# Chapter 12*‘*L’alienato nella cella è libero.’ Mario Tobino Between *Le libere donne di Magliano* and *Per le antiche scale*by Wissia Fiorucci (University of Kent)

## 1. Introduction

A psychiatrist as well as a prolific author, Mario Tobino (1910–91) gained literary recognition with *Le* *libere donne di Magliano* in 1953. This is a collection of narrative fragments, in diary-form, which fictionalize his experiences as a psychiatrist in the asylum of Maggiano (Lucca), during the years 1950–52.[[1]](#endnote-1) The theme of madness recurs throughout Tobino’s oeuvre, being central to the aforementioned text as well as to *Per le antiche scale* (1972), *Gli ultimi giorni di Magliano* (1982), and *Il manicomio di Pechino* (1990). In these works, Tobino puts the asylum ‘al vertice di una gerarchia di valori, una sorta di emblema da difendere ad oltranza,’ even depicting it ‘come una realtà che si può amare’ (Andreoli 2008, p.172). By looking at *Le libere donne di Magliano* and *Per le antiche scale*, in this essay I will offer a critical insight into Tobino’s conception of the asylum as a response to mental illness: framing his thought in-between those two works is fundamental to understanding his position regarding law 180 of 13 May 1978,[[2]](#endnote-2) and thus the debate surrounding it during ‘the years of alienation.’ To this end, looking at the 1953 text will allow me to demonstrate that, despite the many changes in psychiatry during the period studied in the present volume, Tobino’s position never changed.

Firmly averse to the ‘nuova psichiatria,’ in *Antiche*, Tobino (1972, pp.11–12) wrote: ‘I medici giovani, psichiatri innovatori’[[3]](#endnote-3) believe that mental illness ‘non esiste.’ Attacking law 180 and its implementation, he also engaged in a harsh dialogue with Basaglia himself (see De Vecchis 2010).

In the first section of this essay, I will examine Basaglia and Tobino’s dispute, focusing on three main points that informed it: the nature of mental disorders; institutionalization in the asylum as an answer to them; the role of the psychiatrist within the asylum, and thus his relationship with patients. Drawing on these issues I will then proceed, in the second section, to examine Tobino’s representation of alienation in *Libere*. I will demonstrate that, in conceiving of his work as ‘un appello morale alla coscienza dei sani’ (Bresciani Califano 2011, p.26) in an effort to raise awareness of the inmates’ conditions in the asylum, Tobino lets emerge, in his texts, his conviction that madness is intrinsically incompatible with society. That is, Tobino showed in his writings that, for reasons of social decorum and containing danger, confinement was to him the best option and it was so for society rather than for the madwoman. This is evident in what he chooses to reveal in his descriptions of madness, and in how he goes about this. Focusing on the author’s portrayals of his female patients, and comparing these fictional renderings with a number of clinical folders on the real-life cases from Maggiano, I will show how Tobino, rather than instigating pity and compassion in readers, patently wanted to make them avert their gaze. His grotesque and detailed depictions of female patients, especially when they engage in sexual acts, reveal both his intention to show to the ‘sane’ why the ‘insane’ should be locked up, and his belief that female madness goes hand in hand with unrestrained sexuality (and thus, dangerousness). At the same time, I will also demonstrate how his attitude towards madwomen took the standpoint of the privileged perspective of his (male) gaze, in a blatantly chauvinistic attitude.

## 2. Tobino and Basaglia: What Is Madness?

On 18 April 1978, in *La Nazione*,[[4]](#endnote-4) Tobino claimed that ‘quello che nettamente mi divide da [Basaglia] è che io […] ho partecipato, ho sofferto della follia, […] lui […] dice che non esiste, sono i padroni che hanno tirato su i manicomi per tirarvi dentro i diversi, i disturbatori del loro dominio.’[[5]](#endnote-5) He had previously conveyed this point through the words of his alter ego Dr Anselmo in *Antiche*: ‘Per i giovani la follia è solo un misfatto della società, […] non una solenne misteriosa tragedia’ (Tobino 1972, p.125). It is anything but easy to trace a consistent ‘linea di pensiero’ in Tobino’s works, in that ‘non sempre si mostra coerente nelle sue affermazioni.’ Much like Szasz (1960), Tobino (2012, p.114) goes so far as to ask himself: ‘La pazzia è davvero una malattia?’ He will never answer this question, and in both books herein analysed he refers to it in various ways which often have little or nothing to do with psychiatry. More specifically, Tobino’s romanticized conception of madness stands at an implausible intersection between beastliness and divinity. For him, madness could be ‘una delle misteriose e divine manifestazioni dell’uomo […] una *sublime felicità* che noi chiamiamo patologica e superbamente rifiutiamo’ (Tobino 2012, p.114; my emphasis). In *Antiche*, however, he writes: ‘Gridò il suo orrore [per] essere stata tanti anni vicina a questi malati senza percepire *la maledizione che portavano nel sangue*’ (Tobino 1972, p.113; my emphasis). At the end of the book Anselmo even refers to his work as ‘l’altezzosa ricerca di una logica,’ which would ultimately amount to ‘costringere la sua *fantasia*,’ that is the inmate’s imagination, ‘alla nostra misura’ (p.247; my emphasis).

