

Archeosophy, the Arts, and Poetry

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ABSTRACT: The article presents a short biography of Tommaso Palamidessi and the main doctrines of the esoteric school he founded, Archeosophy. It then explores the importance of the arts as part of Palamidessi's path to asceticism and initiation. While other studies have focused on the visual arts and music within Archeosophy, this article discusses Palamidessi's ideas about poetry as a necessary part of the initiatory experience of the Archeosophists. Based on an analysis of Palamidessi's short book *Poetry and Metrics*, his theories about different forms of poetry and their connection with the sacred science of numbers are presented and commented.

KEYWORDS: Tommaso Palamidessi, Archeosophy, Poetry and Esotericism, Esoteric Movements in Italy, Initiatic Order Lotus+Cross.

Introduction

That the arts are an esoteric path to human perfection is certainly a principle of Archeosophy, an esoteric doctrine and movement based on the teachings of Italian spiritual teacher Tommaso Palamidessi (1915–1983). Archeosophy has been the subject matter of a 2009 doctoral dissertation in French at Paris' *École Pratique des Hautes Études* by Francesco Baroni, reworked in 2011 as a book in Italian (Baroni 2009, 2011). There are a few scholarly articles on Archeosophy in French (Baroni 2010) and in Italian (Zocatelli 2020b; Di Marzio 2020). Some Archeosophists have also contributed scholarly articles to *The Journal of CESNUR* (Corradetti and Lullo 2020; Cresti 2020; Lullo 2020), two of which are in English (Corradetti 2022; Cresti and Corradetti 2022).

In general, however, apart from some references in encyclopedias, not much exists in English about this important component of Italian esotericism. In this

paper, I will thus first offer an overview of Palamidessi's biography and Archeosophy's main teachings. Since in this same issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* two other articles are published on Palamidessi's ideas about the visual arts (by Daniele Corradetti) and music (by Francesco Cresti and Daniele Corradetti), I will focus here on a third art that is also discussed in Archeosophy's esoteric teachings, poetry.

Tommaso Palamidessi: A Short Biography

Tommaso Palamidessi was born in Pisa, Tuscany, on February 16, 1915. His father was an army officer, Carlo Palamidessi (1878–1946), and his mother a Sicilian poet and novelist, Luigia Tagliata (1886–1971). At age five, Palamidessi moved from Tuscany to his mother's region, Sicily, living first in Catania and then, from 1931, in Syracuse. He also crossed the Mediterranean Sea and, as a teenager, visited Libya and Tunisia in 1928 (Baroni 2009, 2011; Lullo 2020, which are the main sources for this paragraph).

Palamidessi later described his youth as a time of intense spiritual experiences, who made him a reclusive and unhappy child. His aunt was a nun in the Sicilian monastery of Pozzallo, where, as he reported, he prayed intensely since a very young age. But he also believed in reincarnation, and as a teenager started remembering past lives, including as Italian Renaissance astrologer and philosopher Gerolamo Cardano (1501–1576).

In 1932, his family moved to Turin, at that time one of Italy's capitals of esotericism and occultism. Palamidessi was fascinated by astrology and, by the end of the decade, had started working as a professional astrologer. His main interest was how astrology can contribute to healing. In 1940, he published on this subject his first two books, *Il corso degli astri e le malattie dell'uomo* (The Course of the Stars and Human Diseases) and *La medicina e gli influssi siderali* (Medicine and Astral Influences) (Palamidessi 1940a, 1940b). In 1940–41, he worked in a private hospital in Castelfranco Veneto, in the Venetian region, where he tested his theories on healing.

Back in Turin, he founded there in 1941 his own publishing house, Edizioni Palamidessi, which debuted in 1941 with his largest and most important book about astrology, *Astrologia mondiale* (World Astrology: Palamidessi 1941). In

two books published in 1943, he claimed astrology can contribute to an early diagnosis of cancer (Palamidessi 1943a) and predict earthquakes, a recurring problem in Italy (Palamidessi 1943b).

Turin is home to the second largest Egyptian Museum in the world, after Cairo, which also offers courses of Egyptology. Palamidessi attended one of them in 1941, and acquired a basic knowledge of the ancient Egyptian characters. He explored different features of Turin's esoteric scene, participating in Spiritualist seances and becoming a member of the Theosophical Society, the Martinist Order, and the wing of Italian Freemasonry more open to religion, the Grand Lodge of Italy. He also read the main works of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925).

