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## TO BE IS TO GAZE AND BE GAZED AT

### Vision in Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi's Mysticism

But *videmus nunc per speculum et in enigmate*,  
and the truth, before it is revealed to all, face to face,  
we see in fragments (alas, how illegible) in the error of the world,  
so we must spell out its faithful signals  
even when they seem obscure to us  
and as if amalgamated with a will wholly bent on evil.<sup>1</sup>

*Umberto Eco*

**SUMMARY** — The visionary mysticism of the Carmelite mystic Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi (1566-1607) was from the seventeenth century onwards an object of admiration which triggered an hagiographical legend that surrounds the mystic to this day. As from the first half of the twentieth century scholars carried erudite studies on Maddalena's texts in an attempt to decode her rather exceptional mystical experience. In the following article the author approaches Maddalena's visionary mysticism through an analysis of 'vision' relying upon literary, biblical, mystical, philosophical and psychological perspectives on the subject. The interdisciplinary approach to the concept of 'vision' shows that de' Pazzi's mystical visions led her to gradually acquire both mystical divine knowledge and growth in the formation of self through the reciprocal communicative gaze between God and herself. Mystical vision therefore engenders openness to the other in a relationship that fosters communality against radical individualism.

#### THE GAZE AS UNDERSTANDING

At the end of his life the old monk Adso of Melk, the main character of Umberto Eco's *Il nome della rosa*, left in writing what he learnt from life, namely that we have to search for the 'indisputable Truth' amidst 'the error of the world' compared to a mirror and enigma.<sup>2</sup> This he learnt in part from his apprenticeship

<sup>1</sup> Umberto Eco, *Il nome della rosa*, Milano 2002 (Tascabili Bompiani 33), 19.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

with the Franciscan William of Baskerville who travels to an abbey where a murder was committed. William's efforts to solve the enigmas surrounding the crimes committed become metaphors of the conflict between the search for absolute truth against illusion, relative truth and personal interpretation of facts. The fact that William solves the mystery by accident, since his deductions do not correspond with what actually happened in the Benedictine Abbey, confirm the Pauline assertion cited by Adso at the beginning of the novel, namely that '*videmus nunc per speculum et in ænigmate*'. The whole Pauline text continues: '*tunc autem facie ad faciem. Nunc cognosco ex parte: tunc autem cognoscam sicut et cognitus sum*' (1Cor 13:12).<sup>3</sup>

From Plato onwards the mirror – an instrument of reflection of the self and the world beyond it – is commonly employed as metaphor in the debate on truth, knowledge of self and of reality. The Pauline usage of the mirror metaphor is generally interpreted to mean that we have an imperfect perception of reality. Paul uses this metaphor because in antiquity mirrors were made of highly polished metal, which nonetheless gave a distorted reflection of the face. In addition the mirror, even today, is limited to reflect the object giving a reversed image of the original. Thus the mirror offers an analogous and not an identical copy or reflection of reality.<sup>4</sup> In the context of the whole of 1 Corinthians 13, the metaphor should be understood as illustrating the process of arriving to see clearly, face to face, that which is essential and not through images and distortions as the Corinthian childish Christians were doing by the over evaluation of spiritual gifts.

In the letter 'there is a progression from the lowest gift, tongues (14:6-12), via the intellectual gifts and miracle working faith, to acts of supreme devotion benefiting others'.<sup>5</sup> From the Pauline perspective, Christian existence and knowledge are only authentic inasmuch as these are marked by love. Never ending love has the power to lead us, in the eschatological future, towards a full understanding when we will see face to face. Prophecies, knowledge, tongues and all other spiritual gifts, great and perfect as they may be at present, compared to eschatological fulfilment, seem imperfect and distorted. They are only a poor image that gives a partial and fragmented understanding of the perfection that is to come. Not only Christians in Corinth would have understood perfectly

<sup>3</sup> The Latin is given in the text in respect of the novel quotation from the Vulgate version of the Pauline assertion. The English version (RSV) gives: 'For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood'.

<sup>4</sup> Giuseppe Ricciotti, *Le lettere di san Paolo tradotte e commentate*, Roma 1949, 102.

