

Leaving the Land of Remorse

The Magdalen of Montefiore dell’Aso

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IN THE LATE 1960s my underfunded grammar school nonetheless ensured that by the age of 12 each of us had a copy of *From Giotto to Cezanne* by Michael Levey.¹ This introduction to European art history allowed even those who dropped Art before ‘O’ Level the chance to see reproductions of major works of the Western canon. The author, whose aim was to present The Best, as he saw it, was rarely negative about the featured works but his antipathy in one case was clear and therefore, to me, fascinating. He really had it in for Carlo Crivelli:

Carlo Crivelli who deserted Venice and settled in the provincial Marches. There his ... style took on malevolent intensity. His Madonnas, warped by piety, brood like witches over the sickly Child.

In the accompanying illustration there indeed is a Madonna with hooded, reptilian eyes and long, dangerously-pointed fingers hunched behind an uneasy toddler. Yet there is also a full-page ‘Annunciation with Saint Emidius’² by the same artist: a marvellously gorgeous mixture of realism and visionary mysticism. The Archangel Gabriel kneels in the middle of a street with townsfolk going about their business around him, all failing to spot the miracle in their midst. Even two business-like monks on a balcony don’t see what is happening literally under their noses. This Gabriel is virile, an angelic prince. His clothes are still rustling in the breeze of his arrival and his gaze is inward as he prepares to announce the offer of a pregnancy. He is about to lift his eyes to the Virgin; she is still absorbed in her book. It is the mo-

1. *From Giotto to Cezanne*, by Michael Levey, Thames and Hudson.

2. See: www.nationalgalleryimages.co.uk or http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carlo_Crivelli

ment before the moment when everything will change, charged with possibilities.

So there was more to this Crivelli than a sinister streak, I noted. Thirty years later, I visited the National Gallery in London and saw the original of the Annunciation painting. Good art is food. It replenishes. We feel more alive. It is a kind of viaticum which makes present the artist's grasp of a moment of grace. I wanted to see more of what Crivelli had done and so I encountered, on the page, his wonderful 'Magdalen of Montefiore',³ a rather unusual depiction of this saint. To see her 'in person' I went via The Land of Remorse.

SCENE-SETTING

La Terra del Rimorso is in Puglia, the heel of the Italian boot. I was looking for the background of the protagonist in a screenplay I was writing. There was one scene that arrived fully-formed and it entangled the main characters in a web of guilt and blame and the temptation towards revenge. In the way these things grow, the fictional personages (Italians) acquired relatives, jobs and preferences and I 'discovered' that they came from a village in the south of Puglia, Uggiano La Chiesa, whose patron saint is Mary Magdalen. On her feast-day, 22 July, a great procession follows her statue around the area. She is depicted life-size, beautiful, kneeling in weeping penitence.

The young local woman who showed me around the parish church was insistent that I must not be narrow-mindedly traditional. Mary of Magdala was not necessarily a prostitute, she scolded me. She emphasized the latest research opinions which contradict the typical Magdalen scenes lining the church's walls. These, she said, together with that regrettable but venerated statue, pressurize the faithful into equating female sinfulness with sexual faults, and make women feel guilty for being women – and beautiful women, well, they have no chance of virtue! I assured her I was up to speed on erroneous conflations of Marys in the gospels and mediaeval legend-weaving.

Outside, in the early afternoon, the tiny square was deserted. This peninsula is prey to scorching winds and intense heat in summer. The landscape is harsh. The vines grow in constructed hollows for

3. See: <http://www.arengario.net/momenti/momenti04.html>

protection. The sea's presence is inescapable and it has exposed the inhabitants to relentless invasions even though the coastline is a challenge of blindingly white rock. Although the land produces many fruits, clientilism and corruption over centuries led to a peasant population with few choices, tied to landlords, burdened with debt. In this soil tarantism flourished. Its roots are deep in the ancient Greek world, its Corybantic mysteries and Dionysian cults.