In 1947, he married in Turin Rosa Francesca Bordino (1916–1999), who will have an important part in the development of his esoteric orders. In 1948, both their daughter Silvestra (1948–1996) and a new publishing house founded by Palamidessi, Grande Opera (Great Work), were born. In the 1940s, Palamidessi developed an interest in yoga, publishing several volumes about yoga and Tantrism (Palamidessi 1945, 1948, 1949a, 1949b). At the end of 1948, he opened in Turin one of the first Italian schools of yoga, Scuola Yoga.

He also studied alchemy and the Rosicrucian tradition. After having considered a project of a Scuola Italiana di Iniziazione Hermetica (Italian School of Hermetic Initiations), he founded on May 4, 1948, the Ordine Iniziatico Loto+Croce (Initiatic Order Lotus+Cross), which he led under the name of Grand Master Rajkunda until his death.

Palamidessi, however, had never abandoned Christianity. In 1952, he experienced a renewed “turn” to Christianity. He decided to withdraw some of his books on Tantrism, claiming that these techniques are “dangerous” (Palamidessi 1970, 23) and should be practiced only to the extent they are compatible with Christianity (Palamidessi 2010, 55). In 1957, he visited Mount Athos in Greece and in 1960 in La Verna, Tuscany, he became a member of the Franciscan Third Secular Order. Meanwhile, he had moved to Rome in 1953 and to nearby Morlupo in 1958, where the ceremonies of the Lotus+Cross order were held (Baroni 2011, 87–8).

From the 1960s, Palamidessi devoted a substantial amount of his time to traveling, visiting North and South America, the Middle East, the Far East, India, Ethiopia, as well as the Soviet Union and some of its satellite countries. He also

managed to travel to China and visited Tibet twice, which was uncommon for Europeans at that time.

While he continued leading the Lotus+Cross order, on September 29, 1968, Palamidessi founded a new organization, the Archeosofica School, and he legally incorporated an Associazione Archeosofica in 1973. His followers regard a mystical experience he had on April 7, 1966, in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, where he witnessed extraordinary phenomena, as the final, decisive step leading to the unveiling of the school to the world. He introduced “Archeosophy” as a synthesis of his teachings, presented in 51 “Quaderni” (Notebooks) for the members, written between 1968 and 1983. From 1971 to 1982, he also published a journal, *Il Messaggio archeosofico* (The Archeosophical Message). In 1975, Palamidessi published *Tecniche di risveglio iniziatico* (Techniques of Initiation and Awakening: Palamidessi 1975a), his last main book. He died in Rome on April 29, 1983.

As it often happens in esoteric orders, controversies erupted about the master’s succession, involving his wife Rosa and daughter Silvestra, and his closest disciple Alessandro Benassai, born in 1940. Before Rosa’s death in 1999, the controversies were solved, and Benassai was recognized as the president of Associazione Archeosofica, whose headquarters were moved to Tuscany in 1983, initially to Florence, then to Siena and finally to Pistoia. Already during Palamidessi’s lifetime, Tuscany was an important center for Archeosophy, which gradually expanded to several Italian cities and some foreign countries as well.

Archeosophy, according to Palamidessi, is a doctrine or a science. The Archeosofica School, as the name indicates, is a school or academy. It is not a religion, and is open to members of all religions interested in learning certain principles and techniques, and even to atheists (Cresti 2020, 111).

Palamidessi always insisted that the teachings of the Archeosofica School are open and free. It is not necessary to become members of any organization or association to receive them. However, for those who want to cooperate in spreading the Archeosophical teachings, an Associazione Archeosofica was legally incorporated in 1973. It currently includes 27 branches in Italy and 3 in Germany (Berlin, Cologne, and Düsseldorf), although members are also present in Portugal, France, and Brazil, with a global membership around 1,000 (Cresti 2020, 114).

As internal *ekklesia*, the Lotus+Cross order offers to the initiates a priesthood, which is rooted in the Christian doctrine of the common priesthood of all believers, and a more intense and demanding spiritual experience of Archeosophy (Zoccatelli 2020a). The order appears as an internal, more esoteric circle of the Archeosofica School. Some 20% of the school members are initiated into the Lotus+Cross order (Di Marzio 2020, 58). The order is organized in twelve degrees, plus one reserved for the Grand Master, appointed for life by his predecessor. The first Grand Master was Palamidessi and the current one is Benassai, who is also president of the Archeosophical Association (Cresti 2020, 115–16).

What Is Archeosophy?

