

The spatial representation of the Blessed Mary in Italian poetry at the time of the Second Vatican Council

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Abstract. The representation of the Holy Virgin has long constituted one of the most important thematic lines in Italian poetry, both sacred and profane. In terms of the representation of space, the Blessed Mary was traditionally placed in far-away, celestial hierarchies. In more recent periods, this figure is often placed in the space of earthly life, with which the lyrical subject (the enunciator) is more familiar. Juri Lotman's perspective on the space of the typological description of culture shows that divinities belong mainly to the exterior (E) space of culture. Building on these considerations, the purpose of this article is to analyse recent Marian representations – both poetic and theological – in Italian culture. I will demonstrate that, during the 20th century in Italy, Marian *sacrum* was moved closer to or even inside interior space (I), as the Blessed Virgin started to appear mostly in scenes of daily life and her divine traits gradually lost importance. This kind of spatiality is also found in the ecumenical dialogue. The Second Vatican Council normalized both Marian theology and the faithful's practices, which influenced textual production and brought about further changes in the spatial placement of Mary. While the general social trend towards secularization has been increasing the distance between the human and the divine, Mary's sanctity was transferred to the interior space (I) of everyday life – and this could be one of the factors that relaunched Marian poetry.

Keywords: The Holy Virgin; the Blessed Mary; the Second Vatican Council; interior (I)/exterior (E) space of culture; spatial descriptions; Marian theology; Italian poetry; contemporary poetry

1. Mariology, poetry, and the self-description of culture

The 20th century was a period of a deep reflection by Christians concerning the figure of the Blessed Mary, a reflection now recognized as an independent branch of theology. Mariological studies focus on the historic role of Mary – the mother of Jesus – in the context of the Scriptures, within the Christian tradition and

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the Catholic Church's teachings over the centuries. Other elements are equally important, such as the history of official and popular devotion, Roman Catholic dogmas, both liturgy and prayer, and of thinking about Mary throughout the evolution of Christianity. In this context, the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) of the Roman Catholic Church was a milestone in the reflection on Marian topics. In fact, one of the council's principal documents was the constitution *Lumen Gentium* promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1964, which contains a chapter distinguishing and normalizing a series of previous reflections about Mary. This constitutes an important landmark for the further development of Mariological concepts in the wider, ecumenical direction defined by the Council; indeed, it is among the most important modern aspects of the Roman Catholic Church's teachings in the second half of the 20th century. Pope Paul VI returned to this topic twice more, in 1967 and 1974, with two apostolic exhortations entitled *Signum Magnum* and *Marialis Cultus*. These texts describe, comment on, and critique ways of venerating Mary. Indications of orthodoxy and doctrinally correct devotion are provided in the latter document. In his encyclical letter on Marian topics, *Redemptoris Mater* (1987), Pope John Paul II further promoted both devotion to and theology about Mary. The common element uniting these papal documents is repeated references to the Scriptures, but they also have in common significant consideration of the cult of Marian devotion in both the past and the present, including popular veneration. Indeed, this aspect characterizes the Marian debate as a whole, at least in Modern Italy – we might recall, for instance, the Marian treatise by Ludovico Antonio Muratori from the mid-18th century, *Della regolata divozion de' cristiani*.² De Fiores' (1999: 23–24) analysis shows how important this work was in its epoch.³

The Blessed Mary has a significant presence in Italian poetry beginning with the earliest works that have survived to the present, both fragments and entire texts.⁴ Marian poetry has been cultivated by both devotional poets and the best

² During the 18th century, Muratori's treatise was published at least sixteen times and translated into several languages (Latin, German, French, Spanish). Chapter XXII of the treatise speaks about *Della divozione a Maria Vergine Santissima*.

³ Historical reflections on the evolution of Marian theology can be found in several works by Salvatore M. Perrella and Stefano de Fiores. My argument is based mainly on Perrella 2015 and De Fiores 1999.

⁴ An example is the fragment called "Passion from Montecassino", a three-line 12th-century vernacular *planctus* of Mary (see Zimei 2012). In the period of the Origins, during the 13th century, Mary was the addressee or voice speaking in several lauds (*Donna de Paradiso* by Jacopone da Todi; the anonymous *Rayna possentissima*, etc.). Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, together with many other authors, wrote works devoted to the Virgin during the fervid 14th century, as did many other poets over the centuries. Naturally, this brief overview cannot be exhaustive.

known authors of every literary epoch. The long life of certain Marian devotional texts, such as *Le glorie di Maria* by Saint Alfonso Maria de' Liguori for example, can be compared to that of certain great secular literary works. This article analyses poems written in different periods to illustrate the traditional approach to spatial metaphors involving the figure of the Blessed Virgin. By focusing mainly on 20th-century Italian poetry, I show that a significant change occurred in the last century. This shift unfolded over a long period, beginning before the Second Vatican Council to continue to the present day together with the spread of a standardized Catholic Mariology.

