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“Divine Women” and the Poetry of Alda Merini

Laura Wittman

Alda Merini’s poetry is compelling and mysterious in a very particular way: at times her metaphors are incandescent with the ecstatic struggle of body and soul, yet at others they are doctrinally trite, almost to the point of kitsch in their rehearsal of spiritual clichés. More generally, her evocations of the divine seem full of contradictions, ranging from the canonically Catholic to the clearly transgressive. Furthermore, her love poetry and her religious poetry are not as easily divided as they seem, as is perhaps most clear in the first works Merini published after her ten years in the asylum, *La terra santa* (The Holy Land) and *Delirio amoroso* (A Rage of Love).¹ Finally, Merini seems at once to reject and embrace all the familiar stereotypes about women and madness. The following reflections are an attempt to understand how these apparent oppositions work together, as I am not content to separate “poetry” from “non-poetry,” or to claim that she is a good poet when she is “mad” and a bad one when she is “faithful.” The metaphor I will focus on, though not exclusively, is that of the rose, for it allows Merini to enact in one image the tension between the mystical and the erotic.

Born in 1931 in Milan, Merini published her first poems in 1950; she married in 1953, the same year in which she published her first volume of poetry, the critically acclaimed *La presenza di Orfeo* (The Presence of Orpheus). She had already been institutionalized briefly for psychiatric problems in 1947, and in 1961 she was institutionalized again, this time in the “Paolo Pini” mental hospital, where she remained almost without interruption until 1972. During this time she did not publish, but continued to write intermittently. After she left the hospital, she still struggled with mental illness—she described herself as “schizophrenic”—but also began to publish again, becoming increasingly prolific up until her death on 1 November 2009. In Italy, Merini now has an extraordinary following, as evinced by her state funeral in Milan on 4 November 2009. Small booklets of her poetry continue to multiply, as she was in the habit of giving verses to friends who would publish them in a variety of formats, including precious illustrated volumes; her poems have also been sung by the popular singers Milva and Giovanni Nuti. Her popularity comes in large part from her self-fashioning as a survivor (of the asylum, of the death of two husbands, of a society that restricts female sexuality) and a feminist who breaks all the rules, even those of feminism (embracing stereotypes about women’s irrationality, or their devotion to absolute love). It also comes from her engagement with Catholicism, which mirrors contradictions present in Italian society. Beyond her popular success, how do we interpret these contrasts in terms of poetics and spirituality?²

¹ Alda Merini, *La presenza di Orfeo-La terra santa*, ed. Grazia Carpena, 2 vols. (Milan: Libri Scheiwiller, 2005) and id., *Delirio amoroso* (Genoa: Il Melangolo, 1989).

² In 2011, there were still two competing web sites for Merini, the now-defunct *Alda Merini: sito ufficiale*, previously available at <http://www.aldamerini.com/>; and the more recent *Alda Merini: sito ufficiale della poetessa dei navigli*, available at <http://www.aldamerini.it/>: only the second now remains, and is officially approved by her daughters. It gives a good sense of her myriad publications, activities, and large fan base. On the unevenness of Merini’s “loquacious” work, which Maria Corti famously attempted to edit, see Francesca Parmeggiani, “La folle poesia di Alda Merini,” *Quaderni d’Italianistica: Official Journal of the Canadian Society for Italian Studies* 23, no. 1 (2002): 188, n. 10. Riccardo Redivo interestingly claims that Merini’s later production has an “oral” quality and structure that has made it so popular and easy to popularize in song (Riccardo Redivo, *Alda Merini, dall’orfismo alla canzone: il percorso poetico (1947-2009)* [Trieste: Asterios, 2009], 149, 166). Along with Redivo, a number of critics propose a biographical reading of Merini’s work; see Roberta Alunni, *Alda Merini: l’“io” in scena* (Florence:

As the title suggests, my guiding hypothesis in considering the divine and its metaphors in Merini draws on Luce Irigaray's essays "Divine Women," but also "Belief Itself" and "La mystérique."³ Specifically, I will begin with Irigaray's claim that "women lack a female god who can open the perspective in which *their* flesh can be transfigured."⁴ The first part of the discussion will thus ask whether there is such a thing as a female god in Merini's poetry, and how it relates to the flesh. As has been noted by Elisa Biagini, Merini's attitude toward the body reminds one of "schizophrenia" in its oscillation between revulsion and sacralization; this is reflected in her conflation, or at least intertwining, of "the roses of religious devotion and those of physical love."⁵ We will see that the longstanding debate about Irigaray's female divine—does it repeat the logocentric and authoritarian qualities of the Christian God? Is it a new form of essentialism, a return to essence rather than existence, which both feminism and modern philosophy question? And why should we fear essentialism?—is pertinent also to Merini, as we seek to interpret her refusal to separate the sacred and the profane.⁶ But let me also say at the outset that my goal is not to draw a parallel between these two writers, nor is it to apply Irigaray's psychoanalytic theory to Merini. Rather, I borrow from Irigaray a number of issues, such as essentialism, that I believe are also important in Merini. In other words, I hope Irigaray

Società editrice fiorentina, 2008); Giuseppe de Marco and Alda Merini, *Le stagioni dell'epifania poetica di Alda Merini: invito alla lettura* (Salerno: Ripostes, 1995); Filippo Giuseppe Di Bennardo, *Poesia e follia: Alda Merini, la follia della poesia*, 2nd ed. (Lonato del Garda, Brescia: EDIBOM, 2009); Daniela Orlandi, "Oltre la leggenda della 'sibilla metropolitana': Alda Merini e la sua poesia," *Romance Languages Annual* 10, no. 1 (1998): 337-40; Daniela Orlandi, "La schizofrenia come forma poetica e come forma clinica nella scrittura di Alda Merini," *Romance Languages Annual* 11, no. 1 (1999): 301-05. Di Bennardo sees the eight overtly religious poetry collections published by Merini as a separate cycle of poetry, which he does not link closely to her other production; he also perspicaciously comments on their publication as a set, concluding that they embody "un archetipo di poesia religiosa della cultura italiana contemporanea" ("an archetype of religious poetry within contemporary Italian culture), which he defines as "contraddizione" ("contradiction") (Di Bennardo, *Poesia e follia*, 84, 94). Parmeggiani puts more emphasis on the "rapporto ambiguo [...] tra poesia, malattia, e istituzione psichiatrica" ("ambiguous rapport [...] between poetry, illness, and psychiatric institutions") and in particular insists that in Merini, "malattia psichica" ("mental illness") is sublimated into "follia" ("madness"), which is a poetic delirium and a way to transcend illness (Parmeggiani, "La folle poesia di Alda Merini," 183, 173). It is unclear what mental illness Merini suffered from (and what may have been caused or aggravated by her stays in the asylum). Her sublimation of mental illness is also reminiscent of the way female mystics have appropriated the stigma and symptoms of the "hysteric" and turned them into poetic inspiration; see Barbara Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to d'Annunzio* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989) and Cristina Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria: Neurosis, Mysticism, and Gender in European Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996). All translations from the Italian are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

³ The first two essays are contained in Luce Irigaray's *Sexes and Genealogies* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993), 55-72, 23-53, whereas the third is from her *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 191-202. All further references are to these editions.

⁴ Irigaray, "Divine Women," 64.

⁵ Elisa Biagini, "Nella prigione della carne: appunti sul corpo nella poesia di Alda Merini," *Forum Italicum* 35, no. 2 (2001): 445.

⁶ On Irigaray, spirituality, and essentialism, see Penelope Deutscher, *A Politics of Impossible Difference: The Later Work of Luce Irigaray* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Frances Gray, *Jung, Irigaray, Individuation: Philosophy, Analytical Psychology, and the Question of the Feminine* (London; New York: Routledge, 2008); Amy M. Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History, Religion and Postmodernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); C. W. Maggie Kim, Susan M. St. Ville, and Susan M. Simonaitis, *Transfiguration: Theology and the French Feminists* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); Alison Martin, *Luce Irigaray and the Question of the Divine* (Leeds: Maney Pub. for the Modern Humanities Research Association, 2000); Helene Tallon Russell, *Irigaray and Kierkegaard: On the Construction of the Self* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009).

will help us question some of the assumptions—e.g. that her impact is more emotional than theological—that Merini’s popularity, as well as her mental illness, have created.⁷

The second part will examine yet another aspect of Merini’s spirituality, which can be related to the “dark night of the soul” described by John of the Cross, and is central to traditional Christian mysticism, but also concerns a more abject dark night, and ultimately Christ’s dereliction, which less canonical (and at times heretical) mystics explore. This is the night in which the mystic feels utterly abandoned by God, and experiences the loss of any ontological ground; at times this is a prelude to God’s return, as in John of Cross, but, increasingly in the modern era (though its model is medieval negative theology), it becomes an experience of the divine that lies beyond ontology, beyond language and categories, and even beyond the division of existence and essence. This experience of negation is extremely hard to describe, for in it, self, language, and world collapse inward; yet it is often felt to be refreshing for the mystic: the

