

CHAPTER 1

Orality and Time in I Colloqui

Scholars believe that the most demanding part of de Pazzi's production is *I colloqui*. In these two volumes the nuns report Maria Maddalena's most intriguing mystical experiences, such as her marriage to the Word, her visiting Hell, her speaking as God the Father, and finally her taking part in the Word's funeral and resurrection. This two-volume book is relevant also from another standpoint. In *I colloqui* the transcribers attempt to reproduce the oral tone of de Pazzi's discourses by marking down her silences, her exclamations, and her repetitions. However, as we shall see, in their editing the nuns introduce some significant corrections. For instance, they modify the order of her sentences to make her discourse "clearer," and they expand the mystic's monologues with their own interpretations.

It is necessary to explain two crucial points of de Pazzi's mysticism: the nature of her oral mystical language and the relationship between her monologues and her listeners/readers. As far as the first point is concerned, it is important to understand that Maria Maddalena is highly influenced by St Augustine's theories on language. As I have pointed out in the introduction, St Augustine's books, in particular the *Confessions*, *On Christian Doctrine*, *On the Trinity*, and *The City of God*, were fundamental readings in the convent of Santa Maria degli Angeli.

For the history of semiotics, Augustine's most influential texts are *On Dialectics* (written in 387), *On Christian Doctrine* (397), and *On the Trinity* (415). In the first book, a treatise of his youth, Augustine states that "signum est quod et se ipsum sensui et praeter se aliquid ostendit" (a sign is something that is itself sensed and that indicates to the mind something beyond the sign itself). As Hans Ruef explains, this definition describes "a double relationship. The first is between the sign itself and *sensus*. . . . The second relationship connects the sign with *aliquid* (something which is not the sign)."¹ What Augustine underscores in his first semiotic interpretation of language is "a certain nonidentity of the sign with itself, a feature arising from the fact that the sign is at once perceptible and intelligible."² In other words, in *On Dialectics* Augustine

already stresses the communicative character of the sign, which has no essence in itself, but rather exists in the act of being pronounced for someone. Words, Augustine holds, mean things; they do not represent them. Words do not have an iconic relationship with the signified things; they point to things without embodying their "affective" content.³ A sign is something that at once shows something to someone and exposes itself as the carrier of a given meaning (Ruef, 86). As a consequence, a sign identifies with the temporal level of its expression.⁴ As we shall see later, this element plays a central influence in de' Pazzi's view of the linguistic sign.

In an important passage from his *Sermons*, which describes the phenomenology of interpersonal communication, Augustine indirectly confirms the fundamental importance of temporality in any form of verbal expression. To communicate, Augustine says, means to speak to the mind (*mens*) of others. Although the speaker does not see the others' minds, he wishes to communicate his thought (*verbum*) by means of the sound (*sonus*) of the voice (*vox*).⁵ The semiotic activity of the sign is strictly connected with the social context in which the sign is manifested.⁶ Moreover, investigating language's intrinsically social nature, in *Concerning the Teacher* (389) Augustine underscores that not only does the speaker sometimes fail to communicate with his listener, he also misuses his own words. Augustine goes so far as to say that the words we articulate may not correspond to the content of our thoughts. According to Augustine, our miscommunication may result from a number of factors.⁷ For instance, our memory may suggest a word or expression that does not express what we mean to say. In other cases, a simple *lapsus linguae* (slip of the tongue) may occur.⁸

In *On Christian Doctrine* Augustine offers his most complete formulation of semiotic sign. In this central text of Western spirituality Augustine states that words and things share some characteristics; both things and words can be seen as signs, that is, both things and words signify something. In this work Augustine defines a sign as follows: "A sign is a thing which causes us to think of something beyond the impression the thing itself makes upon the senses. [There is no] other reason for signifying, or for giving signs, except for bringing forth and transferring to another mind the action of the mind in the person who makes the sign."⁹ A sign, says Augustine, is essentially something that makes us think about something else. One crucial difference between *On Dialectics* and *On Christian Doctrine* is that in the latter Augustine's theory of the sign does not consider the "thing" as a referent. Augustine believes that "the world is divided into signs and things according to whether the perceived object has transitive value or not. Things participate in signs as signifiers, not as referents" (Todorov, 40).

Augustine further develops this concept of sign by introducing a distinction between use and enjoyment. Since things are similar to signs because both are signifiers, there are things/signs that exist in order to be used, and things/signs that can only be enjoyed:

It is to be asked whether man is to be loved by man for his own sake or for the sake of something else. If for his own sake, we enjoy him; if for the sake of something else, we use him. But I think that man is to be loved for the sake of something else. In that which is to be loved for its own sake the blessed life resides; and if we do not have it for the present, the hope is for it to console us.¹⁰

It is apparent that the only “thing” that can be enjoyed is God, because everything else, both words and things, have no existence in themselves. They, rather, “refer to” something else, the divinity himself. Reality is empty, so to speak, whereas the ultimate signified is God, for Maria Maddalena the Word, the incarnate Son. Maria Maddalena’s oral sign is exclusively directed to the divinity, as both an eternal and a mortal referent.