The doctrine of Archeosophy is presented, in its definitive form, in the 51 Notebooks. Members, however, also read other works by Palamidessi and, while presenting his doctrine, its development through the years and the crucial “turn to Christianity” in 1952 should be considered.

According to Palamidessi, God sent his son, the eternal Avatar, to incarnate on Earth several times as Rama, Krishna, Jesus. A future Messiah may appear in the future, but in all cases, it is the same Divine Person who incarnates to lead humans to Divinity. In the lineage of the Avatars, *ekklesiae* (churches) develop throughout history. *Ekklesiae* consist of an external and an internal (esoteric) body. One of these esoteric bodies was the Rosicrucian Order, which however ended up in decline. Hence the need of a new esoteric center, the Lotus+Cross order, whose wider external circle is the Archeosofica School (Zoccatelli 2020a).

The lotus mentioned in the name of the order is a clear reference to the wisdom of the East, which however is accepted selectively by Palamidessi, as long as it does not contradict Christianity. The lotus in the Eastern religions is also a symbol of reincarnation. According to Palamidessi, the doctrine of reincarnation is not incompatible with Christianity, and in fact was always taught in Christian esoteric schools. Archeosophical teachings include specific techniques on how to remember the students’ own past lives (Palamidessi 1968).

In his early works, Palamidessi taught traditional Tantric techniques about the awakening of the kundalini. Some of these techniques are based on sexuality and

on male continence, i.e. orgasm without ejaculation (Palamidessi 1948). Palamidessi regarded these practices as valuable but “dangerous” (Palamidessi 1970). He believed that all forms of external and internal alchemy should always be accompanied by, and subordinated to, Christian prayer and meditation in the shape of “cardiognosis,” the gnosis of the heart (Lullo 2020, 13–4). The reference to male continence does not mean that women are less important than men in Archeosophy. On the contrary, Palamidessi believed that women will save the modern world and that we are entering, as prophesied by Joachim of Fiore (1135?–1202), in the Age of the Holy Spirit, where the female aspect of God will be revealed (Lullo 2020, 16).

Archeosophy is presented as “the most comprehensive interpretation of Christianity” (Palamidessi 1979, 8), and a revival of Alexandria’s Didaskaleion as it flourished at the time of Origen (ca. 184–253), who according to Palamidessi had been another of his previous incarnations. This revival, however, is not a mere return to the early Christian centuries, which would be both impossible and inappropriate in an era dominated by science. Since the 1940s, Palamidessi was among the first to use the expression “Age of Aquarius,” based on his understanding of astrology. The Age of Pisces, he taught, was the age of mysticism, while the Age of Aquarius, which started in 1789, is the age of science. However, science is not opposed to spirituality, as all ages are part of a progressive revelation of God (Corradetti and Lullo 2020, 35–6).

Archeosophy’s techniques are aimed at a full grasp of this “more comprehensive Christianity.” They also prepare for death. *Il libro cristiano dei morti* (The Christian Book of the Dead) is among Palamidessi’s works that were published after his death (Palamidessi 1985, 2010; Baroni 2010; Cresti and Corradetti 2022). It is a practical guide for the dying, who are also taught about what happens immediately after death. The dead will reincarnate, although the most perfected souls will eventually escape the cycle of reincarnations. Heaven, hell and purgatory are status of consciousness and, as such, temporary (Lullo 2020, 22–3). However, the very evil may experience a “second death” at the end of this world, or even before: their individual soul will disappear as such by merging into the Universal Spirit (Zoccatelli 2020a).

The techniques and rituals taught by Archeosophy encompass the whole spectrum of Western esotericism, from alchemy to numerology, from breathing exercises to astrology. Corradetti and Lullo have evidenced three techniques as

particularly important: chakra meditation, the “eucharistia lucernaris” ritual, and “cardiognosis” (Corradetti and Lullo 2020).

The notion of chakras had been popularized by the Theosophical Society, of which Palamidessi was a member. In the period 1945–1952, he elaborated a classification of twelve chakras, which is different from the most common Theosophical system. After 1952, the theory of the chakras was reinterpreted through the lenses of Christian mysticism. He mentioned 24 spiritual centers: seven physical, seven astral, and seven psychical. They should be activated in order to conquer the seven main vices and convert them into seven virtues. These virtues should be cultivated in the daily life of the devotees, but Archeosophy also offers a meditation technique. It starts with prayers written by Palamidessi, and proceeds through breathing and visualization exercises, and concludes by focusing on the divine name corresponding to the chakra to be awakened. These divine names correspond to the Sefirot of the Kabbalah.

