spatiality, represented by our body. We are a time, a specific temporality; more particularly, we experience and have a life time. Being a body and a time, we are a subjectivity, a specific subject<sup>34</sup>. These different dimensions contribute to defining our identity and Ourselves, and they orient and compose the condition and the story of our life. In restrictive situations, in a disabled, ill or painful condition, and in positive experiences as well, like joy and pleasure, we experience our body and we perceive time differently<sup>35</sup>. Therefore, a

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and was involved in politics, at a local level and as commentator on Italian and international political life.

<sup>31</sup> To move around Piergiorgio used a wheelchair, and was always accompanied. When writing, he used a computer with voice recognition software. All these means became essential components of his everyday life and they were in some cases technologically extremely advanced.

<sup>32</sup> In other cases – we may consider ill people who no longer find a meaning in a condition they consider too demanding, who perceive themselves to be 'imprisoned' in their body, or all the people who experienced forms of estrangement and alienation during their confinement due to the Covid pandemic – moving beyond these conditions and transcending them can become a profound necessity: it may entail forms of rejection of the boundaries experienced. See S. Canestrari, *Ferite dell'anima e corpi prigionieri. Suicidio e aiuto al suicidio nella prospettiva di un diritto liberale e solidale*, Bologna, Bononia University Press, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> B.J. Good, *Medicine, Rationality and Experience: An Anthropological Perspective*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

<sup>34</sup> L. Galvagni, *Narrazioni cliniche. Etica e comunicazione in medicina*, Roma, Carocci, 2020, pp. 205-208.

<sup>35</sup> See S. Kay Toombs, *The Meaning of Illness. A Phenomenological Account of the Different Perspec-*

disabled or ill condition, as a situation of restriction and confinement, and a pleasant bodily situation, tends to modify us as subjects, and can modify our subjectivity, as Paul Ricoeur observes<sup>36</sup>.

As phenomenology has underscored, the body is the main means we have to enter into a relationship with the world. Therefore, every modification of the body, of its physical, temporal or relational conditions may imply the development of a different ability to reflect: we may thus experience a body-mediated reflection, or a body-mediated ability to reflect. In this condition, we can also experience a different inner perception and self-awareness: it seems that the importance of the inner life and of interiority tends to change and be strongly perceived. At the same time, the extraordinary ability of the body to adapt and re-adapt itself seems to replicate at an individual level the adaptive abilities of the human species in evolution. The body exhibits a distinctive adaptability understood as an ability to transform, improve and enhance itself when necessary.

Bodily spatiality is not only a 'physical' position; it is also a 'situated' spatiality because it is related to the perception and representation of our position in the world. We are always able to 'reposition' ourselves in the world, finding and experiencing different possible modes of being-in-the-world. As regards verticality, Susan Kay Toombs writes: «Verticality is directly related to autonomy. Just as the infant's sense of autonomy and independence are enhanced by the development of his ability to maintain an upright posture and 'sally forth' into the world unaided, so there is a corresponding loss of autonomy which accompanies the loss of uprightness»<sup>37</sup>. Apparently, our bodily posture and position also deeply influence the different possible ways to enter into relationships and interact with others: in an illness condition, in a confined condition, losing one's upright posture – or being restricted in one's ordinary mode of acting and interacting – may generate a feeling of losing one's independence and modify the ways in which a person relates with the world and with others<sup>38</sup>. For this reason, some expressions reflecting our body posture and position are not only metaphorical: «In 'looking up to' the doctor, and 'being looked down on', the patient perceives himself to be on an unequal 'footing' with his physician, concretely diminished in his auton-

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*tives of Physician and Patient*, Dordrecht - Boston, Kluwer Academic, 1992; H. Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness*.

<sup>36</sup> P. Ricoeur, *Les trois niveaux du jugement médical*, in «Esprit», 12, 1996, pp. 21-33.

<sup>37</sup> S. Kay Toombs, *The Meaning of Illness*, p. 65.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

86 | omy»<sup>39</sup>. Therefore, the spatiality of the body is not simply a ‘physical’ condition: it is primarily a ‘situated’ spatiality related to how we perceive and represent our position in the world.

In a condition of confinement due to disability or illness, autonomy seems to be redefined by means that become essential in movement and daily life – a wheelchair, a computer, a well-organized context and environment in which to live – since the condition in which a person lives is profoundly influenced and marked by the environment in which s/he finds her/himself<sup>40</sup>. Generally, in these conditions also the sense of interdependence, interconnectedness and mutual interaction becomes stronger: Piergiorgio evidently felt the necessity not to live in isolation, but to interact with family members, with friends, caregivers, and society. The living environment itself can become a community of life and can represent a community of care: for some authors it can become an enabling environment as well<sup>41</sup>. The sense of justice, the perception of what is right, equal and good in an ill or disabled condition, can be defined or identified through the body, which can represent and become a «criterion of justice»<sup>42</sup>.

In many respects, how we consider disease, illness and disability reflects their social representation and the cultural representation of limits – induced by disability, illness, disease or confinement – tends to have a strong impact on life habits, on ordinary activities, and on social roles. Some authors underscore that there is a process of ‘handicap production’ in which personal, cultural and environmental factors play a leading role<sup>43</sup>. However, we may modify how we consider disability and illness by adopting other frameworks. Instead of regarding them as opposites, or as extremes, where health is counterposed to disease, wellness to illness, ‘normality’ to handicap, ability to disability, freedom to confinement, we can look at all these physical and bodily conditions – from a phenomenological perspective – as varieties along a continuum composed of the

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>40</sup> L. Galvagni, *Dynamiques existentielles, éthiques et anthropologiques autour du handicap*, in M.-J. Thiel (ed.), *Les enjeux éthiques du handicap*, pp. 289-299.

<sup>41</sup> See P. Falzon, *Enabling Environments, Enabling Organizations, Enabling Interventions: A Constructive Ergonomics Viewpoint*, in «ECCE '15: Proceedings of the European Conference on Cognitive Ergonomics 2015», July 2015, pp. 1-3. See J. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, and J.-F. Malherbe, *Sujets de vie*.

<sup>42</sup> See H. Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness*; M.-J. Thiel (ed.), *Les enjeux éthiques du handicap*; L. Galvagni, *Narrazioni cliniche*.

<sup>43</sup> P. Fougeyrollas, *Le funambule, le fil et la toile: transformations réciproques du sens du handicap*, Québec, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2010; D. Pagetti Vivanti, *Histoire des représentations autour du handicap*, in M.-J. Thiel (ed.), *Les enjeux éthiques du handicap*, pp. 25-29.

many possible ways of being-in-the-world<sup>44</sup>. This continuum represents the different bodily situations that we as human beings can experience: we can also call this continuum 'life'.

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## 5. Resistance, Resilience and Spirituality

In a condition of bodily restriction, as happened during the Covid outbreak, we all perceive our body more clearly and have a different sense of time. When forms of 'restriction' persist, we may realize what it means to exercise resistance and resilience. Perhaps we can also better understand our idea of humanity if we consider and interpret confinement, illness and disability as potentially extreme conditions. Tzvetan Todorov observed that, in face of the extreme, we can experience our authenticity and our truth, as human beings, and we can understand them better, even if these extreme conditions should and cannot last too long<sup>45</sup>.

In experiences of disability and disease, illness and recovery can be perceived as 'resistance and giving up', and from this perspective 'recovery' can become an existential process, and a spiritual process as well, of self-understanding and repositioning of the body and in the body. At the same time, this generally implies a different way of looking at the world and of comprehending it. Piergiorgio notes: «Talking of recovery is an absolute paradox for me ... Recovery will never come. But many types of healing exist»<sup>46</sup>.

Body and embodiment always have and reflect an inner life. Maybe for this reason Piergiorgio considered his story as a narrative about a «recovery of the soul»<sup>47</sup>. He writes: «Sometimes I feel as if I have recovered ... maybe because I consider disability not as a disease, but as a distinctive individual condition. Or because I have inwardly recovered from my disability *through a mental and spiritual process* that may now have reached

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<sup>44</sup> As Christina Papadimitriou underscores, it is possible to interpret the so-called 'normal' and the so-called 'pathological' as «different varieties along a continuum of modes of being-in-the-world. Just as normative upright posture is a mode of being-in-the-world, so is physically disabled embodiment», see C. Papadimitriou, *From Dis-Ability to Difference: Conceptual and Methodological Issues in the Study of Physical Disability*, in S. Kay Toombs (ed.), *Handbook of Phenomenology*, pp. 475-492, here p. 485.

<sup>45</sup> T. Todorov, *Facing the Extreme. Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*, New York, MacMillan, 1997.

<sup>46</sup> P. Cattani, *Guarigione*, p. 146.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 155.

88 | its maturity»<sup>48</sup>. He explains the process thus: «It has been the ‘recognition’ of limits and abilities of my body that has defined what I call ‘recovery’, understood as a continuous process of self-understanding. This should happen on a biological level, so that we consider our embodiment not as an element distinct from our inner sphere, but as constitutive of the person». He remarks: «We need another form of listening; we should perceive the echo of our more intimate dimension»<sup>49</sup>.

In a process of continuous confrontation with the body, its perceptions, emotions, and inner states – and in confrontation and relationship with others, in interaction with the communities in which we live – we also experience situations which can be at the borders and at the limits of what is sustainable, but which still represent and are forms and conditions of life. Nothing is obvious, nor predefined, in this kind of situations.

