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*De las tinieblas de la locura a la luz de la poesía.
La mística de Alda Merini*

*From the darkness of madness to
the light of poetry. The mystique of
Alda Merini*

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Resumen

La personalidad y la obra de Alda Merini (1931-2009) son todavía muy poco conocidas fuera de los confines de Italia. La de Merini es una poesía inquietante, fuertemente femenina, contradictoria y cargada de sensualidad mística. El presente artículo se propone acercar al lector al mundo poético de Merini y arrojar luz sobre la frágil raíz psíquica del mismo mediante el análisis de diferentes textos, muchos de los cuales se ofrecen aquí por primera vez traducidos al inglés.

Palabras clave: *Lucha Espiritual, Esquizofrenia, Asilo, Poesía, Cuerpo, Feminismo, Alda Merini.*

Abstract

The personality and work of Alda Merini (1931-2009) are still very little known outside the confines of Italy. Merini's poetry is disturbing, strongly feminine, contradictory and charged with mystical sensuality. This article aims to bring the reader closer to Merini's poetic world and to shed light on its fragile psychic root through the analysis of different texts, many of which are offered here for the first time translated into English.

Keywords: *Spiritual Struggle, Schizophrenia, Asylum, Poetry, Body, Feminism, Alda Merini.*

1. The night

*The most superb reality is the night
when the latter fears fall
and the soul throws himself into adventures.*

“I was born on the 21st in spring” Alda Merini reveals. She is one of the most charming and still little-known voices of the entire 20th century. Seen from the outside, her life was a pitiful thing, a garden full of flowers of one day. For almost twenty years, from the night of October 31, 1965, to the mid-eighties, Alda Merini knew the walls of a psychiatric hospital from which she entered and left periodically looking for a *Sense* always perceived and perhaps never found. Four daughters were torn from her hands, born from two painful marriages; another innocent creature was torn from her too, a creature of whom we know nothing, luminous fleeting star, burst into the white nonsense of an asylum.¹

The first warnings of her disease appeared at the end of the second world war: because of the economic constraints of her family, young Alda had to abandon her studies and seek unwanted work. This generated in her a feeling of injustice, of nonsense, a feeling of lack that will accompany her throughout her life. Around her fifteen years, Alda fell prey to a mystical crisis that would equally mark her deeply until her last days². In the early fifties, Alda, probably in the wake of the breakdown of her relationship with Giorgio Manganelli -an acclaimed writer, married, father of a daughter and 26 years older than her- and also because of economic difficulty of publishing her first book, met for the first time and for a brief time the walls of a psychiatric clinic, Villa Turro. Manganelli himself introduced Alda to Franco Fornari and Cesare Musatti, scholars of enormous prestige, to make her undertake a path of psychoanalysis. The marriage (1954) to Ettore Carniti, owner of a bakery, the birth of two daughters, the death of her parents, the relentless creative work complicated by the need to manage the unfortunate business of her husband, the misunderstandings and the recurring family fights, made the glass overflow. Merini's testimony needs no comment:

When I was first admitted to an asylum, I was little more than a baby. I had two daughters and some experience on my shoulders, that is true, but my soul was still simple, clean,

¹ Alda Merini was admitted intermittently to the Paolo Pini Hospital in Milan and, in 1986, for a very short period, to the psychiatric section of the Taranto Hospital. For an excellent biographical synthesis and relative basic literature, cf. Ambrogio Borsani 2014. Cf. also Alda Merini 2014.