Maria Maddalena’s mystical language is essentially related to Augustine’s theory. If everything, both words and the world, is nothing but a sign of God, everything, language included, somehow participates in the divinity. The unique aspect of Maria Maddalena’s visions is that the saint comes into contact with the divinity through language and, more important, *in* language; in her rapture she tries to convert language into the Word’s *body*, the “thing” that can only be enjoyed but never used. Moreover, the “thing” itself has a double essence. God/thing embodies a mortal eternity, so to speak, for at once “he is who is,” as Jesus says, and is who has entered temporality in order to die.

Another significant element is that Maria Maddalena’s oral discourses are never directed to the reader of *I colloqui*. When the mystic converses with God, the transcribers can hear her voice, but not that of her interlocutor. In other words, her sisters and thus all of us, the readers of their manuscripts, “overhear” a conversation that does not concern us.¹¹ Paradoxically, the Other’s voice can be perceived only by the speaker who articulates his, the Other’s, voice. It is therefore legitimate to wonder what kind of reading/listening this text asks us to perform. When we read a literary page, we “complete” the images described by the author, assuming that we, the readers, and the writer look at reality in a similar way. In other words, by composing a text the author necessarily believes that his readers will *see* something similar to what he imagined in the act of producing his text. Conversely, the page might be seen as a mirror in

which the reader reflects his understanding of the page itself; the page justifies the reader's imagining and understanding. This is not the case with *I colloqui*. Maria Maddalena's use of language is not descriptive; she does not speak in order to narrate. For the Florentine mystic language is the means through which the body of the Word *may* be evoked; the presence or absence of an audience for her discourses is absolutely irrelevant to her.

Let us remember that we do not read the mystic's words to the Word, but rather the nuns' edited texts. We might say that, by writing down the mystic's monologues and by giving them a rationally syntactic structure, the nuns translated Maria Maddalena's language into Italian. When their transcriptions still lacked coherence, the nuns felt compelled to introduce their own tentative explanations. Our contemporary debate on the topic "tradire/tradurre" (to betray/to translate) is not at stake here. We can only betray/translate an original text; *I colloqui* is the translation of a nonexistent text. Whereas the Other's discourse, the Word's words, does not exist, the mystic's utterances exist as mere attempts to articulate a foreign language. As Lacan reminds us, the Other himself does not exist and thus cannot be pronounced. However, the Other does possess a language, but he does not have a voice.¹² Maria Maddalena's ultimate task is in fact a paradox: to allow the Word to pronounce himself through her voice.

When in colloquio 48 the mystic momentarily succeeds in evoking God's discourse through her voice, two events take place. First, whereas her previous visions invoked the Son/Word, in colloquio 48 the Father takes over. The Father's Law interrupts the dialogue between the subject and the Other. Erasing both the Son as the Lacanian imaginary and the mystic as the desiring subject, the Father restates his Law. At that point Maria Maddalena disappears as a subject; she is *a body that articulates the Father's voice*. Second, the saint's voice acquires a masculine tone. Maria Maddalena turns into a hybrid; she is a female body with a male voice and identity.

How do we, readers, relate to this translation of a lost text? *I colloqui* requires a unique act of reading/listening. If we limit ourselves to processing the saint's words according to our personal perception, we betray the sense of her speaking, because her words are not for us. Whereas linguistic exchange is based on an agreement between two or more subjects who believe that they share the same linguistic field, in *I colloqui* words have a meaning that is foreign to us; we are excluded

from the text itself. *We do not belong in this text.*¹³ We must understand that *I colloqui* reflects our misunderstanding; no reassuring agreement exists between our comprehension and the written text. To listen to Maria Maddalena's monologues primarily means to know that we are *mis*-listening.

As a consequence, in order to perform a "respectful" listening we must bracket any interpretation we may have; we must let Maria Maddalena's words *pass through* ourselves.¹⁴ Unlike our typical and active way of listening, *I colloqui* asks us to be "modest" or even "passive" readers and to let its words *happen within* ourselves. This is how the Italian philosopher Pier Aldo Rovatti describes this different kind of listening:

It is this "let the words be," this act of opening up, if we are *really* able to open up to it, which prepares us for a peaceful abandonment. . . . [A]t that point language speaks, words offer themselves and come to be. It is a question of listening . . . there is a listening that overturns our obvious lending an ear to something.¹⁵

More than decoding the meaning of her visionary discourse according to some prepatterned interpretation based, for instance, on our knowledge of other mystical works and on our personal visual memories, we can approach *I colloqui* only if we allow its language to be listened to (Rovatti, 107).

However, although the mystic's language comes to us as a sort of echo, as a sudden message from the external world, we realize that *her words somehow concern us*. We sense that when we actually let her words occur they are not foreign to us, even though we cannot *appropriate* them.¹⁶ It is only in this way that we can establish a basic communication with the Maria Maddalena's oral discourse in its transcribed form. Even though Maria Maddalena does not take into account any human listener, in our modest *overhearing* of her monologues we come to perceive her words *as if they were directed to us*.