The ritual of “eucharistia lucernaris” (eucharist of the light) is included in a daily routine of spiritual exercises, and is performed at sunset, either individually or with other devotees. Three drapes, respectively black, white, and red are placed on a table, together with a tripod holding a candle or a glass with olive oil and a wick. After a prayer to the Trinity, all lights are switched off and a woman (if present), or otherwise a man, lights on the candle with a blessing. After a sign of the cross, all will perform breathing exercises, focusing first on the external flame and then on the internal flame burning in the heart of each devotee.

The cardiognosis (prayer of the heart) is a form of hesychasm, a technique that Palamidessi learned during his visit to Mount Athos. It is a form of “continuous prayer” where a short formula is repeated in correspondence with breathing exercises (Palamidessi 1969). Palamidessi recommended different formulae as prayers to Christ and the Holy Wisdom, Sophia, and a variety of breathing techniques (Corradetti and Lullo 2020, 38–50).

These are just three among a large variety of techniques and rituals taught by Archeosophy, which readers of the Notebooks would learn through a training that lasts for several years.

Archeosophy and the Arts

Visual arts, music, and poetry all include for Palamidessi an esoteric dimension. Among Palamidessi's works published posthumously, more than one deal with these subjects. In *L'ìcòna, i colori e l'ascesi artistica* (Icon, colors, and artistic ascesis, 1986), based on Palamidessi's reminiscence of a past life as a monk working as iconographer, he proposes something called "iconognosis," which is a way of reaching the Divine both by contemplating sacred images and by painting a "personal icon" (Palamidessi 1986).

Trattato di musica e melurgia archeosofica (A Treatise of Archeosophical Music and Melurgy) is among Palamidessi's posthumous works dealing with music as a spiritual and mystical experience (Palamidessi 1975d). In 1999, guided by these teachings, Alessandro Benassai established the Choir of Sacred Music "Saint Cecilia" in Florence (Lullo 2020, 23–6).

In general, Palamidessi taught that an "aesthetic sense" exists in all human beings:

The aesthetic sense is possessed by primitive men as well as civilized ones. It survives even intelligence itself: in fact, even idiots and psychiatric patients can create works of art (Palamidessi 1971, 2).

However, the modern industrial and materialistic society often prevents the aesthetic sense from flourishing into art. This is a condition Archeosophist should try to overcome.

If the aesthetic activity remains in the virtual or potential state in most human beings, it is because of the industrial and technological civilization, which removes the creative freedom from every single worker and intellectual. It is the task of the artists who are followers of Archeosophy to propose to society new ways of life, where the exploitation of humans by humans performed by individual business owners or by the State as the sole entrepreneur, necessary as it is [to modern economy], would not take away from the individual the experience of aesthetic joy (Palamidessi 1971, 3).

For Palamidessi, art is much more than aesthetic pleasure. It is a way to the divine through beauty. In fact, producing beauty is impossible without an effort to reach the divine.

If the work of art does not correspond to the revelation of a superior reality, if the artists do not try to penetrate the inner reality of things in order to reach the attributes of God, then they are artists of the ugly and the bad. Art is high and perfect in a superlative sense when it not only satisfies the physical needs of the aesthetic sense, the laws of formal

beauty, the faithful representation of external reality and life, the emotional needs of humankind, but it expresses the inner spiritual truth, the hidden reality of things. This is the deeper reality, the joy of God the Creator expressed in the world, its beauty and attractiveness, and the manifestation of the divine force and energy in the creation of the phenomenal world. Artists must see in the whole world, in the life, and in the human beings the beauty of God, loving what they have come to see and feeling in this love and in this beauty a pure bliss that elevates them to God (Palamidessi 1971, 4–5).

Palamidessi does not deny that to create immortal works of beauty one needs to be a specially gifted artist. However, he also insists, for example when discussing the “personal icon,” that through contemplation and prayer everybody can produce works of art that will perhaps not be regarded as masterpieces by critics, yet would help the amateur artists in their path to initiation and their communication with the beauty of God.

The Experiences of 1974

Palamidessi reported that its main teachings on poetry derived from experiences he went through in 1974. Feeling in “urgent need of a bath of light” (Palamidessi 1975b, 67) and at a specific astrological time, he performed a theurgic rite and received as a result revelations on art and poetry.