2. The Blessed Mary in cultural space according to Lotman

Juri Lotman's two articles "On the metalanguage of a topological description of culture" (Lotman 1975), and "On the semiosphere" (Lotman 2005[1984]) focus on questions of spatial-cultural representation. I draw on the categories of (I/E) space and the vertical stratification of the space of believers as my starting points when analysing metaphors related to space and the placement of the Blessed Virgin Mary in contemporary Italian poetry. In Lotman's framework, interior (I) space is that of "one's own culture" (Lotman 1975: 97) and is perceived as "the only one" (Lotman 1975: 97), neutral ("deprived of a specific character", Lotman 1975: 99), and organized. Spatial models are subdivided into interior (I) and exterior (E) space, with the latter perceived as significantly different from that which is neutral. In Lotman's corpus of analysed texts, exterior space may be either good or bad. Specifically, (E) space can house divinities that represent either protective or evil forces, influencing human life in either direction. The consequence of this subdivision of the space of culture is that a boundary exists between the two, and all beings who cross the boundary are attributed particular importance: "[...] the border points of the semiosphere may be likened to sensory receptors, which transfer external stimuli into the language of our nervous system, or a unit of translation, which adapts the external actor to a given semiotic sphere," as Lotman (2005[1984]: 209) explains. This article thus analyses the placement of the Holy Virgin in either (E) or (I) space and the relationship created between an enunciator (the lyrical subject) and the Holy Mary. In my corpus, (I) space is represented as earthly life and the physical dimension in which the lyrical subject operates. (E) space is the celestial area inhabited by the divinities venerated by Christians. My corpus is selected mainly from among 20th-century Italian poetry and theological works, as an interesting change occurred during this period. The turning point of this change was the Second Vatican Council, a moment of great progress in

the Mariological debate. Indeed, I believe the Second Vatican Council can be considered a moment in which previous theological ideas were incorporated and a push to move forward. Such process is reflected in poetry, both Italian and European.⁵

To analyse a shift in the Virgin Mary's placement in cultural space, we need to begin by summarizing the traditional vision. In Italian literature, the Blessed Virgin is a highly placed figure. She was usually evoked in terms of her human aspects (her motherhood, maternal sorrow and grief), and traditional representations of this figure can be summarized as a human face of the divine. Her position in poetry, in both poems of praise and prayers, was hierarchical. Traditionally, there was a distinct boundary separating the earthly life of the lyrical subject and the celestial area where the Blessed Mary was positioned. At one time, only the Blessed Virgin Mary was attributed the ability to cross this border:⁶ as scholars have recognized, Dante is among the few voices of Italian poetry to have crossed the gate of Heaven to interact with celestial hierarchies and, even in this case, his visit was unrepeatable. In contrast, one of the most common prayers to Mary involves asking her to come and look on our misery.⁷ As far as the relationship between the Blessed Virgin and the faithful (the enunciator, i.e. the subject speaking in poetic texts) is concerned, the axis in Marian culture has traditionally been vertical, with the enunciator down in his/her earthly dimension addressing Mary up above (in keeping with the categories outlined in Marsciani 2007⁸). From this starting point, we can see that this relationship gradually transformed from vertical to horizontal. This shift occurred during the 20th

⁵ My research also touches on poetry written in other European languages; regarding this topic, see Kubas 2022.

⁶ According to Lotman 2005: 211, the Blessed Virgin would be a kind of interpreter, but in my corpus, she can settle either on the boundary of the space represented or in the centre. In a different cultural configuration, the figure of the Blessed Virgin can directly occupy the boundary and become a semantic operator between (I) and (E) space, as shown in Francesco Galofaro's article (Galofaro 2023) in this issue of *Sign System Studies*.

⁷ Dante's visiting of Paradise is related with a strong difficulty of telling, of expressing, as many scholars notices. In fact, one of the topics of this part of the *Divine Comedy* (and a topic of literary research on this masterpiece) is ineffability, especially of Dante's celestial pilgrimage – this is declared starting from Canto I of the third part of the *Comedy*. According to Lotman 2005: 209 such a phenomenon must be *translated* into the language of the internal space, poetic and epic, in our case. There is a rich bibliography on this topic, see, for instance, Colombo 1987; Ledda 1997.

⁸ Marsciani, Francesco 2008. Il discorso della preghiera (un abbozzo). *I Destini del Sacro – Convegno AISS 2007 – Reggio Emilia*. Available online at: https://www5.pucsp.br/cps/downloads/biblioteca/2016/marsciani__f__il_discorso_della_preghiera__.pdf. Last accessed on 4 August, 2022.

century, with the Second Vatican Council constituting a key moment of change. It is important to stress that the change in question took place over time, over the span of a century or perhaps almost two. During the period of change, the two models coexisted: the traditional prayer to the Virgin (the *Litany of Loreto*, for instance, still in use with its poetic reinterpretations) is an example of such coexistence.

3. Marian spatiality: poetry and theology

3.1. Traditional vision

This textual analysis focuses on contemporary Italian poetry, but it also requires an introduction together with a brief retrospective including a few texts from the past. The focus on poetry will be accompanied by the reading of other types of Marian works as well, such as devotional or theological writings. To span the period up to the present day, it is necessary to select among the texts and periods under consideration, a step that constitutes a delicate moment in this study. In order to discuss a topic of poetry as frequent as Mary is, we must keep in mind that more than one spatial representation trend can coexist in the same epoch. In fact, this paper is interested in the prevailing vision of Mary in the periods under consideration as well as the dynamics of change these visions have undergone.