Piergiorgio observes that the dimension of wisdom and the awareness about ourselves and on the meaning of existence correspond to the ancient Greek philosophical doctrine of *gnòthi seautòn*: «*Gnòthi seautòn* concerns the meaning of life»<sup>50</sup>. Maybe through this knowledge of ourselves, of our body as a potential room, we may experience a different sense of ourselves, a deeper, more spiritual sense of our identity and of our being-in-the-world.

In fact, how we conceive disability reflects our notions of humanity and human beings: another way to define humanity can thus be derived from a broader conception of humanity, one that includes the many different bodily and temporal conditions that as human beings we may encounter, experience and live with.

We all as human beings need to adapt to new contextual and bodily conditions that are and remain extremely demanding: those who experience the most extreme conditions and have to cope with them every day may represent true ‘super-humans’<sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> P. Cattani, *Guarigione*, p. 147.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 148.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 149.

<sup>51</sup> In the video *We’re the Superhumans*, prepared for the Rio Paralympics 2016, athletes present themselves: the video is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=locLkk3aYIk> (accessed on July 3rd, 2023).

# Un mondo possibile in una stanza.

## La «sommersività» come forma di trascendenza

Massimo Roberto Beato

**Abstract** – The actor-spectator relationship is not articulated according to the same parameters and stable values over time. In this paper, we aim to illustrate the extent to which a few immersive theatre experiences involve a reconfiguration of the categories of space, time and action to which we are usually accustomed as spectators comfortably seated in an audience. By way of example, to describe these unprecedented dynamics of perception of the immersive experience, we shall refer to *The Burnt City* performed by the British theatre company Punchdrunk as a case study. Finally, we shall argue that the being-in-the-moment effect generated through the strategies actualized in Punchdrunk's performance may, in turn, trigger in the spectator a further effect of submersivity, which can be interpreted as a form of transcendence.

**Keywords:** immersive theatre – transcendence – spectatorship – experience – semiotics of theatre

### 1. Introduzione

Per diverso tempo gli studi sul fenomeno teatrale sono stati influenzati da una ideologia di fondo, secondo la quale lo spettatore rivestiva un ruolo di soggetto ricettore passivo nella partecipazione alla performance che, nella maggior parte dei casi, era concepita secondo una logica comunicazionale oggettivistica<sup>1</sup>. Da una prospettiva semiotica, questa premessa (fallace) ha portato gli studiosi a considerare la relazione teatrale tra attore e spettatore nei termini di un «neutro» scambio di informazioni. La svolta relazionale<sup>2</sup> ha ampiamente mostrato, invece, quanto lo spettatore sia a tutti gli effetti un co-autore dello spettacolo e rivesta, di contro, un ruolo «attivo». La relazione attore-spettatore, però, non si articola affatto secondo gli stessi parametri e le stesse valorizzazioni stabili nel tempo<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. M. De Marinis, *Ricezione teatrale: una semiotica dell'esperienza?*, in «Carte Semiotiche», 1986, 2, pp. 36-45.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. E. Fischer-Lichte, *Estetica del Performativo. Una teoria del teatro e dell'arte*, Roma, Carocci, 2014, p. 67.

<sup>3</sup> A. Pais, *From Effect to Affect: Narratives of Passivity and Modes of Participation of the Contemporary Spectator*, in «Studia Ubb Dramatica», 60, 2015, 2, p. 123.

Il rapporto dello spettatore con la performance deve essere indagato in relazione alle numerose variabili sociosemiotiche in questione: convenzioni produttive, competenze dello spettatore, ecc<sup>4</sup>. In altre parole, come suggerisce Marco De Marinis, è necessario «concepire il rapporto spettacolo-spettatore nei termini di una interazione *simbolica* che mette in gioco molto più di valori semantici asetticamente definiti, coinvolgendo i suoi partecipanti in dinamiche interpretative e passionali molto più complesse, le quali pertengono ... non tanto alla modalità del far-sapere quanto piuttosto a quelle del far-credere e del far-fare»<sup>5</sup>. Dal punto di vista dello spettatore, così, il fenomeno teatrale acquista i connotati di una *esperienza*, che per sua natura è transiente, momentanea, sempre presente, autoreferenziale e multisensoriale<sup>6</sup>, a prescindere dalle forme teatrali e dalle modalità impiegate. Al semiotico, dunque, si richiede l'impiego di nuove categorie analitiche in grado di cogliere tale «apertura» dell'oggetto d'analisi<sup>7</sup>.

In questo contributo, si intende illustrare in che misura alcune esperienze teatrali immersive comportano una riconfigurazione delle categorie di spazio, tempo e azione a cui siamo solitamente abituati come spettatori comodamente seduti in una platea o raccolti in un qualsiasi luogo deputato alla partecipazione separato da quello dell'azione. Per affrontare le pratiche teatrali immersive è però necessario, prima di indagarne le forme, stabilire cosa si intenda per *immersione* e *immersività*. Come sottolineato da Lopes Ramos *et alii*, infatti, «nell'ultimo decennio, «immersivo» è diventato uno dei termini più abusati per descrivere produzioni teatrali che mirano a coinvolgere il pubblico in modi non convenzionali»<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Per un approfondimento sugli studi semiotici teatrali si rimanda in particolare a M. De Marinis, *Capire il Teatro. Lineamenti di una nuova teatrologia*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2008; M. De Marinis, *Teatro, pratica e storia: problemi metodologici degli studi teatrali*, in «Annali online di Ferrara», 2007, 1, pp. 262-272; M. De Marinis, *Semiotica del Teatro. L'analisi testuale dello spettacolo*, Milano, Bompiani, 1982; J. Alter, *A Sociosemiotic Theory of Theatre*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990; F. De Toro, *Semiótica del teatro: Del texto a la puestra en escena*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Galerna, 1987; P. Pavis, *L'Analyse des spectacles*, Parigi, Editions Nathan, 1996; A. Helbo, *Semiotics and Performing Arts: Contemporary Issues*, in «Social Semiotics», 26, 2016, 4, pp. 341-350.

<sup>5</sup> M. De Marinis, *Ricezione teatrale*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. Y. Meerzon, *On Theatrical Semiosphere of Post Dramatic Theatrical Event. Rethinking the Semiotic Epistemology in Performance Analysis Today*, in «Semiotica», 185, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Per un approccio semiotico teorico e metodologico più recente, si veda M.R. Beato, *Ecosistemi performatici: dalla frontalità all'immersività (e ritorno)*, tesi di dottorato, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna, 2023, DOI 10.48676/unibo/amsdottorato/10580.

<sup>8</sup> J. Lopes Ramos - J. Dunne-Howrie - P. Jadé Maravala - B. Simon, *The Post-immersive Manifesto*, in «International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media», 2020, p. 1. (Traduzione mia dall'inglese).

Soprattutto nei paesi europei, l'espressione «teatro immersivo» identifica quelle esperienze teatrali co-partecipative in cui il tradizionale confine tra pubblico e attori viene disintegrato, incoraggiando un posizionamento degli spettatori all'interno della narrazione drammatica e invitando a una *partecipazione produttiva*<sup>9</sup> attraverso modelli di spettatorialità (e visione) radicalmente differenti rispetto a modelli astantivi<sup>10</sup>. Nel corso della storia del teatro sono numerosi gli esempi di pratiche teatrali che ricorrono a forme di immersività, dal teatro medievale ad alcuni spettacoli di Luca Ronconi o di I Magazzini o de La Fura del Baus, ad esempio, che conservano tra loro costanti spaziali e relazionali, ma anche numerose variabili. In questa sede, tuttavia, ci concentreremo solamente sul fenomeno dell'*immersive theatre*<sup>11</sup>, popolare nel Regno Unito, la cui diffusione può certamente essere letta anche come un ritorno alle tecniche di coinvolgimento del pubblico sperimentate tra gli anni Sessanta e Settanta del XX secolo.

La delocalizzazione rispetto ai siti solitamente delegati alle pratiche teatrali è senza dubbio un primo e importante elemento di discontinuità. Le esperienze immersive, infatti, sono concepite a partire da uno spazio *altro* che viene allestito e organizzato per costruire un mondo possibile drammatico all'interno del quale accogliere lo spettatore, così da sollecitare un effetto di compartecipazione in cui si realizza un accordo tra i soggetti partecipanti coinvolti e l'ambiente mediale costruito<sup>12</sup>. La colusione con l'ambiente (*immersione*) dovrebbe favorire nello spettatore una esperienza estetica di superamento della soglia, dove i confini tra ciò che è programmato/controfattuale e ciò che è aleatorio/fattuale si fanno talmente indistinti al punto da annullarsi, producendo nel soggetto percipiente un effetto di immediatezza, di *essere-nel-momento*, nel *qui-e-ora* del mondo indiretto<sup>13</sup>. Definiremo tale effetto generato dall'incontro del soggetto partecipante con l'ambiente come «effetto di immersività».

