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# ***ORA PRO NOBIS: BLESSED MARY'S HUMAN AND DIVINE PRAYER***

## **ABSTRACT**

The most important sources concerning Mary are the canonical Gospels and the *Acts of the Apostles*. The theology, cult and literature concerning Mary are imbued with almost two thousand years of cultural history. Moreover, the interest in this figure grew continuously up to recent epochs. The aim of my study is to analyze Italian poetry in which the Blessed Virgin Mary is the enunciator or addresser of discourse. As prayerful enunciation may occur only in certain discursive conditions, many of the prayers present in Italian literature can be interpreted as instances of illocutionary acts—in this framework Mary's words present conversational features and her direct speech allows the investigation of creative fiction that is closely (and pragmatically) linked to a portion of reality. The words pronounced by Mary in the poetry analyzed engage with the idea of sanctity and make it understandable in relation to people's lives.

## **KEY WORDS**

Marian poetry, Italian poetry, planctus, literature and theology, prayerful enunciation, direct speech in poetry

...l'altezza del discorso su di lei è maggior di me, e come farò?  
--Ephrem the Syrian

## **Introduction**

The most important sources concerning Mary are the canonical Gospels.<sup>1</sup> It is here that we find certain references to the events that help contextualize her life, such as the Roman census appearing in Luke 2:1. Another point of reference can be found in the *Acts of the Apostles*, where there is a brief description of Mary's life in the first Christian communities after Jesus' Ascension. The Virgin Mary is one of the earliest saints in Christianity and also the most important. In this context, notwithstanding the differences between specific theologies, she is believed to be the Mother of Jesus or Mother of God. She began to represent an object of reflection, veneration, and liturgical prayer from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century onwards.

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The Blessed Mary is a figure imbued with two thousand years of cultural history. In fact, Marian devotion arose quite early: suffice it to recall the theologian Irenaeus of Lyon, who wrote about her during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. In his *Adversus haereses*, Irenaeus defined Mary as a counterbalance of Eve by tracing an analogy between Mary's obedience and Eve's disobedience in relation to God's word.<sup>2</sup> In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, after a period of debates and conflicts concerning this issue, a council convened to discuss Marian theology and issued the first and most important Marian dogma:<sup>3</sup> the dignity and theological implications of Mary's status as *theotokos* were officially accepted and went on to become a paradigm of real orthodoxy, as De Fiores argues (*Maria sintesi* 101-107). According to Augustine of Hippo and Ambrose of Milan, the Virgin Mary was framed as a part of Christological theology and an integral component of the Church's vision in the Greco-Roman world (Raab et al. 230). It is not my purpose here to summarize the development of theology that is focused on the Blessed Virgin Mary or the history of Marian dogmas. Instead my aim is to cite the moments that had the greatest impact on representations of the Virgin Mary, in the sense of both creation and the expanse of prayers addressed to her: these prayers influenced poetry and often gave rise to an increase in literary production focused on this topic.

A short introduction is necessary for a basic understanding of the cultural dynamics of the relationship between Marian theology, the cult devoted to her, popular devotion, and poetry which imagines and utters her words. There are two recent moments in this evolution, the first one occurring during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the second during the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the proclamation of the most recent Marian dogmas; namely, the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption.<sup>4</sup> General interest in Mary grew continuously up to recent epochs, and it is worth noting that theological and popular attention to this figure have grown side by side. Works considering this particular, dual character of Marian culture in Italy can be found beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> The last century is surely the most interesting one in terms of Marian theology,<sup>6</sup> veneration, and popular cults and it was in this framework that all kinds of devotion—including prayer—developed as well. Such devotion was openly promoted among Catholics by popes and popular saints such

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<sup>2</sup> This work is available online at [http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/04z/z\\_0130-0202\\_\\_Iraeneus\\_\\_Adversus\\_haereses\\_libri\\_5\\_\[Schaff\]\\_\\_EN.pdf.html](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/04z/z_0130-0202__Iraeneus__Adversus_haereses_libri_5_[Schaff]__EN.pdf.html).

<sup>3</sup> Recent dogmas are proclaimed by popes, but earlier ones were voted by a council – dogmas established by popes include the Immaculate Conception (Pope Pius IX, 1854) and Assumption (Pope Pius XII, 1950), while the previous dogmas are: the dogma of the Mother of God or God-Bearer (*the Theotokos*) and that of the virgin birth of Jesus (6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> century).

<sup>4</sup> Of course, these issues were also widely debated beginning in the Patristic epoch and later, during the Middle Ages. As topics, they are also present in Italian medieval poetry.

<sup>5</sup> I mean the treatise *Della regolata divozione dei Cristiani* written by Lodovico Antonio Muratori, published in 1779. For the critical focus see De Fiores, “L'immagine di Maria” 23-24.

<sup>6</sup> Theologians of the catholic and reformed churches wrote about Mary during the last century, such as Karl Rahner, René Laurentin, Romano Guardini, Suzanne de Dietrich, etc. Important theological works were published also within the Eastern Church.

as Giovanni Bosco, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, John Paul II, and others. Mary is also a significant topic in ecumenical debate.