Overall, despite the many oscillations, we can grasp an ‘idea fondamentale’ that brings Tobino close to Lombroso through ‘il concetto di una fatalità della follia’ (Andreoli 2008, pp.169–70). This is apparent, for instance, when Tobino (2012, pp.30 and 57) refers to madness as something intrinsic, innate, to a person’s ‘nature’: ‘È costretta *dalla sua natura* a comportarsi così;’ or ‘non trovava nell’ambiente alcun alimento per *la sua natura*.’ In stark contrast with these somewhat insubstantial positions, Basaglia never stopped seeing madness as a pathological condition that makes human beings suffer: famously in *Conferenze Brasiliane* (1979) he said that madness exists as an illness in much the same way as flu does. That is to say, for him, there was nothing innate, mysterious or god-like about the condition of madness: ‘La follia esiste ed è presente come lo è la ragione. […] Il problema è […] superare la follia istituzionale e riconoscere la follia là dove essa ha origine: nella vita’ (Basaglia 2000, p.34). Madness is a condition that the physician must treat, and must do so *outside* of the asylum, because the latter is a total institution, in Goffman’s terms (2007), that is a ‘prigione in cui l’inferiorità morale del recluso era scientificamente sancita, e la reclusione scientificamente giustificata’ (Basaglia 1967, p.449). Conversely, Tobino (2012, p.40) went so far as to say that ‘l’alienato nella cella è libero.’ Thus, when he wrote this sentence in 1953, he was not only defending the asylum itself, but also the practice of confining the *agitate* in a cell – a practice he never questions and actually even justifies by pointing to the danger posed by inmates and their beastliness: ‘Il manicomio si divide in maschile e femminile. Ciascuna divisione è ordinata e disposta *secondo il grado di agitazione e pericolosità*. Si parte dai tranquilli e si arriva agli agitati, *tutti* hanno deliri, alcuni come bestie ruminano e respirano’ (Tobino 2012, p.22; my emphasis). In his 1963 preface to *Libere*, he explained what had prompted him to write it: ‘Il mio scopo fu ottenere che i malati fossero trattati meglio, meglio nutriti, meglio vestiti, si avesse maggiore sollecitudine per la loro vita spirituale, per la loro libertà’ (p.112) – thus re-stating his faith in the institution whose circumstances, however, he wanted to improve for the sake of the mentally ill. His position, if read through Basaglia’s critical viewpoint, may seem as ineffective as those positions held by anti-psychiatrists (a term that needs to be used with caution, as discussed in Foot 2015), an apparent comparability due in part to his wavering conception of madness. Ultimately, for anti-psychiatrists, it is society that is ill, and what we define as mental illness is the individual’s process of healing from it; in fact, madness may even be seen as a liberation from societal constraints.[[6]](#endnote-6) According to Tobino, this liberation can only happen in institutionalized confinement. The title of Tobino’s 1953 text is rather self-explanatory: for him, the asylum allows the insane to express their insanity in a protected environment. When Tobino (2012, p.40) describes the *agitate*, their confinement is explained as a condition for which, paradoxically, ‘l’alienato […] sbandiera, non tralasciandone alcun grano, la sua pazzia, la cella [è] il suo regno dove dichiara se stesso, che è il compito della persona umana.’ This position is totally incompatible with Basaglia’s perspective. For the latter, the walls of the asylum had to be taken down, regardless of what was going on inside: whatever the degree of humanization achieved in terms of individual experiences, so long as mental institutions existed Basaglia warned that society would always have a convenient place to segregate its deviants (see Basaglia 1964). In this connection, the role of the psychiatrist as the guard of the inmates, invested with this task by the political powers that governed the asylum, was crucial to Basaglia’s understanding of this institution and of the power dynamics at work within it.