⁷ With obvious differences, Merini suffers a fate similar to that of Amelia Rosselli, whose intellectually complex poetry was praised early on only for its immediacy in evoking her mental illness, a situation made worse by her eventual suicide; as regards Merini, I hope that Irigaray will help us to see past this sort of problem. See Elizabeth Leake, *After Words: Suicide and Authorship in Twentieth-Century Italy*, Toronto Italian studies series (Toronto; Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 2011). Among other things, Leake offers a critical discussion of the connections that have been made between Sylvia Plath and Rosselli, a task that still needs to be undertaken for Merini. Alunni notes that Merini mentions Plath as early as 1985, and comments “le corrispondenze Merini-Plath non appaiono più tanto azzardate” (“echoes between Merini and Plath no longer seem so random”); see Alunni, *Alda Merini: l’“io” in scena*, 84. Leake is rightly critical of excessively biographical approaches to poetry, and specifically to women’s poetry, noting that biography has been a way to divest Rosselli of her agency and to impose on her a monolithic gaze that her poetry calls into question; much the same could be said of Merini. See for example: “vi è prima una realtà tragica vissuta in modo allucinato e in cui lei è vinta; poi la stessa realtà irrompe nell’universo della memoria e viene proiettata in una visione poetica in cui è lei con la penna in mano a vincere” (there is initially a tragic reality, experienced as a hallucination, in which she is vanquished; then the same reality emerges through memory and is projected into a poetic vision in which she can now vanquish it); “la poetessa è coerente perché sincera, autentica” (the poetess is coherent because she is sincere and authentic”); De Marco and Merini, *Le stagioni dell’epifania poetica*, 37-38, 40. Authenticity here comes from an imposition of order on biographical “matter”—an order that it seems to me Merini resists. Similarly, Redivo claims that “la chiarezza di un delirio, la sua totale presa di coscienza, porta alla sua eliminazione, o quasi” (“the clarity of delirium, its complete conscious knowledge, leads to its elimination”); Redivo, *Alda Merini, dall’orfismo alla canzone*, 97. Hence Orlandi rightly claims, “se è vero che sia assolutamente fuorviante porre l’origine di tutta l’arte poetica della Nostra nel disordine mentale [...] è, tuttavia, altrettanto chiaro che non si può prescindere totalmente da ess[o]” (“though it is true that it is quite misleading to put the inspiration for all of our poet’s art in mental illness [...], it is, nonetheless, clear we cannot simply discount it”); she goes on to claim there are structural similarities between schizophrenia and Merini’s poetry, noting in particular a “decostruzione del reale” (“deconstruction of the real”) that I will be discussing (Orlandi, “La schizofrenia come forma poetica,” 301). Another problem Irigaray can help us to address is that Merini is often depicted as having a purely “emotional” faith that has no “theological” theory behind it—a claim that exonerates her from being accused of contradicting the Church; see Mons. Gianfranco Ravasi’s preface to Alda Merini, *Corpo d’amore: un incontro con Gesù* (Milano: Frassinelli, 2001), vii. This in turn is quoted approvingly by Dipace: “la sua ‘professione d’amore [...] non intacca minimamente i dogmi del cristianesimo” (“her ‘declaration of love [...] does not in any way damage the dogmas of Christianity”); Silvia Dipace, *Il multiforme universo della poesia di Alda Merini: temi e figure* (Civitavecchia, Rome: Prospettiva, 2008), 82. That said, Ravasi also sees her collection *Corpo d’amore* as a “piccola cristologia poetica” (“small poetic christology”); Ravasi in Merini, *Corpo d’Amore*, vii. Saletti seeks to take this assertion seriously, but is, in my view, still too committed both to making Merini a poet who “non ha velleità teologiche,” and to seeing her God as “parola sottile, evanescente, sussurrata,” a “Dio nascosto, velato” (“does not have theological pretensions,” “subtle, evanescent, whispered word,” “hidden, veiled God”); Saletti, *Poesia come profezia: : una lettura di Alda Merini* (Cantalupa, Turin: Effatà, 2008), 104, 94, 93. She does acknowledge that “il Mistero sfugge ad ogni definizione dogmatica” (“the Mystery escapes any dogmatic definition”) in Merini, but does not take into account the violence of Merini’s refusal of canonical Christianity (ibid., 93).

question is how and why.⁸ It is here that a dialogue between Irigaray and Merini becomes most fruitful, for the former, inspired in part by Bataille's notion of "contestation," itself based on the heretical dark night described above, responds to her critics that a strong female divine must first be upheld so that it can, in a second moment, be undone, deconstructed, and mourned. In Irigaray's view, women need to experience the loss of ontological ground, but it must be the loss of *their female* ontological ground: this is, in short, a female dereliction, which is also a new sort of dark night. Through it, for Irigaray, the mystic experiences the sacredness of embodied existence, specifically of the female body and female existence, which she sees as symbiotic (that is, based on the mother-child bond, as well as its gradual severing).⁹ Does Merini experience something of this sort, when she radically questions the existence of the Christian God, and even of the more female divine she at other times seems to believe in? How does Merini's dark night connect to her experience of the asylum and of mental illness, which, as Francesca Parmeggiani has noted, is ambiguously at once a source of poetic inspiration and a terrible "laceration"—a living hell, yet one that seems paradoxically fruitful?¹⁰ How, in sum, does Merini's suffering, which—to return to a central metaphor—is like roses blooming unwanted and unattended in the asylum, become a spiritual "blossoming" and, ultimately, a sort of "maternity"?

Finally, in the concluding section I will address metaphoricity itself in its relationship to spiritual experience. The famous line from Gertrude Stein's "Sacred Emily," "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose," is a reminder that metaphors, and that of the rose in particular, have a history.¹¹ Her reiteration of "rose" simultaneously acknowledges that poetic language refers increasingly only to itself, and yet collapses this repetition into the proper name, "Rose." Though her quote has been interpreted in many ways (including by Stein herself), I will take it as a suggestion that somehow poetry's ironic divorce from the real obscures the obvious, the real that was and is there in the first place. Moreover, and most important for Merini, the real can seem trite—as evinced by the fact that when Stein's line is quoted, the proper name at the beginning is often forgotten, and it is not an "original" or "modern" name in the first place. In other words, as is well known, the rose (and the flower more generally) has been seen as a meta-metaphor, referring to the flowers of rhetoric; because of this, it becomes increasingly difficult, especially in modern poetry, to invoke the naïve blush of the real rose. And yet this naïve rose somehow persists.¹² When it comes to Merini and her mysticism of negation or laceration, the question therefore is: what relation does she establish between language and spiritual experience? More bluntly, is her use of naïve, seemingly dead, metaphors an attempt to revive them? And most importantly, what counts as revival in her world, which vehemently rejects any canon for mysticism or sanity? In its broadest implication, I would like to propose that Merini's poetry is a provocative clash between the immediacy and presentness of prayer and the ironic vocation of

⁸ On this modern negative mystical experience and its relation to the more traditional dark night, see Thomas A. Carlson, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*; Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard, *Mystics: Presence and Aporia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Laura Wittman, "Mystics without God: Spirituality and Form in Italian and French Modernism," PhD diss., Yale University, 2001.

⁹ On Irigaray and Bataille, see Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, 60-86, 187-210.

¹⁰ Parmeggiani, "La folle poesia di Alda Merini," 183.

¹¹ Gertrude Stein, *Writings: 1903-1932*, ed. Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman (New York: Library of America, 1998), 394.

¹² For a very interesting overview of the rose metaphor, see Thomas E. Peterson, *The Rose in Contemporary Italian Poetry* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000).

modern poetry. Her roses may provoke a certain derision, but like the famous old lady dressed too young for her age in Luigi Pirandello's *L'umorismo*, they can also force upon us an uncomfortable realization: we are no better, we have no better, or less wanting and less awkward, language for spiritual longing.