² According to Ambrogio Borsani, Merini considered the possibility of religious life as a way to continue her studies.

constantly waiting for something pleasant to appear on my horizon. After all, I was a poet and spent my time among the care of my daughters and private lessons that I gave to some students: many came studying with me and brightened my house with their presence and their playful cries. Briefly, I was a cheerful wife and mother, although sometimes I showed signs of tiredness, and my mind got stuck. I tried talking to my husband about these things, but he made no sign of comprehending them, so my exhaustion worsened. When my mother, to whom I cared a lot, died things went from bad to worse. That one day, exasperated by immense work and continuous poverty, and besides, who knows, prey to the fumes of my disease, I lost control of myself and my husband was not able to do anything better than to call an ambulance. Undoubtedly, he didn't foresee it would lead me to the asylum. However, the laws were precise: the fact is that even in 1965 the woman was subordinate to the male and that the male could decide regarding her future. That way they put me in without me noticing. I didn't even know the existence of psychiatric hospitals because I had never seen them. When I found myself in the center of one of these places, I think I went crazy the moment I realized I had entered a maze from which I would have a hard time getting out. Suddenly, as in the fables, all the relatives disappeared. When the night came, the bars of protection came down and there was infernal chaos. An excruciating scream started from my viscera, a spasmodic invocation directed to my children and I screamed and kicked with all the strength I had inside, so they fastened me up and hammered me with calming injections. But wasn't mine a humane rebellion? I was just asking to enter the world that belonged to me, wasn't I? Why was that rebellion mistaken for an act of disobedience? Partly because of the effect of the medicines and partly because of the severe shock suffered, I was in a coma for three days distinguishing only a few voices, but fear had disappeared, and I felt resigned to die. After a few days, my husband came picking me up, but I didn't want to follow him. I had learned to recognize an enemy in him and besides I felt so weak and confused that I could do nothing at home. And they said it had been the second choice of mine, an election I paid with ten years of coercive punishment.³

³ Merini, A. 2014, pp. 11-13: "Quando venni ricoverata per la prima volta in manicomio ero poco più di una bambina, avevo sì due figlie e qualche esperienza alle spalle, ma il mio animo era rimasto semplice, pulito, sempre in attesa che qualche cosa di bello si configurasse al mio orizzonte; del resto ero poeta e trascorrevi il mio tempo tra le cure delle mie figliole e il dare ripetizione a qualche alunno, e molti ne avevo che venivano a scuola e rallegravano la mia casa con la loro presenza e le loro grida gioiose. Insomma ero una sposa e una madre felice, anche se talvolta davo segni di stanchezza e mi si intorpidiva la mente. Provai a parlare di queste cose a mio marito, ma lui non fece cenno di comprenderle e così il mio esaurimento si aggravò, e morendo mia madre, alla quale io tenevo sommamente, le cose andarono di male in peggio tanto che un giorno, esasperata dall'immenso lavoro e dalla continua povertà e poi, chissà, in preda ai fumi del male, diedi in escandescenze e mio marito non trovò di meglio che chiamare un'ambulanza, non prevedendo certo che mi avrebbero portata in manicomio. Ma allora le leggi erano precise e stava di fatto che ancora nel 1965 la donna era soggetta all'uomo e che l'uomo poteva prendere delle decisioni per ciò che riguardava il suo avvenire. Fui quindi internata a mia insaputa, e nemmeno io sapevo dell'esistenza degli ospedali psichiatrici perché non li avevo mai veduti, ma quando mi ci trovai nel mezzo credo che impazzii sul momento stesso in quanto mi resi conto di essere entrata in un labirinto dal quale avrei fatto molta fatica ad uscire. Improvvisamente, come nelle favole, tutti i parenti scomparvero. La sera vennero abbassate le sbarre di protezione e si produsse un caos infernale. Dai miei visceri partì un urlo lacerante, una invocazione spasmodica diretta ai miei figli e mi misi a urlare e a calciare con tutta la forza che avevo dentro, con il risultato che fui legata e martellata di iniezioni calmanti. Ma, non era forse la mia una ribellione umana? Non chiedevo io di entrare nel mondo che mi apparteneva? Perché quella ribellione fu scambiata per un atto di insubordinazione? Un po' per l'effetto delle medicine e un po' per il grave shock che avevo subito, rimasi in stato di coma per tre giorni e avvertivo solo qualche voce, ma la paura era scomparsa e