<sup>5</sup> Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, 'The first letter to the Corinthians', in: Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer & Roland E. Murphy (Eds.), *The new Jerome biblical commentary*, London 1993, 798-815: 811.

St. Paul's use of the mirror 'metaphor for man's obscure vision of God',<sup>6</sup> because 'small metallic mirrors with highly polished surfaces were largely used during the early centuries of the Christian era',<sup>7</sup> but even more so because Corinth was apparently famous for producing highly polished bronze mirrors almost to perfection.

Paul uses *γινώσκω* to refer to his present partial understanding or fragmented knowledge whilst he uses *ἐπιγνώσομαι* in reference to the complete eschatological future knowledge. Although *γνῶσις* is synonymous to *ἐπιγνῶσις*, in this case, the text makes a clear distinction between the two.<sup>8</sup> 'In the New Testament *epignosis* is a technical term that expresses a decisive knowledge of God. One obtains this goal through conversion towards the Christian faith. It is an intimate, perfect and intense knowledge (*epi* is intensive) that has also Christ as its object'.<sup>9</sup>

The use of the latter reminds us also of the Old Testament references to Moses' knowledge of God in this present life (Ex 33:11; Num 12:8; Deut 34:10). Complete knowledge and understanding include the *καθὼς καὶ ἐπεγνώσθην*, namely to understand 'even as I have been fully understood' (1Cor 13:12). *ἐπεγνώσθην* 'is clearly a divine passive'<sup>10</sup> pointing towards being known by God and having 'the divinely-initiated experience of God'. In other texts Paul writes: 'if any one imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if one loves God, one is known by him' (1Cor 8:2-3). And in speaking about those who love God, Paul asserts: 'For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son' (Rom 8:29). Paul in fact cannot understand how the Galatians returned to the slavery of 'the weak and beggarly elemental spirits', they who 'have come to know God, or rather to be known by God' (Gal 4:8-9).<sup>11</sup>

Interesting to note that Merkavah mysticism and Hekhalot literature, which highly value the ecstatic mode of perceiving the transcendent and divine realms, 'describe this goal as 'gazing', beholding, seeing, or 'watching God'. Not only is this goal seen as the final aspiration of human adepts but also as the desired goal of God himself.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, London 1992, 581.

<sup>7</sup> 'Mirror', in: *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Vol. 15, Chicago 1963, 589.

<sup>8</sup> Osvaldo D. Vena, 'La lucha por la ortodoxia en las comunidades cristianas del 2º siglo', in: *Revista Bíblica* 52 (1990/1) no. 37, 1-28: 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, Collegeville (MN) 1999 (Sacra Pagina Series 7), 487.

<sup>11</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>12</sup> Daphna Arbel, "'Pure marble stones of water?": On ecstatic perception, group identity, and authority in Hekhalot and Merkavah literature', in: *Studies in Spirituality* 16 (2006), 21-38: 28.

From a Christian perspective to be fully understood or known by God, ultimately means to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ the Son inasmuch as God gazes at creation only through the Son. 'Creation has a Son-like colour, a Son-like shape which the Son alone could fill'.<sup>13</sup> Jesus Christ, the Son of God is the visible 'image of the invisible God' (Col 1:15) so much so that the one who sees the Son sees the Father (Jn 14:9; 12:45). The double nature of the person of Jesus Christ the Son makes it possible for God and humanity to behold each other in the act of 'looking', 'seeing', 'observing' or 'fixing the gaze' upon Christ. The seer beholds the object of his vision. From God's perspective, to gaze at the Son, ultimately means to see reflected in him divinity and to behold humanity. From humanity's perspective, to gaze at the Son, ultimately means to see reflected in him perfect humanity and to behold the divinity.