The divine

Is there, then, a female divine in Merini, and if so, what are its qualities? Does her play with sacred and profane succeed in undercutting the authoritarian qualities of the Christian God who is clearly her inspiration, yet is also associated with all the authorities who condemn her as "mad"? In Merini's *La terra santa*, her first book of poetry drawn from the experience of internment, we find that mystical ecstasy is evoked in an address to the mother (notwithstanding Merini's well-known ambivalence toward her own mother):

mi sono schiantata
contro l'albero del bene e del male,
 ho mangiato anch'io la mela
 della tua onnipresenza
 e ne sono riuscita
 vuota di ogni sapienza,
perché tu eri la mia dottrina,
e il calice della tua vita
sfiorava tutte le rose.
 Ora ti sei confusa
 con gli oscuri argomenti della lira
[...]
 [...] io verrò a cercarti
 scaverò il tuo fermento,
 madre [...].

but I threw myself
against the tree of good and evil,
 I, too, ate the apple
of your omnipresence
and I have emerged again
empty of all knowledge,
[. . .]
and the calyx of your life
brushed against all the roses.
Now you have become confused
with the obscure arguments of the lyre
[. . .]
[. . .] I will come to search you out,
I will unearth your ferment,

mother [...].¹³

The poem opens with a powerfully physical breaking of the poet's body against the tree of good and evil, that is, against what is canonically the absolute separation of sacred and profane, salvation and damnation, the realm of the divine and the fallen realm of the human. But then the poem proceeds backwards, invoking the eating of the apple; though normally it would occasion the fall, and the knowledge of good and evil, here it appears to reverse it, emptying the poet of knowledge, and offering her instead a taste of omnipresence. What was once doctrine, the calyx of life only brushing against roses, descends into chthonic ferment. To unpack the closing lines, we must first recall Merini's longstanding rewriting of the Orpheus myth, which begins in the title poem of her 1953 collection, *La presenza di Orfeo*. Here, instead of embodying Eurydice led back to the light by Orpheus, she claims a part of Orpheus's power for herself in order to descend deeper, not into death, but into the chaos from which all things are born: "fusa io stessa, sciolta dentro il buio, / per quanto possa, elaborata e viva, / ridivenire caos" ("fused / with what is formless, melted within the darkness, / as far as I can, secreted and alive, / become chaos again").¹⁴ Secondly, we must also recall an episode from Merini's internment recounted in her 1986 *L'altra verità: diario di una diversa*, in which the patients are finally allowed into the garden to touch and smell the roses: "tutte le nostre inquietudini segrete disparvero, perché finalmente eravamo vicini a Dio [...] E per ore, inginocchiata a terra stetti a bere di quella sostanza vitale, senza peraltro fiatare, senza dire a nessuno che avevo incontrato un nuovo tipo di morte. / Divine, lussureggianti rose!" ("all our secret fears disappeared, as we were finally close to God [...] For hours, kneeling on the soil I drank in that vital substance, without saying a word, without revealing to anyone that I had encountered a new type of death. / Divine, lush roses!").¹⁵ In "Tu eri la verità," these two moments come together as the poet seeks the mother, who is associated both with a "confusion" and even a death that is "chaos" and "ferment" (death becomes the source of new life, as in much mystical imagery), and with roses and the lyre, roses that are not only "divine" but "luxurious" (and "lussureggianti" invokes "lussuria," as is confirmed by the end of the episode in the asylum, when the poet makes love with another patient, Pierre).¹⁶ As the divine descends into maternal and life-giving flesh, then, its ferment is also the refusal to separate good and evil, "divine" and "lussureggianti."

In a later poem, this resacralized flesh is overtly associated with pregnancy and childbirth, in the words of Saint Francis: "anch'io devo partorire il mio vero Dio" ("I too must give birth to my true God").¹⁷ In yet another poem, from *La carne degli angeli*, Merini adds in her own first

¹³ Alda Merini, "Tu eri la verità," in *La presenza di Orfeo-La terra santa*, 2: 81; trans. in Alda Merini, *The Holy Land*, trans. Stephanie Jed and Pasquale Verdicchio (Toronto: Guernica, 2002), 42 (with one emendation, "calyx" instead of "chalice"). Whenever possible, for English translations of Merini's work, I will draw from the three existing books listed in the bibliography; in all other cases, the translations are my own.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:18; trans. in Alda Merini, *Love Lessons: Selected Poems of Alda Merini*, trans. Susan Stewart (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 19.

¹⁵ Alda Merini, *L'altra verità: diario di una diversa* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2006), 107.

¹⁶ In his illuminating book about the Orpheus myth in Merini, Di Bennardo sees in this first among Merini's Orpheus poems a "germe di accettazione della propria sessualità" ("the seed of acceptance of her own sexuality"). He also shows that through a cycle, spanning many years, of six poems around the Orpheus myth, Merini moves through "travaglio" ("anguish") in search of self-acceptance, and reaches a Christian interpretation of the myth as a warning to the self that unity is never reached, finally finding some hope in her ability to be reborn as a poet. See Filippo Giuseppe Di Bennardo and Gianluca Falconi, *Alda Merini: Orfeo sono io, e io sono Euridice* (Montichiari, Brescia: Zanetto, 2007), 164-66.

¹⁷ Alda Merini, *Francesco: canto di una creatura* (Milan: Frassinelli, 2007), 54.

person voice, addressing God:

Ho solo bisogno del tuo grembo
per conoscere il mio
e del mio grembo
per conoscere il tuo

I only need your womb
to know mine
and I only need my womb
to know yours.¹⁸

Rather than a female divine per se, then, the experience of God, and especially the incarnation, is depicted by Merini as a kind of maternity, which is also a descent into creative chaos. But we also see here what is perhaps the most important characteristic of Merini's divine: the chiasmus, by which human and God, female and male, soul and body, belong to each other through an exchange of contrasting characteristics rather than via mirroring or similarity. Merini's God is thus intimate while remaining radically Other at the same time.

The chiasmus also appears in Merini's depictions of Jesus. On the one hand, human limitations are "violat[at]e dalla santità di Gesù" ("violated by the sanctity of Jesus");¹⁹ more ambiguously, but in the same direction, "l'uomo è stato deflorato da Dio al momento stesso della creazione" ("man was deflowered by God in the very moment of creation").²⁰ On the other hand—on the other side of the chiasmus—Christ too has been violated; this time, however, Merini does not use the image of deflowering or rape, but rather asserts: "Il Cristo emerge sì, ma è materno, e ciò mi fa paura: le sue braccia allargate e il suo petto ahimè senza mammelle" ("The Christ emerges, yes, but Christ is maternal, and that scares me: His wide open arms and his chest without breasts").²¹ This is a feminized, doubly castrated Christ, the very image "del Dio offeso," "un pugno di dolore,"²² that "mangia la terra del manicomio"²³ ("of the humiliated God," "a fistful of pain," "eats the soil of the asylum"). The human body, then, is deflowered when the divine penetrates it; at the same time, the divine is castrated by its descent into the flesh. The violence of these images expresses Merini's experience of alterity within unity. Far from the doctrinally acceptable mystical marriage (associated with Catherine of Alexandria, Catherine of Siena, and Teresa of Avila), these are also removed from the notion of an indwelling God (as in the heretical vision of Marguerite Porète, for example); the meeting of human and divine is, instead, a struggle that recalls Angela da Foligno's writhing, "overwhelmed," "on the verge of death," as she sees God "in darkness."²⁴

¹⁸ Id., *La carne degli angeli*, I libri di Arnoldo Mosca Mondadori (Milan: Frassinelli, 2003), 100.

¹⁹ Id., *Delirio amoroso*, 30; trans. in Alda Merini, *A Rage of Love*, trans. Pasquale Verdicchio (Toronto: Guernica, 1996), 29.

²⁰ Id., *L'anima innamorata*. I libri di Arnoldo Mosca Mondadori (Milan: Frassinelli, 2000), 8.

²¹ Id., *Delirio amoroso*, 17; trans. in Merini, *A Rage of Love*, 15.

²² Id., *Magnificat: un incontro con Maria* (Milan: Frassinelli, 2002), 35.

²³ Id., *Poema della croce* (Milan: Frassinelli, 2004), 10.

²⁴ Angela of Foligno, *Angela of Foligno: Complete Works*, ed. Paul Lachance, Classics of Western spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 131, 203. Teresa of Avila's descriptions of ecstatic union are especially relevant to Merini: though Saint Teresa's experience can be fit into canonically Christian views of the distance between human and divine, in the words of Ahlgren, she constantly had to defend the orthodoxy of her vision, in particular as concerns union as a place beyond knowledge. Moreover, her language uses powerful erotic and embodied metaphors

Such images recur, and are even more startling, in Merini's recent poems for Pope John Paul II:²⁵

Qui con le ali convesse gli angeli
della terra che siamo noi rattristati da tempo
da una maternità non risolta
non cantiamo più alla pendice della
tua croce, e guardiamo sventolare
nel ventre la tua carne come ferita, che
pare strappata da mille demoni

Here with convex wings we angels
of the earth long saddened
by an unresolved maternity
no longer sing at the foot
of your cross, and we watch your flesh
flapping in your belly like a wound,
torn by a thousand demons²⁶

Now, Christ—and John Paul II as *alter Christus*—is not only violated, but his wounded belly becomes “una maternità non risolta.” Merini's divine is thus once again this feminine Christ, wounded by the terrestriality of his own incarnation, by the fallenness of his own maternity—a Christ Merini saw everywhere in the asylum:

C'è qualcosa di più amorale di un manicomio? La vergogna delle nudità offerte al sacrificio è stata anche la vergogna di Dio. Fu a questo punto forse, Signore, che io e te abbiamo pianto.

Is there anything more amoral than an insane asylum? The shame of the nakedness offered as sacrifice was also God's shame as well. It was maybe at this point, my God, that you and I cried.²⁷

At the same time, once again the divine is also the first part of the chiasmus: the woman whose flesh is wounded by the spirit, and who cannot but ultimately compare the invasion of her body by this god to a violent deflowering, to a pregnancy unwanted yet desired, and even to a rape.