Dissociation of psychic personality, arbitrary associative mechanisms, use of illogical symbols, disorders of affective dynamics, and confusing perception of the relationship between the *self* and the environment... The diagnosis was clear and terrible: schizophrenia. However, it was on that autumn night, the eve of the Feast of All Saints, that Alda Merini embarked on the flight that would take her to the sky of infinite poetry. As in the darkness of the *μανία* (*mania*, “madness”) of the archaic seers was hidden that lost *σοφία* (*sofia*, “wisdom”) to which Philosophy, from its origins, strives in vain to approach (*cf.* Colli 1975), thus in the darkness of the *mani-comio* (“madhouse”) Merini was able to discover a pearl of wisdom that, precisely because of her *infirmity* -that is because of the constant confusion of the so-called “normality” due to the etymologically *extra-ordinary* mobility of her perception-, allowed her to know and communicate a different, more authentic comforting reality.

As Maria Corti, who was her close friend and editor, has masterfully revealed, Merini wrote “in moments of special lucidity, although the ghosts that recite as protagonists in the theatre of her mind often come from places visited during the moments of madness. In other words, before there is a tragic reality lived in a hallucinated way in which she is defeated; afterward that same reality bursts into the universe of memory and is projected into a poetic vision in which it is she, with her pen in her hand, that overcomes.” (Maria Corti 1991, in Alda Merini 1991, p. V). A minor thing, an ordinary “apricot nut”, is enough for Merini’s reason to bear order to the chaos without light and reach the feet of the Mystery:

On an apricot nut
on the first thought that comes to my mind
I sink the big toe of my reason
to touch your eternal feet.⁴

The privileged and terrible occasion of such moments of madness is undoubtedly the night, when the soul has no limits and the mind can afford to travel without fear to the past and the future, when the cries of a love guarded in the flesh’s depth -a love of mother, wife or lover- seem to be diluted in the flow of blood and finally clothed of a strange divine serenity that one wishes to enjoy without end:

mi sentivo rassegnata alla morte. Dopo qualche giorno mio marito venne a prendermi, ma io non volli seguirlo. Avevo imparato a riconoscere in lui un nemico e poi ero così debole e confusa che a casa non avrei potuto far nulla. E quella dissero che era stata una mia seconda scelta, scelta che pagai con dieci anni di coercitiva punizione”.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3:
Sulla noce di un’albicocca
sul primo pensiero che mi salta in mente
fondo l’alluce della ragione
per toccare i tuoi piedi eterni.

The most superb reality is the night
 when the latter fears fall
 and the soul throws himself into adventures.
 He is silent in your womb
 as reabsorbed by the blood
 that is finally colored by God
 and you pray that he will remain silent forever
 not to feel it as a fixed luxuriance
 even within your walls.⁵

Who is this silent “*he*” in Alda’s womb? A lover? A son? The world with its ugliness? Merini escorts us inside her being, in her entrails that tremble with desire and fear. According to Francesca Parmeggiani (2002), Merini proves that “when it narrates psychic illness following and reproducing its evolution (degenerative and at the same time creative), from a state of alienation and inability to grasp reality as a whole to the construction of an imaginary reality, artistic creation certainly results in a way to neutralize and transcend the disease, but also in a weapon to induce this same disease to take part in the creative process. Through writing, a space of freedom in which it is possible to speak and be oneself and in which it is possible to experience love for oneself and the other -man or God- in its fullness, the poet controls and no longer suffers the power to *ingere* (“to shape” “to feign”), to transfer the imagination into reality, to the point that madness, in the sense of Merini, becomes necessity and condition of life and poetry”.

⁵ Alda Merini 2000b, p. 4 (*Superba è la notte*):
 La cosa più superba è la notte
 quando cadono gli ultimi spaventati
 e l’anima si getta nell’avventura.
 Lui tace nel tuo grembo
 come riassorbito dal sangue
 che finalmente si colora di Dio
 e tu preghi che taccia per sempre
 per non sentirlo come un rigoglio fisso
 fin dentro le pareti.