Observing the ephemerides to look for an effective Lunation, I realized that within a few days of the Sun’s Entrance into Aries there would be a conjunction between the Sun and the Moon, on March 23 of that 1974, at 9.24 p.m. Greenwich Mean Time, and a few days later, on April 2, the Moon would be at Perigee, that is, at its closest proximity to Earth. In fact, the Lunation was already accelerating, a sign that it was getting closer to Earth, not to mention that on March 21, with the Sun’s Entry into Aries, my Jupiter was back on natal position at 2° 57’ Pisces, conjunct to natal Mercury and with Mercury and the Moon transiting. Added to all this was the cyclic return of Saturn at 28° 13’ Gemini in trigon to natal Jupiter in its cyclic return (Palamidessi 1975b, 67).

The timing “could not have been better, even if troubled by some secondary dissonance” (Palamidessi 1975b, 67).

The cyclic return of Jupiter and Mercury coincided with the natal stars Fomalhaut at 2° 40’ Pisces (in the throat of the Southern Pisces), nature of Venus and Mercury, of first magnitude, whose influence is mighty for good fortune and spiritual studies. This star, when in conjunction with Jupiter, indicates a high position in the esoteric fraternities, an occult priesthood. This star was also joined by Sodalmeik at 2° 10’ of the Sign of Pisces, on the shoulder of the “Water Bearer,” nature of Saturn and Mercury, third magnitude,

general influence highly favorable to psychism, philosophy and occult sciences (Palamidessi 1975b, 68).

Therefore, Palamidessi prepared for

theurgic rites, a deep meditation to receive a message, and help from the Cosmogonic Entities of Jupiter, Saturn, and Mercury. The preparation, although it was cursory (it must last 40 days: silence, partial and vegetarian fasting, rhythmic breathing [...], Eucharistic Communion), yielded surprising results: impetuous and scorching came the Wind Bearer of Light, Love, Hope with Sophia, the created Wisdom. On May 14 and 22 of the same year 1974 in Rome, the two Sophian apparitions and revelations were fixed, as far as it was permitted to communicate to others, in two summaries in verse. From those moments, the inspirations and insights followed one another relentlessly and gave the energy to write some important works (Palamidessi 1975b, 68–9).

These works included the treatise on poetry (Palamidessi 1975c), as confirmed by Palamidessi's disciples in interviews with the undersigned.

Palamidessi's Teachings on Poetry

Just as everybody, or almost everybody, can become a painter of icons, everybody can also become a poet. In his work *Poetry and Metrics, or the Art of Creating Poetry for the Ascetic Work: Theory and Practice*, Palamidessi connects poetry with grammar, one of the disciplines of the medieval Trivium, which also included logic and rhetoric. The Trivium and the Quadrivium (including in turn arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy) comprised the seven liberal arts that were at the core of medieval education.

Palamidessi insisted that “grammar” in the Middle Ages had a broader sense than it had in the 20th century. Grammar

was defined as the gateway to all the Arts, because without its contribution the knowledge of the Sciences is impossible. It is both the Science and the Art of Language, the principal means of communication, whether spoken or written, which exists among humans. As a Science it reveals the elements of which it is composed and of course the general principles that form its laws. As an Art, it explains their different ways and practices, which vary according to geography and history. (...) Words are signs of thought, and grammar teaches how to express and understand them exactly (Palamidessi 1975c, 1).

The importance of grammar (in the medieval sense) cannot be overestimated. Only through grammar can we be sure that what we say corresponds to what we

think and want to communicate. Grammar “realizes the perfect unity between thought and language” (Palamidessi 1975c, 1).

While Palamidessi presents here a notion of the medieval grammar shared by most scholars of the Middle Ages (see e.g. Marrou 1969), what is more surprising is his statement that grammar not only includes the rules of poetry but, correctly understood, leads all its students to poetry.

When it [grammar] is well understood, it leads to poetic language, aesthetically perfect, which, when listened to and understood, becomes an inner propulsive force (Palamidessi 1975c, 2).

Palamidessi insists that producing poetry is both natural and needed in order to progress on the spiritual path. Prose is not enough.

One can write well in prose, but poetry also takes on a sense of refined, elevated speech. Prose, on the other hand, is mostly low speech. In fact, even modest connoisseurs of grammar, when they express their opinions [on bad poetry], would say: these verses are not poetry, but prose (Palamidessi 1975c, 2).

Had the works of Homer, the Psalms, or Dante’s (1265–1321) *Divine Comedy* be written in prose, they would not have had the same strength, Palamidessi argues.