In the context of institutional psychiatry (i.e. in the asylum) there seems to be a strict hierarchy at work: the director (a psychiatrist) is the unquestioned master of the institution, followed by other psychiatrists, nurses, support workers, and finally the inmates who are, allegedly, at the bottom of this pyramid of command. Yet, for Basaglia, institutional psychiatry does not actually work as a medical discipline that aims at treating mental disorders, but as an instrument of social control that forces the psychiatrist into the role of ‘master’ and the inmates into the role of ‘slaves’ (to use the classic Hegelian dialectics).[[7]](#endnote-7) This is one of Basaglia’s (1975, p.710) main tenets: psychiatrists are ‘funzionari del consenso.’ They work for society by contributing to the maintenance of the social order, rather than acting primarily as medical professionals specialized in the treatment of mental disorders. This was already a central consideration in one of his ‘manifesto’ publications, his 1968 *L’istituzione negata*: ‘Nel momento in cui neghiamo il nostro mandato sociale, noi neghiamo il malato come malato *irrecuperabile* e quindi il nostro ruolo di […] tutori della tranquillità della società’ (Basaglia 2012, p.70; my emphasis). The awareness of being a ‘guarantor of social order’ is absent in Tobino, and he never seems aware of that mechanism of power of which he is a pawn, just like he never questions ‘quel ruolo di presa sul paziente da parte dello psichiatra’ denounced by Basaglia, which in turn traps patients in their passivity (Colucci 2011, p.26). This passivity, for Basaglia, is primarily responsible for negating the ‘spazi di espressione riguardo alla sua esperienza di follia’ (Colucci 2011, p.26), an idea which is in patent contrast with Tobino’s view that the madwoman is free in her cell.

Tobino’s lack of awareness with regard to institutional power led to a number of consequences that are evident in both works herein analysed. First, there is no critical questioning, on Tobino’s part, of the laws that governed the asylum. In *Antiche*, for instance, he mentions article 4 of the *Legge Mariotti* of 18 March 1968,[[8]](#endnote-8) which introduced voluntary admission to the asylum allowing for a possible loophole: patients could convert their stay into voluntary. In the section ‘Anselmo ha paura e si sbaglia,’ the latter struggles in applying this article, which is ‘di difficile e rischioso maneggio’ (Tobino 1972, p.120). Yet the doctor sets out to do as told, as if his task as a medical professional were merely that of obeying institutional power without ever questioning it. Though Anselmo seems to approve of the new regime of relative freedom that has brought ‘felicità,’ it is obvious that the law itself is still ‘nuova, da discutere’ (pp.119–20) and that he does not really know how to handle it and its consequences. But he accepts it without ever criticizing the passivity implied in his role that, as is evident in this episode, ultimately amounts to mediating between the framework laid out in the law and its practical implementation. Even at the beginning of the book, when Dr Bonaccorsi and his colleagues decide to retire following Mussolini’s ascent to power, on the author’s part we find a very feeble response to the way ‘il fascismo, che prima aveva circondato il manicomio, poi era soffiato dentro.’ The narrator merely comments that ‘di questo nuovo mondo loro erano alieni, diversi. Alzare il braccio nel saluto sembrava loro ridicolo […] Decisero di andare […] in pensione’ (p.53).[[9]](#endnote-9) This reflects Tobino’s own passive attitude. Although he claimed to be a first hand witness of madness – ‘I have seen it’ he said (1978) – ‘sul piano scientifico […] il suo contributo come psichiatra è stato praticamente nullo […], *limitandosi a gestire l’esistente*’ (Piazzi in Maggiorelli 2010).

Another evident consequence of Tobino’s lack of awareness is the way he conceived of the asylum’s hierarchy as somehow both normal and incontrovertible. This is in turn strictly linked with his view that, as mentioned above, madness is ‘fatalmente immutabile’ (Andreoli 2008, p.179). Seen from Tobino’s perspective, the mentally ill – doomed to her destiny of madness – is never a protagonist in his books. Relegated to the bottom of the pyramid of power, ‘non ha storia’ and, as I will further explain in the next section, ‘rimane relegato al suo ruolo di puro e semplice *lusus naturae*’ (Andreoli 2008, p.186). Conversely, for Basaglia:

Non è che noi prescindiamo dalla malattia, ma […] nel momento in cui io dico: […] è uno schizofrenico […] io mi rapporto con lui sapendo [...] che la schizofrenia è una malattia per la quale non c’è niente da fare. […] Per questo è necessario avvicinarsi a lui mettendo fra parentesi la malattia perché la definizione della sindrome ha assunto ormai un giudizio di valore, di un etichettamento che va oltre il significato reale della malattia stessa. (Basaglia 2012, p.70)

Thus, while for Basaglia it was central to establish a relationship with patients which transcended their illness, Tobino would not look past their diagnoses: this is especially the case in *Libere*, where he treats his patients as being one with the illness from which they suffer.[[10]](#endnote-10) In *Antiche*, on the other hand, we have one instance in which ‘il dottor Anselmo fu soltanto amico di quei malati, si scordò […] di essere psichiatra’ (Tobino 1972, p.186). This is possible within the context of the café inside of the asylum, which is basically run by patients (in real life, this was part of the ‘humanization’ of the asylum Tobino wanted to carry out in Lucca),[[11]](#endnote-11) but also by the fact that the patients in question were all men, and with them Anselmo/Tobino shared the experience of WWII. This is a rather isolated episode, dictated mostly by Anselmo’s need to forget, even if only momentarily, his being a psychiatrist (though it is interesting to notice that before going to the bar ‘si infilava il camice’ (Tobino 1972, p.187), and it will be remembered how Basaglia had ‘discontinued the use of the white coat’ to reduce ‘the distance between doctor and patient’; Sforza Tarabochia 2013, pp. 98–99). In order for Anselmo to take a break from his role, it is necessary that his (male) patients, are freed of their diagnoses too, and ‘mai aveva ricercato le loro cartelle cliniche’ (Tobino 1972, p.189), otherwise there would be no possibility for him to be a ‘friend of those sick people.’ Yet even on this occasion Tobino does not call patients simply ‘people,’ without qualifying this by stressing that they were sick. Later on in the same text, he also writes: ‘Desideravo, preferivo intrattenermi con lui *come* un buon conoscente, quasi *come* un amico, non volevo assolutamente ricordargli che era *marcato col timbro della maledetta dea*’ (Tobino 1972, p.213; my emphasis). He is unable to see mentally ill patients as human beings suffering from a medical condition that, as a physician, he should try to cure just like any other illness. For Tobino, madness indeed exists but he never figured out whether or not it was to be considered a proper illness (though he does refer to inpatients as ‘malati’, see e.g. Tobino 1972, p.186). This in turn led him to look at his patients not as fully-fledged humans but as creatures whose condition he saw as something ineffable, and perhaps even divine (‘a damned goddess’), which as such should not be tamed. He wrote in 1963 that the ‘psicofarmaci […] hanno talmente cambiato i manicomi che […] non si riconoscono più, le urla sono taciute, i delirî rotti, le allucinazioni con i vetri affumicati’ (Tobino 2012, p.112; my emphasis). These new tools are seen by Tobino (1972, p.41) as a constriction, as they make mental illness ‘ovattata, dissimulata, intontita, mascherata, camuffata.’ Overall, he rejected any attempt that was aimed at handling outbursts of madness: ‘Quando un malato si illumina di *fantasia*, lo rinchiudi. Facile […] hai avuto paura della follia e invece di […] comprenderla le hai messo le manette’ (Tobino 1972, p.127; my emphasis). Thus, for him, trying to tame madness, whatever the method, was the easy way out – and yet he was an advocate of the asylum, a contradiction which should itself undermine his viewpoints. Yet critics of Tobino – both now and around the time of publication of *Libere* – tend to comment positively on his views,[[12]](#endnote-12) often taking his side in the dispute with Basaglia. For instance, Marabini (1969, p.243) comments that in *Libere* ‘l’amore Cristiano e la pietà si esaltano per un inno alla vita,’ while De Vecchis (2012, p.182) goes as far as to say that ‘il tempo […] comincia a dare ragione alle intuizioni di uno psichiatra, ch’era principalmente […] uomo’ in a comment that is as groundless as it is meaningless. I find these affirmations not merely questionable but actually misleading. Though in 1953 the reform was still far away in time, Tobino’s authoritarian relationship with his patients (for instance, he uses the word ‘interrogatorio’ when he asks them questions; see e.g. Tobino 2012, pp.57–78) was in no way moderated by his alleged ‘compassion’ or ‘Christian love.’[[13]](#endnote-13) Moreover, in the 1972 text Tobino (1972, p.115) describes a restraining practice that he actually justifies by explaining it: ‘Quando un malato […] compie qualcosa di insolito […] viene trasferito […] in Vigilanza, dove sarà osservato, studiato;’ this is the ‘reparto chiuso, dal quale non si può uscire.’

