

A Room for Herself: The Semiotics of the Interior and Exterior Space in the Mystical Imagery of the Cell

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Abstract – In the writings of Christian mystics from the Middle Ages up to our days, there is a recurring need for a room intended as a place of intimacy and independence, of loneliness and freedom, in which to build one own's subjectivity, especially thanks to the construction of a relation to a transcendent Other. As the 20th-century culture has shown, this need of a space of oneself is particularly connected to the affirmation of feminine subjectivity: if Virginia Woolf wrote that a woman needs «a room of one's own» to write fiction, a similar concept seems to apply to female mystics across the centuries. This theme is analyzed through different concepts, such as the oppositions, and the related tensions, between inside and outside, proximity and distance, immanence and transcendence, which are in turn connected to the dynamic relationship between a limited possibility of perception and an unlimited potentiality of imagination and knowledge.

Keywords: mysticism – concentration – space – subjectivity – imagination

«... e della Cella si fa uno cielo»¹.
(Catherine of Siena, *Lettere*)

1. Introduction

In the writings of Christian-Catholic mystics from the Middle Ages to our days, there is a recurring need for a room intended as a place of intimacy, of freedom from the world, in which to freely and creatively experience transcendence, which is possible only in a condition of loneliness and stillness. This need of a space of oneself is particularly (even not exclusively) connected to the affirmation of feminine subjectivity: if Virginia Woolf wrote that a woman needs a room of one's own² to write fiction, a similar concept seems to apply to mystics across the centuries.

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¹ Catherine of Siena, *Lettere*, Firenze, Marzocco, 1939, letter CCIII. All translations, unless different specification, are my own.

² V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, London, Hogarth Press, 1929.

The condition of solitude granted by this personal space is an important premise to reach a state of mediation and concentration, a state for which contemporary culture still expresses a strong interest³. In this paper I will therefore firstly focus on the Christian-Catholic idea of concentration and show how it is strictly connected with the spatial imagery of the cell; then, I will concentrate on the distinction between the exterior and the interior cell, based on the writings of Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), Theresa of Avila (1515-1582) and Veronica Giuliani (1660-1727).

2. The Idea of Concentration in Christian-Catholic Tradition

In the Christian-Catholic tradition, praying is considered an act engaging *the whole person* and consisting in a *dialogue* with the divine. This act requires «to enter into oneself and take a distance from ordinary and daily things and, in the meantime, provokes a movement and an opening toward the Other»⁴. The condition of prayer is thus characterized by a typical tension between opposed poles combining motion and stasis, interiority and exteriority: the soul is required to exit from the movement of daily life and stand still and quiet, to reach a condition of solitude and silence; this condition is necessary to the spiritual movement, to the instauration of a dialogue which cannot take place if the soul is not available to listen.

Catholic theologians agree that concentration can be reached in different environments, for instance, in a church, in a garden, a field, or a desert. A widespread and crucial model is however praying alone inside one's room. This model finds a first formulation in Mt 6:6, where Jesus prescribes: «But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you».

³ And this often leads to re-elaborations of the traditional models, see e.g. the contemporary phenomenon of the 'urban hermits', who adapt the ascetic practices to the life in contemporary [cities](http://nuovieremiti.blogspot.com/search/label/Eremiti%20di%20citt%C3%A0) (<http://nuovieremiti.blogspot.com/search/label/Eremiti%20di%20citt%C3%A0>), or the combination of the Christian-Catholic tradition with the oriental traditions (a key contribution in this respect is that of Anthony De Mello).

⁴ C. Laudazi, *Preghiera*, in E. Ancilli (ed.), *Dizionario enciclopedico di spiritualità*. Roma, Città Nuova, 1990³, vol. 3, pp. 1992-2009, here p. 1992.

Surely, the cell as a topologic configuration is particularly coherent with a *form of life*⁵ based on the secret, intended as the regime of «being» and «not-seeming»⁶.

3. The Exterior Cell

3.1 *Inside and Outside*

In the Catholic imagery regarding praying in a room, the relationship between physical and spiritual senses is crucial, and is connected to the topological distinction between inside and outside. From this perspective, «External silence ... is nothing more than the environmental premise of inner silence; it is necessary as recollection and solitude ...»⁷.