If it is natural to sing, it is also natural to produce poetry:

It was always spontaneous, instinctive in a high sense, to express the songs with poetic, rhythmic, or metric words. This phenomenon does not happen only when poets want to set their verses into music, and composers want to give words to their music. Flowery, rhythmic, poetic speech is on the lips of the prophet and the charismatic, as if the Spirit of God filling the souls chosen to communicate a message to humans were a divine poetic power, rich in symbolism and mysteries (Palamidessi 1975c, 2).

At the core of Palamidessi’s discussion of poetry is the idea that it is not only natural but it is *necessary* for those on the spiritual path of initiation

to become poets in order to glorify God also through the elevated language of love between our soul and Him. The reader [of the short book *Poetry and Metrics*] who prays, sings, and plays, must also know how to be a poet and compose Hymns and Canticles. Producing poetry is necessary because it is found when the mystic sings praying to the Lord, the Trinity, the Virgin Mary, and her Angels (Palamidessi 1975c, 3).

This does not mean that poetry may be a totally spontaneous activity. It “also requires knowledge of metrics for the finishing touches of perfection of the poetic composition” (Palamidessi 1975c, 3).

In *Poetry and Metrics*, Palamidessi then offers no less than thirty pages of classifications of the different poetic forms, verses, and rhymes. These pages may easily appear as pedantic. However they are not a mere summary of what can be found in manuals of poetry and metrics. Take for example the definition of “hymn.” Palamidessi duly notes that hymns are usually based “on the quantitative or rhythmic system.” However he also adds that,

The Hymn is a lyrical song in verse, expressing courage, love and incitement to holy works. [...] The Hymn represents the affective and lyrical element, therefore a prayer and a well determined song, a complete text of poetry and melody regulated by prosodic and rhythmic laws. The Hymn must be considered a poetic song, a prayer that benefits the edification of the community (Palamidessi 1975c, 4–5).

In fact, Palamidessi explains, these comments refer to Jewish and Christian hymns, who are essentially prayers, while Greek and Roman hymns were a sort of “carols to the Gods” (Palamidessi 1975c, 5). This discussion of the hymn confirms that, while discussing form and metrics, Palamidessi considers them as inseparable from the sacred function of poetry.

Its description and classification of metrics is not an exact reproduction of any pre-existing manual, but includes original elements. For Palamidessi,

Metrics or the way of making poetic verse is the science that explains:

- 1) how to recognize and make verse;
- 2) to put verses in order and arrange them into stanzas;
- 3) to order the stanzas into poetic compositions.

Therefore, the main elements on which versification or metrics are based are:

- 1) The verse, defined a series of words dependent on three laws:
 - (a) the rhythm, that is, the position of the rhythmic accents;
 - (b) the number of syllables;
 - (c) the rhyme, when there is one.

Verses are defined, for example, as the quinary, the septenary, the hendecasyllable, etc..

- 2) The stanza, defined as a set of several verses arranged in a specific order, forming a rhythmic period, repeated several times.

Stanzas include, for example, the triplet, the sestina, the octave, etc.

- 3) The poetic composition, defined as a group of stanzas ordered according to certain patterns.

Poetic compositions include, for example, the sonnet, the hymn, etc. (Palamidessi 1975c, 6–7).

Again, Palamidessi is not trying to be original. He wants to convey to his readers the idea that they are learning all these lengthy classifications and rules for the purpose of producing poetry as part of a spiritual and esoteric path. For example, he recommends to mix septenaries and hendecasyllables “because of their unique ability to harmonize,” giving as examples the play *Aminta* by Italian 16th-century poet Torquato Tasso (1544–1595), and one of the most famous poems in the history of Italian literature, “La quiete dopo la tempesta” (Quiet after the storm), composed in 1829 by Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837: Palamidessi 1975c, 19).

Palamidessi also offers a thorough discussion of rhyme. He notes that,

Today there is a tendency to poet without rhyme for a deliberate libertarian decision. Rhymes are difficult, and one does not always have them ready in the memory or in the rhyming dictionary. In the twentieth century the presence of rhyme is rare because there is a desire to free poetry from schemes and rules of all kinds. It tends to the easiest free verse, where even the number of syllables is not respected. Musicality is expressed through the intimate sound of freely arranged periods and single words. There is still no lack of poets who know and want to rhyme. Personally, I sometimes rhyme, but I often make free and loose verse, that is, not rhymed (Palamidessi 1975c, 22).

Skipping the rhyme, Palamidessi notes, is not a modern invention. Two classics of Italian poetry, “*Dei sepolcri*” (Sepulchers, written in 1806 and published in 1807) by Ugo Foscolo (1778–1827), and the satirical “*Il giorno*” (The Day, 1763), by Giuseppe Parini (1729–1799) do not include rhyme, although they respect the consistent number of syllables in each verse and use hendecasyllables.