Our strategy of reading must also incorporate other fundamental factors. On the one hand, in our reading we focus on Maria Maddalena's voice as it is conveyed through the nuns' transcriptions. On the other hand, the mystic's monologues are inserted into a "colloquio," that is, into a coherent chapter of a narrative structure. Each colloquio first gives introductory explanations about the forthcoming vision; then it presents the edited transcription of the actual vision; finally, it concludes with some moral remarks from the transcribers.

A second crucial problem arises when we take into account the saint's ambiguous attitude toward her own oral discourses: Maria Maddalena seems often not to remember what she said even a few minutes

before. Her words seem to have flown out of her mouth, as if she had been unaware of her own speaking. As Lacan points out in “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious,” the act of speaking is in fact a response to the Other’s question: “What do you want?” (“Che vuoi?”).¹⁷ In other words, when Maria Maddalena enters a rapture and starts to speak, she attempts to respond both to the Word’s request for being and to her own desire for self-expression. The articulation of the Word is equivalent to the expression of the self. We might thus say that the real author of *I colloqui* is the saint’s relationship with the Word.¹⁸ Their relating to each other, their coming in contact with each other is *the author* of this text.¹⁹ On the one hand, Maria Maddalena is obsessed with the Word’s request for being; on the other, she is tormented by her sense of guilt. The Word has been humiliated, tortured, and crucified. She wants to bring him back to life. Her sense of being inappropriate for this task devastates her. For Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi, to speak also means to give voice to her guilt. More than monologues, her utterances are often similar to tormented soliloquies.

Maria Maddalena believes that human language is not synonymous with communication, but rather with exclusion. What she says *resembles* our language, but it does not coincide with it. It is as if the language she speaks and the sixteenth-century Italian of her convent sisters, and thus the language of *I colloqui*, are different idioms, which happen to use the same phonemes. In order to render the mystic’s monologues intelligible, the transcribers give them a clearly narrative character. The act of turning Maria Maddalena’s words into a more or less coherent chronicle is in fact an act of translation.

In order to become a comprehensible language, the discourse between the mystic and God must adhere to the temporal categories of narration. More than transcribing the mystic’s conversations with the Second Person of the Trinity, the nuns submit them to time. The words of/about the Word must become mortal in order to be understandable. We, human speakers, only perceive and exchange our mortality. In the nuns’ transcriptions, the Word “becomes incarnate” in the Savior; he acquires a biography, along with sufferings, desires, and death. When we read the first chapters of *I colloqui*, in which the writers faithfully reproduce the most common topoi of every hagiography, the Other is Jesus, Maria Maddalena’s anxious groom who would like his bride to respond to his love exhaustively.

Maria Maddalena is the only interlocutor of God’s discourse; she is the only one who is capable of perceiving his words. However, in their transcriptions the nuns make God pronounce words that are direct quotations from the sacred texts:

My dear daughter, I want to enjoy some time with you . . . given that today is that day in which I decided to shed so much Blood for my creatures' sake, now I want to draw you, my creature, toward me [*ad me ipsum*]. You know that I said that when I was on the Cross, [that is, that] I would draw everything to me: *Omnia traham ad me ipsum*; and the other [sentence]: *Et delitie mee esse cum filijs hominum*. (1:55)

In this passage God simply comments on certain statements of his reported in the Bible: *Omnia traham ad me ipsum* (John 12:32) and *Et delitie mee esse cum filijs hominum* (Prov. 8:31). For the transcribers, the divinity can only speak the language of the Law. In fact, human language can report no actual interaction between the Word and the mystic. At times the Word's responses to Maria Maddalena might be perceived in the mystic's silences:

I do not understand anything more. In other words, you show me these things about you, but I don't understand them [*silence*] you know the strengths better than I do [*silence*] yes, last night passed very quickly [*silence*] three more nights, right? [*silence*] but last night doesn't count, right? (2:135)

The Word is present in the mystic's language as an absence. In the act of reporting Maria Maddalena's monologues the transcribers must solve a fundamental problem: If the mystic converses with the Word in silence, how is it possible to make the Word present in the text? It is simply impossible to determine how extensively the nuns have corrected and interpolated the mystic's oral discourse. As we shall see later, some passages clearly show that the authors of *I colloqui* did modify the mystic's discourse. The nuns either point it out themselves, or structure the text in a way that makes manifest a discrepancy between the oral and written level of the mystic's monologue.

In *I colloqui* the Word becomes Jesus; the page makes the Other a historical event. Similarly, the speaking subject, the mystic herself, whose identity was the words she pronounced to her divine interlocutor in a private relationship, turns into the main character of a narration. The style, content, and emotional message of each colloquio mold the identity of the visionary. Maria Maddalena, we might say, *exists* only insofar as the text makes her the main character of her own experiences. When we read a colloquio, we encounter a body that expresses itself through certain metaphors, rhetorical devices, and narrative twists. The text tells us how the mystic's body sweated, blushed, shook on the floor when the Word approached her. Moreover, in chapter 2 we shall see how the style itself of the mystic's reported discourses aims to communicate a specific emotional state. The nuns try to describe the mystic's body *through* a specific rhetoric.