<sup>9</sup> A. Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre. Aesthetic, Politics and Productive Participation*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> R. Eugeni, *Temporalità sovrapposte. Articolazione del tempo e della costruzione della presenza nei media immersivi*, in A. Rabbito (ed.), *La cultura visuale del XXI secolo. Cinema, teatro e new media*, Milano, Meltemi, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. G. White, *On Immersive Theatre*, in «Theatre Research International», 37, 2012, 3, pp. 221-235.

<sup>12</sup> I termini «compartecipazione» e «accordo» fanno riferimento alla teoria semiotica processuale di Daniele Barbieri. Cfr. D. Barbieri, *Testo e Processo. Pratica di analisi e teoria di una semiotica processuale*, Bologna, Esculapio, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Il termine «indiretto» è riferito alla realtà istituita dalla performance nell'esperienza mediale. Cfr. R. Eugeni, *Semiotica dei media. Le forme dell'esperienza*, Roma, Carocci, 2010, p. 44.

Nel descrivere queste dinamiche di percezione dell'esperienza, si prenderà come caso studio *The Burnt City*<sup>14</sup> della compagnia teatrale inglese Punchdrunk. Sugeriremo, infine, come l'effetto essere-nel-momento generato dalle strategie attualizzate nello spettacolo di Punchdrunk possa, a sua volta, innescare nello spettatore un ulteriore effetto di «sommersività», interpretabile come forma di trascendenza<sup>15</sup>.

## 2. Costruire ed esplorare un ambiente immersivo

Le pratiche teatrali che tendono a un effetto di immersività sono estremamente complesse, poiché aspirano a costruire «un *campo* esplorabile, un'atmosfera *vivibile* di uno spettacolo, caratterizzata dalla contemporaneità e dalla struttura cangiante, multilivello, in funzione delle scelte che lo spettatore-partecipante opera ogni istante»<sup>16</sup>. Ciò comporta una attenzione meticolosa alla progettazione dell'esperienza mediale<sup>17</sup>, poiché sono riconfigurati soprattutto due aspetti della pratica teatrale: il ruolo del pubblico e la modalità di utilizzo dello spazio. La partecipazione, dopotutto, è un atto fondamentalmente spaziale: lo spazio è responsabile della costruzione dei corpi dei performer e degli spettatori come oggetti (e soggetti)<sup>18</sup>. Nelle forme di immersività attualizzate nelle pratiche di Punchdrunk, generalmente queste esperienze si svolgono in un ambiente costituito da più stanze: sono i partecipanti a scegliere dove e come esplorare lo spazio, che è organizzato dettagliatamente per suscitare un piacere voyeuristico<sup>19</sup>, indipendentemente dalle azioni degli attori. Dalla libertà di esplorazione ne consegue quella di ricostruzione individuale della narrazione drammatica che, svolgendosi contemporaneamente in ognuno dei luoghi dell'ambiente mediale, può essere fruita con l'ordine che si desidera.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.punchdrunk.com/project/theburntcity/> (ultima visita 11 gennaio 2023).

<sup>15</sup> M. Leone - R.J. Parmentier, *Representing Transcendence: The Semiosis of Real Presence*, in «Science and Society», 2, 2014, 1, pp. 1-22; J. Ponzio - R.A. Yelle - M. Leone, *Mediation and Immediacy. A Key Issue for the Semiotics of Religion*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2, 2021, 1.

<sup>16</sup> R. Brunetti (ed.), *Esperienze immersive. Creazione e fruizione*, Roma, La Rocca Edizioni, 2017, p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> L'esperienza performativa può essere concepita come un'esperienza mediale, distaccata dalla sfera delle esperienze ordinarie, che si svolge all'interno di un ambiente mediale in cui sono messe in gioco competenze pratiche in grado di guidare i soggetti fruitori nella relazione con il medium.

<sup>18</sup> A. Fenemore, *The Pleasure of Objectification. A Spectator's Guide*, in «Performance Research. A Journal of Performing Arts», 12, 2007, 4, pp. 4-13.

<sup>19</sup> H. Maples, *The Erotic Voyeur. Sensorial Spectatorship in Punchdrunk's The Drowned Man*, in «Journal of Contemporary Drama in English», 4, 2016, 1, pp. 119-133.

L'organizzazione dell'ambiente è un elemento centrale, poiché predice un certo tipo di comportamento, ma produce anche nell'osservatore di questi comportamenti l'emergere di un significato<sup>20</sup>.

«Lo spazio performativo è sempre, al contempo, uno spazio atmosferico»<sup>21</sup>. Per questa ragione è determinante un certo grado di programmazione preventiva. In *The Burnt City* l'accesso progressivo nell'ambiente immersivo è una strategia che contribuisce significativamente alla percezione delle atmosfere da parte del soggetto partecipante. Infatti, per consentire un ingresso al mondo indiretto della performance, e generare un effetto di immersività, è indispensabile lasciar fuori dall'esperienza mediale ciò che favorirebbe (percektivamente) un inesorabile ancoraggio al mondo diretto. Ogni pratica teatrale deve fare i conti con certi aspetti prassici che non possano essere evitati, ma, tuttavia, contenuti. All'arrivo al One Cartridge Place presso il Royal Arsenal di Londra, sito scelto per ospitare *The Burnt City*, si è accolti in una anticamera nella quale si è invitati a lasciare i propri effetti personali. La fase successiva prevede un primo accesso preliminare all'ambiente mediale con l'ingresso in un'ulteriore anticamera, dove le atmosfere gradualmente iniziano a prendere forma. La stanza ricostruisce una sorta di museo, con tanto di teche e opere esposte, brochure informative e foto: ci troviamo nel *mock-up* di una mostra archeologica su Troia, che introduce i partecipanti all'idea di setacciare strati di prove e significati. I partecipanti, infatti, visiteranno le rovine degli scavi archeologici di Schliemann, scopritore della mitica città di Troia.

Lo spazio è debolmente illuminato dalle luci delle teche e i confini della stanza lasciati nella più completa oscurità al punto da sembrare quasi assenti. Sonorità e bruitismi iniziano a popolare la stanza e a sommarsi alle voci dei partecipanti che, per un curioso effetto di contagio intercorporeo, iniziano pian piano ad abbassare il volume delle loro conversazioni che si trasformano in un indistinto brusio che si mescola ai suoni ambientali. Si percepisce un effetto di dilatazione temporale in cui il tempo acquista gradualmente una qualità cairologica<sup>22</sup>. Avvicinandosi a una porta ha inizio la fase di manipolazione in cui un personaggio espone le regole di partecipazione, raccomandando a tutti di non raccogliersi in gruppi ma di disperdersi e di lasciarsi *prendere* dall'espe-

<sup>20</sup> R. Eugeni - G. Raciti, *Atmosfere Mediali*, in «Visual Culture Studies», 2020, 1, pp. 5-17.

<sup>21</sup> E. Fischer-Lichte, *Estetica del Performativo*, p. 201.

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. P. Philippson, *Il concetto greco di tempo nelle parole Aion, Chronos, Kairos, Eniautos*, in «Rivista di Storia della Filosofia», 4, 1949, 2, pp. 81-97.

rienza<sup>23</sup> che per essere veramente unica deve essere individuale. Vanno neutralizzate, perciò, tutte le relazioni che ci legano al mondo diretto (amici, compagni, familiari, con cui si è venuti a partecipare alla pratica) allo scopo di essere noi – soli – a vivere in prima persona<sup>24</sup>, sulla nostra carne, l'esperienza immersiva nel più rigoroso e raccomandato silenzio voyeuristico, in cui la musica ambientale e gli effetti sonori emergono prepotentemente dominando su tutto il resto.

### 3. Forme di visione, percezione e spettatorialità

Negli ambienti immersivi si realizza una convergenza fra l'architettura dell'edificio, lo spazio delegato alla performance e le soglie di demarcazione tra luogo della fruizione e luogo dell'azione, i cui rispettivi confini sono più porosi e opachi<sup>25</sup>. *The Burnt City* si svolge in due vasti edifici di Woolwich, ex fabbriche di munizioni, che ricostruiscono il mondo (possibile) di Troia e della Grecia, mostrando la storia del loro fatidico conflitto. Questi edifici industriali sembrano in grado di evocare un senso di area infinita, in cui affiorano ricordi della guerra, del suo svolgimento e dei suoi effetti devastanti. In questa cornice al limite tra fattuale e controfattuale sorge la città bruciata. Questa combinazione di dimensioni epiche, installazioni intricate e incontri intimi si estende su cento stanze in un'area di circa novemila metri quadrati, al fine di ricostruire accuratamente due città. Si tratta, appunto, di creare un mondo possibile drammatico, mettendo però lo spettatore in condizione di poter entrare *letteralmente* in quel mondo, di viverlo e agirlo a partire dalla sua materialità.

Da un punto di vista narrativo, *The Burnt City* fonde riferimenti a dramaturgie della tradizione greca antica – *Agamennone* di Eschilo e *Ecuba* di Euripide – con *Metropolis* di Fritz Lang. Eppure, la narrazione lineare degli eventi (e la loro comprensione) non è ciò su cui si fonda questa esperienza immersiva, quanto piuttosto la frammentarietà. Si è «catturati» soprattutto dall'atmosfera e dalla modalità rituale di accesso alla per-

<sup>23</sup> È un concetto analogo a quello impiegato nella realtà virtuale (VR), in cui lo spettatore non ha un'esperienza ma è l'esperienza che ha lo spettatore, secondo una polarità / *I had an experience/ vs / An experience had me/*, Cfr. C. Heim, *Audience as Performance. The Changing Role of Theatre Audiences in the Twenty-first Century*, London - New York, Routledge. 2016.