TARANTISM

The phenomenon of tarantism (source of the famous *tarantella*) is marvellously analysed by the anthropologist, Ernesto De Martino⁴ who also, in 1959, photographed some of the last of the *tarantati* during their rituals. Allegedly bitten by spiders, snakes or other poisonous animals, these men and women were compelled to dance till exhaustion and a 'cure'. The family and neighbours of a 'bitten' person knew they must provide musicians, a safe space, coloured stimuli (such as red and green cloths and mirrors), branches, leaves and bowls of water. Daggers, swords and ropes might be called for. As many as seven or eight days of frantic dancing and mimesis could ensue while the onlookers watched the *tarantato* obey what had bitten him and was goading him on. The family might be ruined by the cost of providing all this but the community would not abandon the victim until his frenzy peaked and he was granted a cure.

De Martino writes:

With the word 'remorse', we usually mean the biting recollection of a wrong decision and the need for a reparatory choice which wipes out the debt incurred with ourselves and others. In remorse understood this way, the wrong decision lies squarely at the forefront of memory, and we know exactly what we are remorseful of, even if it is not always possible for us to satisfy the need for a reparation 'down to the last penny.' In the crisis of tarantism, there is instead an unresolved conflict in which the individual presence has remained imprisoned; lost to resolving remembrance, it returns cropping up

4. *The Land of Remorse, A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism*, by Ernesto De Martino, Free Association Books, 2005.

as a closed, ciphered symptom removed from any power of decision or choice. In the crisis of tarantism, remorse does not lie in the memory of a wretched past, but in the impossibility of remembering it in order to settle it; masked as a neurosis, the remorse keeps the sufferer in its bondage.⁵

The alleged bite, he explains, is

actually (the) 're-bite (re-morse)' [from '*remordere*' – 'to bite again'] of a critical episode from the past, of a conflict with no choice.'

Through the alleged bite the conflict enters into consciousness

as a project for evocation and release, healing and reintegration, ... a commitment to emerge from neurotic isolation in order to participate in a system of cultural ideals and in a framework of interpersonal communication which is traditionally accredited and socially shared.⁶

Many of the *tarantati* had been frustrated at the emotional level, through forced marriages or the inability to marry because of debt, or were denied a life worthy of a human being, but the striking feature is that these were often people who may have felt that in a great existential crisis they had made the wrong choice because they had not rebelled, not refused, not resisted, although in truth, their circumstances were very heavily loaded against the possibility of free choice. The sense of doing the wrong thing, the guilt, would not leave them. It gnawed invisibly until transformed into a 'bite' which maddened them visibly, obliged the community to see there was a problem and achieved a cure, more or less temporary.

De Martino prefaces his book with a plea that we be sensitive to

everything concerning 'remorse', the return of the wretched past, the past which was not chosen. For ... the Land of Remorse is our whole planet, or at least that part of it which has entered the shadow-cone of its wretched past.⁷

5. Op. cit., p. 128

6. Op. cit., p. 129

7. Op. cit., Preface, p. xxi

Anyone who has ever has felt the sharp tooth of remorse knows the struggle to keep it within its proper limits so that it does not devour the heart.

CRIVELLI'S REMORSE

Carlo Crivelli had something for which to be remorseful. He was a Venetian. On the 7 March 1457, when he was in his mid-twenties, the city council sentenced him for having fallen in love with Tarsia Cortese, the wife of a sailor, abducting her and keeping her hidden for months. He served six months in prison and paid a fine for 'having carnal knowledge of her in contempt of God and holy matrimony'.⁸ On his release he left for Padua. There he met the Dalmatian painter, Giorgio Schiavone, moved to Dalmatia with him and thence to Le Marche on the Italian Adriatic coast where he painted his mature works.

Crivelli painted Mary Magdalen several times. She was a highly popular saint, especially among Franciscans who were often his patrons. The mediaeval Western Church conflated Mary of Bethany (sister of Lazarus and Martha) with Mary of Magdala and embellished the records creatively, making her, for instance, the fiancée of John the Evangelist. Hence, it was asserted, it was their marriage at Cana that Christ attended and she took to a life of sin in spite at being abandoned by John when, after the ceremony, he went off to follow Christ. Or, it was said, after Christ's death she and her brother and sister ended up in Marseilles where she lived for thirty years in a cave, needing no food.