Certainly, the use of repressive methods such as isolation cells, interrogations, and force-feeding, is partly mitigated in *Libere* by ‘qualche atteggiamento che ricorda il trattamento morale alla Pinel,’ which seems however to be mostly dictated by personal feelings towards individuals, rather than by strong and far-reaching ideological convictions (Andreoli 2008, p.163). Tobino never stops seeing himself as the master of the asylum, and thus his patients as patients. Rather tellingly, his descriptions of inmates in *Libere* were drawn from, and inspired by, their medical folders.[[14]](#endnote-14)

## 3. The Captive Human Beasts of Magliano

Tobino did not follow a consistent criterion in choosing which and how much data from medical folders to transpose into his literary text, or in interpolating invented data. But what emerges from a comparison between folders and fiction is that, for him, inmates are completely alienated in the role assigned to them by institutional psychiatry. For instance, in Berlucchi’s case, Tobino omits the episode believed to be the root of her mental ailments (which is however included in the medical folder), as he focuses instead on her attempted suicide. We read in the folder that ‘Da giovane fu ammalata di polmoni. […] Furono contagiati da essa un fratello, una cognata ed una sorella, i quali morirono di tubercolosi. Ora prova un forte rimorso […] che non le dà pace.’ In the fictionalized text no mention is made of this, and Tobino (2012, p.28) gives instead graphic details of the suicidal gesture: ‘Un ferro da calza dalla parte del cuore, se lo è conficcato tutto sì che una punta affiorava appena nella pelle della mammella sinistra, l’altra punta emergeva nel dorso.’ He leaves the reader in the dark as to the guilt that had caused Berlucchi, first, to lose her mental health, and then to attempt suicide in a rather significant way: devoured by guilt for having infected her family with a lung disease, she tries to kill herself by inserting a needle through her chest. With *topo pallido* Tobino follows a similar procedure, that is he extracts one element from the folder, and expands it until the character is built exclusively around it, and in it she is alienated. *Topo pallido*, we read in the folder, is afraid of having passed on pleurisy to her children, but this worry is reduced to a meaningless obsession in the fictional text. It is meaningless, because we do not know where it came from: ‘Questa donna non è che abbia uno scopo […]: ha solo quel pensiero della pleurite e non avendo altri pensieri, […] ripete quell’unico pensiero’ (Tobino 2012, p.26). In the case of *Professoressa* *Galli* (or of *le cucitrici*), Tobino opts for inserting fictional elements, rather than omitting real ones: ‘Crede […] che io sia suo marito e da questo connubio siano nati due figli, […] odia Suor Giacinta […] perché è sicura che sia la mia amante […] In queste lussurie io sono il crudele e amato protagonista’ (p.42). In the folder, the various references to her sexuality do not include Tobino and can be summarized, content-wise, in the last note he wrote: ‘Vivissime allucinazioni […] a contenuto sessuale e persecutorio [...]. È dichiaratamente lesbica.’ Hence, Tobino includes invented elements to picture himself as the woman’s object of sexual desire, which leads us to a crucial aspect of his descriptions of inpatients in *Libere*.

It is rather surprising that, in making claims about Tobino’s alleged *pietas* and mercy, the majority of critics completely and systematically disregard the insistent eroticisation in his descriptions of female patients, which indicates an attitude that we may define as voyeuristic: ‘Bella e furente nella chioma nera e nell’espressione del volto, il petto sodo e gonfio, il ventre liscio, le cosce robuste, affusolate le gambe’ (Tobino 2012, p.46). In Andreoli’s words, ‘sembra quasi che le matte facciano spettacolo per un osservatore privilegiato qual è lo psichiatra’ (2008, p.181).[[15]](#endnote-15) The examples are many, and Tobino’s focus on the inmates’ attractiveness does not end with descriptions of their bodies. Not coincidentally, summer is the dominant season in *Libere*.[[16]](#endnote-16) This is the period of the year when, according to the author, the erotic character of female madness manifests itself more freely: ‘La bava, la lussuria estiva, le donne che si toccano, si abbracciano, la saliva, gli occhi languidi lucidi: […] nei reparti femminili, senza pudicizia si scarica la sensualità. È d’estate’ (Tobino 2012, p.185). Tobino’s descriptions of his patients’ sexual behaviours betray a morbid attention on his part, at times even leading him to some questionable conclusions: ‘Viene il sospetto che le matte sian guidate dall’odorato più che dalla vista, e ciò che più sa di bestia sia perseguito, oppure *le sessuali* per soddisfarsi … si avvicinano a quelle più facili […] perché *senza senno e morale*, il soddisfacimento essendo soltanto lo scopo: *far gemere quelle mucose sensibili*’ (p.107; my emphasis). This problematic nexus between female madness and sexuality is reiterated in *Antiche*: ‘Nel silenzio della notte arrivavano i lamenti […] dalla parte degli uomini, e […] nella divisione femminile […] in più gemeva la miseria del sesso’ (Tobino 1972, p.41).