The gaze of God on the created order through Christ the Son 'cleanses, makes beautiful, enriches and enlightens'.<sup>14</sup> The gaze of humanity through Christ enables us to make 'that experience of meeting the eyes of someone who sees through us, but does not despise us, and whose eyes hold out the possibility of becoming more than we are'.<sup>15</sup> In this context we can understand why in the history of spirituality mystics applied the mirror metaphor to Christ. Clare of Assisi, for instance, writes to Anne of Prague:

Look upon that mirror each day, O queen and spouse of Jesus Christ, and continually study your face in it, so that you may adorn yourself, within and without with beautiful robes and cover yourself with the flowers and garments of all the virtues, as becomes the daughter and most chaste bride of the Most High King. Indeed, blessed poverty, holy humility and ineffable charity are reflected in that mirror, as, with the grace of God, you can contemplate them throughout the entire mirror.<sup>16</sup>

According to Clare the 'source of contemplation' enables the soul to let the 'heavenly spouse' lead her into his wine cellar where the King dwells.<sup>17</sup> There the divine spouse will embrace and unite the soul bride with him making her his queen.<sup>18</sup> Similarly Marguerite Porete in *Le Mirouer de Simples Ames Anienties* presents the soul as mirror of the Trinity through Christ her exemplar (mirror). The soul gradually grows and is transformed in the mirror that is Christ, becom-

<sup>13</sup> Iain Matthew, *The impact of God: Soundings from St. John of the Cross*, London 1995, 30.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

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

<sup>16</sup> 'The fourth letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague', in: *Francis and Clare: The complete works*, transl. & introd. Regis J. Armstrong & Ignatius C. Brady, New York 1982, 203-206: 204.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem.*

ing by grace what he is by nature, namely truly human and truly divine.<sup>19</sup> This is only possible to the soul because she is to be for ever.<sup>20</sup>

From Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theory we know that in human growth the mirror stage is a fundamental step that sheds 'light on the formation of the I'.<sup>21</sup>

Briefly: in the mirror stage, the infant who has not yet mastered the upright posture and who is supported by either another person or some prosthetic device will, upon seeing herself in the mirror, 'jubilantly assume' the upright position. She thus finds in the mirror image 'already there', a mastery that she will actually learn only later. The jubilation, the enthusiasm, is tied to the temporal dialectic by which she appears *already* to be what she will *only later become*.<sup>22</sup>

Thus the mirror stage 'is itself a moment of self-delusion, of captivation by an illusory image'.<sup>23</sup> This constitutes a permanent structure where the subject is strongly captivated by his own image. According to Lacan at this stage 'The *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject'.<sup>24</sup> It will be the tension between subjectivity and identification with the *other* and the *big Other* that will thrust the child into the development of his or her personality to really become what one is to become.

By analogy, from the abovementioned Christian spiritual perspective, we can state that *the mirror* and *the Other* are one. By gazing at the reflected image in the mirror that is Christ, the soul is freed from narcissistic self-love<sup>25</sup> based on the self-image or ego, only to be exposed to transforming communion with her exemplar in ecstatic love.<sup>26</sup> The epistle of James warns the reader from being curved in on oneself like those who do not let themselves be transformed by the

<sup>19</sup> See: 'Le Filz de Dieu le Pere est mon mirouer de ce; car Dieu le Pere nous donna son Filz, en nous sauvant. Il n'eut nul aultre regart, en ce don donnant a nous, que le regart de nostre salut tant seulement. (...) Et le Filz de Dieu est exemple de nous, et pource le devons nous en ce regart ensuir, car nous devons vouloir en toutes choses tant seulement la divine volenté; et ainsi serions nous filz de Dieu le Pere, a l'exemple de Jhesucrist son filz', Margherita Porete, *Lo specchio delle anime semplici*, transl. Giovanna Fozzer, introd. Romana Guarnieri, notes Marco Vannini, Milano 1994, 400; Ellen L. Babinsky, 'Christological transformation in The Mirror of Souls, by Marguerite Porete', in: *Theology Today* 60 (2003), 34-48.

<sup>20</sup> 'nul ne peut veoir les haultes choses se il ne doit ester permanablement': Porete, *Lo specchio*, 414.

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience', in: *Écrits: A selection*, transl. Alan Sheridan, London-New York 2001, 1-7: 1.

<sup>22</sup> Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, Ithaca-London 1985, 78.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>24</sup> Lacan, 'The mirror stage', 2.

<sup>25</sup> In theological terms: from being an *homo incurvatus in se*.

<sup>26</sup> 'Ecstasy' derives from ἐκστασις, namely 'to stand out of'.

word of God.<sup>27</sup> The latter are like ‘a man who observes his natural face in a mirror (...) and goes away and at once forgets what he was like’ (Jas 1:23-24). On the contrary the epistle calls blessed ‘he who looks into the perfect law’ (Jas 1:25), steadfast in the love of God and neighbor until the glorious coming of the Lord.