As a consequence, the creation of a closed personal space granting solitude and silence must be propaedeutic to concentration. The action of isolating oneself into a room can be defined as a secondary narrative program useful for the accomplishment of the principal one, consisting in reaching the concentration which makes prayer effective, or even as a *semiotecnique*, namely a practice producing the meaning intended by the subject⁸. What is particularly interesting is that this model of prayer is based on an analogy between the organization of the spatial environment and the inner disposition of the soul, so that the space of the room results as the material realization of the idea of concentration: the desired spiritual state is fostered by an analogous spatial organization, so that the whole person results centered on their own, concentrated. Reflecting on the organization of the ascetic space, Massimo Leone observes that any space or place is set up, like a scenography created more or less consciously, and plays a relevant influence on the ascetic's semiotic grip of the space, because there is a sort of echo between the plastic structure of the

⁵ On this concept, cf. J. Fontanille, *Formes de vie*, Presses Universitaires de Liège, Liège, 2015. See also L. Ruiz Moreno, *La solitude comme forme de vie*, in «Nouveaux actes sémiotiques», 115, 2012, <https://www.unilim.fr/actes-semiotiques/2664>.

⁶ A.J. Greimas - J. Courtès, *Semiotics and Language. An Analytical Dictionary*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982, p. 310.

⁷ G. della Croce, *Silenzio*, in E. Ancilli (ed.), *Dizionario enciclopedico di spiritualità*, vol. 3, pp. 2308-2312, here p. 2310.

⁸ Cf. F. Galofaro, *Come prestare attenzione a Dio: preghiera e semiotecnica*, in J. Ponzio - E. Chiaia (eds.), *Il sacro e il corpo*, Milano - Udine, Mimesis, 2022, pp. 133-151.

42 | spatial language and the plastic structure of the spiritual language⁹: these considerations well apply to the case under examination.

3.2 *The 'atmosphere'*

Both the religious discourse about prayer and the recent semiotic reflection¹⁰ have devoted much attention to the ideas of *environment* and *atmosphere*, intended as a «resonance» of the lived space, which results filled with a «vibration», a feeling, a surplus of meaning which is more bodily and emotional than abstract and semantic¹¹.

Atmosphere has therefore to do with the aesthetic and pathemic grip of the space. The environment, or atmosphere, surrounding the praying faithful is a relevant component of an effective technique of prayer. According to Theresa of Avila, for instance, the mental oration consists in a friendly and loving conversation of the soul with God¹². Based on this consideration, theologian Carlo Laudazi observes that «saints not only define the main features of this kind of oration, but they also insist on the spiritual atmosphere»¹³ in which mental oration should be practiced. Theresa describes an informal atmosphere, in which the affective elements prevail. The particular environment of prayer, therefore, results from the contrast between the material emptiness of the room and the fullness of the inner experience.

3.3 *Sensorial Limits, Reflection and Imagination*

A relevant idea informing this model of prayer is that sensorial limits trigger imagination, that a limited or impeded sight leads to explore with the eyes of the soul what is beyond. This idea is widespread in western culture. Its roots can be traced back to Platonism, and it influences not only the religious imagery and practice of mystics across the centuries, but also the artistic and literary imagery up to the modern and contemporary epoch. Just to mention one example, Marcel Proust writes:

⁹ M. Leone, *Semiotica dello spazio ascetico*, in «Humanitas», 68, 2013, 6, pp. 937-947.

¹⁰ See e.g. the issue 9-10 of the journal «Lexia» (2011), edited by M. Leone and devoted to «Environment, Habitat, Setting».

¹¹ Cf. T. Griffiero, *Amosferologia. Estetica degli spazi emozionali*, Sesto San Giovanni, Mimesis, 2017², p. 14.

¹² Theresa of Avila, *Libro de la vida – La Vita*, in *Tutte le opere. Nuova edizione riveduta e corretta, testo spagnolo a fronte*, Milano, Bompiani, 2018, pp. 3-719, 106-107.

¹³ C. Laudazi, *Pregghiera*, p. 2003.

«When I was a child, the fate of no saint seemed so miserable to me as that of Noah, because of the flood that kept him locked in the ark for forty days. Later, I was often ill, and for many days I also had to stay in the 'ark'. I understood then that Noah could never see the world so well as from the ark, despite the fact that it was closed and it was night on earth ...»¹⁴.

This idea has to do with a concept which is fundamental in semiotics. Classic theories of the sign, such as Ferdinand de Saussure's, Charles S. Peirce's, and Umberto Eco's, have taught us that signs have an abstract and substitutive nature, that they can signify what is beyond sensitive experience (and can therefore be used to lie). Going beyond the limits of the matter, and also beyond pure referentiality, is a constitutive part of our semiotic capacity. From this perspective, the model under consideration stresses this tendency, since it entails that an individual voluntarily exasperates the limits of perception in order to stimulate their semiotic faculty – namely the faculty *to imagine beyond the sensual experience*.