Having confessed that he does not use the rhyme often, and noted that “rhyming is not strictly necessary,” Palamidessi still maintains that rhyme conveys feelings of “harmony” (Palamidessi 1975c, 23), which may be spiritually uplifting and should not be dismissed lightly. This is also true for the stanzas, which are also part of a “glorious tradition.”

The growing need for freedom in the modern age prompted writers to repudiate preordained stanza systems. Freedom or laziness? Everything in the creation is under a melodic and harmonic law, and freedom must be understood as subject to order (Palamidessi 1975c, 30).

On the other hand, Palamidessi notes that there are no general rules, and most depends on what effect one wants to achieve. He includes in *Poetry and Metrics* a discussion of librettos intended for operas. Here, rhyming couplets in the form

AA–BB are often used to convey a sense of urgency, as it was done in previous centuries when composing epic or chivalric poems. Chained rhymes (ABA–BCB) are also very good for dramatic effects and were used by Dante. Palamidessi believes they would be theoretically effective for operas, but “they are too constraining for the composers” and are rarely used. According to those who had read it before it was lost, one example was the opera version of Count Ugolino’s story in Dante’s *Comedy* by Vincenzo Galilei (1520–1591), better known as the father of scientist Galileo Galilei (1564–1642: Palamidessi 1975c, 29). The reference to this lost and obscure work confirms that Palamidessi had an encyclopedic knowledge of Italian operas.

One of the most important parts of *Poetry and Metrics* is Palamidessi’s discussion of the relationship between poetry and numbers. This part of the short book discusses theories by historian of religious music Margherita Fürst-Wulle (1893–1982), whom Palamidessi and his wife met personally in Rome, where she lived in Rome after World War II. She was a lecturer at the Waldensian Faculty of Theology, the director of the choir of the German Protestant Church of Rome, and the founder and director of the choir of the Waldensian Church located in Piazza Cavour.

Palamidessi’s point is that “the symbolism of numbers” and the symbolic meaning of poetry were not separated in ancient times (Palamidessi 1975c, 35). Fürst-Wulle was a great scholar of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750). In a passage quoted by Palamidessi of her 1967 book *Il canto cristiano nella storia della musica occidentale* (Christian Chant in the History of Western Music), the German-Italian scholar wrote that,

It is interesting to have some insight into the very ancient science of symbolic numbers, which Bach used with such easiness in his musical works. For our generation, numbers serve exclusively to indicate quantities. In other times, however, they were understood also as representations of material things, of concepts, of characters, of immaterial and spiritual realities (...). The most frequent numbers used by sacred symbolism go from 1 to 10–12, of which 7 and 3 have also entered the common language, where they have lost their primitive meaning. These numbers appear singularly, but also united through addition ($1+1+1=3$ =God, the Trinity), multiplication ($3\times 3=9$ =the Faith; $3\times 4=12$ =the Church), cubed ($3\times 3\times 3=27$ =the “highest Faith”). The paired or reinforced symbols powerfully heighten the idea of origin (Fürst-Wulle 1967, 309–10).

That composers use numbers is not an original observation; however, what interests Palamidessi in Fürst-Wulle’s discussion of Bach is that numbers are not

only at work in his composition technique, but are used symbolically to refer to spiritual realities. For examples, in several Alleluias by Bach the composers use 27 bars. This is not needed for any technical purpose, yet Bach wants the bars to be 27 because the number 9 represents Faith, and the tripled number 9, i.e., 27, represents the “joy in the faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (Fürst-Wulle 1967, 208).

Here, Palamidessi notes that Bach refers to Martin Luther (1483–1546), who was originally an Augustinian friar, and that the symbolism and power of numbers was already known to Augustine of Hippo (354–430) according to the studies of Henri de Lubac (1896–1991: Palamidessi 1975c, 36).

Palamidessi enthusiastically writes that,

Undoubtedly, Fürst-Wulle has discovered precisely one of the greatest secrets of the ancient ecclesial Tradition: the metaphysical value of the Sacred Numbers, the revealed Word of God, and the poetic-musical inspiration (Palamidessi 1975c, 36).

In fact, if they are not connected with musical technique but allude to spiritual realities, these numbers may also be used in poetry. For instance, just as it happens with the bars in Bach’s Alleluias, a stanza may include 27 verses, or a poem may consist of 27 stanzas, symbolizing the joy of the faith.