Marian prayers can be found in Christian culture in both liturgical and popular contexts. One of the most ancient prayers of this kind is *Suub tuum praesidium*, the Greek version of which has been identified in an Egyptian papyrus dated to no later than the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (Long 363). Significantly, this prayer also includes an onomastic element (v. 2, “Theotóke”) sanctioned during the abovementioned Council of Ephesus. Exponents of prayer addressing Blessed Mary have included the most important fathers of the Church and the most well-known Medieval intellectuals and poets, from Ephrem the Syrian to Bede the Venerable and Bernard of Clairvaux.<sup>7</sup> Marian praise appears in the homilies, liturgical books, and sacramentaries—it was a common phenomenon during the Middle Ages alongside the popularity of the so-called Marial books, namely collections of prayers, poems, miracles, sermons, and scholastic treatises (De Fiores, *Maria sintesi* 181-82). The autumn of the Middle Ages brought with it the wide circulation of extraordinary Marian poetry written by both ecclesiastical and secular authors: the act of incorporating Marian theology and devotion into verse became an appropriation, giving rise to a strong current of writing about this theme spanning the centuries without discrimination between religious and profane authors, prevailing or minor theological trends, or different paradigms. For reasons of limited space, the liturgical context surrounding the Virgin cannot be included in this analysis. However, this type of prayer—along with liturgy-oriented poetry—might constitute a topic for a separate essay.<sup>8</sup>

Even if I focused exclusively on its private forms, it would be impossible to summarize the history of Marian prayer here. Therefore, I aim to circumscribe my study to those writings—mostly poetry, broadly conceived—in which Mary is represented while she is praying. What makes this analysis an interesting topic? It is significant because it leads to investigating the relationships between religious discourse and literary representations, analyzing creative fiction that is closely linked to a portion of reality. Stefano De Fiores, speaking of inculturation, argues:

La Vergine di Nazareth viene estratta dalla umile condizione umana per esser presentata nella sua nobiltà (Mantovano e Sannazaro): più regina che serva, ma sempre tenera madre. Il protagonismo di Maria raggiunge vertici estremi nella poesia latina [*scil. of Renaissance humanism*] che attribuisce a lei, come nell'antichità

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<sup>7</sup> In the second part of the prayer, *Ave Maria* also includes an invocation to the Mother of God.

<sup>8</sup> The litany or the rosary are good examples of what I mean by extra-liturgical prayers that inspire poetry. Both prayers were born out of the official liturgy and rites. Successively they were included in certain liturgical celebrations, while forms of liturgy entered in the contexts of private prayer. Josef Andreas Jungmann argues that liturgy is a public prayer and there is a deep difference between this and private prayer.

a Iside, la potenza sulle forze della natura oltre che sulle sorti degli umani. (De Fiore, *Maria sintesi* 219-20)

In poetry, the Virgin Mary played the protagonist in successive literary epochs as well, and her divine and human characteristics prevail in specific representations and poetic trends. Poetic representations of Mary in prayer reflect this balance by indicating or even anticipating the directions that change took. Let me start with the Gospels: the Virgin Mary does not speak often in these texts, but her words are always incisive.

### Mary's Words in the Gospels

Pope Francis recently defined the Virgin Mary as the “everyone’s mom.” In Western culture, she has been and continues to represent a cultural protagonist. Her life and miracles are the focus of extensive literary production, and she is also an object of both religious and poetic prayer and praise. In Christianity, she is the addressee of prayers and one of the most popular figures interceding on behalf of the faithful. At the same time, it is rather uncommon to find direct utterances by Mary, that is, instances of her speaking in the grammatical first person: we do not often imagine her speaking. Nevertheless, as a human being and faithful Jewish believer, she had to pray. After the end of her earthly life, she is believed to have been welcomed into Heaven; as an intercessor, a mediator, she is believed to bring human intentions to God’s attention. This study is aimed at both researching and analyzing literary works in which Mary is the enunciator or addresser of discourse. As this analysis will show, in the common two-fold representation of Mary—on earth, among humans, and afterwards in the glory of Heaven—the Virgin’s former role is privileged in Italian poetry starting in the Middle Ages.<sup>9</sup>

Among the fragments referencing Mary in the canonical Gospels, her voice is directly reported:

1. in Luke, 1: 38 when, during the Annunciation, Mary defines herself as the servant of the Lord (the famous *Ecce ancilla Domini*<sup>10</sup> in the Vulgate) who answers through an act of submission to God’s will (*fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*);
2. in Luke 1: 46-55, during the Visitation of Elisabeth, Mary’s direct speech is reported starting from *Magnificat anima mea Dominum*;
3. in John 2: 3, 5, Mary addresses her Son to inform him that there is no more wine. Shortly afterwards, she orders the servants to do as Jesus tells them.

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<sup>9</sup> About Mary’s presence in the Gospels see Valentini, “Maria nella Scrittura.”

<sup>10</sup> In examining the well-known sentences pronounced by the Virgin Mary in the Gospels, I draw on the *Vulgata*.

The mother of Jesus is mentioned several times, but the above instances are her only direct speech in the Gospels. Patterns of representing her in Italian literature—and this study concerns primarily poetry—derive from the scenes recounted in the Gospels. There are literary works in which poetry depicts Mary as speaking where the Scriptures leave her in silence.