In spatial representations, the Blessed Virgin can be seen as belonging to either (E) or (I) space. The former is the most common representation in the centuries characterized here as traditional: in these cases, Mary belongs to far-away space and is an object of humble prayer and veneration. This way of describing her was common, beginning in the Middle Ages, and it is clearly visible, for example, in the 13th-century praise songs⁹ and, three centuries later, in the parts of the proceedings of the Council of Trent concerning Mary. As De Fiores (1992: 12) notes, the idea of the superiority of grace in the divine maternity prevailed in 16th-century Catholic theology and, from a spatial point of view, this idea placed the Holy Virgin in an exclusively divine space (E).¹⁰ Let us recall one of the canons of the afore-mentioned Council:

⁹ In the historiography of Italian literature, the 13th century is referred to as *le Origini*. A typical Italian genre called *lauda spirituale* flourished in that period.

¹⁰ This research does not analyse the distance between the Blessed Mary and her Son or God – that would be a topic for another study. Certain Marian issues were discussed during the Council of Trent, such as the Immaculate Conception, the original sin of Mary, and divine grace towards her. One of the official decrees concerning this figure is Canon XXIII.

If any one saith, that a man [...] is able, during his whole life, to avoid all sins, even those that are venial, – except by a special privilege from God, as the Church holds in regard of the Blessed Virgin; let him be anathema. (6th Session, Decree on Justification, Canon XXIII)¹¹

The representation of space in this document associates human life with earth and positions the Church as a mediator located in (I) space but close to the border, while the Blessed Virgin belongs to Heaven. This cultural setting determined a strongly vertical relationship between the faithful (and poets) in their praising of and praying to Mary. Such a relationship is internally dynamic but with stable poles.

Before arriving in the 20th century, let us look at a series of poetic examples defining the space and traditional relationship between the subject and the Blessed Mary. The first is from the most ancient collection of Italian lauds from the 13th century. It clearly illustrates the type of relationship, lasting for centuries, in which divine virtues rained down on the Blessed Virgin, transforming her into the holiest and most powerful of queens:

*Ave, donna santissima,
regina potentissima!*

*La virtù celestiale
colla gratia supernale
en te, virgo virginale,
discese benignissima.* (Guarnieri 1991: 8)¹²

[Hail, Most Holy Woman, / powerful queen! // The celestial virtue, / and supernatural grace / descended upon Thee, / oh virginal *virgo*.]

Later in the same poem, Mary is also the one who shows her devotees the way, so her work is related to the idea of an earthly journey. Marian *lauda* of the 13th century decisively influenced the most important Italian authors from the 14th century, namely Dante and Petrarch, whose poetry in turn spread across the continent to influence many European writers.¹³ Although it is not the aim of this paper to analyse medieval poems, it is worth citing Dante's well-known

¹¹ The English text, together with the concordances, is available online, see http://www.intratext.com/IXT/ENG0432/_PJ.HTM#4AR; last access on 4 August, 2022.

¹² Unless otherwise indicated, all the translations are mine (M. M. K.).

¹³ The influence of the spiritual *lauda* genre on Dante and Petrarch is examined in Kubas 2018: 171–183.

Canto XXXIII of *Paradiso* as a significant stage of Marian poetic praise. The “Virgin mother” in Dante’s work is “humble and high”.¹⁴ the canto thus opens with a complex spatial representation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a type of spatial description that never prevailed as the main way of representing Mary but has always appeared and persisted across the centuries. This element will be considered in the last part of this paper. In the following stanzas, we find both a description of directional movement (the faithful’s prayers described as “flying” towards Mary) and a low self-positioning of the pilgrim Dante. See for instance these short excerpts from the canto (ll. 1–3; 13–15; 49–51):

*Vergine Madre, figlia del tuo figlio,
umile e alta più che creatura,
termine fisso d'eterno consiglio,
[...]
Donna, se' tanto grande e tanto vali,
che qual vuol grazia e a te non ricorre,
sua disianza vuol volar sanz' ali.
[...]
Bernardo m'accennava, e sorridea,
perch' io guardassi suso; ma io era
già per me stesso tal qual ei volea:*

[“Thou Virgin Mother, daughter of thy Son / Humble and high beyond all other creature, / The limit fixed of the eternal counsel, // [...] // Lady thou art so great, and so prevailing, / That he who wishes grace, nor runs to thee / His aspirations without wings would fly. // [...] // Bernard was beckoning unto me, and smiling, / That I should upward look; but I already / Was of my own accord such as he wished]¹⁵

In the hymn “Lovely Virgin” by Petrarch, the lyrical subject defines his relationship with the Blessed Virgin in the first stanza of his *canzone*. Describing his positioning as human, he associates the second term of the metaphor with his own identity. In fact, the enunciator states: “though I am earth, and you the queen of heaven” (Petrarch 2015).¹⁶ In the following stanzas he prays:

¹⁴ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s translation of the *Divine Comedy* is available at the website *Digital Dante*, <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/paradiso/paradiso-33/>, last access on 28 December, 2022.

¹⁵ The Italian version is from the edition by Anna Chiavacci Leonardi (Alighieri 2016: 907–914), the English translation is by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (see the previous footnote).

¹⁶ Translation of Petrarch by A. S. Kline in which the pages are not numbered.