Let us examine briefly the major topoi of *I colloqui*. The Son, the incarnate Word, is the unifying theme of the transcribers' text. Maria Maddalena's raptures focus on two aspects: the Son's body and his death. In *I colloqui* the Savior's body, especially his bleeding wounds, has a complex metaphorical significance. The Savior's wounds are similar to furnaces (colloquio 2, 67), to deep channels (colloquio 5, 95), to vineyards (colloquio 16, 182), and to windows (colloquio 18, 201). His body often becomes a mystical place that the mystic visits, almost always accompanied by her sisters. For example, in colloquio 4 some angels pick up the saint and her sisters by their hair and plunge them into the Son's breast: "Then she had the impression that the Holy Spirit asked the angels to pull us up by the hair . . . and so they took us into Jesus' side" (1:87).

Closely related to his suffering body, *I colloqui* speaks of the Savior's passion and death in a number of different manners (see chapters 2 and 3). According to structuralist terminology, the Son could be seen as a plot with infinite linguistic versions.²⁰ However, the Son pervades the mystic's narration of his existence even when he is not directly present as a character. In order to clarify this crucial point, let us compare two colloqui that revolve around the same topic, Jesus' passion, but which address it in two different ways. In colloquio 5, the transcribers state:

She had started to accompany her beloved Bridegroom toward his passion, as she usually does all day Friday. During this period her face becomes much more pensive and grim than usual, and when she speaks and converses she almost does not seem to be herself. Nevertheless, that night we asked her to tell us everything the Lord deigned to tell her. (1:92)

According to her sisters, in this rapture the mystic holds her conversation with Jesus in her own mind, without expressing any physical reaction to the images she is seeing or the voices she is hearing. The nuns seem to understand that she is having a vision only by looking at her preoccupied expression. They state that, after recovering from her rapture, Maria Maddalena is able to talk about her experience. God, she tells them, answered her questions and showed her some powerful images concerning his incarnated Son (93–95). The mystic calmly converses with her sisters, recounting several aspects of her vision.

If we now read a passage from a later rapture (colloquio 36), we can see how here the Son makes Maria Maddalena participate in his passion by sharing with her his harrowing pains:

Oh, what a penetrating pain! . . . *cor meum dereliquit me, et dolor passionis me assunsit me* [silence] *et peccatum omni creature* [silence] oh,

oh, now it seems as though you do not remember what you said: *Filius meus est tu* [silence] *et: In quo michi bene complacui, ipsum audite* [silence] *et non audisti eum*. Oh, oh and everything was for your creatures [silence] oh Word, I wonder if you mean: [silence] *transeat ad me penis ista*, even though it gives glory. (1:400)

In this second passage the Son is nothing but sheer despair. The transcribers report Maria Maddalena's anxiety primarily by citing well-known biblical verses: "Cor meum dereliquit me" (Ps. 39:13), "Filius meus est tu" (Ps. 2:7) and "In quo michi bene complacui" (Matt. 17:5), and by rephrasing other sacred expressions, such as "transeat ad me penis ista" (cf. Matt. 26:39: "My Father . . . if it is possible, let this cup pass from me"). All these quotations/interpretations aim to communicate and visualize the saint's disquiet, which is the real unifying theme of this discourse. The authors of *I colloqui* signify this by reproducing a fragmented syntax and citing passages from the sacred texts that allude to the mystic's sense of anxiety. On the page both the Other/Word, who conversed with the mystic in a perfect silence, and the speaking subject acquire a body through the very style of the text.

The nuns slowly learned how to mold their reportages, that is, how to edit their transcriptions. Exclamations, ellipses, biblical quotations (either uttered by the saint or chosen by the authors themselves), repetitions, and linguistic/thematic variations are the rhetorical devices that the authors use to give the mystic's discourse a narrative unity. In some passages Maria Maddalena's monologues actually take up a clear homiletic style, similar to what male preachers must have used during the morning mass in her convent. The saint's visions abound with homiletic passages:

Ubi sum ego ibi e minister meus erit [silence] who are these your ministers? And who can glorify your Father without glorifying you? Where you are, oh good Jesus, they are there [silence] you are everywhere, and they are everywhere, because they are in you who are everything, and they are everything. You are in them, who are nothing by themselves. However, since they are in you and you are in them, they are something. They are your ministers and your Christs, and (if they perform their ministry with sincerity) they acquire a name that is above every name, as is yours: *in nomine Jesu omne genu flectatur, celestium, terrestrium e infernorum*. (1:394)²¹