<sup>24</sup> C'è una analogia col concetto di *first person shot* a cui fa riferimento Ruggero Eugeni a proposito dei videogiochi o delle esperienze virtuali. Cfr. R. Eugeni, *La condizione post mediale. Media, linguaggi e narrazioni*, Brescia, La Scuola Editrice, 2015, p. 52.

<sup>25</sup> Cfr. M.R. Beato, *Opacità e trasparenze della cornice performativa nel teatro immersivo*, in «Carte Semiotiche», 7, 2021, pp. 181-198.

formance, e la fruizione dei soggetti partecipanti coinvolti passa da atto di comprensione ad atto di apprensione. Vengono, così, scardinati i modelli (classici) di percezione frontale dell'evento performativo, influenzando, di conseguenza, sulla modulazione della soggettività nell'esperienza estetica. La contaminazione tra i due piani di realtà rende più ardua l'individuazione dei dispositivi delegati alla discorsivizzazione dello spazio e del tempo drammatici, richiedendo allo spettatore una maggiore cooperazione nel delicato processo di (ap)percezione<sup>26</sup>. Entrando all'interno di questo mondo possibile, gli spettatori sono immersi in una grande «stanza delle meraviglie» in cui sono coinvolti nelle varie attività performative attraverso la totalità dei propri sensi<sup>27</sup>. I corpi sono prioritari in queste forme di immersività, e sono sempre corpi performanti e percipienti. L'interazione dal vivo con lo spazio, inoltre, conferisce a ogni singolo partecipante una forma di *agency* creativa: i processi decisionali, nel corso dell'esperienza immersiva, producono una varietà di interpretazioni e risultati durante e dopo l'evento. Ciò evidenzia l'unicità di ogni esperienza per ogni partecipante. L'occultamento dei dispositivi finzionali che garantirebbero la trasparenza comporta, però, la dissoluzione del confine tra controfattualità e fattualità costringendo lo spettatore a oscillare di continuo tra le due dimensioni. Si genera, dunque, una *confusione* proprio tra regimi di credenza, articolata sull'opposizione *modo referenziale vs modo finzionale*<sup>28</sup>. Gli spettatori sono «sommersi» in un luogo che richiede loro un carico percettivo diverso rispetto a configurazioni astantive – che impongono una certa distanza e incorniciatura dell'evento predefinite – impegnandoli in un *material engagement*<sup>29</sup> con lo spazio che diviene, così, estensione della loro mente. La storia, oltretutto, si sviluppa in maniera reticolare nello spazio attraverso numerosi percorsi drammatici che spetta allo spettatore individuare e ricostruire. Per orientarsi all'interno dell'ambiente immersivo, il soggetto partecipante, secondo un principio gestaltico, deve ricorrere a strategie (cognitive) di framizzazione dello spazio, allo scopo di ordinare la percezione del mondo possibile drammatico. Rispetto a pra-

<sup>26</sup> Cfr. J. Machon, *Watching, Attending, Sense-making. Spectatorship in Immersive Theatres*, in «Journal of Contemporary Drama in English», 4, 2016, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Cfr. D. Heddon - H. Iball - R. Zerihan, *Come Closer. Confessions of Intimate Spectators in One to One Performance*, in «Contemporary Theatre Review», 22, 2012, 1, p. 122.

<sup>28</sup> Seguendo la prospettiva di Bruno Latour, lo spettatore è soggetto a potenziali «errori di categoria»: se si facesse a botte con un attore che interpreta il cattivo sul palcoscenico, ad esempio, si commetterebbe un errore di categoria. Cfr. A. Fossier - É. Gardella, *Entretien avec Bruno Latour*, in «Tracés. Revue de Sciences Humaines», 10, 2006, p. 121.

<sup>29</sup> Cfr. L. Malafouris, *How Things Shape the Mind. A Theory of Material Engagement*, London, The MIT Press, 2013.

tiche teatrali astantive che adottano modalità di visione associate alla distanza spettacolare, in *The Burnt City* ciò che è guardato agisce anche su ciò che guarda, poiché l'oggetto esercita parimenti tensioni sul soggetto, oggettivandolo a sua volta. Si realizza, perciò, un modo di essere situati nell'ambiente che scopre il *sé-nel-mondo* come soggetto e oggetto, e così facendo scopre simultaneamente gli altri nel mondo come soggetto e oggetto. L'immersività, dopotutto, ci porta fisicamente nel mondo possibile della performance («*in-its-own-world*»-ness)<sup>30</sup>, piuttosto che invitarci a guardarlo e comprenderlo da lontano. I partecipanti comprendono lo spettacolo a livello incarnato, senza essere necessariamente in grado di descriverlo o spiegarlo.

Nello spettacolo di Punchdrunk, ogni spettatore si ritrova a compiere due operazioni nel corso dell'esperienza immersiva, definibili anche in termini di programmi narrativi d'uso (PN<sub>u</sub>): la mappa (*map*) e l'itinerario (*tour*). Si tratta di modalità di esplorazione dell'ambiente che potremmo anche illustrare in termini di oggettivizzazione (mappa) e soggettivizzazione (itinerario) dell'esperienza<sup>31</sup>. Mentre la mappa crea l'oggetto come campo visivo, mantenendo il sé come soggetto, l'itinerario crea oggetti in un campo spaziale e costituisce il sé come oggetto tra i tanti. La mappa – legata all'atto di osservare – crea perciò un inquadramento visivo delle interrelazioni esterne, l'itinerario – legato all'atto di agire – crea una relazione reversibile e transizionale tra oggetto/soggetto (attore) e soggetto/oggetto (spettatore). Queste due modalità sono continuamente in gioco, nell'atto di percezione dello spettatore, poiché il modo di esistere in questo genere di ambienti immersivi non è mai puramente soggettivo né oggettivo. Il corpo dello spettatore abita un ambiente ed è abitato a sua volta dall'ambiente, nel quale, come in risposta a una sorta di legge della partecipazione mistica, la suggestione tende a prevalere sull'osservazione<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> J. Machon, *Watching, Attending, Sense-making*, p. 35.

<sup>31</sup> Cfr. M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkley - Los Angeles - London, University of California Press, 1984.

<sup>32</sup> L. Lévy-Bruhl, *La Mythologie Primitive*, Paris, Alcan, 1935.

Nel caso studio affrontato, nonostante l'immersività favorisca una prossimità con oggetti, attori e ambientazioni, non va sottovalutata la necessità di poter recuperare una distanza somatico-esperienziale dagli eventi e dalle situazioni mostrate. All'*immersione ermeneutica* del soggetto nel mondo possibile mediale va associata, infatti, l'opportunità di una «emersione mnestica» attraverso la quale è possibile supporre che lo spettatore possa esercitare soprattutto il piacere della memoria e il piacere di comprendere ripristinando, così, la propria sospensione dell'incredulità. Si accetta l'immersione nell'esperienza poiché si conserva la possibilità di emersione attraverso la riappropriazione di un distacco osservativo. Questa doppia condizione che consente al soggetto di entrare e uscire dall'esperienza, di essere soggetto e oggetto, lo modalizza secondo un «poter fare» che conferisce una aspettualizzazione reversibile, sia tematica che attanziale, con conseguenze sul piano della percezione, soprattutto nel caso di forme di immersività in cui si genera nello spettatore un effetto di sommersività, come ad esempio in *The Burnt City*. Infatti, ambienti mediali come questo espongono il soggetto partecipante a forme di allucinazione<sup>33</sup>, in quanto l'immaginazione viene percepita come realtà. L'emersione innescata dalla reversibilità aspettuale, dunque, consente di riacquisire coscienza di sé e della propria esperienza. La sommersività offre al soggetto partecipante l'accesso a una dimensione trascendente in cui può arrivare a dimenticare il proprio corpo e a smaterializzarlo nel corso dell'esperienza immersiva, pur partendo dal corpo stesso come medium per l'esperienza<sup>34</sup>. Nella sommersione, dunque, lo spettatore ha l'impressione (intesa come effetto/affetto di senso che emerge nel corso dell'esperienza) di essere in un altrove che trascende la materialità dell'evento, in un mondo possibile altro, cioè, rispetto alla realtà fattuale.

<sup>33</sup> C. Paolucci, *Cognitive Science. Integrating Signs, Minds, Meaning and Cognition*, Berlin, Springer, 2021, p. 127.

<sup>34</sup> J. Ponzio, *Cenni per una semiotica del sacro e del corpo*, p. 268.



# Spirituality and Law: The Example of the Decalogue

Debora Tonelli

*Abstract* – In the age of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the need to offer simple and accessible pastoral tools arose. Indeed, it was in this time that the first catechisms and breviaries of prayers were written and that the Decalogue was transformed into the «Ten Commandments», that is, a list of norms and prohibitions which – without asking questions – tell the believer what is lawful and what is not. In reality, the literary context places the Decalogue within a path of liberation which is both a path of political emancipation and spiritual growth. The list of *debarîm*, that is, of words, that make it up is not a list of duties and prohibitions imposed by God, but the result of this double path. Israel accepts the gift of the Ten Words because they correctly tell its story of liberation and relationship with its God. In this sense we can say that the Decalogue is not 'right' but 'true'. It is the room of the whole lifeworld. The paper supports this thesis by discussing some salient points of the text and demonstrating the spiritual depth of the text.