2. A God of flesh and contradictions⁶

If something stands out in Alda Merini's compositions, this is the constant presence of contradictions. It is the same poet who, fed up with "feeling herself invented", provides us the key to her world:⁷

I was not born
but I jumped overbearing
from the weft of the darkness
to bind myself to every confusion.⁸

These verses are part of *Paura di Dio (Fear of God)*, a collection of poems published in 1955 by a Merini who had entered the Italian poetic scene at an extremely young age⁹, awakening the "unarmed" admiration of intellectuals like Pier Paolo Pasolini whose lucid judgment was correct in finding in the poet's verses a certain "thoughtless deformity", but too positivist in considering religious restlessness as a veil that hid many more earthly desires. However, Pasolini was observing the first steps of a path that fate would not allow him to follow for long.¹⁰

⁶ The bibliography on the relationship between the poetry of Alda Merini and the mystery of God is enriched year after year: among others, cf. Antonio Spadaro 2004, Chiara Saletti 2008, Ennio Laudazi 2012, Claudio Cianfaglion 2013.

⁷ Cf. the aphorism: "Sono stanca / di sentirmi / inventare" ("I am tired / to feel myself / invented."), in Alda Merini 1998, p. 234.

⁸ Alda Merini 1955, in Alda Merini 1998, p. 24, vv. 7-10: "Io non fui originata / ma balzai prepotente / dalle trame del buio / per allacciarmi ad ogni confusione". Cf. also Alda Merini, *Magnificat*, in Alda Merini 2013, p. 79.

⁹ Alda Merini's first book was *La presenza di Orfeo* (Milan Schwarz, 1953), fifth volume in the collection *Campionario* directed by Giacinto Spagnoletti, considered the true discoverer of the poet. Previously, Alda Merini had published two poetry -*Il Gobbo* ("The Hunchback") and *Luce* ("Light")- in the anthology *Poesia italiana contemporanea. 1909-1949* (Parma, Guanda, 1950), both included, along with two other poems, in the anthology *Poetesse del Novecento*. (Milan, Scheiwiller, 1951), following the suggestions of Eugenio Montale and Maria Luisa Spezzani.

¹⁰ Cf. Pierpaolo Pasolini 1954: "[...] it is certainly not possible to speak about sources, in young Merini's case: and, faced with the explanation of this precocity, of this monstrous intuition of a perfectly suitable literary influence, we declare ourselves unarmed. If it is true that her text (metrically formless, with its somewhat anonymous hendecasyllables) must be analyzed while saving its relations with her biography, it is equally true that this same text constantly forces you to carry out psychological surveys endowed with the most disturbing interest. A formless state, almost of thoughtless deformity -passive in the most relevant sense to her sex-, a stagnant archaic state, is the one in which Merini lives and to define which, awakened by the nervous restlessness of her unhappy senses, a monstrous masculine voice is born. To define it (to be exact) as *darkness* and *expectation*. And from this act of reflection, impulsive and irrational, a sphere of reasoning arises, so that, in Merini's verses, any movement of singing is suppressed, and the musical element is reduced to the metric mechanics [...] Merini is not religious nor Catholic: Catholicism re-enters through a hagiography worthy of a sacrilegious image. It is only the lack of the sense of identity, for which she expands herself in the world around her, that configures in Merini something mystical: however, the intervention that she expects, to unify herself, to be a person, is not precisely the divine one ...".

Fear of God means, at the same time, recognizing the existence of a personal Mystery and declaring with absolute sincerity the anxiety that arises from the daily and disheartening evidence of the existence of evil: if God is goodness, justice, and absolute power, how to explain the wickedness, injustice, and limits within which we live submerged? There is no explanation. Merini perceives two faces of God, the luminous one and the shady one, and, throughout her life, she fights like Jacob against this evidence.

One day in the garden I met a priest. I was alone and asked him what idea God has of fools. "Well," he replied, "What idea do you want him to have, daughter? Fools are not responsible for their actions." "Well," I continued, "if God gave us free will so that we could choose good and evil, why has he taken it from us with madness?" The priest was puzzled and grumbled, but to me that concept gnawed at my insides: why can't a madman own his will? I felt reassured only when I thought about how ignorant I was in that matter. 11

At the age of sixteen, Merini asks and answers:

Who are you?