This heuristic method often receives a positive *sanction* from the society in which the mystic acts. Indeed, numerous mystics across the centuries who professed – and practiced – the value of an isolated life have had the capacity of attracting crowds of people asking for advice for both mundane and spiritual issues.

3.4 *Self-Affirmation*

The practice of enclosing oneself into a room is not only part of a technique aiming to acquire concentration as the necessary condition of prayer: especially for feminine mystics, the desire to be able to close themselves in a room for their own has undoubtedly another meaning too, connected to their sociocultural environment and their personal condition.

According to Rudolph Bell, many important mystics, such as Catherine of Siena and Veronica Giuliani, were young women who strived for their self-affirmation, in a way which is similar under many respects to the rebellion that many young women still act today in relation to their family and the society they are part of¹⁵. This need of self-affirmation is not only expressed through fasting (the aspect on which Bell focuses more extensively), but also through the desire of a room for themselves, intended as a place of freedom from the prefixed roles imposed by the society and the standard models of behavior.

¹⁴ M. Proust, *Les plaisirs et les jours*, Paris, Calmann Lévi, 1896, p. VII.

¹⁵ R. Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, Chicago - London, The University of Chicago Press, 1985.

From this perspective, it is possible to draw a parallel between mysticism and art. Virginia Woolf, for instance, writes that the creation of a work is hard and is made more difficult by the material circumstances surrounding the writer, who will be distracted by a number of noises and interruptions depending on the environment in which they work, as well as by money and health concerns. Especially for a woman, Virginia Woolf claims, having a room of one's own means to be able to free herself from contingency, open her mind, think independently, and become creative and fully expressive¹⁶.

A further key to interpret the phenomenon under consideration can come from a dilemma proposed by Schopenhauer¹⁷ and recently applied by Davide Sisto to account for the changes in the interpersonal relationships during and after the pandemics¹⁸. In this dilemma, in a cold winter day, some porcupines get close to warm each other, but they are hurt by the reciprocal spines, so they have to get distant again, but then again start feeling cold. In the end, they find a moderate distance balancing pain and cold in a bearable compromise. However, Schopenhauer also notes that there are rare individuals who are able to accumulate much inner heat. These individuals prefer renouncing to society so as to avoid giving or receiving unpleasant sensations. We could say that many mystics (and some artists too) are among these rare individuals, and that their capacity of renouncing to the world derives from a subjectivity which finds its realization in a quest which is independent from the dominating social schemes, and in a fervent intellectual, imaginative and spiritual life, which leads them to find satisfactory a situation of sensorial and social deprivation that for most part of the individuals would be unbearable. Indeed, as Jean de Saint-Samson claims, «to confine in the solitude the body only, without accompanying it with the solitude of the spirit, this means to put oneself, while still alive, in the hell»¹⁹. This kind of proxemics, therefore, is not only reserved to rare individuals, but is inseparable from the relationship to the spiritual dimension, so that the scarcity of social and sensorial stimuli is paralleled by an exceptionally rich spiritual life, overcoming the silence of the senses and annihilating the pain of loneliness.

¹⁶ V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*.

¹⁷ A. Schopenhauer, *Parerga und Paralipomena: kleine philosophische Schriften*, Berlin, Hayn, 1851.

¹⁸ D. Sisto, *Porcospini digitali*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2022.

¹⁹ Jean de Saint-Samson, *Les Contemplations et les divins soliloques*, Paris, Chez Denys Thierry, 1654, pp. 11-12.

4. The Inner Cell

As the term itself suggests, asceticism is a path, a progressive development of the spiritual experience. Many mystics describe several stages in this path, and generally the progression is towards a growing abstraction, in which the experience of the divine gets rid of reason, as well as of images and imagination, and is described as a full union, a communion. Having a room for oneself is a need characterizing in particular the first stages of the ascetic path, when the senses play a bigger influence on the spiritual performance. A more advanced level – even if one which is not yet fully devoid of images – is represented by the creation of an inner room or cell. The mystics able to create an inner space for their own are free to cultivate their spirituality even while they are acting in the world. Inside their inner cell, they keep the dialogue with the divine alive and safe from distraction.

In mystical literature, the use of the spatial metaphor of the inner cell provides a very coherent and effective figurative representation of the idea of concentration. This metaphor is developed in particular by Catherine of Siena. Her hagiographer Raymond of Capua narrates that, since her childhood she was fascinated by the Egyptian fathers and she wanted to imitate them, become a hermit and live in a cavern²⁰. The young Catherine had to face the hostility of her family, who contrasted her religious vocation and her often extreme devout practices. When her parents deprived her of her room, she built an inner cell for herself:

«... she made herself a secret cell under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in her own mind, from which she decided to come out only for serious reasons. And so it happened that, while before she had a material cell, in which she sometimes entered and sometimes left, now she never left the inner cell, which could not be taken from her»²¹.