In this excerpt Maria Maddalena discusses the role played by male ministers within the Church. In fact, in the above quotation Maria Maddalena preaches as if she were a priest. The mystic uses some of the devices typical of a sermon: she starts her discourse by quoting a biblical passage in Latin; then she expands it, analyzing its single elements;

finally, she concludes with another Latin quotation. From a thematic standpoint, it is important to note that Maria Maddalena dares to cast doubt on the priests' sincerity. Who actually dares to express such critical doubts? The mystic? The nuns? Both the nuns and the mystic? How far was the mystic's standpoint from that of the transcribers themselves?²²

In other passages of *I colloqui* the editors state that often Maria Maddalena's visions focus on her sisters' morality. Summarizing the alleged content of one of her monologues, the nuns tell us that in a rapture the mystic reproached some of them for being lazy and skeptical toward their faith:

She saw that every nun had Jesus within herself. Jesus sat, slept, and took a rest under a beautiful tree, that was in the soul of each nun. Some of the nuns had a big big tree . . . some others had a small one, and others a tiny one. She understood that this tree was the charity of each nun. (1:80)²³

In this passage, Maria Maddalena's rapture exclusively concerns her convent sisters. In other words, in this case the transcribers constructed a text about themselves. To what extent did they modify the mystic's orality? To what extent were they faithful to the mystic's discourse? These questions are particularly relevant if we remember that the mystic allegedly did not recall the content of her raptures. How can the editors create a text that is erased/forgotten by its author? What does it mean to write a forgotten text?

I colloqui is what its author *does not* know, what she *does not* remember. Whereas writing is usually conceived of as an act of memory, in *I colloqui* writing is equivalent to forgetfulness. What we read, what the transcribers wrote down is the mystic's oblivion. As we have seen in the excerpt from *Probation*, although the nuns report that Maria Maddalena does not recall the content of her visions she is forced to abide by her confessor's order: Maria Maddalena must become editor of her own raptures. After having spoken, the saint sits down with her sisters and takes part in the editing of her own words:

She spoke for a long while and said many beautiful things. By the grace of God, we wrote them all and we shall transcribe them in their right place, after having checked them with her, although she remembered very little. (1:264–65)

The mystic supposedly said "many beautiful things," which the editors respectfully wrote down, along with her subsequent remarks and clarifications. Her "beautiful things" are legitimized, we might infer, when the transcribers involve her in their editing. What her words *must* obtain

in their passage from the oral level to the written one is a logical, narrative sense.

The written text attempts to reinstate the connection between voice and hand, which is split in the mystic's orality. In *I colloqui* what the hand composes is not what the voice expresses. The voice speaks, and the hand interprets. Whereas the mystic's voice is primarily the attempt to articulate the Word's being, the hand tries to capture the voice's logical message. As we shall see in chapter 2, although the mystic's monologues cannot help but use Italian and Latin as their main languages of expression, they mean something radically or partially different from what they seem to say.

Prior to any specific content, that is, prior to any given signified, the saint's voice *speaks* her effort to utter the Word. Asked to help her sisters to edit her monologues, Maria Maddalena has difficulty in pinning down a single moment in the development of her past emotions, since written words cannot reconstruct her internal conditions. She directly refers to this problem in colloquio 27, when she states that she retains only what she has perceived rationally, whereas she forgets all her feelings (1:288).

By taking part in their interpretation of her discourses, Maria Maddalena validates her sisters' work. Sometimes it is not clear who has actually explained an obscure passage, Maria Maddalena or her sisters; the nuns use expressions such as "we understood that," "it became clear to us that," without specifying the source of a particular insight. To conclude, we may say that in *I colloqui* Maria Maddalena plays two distinct roles: she is not only considered by her convent sisters the actual author of their transcriptions, she is also one of their editors. In her second role she authenticates her sisters' edition of her raptures.

Maria Maddalena's convent sisters are directly present in the text when they insert their comments on some obscure passages of the saint's monologues. The nuns claim that their interpretative work is primarily based on their conversations with Maria Maddalena; however, on some occasions the sisters directly introduce their own interpretation. For instance, in "colloquio 9 the transcribers say that it was so difficult to obtain any explanation from the saint that they felt forced to guess at the meaning of her words (1:129). In some of the most complex passages, Maria Maddalena's words, other saints' alleged statements, and the nuns' comments, become interwoven. The nuns transcribed what Maria Maddalena said, but Maria Maddalena actually repeated what another saint had just told her. As a result, it becomes nearly impossible to understand who says what. An example of this can be found in colloquio 7, wherein Maria Maddalena reports her dialogue with St Agnes:

First, St Agnes said (she told us), from the mouth of my groom I have received milk, that is charity . . . although it is sweet, honey is quite raw; this means that love for our neighbor makes us suffer, especially holy persons like Saint Agnes . . . since God gave her this charity, not only toward God Himself, but primarily toward her neighbor [St Agnes] could feel this rawness when she endured so many insults. (1:110)

In this passage the editors write that Maria Maddalena reported to them what St Agnes had told her about her experience with God. All of a sudden, the text shifts to the third person. Who then is the narrator? Maria Maddalena or the transcribers? Who is speaking about Agnes' charity?