*o fenestra del ciel lucente altera,
venne a salvarne in su li estremi giorni;
o fra tutti terreni altri soggiorni
sola tu fosti electa;* (Petrarch 2013: 1204-1205)

[O highest shining window of heaven, / came to save us in these latter days: / and from all the other earthly wombs / you alone were chosen;]

For Petrarch as for Dante, the Blessed Virgin Mary is an object of complex spatial representation in which the earthly and celestial features associated with this figure are woven together – in fact, in the fourth stanza her virtue is defined as high humility.¹⁷ She is a bright “star of this tempestuous sea”, the “lady of heaven” and of “high feelings”, while the man who speaks is “low”.¹⁸ This partitioning of space creates a vertical relationship between the faithful and the divine addressee (Marsciani 2007: 5).¹⁹ In this relationship, positive features – all that the subject might desire – are attributed to the high²⁰ dimension, while the earthly (low) condition is represented as negative. In the first half of the 16th century, Vittoria Colonna, a Renaissance poet who witnessed the earliest stage of the Council of Trent, addressed Mary in several sonnets. As an exponent of “spiritual Petrarchism”, Colonna’s imagery and technique was linked to that of the above-mentioned 14th-century master. In the poem cited below, the Blessed Virgin occupies high and earthly portions of space at the same time. This aspect is clearly visible in the opening stanza of Colonna’s Sonnet 133:

*Stella del nostro mare chiara e sicura,
che il Sole del Paradiso in terra ornasti
del mortale sacro manto, anzi adombrasti
con il velo virgineo tuo sua luce pura;* (Colonna 1982)

[Star of our sea, clear and safe, / that the Sun of Paradise on earth adorned / of the mortal sacred mantle, and overshadowed [him] / by thy virginal veil his pure light;]

The cultural setting of the epoch was focused on Mary’s divine maternity, but in Colonna’s poetics it is Mary who both brings God down to occupy earthly space and transforms God’s celestial glory. It is necessary to underline that Colonna’s

¹⁷ The Italian original reads ‘*altissima umilitate*’; Kline translates it as ‘noblest humility’.

¹⁸ Or ‘vile’.

¹⁹ As in Marsciani’s analysis of *Pater Noster*, this vertical relationship is, at the same time, an instance of “staying in front of” (my translation) as implied by the pronoun ‘you’, typical of several Christian prayers.

²⁰ In Kline’s translations of *The Canzoniere*, the term use to render the Italian words ‘*alto*’ and ‘*altissimo*’ is ‘noble’.

late spiritual vision was not considered an example of Catholic orthodoxy, as she was in touch with movements seeking renewal in the Church.²¹

3.2. The 20th century

3.2.1. Dialogue

It is quite uncommon, albeit not impossible, to find complex representations in the grouping of work defined here as “traditional”²², as in modern and contemporary writing. From my perspective, the central turning point was the Second Vatican Council.²³ Before, during, and after the Council, a series of theological works were produced in which Marian thought underwent intense development. During the 20th century and at the beginning of this millennium, these renewed concepts were attentively received and there was an exchange between theology and poetry: one might say that Mariology influenced poetry and *vice versa*. Both Marian theology and Marian poetry conveyed a change in the spatial positioning of the relationship between the faithful (the lyrical subject, namely ‘I’) and the Blessed Virgin Mary. In a spatial partitioning that remained the same, the placement of Mary shifted. The representation of Mary moved from (E) to (I) space. She is either close or far away, but the prevailing vision positions her as sharing human spaces. This is emphasized both in the discourse of the Second Vatican Council and in several theological works. Certain theologians directly defined Mary as a spatiality. Recent Marian discourse – at least in the Italian cultural context – brings the *imago* of Mary inside earthly space. Changes thus took place in the distance with God and celestial hierarchies, but this is not a necessary implication of the phenomenon under observation here.

Let me start with the Second Vatican Council’s most important Marian document, the dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* by Pope Paul VI.

Predestined from eternity by that decree of divine providence which determined the incarnation of the Word to be the Mother of God, the Blessed Virgin was on this earth the virgin Mother of the Redeemer, and above all others and in a singular way the generous associate and humble handmaid of the Lord. She

²¹ For the purposes of this analysis, it is important to highlight the relationship between Colonna’s Marian vision and 16th-century preaching, for example that of Bernardo Ochino. See Forni 2011: 77–78.

²² The grouping of texts referred to here as “traditional” was created for the purposes of this study and does not correspond to any specific historiographical classification. Naturally, this grouping is not homogeneous and could be analysed using the same premises, but this is not a focus of my study.

²³ The last council seriously discussed the post-Tridentine heritage.

conceived, brought forth and nourished Christ. She presented Him to the Father in the temple, and was united with Him by compassion as He died on the Cross. In this singular way she cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the work of the Savior in giving back supernatural life to souls. Wherefore she is our mother in the order of grace.

[...] Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this salvific duty, but by her constant intercession continued to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation. By her maternal charity, she cares for the brethren of her Son, who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and cultics, until they are led into the happiness of their true home. (Paul VI 1964: III, 61–62)²⁴

Semantic areas of daily work, effort, cooperation, and the sphere of home and family mark this text and its way of conceiving Marian space in connection with human life.²⁵ Karl Rahner, who participated in the Second Vatican Council, was among those asserting Mary's close presence in human life. In his meditations, he considers Mary both a perfect Christian and a human being who stands "on our side" (Comunità di Bose 2004: 1060–1062). In the mid-20th century – before the beginning of the Council – Romano Guardini outlined Mary as a human being with a human spiritual itinerary in an epistolary work entitled *Die Mutter des Herrn* (Guardini 1955; see De Fiores 1999: 42–45). Guardini also highlights the distance between her and the Son; his reflections concern proxemics and, in certain ways, contributed to shifting the figure of Mary into (I) space. A theology that directly conceptualized the figure of Mary as space appears in the work of Maria Teresa Porcile Santiso. In her *La mujer, espacio de Salvación* (Porcile Santiso 1993), we find the Blessed Virgin described as a space open to God and, at the same time, our (human) space. This representation recognizes Mary as having an independent spatial status and creates a kind of third space from which two traditional spatialities, the divine and the human ones, are accessible.

