

In Titian's time, nakedness in art was symbolic of truth. It is in nakedness that we come into this world, and it must be in nakedness that we present ourselves before the loving gaze of our Creator. That is to say, we must stand before God with our hearts and minds fully exposed, hiding nothing from His sight. We must accept the truth of ourselves that we neither are, nor have, anything. We are helpless, we are vulnerable, we are exposed. This is the nakedness of humility.

It is in a posture of humility that St. Mary Magdalene presents herself to Our Lord, she knows the truth of what she is—a harlot who has been rescued by the transforming Love of Jesus Christ—and it is in the nakedness of her humility that she is able to love her Lord to such a degree that He chose her, from all of eternity, to be the first documented witness of His Resurrection. Her love for Him is so strong that it has resounded, through all of creation, for thousands of years, even until this very moment. It was the power of this love that compelled her to rise early in the morning to anoint the dead body of her Lord, entombed in the garden.

It is the dawn of a resplendent new day. The light of a yellow sun rises over an expansive blue horizon and warms a flock of soft white sheep as they graze peacefully in a verdant pasture. The blue sky is partially obscured by clouds, and the world is fresh with morning dew. A reverential stillness lingers in the air as creation wonders at the Miracle it witnessed in the small morning hours. All of this, however, is eclipsed by the anguishing heart of St. Mary Magdalene as she searches desperately for the crucified body of her Beloved Lord, Jesus.

But this is not where the story told by Titian's *Nolie Me Tangere* (1511-40) begins.

The Beginning of the Story

The story begins in the background, beyond St. Mary Magdalene. There, we see a man. This man walks down-hill behind a dog and away from the elevated edifice on the right side of the canvas. The building is a place of protection and safety for those who chose to reside inside of it. It is a visual metaphor of the state in which Adam, the first man, was created. In particular, the building shows us the gift of integrity, which is stability and strength, a fortress of protection. By the gift of integrity, Adam and Eve's reason "had complete control over their animal nature; they could not be carried away by sense desire to irrational action, nor could their judgment be blinded by passion. They had complete self-control and their nature worked with complete harmony in due subordination to their higher faculties."[\[1\]](#)

By acting in pride and disobedience and choosing to eat the forbidden fruit, Adam, like the man in the painting who walks away from the building, chose to leave behind God's gifts. The loss of this integrity brought about the disorder of human nature: "In the very moment when by rebellion [Adam and Eve] had asserted the independence of their human nature and rejected the subordination to God that was necessary for their sharing in the divine nature, their own animal nature was unleashed from its complete subjection to their reason, and there began that unending rebellion of the flesh against the spirit, that is called concupiscence."^[2] As a result of this disorder we are now inclined to follow our lower animal nature, in the same way that the man in the background follows the dog down-hill.

The Garden of Eden was beautiful and orderly, the animals were subjected to Adam, a stream of clear and refreshing waters ran through it, and God walked in the garden of pleasure. Eden was a real, physical place, but it can also be thought of as an image of man's soul before the Fall. After the Fall, Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden of paradise, the animals turned against him and death entered into the world. Now the once beautiful garden of Adam's soul became overgrown and subject to decay, the clear waters became muddy and God no longer dwells inside of him.

However, "God, in His infinite mercy, decided to give men a new Adam and a new Eve who by their humility and obedience would repair the spiritual ruin caused by the first man and woman."^[3] The first Adam rejected God's will in a garden of delight, but in a garden of suffering, the garden of Gethsemane, the New Adam accepted God's will: "My Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me. Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt." (Matthew 26:39) And now, in a garden of resurrection, the fulfillment of the promised redemption is witnessed by a woman who mistakes the new Adam for a gardener.

Lessons from the Garden

For all of those who are disposed to receive it, this painting holds a great wealth of insight into the spiritual life, and the workings of God in the soul. But how does one prepare himself to respond to such treasures? By the humble teachings of dirt which is the foundation of the garden, and present in over half of the pastoral setting of Titian's painting. In order to receive these insights, our hearts must become like earth, passive and receptive to all that God desires to do in the garden of our soul. The earth does not act, it receives. It receives the seeds, it receives the light of the sun which warms and incubates the seed, and it receives the rain that God showers down from the heavens. The fruit of the earth is born, not by its own effort, but by its passive, docile acceptance of everything that God wills to do to it. By a mindful recollection of the presence of God in this moment and a slow, deliberate viewing of the painting we can begin to quiet our minds and become like the dirt—open to receive the seeds of contemplation that the Gardener wills to plant in our hearts through a

calm exploration of the image.