The *Magnificat*<sup>11</sup> in Luke 1 is a tribute to the Lord. Its final formula<sup>12</sup> was later taken as the closing part of many prayers. In the fragment analyzed here, Mary answers Elisabeth after Elizabeth had greeted her during the Visitation. Examining definitions of prayer, we find an article on prayer appearing in the Encyclopedia Britannica:

From its primitive to its mystical expression, prayer expresses a human desire to enter into contact with the sacred or holy. As a part of that desire, prayer is linked to a feeling of presence (of the sacred or holy), which is neither an abstract conviction nor an instinctive intuition but rather a volitional movement conscious of realizing its higher end. Thus, prayer is described not only as meditation about God but as a step, a “going out of one’s self,” a pilgrimage of the spirit “in the presence of God.” It has, therefore, a personal and experiential character that goes beyond critical analysis. (“Prayer”)

From this point of view, the *Magnificat* meets the criteria of prayer. In biblical studies, it is also well-contextualized in the tradition of the Old Testament as well as the earliest currents of Christian liturgy and prayer.<sup>13</sup> It is worth recalling that *Ave Maria*, which also constitutes one of the canonical prayers of Christianity, accompanies the fragment of speech pronounced by Mary. To return to the definition of prayer as well as a possible association with the prayer pronounced by Mary, and therefore a change in what we traditionally consider an axis of communication in this case, Francesco Marsciani provides a broad description of the concept:

Vi sarebbe dunque, forse, la possibilità di dilatare il campo della preghiera da un estremo rappresentato dall’esperienza mistica di elevazione ad un altro estremo che consisterebbe nella supplica qualunque, tutto ciò che si risolve in una domanda di qualcosa a qualcuno con atteggiamento di sottomissione.

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<sup>11</sup> There is a rich tradition of studies concerning the *Magnificat*, its sources and subdivision in parts, textual tradition, etc. To cite only one work on this topic that, however, offers a complex discussion, see Valentini, *Il Magnificat*. See also the aforementioned Valentini, “Maria nella Scrittura:” “Il Magnificat infatti è un canto personale e comunitario, della serva del Signore e d’Israele suo servo [...]. Non a caso le comunità cristiane, fin dalle origini, hanno recepito l’importanza di questo canto, facendolo proprio; e unendo la loro voce a quella della Madre del Signore, lo ripetono incessantemente” (34).

<sup>12</sup> “Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto, sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper: et in Saecula saeculorum. Amen” (The Vulgate version).

<sup>13</sup> Following the notes on the Ecumenical Translation of the Bible, Mary’s *Magnificat* appearing in Luke is intertextually connected to the psalms as well as the Books of Samuel, Genesis, Sirach, Habakkuk, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Job, Ezekiel, and Micah (*La Bibbia TOB* 2324).

As Marsciani shows, prayerful enunciation occurs in certain discursive conditions that define prayer from the communicative point of view. In its simplest version, prayer involves an individual believer or group of faithful who seek to communicate with divinity, believed to have the power to concretely influence their lives. This is a communicative situation that normally occurs for believers of many religions. In my view, this fact can influence our interpretation of Mary's prayers starting from the Gospels and concluding with the poetry of the contemporary era. How so? Starting with Luke, Mary's words can also be interpreted as reported illocutionary acts, just like the prayer uttered by any person of faith in any historical moment.<sup>14</sup> I would argue that, under similar circumstances and given these premises, many of the prayers present in literature—in this case, Italian poetry—can be considered instances of illocutionary acts: they can be positioned or carried out as illocutionary acts. Why it is necessary to justify my point of view in this case by invoking a field as distant as pragmatics? This approach is useful in the analysis of recent poetry in which the Virgin Mary's spatial positioning in theological and artistic representations of her has shifted (Kubas, "Mary in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Italian poetry"). At the same time, private and (in this case above all) poetic prayer also displays conversational features: as we will see, this and other factors—such as the existence of certain components comprising the poems I will present in the following section of this article—move the fragments under consideration to an area located between literature and everyday reality.

### **Mary's Prayer in Poetry: From the Early Period to the Council of Trent**

The words pronounced by Mary in the canonical Gospels are among the sources authors draw on for successive poetic creations.<sup>15</sup> Certain relevant scenes have become the topic of poems and works in which Mary is made to speak. I have in mind the moments in which a human being would normally express thoughts and feelings, as if the fact that Mary does not often speak in the Gospels were justified by the rhetorical use of ellipsis. Before focusing on the analysis of lyric genres across centuries, I would like to offer a brief example of Marian enunciation written in one of the earliest

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<sup>14</sup> I discussed the conditions of prayer reported in Dante's *Divine Comedy* in a paper presented during the 2022 Annual Conference of the American Society of Names, on the basis of theoretical works by J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (1962); De Gaynesford; Kalbarczyk. In *How to Do Things With Words*, Austin leaves some room for possibility by speaking about "the special nature of acts of saying something" (112, but see also 111-15, and following). According to ???, "Poetic uttering can then be regarded as a species of the latter group" (628). Prayer almost always presumes a kind of auditory memory. In Christian prayer, a very simple example would be the invocations to the holy names: any believer recognizes them because of their constant presence in all Christian culture, after having used them many times in private and collective prayer. The invocation itself can be considered performative. A proposal of textual pragmatics was recently made by De Gaynesford (213), who worked on poetic text. In my view, in De Gaynesford's study the relevant passages are those concerning the values of truth or action achieved by speech acts.