At this point it is necessary to focus briefly on recent Marian imaginary in other Christian churches and rites. As scholars have recognized, Orthodox theology preserves a traditional vision of the Mother of God with its complex spatial character, a spatiality that cannot easily be summarized in a few sentences. During the 1920s, Sergij Bulgakov asserted Marian traits linked to glory – Mary is the "celestial queen" who was "raised to Heaven" (Comunità di Bose 2004: 1166–1171), the close proximity of the Holy Spirit, God, and her divine life.

²⁴ Paul VI 1964. *Dogmatic Constitution of the Church Lumen Gentium*. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html. Last accessed on 4 August, 2022.

²⁵ Human earthly life. It seems a more general issue of all Christian discourse, especially in the ecumenical dialogue (McCaughey 2014: 18).

Mary's humanity is considered in reference to its negative aspects, as the original sin which, in her, retained all its force and consequences: illness and corporal mortality. Mary's human life is a topic of Evangelical theology as well. In the late 20th century, Giorgio Tourn sketched this figure – as depicted in the Gospels – as a simple girl. Tourn, an exponent of the Italian Valdese Church, framed Mary's *Magnificat* as having significance for all the faithful in that it makes God great. Mary, the image of all believers, created around her a space for carrying out God's work (Comunità di Bose 2004: 864–867). To return to the beginning of the century, a poem by Suzanne de Dietrich²⁶ insightfully investigates Mary's human emotions. Mary feels alone in her experience of motherhood. She experiences pain, just like the world around her, and is superhumanly sweet and silent (Comunità di Bose 2004: 832–835). The spatial traits deriving from this figure of Mary contextualized in earthly terms also appear in the work of another poet active a hundred years before de Dietrich, the Anglican John Keble. Keble's poems recall the glory of Mary as the Mother of God together with the material poverty of her maternity on earth. In Keble's *Mother out of Sight*, starting from the title of the work both Mary's glory and her "crowned form" are framed as distant while her vision during the Nativity is very close to the collective subject of the poem:

What glory thou above hast won,
By special grace of thy dear Son,
We see not yet, nor dare espy
Thy crowned form with open eye.
Rather beside the manger meek
Thee bending with veiled brow we seek,
Or where the angel in the thrice-great Name
Hail'd thee, and Jesus to thy bosom came. (Keble 1899: 314)

The spatial representation here is complex in that it weaves together Mary's presence in both (E) (the glory of Heaven), and (I) space (earthly life), with her humble (or even poor) maternity associated with the latter.²⁷ As we can see, the proxemics in this poem privilege humanity, composed of well-known elements belonging to Mary's human existence.

At this point, let us briefly consider two other types of texts as well. The first is a declaration by the Federation of Evangelical Churches of Italy (Fcei) concerning Mary, published following a 1988 conference in which the Federation defined its

²⁶ She is known as a promoter and participant of ecumenical dialogue.

²⁷ Following the official interpretation proposed in the collected poems published in 1899, this poem also metaphorically tells the state of the Church of England, as one can read in the commentary (Keble 1899: 311).

position regarding the new version of Mariology (Comunità di Bose 2004: 869–871). “Mary, our sister” was the topic of the conference. Underlining the lack of Marian devotion among evangelicals, the document focuses on the element that might ecumenically unify Christendom, namely the biblical figure of Mary. This document represents her as occupying the space of earthly life and maternal care: Mary is the witness of the historicity and humanity of Jesus’ life. Her being called the “mother of believers” is discussed, together with the necessity of being saved by Christ. The second document is *Redemptoris Mater* promulgated in 1987 by Pope John Paul II, a text that takes Marian documents from the Second Vatican Council as its key sources. In the ecumenical part of this encyclical letter, John Paul II speaks about the “pilgrimage of faith” carried out during her life (John Paul II 1987: III, 40) and posits it as exemplary for all Christians (John Paul II 1987: II, 30).²⁸ Other terms in this text belonging to the same semantic field of movement along the horizontal axis are ‘to journey’, ‘the journey’, and ‘the path’ (John Paul II 1987: I, 2). Joining Heaven is a vertical movement, but it is pointed out how this is the last stage of life of faith for both Mary and any faithful person. In his apostolic letter on Dante Pope Francis notes about the *Purgatorio*: “[...] she [Mary] is the morning star who helps the poet to emerge from the dark forest and to seek the mountain of God” (Francis 2021: 7).²⁹ In an apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et exultate*, Francis similarly describes a woman who, “recalling the love of the Virgin Mary, [...] takes her rosary and prays with faith. Yet another path of holiness. Later still, she goes out onto the street, encounters a poor person and stops to say a kind word to him” (Francis 2018: I, 16).³⁰

3.2.2. Poetry

The religious background of Italian poetry during the 20th century was pre-vaillingly Catholic, and based on this premise I consider mainly – but not exclusively – Catholic theological discourse as either a source for, or a pole of exchange

²⁸ John Paul II 1987. *Redemptoris Mater. On the Blessed Virgin Mary in the life of the Pilgrim Church*. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031987_redemptoris-mater.html. Last accessed on 4 August 2022.