In mediaeval painting these stories are traceable in the three main depictions of her: the emaciated penitent, the glamorous wanton woman (the sinner *par excellence*), and the saint in heaven restored to virginity.

In about 1471 Carlo Crivelli received a commission from Montefiore dell'Aso. I travelled there by train from Puglia. The track, for many kilometres, runs close to the water's edge along the coast of Italy. This very small town, inland from Ancona, teeters on top of a soaring pinnacle of rock. The road to it spirals up and up out of the plain.

8. *Carlo Crivelli*, by Ronald Lightbown, Yale University Press, 2004, p. 3. Comprehensive and beautifully illustrated.

Montefiore's towers appear, disappear, reappear as one rounds each bend. They seem to swim in the sky. It's a gear-grinding ascent. Even the local driver was reluctant. He got lost twice on the way because, 'No one ever goes to Montefiore!' One has to have a reason to brave that climb.

FINDING THE CHURCH

The central piazza is small with a circular fountain at its centre and the church of St Lucy beyond. Tucked behind that, on a lower level, is that of St Francis, which dates from the mid-thirteenth century. Crivelli painted a huge altarpiece for this monastery church. It is now no longer in use and it took many requests until someone's brother's uncle was found to have a key. Inside was dusty, with an almost domestic untidiness. In the sacristy ephemera and ageing parish records had been abandoned with insouciance. Nothing to hide. A door was unlocked and I saw, over the porch, frescoes, recently partially uncovered, of biblical scenes that brought Giotto to mind. Crivelli must have seen these, I thought, and, though they are beautiful, he was about to paint something more splendid.

This is a large church, without side aisles and, though it was altered in the mid-eighteenth century, one can imagine the effect his work would have had: a huge altarpiece, with a Virgin and Child, a pieta, eight saints and, along the bottom, a predella containing Christ and eleven apostles. All this would have faced one on entering. It must have been like coming upon a scene in heaven.

The Franciscan friars, fund-raising for a restoration of their monastery, split up the altarpiece in the 1850s. Some of the panels found their way to various museums; some are lost. Only three remain in Montefiore: St Catherine, St Peter, and St Mary Magdalen. These are now housed in St Lucy's church.

MARY MAGDALEN

Crivelli depicted Mary Magdalen, full-length, as a high-breasted, blonde young woman in a golden gown. She stands in profile, with her left shoulder towards the onlooker, turned so that her cleavage is visible. On the palm of her right hand she holds up a lidded, transpar-

ent vase; the fingertips of her left hand delicately keep a scarlet mantle in place around her hips. Her left eye has already found its target, the onlooker, and her head and body are about to follow the direction of its gaze. At any moment she will turn fully – her lips are parted, a smile already begun – and the cloak slipping now from one shoulder will fall away to reveal all her beauty.

It is a remarkable image. That sideways look! Mischievous, roguish, expecting complicity, Mary Magdalen seems to be saying knowingly, ‘Oh, it’s you again!’ Her hair is smooth over her head, under the sheerest of veils which is held in place by a circlet of pearls with a ruby clasp at her forehead. At the nape of her neck the locks are tightly bound with white ribbon but below that they gush down her back in a spume of waves and curls that the picture frame cannot contain.

The chemise beneath her heavy gown is cut low at the back, down between the shoulder blades. It is made of lawn so transparent that, though it covers, it does not conceal the swell of her full bust whose pressure against a bodice of gold brocade tautens the fine fabric and tugs it down into narrow columns. The bodice-lacings give out half way up in their effort to constrain the closely-paired breasts. On her gown and the one sleeve visible are slits and ties and eyelets – material being kept in check, or pushing through wherever it can, in irrepressible vitality. There is much binding and loosing of fabric, accommodating it to the body. A tight, narrow belt accentuates the sturdy waist. Her foot is naked, strong and competent, in a wooden sandal.