On this transformation the Apostle Paul writes: ‘But we with open face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord’ (2Cor 3:18).<sup>28</sup> There are no temporal limits that hinder the transforming action of the Spirit in us; we move *from glory to glory* anticipating in the here and now the definitive glory that is to come.<sup>29</sup>

#### FIXING THE GAZE

The movement from *glory to glory* through an experiential knowledge of God and of herself before him is clearly expressed in Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi’s visionary mysticism. On April 28, 1585 the Carmelite mystic Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi underwent a significant leap in her spiritual and mystical adventure. Initially, ‘by way of mystical illumination Maddalena progressed into the contemplation of God through the intellect’.<sup>30</sup> This was succeeded by a leap into a loving surrender to God. The leap was triggered by the experience of mystical

<sup>27</sup> Martin Luther has a deep exposition on the inclination to self-love in his *Lectures on Romans*. See in particular: Luther, *Lectures on the Romans*, ed. & transl. Wilhelm Pauck, Westminster-London 2006 (= Library of Christian Classics), 112, 159, 182.

<sup>28</sup> The mirror metaphor, used in classic philosophical writings by Plutarch (‘Isis and Osiris’, *Moralia* 382 A-C) and other ancients in a way similar to Paul’s’ (Collins, *First Corinthians*, 486; see also: Plato, *The Republic*, x; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, iii) became very popular in the Middle Ages and Renaissance in religious and secular writings and compilations taking gradually more positive nuances as a metaphor for the gathering of knowledge. From the Christian tradition, Augustine’s *De Trinitate* could be mentioned here for his exposition of 1Cor 13:12, especially in Book XV (See: *Patrologiae cursus completus: Series Latina* [PL] 42, 0819-1098) or his Biblical anthology *De Sacra Scriptura Speculum* (See: PL 34, 0887-1040). Other important compilations include the *Speculum Majus* by Vincent Beauvais (1190-1264). Thus from an instrument that produces a *fleeting image* or *the shadow of reflected form* the *speculum* reflected the ideal form of things and people. To gaze at the *speculum* implied the readiness to conform to an exemplar. As examples see: Aelred of Rievaulx, *The mirror of charity*, transl. Geoffrey Webb & Adrian Walker, London 1962; Jan van Ruusbroec, *Lo specchio dell’eterna beatitudine*, transl. Franco Paris, Milano 1994 (Lecture Cristiane del Secondo Millennio 14).

<sup>29</sup> Charles André Bernard, *San Paolo mistico e apostolo*, Milano 2000, 58-59.

<sup>30</sup> Charlò Camilleri, *Union with God as transformation in beauty: A literary-spiritual analysis of the Colloquies of Santa Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi (1566-1607)*, Roma 2008, 282.

marriage through which Maria Maddalena ‘understood that by the grace of this marriage she would eventually be crucified in Christ who eternally rests in the Father’s bosom’.<sup>31</sup> She was drawn close to her exemplar in order to live with him in God’s sight.

*The Forty-Eighth Colloquy* narrates that the Father invited the mystic to look at her divine Spouse whilst revealing to her the reciprocal gaze of the two Divine Persons in each other:

‘In my bosom, the Soul of my Word gazes, and I gaze in him with wonder, admiration, love, annihilation, purity, peace, counsel, piety, liberality, mercy, justice, goodness, wisdom, power, communication, truth, union, eternity, clarification, transformation and glorification’. Having said this she remained quiet for a long time with her gaze fixed, admiring [the vision], and showing that she understood something.<sup>32</sup>