You are the top of the mountain whose hips
the stacked centuries draw,
the unreachable summit,
the compendium of Nature
inside which our mind digs.
You are the One with two Faces: one of light,
pasture of blessed souls,
and a shady one
undefined, which immerses
a large part of souls shocking
against the persistent

enemy shadow: and they go, in that darkness,
spreading hands like blind people...

¹¹ Alda Merini 2014, p 16: "Un giorno in giardino incontrai un prete. Ero sola e gli chiesi in che concetto Dio tenesse i poveri pazzi. «Mah» rispose quello, «che volete, figliola. I pazzi non sono responsabili.» «Mah», proseguì io, «se Dio ha dato il libero arbitrio perché scegliessimo il bene ed il male, perché ce l'ha tolto con la pazzia?» Il prete rimase confuso e se ne andò borbottando, ma a me quel concetto mi rodeva dentro: perché un folle non può più essere padrone della sua volontà?».

December 21, 1947¹²

These blind people who walk with outstretched hands in the darkness are any human being made of soul and flesh. Now if God seems unattainable:

[...]
my God is submerged
a span beyond and my fingers are truncated
to achieve Him in full!¹³

the poet, as etymologically *creator*, enjoys a particular privilege that allows him to help his neighbour to open his eyes:

The poet must experience everything
before he could write;
the poet is like pure plasma
in which God sometimes prints
his contradictions.¹⁴

Merini knows, because she feels this way, that there are not a few contradictions also in God and that the flesh (this reality so Christian and so forgotten by the Christians themselves, unable to understand the authentic novelty of the message

¹² Alda Merini 1955, in Alda. Merini 1998, p. 23.

“Chi sei?”

Sei il culmine del monte di cui i secoli
sovrapposti determinano i fianchi,
vetta irraggiungibile,
il compendio di tutta la Natura
per entro cui la nostra mente indaga.
Sei Colui che ha due Volti: uno di luce
pascolo delle anime beate,
ed uno fosco
indefinito, dove son sommerse
la gran parte delle anime, cozzanti
contro la persistente
ombra nemica: e vanno, in quelle tenebre,
protendendo le mani come ciechi...

21 dicembre 1947

¹³ Alda Merini, *Lamento di un morto*, vv. 12-15: “[...] il mio Dio sta immerso / di là d’un palmo, e ho le dita monche / per raggiungerLo in pieno!”. The full text, composed on July 7, 1953, is included in Alda Merini 1955, in Alda Merini 1998, p. 27.

¹⁴ Alda Merini 1980: “Il poeta deve provare di tutto / prima di poter scrivere; / il poeta è come puro plasma / sopra cui Dio imprime a volte / le proprie contraddizioni”.

of Jesus and, therefore, unable to understand their essence) is at the very heart of divine reality, at the point of arrival of what we do not casually call the *Uni-verse*. Through her creative efforts, which she conceives as a prayer - "The most beautiful poems / are written on the stones / with bent knees / and minds sharpened by mystery"¹⁵ - Merini endlessly seeks this contradictory God, this God who terrifies and fascinates her, this God to whom she can say:

I've lost you in the furrows of life,
my only love,
God of hush and doubt
God of the mythical forces
God, God always God
You're stronger than the embraces,
stronger than tender love.
You who make the fountains grow,
you who show yourself and hide
like a lieutenant of destiny.
Losing yourself is like losing hope
and I have lost you
not once but a million times
and meeting you again is like getting out of eternal sin
to see the cracks in life
but also your mobile stars:
YOU ARE A GOD OF LOVE.¹⁶

¹⁵ Alda Merini, *Le più belle poesie*, in Alda Merini 1984 (= *Id.* 1991: 104 and *Id.* 1998: 84, vv. 1-4): "Le più belle poesie / si scrivono sopra le pietre / coi ginocchi piegati / e le menti aguzzate dal mistero".

¹⁶ Alda Merini, *Amore*, in Alda Merini 2005 (= Alda Merini, 1991, p. 74).