A similar chiasmus is also seen in Merini's depictions of the flesh and the spirit: in the Passion, which appears in Merini to be one with the Incarnation, the body remains “appeso oltre l'anima” (“hanging beyond the soul”) and without a voice, like an empty shell;²⁸ similarly in amorous passion, and especially in its inevitable end, “l'anima” feels the body as “un terreno che non darà più frutto” (“a land that will no longer give fruit”):

for spiritual experience in a way that clearly prefigures Merini. See Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 99ff.

²⁵ I would like to thank Serena Ferrando for providing me with copies of these poems before their 2009 publication.

²⁶ Alda Merini, *Santo Padre Divina Poesia* (Milan: Giuliano Grittini, Incisione Arte, 2009), n.d.

²⁷ Id., *Delirio amoroso*, 10; trans. in Merini, *A Rage of Love*, 7.

²⁸ Id., *Poema della croce*, 91.

Secondo l'intelligenza dell'anima il corpo ormai non le serve più, è un terreno che non darà più frutto.

[...]

Quindi l'uomo che ami è il tuo deserto ma anche la tua risurrezione.

According to the soul's knowledge, the body no longer serves, it is soil that will no longer grow fruit.

[...]

Thus the man you love is your desert and also your resurrection.²⁹

Conversely however, the body is needed for the soul to acquire a "coscienza fisica," which is not just consciousness but conscience:

Il principio dell'anima è anche la salute del corpo: anima e corpo vanno di pari passo, e quando il corpo viene schiantato dal male l'anima si siede in un'attesa disperata perché appartiene ad altre istanze di felicità e misura per cui è difficile per l'anima capire il dolore.

L'amore santifica l'anima e anche l'implora di non lasciarlo perché l'amore sottende a una bramosia del corpo così profonda che l'anima vorrebbe andarsene per godere spazi meno interrotti, ma è anche vero che l'anima nell'amore conosce la prima occasione di meditare sui mali del corpo e quindi acquista stranamente anche una coscienza fisica.

The principle of the soul is also the health of the body: soul and body go together, and when the body is torn by pain the soul sits and desperately waits, for it belongs to other realms of happiness and measure, which make it hard for it to understand suffering.

Love sanctifies the soul and also implores it not to leave it, for love moves a desire in the body so intense that the soul would like to leave, to enjoy a less chaotic state, yet it is also true that the soul finds in love its first opportunity to meditate on the suffering of the body and by this it strangely acquires a physical consciousness/conscience.³⁰

A key figure for "coscienza fisica" in Merini is Mary Magdalene, who represents throughout the poetic corpus the need for spiritual longing to be imprinted in the flesh, so that it is simultaneously the same wound that brings sin and salvation. Already in *Nozze Romane*, Merini writes, speaking as Mary Magdalene, "Guarda, senza sapere l'astinenza / queste carni purgate dal piacere" ("Look upon, without knowing abstinence / this flesh that has been purified by pleasure").³¹ Years later in *Cantico dei vangeli*, she echoes the same sentiment, as Mary Magdalene says: "La tua parola mi ha dato un brivido / per tutto il corpo" ("Your word made my whole body / shiver);³² and Jesus responds:

soltanto peccando
hai potuto conoscere

²⁹ Id., *L'anima innamorata*, 64.

³⁰ Ibid., 83.

³¹ Merini, *Nozze romane* in *La presenza di Orfeo; La terra santa*, 1:68.

³² Id., *Cantico dei Vangeli* (Milan: Frassinelli, 2006), 53.

l'uomo che era in me.
Soltanto tu potevi avere pietà
dei miei piedi trafitti dalla stanchezza.

only through sin
could you know
the man in me.
Only you could have pity
of my feet pierced by weariness³³

To some extent, Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary form a chiasmus as well, for whereas the former's sinful flesh is sacralized, the latter's pure flesh acquires the consciousness of pain and sin—and this is part of her perfection, that she reaches through mourning Jesus: “Il dolore è necessario a Maria per entrare nella sapienza divina e per superare con Cristo la radura della sua carne un tempo così felice, ora diventata materia di lutto” (“Suffering was necessary to Mary so that she might enter into divine knowledge and overcome with Christ the limits of her flesh that was once so happy, and has now become the substance of mourning”).³⁴

As a result, in the asylum—which is also the experience of “the Holy Land”—the poet is caught by apparently contradictory injunctions, to follow the body and yet also to follow the soul:

Ma questi cieli soffocano il corpo, lo uccidono. E, allora, a chi dobbiamo dare ragione, all'anima, o al corpo? O corpo che duoli...sei forse tu...la forza segreta dei miei impulsi spirituali? Oh, sì. Contro la pazzia, nemmeno Dio può nulla.

But these heights suffocate the body, they kill it. And so, then, who should we consider right, the soul, or the body? O body in pain [. . .] are you perhaps [. . .] the secret force in my spiritual impulses? Oh, yes. Against madness, not even God can prevail.³⁵

In the end, if “l'anima è una specie di inceneritore del corpo” (“the soul is a sort of incinerator for the body”),³⁶ “corpo” (body) is what the angel in Merini's parable (cited below) comes to gather at death because, “quel corpo, vedete, era atteso da un Amore” (“[that body,] you see, was awaited by a Love”). In this last passage, the body, which desperately seeks a soul it can barely remember it has lost, is at the same time “un corpo fatto di anima” (“a body made of soul”):

Era un corpo chiaro, asfittico, immemore. Un corpo che non aveva paura. Transitava sulle rive del Naviglio, solo, corvino, con l'aria celere di chi vuole nascondere una grossa nudità interiore o una grossa gobba di maleficio. Questo corpo non aveva un'anima, ricordava vagamente di averla perduta laggiù, di aver equivocato. Un terribile buco nella memoria lo costringeva a passeggiare lungo il Naviglio in preda al panico più assurdo.

³³ Ibid., 41.

³⁴ Merini, *Magnificat*, 14. As Elisa Biagini writes of Mary Magdalene, “vive il proprio peccato carnale come mezzo privilegiato di avvicinamento a Dio” (“she lives out her carnal sin as a privileged mode of access to God”). Elisa Biagini, “Nella prigione della carne,” 446.

³⁵ Merini, *L'altra verità*, 121.

³⁶ Id., *L'anima innamorata*, 19.

Era un corpo fatto di anima. [...] A volte emetteva nitriti di belva, o di puledro chiuso in un'orribile stalla. [...]

Ma il corpo sognava, e più sognava e più si rarefaceva. A volte parlava anche uno strano, grigio esperanto, mescolando assurdamente dialetti settentrionali e ritmi danteschi.

Un giorno il corpo morì, schiacciato da una carrozza fine ottocento sbucata dalle pagine di un libro. [...] La più bella [bambina], che sembrava una fata, disse: "Tanto non serviva a nulla."

Ma improvvisamente dal cielo scese un angelo, guardò il corpo con un sorriso, lo raccolse e se lo mise nel seno, dicendo poi ai ragazzi che il corpo non era destinato a quegli ignobili marciapiedi, aveva una casa, un recapito, perché quel corpo, vedete, era atteso da un Amore.

It was a clear body, forgetful and breathless. A body that knew no fear. It travelled along the shores of the Naviglio, alone, raven-like, with the hurried air of someone who wants to hide internal nakedness or a large evil hunchback. This body did not have a soul, it vaguely remembered having lost it down there, of having made a mistake. A terrible hole in its memory forced it to walk up and down the Naviglio, prey to the most absurd panic. It was a body made of soul. [...] It would let out beastly yelps or whinny like a colt locked up in some horrible stable. [...]

But the body dreamed, and the more it dreamed, the more it became rarefied. It spoke a strange, grey, esperanto, absurdly mixing northern dialects and Dantean rhythms.

One day the body died, crushed by an eighteenth-century coach that suddenly emerged from the pages of a book. [...] The most beautiful girl among them [the children], one that looked like a good fairy, said: "Oh well, it served no purpose anyway."

But, suddenly, an angel fell from the sky, looked at the body with a smile, gathered it up in its bosom, and told the children that the body had not been destined for those ignoble sidewalks, it was a body with an address, because, you see, it was awaited by a Love.³⁷

We see here that the divine is manifested just as much—and contradictorily—in the soul's leaving the body behind as an empty shell as in the body's awaiting love and dreaming of its transfiguration. Hence, to sum up, where Irigaray asks whether women can cultivate a female divine to uphold their subjectivity (if only to question it later), Merini responds with two contrasting experiences of the divine, related but not reconciled by a chiasmus: the violent influx of spirit into woman, and the equally violent "maternalization" and wounding of God. In both,

³⁷ Id., *Delirio amoroso*, 45-46; trans. in *A Rage of Love*, 44-45. I have added a capital "L" to "Love" to reflect the Italian original. A similar image is found in her *L'anima innamorata*, 42:

Quando l'anima si nasconde comincia il dolore e noi non abbiamo più né la percezione né la dignità del corpo.