<sup>15</sup> Other sources of the words of Mary exist, for example the apocryphal Gospels.

vernaculars from central Italy inserted in a Latin drama about the Passion of Christ—this specific case comes from a Latin manuscript entitled *Passion of Montecassino*—believed to originate in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The fragment quoted below contains the only part of this work written in the vernacular. It can be seen as connected to the typical medieval genre of *planctus Mariae*, the genre on which a later section of this study focuses. I agree with scholars who interpret this fragment as conveying a very concrete closeness between Mary and the faithful (or the poet), a real participation in the pathos and drama of the mother (Sticca 182-83). Let me quote a three-line complaint uttered by Mary in the vernacular Italian:

[E]o te portai	nillu meu ventre.
Quando te beio	[m]oro presente.
Nillu teu regnu	agime a mmente. (Zimei 189)

In his comparative study of medieval, vernacular fragments on the passion in which Mary speaks, Zimei highlights the function of this specific type of passage placed in longer texts: “[the piece] evidently had a simple function of reminding—that is, of saying: from here on the Lament of the Virgin is sung” (193).<sup>16</sup> Edwards touches on this literary-pragmatic problem arguing that “when the Virgin makes her lament in Italian, the effect is to join the witness of ordinary speech to that of the Biblical language” (54-55). Thanks to these insightful observations, I have been able to recognize the link between this fragment and many other Italian poems that constitute the object of the following analysis. Zimei also points out the “Benedictine-Franciscan joint,” which will be relevant for other works that I will focus on in the following part of this article (191-92).

A few representations of Mary at prayer can be found in the early period. As far as religious poetry is concerned, the genre of *lauda* or the song of praise flourished, in early Italian poetry and its great success can be attributed to an increasing demand for prayer in the vernacular languages (Kubas, “La lauda spirituale” 783-84).<sup>17</sup> Generally speaking, reported speech is not a relevant element of *lauda*: the common opinion is that it characterizes more lyrical genres. Nevertheless, in a volume collected under the title *Laudario della Compagnia di San Gilio*, including *laudas* related to the milieu of the Florentine lay confraternity that was active during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries,<sup>18</sup> there is a poem which uses a collective voice to praise the Nativity. However,

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<sup>16</sup> Both of the translations of Zimei in this paragraph are mine.

<sup>17</sup> See the seminal history of the *lauda* by Matteo Leonardi.

<sup>18</sup> The phenomenon of confraternities is typical of the late Middle Ages in Italy. These widespread organizations consisted of devotional (or penitential) associations of lay people who met to collectively either pray or flagellate themselves. Confraternities focused on praise were called *compagnie dei laudesi*: they had a statute, patron saint, and set meeting place where participants came together to pray (usually a town church). The phenomenon was related to a general trend of spiritual renewal characterizing the mid-thirteenth century. Each confraternity developed a set of original (in the medieval sense, naturally) prayers—collected



as in the previous work, at a certain point the poem directly reports Mary's words for her baby Jesus:

O virgo Maria che l'ài nel preseppio,  
 quello dolce bambino, goderemo con esso  
 [...]
 Or veggiamo lo bambino gambectare nel fieno,  
 colle braccia scoperte non cura del gielo;  
 la madre il ricopria con gran desiderio;  
 e métteli la poppa nella sua bocchina.

Ciuppava il bambino la beata ciuppa,  
 et stringea con bocca, colle sue labbruçça;  
 ciuppa, ciuppa, ciuppa non vuole minestruçça,  
 ché non avea dentucci la dolce bocchina.

Cullava il bambino la mamma sua;  
 "Nanna, l'amor mio, colla gratia tua!;"  
 [...] (Del Popolo 155-56)

This short lullaby raises two noteworthy issues. The first is related to the genre of *lauda* itself, as it is very difficult to date these works<sup>19</sup> in relation to the late dating of the manuscripts—in this specific case, the preserved texts come from the mid- or late-fourteenth century *laudario* (Del Popolo 38-43). First, the presence of such fragments may suggest that this *lauda* was quite ancient and closely related to earlier forms such as the one quoted above.<sup>20</sup> Second, this lullaby increases the audience's engagement in the scene being described, creating an emotional moment that can easily be shared by any human being. Natalino Sapegno has noted the highly popular character of this poem (1029). Once again, within a larger form—this time a *lauda*—there appears an inset, a heterogeneous element, that may either represent real words heard in everyday life or create an effect that I would define as pragmatic. Apart from possible artistic aims, the double composition of this poem gives the impression of closeness between the human

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in *laudarios*—devoted to its patron saint and the patron of the church that hosted the meetings. The Virgin Mary was the patron saint of many confraternities, as can be deduced from the fact that she is the main figure invoked in several *laudarios*. Most *laudarios* are anonymous and it is quite rare for a *lauda* to bear an author's name, as in the of example Jacopone da Todi's collection. This problem is discussed in Kubas, *Litanic Verse* (33-37; 45-57). The Compagni di San Gilio was a confraternity of praise, consecrated to "Madonna Sancta Maria" and "messere San Gilio" (Del Popolo 21), namely St. Giles.