SHAMEFREE

Here is a Magdalen – but a smiling one! She is not ashamed of the red cloak that should mark her out as a dishonoured woman. She is proudly displaying it, and on her sleeve a phoenix is embroidered as a sign of a new life triumphantly begun. All commentators remark on the apparent incongruity of celibates commissioning such a very attractive version of this saint but she is a womanly woman, her sexuality neither denied nor exaggerated (unlike those depictions which use her penitential aspect as an excuse to portray eroticised female flesh). She was a favourite among Franciscans as the great exemplar of the contemplative life because she chose ‘the better part’ in contrast

to her bustling sister, Martha and she was considered the greatest female saint.

It seems to me that Crivelli made a careful effort to include in the painting the three aspects of the Magdalen's story: penitential, glamorous, virginal. He uses every detail of clothing, pose and colouring to signal nuances of his insights into the Gospel accounts. Two instances: though her cloak is the scarlet of a whore's, its lining is dark green, which to his contemporaries in the Marches was the colour of mourning; her hair is hanging mostly uncovered and loose as a virgin's would because love has 're-virginised' her, that is, love has made her whole (physical virginity in itself being nothing more than a bodily fact unless it is witness to a life of self-donation).

Most important of all the artistic choices that Crivelli made is that smile. I cannot see her without being reminded of a triumphant gambler. She looks like someone who is saying, 'You see! I was right. He was who he said he was. I backed the right man and I was right to be faithful to him though he died and was buried.' She holds up the vase of ointment as evidence of her victory and, in doing so, reminds us that Christ defended the woman who, in various versions, anointed his feet and head; the woman who gave the body its rightful place.

FROM REMORSE TO HOPE

This Mary Magdalen has moved beyond remorse. She has felt its pang and it has prompted her to accept forgiveness. She is a forgiven person and so she loves. Of course she smiles! Not for her endless penance and mortification. She has even moved beyond the dramatic and touching '*Noli Me Tangere!*'⁹ moment in the garden, that sudden re-direction of the story where, just as one expects a denouement of loving contact, she is fended off and asked not to cling to the visible and tangible so that a greater, even more intimate communion may be achieved. Crivelli's Magdalen escapes the self-centredness which is a peril of self-inflicted penance. She is an icon of hope.

The Magdalen is a figure who weeps: in penitence for sin, at the foot of the cross and at the tomb, and we do need to see representations of penitential grief and of grief at separation from the Beloved but Jesus

sent her out of her grief to share the news of his resurrection and this Magdalen is properly, sanely happy at this triumph.

As far as I am aware, no one knows how remorseful Carlo Crivelli was for his crime nor what sort of experience it was for Tarsia Cortese. It may have been a dreadful one.

A healthy remorse stimulates the desire to make reparation. Was De Martino alluding to Matthew 5:26 when he refers to ‘the need for a reparation “down to the last penny”’?

Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are still on the way to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison: truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny.

Remorse imprisons unless a conversation begins, an effort to bridge the gap, to negotiate terms with the accuser - who is often a part of ourselves. The very next verse is,

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Christ, in the same chapter advises a ‘righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees’. Adultery was a sin that Crivelli knew about from experience but in this painting he succeeded in portraying the woman popularly, and liturgically, known as the Great Sinner as a lovely woman who has stepped outside the prison of morbid remorse and no longer thinks of herself but of Christ.

Many years ago I used to go to early weekday Mass in a sparsely-attended parish church. An elderly woman, spinsterish, thin, always shifted after the service to a side altar where she would weep and moan. Feeling sorry for her, I went over one day to offer sympathy. She turned on me such a look of outrage that I realised I had interrupted her private communion with her own sinfulness! She did not want relief. She preferred her prison.

Perhaps many of us know a little of what that is like: the prayer, for instance, that leads nowhere but back to one’s own failings. That is why, I like to think, Crivelli’s Magdalen of Montefiore is shown just

about to step out of her frame. She is moving on, into loving every person who encounters her. Exaggerated remorse tempts us to despair that we can repay fully the debt we owe to those we have wronged or to ourselves for the harm we have done ourselves. Crivelli's Magdalen is a realist. She displays her scarlet cloak, her 'badge of shame', like a banner. She is not ashamed of it. It is part of her wretched past, but it has become beautiful because she is redeemed in the present. She has mourned and moved on and she lives eternally in each present moment. Her smile invites us to do the same.