Palamidessi concludes *Poetry and Metrics* with three poems, whose Italian texts and English translations are presented here below as Appendixes 1, 2, and 3. The first is in free verses, the second and third experiment with different models of rhyme. The first two poems have a devotional Christian content, the third is a meditation on the hidden symbolism of the numbers 7 and 8.

The poems confirm that there is nothing mechanic in the suggestions Palamidessi offers to his students about poetry. Ultimately poetry, just as music and painting icons, is a form of asceticism and gnosis, and a necessary part of the demanding path of the initiate.

Appendix 1

Ti chiamo e t'invoco

1

Vieni Gesù, t'aspetto
visita il cuore mio
Tu sai che son malato
ma sempre a Te fedele.

2

La mente mia illumina
la forza tua infondi
dammi la grazia eterna
e più non indugiare.

3

Il Padre tuo rivelami
in tutto il suo splendore
Luce, corazza ed elmo indossami,
ti prego, o mio Signore!

4

Dal Cielo presto scendano
su questa mente tormentata
e debole, i sette preziosi doni
non giudicarmi inutile, ma tuo figliol.

5

Vieni Gesù, t'aspetto;
la mente e il cuore visita
Tu sai che son malato

ma sempre a Te fedel.

6

Bussate e aprirò;

chiamate ed io verrò.

Così ti chiamo e imploro

Ardente e pien d'amor.

I Call You, I Invoke You

1

Come Jesus, I wait for you

Visit my heart

You know that I am sick

But always faithful to You.

2

Enlighten my mind

Give me your strength

Give me eternal grace

And delay no longer.

3

Reveal to me your Father

In all his splendor

Light, armor, and helmet put on me

I pray thee, O my Lord!

4

From Heaven soon descend

On this tormented and weak mind

The seven precious gifts

Do not judge me useless, but your son.

5

Come Jesus, I wait for you

Visit my heart

You know that I am sick

But always faithful to You.

6

Knock and I will open

Call and I will come

Thus I call and implore You

With a burning heart full of love.

June 6, 1975.

Appendix 2

Lodate Dio

Alleluia, alleluia!

È risorto il Signore

l'Eterno Increato del mondo Creatore.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Preghiamo tutti insieme

perché solo in Lui troviamo la speme.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

È l'ora solenne, di guerra e di pace

dei Figli di Dio nei qual si compiace.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Cantiamo tutti in coro le glorie del Verbo
cantiam tutti in coro con cuore superbo.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Il mondo sprofonda pagando il suo fio,
ma noi vincerem con la Luce di Dio.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Gesù, t'aspettiamo veglianti e sicuri,
conservandoci intatti con cuori assai puri.

Praise God

Hallelujah, hallelujah!

The Lord is risen

The Eternal Uncreated Creator of the world.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Let us pray together

For in Him alone do we find hope

Alleluia, Alleluia!

It is the solemn hour of war and peace
of the Sons of God in whom He is pleased

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Let us all sing in chorus the glories of the Word

Let us all sing in chorus with a proud heart

Alleluia, Alleluia!

The world is sinking paying its dues

But we shall overcome through the Light of God

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Jesus, we wait for you, watchful and sure,

Keeping ourselves intact, keeping our hearts pure.

Rome, June 9, 1975.

Appendix 3

Le sette porte

Il sonno è finito
mi sono svegliato
varcare le porte
affrontare la morte
spezzare i suggelli
volare come uccelli,
questa è la mèta
di chi è un atleta.
Son sette le porte
di sostanza assai forte.
Dal sette all'otto
son già l'aquilotto
e più in alto sul mare
mi devo librare
se Dio con l'aiuto mi vuole salvare.
Son sette le rose di sette colori
che devo mutare di dentro e di fuori.
Aiutami, o Dio, Trinità mia perfetta,
è sera ed è tempo di fretta.
Soccorri anche Tu, Regina dei Cieli

bellissima e pura, ammantata di veli.

The Seven Doors

The sleep is over
I woke up
To cross the doors
To face death
To break the seals
To fly like birds
This is the goal
Of those who are athletes.
There are seven doors
Of very strong substance.
From seven to eight
I am already the eaglet
And higher over the sea
I must now soar
If God with his help
Wants to save me.
There are seven roses of seven colors
That I must change inside and out.
Help me, O God, my perfect Trinity,
It's evening and it's time to hurry.
Help me too, Queen of Heaven,
Beautiful and pure, covered with veils.

Rome, June 12, 1975.

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