In some other passages the nuns censor the mystic's words. They believe that Maria Maddalena's remarks about specific persons or situations may not be included in their final edition, as in the case of colloquio 31: the nuns explicitly say that the saint's comments on a certain Florentine convent are unbecoming, and thus they will not write them down:

[S]he said many more things about a certain convent here in Florence; Jesus would like to warn them, but we shall not say more, and shall not report the words she spoke in this rapture, because it is not appropriate. (1:315)

In several other pages, Maria Maddalena speaks about those of her convent sisters who seem to have difficulty in their faith. In these cases, the names of the nuns are not written down.²⁴

The nuns' primary effort is to turn their own transcriptions into chapters of a narrative text. It is important to remember that *I colloqui* is not a series of unrelated raptures, but rather a cohesive narration. It encompasses a specific period of time, from December 1584 to June 1585, and describes a specific place, the convent of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Florence. To compose a coherent literary product, the editors manipulated the notions of time and space, modifying the temporal and spatial categories of the first draft of their transcriptions, shifting passages, inserting various remarks, eliminating excerpts that would disturb the coherent structure of their text.

In *I colloqui* time and space are synonymous with structure. However, to organize the mystic's monologues with the Word, that is, to insert them into time and space, essentially means to silence the voice of/to the Other. As the final section of *I colloqui* clearly shows, language in time and space can only be the language of the Father. In colloquio 48, when God finally articulated his Law through Maria Maddalena's

mouth, neither the mystic's voice nor the Word's responses were reported. In *I colloqui* the Word does not come to express his will, because the Father takes over in that moment when, after the first half of the text, Maria Maddalena has completed an excruciating mystical purification. When the actual encounter with the Word seems close to its realization, the Father invades the mystic's body and starts to express his Law through her mouth. Time and space, seen as narrative constructions, mold a text that reveals the Law of the Father.

Let us examine first the temporal composition of the text. To begin, we must distinguish between two different temporal categories: time within each colloquio and time as a result of the relationship among all the colloqui. As far as the first category is concerned, we can easily notice that the writers marked not only when each vision took place, but also which saint was celebrated that day and how long the rapture lasted. Also, since in each rapture the mystic was reported to interpret a particular episode of the Gospel, the transcribers constructed each colloquio on two interrelated levels: (1) the historical time of the vision itself, and (2) the mystic's interpretation of the biblical time. According to the writers, when she acted out a moment of the Savior's life, Maria Maddalena never followed consequential time, but she rather went back and forth from the biblical past to her present moment. The nuns believed that the mystic's interpretation of the sacred texts was influenced by her psychological condition. We might say that an essential part of the editors' literary construction is based on a sort of "emotional time," that is, the constantly changing of the mystic's psychological responses to her divine interlocutor. When, after the first half of the book, the nuns modified their rhetoric they started to reproduce on the page the oral cadence of the mystic's discourse, that is, her silences, exclamations, repetitions. They felt compelled to construct a narration of the mystic's emotions. Maria Maddalena's feelings became chapters of a private story, her love relationship with the Word.

In order to better understand this point, let us study briefly the temporal structure of colloquio 36, one of the most interesting chapters of the book. The editors state that in this rapture Maria Maddalena celebrated Good Friday and reexperienced the Word's pains. From a temporal standpoint, we may distinguish at least three different narrative levels. The first level is the present of the nuns' and of the saint's comments on this vision. On the one hand, the transcribers describe her gestures and her movements, and try to explain her words. On the other, Maria Maddalena converses with the Word and the Virgin Mary about the sense of his past sufferings. For instance, at a certain point Maria Maddalena reminds the Word of his mother's anguish over his forth-

coming death: "This narration of your action made Mary suffer a lot [*silence*] *elegi eam apud te* [*silence*] *et confirmasti eam de manu tua*; because she was going to give birth to you, I believe that too" (1:384). On the second temporal level the mystic merges her commentaries with the account of Jesus' sufferings, as if they took place at that very moment:

So wonderful are the vision that you wanted to give us and the glory that you wanted us . . . I would not say to participate in, but rather to taste and enjoy, that if it were not more intense than the suffering I would not speak any longer [*silence*] vision [*silence*] vision. Only vision of truth and of the Word [*silence*] but today it is a day of Passion and not of vision, yes, but. (1:385)

In the first part of this passage, the mystic comments on a past event, the Savior's passion, whereas at the end she seems to say that the two temporal levels, the time of her commentary and that of the commented event, coincide.²⁵ The text states that through her own suffering the mystic is capable of connecting the two distinct times of her rapture. On the third level, Maria Maddalena totally identifies with the Word's experiences. The present time is the time of the biblical event. For example, toward the end of this colloquio Maria Maddalena addresses the mob that saves Barabas and condemns Jesus:

You say that Caesar is your king, but in reality you do not deserve my Spouse to be your king; He will be your judge [*silence*] *ecce Rex vester* [*silence*] what are you doing, ungrateful people? What did you say before? *Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini*, but now you say: *Crucifige, crucifige eum*. (1:414)

Maria Maddalena participates in the Word's passion as his spouse; she reenacts the last moments of the Savior's life and yells at the crowd that rejects his message. However, unlike other mystics, Maria Maddalena does not make frequent use of this third temporal level. In most cases, the time of her rapture and that of the Gospel intermingle, that is, the saint both recounts a past event and actively participates in it.