In His left hand, Our Lord holds a hoe, which reminds us that at first, St. Mary Magdalene did not recognize Our Lord, but mistook Him for a gardner. “Perhaps, however, the woman was right, in believing Jesus to be the gardener. Was not He the spiritual Gardener, who by the power of His love had sown strong seeds of virtue into her breast?”^[4] The gardener uses his tool to prepare the earth and loosen the dirt in order to cultivate the garden. He has to break and churn the earth, to remove weeds and other imperfections, before he is able to plant seeds which will grow up to bear fruit. In the moments that Our Lord delays the revelation of Himself to the Magdalen, He, the Gardener, cultivates her faith. Painful though it may be, He detaches, or loosens from her heart the temporal love she holds for Him and prepares the soil of her soul to receive supernatural Charity.

Like St. Mary Magdalene, we often do not recognize Jesus, the Gardener, when He works in our soul in this way. We do not recognize Him because we only want to experience the consolations and favors that He gives to us—the refreshing spring rains, the gentle summer breezes, the butterfly resting gently on the sweet-smelling lavender—and so we do not know how to see Him when works in our soul and breaks new ground, when He cuts back the thistles which we thought were beautiful flowers. If we do not know the landscape of our souls, the hard dry ground, the rocky patches, the streams of filthy water, the plot of brown grass, the brambles and thorns, we will be unaware of our need for a Gardner to cultivate our soil. Without this self-knowledge, we will not know how to respond to Our Lord. In hearing Jesus say her name, “Mary,” she becomes aware of Him, because in hearing her name she returns to herself. It is in knowing herself that she recognizes Jesus who stands before her. “‘Master!’ exclaims the humble Magdalen. All is clear: she believes”^[5]

Love Elevated

Titian's Mary Magdalen is the image of feminine beauty. Her loose flowing hair reminds us of the love she bears for Our Lord, a love so strong that it moved her to wash His feet with her tears and dry them with her hair. The movement in her modest dress is evidence that, in the instance that she recognized Jesus she fell to her place at the feet of the Master. In this bodily posture of humility she is passive and disposed to receive the lesson that He will teach her.

Although Jesus has pulled his body back to deter her touch, His head and shoulders lean over her in an attitude of protection. She looks up at Him, their eyes are locked and through His gaze, He communicates wordlessly to her heart. But still, in her state of bewilderment, Mary Magdalen, reaches her right hand up and towards Jesus as if she is going to anoint the body of her Lord. “She is absorbed in the resolution of giving it a second burial! Her love

distracts her, for it is a love that is not guided by faith; her desire to find Him as she thinks Him to be blinds her from seeing Him as He really is—living, and near her.”[\[6\]](#) She still had much to learn about Divine Love.

We see that in the painting she leans her weight on a jar of oils which is under her left hand. These oils on which she leans represent the oil of her natural love. She knew how to love Him by anointing His body with oils and chrisms, but she has only begun to learn how to love Him supernaturally, by pouring out the oils of her heart through tears of compunction. He begins to elevate her love to new heights when He says: do not touch Me, “That is, I do not wish you to approach Me bodily, or recognize Me with thy bodily senses. I reserve thee for higher things. I am preparing for thee greater things.”[\[7\]](#) The elevation of her love is visually presented to us in a line that begins at the tip of St. Mary Magdalene’s dress. This line traces her back and extends up through the tree and shows us what takes place in the heart of the Magdalene as Jesus purifies and lifts her love to Heaven. The fruit of Mary Magdalene’s love grows in the high branches of this tree, and holds new seeds which will fall to the ground and, God willing, land in good soil of our hearts so that a garden of love might grow for our Resurrected Lord to take delight in.

[\[1\]](#) Boylan, Fr. M Eugene, *This Tremendous Lover*, 1947. Westminster, Maryland, The Newman Bookshop, p. 3.

[\[2\]](#) Boylan, Fr. M Eugene, *This Tremendous Lover*, 1947. Westminster, Maryland, The Newman Bookshop, p. 8.

[\[3\]](#) Boylan, Fr. M Eugene, *This Tremendous Lover*, 1947. Westminster, Maryland, The Newman Bookshop, p. 11.

[\[4\]](#) Aquinas, St. Thomas (Newman, John Henry, Translator) , *Catena Aurea*, Vol. 4, St. John, 2012, Veritatis Splendor Publications, p. 352.

[\[5\]](#) Guéranger, O.S.B, Abbot Prosper (Shepherd, O. S. B. , Dom Laurence, translator) , *The Liturgical Year*, vol. 7, “Paschal Time”, Book One, 2013. Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire, Loreto Publications, p. 109.

[\[6\]](#) Guéranger, O.S.B, Abbot Prosper, Ap. 108.

[\[7\]](#) A Lapide, Cornelius, *The Great Commentary: The Holy Gospel According to Saint John*, 2008. Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire, Loreto Publications, p. 759