Ti ho perso lungo i solchi della vita,
o mio unico amore,
Dio di giacenza e di dubbio
Dio delle mitiche forze
Dio, Dio sempre Dio
che sei più forte degli amplessi
e dei teneri amori.
Che fai crescere le fontane,
che appari e dispari
come un a luogotenente del destino.
Perderti è come perdere la speranza
ed io ti ho perduto

The privileged place of this infinite reunion with God is none other than the flesh, that land of pleasure and suffering that the Creator wanted to share with his creature:

[...] It is God who enjoys the flesh of human being
in which he finds his material comfort
as God who created all things¹⁷

The body of the God of love is therefore a *corpo d'amore* ("body of love"), words chosen for the title of the book *Corpo d'amore. Un incontro con Gesù* ("Body of love. An encounter with Jesus") published in 2001 with no minor concern, if we read the note placed by Merini at the opening of the volume:

This free interpretation of the Author does not want at all to affect the dogmas of Christianity. It is a personal tribute to the figure of Christ, with all the limits that the Author's intelligence can have.¹⁸

It could be said that Merini's Jesus is a "very Christian" Jesus, but not the Magisterium's one: hers is a Jesus whose love is "like a flame that melted all the glaciers in the universe" and whose body visits the poet every night, seducing her and filling her with desire. Others can't comprehend this mystery and laugh because they see nothing, unless they look her in the eye and get stuck, for they understand she can say to God: "I have seen you, I have felt you or, at least, sometimes, I also have betrayed you." Alda Merini's madness is the madness of divine love¹⁹:

When I dream at night
and I am distorted by desire
and I hate you and I love you,
when I tell neighbors
that someone seduces me in the night
and then abandons me

non una ma un milione di volte
e ritrovarti è come sorgere dall'eterno peccato
per vedere le falle della vita
ma anche le tue mobili stelle:
tu sei un dio di amore.

¹⁷ Alda Merini 2000, p. 28: "[...] È Dio che gode della carne dell'uomo / in cui trova la propria consolazione materiale / come Dio creatore di tutte le cose".

¹⁸ Alda Merini, *Corpo d'amore*, in Alda Merini 2013, p. 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

and when they laugh at me for
 they see nothing,
 they do not know I am talking about you,
 but what happened here within these walls
 which to others seem disordered and infirm
 only you and I know it.
 But I will not say it,
 also because it is not worth stating
 a religion
 who has already conquered the world.²⁰

The incarnation is a turning point, the moment in which the Creator reveals to his Creature the rules of the game:

To console men, Jesus came to earth as an emanation from God. He had understood that man, a divine masterpiece, was so limited, so bare and so naked that he needed confirmation. / Man was afraid of the cold, of the hunger, of the silence, of the hatred of his fellow men. / Man was afraid of his inconsistency, was afraid even of love. / At some point God lifted the huge lid of this big boiling boiler

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53:

Quando di notte sogno
 e sono stravolta dal desiderio
 e ti odio e ti amo,
 quando dico ai vicini di casa
 che qualcuno nella notte mi seduce
 e poi mi abbandona
 e quando mi deridono perché
 non vedono niente,
 loro non sanno che parlo di te,
 ma ciò che è accaduto qui tra queste mura
 che ad altri paiono disordinate e inferme
 lo sappiamo soltanto io e te.
 Ma io non lo dirò,
 anche perché non vale la pena affermare
 una religione
 che ha già conquistato il mondo.

Cf. also, *ibid.*, p. 64:

Molti mi guardano negli occhi
 e rimangono statici
 perché capiscono che ti ho visto,
 che ti ho sentito,
 o che per lo meno qualche volta
 ti ho anche tradito.

Many look me in the eye
 and get stuck
 because they understand that I have seen you,
 I have felt you,
 or that, at least, sometimes
 I also have betrayed you.

which is love and showed that inside the love there were angelic vapors and so many angels that could get out of it, but there was even blood. / Jesus understood this, showed that he was not afraid of the blood of love, let it flow from his wounds, made everyone see it. / I do not know what the variation of blood is nor the red color of martyrdom, but I think that all lovers are martyrs, all lovers are in Christ, all lovers are in God.²¹

Merini's relationship with the incarnate God is a woman's relationship with a night lover, with a being who is infinite but also subjected to the limits of time.