**Keywords:** Decalogue – lifeworld – law – spirituality – *debarîm*

Since ancient times, man has wondered about the relationship between law and ethics, between the individual and the law and, starting from the biblical tradition, also between law and spirituality. The question is whether there is some form of continuity between the spiritual and the normative dimension, between inner experience and outer duty, to the point of transforming duty into a form of being. The question has become more urgent with the birth of modern legal science and regulatory systems, often perceived as abstract and artificial with respect to inner experience. This evolution in the conception of Western law influenced not only the creation of new legal systems, but also the interpretation of earlier law, including biblical law. Within the biblical tradition, one of the most misunderstood texts is the Decalogue, which has become the emblem of a deontological morality, that is, of an ethics of duty that does not require the individual's inner adherence but only obedience. This was possible (also) thanks to its decontextualization, which made it one of the favorite texts of the catechisms of the Christian churches.

The aim of this contribution is to propose an interpretation of the Decalogue in the light of the literary context in which it was handed down and to demonstrate that it is not a list of commandments, but the result of a common experience (between God and Israel). On a metaphorical level, the Decalogue is the 'room' that encloses and expresses this inner experience. It is not just a text, but the expression of a 'meaning', of a whole lifeworld, which makes intelligible the history of which it is the result. For this reason, it does not require external and formal respect, but internal adherence. Where deontological interpretation closes in constraints, the depth of inner experience opens up to the world of life. The political experience of liberation and the spiritual experience that made it possible come together in a collection of words (*debarîm*) that will serve Israel to build its political-religious identity and maintain the hard-won freedom. The Ten Words draw their binding force not only from the fact that they were spoken by God, but also from the inner resonance through which the individual recognizes and rediscovers his own experience. The experience of Israel and, we could say, its lifeworld, is simultaneously enclosed and expressed in those words, creating a bridge between past experience and future planning, between inner resonance and law. More than norms, as I will try to demonstrate, they are the *criteria* with which Israel will have to make its choices and build its future. Their respect, therefore, is not a mere legal obligation, but an expression of the recognition that they derive and correctly interpret Israel's relationship with its God. My thesis is that it is the first Constitution of the nascent people of Israel which, until then, was only a group of slaves with no identity.

Concretely, my argument will begin by explaining when the decalogue was interpreted in a deontological key and will continue with a brief analysis of the literary context in which it is placed. A few words will be dedicated to the desert, the place where Israel concludes the covenant with God and receives the Ten Words. As far as the text is concerned, I will only focus on three elements that prompt a reflection on the pericope. Finally, I will formulate some considerations on the relationship between spirituality and law, that is, the inner space of the law.

## 1. From the Logic of the Seven Deadly Sins to Deontological Morality

The expression «the Ten Commandments» is known to both believers and non-believers: the former encountered it in catechisms, the latter in everyday language and in cinema. In fact, for some centuries catechisms and

prayer breviaries have contained the Ten Words: in a few lines they summarize Christian morals and it seems that there is not much to discuss. However, it wasn't always like this. Contrary to what is often believed, the Ten Words are not «the Ten Commandments». The catechisms of the Catholic and Protestant churches present it thus, but this interpretation and this use of the text is relatively recent. It dates back to the period of the Protestant Reformation, during which the first catechisms were born. According to the reconstruction of James Bossy, the catechisms collected some prayers and the Decalogue provided a brief summary of Christian morality<sup>1</sup>.

In this way the Decalogue gradually replaced the logic of the Seven Deadly Sins that had characterized the medieval age. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the doctrine of the Seven Sins was dominant in the practice of the sacrament of penance, subsequently the Decalogue became the only tool to know what God wanted or what he forbade: ethics was a matter of faith, not of reason<sup>2</sup>. Immediately before the Reformation and even more during the Counter-Reformation, the Decalogue was transformed into a rigid normative system and was used for both Catholic and Protestant Christian education.

The deontological interpretation of the Decalogue was, therefore, the result of the combination of various factors: on the one hand the need to identify a few clear fixed points of Christian ethics, on the other the birth of modern juridical science, which transformed law into rational science<sup>3</sup>. Finally, the very form of the text, expressed in a list. The next step will be to re-insert the text into its literary context to understand the meaning of the Ten Words within the biblical narrative.

## 2. The Narrative Context: Between «no more, not yet»

The expressions «Decalogue», «the Ten Words» and «the Ten Commandments» are used to indicate two similar but not identical texts: Ex 1-17 and Dt 5, 6-21. This last version, according to the literary sequence, is a

<sup>1</sup> J. Bossy, *L'Occidente cristiano. 1400- 1700*, Torino, Einaudi, 1985 (orig. ed. *The Christianity in the West: 1400-1700*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> See for example F.C. Clopston, *A History of Philosophy*, 9 vols., London, Continuum, 2003<sup>2</sup>, vol. II.

<sup>3</sup> See: H.J. Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1983; By the same author, *Law and Revolution II: The Impact of the Protestant Reformations on the Western Legal Tradition*, Cambridge, Belknap Pr, 2006; P. Prodi, *Il sacramento del potere. Il giuramento politico nella storia costituzionale dell'Occidente*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2017.

memory of the one contained in Exodus. We leave aside here the questions relating to which of the texts is the original one. The two texts have the same collocation: that is, the text of Deuteronomy places the pronouncement of the Decalogue in the same setting, that is, at the moment in which Israel has now left Egypt and is found in the desert. Ex 20 is inserted in the full course of the story, while Dt 5 is part of Moses' account of that same story. The role of the Decalogue as a text pronounced when the slaves are out of Egypt but not yet in the promised land is therefore common to both versions. For this reason, the literary context of reference can be considered that intermediate moment between the end of slavery and the journey to the Promised Land. Between «no more, not yet». Here I will refer to the Exodus version, aware that its duplication in Dt 5 strengthens my hypothesis<sup>4</sup>.

Jewish slaves have suffered for a long time, but manage to escape from Egypt thanks to Moses, a Jew adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter and who, grown up, receives the mission to free the Jews from the God of the Fathers. Moses is outlined as a religious and political leader, capable of being followed by the people despite the hostility of the Pharaoh<sup>5</sup>. Through Moses, the Jews rediscover the courage of their faith and allow themselves to be drawn out of Egypt. Their action, however, is still immature. In the desert, hungry and thirsty, they long for Egypt (Ex 16, 2-3). They want to be freed, they want to get better, but they are not yet ready to take responsibility. Their path is still long.

In the desert the Jews live in a free zone. According to the tradition of the time, the desert had no jurisdiction, it was an inhospitable territory, one of the gates of She'ol, of the afterlife, because it was impossible to survive<sup>6</sup>. The spatial dimension plays a fundamental role in the narration, because it indicates an impenetrable, even dangerous place, but the only one where slaves can experience the recollection of a suspended reality and make a choice.

In a positive sense, the desert is a place of freedom, of non-slavery. A non-place where Jews can stop and become something new, the space of inner recollection and interiority. It is here that God presents himself

<sup>4</sup> In the biblical tradition, the repetition of a text is a sign of its importance. In some cases we find the same narrative in prose and poetry, as in Ex 14 and 15, Jdg 4 and 5.

<sup>5</sup> For the prophetic and political figure of Moses, see W. Brueggemann, *Phrophetical Imagination: 40th Anniversary Edition*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> See C. Peri, *Il regno del nemico. La morte nella religione in Canaan*, Brescia, Paideia, 2003; P. Xella (ed.), *Archeologia dell'Inferno. L'Aldilà nel mondo antico vicino-orientale e classico*, Verona, essedue edizioni, 1987.

to them and invites them to enter into a covenant. We are in chapter 19, 1-8 of the book of Exodus and this passage is decisive for understanding the Decalogue.

The language and structure of this text - which is generally referred to as a pact<sup>7</sup> - are diplomatic in nature and, more precisely, are characteristic of the treaties of 'vassalage' that the Babylonian Empire - and before that the neo-Assyrian - stipulated with neighboring peoples. In those cases they were real acts of submission: this protection was guaranteed after the stipulation of the treaty and not before. If not, the vassal was overrun and killed. The outline of the treaties was the following: presentation of the contracting parties, historical prologue which served to justify the loyalty asked to the vassal, stipulation of the treaty, periodic reading of the treaty and custody of the document, list of divine witnesses, blessings and curses.

In Ex 19 the Israeli editors use the outline of these treaties to recount the covenant stipulated with God, with some important innovations: God has already done what is good for Israel and does not say what will happen if the people do not he will accept the deal. God presents himself to them as someone who has already fulfilled their hopes. A bit as if today we elect our rulers after they have acted for the good of the community and not before with the hope that they will do it later. Furthermore, God does not threaten Israel if they do not accept the covenant.

Only now that the people are free can they make an informed decision and take responsibility for respecting it. The covenant represents the fulfillment of the history of liberation and, at the same time, marks the birth of Israel as a nation. It is only at this point that in v. 9 we read: «The LORD said to Moses: 'Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people will hear when I speak with you, and they will believe you forever'. And Moses told the LORD the words of the people». Only then, God pronounces the Decalogue. The Decalogue is the Constitution of the new people and summarizes the fundamental principles that will allow Israel to live.