²⁹ Francis 2021. *Candor Lucis Aeternae. Apostolic Letter on the Seventh Centenary of the Death of Dante Alighieri*. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20210325_centenario-dante.html. Last accessed on 4 August 2022.

³⁰ Francis 2018. *Gaudete et exultate. Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father*. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exultate.html. Last accessed on 4 August, 2022.

with, literary works. Similar links could likely be traced by analysing other European literatures: for instance, we might cite Rainer Maria Rilke's poem entitled "Annunciation: The words of the Angel", published in the early 1900s in *The Book of Images* (1902). The distance between God and human Mary is the most important subject treated in this poem, together with a figure of Mary rooted in the earthly sphere:

Thou are not nearer to God than we;
we all are far from him.
Wonderfully nonetheless
are thy hands blessed.
No other woman's ripen so,
shimmering out so from the hem:
I am the day, I am the dew,
but thou art the tree. (Rilke 1938: 91)

Between the 20th and 21st centuries, there was an intense and continuous interest in Marian topics in Italian poetry. The poems listed and analysed below are evidence of a silent yet extensive dialogue with contemporary Marian culture. The purpose of this last section is not textual research to locate lexical traces of that dialogue, although such research would be useful, but rather outlining the spatial change that occurred in poetry as well as Marian theology following its reinvigoration. I proceed in order of the poets' dates of birth to illustrate new spatial representations of the Blessed Virgin, showing that there has been a specific trend in poetic depictions of this figure: that of bringing the Blessed Virgin into (I) space and proposing a series of horizontal representations that include Mary and the faithful.

Antonia Pozzi (1912–1938), a brilliant young woman who participated in the intellectual milieu of the 1920s Milan, committed suicide at the age of 26. She wrote approximately 300 poems and her work was published posthumously. In Italy, she is currently considered one of the most important female poets of the last century. Antonia Pozzi wrote a poem about the cathedral of Messina during the 1908 Messina and Reggio earthquake, that speaks about a mosaic representing Mary located in the apse of the city cathedral. The Virgin is placed in both high and low positions, and in both cases she belongs to the space of destruction, of human suffering and grief. Mary – or a visual representation of her – feels alone in the midst of the survivors. Her final gesture is a kind of *de profundis*:

Sola
nella notte di rovina e di spavento
restavi tu
Maria –
incolume nell'abside
della tua cattedrale –
curva sul crollo orrendo
con il figlio avvolto
nel tuo manto celeste –
 [...]

Maria
nella spaventevole notte
la solitudine tua
materna
e più fulgente il tuo serto di stelle
più turchino il tuo manto
più soave il tuo figlio
levavi
dal fondo della chiesa crollata
sulle madri dei morti – (Pozzi 2001: 116)

[Lonely / in the night of ruin and fright / Mary – / unharmed in the apse / of your cathedral – / curve on horrendous crash / with your son wrapped up / in your heavenly mantle – / [...] / Mary / in the frightening night / of your maternal solitude / you lifted / your resplendent mantle of stars / your turquoise coat / your sweetest child / from the bottom of the collapsed church / onto the mothers of the dead –]

David Maria Turollo (1916–1992) was a friar of the Order of Servants of Mary as well as a theologian, poet, essayist, and translator. An extraordinarily large proportion of his work is intellectually and spiritually related to the achievements of the Second Vatican Council.³¹ In a poem included in the collection *Ave Maria*, his representation of the Virgin draws on the traditional symbology with which are associated spatial representations of human life and Mary's life as rooted in the earthly dimension. The imaginary in question is complex, chthonic and celestial, with the opposition 'light vs night' associated with this imaginary. In both the opening short prose and the poem cited below, the Blessed Virgin is someone who crosses the boundary ("you come and go towards us") between (I) and (E) spaces, a mobile element present in both. While the prevailing positioning of the Blessed

³¹ Turollo's works include *Ave Maria: Adolescenza, vita e mistero della vergine illustrati con le più belle miniature e seguiti da una preziosa antologia poetica mariana* (1984) and *Laudario alla Vergine: Via pulchritudinis* (1980). His attitude towards the council, together with the hopes it represented, is analysed in Maraviglia 2014: 109–113.

Virgin Mary changes, this typical characteristic of hers remains stable across the centuries, as was noted above:

*Sei la palma di Cades,
orto sigillato per la santa dimora.
Sei la terra che trasvola
carica di luce
nella nostra notte.*

*Vergine, cattedrale del silenzio,
[...]
Vieni a vai per gli spazi
a noi invalicabili.
Sei lo splendore dei campi,
rovetto e chiesa bianca
sulla montagna.*

[You are the palm of Kadesh, / sealed garden for the holy dwelling. / You are the land that flies / full of light / in our night. // Virgin, cathedral of silence, / [...] / You come and go through the spaces / uncrossable to us. / You are the splendour of the fields, / bushes and white church / on the mountain.]