In the original, to describe Maddalena’s gaze, the text gives ‘*affissata*’. Etymologically *affissata* can have a more profound linguistic nuance than ‘looking attentively’. It can mean ‘to be fixed’, ‘grounded’, ‘tied up’, and ‘united to’.<sup>33</sup> In this text there is a movement from the gaze of both the Son and the Father to the mystic’s gaze upon their reciprocal gaze. Fixing her gaze on the divine gaze she is not merely a passive spectator, but is made to participate in the divine life. The text tells us that she remained in admiration *affissata* in this vision whilst specifying that consequently she ‘understood something’ of the mystery enfolded before her. The above quoted text is taken from the eighty-five page long *Forty-Eighth Colloquy* into which the soul probes God with her questions in an effort to understand fully the mystery of the Trinitarian Divine Life and the soul’s participation in it. Still, as in 1 Corinthians 13:12, in this filial dialogue, Maddalena does not see fully and understands partially – the text says ‘something’ – of the mystery unfolding before her eyes.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 283. The account of Maddalena’s mystical marriage is given in *The Thirty-Ninth Colloquy* of manuscript *Libro de’ Colloqui* still preserved in the Carmelite monastery – Careggi (Florence) and edited in two volumes by Claudio Catena for the publication *Tutte le opere di Santa Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi dai manoscritti originali*, III, Firenze 1963. Hereafter *I colloqui*.

<sup>32</sup> “*Risguarda l’Anima del’ mio Verbo stando nel’ mio seno, e io risguardo in lui con risguardo di miratione; risguardo di ammiratione, risguardo d’amore, risguardo di nichilatione, di purità, di pace, di consiglio, di pietà; risguardo di liberalità, di misericordia, di giustizia; risguardo di bontà, di sapientia, di potentia; risguardo di comunicazione, di verità, di unione; risguardo di eternità, di clarificatione, di transformatione e di glorificatione*”. *Et detto questo si chetò, stando per un gran pezzo molto affissata e ammirata, mostrando d’intendere qualcosa’*: Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi, ‘Colloquio quadragesimo ottavo’, in: *I colloqui*, II, 334.

<sup>33</sup> See: *affissare* and *affisso* in Manlio Cortelazzo & Paolo Zolli, *L’etimologico minore: DELI. Dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana*, Milano 2004, 47.

The mystic emphatically states that only God can have knowledge of himself, by himself, for himself and in himself. Creatures can only make way for God to appear in their lives by immersing themselves in his greatness and by being totally abandoned in him.<sup>34</sup>

From the *Forty-Seventh Colloquy* onwards, she repeatedly insists on this. A particular text reads:

Most High. \_\_\_\_\_ Highness, in everything inconceivable and inexplicable. Highness so great that only of yourself, for yourself and in yourself you can understand yourself; and only of yourself can you delight in yourself, for only by yourself you are comprehended. \_\_\_\_\_ Highness in which the soul is lost for it cannot descend or ascend more; nor cannot she roam about so near or further on. \_\_\_\_\_ Highness, upon whom the angels gaze. \_\_\_\_\_ Highness, in the admiration of whom the Archangels admire, the height of whom lowers itself so much to come to us here below. \_\_\_\_\_ *Offero tibi omnem creaturam*, and the Blood of your only-begotten Word for them. \_\_\_\_\_ *Admirabilis in altitudine unitatis tue*. \_\_\_\_\_ Who will ever be able, when communicating [your attributes], to narrate something of your greatness, and of your goodness? \_\_\_\_\_ The greatest narration that one could make of you consists in abandoning the self totally in you, and to be annihilated beneath you. \_\_\_\_\_ *Complevit colloquium Pater cum filia e sponsa Unigenitis sui*.<sup>35</sup>

Of note here are the words ‘*ammirazione*’ and ‘*ammirano*’ that define the gazing of Archangels in God. As they admire the greatness of the divinity their own greatness appears as nothing. Implicitly the text reveals the same dialectic as to Maddalena’s gaze. She perceives God’s immensity through unknowing and perceives the nothingness of herself and of creation before such an immensity. Christ-like abandonment in God becomes, therefore, the pathway for understanding. In the last part of the text divine knowledge is implicitly present in the use of ‘*narrare*’ and ‘*comunicarla*’. To communicate and to narrate something

<sup>34</sup> Camilleri, *Union with God*, 246.

