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

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*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.