<sup>19</sup> As far as this anonymous *lauda* is concerned, the manuscripts were drafted at a moment subsequent to its artistic creation; indeed, sometimes two or three centuries passed between the moment the poem is assumed to have been written and the moment in which the manuscript conveying the text and preserving it for future audiences was composed.

<sup>20</sup> Del Popolo argues that the company cannot have been without a *laudario* all that time (27).

(reader, reciter, etc.) and the divine. To reverse the direction of reasoning, this might be seen as a specific result of poetic art addressing a specific audience.

The genre of *planctus Mariae* emphasizes imaginary words pronounced by Mary, especially during and after the Passion. Such words can, for instance, summarize the theological vision prevailing in the period under consideration: the purpose is to transmit the concrete religious thought of an epoch.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the ‘contamination’ of poetry with direct speech formally refers to drama and aims to achieve a degree of pathos that cannot be attained in other ways. Examples of this include Jacopone da Todi’s *Donna de paradiso*, which will be addressed later in this paper, but also *Lamentatio Beate Virginis Marie*, a long poem written by Enselmino da Montebelluna in the first half of the fourteenth century: this *terza rima* is among the longest (1513 lines) and most beautiful examples of the genre preserved from the Italian Middle Ages.<sup>22</sup> As Elisabetta Crema (34) reminds us, one of the sources for this *planctus* is the *Liber de Passione Domini* attributed to St. Bernard and, on the basis of this fact, we can position the work as part of a tradition akin to the works analyzed earlier in this article. Crema also notes: “Enselmino utilizza spunti più originali per avvicinare la Passione del Figlio e il dolore della Madre, rendendo quest’ultima protagonista di situazioni che nel Vangelo sono notoriamente attribuite a Cristo” (42). From the point of view of my study, Enselmino’s *Passione* is a significant work because it contains long fragments in which a conversational effect is a structural foundation for the entire work. As in Enselmino’s *Lamentatio Virginis* the Virgin Mary speaks in the first person,<sup>23</sup> several spoken inserts appear beginning with the lyrical subject who reveals himself in several passages of the poem. The Marian enunciation in this poem is richly developed and can be divided into several types, defined according to the addressee of the specific passages. Mary addresses:

- 1) Christ (as either mother or a believer),
- 2) God,
- 3) herself,
- 4) the people who witness the crucifixion,
- 5) believers in Christ of any epoch,
- 6) the Apostles and the followers of Christ, the Angels

In cases 4 to 6, what she says is often similar to accounts found in the Scriptures or the theology of the period, but in cases 1 and 2 she speaks to God or the divine nature of Jesus. Here we find a passage that unites maternal discourse with the act of praying to

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<sup>21</sup> Strong emotional mark makes it possible, for example, to skip over controversial points of the theological debate.

<sup>22</sup> See also Brugnolo.

<sup>23</sup> As seen in the mentioned 13th-century *Donna de paradiso* of Jacopone da Todi. I will focus on this point in the following section of this paper discussing Alda Merini.

God. In the second part in particular, a dense series of anaphoras, invocations using antonomasias reminiscent of the litanies, are interwoven with lines representing the discourse of a mother. This alternation combines antithetic visions, such as an elevated position related to the space of the divine within the prayer (“altitudo”) and the low position associated with the self-representation of human beings’ place in the space of earthly life (“humelmente”). Mary reports her own words:<sup>24</sup>

“O gloria – dis’io – del paradixo,  
 en cui desira li ançoli guardare,  
 como te vegio befato e derixo!”  
 Verso del cielo començai cridare:  
 “O *altitudo sapiencie Dei*,  
 como te vego humelemente stare!  
 O specchio reluçente ai occhi mei,  
 como te vego turbolento e scuro!  
 (Enselmino da Montebelluna 497)

In poetry, the tradition of *planctus Mariae* continued in the sixteenth century by the *lacrime* genre.<sup>25</sup> The sixteenth century, a turbulent time for Christianity, closes with *Le lacrime della beata Vergine* by Torquato Tasso, a medium-long poem using the form of *ottava rima*. The relationship between the human and the divine changed after the Reformation and so did representations of the Virgin Mary.<sup>26</sup> In Tasso’s poem, as Giuseppe Mazzotta notes, the tears are those of both Mary and the poet (140). Erminia Ardissino (610) considers Tasso’s lyric poetry through the lens of its representing the product of an era, writing that adheres to a specific way of experiencing and enacting faith, and this point brings one of the issues of my study into focus. Indeed, the fragment quoted below—apparently a statement directed at the Son—brings together features of soliloquy with a discourse addressing Jesus. As we see below, Mary does not belong to the space of heaven—even her maternal prayer is unworthy of the celestial call:

E, piangendo, diceva: “Oh com’è lunga  
 la mia dimora, anzi l’essiglio in terra!