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<sup>7</sup> The word translated 'covenant' is *berit*. The etymology is controversial, but it could belong to the secular sphere. However, the biblical texts attest to its use in different contexts. It probably acquired theological relevance in the Deuteronomist era and was one of the tools with which the ancient traditions were re-evaluated to reconstruct the Israelite identity. See E. Kutsch, *Sehen und Bestimmen. Die Etymologie von tyrb*, in A. Kuschke - E. Kutsch (eds.), *Archäologie und Altes Testament. Festschrift für Kurt Gallig zum 8. Januar 1970*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1970, pp. 168-178; D.J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant. A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament*, Roma, Biblical Institute Press, 1978; L. Perlitt, *Bundestheologie im Alten Testament*, Neukirchen Vluyn, Neukirchener Verlag, 1969.

### 3. The Decalogue (Ex 20, 1-17)

As the word *deca-logos* says, Exodus 20, 1-17 (and Dt 5, 6-21) is made up of Ten Words: *áseret haddebarim* in Hebrew language. The lexical question is fundamental for the interpretation of the text, since the Hebrew language had specific words available to express the concept of law and that of norm<sup>8</sup>. The meaning of the individual elements that make up the text is linked both to the relationship with all the others and to the possibility of saying the same things in different ways, thus changing perspective and meaning. The question is interesting, because in the passage from a narrative text to a legislative one, the look on the text has changed to the point that it has become the manifesto of a deontological ethics, in which the inner adherence of the individual does not occupy a decisive role.

The word «decalogue» derives from the Greek *decálogos*: used for the first time by Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria, it has its origin in the translation of the Septuagint of verses Ex 34,28; Deut 4.13 and 10.4, in which the expression *áseret haddebarim*, «Ten Words» appears. The later Christian tradition took up this expression to designate both versions of the Decalogue.

For reasons of space, I will not reproduce the text, which is easily found in any Bible. Rather, I will focus on some textual elements useful for clarifying the meaning of the text in relation to its literary context. In particular, I will focus on: 1) the beginning of God's direct speech in Exodus 20, 2; 2) the verbal modes; 3) the word *dabar*, which is significant both in relation to the corresponding *mizwotaj* (v.6) and in relation to her possible alternatives. Naturally these three elements are not exhaustive, but they help to stimulate reflection on the meaning of the text, which is more complex than a list of deontological norms.

Regarding the beginning of God's direct speech, God presents himself with his Names and with his deeds. Understanding His proper Name means to know what kind of divinity Israel trusts. This verse conditions the interpretation of the following ones.

In the Bible God is called by many names (El, 'Elohim; Šaddaj, El Olam, El Eljion), but Yhwh, the name of revelation (cf. Ex 3,6, 13-15), is his proper name, that which expresses its essence and in v. 2 appears next to that of the tradition of the Fathers. In this verse the verbs are conjugated to the

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<sup>8</sup> I have thoroughly investigated the matter in D. Tonelli, *Note sul lessico giuridico del Decalogo (Es 20, 1-17)*, in «Materiali per una storia della cultura giuridica», 1, 2008, pp. 3-32.

indicative (*hōze 'tīkā* «that I made you go out») and precede the exhortative ones of the following verses: the verb *jāsā*, «to go out» in the causative form, also means «to release», therefore «that he freed you». Two aspects must be emphasized in this self-presentation: the first consists in the fact that God affirms that the exit from Egypt sanctions the birth of Israel as a people/nation; the second, in awakening the people's memory of him, since He makes himself recognized as the God of the Patriarchs, the God of promise and, at the same time, identifies himself with the God of the Exodus. The God of liberation is the same as in the patriarchal tradition, but before being obeyed, He wants to be (re) known: the whole Decalogue develops around the memory of liberation.

Compared to the culture of the time, the Decalogue presents another element of novelty and perhaps the most important: while the other divinities founded a sanctuary or a city and, therefore, were linked to a place or a territory, J-H binds its sovereignty to an experience. Even in the sanctification of the Sabbath, worship is not associated with a place, but with the memory of creation (Ex 20, 11) or liberation (Dt 5, 15), through a new temporal scan. The fundamental idea that this self-presentation expresses consists in identifying the foundation of the law in the memory of the experience of the exodus. Without this memorial, Israel would not be able to recognize J-H as their God, nor to accept the following words as legitimate. The link between J-H's self-presentation and the memory of liberation is not, however, only external, formal, but is essential to God himself and it is for this reason that it conditions the interpretation of the entire passage.

A second observation is necessary regarding verbs: v. 1, in which God affirms his sovereignty over Israel is conjugated to the indicative, that is, it does not express a command, but a simple observation about the actual state of his relationship with Israel. In the following verses, however, the verbs are conjugated to the imperfect, which in Hebrew expresses the action that is not perfected, that is, not completed and therefore translates with the future. In the second group of verses, the imperfect is preceded by a negation (*lō* followed by the verbal mode *yiktol*) which gives rise to a vetitive. We could translate it with the future tense: «you will not steal» because, in light of your relationship with God, you will not need to steal (and so on). The fact that God's interlocutor is Israel can be deduced from what happens in the previous chapter and from the adjective «your» with which God relates to Israel, since it is not specified here.

Last but not least, in the first verse, *dabar* appears both as a verbal form and as a noun, so there is an insistence, a repetition, a confirmation of

the fact that it is simply «words»<sup>9</sup>. Unlike *āmar* «to say», which requires an object complement, in *dabar* it can be implicit, or it can summarize a presupposed or already pronounced speech, which contains a finite verbal form of *āmar* or the infinitive *le'mōr*. Furthermore *āmar* can have a great variety of subjects (people, animal things, etc.), while *dabar* has as subject either the people or the instruments with which speaking is designated (mouth, lips, voice ...). When *dabar* is to be understood as «the word of God», it expresses a broader concept of «commandment» and «precept».

In the whole text, the only word that can be translated as command is *mizwotaj* (v. 6 «my commandments») from *mizwah* «precept» and from the verb *zwh* «to command, to order», but also «to give responsibility», which therefore requires an active role on the part of those who accept God's requests. This term appears in place of *dabar* only after J-H has proclaimed his uniqueness for Israel: the word becomes command if the interlocutor accepts the special relationship to which God calls him.

Narrative context and linguistic correspondences attribute to the Decalogue a deeper meaning than that of a simple list of commandments: the Decalogue wants to tell and remember first of all a founding experience and to organize the future of the people. A different and better future than what was experienced during slavery.

#### 4. The Relationship between Spirituality and Law

The Decalogue was interpreted as a legislative text in the strict sense only many centuries after its writing and, precisely, at the time of the *mishna*, or about a century after the destruction of the second Temple in Jerusalem (AD 70). In the beginning it was a simple collection of general criteria that served to orient the relationship of the individual with J-H and with the community to which they belongs. Precisely as criteria, the *debarîm* have always come «before» the law and constitute its foundation. Their function was indicative not in the sense of the possibility of doing otherwise, but in determining the direction of action.

From a juridical point of view, the Decalogue represents something that goes beyond the law: it constitutes a first result of the historical-political experience that Israel carries out together with its God and, at the same time, the set of criteria from which to derive the other norms. It acts as a keystone of the religious and political identity of the people: Ex 20: 1-17

<sup>9</sup> S. Jackson, *Theft in Early Jewish Law*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972.

is the result of the path followed up to that moment, but also a new beginning, to the extent that it is able to guide the future.

As we saw, the narrative context in which the passage is situated is the stipulation of the covenant between Israel and the liberating God. It represents the culminating moment of liberation from slavery and every element of the Decalogue is intimately linked to it: all the verses that follow must be interpreted as a consequence of that fundamental event.

It is the combination of lexicon and narrative context that gives a certain meaning to the pericope rather than another. The Decalogue is a juridical-normative text not because it proclaims rules of law, nor because it expresses a natural order of things, but because it is full of a founding experience, made possible by the relationship between J-H and his people.

The people accept the Decalogue as a founding constitution not because it judges its contents «just», but because it judges them «true»: it is the room of the whole lifeworld, place of identity and meaning. The motivation criterion is not ethical judgment, but historical truthfulness. Here memory performs a universalizing function not only in a spatial sense but also in a temporal sense, that is, it embraces future generations. This takes the form of the possibility of rediscovering the vital world when the text is read or remembered. In this sense, the constitutional criteria of the Decalogue are projected towards a different and better future.

More than a norm, the Decalogue could be defined as the temporal and juridical medium of Israel, the turning point in which the people's awareness means that what has happened up to that moment is interpreted as an event, that is, as history, tradition and what follows is the future, characterized, this time, by the awareness of the project and its direction. Without this awareness, the past would not be history and it would not make any sense. Respect for the law is therefore not the expression of an external bond, but of an internal experience. Also for this reason the Decalogue is proclaimed directly by God to the people: it concerns everyone, that is, each one in their relationship with the others and there can be no awareness of the community without involvement and responsibility.