As often occurs in Marian literature, a specifically female vision linking symbols of fertility and life can be found in a collection of poems by Margherita Guidacci (1921–1992) entitled *Anelli del tempo* and published posthumously in 1993. Guidacci was a poet, translator, and academic. Much of her work is considered spiritual. The following extract of a poem about Mary's visitation to Elisabeth represents the two pregnant women:

*Così lontane di età, di figura.
La giovane – che quasi
è ancora una bambina – ha il fresco viso
dell'innocenza, la tenera luce
del cielo che si specchia in una sorgente.
L'altra, l'anziana, segnata da tante
fatiche ormai e dolori, somiglia un albero
nodoso e storto, piegato dal peso
degli anni e delle bufere.*

Eppure son vicine – indicibilmente. (Guidacci 1993: 12)

[So far in age, in figure. / The young one – almost a girl – has a fresh face / of innocence, the tender light / of the sky reflected in a spring. / The other, the elderly, marked by so much / fatigue and pain, she resembles a tree / knotty and crooked, bent by the weight / of years and storms. / Yet they are close – indescribably.]

Later, the two women embrace in a gesture that evokes trees. Here, the fact of Mary's being positioned in the earthly dimension is represented as a body of water reflecting the sky: once again, we find a double spatiality in which celestial space is rendered via a Christian symbol (the spring) while the opposite space corresponds to flat land. In this spatial representation, Mary's physical belonging to the ground prevails over other symbolic elements.

Alda Merini (1931–2009) is known for her poetic work denouncing asylum institutions and conveying spiritual and mystical themes. She wrote several Marian poems, paying particular attention to the spatial positioning of Mary and other figures from the Catholic imaginary.³² In a collection of mystical poems entitled *Mistica d'amore*, Mary is defined as:

*La Madre,
quella che come me
mangiò la terra del manicomio credendola
pastura divina, (Merini 2008)*

[The Mother, / the one who like me / ate the asylum ground believing it was / divine pasture,]

In this poem, the Blessed Virgin Mary is placed in solidarity with what can be interpreted as the humiliation of institutionalization. At the same time, however, she is positioned directly on ground that, paradoxically, is believed to be divine even though the poem shows that it is not. In other poems from the above-mentioned collection, this dialogue with Mary continues. The Blessed Virgin is often described through metaphors of fertility and the ground ("*Maria, / che ha fecondato tutta la terra.*" [Mary / who has fertilized the whole earth.]). In another fragment, she is even placed under the ground: "*Maria è la sola radice del mondo*" [Mary is the only root of the world] (Merini 2008). This vision representing another important turning point – in the poetry of Aldo Nove, the last poet quoted in this paper, we will see how vertical spatiality can be restored in reverse.

It is worth pointing out that these representations do not only position Mary at the ground level. In many cases, writers make use of fertility symbolism (such as roots) to construct a depiction of Mary as placed below the human gaze. People play an active role in keeping the Blessed Virgin among the inhabitants of the earth in one of Fabrizio de André's songs.³³ De André (1940–1999) was a singer

³² Staiano (2016) offers a perspective on Merini's representation of divinity. Regarding space in Merini's *Mistica d'amore*, see Kubas 2017.

³³ This "*Ave Maria*" is a part of an album based on the Gospels (*La Buona Novella*) that also includes four other songs about Mary (De André 1970). De André himself has described this album as linked to the protests of 1968 in Italy.

and songwriter, and texts of his have been included in anthologies of 20th-century Italian poetry. The *sacrum* is a common theme in his work. In the singer's personal "Ave Maria", first recorded in 1970, maternity is the main trait defining the Virgin. Her physical presence among the people may even be seen as compulsory, as if she were imprisoned by a barrier. Although this constraint is not violent, Mary is in some way made to remain on earth instead of moving through in a transitory way.

*E te ne vai, Maria, fra l'altra gente
che si raccoglie intorno al tuo passare,
siepe di sguardi che non fanno male
nella stagione di essere madre.*

[So, you leave, Mary, among the other people / who gather around your passing, / a hedgerow of gazes that do not hurt / in the season of being a mother.]

The last author examined here, Aldo Nove (1967), recently dedicated a short collection of poems to the Blessed Virgin (Nove 2007). He is the only living poet cited in this work. Although he is not considered as a religious or spiritual writer, in *Maria* he presents a rich Marian culture clearly based on extensive knowledge of Christian literature and theology. The poet reinterprets this heritage in several ways – for instance, he physically and materially contextualizes the antonomasias quoted from traditional Marian discourse.³⁴ His vision of Mary is not only earthly and positioned along the horizontal axis; rather, he places the Virgin in the lowest level of the ups and downs of life. In Nove's sonnet "Madre di Dio" we find an opening, authored litany:

*Madre di Clivio e di Gerusalemme,
Madre di Betsabea e Baranzate,
Madre delle Bustecche e di Betlemme,
Madre del Monte Nero e di Tradate;*

*Madre del Crocifisso e della strada
che va dal tabaccaio a Primaticcio,
[...]*

*Tra i gas dei camion gli occhi, la scintilla
degli occhi tuoi, Madre, prima che taccia
la sera madre abbracciarmi... (Nove 2007: 37)*

[Mother of Clivius and Jerusalem, / Mother of Bathsheba and Baranzate, / Mother of Le Bustecche and Bethlehem, / Mother of Krn and Tradate; // Mother of the Crucifix and the road / ranging from the tobacco shop keeper to Primaticcio, / [...]
/ In the gases of the trucks the eyes, the spark / of your eyes, Mother, before the evening / becomes silent, hug me, mother...]