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<sup>24</sup> Regarding the specific spatiality of Marian prayer in Italian poetry, see Kubas, “Mary in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Italian poetry.”

<sup>25</sup> The concept increased in breadth, as during the 1500s we find *lacrime* about Jesus’ passion of the Virgin Mary, but also about Peter, Mary Magdalene, and even Christ as in works by Torquato Tasso, Luigi Tansillo, Angelo Grillo, Erasmo da Valvasone, etc.

<sup>26</sup> One of the topics addressed by the Council of Trent was the “special privilege” God granted Mary, which caused the Marian debate to increase. In fact, Mazzotta argues that, in Tasso’s *Lacrime...*, poetry spans both philosophy and theology (140). Shannon McHugh (157-58) downplays in some way the scope of Tasso’s act of making Mary speak—which does not seem justified, even when compared to a strong poetic stance such as the choices Angelo Grillo made in the poems included in his volume *Pietosi affetti*, in which the first-person voice is that of Mary.

Deh sarà mai ch'a te ritorni e giunga,  
pur come da tempesta o d'aspra guerra?  
Bramo esser teco, o Figlio: a te mi giunga  
quella santa pietà che 'l ciel disserra.  
Se non son de la madre i preghi indegni,  
chiamami pure dove trionfi e regni. (Tasso 12)

Many other poetic works from this period are involved in representing Mary, but certain features can be emphasized only by making her speak directly. While the Virgin is traditionally represented in Italian literature as partially elevated figure, the consideration given to her maternal sorrow when depicting her as speaking in this way gives rise to a Marian spatiality that is surprisingly modern, given the distant eras considered thus far.

### **Mary's Prayer in Contemporary Poetry**

Since this study focuses not only on the sixteenth century, at this point let us move to the contemporary age: it is useful to encapsulate here a recent study devoted to changes in Marian spatiality. This process of change, unquestionably lasting more than a century, has continued up to the present. Initiated in the centuries following the Council of Trent, this shift brought Marian *sacrum* from celestial heights, represented as lying outside the boundaries of the space of earthly human existence, into (our) interior space (Kubas, "Mary in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Italian poetry").<sup>27</sup> The above-quoted work by Tasso is illustrative in terms of conveying the direction of this shift. In every era, Mary's prayer is earthly and human: to exemplify the representation of Marian speech, I have chosen two poets who represent two recent generations of contemporary poetry, Alda Merini (1931-2009) and Erri de Luca (1950-).

As Daria Dibitonto argues, Alda Merini's poetry is "variegata e complessa":

[...] soprattutto negli ultimi anni della sua produzione ha messo a tema lo slancio cristiano che ne ha sempre attraversato le rime. Di fronte a uno stesso mistero, la verità dell'uomo e di Dio, con uno stesso strumento, la parola, filosofia e poesia ritagliano spazi di senso tangenti e confinanti nel vasto territorio dello spirito. (153)

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<sup>27</sup> Kubas, "Mary in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Italian poetry" and Kubas, "Second Vatican Council." Interior versus exterior cultural space is understood following Juri M. Lotman's study "On the metalanguage of a typological description of culture" first published in 1975. In my study, the interior space corresponds to the earthly life of each human, while exterior space is a kind of abroad or, in this specific case, Christian paradise. A border divides these two areas. The Virgin Mary is able to inhabit both of these spaces, and in the history of literature she has been represented in both. Moreover, she is also a connector, an element that can cross the boundary between the two spaces.

The last period of Merini's career is the most relevant for the purposes of this study: *Mistica d'amore* is an important collection published during the last years of Merini's life and poetic production.<sup>28</sup> In this context, as Dibitonto (158-59) highlights, the poet devotes special attention to the female element—represented in this case by Mary. Several mystical poems from this collection cast Mary as speaking and the division of space into interior vs. exterior space (following Lotman's typology, see footnote 27) is effective in analyzing the words attributed to Mary in contemporary poetry. The first poem follows in the tradition of the *Magnificat* while also quoting the words appearing in the Gospel of Luke. The prayer is actually a dialogue addressing God, but it is entitled *Spavento di Maria*. The Annunciation is represented here in human terms, and the divine—both in Mary and in Jesus who is being conceived—is positioned exclusively in the earthly dimension, while God is perceived as a distant and hierarchical addressee. As in the Gospel, this new *Magnificat* represents—even more explicitly—a reflection on faith:

un figlio promesso a me,  
 tu ancella che non conosci l'amore,  
 un figlio mio e dell'albero,  
 un figlio mio e del prato,  
 un figlio mio e dell'acqua,<sup>29</sup>  
 un figlio solo:  
 il Tuo.  
 [...]  
 perché la fede è una mano  
 che ti prende le viscere,  
 la fede è una mano  
 che ti fa partorire. (Merini)

In another poem, Merini refers to the tradition of the *placatus* in which Mary is represented as in dialogue with the Son.<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, Merini's poetic representation also brings Jesus into the earthly space. This puts him together with the Mother in the

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<sup>28</sup> In *Mistica d'amore*, a volume published in 2008, Alda Merini gathered together five shorter books of poems that had been published separately in previous years. These shorter books became "chapters" of *Mistica d'amore*:

- 1) *Corpo d'amore. Un incontro con Gesù* (2001);
- 2) *Magnificat. Un incontro con Maria* (2002);
- 3) *Poema della croce* (2004);
- 4) *Cantico dei Vangeli* (2006);
- 5) *Francesco. Canto di una creatura* (2007).