# The Painting Program of the Orthodox Church as a Key to Understanding the Eastern Christian Picture of the World

Yuliia Khlystun

*Abstract* – Monumental ecclesiastical painting is often perceived either as an interior decoration of the temple or as a «Gospel for the illiterate», since temple painting often contains scenes from the Holy Scriptures. In science, the painting program of the Orthodox church is mainly the subject of study by art historians, while from the point of view of cultural studies and semiotics, it is not sufficiently studied. The function of monumental church painting as an image of the Eastern Christian picture of the world is insufficiently revealed; this article is dedicated to this issue. The purpose of the article is to consider the painting program of the Orthodox church from the point of view of semiotics (cultural codes), to show how it reveals the Eastern Christian picture of the world.

Keywords: Orthodox church – iconography – church painting program – Eastern Christian picture of the world – cultural code

## 1. Introduction

Temple painting is one of the main ways of pictorial decoration of the temple, along with icons, however, the purpose of painting in the temple differs significantly from the purpose of the icon. The icon obeys its own image laws, and it is autonomous, not tied to a specific place, while the temple painting is a complex of interrelated plots that opens as you move through the temple. When studying church monumental painting, it is necessary to consider all components of the liturgical space of the temple in synthesis. Only in this way can one understand the language of church painting and comprehend its deep theological meaning.

Temple painting is also called the breath of the temple. The painting, figuratively speaking, is what the walls of the temple would tell us if they could speak. Compared to icon painting, monumental painting is a more dynamic art, directly related to the course of the entire church service<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> D.A. Grebennikova, *Monumental Painting in the Space of an Orthodox Church*, in «Bulletin of the Kazan State University», 2008, 3, p. 217.

In the program of the painting of an Orthodox church, iconographic subjects form an ensemble, the purpose of which is not only to fully reflect the spiritual essence of the Christian faith, but also the picture of the world in its Eastern Christian understanding. This means that the church painting program is a kind of cultural code, thanks to which the transfer of spiritual experience to new generations is possible.

## **2. What is the Program for Painting an Orthodox Church?**

The program for painting an Orthodox church, as defined by Maria Georgievna Davidova, is a combination of canonical images, subject to the principle of the spatial and symbolic hierarchy of the temple interior<sup>2</sup>.

First of all, the painting of a temple is the embodiment of a particular program that meets the purpose of the temple (for example, a diocese cathedral, a hospital church, a confessional church, a tomb church, a church with a baptistery, a katholikon – the main church in the monastery complex, a refectory church, etc.).

Considering the program of painting an Orthodox church from the point of view of axiology, we will see that the paintings are in hierarchical subordination, creating the internal liturgical space of the church.

Researcher M.G. Davidova distinguishes three substantive plans for the church painting program, where the first is common to the cross-domed church, and includes a division into the mountainous and valley parts. The 'mountain' occupies the upper dome space (dome and drum) and symbolizes the celestial sphere, and the 'lower' occupies the lower main part of the temple (walls and columns), and means the earthly world. Also, the hierarchical subordination of images takes place when moving through the temple from west to east: from the vestibule to the altar. At the same time, the significance of the depicted plots (events, personalities) will increase.

The very turning of the temple with the altar to the east corresponds to the idea of moving from darkness to light (which in the architectural space of the temple is identical to the movement of the person entering from the narthex to the altar, that is, the movement from west to east).

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<sup>2</sup> Давидова М. Г. Значение термина «программа росписей» для церковного монументального искусства. Вестник ПСТГУ Серия V. Вопросы истории и теории христианского искусства. М., 2015. Вып. 3 (19), pp. 120-129.

The second substantive plan of the church painting program is more specific, it can be associated with the disclosure of the main Orthodox dogmas, for example, about the Trinity, about the Incarnation. Of particular importance to this plan is the dedication of the temple and its purpose.

The third content plan is determined by the specific wishes of the customer (when choosing certain saints, including locally revered saints in the painting program, or when choosing an analogue to follow, etc.).

Of the surviving descriptions of the painting of the temple, the oldest refers to the middle of the ninth century and belongs to Patriarch Photius of Constantinople. In one of his sermons, he described the painting of the new temple built during his reign in the imperial palace. According to this description, Christ the Almighty was depicted in the dome in a medallion surrounded by archangels. In the conch of the altar is Our Lady Oranta. In addition, the temple had numerous images of saints: forefathers, prophets, apostles and martyrs. About the scenes depicting the Gospel events (the twelfth feasts), he did not mention, although they could also be included in the painting of the temple<sup>3</sup>.

It is known that by the middle of the ninth century, a harmonious theological and artistic system of monumental church painting had finally taken shape. In parallel with this, the cross-domed type of the church dominated in Orthodox religious architecture. A strictly thought-out system of painting was consistent with the architecture of the building and formed a single whole with it. It is the architecture of the temple that is of particular importance in the solution of the monumental-pictorial ensemble. Since an Orthodox church is the most 'open', conscious, thoughtful system of meanings and symbols, at the same time it is a complex symbol itself<sup>4</sup>.

For example, the Western theologian Peter Karnatsky (twelfth century) considers the temple as an image of the world. «At the foundation», he wrote, «a stone is placed with the image of the temple and 12 other stones, as a sign that the Church rests on Christ and the 12 apostles. Walls mean nations; there are four of them, because they accept converging from four sides»<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Лазарев В. Н. История византийской живописи. М.: Искусство, 1986.

<sup>4</sup> I.M. Stets, *Symbolism and Architectural and Spatial Environment. Symbolism of the Orthodox Church*, in «Proceedings of the Pskov Polytechnic Institute», 11, 2007, 1, pp. 78-79.

<sup>5</sup> Кудрявцев. М. П. ., Кудрявцева Т.Н. Русский православный храм. Символический язык архитектурных форм. «К Свету», 17, М., 1998, pp. 65-87.

Hieromonk Dionysius Furnoagrafit (1701-1755) – an Athos painter from Furna, who based on the study of the work of Manuil Panselin and his experience, *Erminia or Instruction in the Art of Painting*, described in his work the system of painting churches of various architecture. About the painting of a *trulnaya* (that is, with domes) church, he writes as follows:

«When you want to paint a trulnaya (dome) church, then draw a multi-colored circle in the sky of the dome, similar to a rainbow that is visible in the clouds during rain, and depict Christ in it blessing and holding the Gospel on his Persians and inscribe: Jesus Christ the Almighty. Draw cherubs and thrones near the circle and write: see, see, see, as I am, and there is no God but Me (Deut. 32, 39). I create the earth and man on it. I have established heaven with my hand (Isaiah 65:12).

Below the Almighty (in the neck of the dome), depict other faces of angels. And among them, to the east, the Mother of God with outstretched hands and write over Her: Mother of God, Mistress of the angels»<sup>6</sup>.

About the painting of the altar, the author of *Erminia* writes: «Inside the altar, in the eastern recess, below the line of the prophets, depict the Mother of God sitting on a throne and holding the Christ Child, and above Her write: 'The Mother of God is the highest of heaven'. On either side of Her depict two archangels, Michael and Gabriel, interceding. Then, on the same line with her, in the altar and throughout the temple, on the upper parts of the walls depict the Lord's feasts, the holy passions of Christ and His miracles after the Resurrection»<sup>7</sup>.

### 3. Church Painting Program as a Cultural Code

The cultural code is the key to understanding a given type of culture; these are unique cultural features inherited by peoples from their ancestors; it is information encoded in some form that makes it possible to identify a culture. The cultural code should have the following characteristics: self-sufficiency for the translation and preservation of culture, openness to change, and universality.

Since «the most important foundations of any culture are the sum of a person's ideas about himself, about the origins and goals of his being in the world, about the world around him and his relationship with God»<sup>8</sup>,

<sup>6</sup> *Erminia, or Instruction in the Art of Painting*, compiled by hieromonk painter Dionysius Furnoagrafit (1707-1733, Kyiv, 1868. Reprinted: 1993), pp. 223-236.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> Андрей Кураев, протоиерей. Дары и анафемы. Что христианство принесло в мир.

the foundations of Christian culture and the Christian worldview should be correlated with the program of painting an Orthodox church.

The division of the internal space of the temple into 'heavenly' and 'earthly' is reflected both in the architecture of the Orthodox church and in its monumental painting. In the heavenly world there is God, angels, there is no time, because there is eternity. This world has boundless space. In the world down below, it is the other way around: there is time and space is limited.

These two worlds are not independent of each other, they do not just coexist in parallel, but they are connected, firstly, by the Coming of Christ to earth and His departure to the heavenly world, and secondly, angels from the heavenly world come to the earthly world. At the same time, the righteous from the earthly world fall into the heavenly one.

The world below strives to imitate the world above, because it must be perfected. This is emphasized in the monumental painting of the temple: the axiological significance of images increases as you move from west to east (which, as mentioned earlier, is the equivalent of the top).

The earthly world communicates with the heavenly world. In this sense, the internal space of an Orthodox church is a condition, a necessary prerequisite for communication between the earthly and heavenly worlds, and therefore this space can be considered as a semiotic space or semiosphere, in accordance with the definition of Juri Lotman<sup>9</sup>. The space of the temple is characterized by the following signs of the semiosphere: delimitation, heterogeneity, unevenness, binary and asymmetry. The temple is a sacred space and thus it is separated from the outer space. At the same time, the inner space of the temple is heterogeneous in terms of sacrality (the altar and the rest of the temple are more profane). The mountainous and valley worlds presented in architecture and monumental painting reflect the binarity. Asymmetry is observed in the fact that the earthly and heavenly worlds are presented in different proportions: the heavenly world is represented to a much lesser extent than the earthly one.