It's useless to shout
that sometimes I shake a hand
I do not know
and it is the brown ghost of ancient memory.
I never sleep alone.
Descends from the ramifications of the Lord
the man I once loved
and who wants to marry me.
He is neither a prince nor a deprived man,
it is just the celestial idea
of an unknown entity
I have called
God.²²

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66: "Per consolare gli uomini Gesù è venuto sulla terra, come emanazione di Dio aveva capito che l'uomo, capolavoro divino, era così limitato, così spoglio e così nudo che aveva bisogno di conferma. / L'uomo aveva paura del freddo, della fame, del silenzio, dell'odio dei propri simili. / L'uomo aveva paura dei suoi cambiamenti, l'uomo aveva paura persino dell'amore. / A un certo punto Dio sollevò l'enorme coperchio di questa grande caldaia in ebollizione che è l'amore, e fece vedere che all'interno dell'amore c'erano vapori angelici e tanti angeli che ne potevano uscire, ma c'era anche del sangue. / Gesù questo l'ha capito, ha fatto vedere che del sangue d'amore non aveva paura, l'ha lasciato sgorgare dalle sue ferite, l'ha fatto vedere a tutti. / Ma io non so cosa sia la variazione del sangue, né il colore rosso del martirio, ma penso che tutti gli innamorati sono dei martiri, tutti gli innamorati sono in Cristo, tutti gli innamorati sono in Dio".

²² Cf. Merini, Alda 2014: 6:
È inutile che io grida
che a volte io stringo una mano
che non conosco
ed è il fantasma bruno dell'antica memoria.
Io non dormo mai sola.
Scende dalle propaggini del Signore
l'uomo che ho amato un giorno
e che mi vuole sposare.
Non è né un principe né un depredato,
è soltanto l'idea celeste

3. Conclusion: the asylum as Holy Land

To say that God does not need his creatures is blasphemy: Love cannot be closed in on itself, Love needs Creation, Love deeply desires to be loved. However, God himself knows that love means disappearing and that disappearing is the only authentic *sacrifice*, that is the only action capable of drawing a *protected space* in which creator and creature can finally embrace each other serenely.

In magnificent lines, in whose center stands mystically the figure of Mary -authentic mother because she donates not only life but also freedom, that is the possibility of suffering-, Merini's vision reaches unprecedented levels of beauty and clarity:

Mary accepts love with joy and her child with joy. She knows he will never be hers, like all the children of this world, and knows she must keep him in her heart and, together with her son, she must also keep in her heart the suffering of her child.

Jesus, who had his way, could not obey the earthly heart of Mary who wanted all the flesh of her son for herself.

He gave it to others, gave it to his enemies so they would feed on it, so God-man could become everyday food and substance.²³

In the asylum, a place of terrible and absurd suffering, Merini saw her Mount Sinai, a place where it is possible to receive "the tables of a law / unknown to men",²⁴ the *Holy Land* where the silence, the only alternative to shouting ("our law was silence, full of a thousand solitudes"²⁵), allowed her to enter herself, recognize herself, and be reborn:

[...] under that diagnosis, my sweet, soothing soul snaked quietly, a soul that had never been so bright and vital, and sometimes, to console myself, I thought that my ugly blue dressing gown was the robe of St. Francis and that I had in-

di un'entità sconosciuta
che ho chiamato
Dio.

²³ Alda Merini 2013, p. 27: "*Maria accetta l'amore in letizia e il figlio in letizia, sa che non sarà mai suo, come tutti i figli di questo mondo, e sa che deve anche tenerlo in cuore, e con il figlio anche il patimento del figlio. D'altra parte Gesù che aveva la sua strada non poteva obbedire al cuore terreno di Maria che voleva per sé tutta la carne del figlio. La diede agli altri, la diede ai suoi nemici, affinché se ne cibassero, affinché l'uomo Dio diventasse cibo e sostanza di tutti i giorni*".