³⁴ Regarding Marian antonomasia, see Kubas 2018a.

Other spatial representations of Mary by Aldo Nove are also evocative: in Sonnet XVI (Nove 2007: 20), presenting a dialogue with the Virgin, the lyrical subject places Mary in a gorge, struck by vertigo – in other words, far from Heaven. This distance from God is expressed in other poems from the collection as well (Nove 2007: 5, 6). Before concluding this brief review, it is worth noting that, in the extract quoted here, Mary's gaze is positioned at the level of the road, of the pollution of the modern world. Even under such circumstances, however, her presence is still desirable.

4. Conclusions

To conclude my overview of spatial representations of the Blessed Mary in a silent but continuous dialogue between the poetic and the theological discourses during the 20th century, I would like to note a series of oppositions conveyed by the texts under consideration. In traditional poetic discourse, (1) the Blessed Virgin is mainly placed in the exterior (E) portion of cultural space, the one that corresponds to Heaven; (2) her position is high, while that of the faithful and the poet is low, as the enunciators place themselves in the (I) space of the earth; (3) the Blessed Virgin is traditionally positioned close to God. She is depicted in cultural representations as having the ability to cross the border between (I) and (E) space. The change that occurred during the last century has affected the spatial relationship, but not the poles themselves. Today's poetry commonly represents Mary as (1) occupying (I) space, (2) in a low position, namely on earth together with the faithful, thereby essentially replacing her traditional exceptional sanctity with an everyday-life form of sanctity. This gives rise to new spatial orientations in the poetic dialogue, understood as both praise of and prayer addressing Mary: the spatial relationship is now horizontal rather than vertical. (3) The Blessed Virgin is detached from celestial hierarchies. This does not exclude either her presence in Heaven or her capacity to mediate between humankind and God, naturally, but the way that 20th-century poetic representations emphasize Mary's human presence does increase the sense of distance between her, the Son and God. As my corpus also shows, complex (dual) spatial positioning also continues to be used as a way of describing Mary.

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La poetica delle rappresentazioni spaziali della Vergine al tempo del Concilio Vaticano II

Fin dal medioevo le raffigurazioni della Vergine si collocano tra le linee tematiche più importanti della poesia italiana sacra e profana. Se la tradizione iscrive Maria nell’ordine celeste, in epoche a noi più vicine questa figura è spesso collocata nello spazio terreno, familiare all’io lirico (ossia l’enunciatore). Gli studi sulla descrizione della cultura di Juri Lotman mostrano come le divinità appartengano prevalentemente allo spazio esterno: in questa prospettiva, lo scopo del presente articolo è l’analisi delle immagini poetiche della Madonna attraverso i collocamenti vicino al confine, tra l’interno e l’esterno della cultura, o direttamente nello spazio terreno e contemporaneo. Nelle raffigurazioni liriche di questo tipo perdono importanza i tratti divini della Vergine. Un processo simile fa parte del cambiamento culturale legato al Concilio Vaticano II, pertanto si può ipotizzare un dialogo tra la teologia cattolica (e più ampiamente cristiana) e la poesia. Mentre la tendenza sociale verso la secolarizzazione sembra allontanare l’uomo dal divino, il nuovo immaginario di cui sopra, nel suo rivelarsi quotidiano e interno alla cultura, è tra i fattori più importanti del grande revival della poesia mariana.

Neitsi Maarja ruumiline kujutamine Vatikani II kirikukogu aegses itaalia luules

Püha Neitsi kujutamine on pikka aega olnud üks olulisemaid teemasid nii sakraalses kui ka ilmalikus itaalia luules. Ruumilisel kujutamisel on Neitsi Maarjat traditsiooniliselt paigutatud kaugesse, taevasesse hierarhiasse. Viimasel ajal paigutatakse tema kuju sageli aga maise elu ruumi, millega lüüriline autorimina on paremini tuttav. Juri Lotmani vaatenurgast kultuuri tüpoloogilise kirjelduse ruumile lähtub, et jumalused kuuluvad peamiselt kultuuri välisesse (E) ruumi. Nendele kaalutlustele tuginedes võetakse artiklis eesmärgiks analüüsida Maarja uuemaid representatsioone – nii poeetilisi kui ka teoloogilisi – Itaalia kultuuris. Näidatakse, et 20. sajandi jooksul nihkus Itaalias Maarja pühadus sisemisele

ruumile (I) lähemale või isegi selle sisemusse, kuna Neitsi hakkas ilmuma peamiselt igapäevaelustseenides ja tema jumalikud tunnused kaotasid järk-järgult tähtsust. Sellist ruumilisust leidub ka oikumeenilises dialoogis. Teine Vatikani kirikukogu normaliseeris nii Maarja teoloogiat kui ka usklise praktikad, mis mõjutas tekstiloomingut ja tõi kaasa edasisi muutusi Maarja ruumilises paigutuses. Samal ajal kui üldine sotsiaalne suundumus sekulariseerumise suunas suurendas inimliku ja jumaliku vahelist distantssi, viidi Maarja pühadus üle igapäevaelu sisemisse ruumi (I) – ja see võiski olla üks teguritest, mis taaselustas Maarjale pühendatud luule.