Tristemente nascosta l'anima geme in cerca delle sue scaturigini.

Persino Santa Teresina nel momento del trapasso lamentava questa non presenza di Dio. È forse questo il momento tragico della nostra esistenza: un trapasso senz'anima, un volto senza cuore.

L'uomo guarda al proprio simile come se fosse un dilemma, una porta che non si aprirà mai.

When the soul hides suffering begins and we lose both the perception and the dignity of the body.

In its sad hiding the soul moans as it seeks its own origins.

Even little Saint Teresa at the moment of her death bemoaned this absence of God. This is perhaps the tragic moment in our existence: a passing without soul, a face without heart.

Man looks at his fellow creature as at a dilemma, a door that will never open.

gender boundaries tend to collapse, as we have seen, even as “maternity” is the dominant image for the action of both, encompassing spiritualization and transcendence as well as incarnation and immanence. Via this double maternity, Merini also counters the danger of essentialism that Irigaray’s critics worried about: there is no single authority here, or locus of being, or Being. Essence is not denied so much as multiplied, via its constant destruction and regeneration; essentialism, then, is not to be feared but to be embraced as dynamic. However, we can also see that this comes at the price of great violence, which affects the flesh in particular, because it can never be fully sacralized. In other words, Merini’s divine seems to reside in the flux and radical becoming of a maternity that is never “resolved” into a fully terrestrial or fully spiritual (re)birth. This is a tumultuous irresolution, a “groaning” of creation, which, biographically, recalls Merini’s painful experience of maternity, as described in *L'altra verità*; her children were taken from her immediately after birth, because she was considered unstable, and her medications prevented breastfeeding. It also recalls Merini’s spiritual longing being ridiculed by her doctors as “insane.”³⁸ However, beyond such biographical elements, I believe what is most original in Merini’s experience of the divine is that she simultaneously retains the traditional image of spirit “ravishing” the flesh (found in John Donne for instance), and turns it around in a radical fashion, claiming that the flesh also “ravishes” God (and feminizes him).³⁹ Though images of a feminized Christ occur in medieval mystics’ works, especially those of women, the violence of this process, its extension to God, and most important the chiasmus by which flesh and spirit “ravish” each other are unique to Merini.

A female dark night?

We have already begun to see in this chiasmus Merini’s “dark night,” and will explore further its relation to her experience of the asylum. A key question here is, is ecstasy possible in Merini, and how does it relate to loss? Or, is there a female dereliction in Merini, and in what way does it bear fruit? Irigaray would claim that if maternity provides us with an experience of divine symbiosis, it can only become fully realized when we also mourn its loss and accept our mortality.⁴⁰ Since Merini’s maternity is more of an experience of divine violence, can we still talk of mourning its loss? Here Merini is closer to Bataille than to Irigaray, for as we will see, loss leads to further ecstasy and does not reach the sort of calm resolution advocated by Irigaray. I will examine the connection between ecstasy and loss in three related metaphors from Merini’s poetry. The first has to do with color as the passage between the drab grey of suffering and the incandescent white of transfiguration. The second associates this passage with the blooming of the rose. Finally, the third envisions such blooming as imprinted upon human flesh.

In one of her earliest poems (1949), Merini already sees color as “anelito [...] vitale” (“vital [...] aspiration”) and vision of “cosmici ‘perché’” (“cosmic ‘whys’”) and yet also as “ancor troppo terrestre” (“too terrestrial”) with respect to “la luce [che] mi sospinge” (“the light that

³⁸ “‘Non esiste lo spirito,’ interviene la psicologa, ‘vero infermiera?’” (“‘The spirit does not exist,’ the woman psychologist intervenes, ‘right, nurse?’”): Id., *Delirio Amoroso*, 20; trans. in *A Rage of Love*, 19.

³⁹ I of course refer to John Donne’s *Holy Sonnet* 14, available at: http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Holy_Sonnets.

Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

⁴⁰ Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 198.

urges me on”).⁴¹ Years later, the “filo della ragione” (“the thread of reason”) becomes a “gomitolo” “di tanti e tanti e tanti colori” (“ball” “of strange multicolored filaments”), but as she addresses it with both reason and love, it remains a “matassa [...] offesa e dura come un osso di seppia” (“skein [...] offended and hard like a cuttlefish bone”).⁴² This reflects one side of the experience of the asylum, in which “calò una nube grigia sulla mia esistenza” (“a gray cloud fell upon my existence”), when she was institutionalized against her will and thus forced to confront the terrible closeness of madness and illumination.⁴³ The other side of that experience is “un anelito bianco [che] mi sospinge” (“a white aspiration [that] urges me on”),⁴⁴ “una fonte bianca alle mie spalle / un lago supremo di voci” (“a white spring at my back / a supreme lake of voices”).⁴⁵ Ultimately color becomes an “ascesa” “simile all’abisso” (“an asceticism” “similar to the abyss”).⁴⁶ Now the chiasmus—God wounded by the flesh, the embodied woman wounded by the spirit—collapses into an oxymoron when God and woman meet: “ascesa” and “abisso” are still two words but they belong together as colors do, divided into a spectrum yet inseparable in their ultimate and perhaps unreachable blending into white, “fonte bianca alle mie spalle” (“white spring at my back”).⁴⁷ In the oxymoron, the denial of God and the openness to divine presence coexist simultaneously: “Il colore inganna e ci colma / quanto basta per non credere in Dio / e invocarlo sempre” (“Color deceives us and fulfills us / just enough not to believe in God / but to invoke him always”).⁴⁸

The blooming of the rose, then, its opening up into color, which recurs so often in Merini, is more than a metaphor for spiritual blossoming; indeed, blooming seems to become itself an oxymoron, for the rose is at once tremendously carnal and provocatively spiritual. Thus the barriers around the asylum are “inferocite dai fiori” (“made fierce with flowers”),⁴⁹ but at the same time “a volte avverti un fruscio come di qualcosa che ti passa vicino, e stranamente esulti, e torna l’uomo amato, e la rosa finalmente si apre” (“something grazes you that just came near, and you strangely exult, and the beloved returns, and the rose finally opens”).⁵⁰ More pointedly:

Il fiore,
che si apre come il seno di una donna
al richiamo divino,

⁴¹ Merini, *La presenza di Orfeo*, 16.

⁴² Id., *Delirio amoroso*, 52; trans. in *A Rage of Love*, 52-53.

⁴³ Ibid., 19; trans. in *A Rage of Love*, 17.

⁴⁴ Id., *Nozze romane* (Milan: Schwarz, 1955), 83.

⁴⁵ Id., *Superba è la notte* (Turin: Einaudi, 2000), 14.

⁴⁶ Id., *Paura di Dio* (Milan: Schwarz, 1955), 44.

⁴⁷ Gubert discusses the “unione quasi ossimorica del sacro e del profano” (“the union of sacred and profane that is almost like an oxymoron”) in Merini’s poetry, though in her view the opposition is between her “severa educazione cattolica” (“severe Catholic education”), from which she inherits the image of a God “che non perdona” (“who does not forgive”) and in particular condemns the flesh and her own feminist rediscovery of the flesh as a “fede altrettanto forte” (“equally strong faith”). See Carla Gubert, “La bellissima eresia: materialità e spiritualità nelle poesie di Alda Merini (dal 1947 al 1961),” *Gradiva: International Journal of Italian Poetry*, n.s., 17 (1999): 17, 22. As my discussion shows, I do not think we can so easily equate profane with flesh and sacred with spirit, because of Merini’s chiastic interpretation of the Incarnation. Gubert notes images similar to those I discuss, in particular as concerns color as “manifestazione della materialità” (“the manifestation of materiality”) and “luce” (“light”) as “anelito alla spiritualità” (“spiritual yearning”), though she transforms this into a somewhat simplistic dualism, from my perspective (ibid., 19).

⁴⁸ Alda Merini, *Clinica dell’abbandono* (Turin: Einaudi, 2003), 72.

⁴⁹ Id., *La presenza di Orfeo; La terra santa*, 2:51; trans. in Alda Merini, *The Holy Land*, 15.

⁵⁰ Id., *Delirio amoroso*, 17.

non è altro che un blocco
d'incertezza e di paura
che viene toccato dalla grazia di Dio.

The flower,
that opens like the breast of a woman
to the call of the divine,
is nothing other than a block
of uncertainty and fear
that is touched by the grace of God.⁵¹

And also:

“Per una rosa”
Vorrei essere te, così violenta
così aspra d'amore,
così accesa di vene di bellezza
e così castigata.
[...]
TU SEI PAUSA DI DIO: DIO IN TE RIPOSA.

“For a rose”
I would like to be you, so violent
so bitter with love,
so awakened in veins of beauty
and so chastened.
[. . .]
YOU ARE THE PAUSE IN GOD: GOD RESTS IN YOU.⁵²

In other words, God resides and the rose blooms in the pause, or perhaps better, the interruption, the hole made in language by the oxymoron: “accesa” and “castigata” (“awakened”; “chastened”), “paura” and “grazia” (“fear”; “grace”), it is at once “peritura” and “rosa rossa piena di sangue” (“mortal”; “red rose full of blood”).⁵³ What I want to insist on here is that blooming is not what comes after or somehow redeems sorrow and mortality; rather blooming emerges as something unexpected, un-hoped for, from the unresolved, perhaps unresolvable contradiction between decay and exultation, between abjection and consecration.