The doctrine of the inner cell is developed in numerous passages of Catherine's writings. Catherine calls this inner room the «cell of self-knowledge». In order to reach it, the soul must be perseverant in prayer, become conscious of itself, of its faults and sins, thus overcoming the love of its sensuality and gaining humility. In this way, the soul becomes aware of the bounty of God, and consequently desires the union with him. This inner cell is therefore the pivot of spiritual life²².

²⁰ R. of Capua, *Vita di Caterina da Siena. Legenda Maior*, Milano, Paoline, 2013, p. 56.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 74.

²² Catherine of Siena, *Libro della Divina Dottrina volgarmente detto Dialogo della Divina Provvidenza*, Bari, Laterza, 1928, chapters I, LXIII; C. of Siena, *Lettere*, II.

In Catherine's thought a constant analogy is proposed between the inner and the material cell, and she claims that the religious who get away from their cell and stay in the world, die, like fishes out of the water²³. Acquiring the inner cell, however, requires a hard work and resistance to the attacks of the devil, which become particularly violent in the solitude of the material cell²⁴. For this reason, remaining in the material cell is almost unbearable for the weak soul, incapable of paralleling the exterior solitude with the inner shelter in which the dialogue with the divine can take place; on the contrary, the more the soul progresses in the building of the interior cell, the more it loves staying also in the material one²⁵.

In several passages (cf. epigraph) Catherine writes that «the cell becomes heaven». This metaphor well expresses the idea that for the mystic the room for herself becomes a whole *lifeworld*. The same idea can be found in other passages, in which Catherine speaks of the «city of the soul»²⁶, and is further elaborated in the figure of a concentric inner room, when she says that inside the room of the self-knowledge, there is another room, which is the room of the knowledge of God²⁷.

The virtually infinite expansion of the space of the inner cell finds its more articulated expression in Theresa of Avila's idea of the interior castle: «This Castle has ... many dwellings: some at the top, others at the bottom, others at the sides. In the middle, at its center, there is the main room, where the most secret things between God and the soul happen»²⁸. For Theresa too, the door to enter the castle is constituted by oration and meditation²⁹ and the first room to be explored is the one of the self-knowledge:

«I would leave no doubt about the importance of self-knowledge, however lofty the spiritual heights you have reached. While we live on this earth, we are only interested in humility. I repeat that it is really very good to try to enter the room where this theme is addressed, before flying to the others»³⁰.

²³ Catherine of Siena, *Libro della Divina Dottrina*, CXXV; C. of Siena, *Lettere*, XXXVI.

²⁴ Catherine of Siena, *Lettere*, CLIV.

²⁵ Catherine of Siena, *Lettere*, XXXVII.

²⁶ E.g. Catherine of Siena, *Lettere*, II, CCCXV, CCCXIX.

²⁷ Catherine of Siena, *Lettere*, XCIV.

²⁸ Theresa of Avila, *Castillo interior – Il castello interiore*, in *Tutte le opere. Nuova edizione riveduta e corretta, testo spagnolo a fronte*, Milano, Bompiani, 2018, pp. 1092-1495, 1104-1105.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 1108-1109.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 1120-1121.

The doctrine of the interior cell enjoyed considerable success in the following centuries. Saint Veronica Giuliani, for instance, takes inspiration from Catherine of Siena. She also lives a retired life and starts to cultivate solitude since her childhood. However, in her account, her desire for the inner cell appears fulfilled by God, so that its obtention seems to derive more from the surrender of the personal will and from divine grace than from a long and patient work to build the cell of self-knowledge, as in Catherine:

It seemed to me that I needed a little retreat, feeling inspired to do like St. Catherine of Siena, to make a remote room in my heart, and there, in the midst of the turmoil, to make my posed retreat with God alone. With this good thought I was preparing for what I wanted to do. In this while, I heard an internal voice that was saying to me: *Do not take pain of not being able to withdraw a little, because I your Spouse will always make you withdraw into Me ...* Therefore, those who want solitude should leave their will ... This is what always keeps our minds raised in things from nothing. And it does not help to build rooms in our hearts, because, since there is a little of our will, soon everything falls on the ground. ... The conversations, the chores, the charity, the office I have, nothing takes me out of holy solitude. Oh! What peace my heart feels staying, continuously, placed in the divine will! Oh! how great is this divine chamber, in this divine will of my God, of my Groom!³¹

Saint Veronica's experience seems moreover more abstract than the one described by Catherine: while for the latter the inner cell is not only structurally analogical to the material cell, but also maintains a relation with it through the practice of the bodily isolation and confinement, Veronica's inner cell appears more independent from the material condition of the body.