We have seen so far that in the nuns' transcriptions time is multifaceted; the present of their commentary interacts with other temporal levels. The writers also gave their edited text a temporal structure by interrelating the visions among themselves. The nuns attempted to show that Maria Maddalena's discourse had an intrinsic coherence that went beyond the basic unit of a single vision.

The writers constantly refer to previous or future raptures, highlighting similarities, repetitions, passages, or images that clarify, say, ambiguous past utterances or the roles of certain persons who witnessed one vision and are reported deceased in a later one. In *I collo-*

qui time goes by not only within each single rapture, from its beginning to its end, but first and foremost in the lives of the saint and of her biographers.

The most evident time sign is at the beginning of each colloquio, when the writers mention the date of that vision. This is how colloqui 1 and 4 begin: "Tuesday January 1st . . . we got together with the blessed soul" (1:51); "Sunday night, January 13th . . . we decided to have our usual dialogue with her" (1:82). In most cases the transcribers also mention how long that vision lasted. We know that the vision reported in colloquio 48 is extremely long; it lasted exactly forty hours. Moreover, at the beginning of some colloqui the nuns summarize previous visions that they were unable to write down. The writers condense in one chapter what has actually occurred in more than one day: "Sunday evening, January 6th, 1584 . . . we began our second conversation . . . we asked our blessed soul what the Lord had communicated to her the past Friday" (1:62); "On Saturday, April 27th 1585, we conversed again with the blessed soul . . . but first we will recount what she experienced last Monday, the second day of Holy Week" (1:428).

The nuns also use flashbacks at the beginning of a colloquio and throughout their transcription of a particular vision. In order to make the mystic's discourse clearer, sometimes the nuns modify the structure of her reported monologues. Sometimes the nuns believe that by reversing the order of her sentences, the sense of the mystic's words becomes more apparent. For instance, in colloquio 32, after having reported a passage of her discourse ("Oh my ingratitude, oh my ingratitude! [*silence*] my ingratitude causes every evil," 1:320), the nuns add: "We believe that here she referred to the Church, because right before she had said: "Your bride cries [*silence*] oh Catherine, if you were here, you would force God." The transcribers have reversed two passages of the saint's speech in order to connect one idea (the solitude of the Church) to Maria Maddalena's following exclamation "oh my ingratitude!"

Let us now move on to analyze how Maria Maddalena's single visions, the so-called colloqui, are related to each other. Two basic kinds of events hold the text together: first, mystical occurrences that testify to a change in the mystic's relation to God; second, historical facts that span more than one colloquio. As far as the first element is concerned, the transcribers never fail to notice that each of the saint's visions corresponds to a different facet of her relation to God. Maria Maddalena experiences all the traditional signs of divine love. In colloquio 42 the nuns state that she is ready to receive the Savior's crown of thorns,

because a week before, like Catherine of Siena, she had married the Word (2:72).

If we look at the second element that unifies the mystic's raptures, we see that historical events play a central role in connecting the individual chapters with each other. A historical occurrence is mentioned in a vision, then developed in the following one, and finally summarized in a third. For instance, in colloquio 15 the nuns state that Lady Camilla da Bagnesi, who had been one of the convent's most influential "friends," is very ill: "While she was praying for the Father Confessor and for Lady Camilla da Bagnesi, who was sick, she was told that . . . Lady Camilla was suffering so much in this latest disease of hers because of her love for her son" (1:177). In the next colloquio the nuns speak of Maria Maddalena's meditation on Jesus' blood offered to God during the morning mass. The nuns specify that the day before, February 20th, the morning mass had been dedicated to Camilla da Bagnesi, who had just passed away:

Wednesday, February 20th, 1584, we met with the blessed soul in the name of God and conversed with her. She told us that yesterday morning many masses had been celebrated for the deceased Lady Camilla da Bagnesi. (1:179)

In a much later colloquio the nuns write that during her vision Maria Maddalena mentioned Camilla da Bagnesi. The saint had seen her in heaven praying for her son, who had given her so much pain: "I saw Lady Camilla in heaven. She wanted to pray to God for her son Niccolò" (1:284).