²⁴ Alda Merini, *Il manicomio è una gran cassa*, in Alda Merini 1984 (= Alda Merini 1991, p. 92, vv. 7-8).

²⁵ Alda Merini, 2014, p. 113.

tionally chosen that robe to humble myself. So, in this gentle way, I used the silence, and the silence made me to meet myself, to meet that self, identical to itself, who did not want to, could not die.²⁶

Where is the real madness, where is the actual hell? The asylum was a Holy Land because “there was no sin committed there, precisely because it was the promised paradise where the sick mind received no blow, where it no longer suffered or where martyrdom became so high as to verge on ecstasy”. The asylum experienced by Merini “left at least the hope of the word.”²⁷ The real asylum, the real hell is outside, here where others “judge you, criticize you and don’t love you”, here where nobody understands that “even illness has a meaning, a disproportion, / a step, / even illness it is the matrix of life.”²⁸

For Alda Merini the internment was a long moment of death and resurrection:

I have known Jericho,
I also have had my Palestine,
the walls of the asylum
were the walls of Jericho
and a pool of infected water
baptized us all.
We were Jews in there
and the Pharisees were on top
and there was also the Messiah
confused inside the crowd:
a madman screaming against Heaven
all his love in God.
A herd of ascetics,
we were all like birds
and sometimes a dark network

²⁶ *Ibid.*: 38: “[...] sotto la diagnosi serpeggiava quieta la mia anima dolce, rasserenante, un’anima che non era stata mai tanto luminosa e vitale, e, a volte, per consolarmi, pensavo che quella brutta vestaglia azzurra fosse il saio di San Francesco e che io di proposito l’avessi scelto per umiliarmi. Così, in questo modo gentile adoperai il silenzio, e mi venne fatto di incontrarvi il mio io, quell’io identico a se stesso, che non voleva, non poteva morire”.

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 106. “[...] non vi si commetteva peccato alcuno, proprio perché era il paradiso promesso dove la mente malata non accusava alcun colpo, dove non soffriva più, o dove il martirio diventava tanto alto da rasentare l’estasi”.

²⁸ Alda Merini, *Ogni mattina il mio stelo*, in Alda Merini 1984 (= Alda Merini 1991, p. 115, vv. 12-14): “[...] anche la malattia ha un senso / una dismisura, un passo, / anche la malattia è matrice di vita”.

imprisoned us
but we were going to the harvest,
the harvest of our Lord
and Christ the Savior.

We were washed and buried
we smelled of incense.

And afterward, when we loved,
we received electric shocks
because, they said, a mad
cannot love anyone.

But one day from inside the grave
I also woke up
and I too, like Jesus,
had my resurrection,
but I didn't go up to the skies
I went to hell
where amazed I look
the walls of ancient Jericho.²⁹

²⁹ Alda Merini, *La Terra Santa*, in Alda Merini 1984 (= Alda Merini 1991: 116):

Ho conosciuto Gerico,
ho avuto anch'io la mia Palestina,
le mura del manicomio
erano le mura di Gerico
e una pozza di acqua infettata
ci ha battezzati tutti.
Lì dentro eravamo ebrei
e i Farisei erano in alto
e c'era anche il Messia
confuso dentro la folla:
un pazzo che urlava al Cielo
tutto il suo amore in Dio.

Noi tutti, branco di asceti
eravamo come gli uccelli
e ogni tanto una rete
oscura ci imprigionava
ma andavamo verso la messe,
la messe di nostro Signore
e Cristo il Salvatore.

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Fummo lavati e sepolti,
odoravamo di incenso.
E dopo, quando amavamo
ci facevano gli elettrochoc
perché, dicevano, un pazzo
non può amare nessuno.
Ma un giorno da dentro l'avello
anch'io mi sono ridestata
e anch'io come Gesù
ho avuto la mia resurrezione,
ma non sono salita ai cieli
sono discesa all'inferno
da dove riguardo stupita
le mura di Gerico antica".

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