<sup>29</sup> This passage displays the Iacoponic and broader Franciscan sensitivity of Alda Merini. There are other passages that refer to Jacopone da Todi's *Donna de paradiso*, such as the poem *Non prendete mio figlio* or the quotation at the beginning of *Poema della croce*, a "chapter" of *Mistica d'amore*.

<sup>30</sup> The poetry brings the Mother and the Son into close proximity. It is interesting to note that theology in this same period of the twentieth century expressed an increasing distance between Mary and Jesus, as can be seen in the writings of Romano Guardini, for instance (De Fiore, "L'immagine di Maria" 45).

interior of culture following Lotman's typology: the question at this point is whether moving Jesus into our interior space increases the distance separating him from God, as the latter remains an elevated addressee. Take for instance:

Gesù, sei tenue come una corda di violino  
e sei bramoso come il mare.  
E ti inerpichi sui monti,  
scendi nelle valli come qualsiasi tempesta di neve,  
ma sei gelido  
soltanto di fronte al peccato,  
e altrimenti sei il calore e il colore dell'anima,  
e tanto dista da te stesso il tuo volto  
quanto quello di Dio dal volto del Figlio...  
Così, Gesù, hai portato la primavera del sole  
in tutte le profondità della terra  
e sei sceso a patteggiare col demonio...

Finally, Merini also revisits the psalmic tradition of *Miserere mei*. This tradition can be seen to permeate another Marian prayer found in *Mistica d'amore*, associating the two spheres with the visual trope of *pietà* which is, in turn, a form of the lamentation of Christ. In a fully Christian context, a human Mary asks for mercy in this poem using penitential words with which she invokes both God and the universe:

Miserere di me,  
che sono caduta a terra  
come una pietra di sogno.  
Miserere di me, Signore,  
che sono un grumo di lacrime.  
[...]  
Miserere di me,  
o universo,  
egli era la punta di uno spillo  
l'ago supremo della mia paura.  
[...]  
Miserere della mia grandezza,  
miserere della mia stanchezza,

Merini also touches on other important aspects of the poetic tradition representing Mary's speech, such as the thirteenth-century *lauda* "Donna de paradiso" by Jacopone da Todi, transforming its recognizable elements in an anaphora ("mio figlio") accompanied by periphrases of the name of Jesus. In so doing, Merini's *Non prendete mio figlio* becomes a litany recited by Mary the Mother over her dead Son. As in the other texts by Merini analyzed here, this poem is included in *Magnificat: Un incontro con Maria*,

namely the first “chapter” of the collection *Mistica d’amore*, that is discursively particularly rich in texts reporting Mary’s words. Marian enunciation is indeed surprisingly widespread in Merini’s *Magnificat*, as if the poet wanted to focus specifically on this point. This part of *Mistica d’amore* grapples with traditional literary, visual, dogmatic, and theological references by making the Blessed Virgin Mary discuss them, thus bringing an innovative, female-spiritual perspective to the sphere of religious poetry.<sup>31</sup>

Erri de Luca is known as a writer whose artistic work and skill are closely related to his revisitation of the Scriptures. As Luciano Zappella argues, “[il] percorso deluchiano presenta la ricorsività di tre ambiti: la lotta politica, l’impegno umanitario, la frequentazione biblica” (33). The author has a single mission—as Nicolas Bonnet concludes—and these three aspects “appartengono alla stessa logica riparatrice” (134). De Luca subscribes to the idea that the Bible can only be read in ancient languages: the poet undertook to learn these languages while also studying biblical culture, and subsequently carried out a literal translation of the Bible. De Luca also wrote stories based on the gospels. Nisii notes that:

L’originalità di questo autore, a partire dalla scelta suggestiva dei titoli, ne fa indubbiamente un riscrittore, ma non semplicemente un romanziere o autore di racconti, quanto piuttosto un libero battitore in un terreno che sembra situarsi a metà strada tra la teologia narrativa e l’esegesi. (48)

*In nome della madre* was published as an audiobook read by the author (2006) to then become, a few years later, a theatrical play (2010). As in the earliest tradition of Italian language and literature, this work is deeply poetic. De Luca states that his sources lie in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (De Luca 4). The author represents Miriàm/Maria, an unmarried Jewish girl who is pregnant. After giving birth she speaks with her newborn, addressing God and herself as well: discursively, *In nome della madre* is Miriàm’s monologue that also includes conversations with Joseph, the voices of people who do not believe Mary, speech by the women of Nazareth who condemn the pregnancy of an unmarried girl, the advice given by Miriàm’s mother, and Joseph’s dialogue with other travelers headed for Bet Lèhem. While remaining awake to care for her newborn baby boy, she pronounces a long prayer addressed to God:

Signore del mondo, benedetto, ascolta la preghiera della tua serva che adesso è una madre. [...] Lo chiamo Ieshu come vuoi tu, ma non lo reclamare per qualche tua missione. Fa’ che sia un cucciolo qualunque, anche un poco stupido, svogliato, senza studio, un figlio che si mette a bottega da suo padre, impara il mestiere, lo prosegue.