This blooming is for Merini like the blood of Christ, which she understands in a way that is most uncanonical, though it is still a “sign of contradiction” like the Biblical Christ.⁵⁴ Like the rose, Christ’s blood is “di tutti coloro che sono stati martirizzati per nulla” (“of all those who were martyred for nothing”), and it is a “variazione del sangue [...] colore rosso del martirio” (“variation of the blood [...] the red color of martyrdom”), which the poet herself cannot

⁵¹ Id., *Francesco*, 100.

⁵² Id., *Tu sei Pietro* (Milan: All'insegna del pesce d'oro, 1961), 108.

⁵³ Id., *La carne degli angeli*, 26.

⁵⁴ Luke 2:34; Acts 28, 32.

understand.⁵⁵ This blood spurts forth from the impossible reconciliation of terms that nonetheless belong together; it flows from “una terra che diventa un fiore / e un fiore che diventa terra” (“earth that becomes flower / and flower that becomes earth”), which is also the double paradox of “vergine [...] madre” and “madre [...] vergine” (“virgin [...] mother”; “mother [...] virgin”)⁵⁶ What is uncanonical here is that Christ’s blood does not wash away sin or mortality, but instead flows from the contestation between the material and the spiritual; similarly, martyrdom has no purpose beyond itself such as salvation, in its very experience blood also blooms. As Merini writes of the asylum in *L’Altra verità*: “Il martirio diventava tanto alto da rasentare l’estasi” (“Martyrdom was so extreme that it almost became ecstasy”).⁵⁷ This is more than a *felix culpa*, because the embodied human, the struggle of soul and flesh, becomes the very source of Christ’s blood:

avendomi dato una forma
 l’hai coltivata nel tuo giardino,
 [...]
 affinché quest’anima si affini come una lama
 e possa finalmente colpirti
 perché tu, nuovamente colpito
 di un amore umano,
 possa dare sangue per noi.

having given me form
 you cultivated it in your garden,
 [...]
 so that this soul be sharpened like a blade
 and might finally strike you
 so that you, newly struck
 by a human love,
 might bleed for us.⁵⁸

This is a “frutto di dannata certezza” (“fruit of damned certainty”),⁵⁹ and, in an image that brings everything together again, it is the silence of God which is reabsorbed in the womb and in the blood, yet still blooms as “[il] sangue [...] si colora di Dio” (“blood [...] takes on the color of God”).⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Merini, *La carne degli angeli*, 33, 78.

⁵⁶ Id., *Magnificat*, 31.

⁵⁷ Id., *L’Altra verità*, 104.

⁵⁸ Id., *Corpo d’amore*, 38.

⁵⁹ Id., *La presenza di Orfeo*, 31.

⁶⁰ The larger context is worth citing:

La cosa più superba è la notte
 quando cadono gli ultimi spaventati
 e l’anima si getta all’avventura.
 Lui tace nel tuo grembo
 come riassorbito dal sangue
 che si colora di Dio
 e tu preghi che taccia per sempre
 per non sentirlo come un rigoglio fisso

As we see already in this last image, such blooming is in and of the body. Thus the flesh is “impronta di Dio e delle cose mutabili” (“imprint of God *and* of mutable things”),⁶¹ and yet it is also imprinted by “non so quale fantasma che mi calchi” (“I know not what ghost that follows me”).⁶² And the flesh that blooms is “apparizione che dilegua [...] tempo che intercorre fra due tappe” (“apparition that disappears [...] time that materializes between two stops”), radical discontinuity, and confusion.⁶³ This transforms or indeed transfigures the poet into a “divergenza di dolore” (“divergence of sorrow”).⁶⁴ She furthermore asserts:

Io non fui originata
ma balzai prepotente
dalle trame del buio
per allacciarmi ad ogni confusione.

I was not originated
rather I leapt overbearing
from the plots of the darkness
and fastened myself to every confusion.⁶⁵

What we see here once again is Merini’s refusal to resolve the oxymoron of “dannata certezza” or also of “madre vergine” into either of its two terms; what is imprinted upon her, rather, is at once their unity and their divergence, and it is only from this living contradiction that something—something that does not have a name and cannot even quite be called ecstasy—may bloom.

Lastly, blooming is most clearly imprinted on the flesh in that for Merini blooming is also birthing, but birthing is forever caught in the contestation between material pregnancy and a pregnancy of the soul which generates “un’altra figlia non nata” (“another daughter who was not born”)⁶⁶ “[una] bambina che non ha[i] religione [una bambina] mai partorita” (“[a] daughter who lacks religion [a daughter] to whom birth was never given”).⁶⁷ The same contradiction is seen in one of the more famous poems of *La terra santa*:

fin dentro le pareti.

The most superb thing is the night
when the last threats tumble
and the soul throws itself into adventure.
As for him, he is silent in your womb
as if reabsorbed by blood
that finally takes on the color of God
and you pray that he will always be silent
so you won’t hear him as a steady gurgling
even inside the walls.

Alda Merini, *Superba è la notte*, 4; trans. in *Love Lessons*, 95.

⁶¹ Id., *L’anima innamorata*, 27; emphasis added.

⁶² Id., *Tu sei Pietro*, 124.

⁶³ Id., *La presenza di Orfeo*, 15.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁵ Id., *Paura di Dio*, 43.

⁶⁶ Id., *L’altra verità*, 66.

⁶⁷ Id., *L’anima innamorata*, 40.

Il mio primo trafugamento di madre
avvenne in una notte d'estate
quando un pazzo mi prese
e mi adagiò sopra l'erba
e mi fece concepire un figlio.
O mai la luna gridò così tanto
contro le stelle offese,
e mai gridarono tanto i miei visceri,
né il Signore volse mai il capo all'indietro
come in quell'istante preciso
vedendo la mia verginità di madre
offesa dentro a un ludibrio.
Il mio primo trafugamento di donna
avvenne in un angolo oscuro
sotto il calore impetuoso del sesso,
ma nacque una bimba gentile
con un sorriso dolcissimo
e tutto fu perdonato.
Ma io non perdonerò mai
e quel bimbo mi fu tolto dal grembo
e affidato a mani più "santé,"
ma fui io ad essere oltraggiata,
io che salii sopra i cieli
per avere concepito una genesi.

My first mother-theft
took place on a summer night
when a madman took me
and laid me on the grass
and forced me to conceive a son.
Oh never did the moon cry so much
against the violated stars,
and never did my womb cry so much,
and the Lord never turned away his head
as he did in that precise instant
seeing my mother-virginity
violated, treated as his laughing-stock.
My first woman-theft
took place in a dark corner
under the vehement heat of sex,
but a gentle baby girl was born
with the sweetest smile
and everything was forgiven.
Nevertheless I myself will never forgive
and that son was taken away from my womb

and entrusted to more “saintly” hands,”
nevertheless I was the one who was offended,
I was the one who climbed above the heavens
for having conceived a genesis.⁶⁸

Here, with extreme violence, material conception is equated with rape, specifically the rape of motherhood and womanhood, whose vocation, by implication, is another type of motherhood, perhaps that of a “*altra figlia non nata*.” Recalling “*La presenza di Orfeo*” again, Merini would like to refuse the ascent into life, and would rather dwell in chaos, in the inchoate, and in the oxymoron that is also “*pausa di Dio*.” As she writes in *Fogli bianchi*, returning once again to the Orpheus myth, “*io infangata sto qui ai tuoi piedi perenne [Signore] / come una nefasta Euridice*” (“covered in mud I stand here at your feet [Lord] / like an ominous Eurydice”).⁶⁹ There is a moment of forgiveness in “*Il mio primo trafugamento di madre...*” that might correspond to Irigaray’s call for accepting separateness and mortality, but it is fleeting. The poem ends with the image of rape once again, seen as punishment for “having conceived a genesis.” This is a key image for Merini’s ultimate refusal of loss, or indeed for its transmutation, via the oxymoron, into ecstasy; as we have seen, conception would be acceptance of mortal life, but Merini rejects this in favor of “a genesis”—she gives birth not to a daughter (or to a daughter only) but to the very contradiction between the material and the immaterial world, to their mutual struggle and fecundation and suffering. In a sense, she here claims divine Creation for herself; but as she did with Orpheus, she also diverts it back into its initial moment. Genesis is the moment of separation, the tearing apart of light and dark, in which the poet dwells, rather than bringing it to fruition, to actual completed separation. This is the ecstatic moment, loss exacerbated yet immobilized into this endless tearing, which is also the tearing of the material from the spiritual.