<sup>35</sup> ‘*Altissimo. \_\_\_\_\_ Altezza in tutto inexcogitabile e inexplicabile. Altezza tanto grande che solo da te stesso, per te stesso e in te stesso ti può intendere, e solo da te stesso ti puoi compiacere, però che solo da te stesso sei compreso \_\_\_\_\_ Altezza nella quale si finisce l’anima che non può andare né più giù, né più sù, né più qua, né più là. \_\_\_\_\_ Nella cui altezza rimirano gli angeli. \_\_\_\_\_ Altezza, nella cui ammirazione ammirano gli Archangeli, la quale altezza si abbassa tanto e viene a noi quaggiù. \_\_\_\_\_ Offero tibi omnem creaturam, et il’ Sangue del’ tuo Unigenito Verbo per loro. \_\_\_\_\_ Admirabilis in altitudine unitatis tue. \_\_\_\_\_ Chi potrà mai narrare un che della grandezza tua, e della bontà tua in comunicarla? \_\_\_\_\_ Il’ maggior narrare che si possa fare di te è di rilassarsi tutto in te, e annichilarsi sotto te. \_\_\_\_\_ Complevit colloquium Pater cum filia e sponsa Unigenitis sui*’: Maddalena de’ Pazzi, ‘Colloquio quadragesimo settimo’, in: *I colloqui*, II, 283.



about God implies having experiential knowledge of God. In this case, Maddalena knows through annihilation and abandonment in God. For the mystic in fact, 'to say something is to do something'<sup>36</sup> in an attempt to creatively perform the Gospel as closely and as perfectly as she could.<sup>37</sup>

According to Maria Maddalena the intra-Trinitarian communication of love into which we are drawn to participate is the source of all possible knowledge of God; a knowledge that radically transforms the soul in a new creation to the point of total divinisation.<sup>38</sup> As Christ is the perfect image of the Father through a reciprocal inhabitation, we can participate in this image in virtue of the life communicated to us in Christ by the Spirit.<sup>39</sup> Participation in this life is possible only through self-abandonment in God.

#### GAZING AT CHRIST THE MIRROR/EXEMPLAR

Even the Eternal Father is described, by Maddalena, as holding the pure souls who find their rest in him, inside his bosom. The Carmelite mystic states that God breast feeds these souls as a mother does with her siblings. In nurturing these souls, the Eternal Father strips them from their self love and self will, giving them instead the gift of himself and of his will.<sup>40</sup> The divine gaze of the Father and the Son nurture the soul-bride with the milk of divine essence enabling both to participate in the divine-life.<sup>41</sup> The soul in turn, struck by the gift of God who looks upon her lowliness (Lk 1:48), receives the divine gaze by returning the gaze at the divine onlookers. From both sides the act of gazing becomes an act of self-gift to the other. This dialectic strikes a cord with the Sartrean gaze where the other-as-subject is known through the disruption of oneself to become an object for the other. This process de-centers the egocentric self enabling dialogue between the two onlookers whilst transforming both into a being-for-others.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, it can be stated that ultimately, the gaze is a relationship.

<sup>36</sup> See: Joe Friggieri, *Actions and speech actions in the philosophy of J.L. Austin*, Malta 1991, 152.

<sup>37</sup> For the concept of performing mysticism see, Camilleri, *Union with God*, 78-85.

<sup>38</sup> See Vincenzo della Croce, 'Gli originali di Santa Maria Maddalena', in: *Rivista di Vita Spirituale* 2 (1948), 447-462; Camilleri, *Union with God*, 241-245. This theme is also fundamental in the writings of John of the Cross. See, Luigi Borriello & Giovanna della Croce, *Conoscere Dio è la vocazione dell'uomo: Linee di antropologia mistica in San Giovanni della Croce*, Milano 1991, 163.

<sup>39</sup> See Bernard, *San Paolo mistico e apostolo*, 59.

<sup>40</sup> See: 'Colloquio quadragesimo sesto', in: *I colloqui*, II, 240-241.

<sup>41</sup> See: 'Colloquio quadragesimo ottavo', in: *I colloqui*, II, 338.