The concept of time expressed in this text derives from the interaction between two complex temporal notions. On the one hand, the mystic's utterances, which correspond to the nonsequential, "mystical" temporality,²⁶ are the actual *signifiers* of the text; what each chapter "says" lies in the mystic's reconstructed orality. On the other, the temporal, historical time of the literary construction is the text's *signified*. It is apparent that *I colloqui is a text that is signified by an absent signifier*. When the mystic's oral words became instrumental to a coherent, narrative temporality, her language had already been converted into a signified. The act of appropriating the visionary's utterances *marks* the disappearance of her voice.²⁷

Similar to the notion of time, space is the result of the interaction between the nuns' transcriptions and their own editing. First of all, her sisters understood that Maria Maddalena spoke not only through her voice but also through her body. The transcribers perceived that the

description of the saint's body was an important factor in their editing; her body completed, or rather, enriched the sense of their reportage. Before and/or after each part of the saint's reported discourse, the nuns introduced a description of her physical conditions:

As soon as she knelt down she entered a rapture, and for three hours she did not come out of it, although through gestures and words she showed that she was suffering a lot; large drops of sweat ran down her face and tears ran from her eyes, and she also had such a rheum and breathlessness that we really worried for her. She drooled . . . as when one is dying. (1:312)

This form of narration of a visionary's suffering is common to many hagiographic texts. In the above passage the nuns compare her with the Savior, since during this vision Maria Maddalena reexperienced his pains on the cross. What distinguishes *I colloqui* from previous hagiographies is the fact that similar physical descriptions accompany almost every utterance of the saint. As I have already pointed out, the mystic's emotional states help the editors construct a logical text. The nuns did not limit themselves to introducing brief excerpts from the saint's inspired discourses with an account of her gestures or movements, they also connected almost every section of Maria Maddalena's often long speeches with her inconstant physical positions. Her body and her words are very closely related to each other:

She joined her hands and stood still, looking toward the sky . . . she said the following words: "God prays to God. . . ." She showed that she was in great pain: "Oh, what excruciating pain!" And one could see that she was participating in it, since her face was slowly taking a sorrowful expression . . . then she gave a painful howl, which apparently came from inside her, and then she said: "In her bosom you desired to suffer, and now? . . ." And after these words she fell down . . . with her hands joined and her arms down like an exhausted person, and she kept her eyes fixed on the floor . . . and then she said: "You suffered all of this for your chosen ones." (1:399-400)

In the above passage each utterance pronounced by the mystic is accompanied by a description of her sorrowful body. In one sense, each word of *I colloqui* contains a specific gesture; each word *is* a gesture.²⁸ The mystic's body "speaks" a language that interacts with that of her voice. By carefully noting Maria Maddalena's physical reactions, the nuns endeavor to give her spoken language a sort of visual perspective.²⁹ In *I colloqui* words speak the visionary's body. If to exist means to be engaged in the effort to articulate the Word, since both our words and our gestures cannot help but be a response to his request for being, *I col-*

loqui itself expresses a desire for existence. This text, we may infer, is a body that longs for incarnation.

According to the editors, the mystic's gestures accompany her words as she acts out a particular episode of the Gospel. Being language, the human body *must* have a meaning; its gestures *must* say something. However, in some cases the nuns' transcriptions of the mystic's physical expressions fail to convey a clear meaning. When this happens, the editors add an interpretative key by referring her gestures to the overall sense of the saint's vision. In colloquio 30, for example, the nuns begin their transcription by reporting a brief, fragmented sentence: "Not insertion, no, but through infusion." Maria Maddalena accompanied these words with an *unclear* movement of her hands, as if she were receiving, welcoming something or someone. The writers relate both her words and her gesture to the fact that this rapture occurred on Easter Monday, and therefore conclude that on that day Maria Maddalena must have received spiritual, though invisible, stigmata. The mystic reminded her sisters of Catherine of Siena:

When the blessed soul was in the garden with the novices . . . she leaned against a pole, with her eyes fixed on the sky. Soon a sister noticed it and took her to the dormitory of the novices . . . she held her hands open, staring at a figure of Jesus that she had on top of her bedstead; she looked like St Catherine of Siena. So, we thought that at that point Jesus gave her his holy stigmata. (1:331)

The nuns insert Maria Maddalena's silent movements into the general frame of their mystical narrative, composing their text as if they were both authors and readers, that is, both as addressers and addressees of their literary discourse. They know how things actually went: how the saint behaved and spoke, how her words resounded in their convent, how painful or cheerful the tone of her voice was.

However, the nuns are aware of the fact that the mystic's words do not suffice to "give body" to her linguistic expression. The editors understand that the mystic's body and her words are two facets of the same signifier. This double-sided signifier both multiplies and weakens its ultimate expression. If, on the one hand, the connection "body-orality" enriches the sign, its potentiality, on the other it jeopardizes the sign itself. In fact, in the written text the mystic's body is both signifier and signified, the sign that says and the sign that is said; her body is both part of that "world" the authors want to initiate the reader into, and the means through which they perform that initiation. As a consequence, if on the one hand we can appropriate the mystic's body as a signified through a phantasmatic association, because by the act of writing the authors allowed us to do so, on the other hand we fail to perceive it as

a signifier because of its strict relation to that orality, which is irremediably lost. The sign's capability of working as a signifier is thus in doubt; the body of the text, we may say, is signified on the page, *it is said*, that is, it is constantly compelled to say something, to mean something, even though we, and the editors, cannot be sure of what it is saying. As the mystic strives to summon the Word's being, *I colloqui* tries to perform it in its own language.