This endless tearing is far closer to Bataille’s notion of “contestation” than to Irigaray’s claim that we must mourn the loss of a female divine, for Merini, like Bataille, does not so much mourn as re-experience, again and again, a loss that is in and of itself ecstatic.⁷⁰ While Irigaray might see this as unresolved mourning, she too recognizes its ecstatic power, as described in a passage from “*La mystérique*” that seems to evoke Merini’s experience of the asylum with unexpected accuracy:

She is pure because she has pushed to extremes the repetition of this abjection, this revulsion, this horror to which she has been condemned to which, mimetically, she had condemned herself. [...]

⁶⁸ Id., *La presenza di Orfeo; La terra santa*, 2:88; translation in *Love Lessons*, 57.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 2:157.

⁷⁰ If we consider Bataille’s description in *Inner Experience* (Georges Bataille, *L’expérience intérieure* [revised edition, Paris: Gallimard, 1954], 124-25) we find that the contemplation of suffering and mortality (which can be represented, Bataille famously proposed, by the photograph of a torture victim, but can also be reduced to an abstract “point” as suggested by traditional meditation techniques) suddenly gives way to ecstatic “non-knowledge” when its object is removed and a total loss of self takes place. Countering the notion that suffering (and most problematically, the suffering of another) is instrumentalized, Bataille insists on the love that must bind us to the object of our contemplation in order for true self-emptying and ecstasy to take place. Nonetheless, Bataille remains obsessed with the ecstatic moment *per se*, rather than with the way it might transform him, especially in his relation to others—a position critiqued for its inward turn, for example, in Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy*. Religion and Postmodernism Series (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

And if “God,” who has thus re-proved the fact of her non-value, still loves her, this means that she exists all the same, beyond what anyone may think of her. It means that love conquers everything that has already been said. And that one man, at last, has understood her so well that he dies in the most awful suffering. The most female of men, the Son.

And she never ceases to look upon his nakedness, open for all to see, upon the gashes in his virgin flesh, at the wounds from the nails which pierce his body as he hangs there, in his passion and abandonment. And she is overwhelmed with love of him/herself.⁷¹

What is key here is that love only occurs in the paroxystic moment of suffering. Yet love finally does occur, and we find it also in Merini’s poetry:

Così l’angelo che si fà demone,
il demone che si fà angelo,
il male oscuro,
la paura del male,
diventano l’inferno vivo della mente.
E allora si sente il palpito divino
di una rinascita che non è più possibile,
e su queste rive di canto
nasce forse l’espansione di una lingua
che non conosce nessuno,
e di cui non parlerà mai nessuno.
Mentre la poesia è distanza
tra corpo e corpo,
mentre la poesia è amore.

Thus the angel who becomes demon,
the demon who becomes angel,
the dark evil,
the fear of evil,
become the mind’s living hell.
And then you feel the divine palpitation
of a rebirth that is no longer possible,
and on these shores of song
a new language is perhaps expansively born,
but no one knows it,
and no one will ever speak of it.
Whereas poetry is the distance
from body to body,
whereas poetry is love.⁷²

In this poem, we again find the refusal of birth, interestingly connected to the refusal of a common speech, associated with the oxymoron of “demone” and “angelo,” which is also an

⁷¹ Irigary, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 199-200.

⁷² Merini, *La carne degli angeli*, 8.

“inferno vivo della mente.” And unexpectedly in this hell “il palpito divino” is felt and both love and poetry bloom as “distanza / tra corpo e corpo.” Lest we take this last image too peacefully, Merini also invokes this distance as “angelica guerra.”⁷³ Because Merini’s paroxysm of loss is also a genesis, a birth at its inception, I propose that it is less of an “ek-stasis” proper (as we see in Bataille, and also in Irigaray’s description of the female mystic) than an “in-stasis,” a loss of self that occurs by delving deep into the self’s dark, inchoate sources. This inward move is also, clearly, Merini’s provocative refusal to conceive into a world that has rejected her, a world whose order can only provoke her scorn. If flesh and spirit ravish each other in Merini, with a violence that is nonetheless spiritually alive, we see here, rather more pessimistically, that such aliveness has no outlet: a “rinascita non è più possibile.” Even if poetry occurs, it is in a “lingua / che non conosce nessuno,” and in the end, the poet can only dwell in the distance between bodies, not in their meeting. Merini’s genesis is thus a way to claim a certain spiritual power—of motherhood, of authorship—over the painful chiasmus of flesh and spirit; yet this power has no outward bloom, for it is a radical plunge into the depths of the self and a violent rejection of the other. The “palpito divino” is felt only in this deep inchoate inwardness, and it is always on the edge of solipsism and scorn for the world.⁷⁴

Metaphor

Such inwardness provokes a number of questions about communication and prayer, which I will briefly address in conclusion. First, if Merini’s spiritual power has no outward bloom, does her poetry still communicate a spiritual experience? Is her refusal to communicate, her turn away, a form of communication? Second, to the extent that Merini’s poetry addresses the “palpito divino” within the self, inchoate and violent though it may be, is it also a form of prayer? What relation does her poetry establish between poetry and prayer?

For some suggestive answers, I will look at an anecdote reported by Merini:

Quando andai a Bergamo per ritirare un premio di poesia, mi regalarono una bella rosa di stoffa. Da allora me la porto appuntata sulla giacca, solenne, irrisoria e provocatoria. Qualcuno mi ha fatto gentilmente notare che le donne che portano le rose, tacitamente si offrono. A nessuno è venuto in mente che quella rosa era per me un lutto. Un lutto pesante, perché dopo il premio Bergamo mio marito non l’ho più veduto. Sì, mi offro al miglior offerente, soprattutto mi offro al panico, ma la rosa da allora me la porto sul petto; e si chiama Michele, si chiama Alda, si chiama matrimonio sconosciuto.

⁷³ Id., *Clinica dell’abbandono*, 93.

⁷⁴ For all that Merini’s love poetry in particular may seem to be about the other, it seems to me far more about being ravished and descending inward, still about Eurydice turning back after Orpheus has looked back to her, to claim her inchoate realms, as we saw in Merini’s early poem, “La presenza di Orfeo.” Interestingly, this image is very close to Gabriele d’Annunzio’s claim that his poetry captures “le regard d’Orphée vers Eurydice et son déchirement” (“the gaze of Orpheus to Eurydice and his heartbreak”) (Gabriele d’Annunzio, *Di me a me stesso* [Milan: Mondadori, 1990], 113)—Merini might be said to capture the same, as in both cases ecstasy takes an inward turn toward “déchirement” (“heartbreak”). Symptomatic of this are the following remarks from Merini’s *L’altra verità*: “Diventavo io stessa la figlia di me stessa” (“I myself became my own daughter,” 57); “noi eravamo preda di noi stessi; noi eravamo braccati, avulsi dal nostro stesso amore” (“we were our own prey; we were targeted, cut off from ourselves,” 98); “rimasi, senza volerlo, vedova di me stessa” (“I became, against my will, widow of myself,” 109). Biagini, “Nella prigione della carne,” 447, 449, also notes that “pur lamentando la latitanza dell’altro, non vuole in verità possederlo,” “può amare solo ciò che è assente” (“though lamenting the disappearance of the other, she does not really want to possess him”).

Si chiama vergogna. Si chiama tutto fuorché “fiore.” È una rosa stupida, inutile come la sofferenza umana quando l’uomo deve soffrire per colpa d’altri e non per sua propria volontà terrena.

When I went to Bergamo to collect a poetry prize, they gave me a beautiful silk rose as a gift. Since then, I have carried it pinned to my jacket, solemn, derisive, and provocative. Someone politely pointed out that women who wear roses tacitly offer themselves. No one thought that for me that rose was worn in mourning. A heavy mourning, because after the Bergamo prize I never saw my husband again.

Yes, I offer myself to the highest bidder. Above all, I offer myself to panic, but since then I have carried that rose on my breast; its name is Michele, its name is Alda, its name is deconsecrated marriage. Its name is shame. Its name is everything, except “flower.” It is a stupid rose, useless like human suffering when one has to suffer at the hands of others and not out of one’s own earthly will.⁷⁵

In the first two paragraphs, we see that Merini seeks to subvert the conventional—and prejudiced—meaning of the rose, so that what appears to be sensual, and perhaps sexually provocative, becomes also a sign of mourning, which, like the language of Merini’s poetry, “no one knows.” She accepts the gift—and we could say she accepts that poetry must use metaphors that have been used before—but she accepts it with a sort of “derision” and “provocation” that renders what might have been trite or simply sensual also “solemn.” Beyond the Bergamo prize, and the biographical elements here, I believe this could well describe Merini’s stance as a poet: there is a hidden solemnity behind her scorn, and a possibility left open for communication if we respond compassionately to her turn inward, if we follow her into the dark. As an example, let us turn again to the poem for John Paul II cited above:

non cantiamo più alla pendice della
tua croce, e guardiamo sventolare
nel ventre la tua carne come ferita, che
pare strappata da mille demoni.