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<sup>31</sup> Regarding the female and maternal mythologies in Alda Merini’s work, see Arriaga Flòrez (356-64).

Noi penseremo a trovargli una moglie, lui mi metterà sulle ginocchia una squadra di figli. Signore del mondo, benedetto, fa' che abbia difetti, non si occupi di politica, vada d'accordo coi Romani e con tutti quelli che verranno a fare i padroni a casa nostra, nella nostra terra. Non ho più visto il messaggero, non l'ho più sentito: è segno che lascerai fare a me e a Iosef? Certo, ce ne occupiamo noi. Fa' solo che questo bambino sia nessuno nella tua storia, fa' che sia un uomo semplice, contento di esserlo e che si arrabbi soltanto con le mosche.

Fa' che non sia bello, non susciti invidie. Ascolta la preghiera alla rovescia della tua serva. Stupida che sono stata a vantarmi in me stessa della sua perfezione, della sua venuta dentro di me senza seme di uomo.

Che vuoto mi hai lasciato, che spazio inutile dentro di me deve imparare a chiudersi. (De Luca 37-39)

The fragment begins as a prayer but then becomes a dialogue or even a negotiation: let my son become a simple man who will give me many grandchildren, requests the mother. Mariàm also asks that her Ieshu be allowed to be a nobody in God's history. The Miriàm represented by De Luca is aware that she is formulating a prayer in reverse, in which the Son is described in terms of human potential, of his willingness to bow to the Romans rather than insisting on greatness, and even with potential flaws. This fragment also references kindness towards animals, possible parenthood, etc., thereby shedding light in an interesting way on the value of traits of holiness in the contemporary world.

Nevertheless, this speech is only a 'prayer in reverse' on a superficial level because the discursive setting of Miriàm's prayer in De Luca's work has all the defining elements of prayerful communication and spatiality. At the same time, Mary's words display elements that allow us to deduce something about the way people pray in our present times: formally, Mary's oration analyzed here is akin to the traditional way of praying. In the fragment quoted above, however, both solitude and desolation dominate the scene of Jesus' Nativity. Some meaningful conclusions can be drawn from the description of this scene. The surface of this prayer reassures the reader, but its descriptive (as opposed to pragmatic) elements—what in a theatrical play would be stage directions—convey information about the distance between human and divine, an emptiness that cannot be filled by traditional ways of performing prayer. De Luca's volume concludes with a poetic lullaby sung by Mary to the Son, but also to herself (41-42).

## Conclusions

Mary's praying is a *topos* in the history of visual arts, from Byzantine mosaics to painting and sculpture.<sup>32</sup> Literature—in this case, Italian poetry—frequently represents

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<sup>32</sup> It would be impossible to sum up the rich tradition of Mary's artistic representations, so I only quote a few examples, as the mosaics in the Church of St. Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, the icon-type called



the Virgin Mary but rarely reports her words and prayers. Nevertheless, it is possible to find significant examples of Marian speech worth analyzing.

A study of the Virgin Mary's enunciations contributes to our understanding of certain aspects of this figure derived from representing her not as the addressee, but as the addresser of communication. Beginning in the early periods of literary history, this specific role as speaker positions her among humans, and initially it might seem to represent a stratagem for moving beyond the poetics of praise, the most common way of describing Mary. In the twentieth century, this went on to become an important issue in Marian theology and in cultural representations of this figure, whose holiness is inscribed in everyday life. On the basis of this study, we can also conclude that prayer continues to represent a powerful conduit of literary communication in recent culture. Through the words pronounced by Mary in the texts analyzed here, poetry engages with the contemporary evolution of the idea of sanctity, readapting its concepts to make them understandable and familiar in relation to people's lives. By looking at the intersection of poetry and prayer, we can study the enunciation of Mary as not only images of voicing. To cite from an insightful study by Jahan Ramazani:

As speech acts directed to an other, yet an other more veiled than a human interlocutor, poetry and prayer function simultaneously as acts of address, albeit partly suspended (hence address modulating into apostrophe), and as forms of meta-address, or images of voicing, because of the decontextualization of address from normal lines of human communication.

Further, in both poetry and prayer, address isn't directed only outward.  
(128-29)

Mary's dual positioning as well as her role as connector between the space of earthly life and that of salvation (Kubas, "Spatial Representation") grant a special status to her words, her prayer, and her communication with the divine. The prayers spoken by Mary examined here not only generate a strong emotional effect and encourage the audience to identify with her, but they also reveal that humans have never ceased feeling a need for communication accompanied by the urge to reduce the distance separating the divine from earthly beings.

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Blachernitissa, *La Vergine delle rocce* by Leonardo da Vinci, the sculptures of the Flemish-German school, Marian paintings by Albrecht Durer, those by The Sassoferrato, to William-Adolphe Bouguereau and others.

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