5. Conclusion

The imagery of the cell is the core of a set of relevant semiotic issues. The first is that this imagery expresses with efficacy the idea, central to semiotic theory, that sensorial limitation is the first impulse for the semi-otization of the beyond, for the elaboration of signs that are abstract and substitutive in nature.

Another key concept is that the relationship between the inner and the material cell depends on a parallelism between the plastic structure of spatial language and the plastic structure of spiritual language. The metaphor of the inner cell also provides a figurative representation of a con-

³¹ Veronica Giuliani, *Un tesoro nascosto (Diario)*, Città di Castello, Stabilimento Tipografico Editoriale, 1969², vol. 1, pp. 264-265.

cept that has been widely explored by recent semiotic studies, namely that the imagination of transcendence and of the immaterial reality necessitates matter, so that the material world is the inescapable model for the imagination of the beyond and of what is immaterial³². In this sense, the imagery of the cell has an utopic character: the cell appears as the parallel or the extension of the body, when it becomes 'utopic' in the sense defined by Michel Foucault, namely a body (or a room) which in its materiality brings in all the space of the religious, of the sacred, of transcendence³³.

At a narratological level, the room of one's own plays a crucial role in the subject's self-definition and self-affirmation: the 'solitary' person finds their full development in the cell, and in what Greimas would call «regime of the secret», in which a lively inner life is hidden inside the soul³⁴. The form of life of the solitary mystic is therefore placed in a complex field of tensions, in which the body and the soul are engaged in an itinerary going from the exterior (characterized by limitation and closeness) to the interior (of infinite depth and openness), from taking the distance from the others to gain proximity to the divine Other, from the poverty of sensual stimuli and pleasure to growingly rich spiritual ones.

This quest can also be interpreted as a heuristic method, i.e. as a way to gain an improved knowledge of oneself, of the world and of the deity. If it is true that mystical and artistic-aesthetic experience are similar under several respects³⁵, the imagery of a room of one's own undoubtedly constitutes one of these similarities, and proves how the solitary form of life and the heuristic technique it entails are central, at least in Western culture. Moreover, an interesting parallel between the cell of the mystic and the room of the artist is provided by the idea that these spaces are the result of a work, are built according not only to spatial principles, but also trying to realize a particular *atmosphere*. As a consequence, while the cell contributes to the progression of self-knowledge and affirmation, at the same time it is shaped by the self living inside it

³² For bibliographic references on this subject, cf. J. Ponso, *Approcci semiotici alle culture religiose*, in G. Marrone - T. Migliore (eds.), *Cura del senso e critica sociale. Ricognizione della semiotica italiana*, Sesto San Giovanni, Mimesis, pp. 451-476, here pp. 460-462.

³³ M. Foucault, *Le corps utopique, les hétérotopies*, Paris, Nouvelles Editions Lignes, 2019.

³⁴ A.J. Greimas - J. Courtès, *Semiotics and Language*, p. 269.

³⁵ Cf. J. Ponso, *Religious-Artistic Epiphanies in 20th-Century Literature: Joyce, Claudel, Weil, C.S. Lewis, Rebora, and Papini*, in J. Ponso - R. Yelle - M. Leone (eds.), *Mediation and Immediacy: A Key Issue for the Semiotics of Religion*, Boston - Berlin, De Gruyter, 2020, pp. 149-164.

and molding it in its likeliness. A similar concept is expressed by Georges Didi-Huberman about the studio of the artist Parmiggiani:

«Does this mean that the artist's studio – the place of work and at the same time the work of the place – should be thought of as ... the transformation of an environment (with the air, the fog, the atmosphere that are proper to it) into a landscape of psyche, in a stylistic character, in the imprint of intimacy?»³⁶.

I think the answer to this question is yes. This consideration explains the fascination that our culture shows for the personal rooms of saints and artists, which are increasingly musealized (this is the case for instance of the room of Saint Pio of Pietrelcina, of Don Bosco, etc.)³⁷. The role culturally attributed to the cell is one of parallelism with the person who lived, built its own subjectivity and had inside it the most important thoughts and experiences making them a great artist or a great saint.

³⁶ G. Didi-Huberman, *Sculture d'ombra: aria, polvere, impronte, fantasmi*, Torino, Allemandi & C., p. 12.

³⁷ Cf. J. Ponzio, *The Saint's Room: Museums and the Management of Nostalgia*, in «Carte Semiotiche», *Annali* 9 (forthcoming).