[we] no longer sing at the foot
of your cross, and we watch your flesh
flapping in your belly like a wound,
torn by a thousand demons.⁷⁶

The images of Christians who are no longer at the foot of the cross, and of flesh “strappata da mille demoni,” sketch a very conventional tableau of loss of faith that recalls any number of paintings from the Christian tradition. But it is the verb “sventolare” that bothers us here: not a precious term that would correspond to the high register of the Passion, it is far too quotidian and concrete. Like the rose Merini chose to wear, but for a non-conventional reason, this term is a provocation to the reader; it looks inelegant or too close to the flesh’s reality, but it also invites

⁷⁵ Merini, *Delirio amoroso*, 54-55; trans. in *A Rage of Love*, 55-56. I have amended “desecrated matrimony” to “deconsecrated marriage” to remain closer to the original.

⁷⁶ Id., *Santo Padre, Divina Poesia*, n.p.

us to a more radical compassion, for suffering that is not beautiful or redeeming. And notably, in this poem we find a choral “guardiamo” that is rare in Merini.⁷⁷

In the third paragraph describing the Bergamo prize, Merini moves to meta-commentary on the rose as a metaphor, in particular when she notes, “si chiama tutto fuorché ‘fiore.’” This echoes Mallarmé’s famous “Je dis: une fleur!” (I say: a flower!) in *Crise de vers*, where he asserts that poetry invokes an “idée même et suave, l’absente de tous bouquets” (“the idea itself and sensuous, the one absent from all bouquets”).⁷⁸ But in Merini, this absence, musical and poetic, clashes with a real rose that is described as “stupid.” Etymologically, “stupid” means to “be stunned, amazed” as we might be when confronted by useless suffering.⁷⁹ The real rose is trite then, as suffering can be trite in the sense of common and unadorned, but it is also stunning, as it can force upon us the shock of suffering, far more than the musical and absent rose, which it nonetheless also invokes.⁸⁰ In Merini’s poetry, I propose, prayer and poetry coexist and clash in just this way: metaphor’s flight into the self-referential and the self-conscious is undercut by sudden returns to the literal, which render us “stupid.” As an example, let us look at an additional excerpt of the poem from *Corpo d’amore*:

non ho mai creduto
che il vero amante geloso
eri tu,
che non vuoi lasciare ad altri
la carne della tua carne,
lo spiro del tuo spiro,
perché avendomi dato una forma
l’hai coltivata nel tuo giardino,
[...]
affinché quest’anima si affini come una lama
e possa finalmente colpirti
perché tu, nuovamente colpito
di un amore umano,
possa dare sangue per noi.

I never believed
that the you were
the truly jealous lover,
you who refuse to leave to others
the flesh of your flesh,
the spirit of your spirit,

⁷⁷ The physicality of Merini’s image and her use of the choral “guardiamo” also recall the spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, and more generally, the structure of Catholic prayer. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer of this article for this insight, which strengthens my sense that Merini is deliberately juxtaposing the linguistic registers of common prayer with those of “high” poetry.

⁷⁸ Stéphane Mallarmé, “Crise de Vers,” in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961): 368. Trans. in Stéphane Mallarmé, “Crisis in Poetry,” in *Selected Prose Poems, Essays, and Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), 42 (with some emendations).

⁷⁹ Available at: <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=stupid>.

⁸⁰ While Simone Weil’s asceticism seems in stark contrast with Merini’s spirituality, here we find them in agreement: suffering that is not chosen, that is, truly passive suffering, is the most stunning and spiritually alive.

for, having given me form
 you cultivated it in your garden,
 [. . .]
 so that this soul be sharpened like a blade
 and might finally strike you
 so that you, newly struck
 by a human love,
 might bleed for us.⁸¹

The end of the poem, already discussed above, expresses the contestation of the material and the spiritual, and returns to Merini's unique imagery of the spirit being wounded by the flesh. But we can now see the importance of the beginning of the poem: the expression "carne della mia carne" is a rather overused cliché suggesting a mother's possessive love of her son, but when it expresses the way Christ gives birth to human flesh via the Incarnation, we are suddenly rendered "stupid" in the senses elaborated above. We are forced to think very literally of God's creation as a birth of flesh whose purpose is to wound the spirit with human love—a heretical collapse of genesis and incarnation, to be sure, but also one that has great spiritual power. And it is here, I would propose, in this apparently trite phrase that becomes so stunning, that prayer clashes with and vivifies poetry. Notably, it is only after this descent into the literal that Merini allows herself an almost Petrarchan line of verse, "lo spiro del tuo spiro."

To conclude, we see in the last two poems in particular that Merini's renewal of poetic language, by which she expresses an original and complex spiritual experience, proceeds in two ways simultaneously. On the one hand, as might be expected of a modern poet, she skews traditional metaphors to make us rethink them, as we can see in her use of "anima che si affin[a]" above, where the "lama" suddenly connects to the imagery of wounding. This is the flight of metaphor into suggestive beauty so famously invoked by Mallarmé. On the other hand, and clashing with the former strategy, Merini also introduces in her poems "stupid" roses, metaphors that stun us by their lack of metaphoricity, their inability to fly; they are like stumbling blocks in our path, shaking us into attentiveness to what these words really mean when they are used in prayer. This sort of renewal is reminiscent of Iacopone da Todi's poetry, in which the nascent love lyric clashes powerfully with Franciscan piety and simplicity.⁸² But in a more modern context, it is also not unlike Pirandello's technique for forcing us to see our own "personaggio" and be compassionate toward the poor overdressed old lady who is trying to keep up with her young husband; Vitangelo Moscarda's crooked nose, which precipitates his descent into madness or mysticism (depending on whom you believe) in *Uno, nessuno e centomila*, is close to Merini's

⁸¹ Merini, *Corpo d'amore*, 38.

⁸² Biagini notes the Franciscan side of Merini, though she depicts it as more of a "gaudiosa follia" ("joyous madness") than I think is appropriate, given Merini's emphasis on embodied suffering. See Biagini, "Nella prigione della carne," 450. Biagini elsewhere emphasizes that "in *La Terra Santa* non esiste speranza, esiste un prender nota della situazione, un cantare al buio" ("in *The Holy Land* there is no hope, there is only a taking note of the situation, a singing in the dark"); Elisa Biagini, "L'opera poetica di Alda Merini tra il 1953 e il 1984," (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2000), 184. More importantly, for this understanding of Iacopone da Todi, I draw on Paolo Valesio, *Ascoltare il silenzio: la retorica come teoria* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1986), and Paolo Valesio, "'O entenebrata luce ch'en me luce': la letteratura del silenzio," in *Del Silenzio*, ed. Giovannella Fusco Girard and Anna Maria Tango (Salerno: Edizioni Ripostes, 1992). From both I borrow the important distinction between an absent God whose silence is both eloquent and grand versus one that is more quotidian in his absence. This distinction is also explored in Valesio's poetry, e.g. in Paolo Valesio, *Il volto quasi umano: poesie-dardi, 2003-2005* (Bologna: Lombard Key, 2009).

“carne della mia carne” in its literal fleshiness.⁸³ Recalling the chiasmus of God and woman we discussed earlier, but now at a meta-level, Merini’s poetics intertwines these two strategies: the Mallarméan flight of metaphor makes the naïve “Franciscan” renewal of metaphor stand out, like the rose on Merini’s corsage, and forces us to take it seriously. In one last quote from Merini, we see once again how she consciously seeks to bring us to “stupore” and silent awe at a very simple flower:⁸⁴

Insomma,
per coloro che muoiono nel nome tuo
apri grandi le porte del Paradiso
e fai loro vedere
che la tua mano
era fresca e vellutata,
vellutata e fresca,
come qualsiasi fiore,
e che forse loro troppo audaci
non hanno capito che il silenzio era Dio
e si sono sentiti oppressi
da questo silenzio
che era solo una nuvola di canto.

Then,
for all those who die in your name
you open wide the gates of Heaven
and you show them
that your hand
was fresh and soft
soft and fresh,
like any flower,
and that they, too audacious perhaps,
had not understood that the silence was God
and had felt oppressed
by this silence
which was only
a cloud of song.⁸⁵

⁸³ Luigi Pirandello, *Uno, nessuno e centomila* (Milan: Mondadori, 1936).

⁸⁴ Dipace concludes her book on Merini by mentioning an autobiographical substrate for this poem: she proposes that identification with Christ on Golgotha is the end point of Merini’s poetry: “Lo stesso silenzio del Padre—‘Dio mio, Dio mio, perché mi hai abbandonato’—era solo una nuvola di canto. È la stessa cosa che pensa Alda Merini, quando racconta della sua mamma che le narrava della morte di Cristo come di ‘una fioritura primaverile, / un mandarlo in fiore’” (“that very silence of the Father—‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me’—was only a cloud of song. This is what Alda Merini thinks, when she recalls her mamma narrating the death of Christ as though it had been “‘a spring flower, / an almond tree in bloom’”); Dipace, *Il multiforme universo*, 88.

⁸⁵ Merini, *Corpo d’amore*, 45.

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