According to one of the iconographic canons, the temple painting should not be lower than the level of the shoulder of a person standing in the temple, since this space is reserved for people living on earth. In the lower part of the temple, on the walls, a holy *ubrus* (tablecloth) is usually depicted – a symbol of purity.

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Размышления на пороге III тысячелетия, <https://lib.pravmir.ru/library/book/1030>.

<sup>9</sup> J.M. Lotman, *Semiosphere: Culture and Explosion. Inside the Thinking Worlds*, St. Petersburg, Art-SPB, 2001.

The reverse perspective used in the Byzantine-style monumental painting conveys that the center of the painting is a person standing in the temple, and thus participating in the depicted events. Thanks to the reverse perspective, a person standing in the temple has the feeling that they are looking at him (from the walls). This serves as a reminder that the actions, words and thoughts of a person cannot be hidden from the sight of God. This technique helps to turn to one's inner world, which can lead to repentant thoughts. Thus, the temple painting reflects that in the center of the universe in the Christian sense there is a person, a «macrocosm», according to the words of Saint Gregory the Theologian.

The people standing in the temple represent the «militant» church, because they are waging an internal struggle with their passions and vices. The painting of the temple is designed to reflect the church «triumphant»: the Glory of the Lord Jesus Christ and the triumph of the righteous in the Kingdom of Heaven. The triumphant church is not subject to global changes, in contrast to the militant church, where at any moment «many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first» (Matthew 19: 30). In this context, the temple also acts as a place of connection and communication between the two components of the church, therefore it is a semiotic space and a semiosphere.

#### **4. Description of the Program for Painting the Church in Honor of the Icon of the Most Holy Theotokos «Joy of All Who Sorrow»**

As an example, let's consider the program for painting the church in honor of the icon of the Most Holy Theotokos «Joy of All Who Sorrow», which is the main church of the women's skete of the Svyatogorsk Lavra in the village Bogorodichne, Donetsk region (fig. 1).

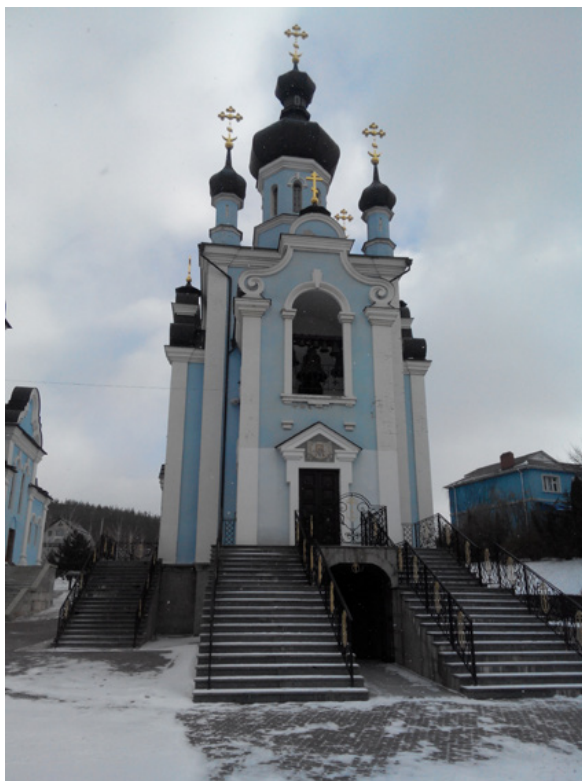


Fig. 1 The church in honor of the icon of the Most Holy Theotokos «Joy of All Who Sorrow» of the women's skete of the Svyatogorsk Lavra in the village Bogorodichne, Donetsk region (early 2000s) (photo by the author).

The church was painted by the icon painter Alexander Chashkin (in 2002-2006), who, together with Metropolitan Arseny (vicar of the Svyatogorsk Lavra), drew up a program for painting this church. This temple was significantly damaged in the summer of 2022 during the invasion of Russian troops into the territory of Ukraine.

According to its internal architecture, the temple is single-domed and painted in the Byzantine style. The 'higher' part of the temple (dome, drum, domed skuf) depicts the gospel picture of the Ascension of the Lord: in the dome of the temple there is the image of Jesus Christ in a mandorla, in the drum there are cherubim and archangels, in the under-dome skufya is the Most Holy Theotokos surrounded by two archangels and eleven apostles (fig. 2). There are four evangelists in the sails (made using

the mosaic technique). In the altar (in the conch of the apse) is the image of the Mother of God of the Sign, below is the image of Christ, the Great Bishop, and the Saints Basil the Great and John Chrysostom, who composed the order of the Liturgy, standing before Him. On the altar wall in medallions are also depicted Saints Nicholas the Wonderworker, Gregory the Theologian, Spyridon Trimifuntsky, Cyril of Alexandria.



Fig. 2 Dome space of the church in honor of the icon of the Most Holy Theotokos «Joy of All Who Sorrow», plot 'Ascension of the Lord'. Painting by Alexander Chashkin (2006) (photo by the author).

In the upper part of the northern wall is the Assumption of the Most Holy Theotokos, below are images of the holy martyrs: Lyudmila, Tatyana, Empress Alexandra, the Monk Martyr Elizabeth; further, in the medallions – the holy royal martyrs-children: Alexy, Olga, Tatyana, Maria, Anastasia (fig. 3).



Fig. 3 A part of the painting of the northern wall of the temple: the Assumption of the Most Holy Theotokos, below are images of the holy martyrs: Lyudmila, Tatyana, Empress Alexandra (2006) (photo by the author).

In the upper part of the southern wall, opposite the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary – the Nativity of Christ, then – especially revered saints: Saint Blessed Prince Dimitri Prilutsky, Saint Martyr. Patr. Tikhon, Saint Rights. John of Kronstadt. In the medallions opposite the holy royal martyrs-children are images of Saint Martyr. Faith, Hope, Love and their mother Sophia.

The walls are dominated by images of saints, whose way of life should be imitated by the nuns of the skete. For example, Saint Euphrosyne and Eudoxia of Polotsk are painted full-length on the north side, Saint Anthony and Theodosius of the Caves are painted on the south side. On the kliros is an image of the Intercession of the Most Holy Theotokos. On the western wall is the image of Jesus Christ in a medallion, on both sides of which the archangels Michael and Gabriel are depicted, which serves as a reminder of the Last Judgment (fig. 4).



Fig. 4 The western wall of the church: the image of Jesus Christ in a medallion, on both sides of which the archangels Michael and Gabriel are depicted by Alexander Chashkin (2006) (photo by the author).

Consequently, when compiling the program for painting this temple, the general canons of building iconographic plots, the dedication of the temple were taken into account (the images of the Most Holy Theotokos are found both in the conch of the apse, and in the under-dome skufya, and on the kliros; the main background of the painting is blue, which is considered the color of the Most Holy Theotokos and symbolizes Her ever-virginity<sup>10</sup>); the purpose of the temple as the main temple of the Lavra skete was taken into account – the images of the saints make up a significant part of the paintings.

The program of painting the temple in honor of the icon of the Most Holy Theotokos «Joy of All Who Sorrow» reflects that the Orthodox Church equally honors both the ancient martyrs and ascetics, and the saints who lived and suffered in the twentieth century. Thus, the saints who have been glorified in recent times are given the same glory as those who were glorified by the church several centuries ago.

<sup>10</sup> *Secrets of the Canonical Icon. Theology of Clothing*, available at: <https://www.pravmir.ru/tajny-kanonicheskoy-ikony-bogoslovie-odezhdy/>.

Considering all the above facts, in the context of culturologists, the term «painting program» of the temple can be given the following definition. The program for painting an Orthodox church is a complex of interconnected iconographic plots, the location of which is determined according to their axiological significance in the Christian hierarchy in projection on the architectural features of a particular church.

According to this definition, the programs of church murals are identical in their structure, since they obey the general laws (canons) of construction, but can be quite peculiar in content within the constituent parts of a given structure. The uniqueness of each particular temple painting program is determined not so much by the unique features of the architecture of this temple, but by the choice of especially revered saints and subjects of the Sacred History by the compilers of the painting program.

The painting program of an Orthodox church reflects the picture of the world in its Orthodox understanding, that is, it displays the interior space of this church as a separate image of the world, but at the same time, this world is only part of the entire «triumphant church» (the heavenly, earthly church is called «militant»), since it cannot include absolutely all existing iconographic plots (Old and New Testaments, church history), images of all glorified and unglorified saints, heavenly powers. The «militant» church is called so because people (members of this earthly church) are at war with their passions, are subjected to temptations, daily make a spiritual choice in the direction of virtue or sin. The «triumphant» church is the church where the power of Jesus Christ triumphs, His victory over death and over sin. An Orthodox church combines the «militant» and «triumphant» churches. The program of the painting of the Orthodox church is designed to display the church «triumphant», the clergy and parishioners of the temple are the «militant» church.

Since the temple is a place of communication between the heavenly and earthly worlds, a place of communication between the church militant and the church triumphant, it can be considered as a semiotic space, that is, a semiosphere.