<sup>42</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and nothingness: An essay on phenomenological ontology*, transl. Hazel Barnes, New York 2007, 277ff. I am not referring here to Sartre's conflictual or non-mutual

In the dramatic moment of Maddalena de' Pazzi's mystical marriage she receives from her divine Bridegroom the gift of the ring, symbol of her bond with the Lord. She describes this symbol as 'a polished mirror' at which she looks to contemplate her union with God through Christ.<sup>43</sup> For Maddalena to gaze at the mirror-like ring ultimately means to gaze at herself in the Bridegroom affirming that in her relationship with God she was bequeathed the attributes of Christ her Bridegroom.<sup>44</sup>

It seems that Maddalena was acquainted with the image of Christ as mirror. In the Carmelite monastery of Santa Maria degli Angeli there are at least two texts, used by the mystic, that exploit this metaphor as a paradigm for the building up of a relationship with Christ.<sup>45</sup> The metaphor was used also in the talks delivered to the community from time to time by the monastery's confessors and spiritual directors. For example, Vincenzo Puccini insists that 'the mirror of the bride of Jesus, is Jesus Christ crucified'.<sup>46</sup>

In the relationship with the crucified Lord the mystic experiences the disruption of herself. This makes way to the birth of the life of Christ in her. She confesses that it is no longer she who lives but it is Christ who lives in her. In

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gazes but to the mutual exchange of looks that express the desire for intimacy. According to Sartre both the conflictual and the mutual exchange produce an existential shame or blush. In *Barionà, ou le Fils du tonnerre*, Barionà cannot believe that God looks at, contemplates lice (human beings) and is drawn to 'become one of these lice'. Ultimately he cannot believe in 'a God transformed into a human being' because gods stay in heaven delighted in self-contemplation. Indeed Sartre's definition of God is: *a being-in-itself-for-itself*. Nonetheless, in *Barionà* he gives us a graceful example of the transforming gaze when describing the *Virgin and Child* scene. During the performance of the drama the audience is invited to look at the nativity scene through closed eyes! The Virgin 'in anxious amazement' gazes at her son who in turn looks and smiles at her: 'She looks at him and thinks: "This God is my son. This divine flesh is my flesh. He is made of me, he has my eyes and the shape of his mouth is the shape of mine. He looks like me. He is God and he looks like me". And no woman has had in lot her God for herself alone. A little God one can hold in one's arms and cover with kisses, a warm God that smiles and breathes, a God one can touch and who lives'. Free translation from: Jean-Paul Sartre, *Barionà, ou le Fils du tonnerre*, Paris 1970, 91.

<sup>43</sup> See: 'Trigesimo nono colloquio', in: *I colloqui*, II, 20.

<sup>44</sup> See: *Ibid.*, 20-25.

<sup>45</sup> The two texts are: Gaspar Loarte, *Istruzione et avvertimenti per meditare la passione di Christo Nostro Redentore: Con alcune meditazioni intorno ad essa*, Venetia 1572; Aurifico Bonfigli, *Specchio monacale, ove piamente specchiandosi la monaca cristiana facilmente potrà conoscere quella vera et spiritual bellezza che da lei desidera lo Sposo suo immacolato Cristo Gesù*, Venezia 1581.

<sup>46</sup> Vincenzo Puccini, *Meditazione per i dieci giorni avanti la solennità della Pasqua dello Spirito Santo insieme con le tre feste, in preparazione alla venuta dello Spirito Santo*, 1610, 29 (Archivio Mon. Careggi, Pal I, 13). Fortunately, amanuenses in the monastery transcribed all the talks delivered to the community by various confessors and spiritual directors. Rightfully these can be considered to be proper treatises on the spiritual life. Though properly preserved in the monastic archives, these manuscripts deserve to be published so as to be available to scholars and the general public.

quoting Saint Paul: *Vivo ego iam non ego vivit vero in me Christus Crucifixus* (cf: Gal 2:20), Maddalena feels the need to specify that it is the Crucified Christ that is now living in her; a disrupted Christ whose identity is definable as a *being-for-others* in love. Her experience of disruption or unformation in the relationship with God progressively takes the radical form of annihilation. At the end of her life, Maddalena arrives at the point of seeing no more. She ceases to see the mysteries through visions and mystical phenomena and has to let herself to be seen – gazed at – only by God. As in the bosom of the Father the annihilated and dead Christ continues ‘to be’ eternally in God’s gaze, so ‘is’ Maddalena.<sup>47</sup> The nuns, who lived with her, express this unformation through metaphors and images. They report that she resembled Job who suffered in patience and the Crucified Christ in agony.<sup>48</sup>

After the mystical marriage experience Maddalena mirrors six attributes in Jesus Christ her mirror and exemplar

1. crucified love
2. desire for God and creatures in loving humility
3. a Eucharistic existence
4. eschatological glory
5. the Word’s attractiveness
6. purity, love and holiness<sup>49</sup>

United in charity with God, both the soul-bride and Christ her Bridegroom adorn each other through their mutual *being-for-the-other*. In looking at each other both corroborate the being-for-the-other through that look.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps John of the Cross explains best this in stanza 36 of the *Spiritual Canticle B* where he expresses the soul’s ‘longing for the beatific vision after having experienced the grace of spiritual marriage’:<sup>51</sup>

*Let us go forth to behold ourselves in your beauty.* This means: Let us so act that by means of this loving activity we may attain to the vision of ourselves in your beauty in eternal life. That is: That I be so transformed in your beauty that we may be alike in beauty, and both behold ourselves in your beauty, possessing then your very

<sup>47</sup> See: ‘Colloquio quadragesimo ottavo’, in: *I colloqui*, II, 285.

<sup>48</sup> *Ultima malattia, Libro nero*, fasc. 10-11 (Archivio Mon. Careggi, Serie I, Pal II, 1). See also: Vincenzo Puccini, *Vita della Madre Suor Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi Fiorentina, Monaca dell’Ordine Carmelitano nel monastero di S. Maria de gli Angeli di Borgo S. Frigidiano di Firenze*, Firenze 1609, 190-191. The last period of Maddalena’s life is characterised by immense and profound suffering. It is usually referred to as the nudo patire period.

<sup>49</sup> For a detailed analysis of these six attributes, see: Camilleri, *Union with God*, 221-234.

<sup>50</sup> Sartre, *Being and nothingness*, 290ff.

<sup>51</sup> Camilleri, *Union with God*, 230.

beauty; this, in such a way that each looking at the other may see in the other their own beauty, since both are your beauty alone, I being absorbed in your beauty; hence, I shall see you in your beauty, and you will see me in your beauty, and I shall see myself in you in your beauty, and you will see yourself in me in your beauty; that I may resemble you in your beauty, and you resemble me in your beauty, and my beauty be your beauty and your beauty my beauty; wherefore I shall be you in your beauty, and you will be me in your beauty, because your very beauty will be my beauty; and thus we shall behold each other in your beauty.<sup>52</sup>

Through the reciprocal gaze both are transformed: *I resemble you, you resemble me*. The participation of the soul in the divine life will reach its fulfilment in the final eschatological transformation, when the soul beholds the beatific vision.<sup>53</sup> Here the soul receives only an imperfect glimpse of what is to come perfectly.

Maddalena explains this journey towards a full understanding in the description of a vision of the Trinity in the form of a 'beautiful circle'. In this circle she sees 'a mirror, a book and a spring'. Although she is already united with the Trinity, still she recognizes the need to continue mirroring herself in the mirror who is Christ, to continue studying the book who is the Father, and to bathe in the spring who is the Holy Spirit.<sup>54</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Maddalena's visionary mysticism brought about a gradual growth in maturity and integrity inasmuch as she embraced God's self-communication to her. To propose a mystical concept of vision can perhaps provide insights to visual culture studies in the investigation of a contemporary visual media drenched culture. The latter powerfully produces, shapes and changes the person, more often than not, into a self-centred spectator-consumer.

Re-evaluating the significance of a personal experience of the other as an important step in the formation of the self can perhaps release today's people and cultures from the radical individualism and inconsiderate self-absorption that fragment human existence. Vision, understood as the capacity to gaze while being gazed at, to behold in letting oneself to be held, not only fosters acceptance of the other in his/her individuality but enables a transcendental sharing of life, apprehensions and principles adept at transforming both the seer and the seen into beings for the other.

<sup>52</sup> John of the Cross, 'The Spiritual Cantic B', 36.5, in: *The complete works*, transl. Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez, Washington, DC 1991, 611.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Aquinas explains this, amongst others, in the *Summa contra gentiles*, Lib. III, cap. LI.

<sup>54</sup> *La probatione*, II, ed. Giuliano Agresti, in: *Tutte le opere di santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi dai manoscritti originali*, VI, Firenze 1965, 102.