As mentioned above, Tobino claimed in the preface to the 1963 edition of the *Libere* that his goal in writing had been to unveil the conditions of the insane in the asylum, in order to urge their improvement. Yet, what he does instead is offer his readers grotesque representations of patients as seen through his privileged gaze:

Alle ‘agitate-donne’ […] ha spesso furore il tribadismo-lesbismo […]. È solo stupefacente che una bruttezza ne ami un’altra con tale spudorato abbandono, sembra che siano solo le mucose che si cercano gemendo; donne anziane sdentate, gli occhi cisposi e strabici, […] ragazze dementi, imbecilli che scolano saliva dalle labbra pendenti; bruttissime, goffe, zoppe. (Tobino 2012, p.105)

Furthermore, ‘le donne’ are depicted not only as ‘oscene,’ but also as ‘cattive,’ as Basaglia (quoted in Castelli 1978) commented. Tobino frequently insists on their violence and dangerousness, which justifies their imprisonment in his eyes: ‘Arrivò in manicomio con tale agitazione che si dovette subito rinchiuderla in cella, dove nuda fece dell’alga dei raggi sensuali e semidivini’ (Tobino 2012, p.46). In his Lombrosian description of *la Benni* Tobino (p.57) associates female madness not only with sexuality and danger, but also with criminality: ‘Èuna criminale […] viveva con la prostituzione che esercitava come una diavolessa e i suoi coraggiosi frequentatori forse non valutavano il pericolo che correvano.’

When the book was written, psychiatrists did not have effective therapeutic tools at their disposal. The first anti-psychotic drug, chlorpromazine, was in fact only introduced in 1952. The point is thus not to question Tobino’s choices as a psychiatrist, which at the time of writing *Libere* would have been limited, but to highlight that he did not unveil the inhumane conditions of life in the asylum. Rather, it appears evident that Tobino was advocating the view that the madwoman had to be separated and removed from the eyes of sane society for reasons of containing danger while upholding social decorum. In the 1972 text, descriptions of patients are not as laden with grotesque details, due to the fact that the introduction of anti-psychotic drugs had radically changed their behaviours – and Tobino also focuses at length on other inhabitants of the asylum (especially Dr Bonaccorsi and Dr Anselmo). Yet references to the dangers inherent in madness are also found here: ‘Oggi è di moda […] sdrammatizzare la pazzia, dichiararla *non pericolosa*’ (Tobino 1972, p.111; my emphasis). We also find a clear equation of female madness with sexuality and dangerousness: ‘A dodici anni portò alla malora un ferroviere, lo costrinse alle sue voglie; fu poi lui condannato per costrizione di minorenne’ (p.213). Tobino here speaks of a 12-year old stating that this child was so dangerous because of her mad sexual appetite, that she made an older man go to prison for her:

La ‘bionda’ […] mi guarda con gli occhi brillanti – lieti di sicura futura voluttà […]. Ogni mattina mi aspetta; mi affaccio allo spioncino della cella, subito i suoi occhi brillanti mi fasciano; […] mi sembra di essere […] un novello sposo che dopo una notte d’amore, allontanatosi per pochi minuti, torna presso di lei e la ritrova ancora tutta calda di lui. (Tobino 2016, pp.78–79)

There is a clear moral judgment in the way this situation is described, besides the obviously problematic implications of the statement itself, which accuses a minor of sexual predation. Overall, Tobino’s descriptions are clearly aimed at explaining why madness must be dealt with far from the eyes of the sane, in light of its intrinsic dangerousness and obscenely sexual character: ‘Come bestie nelle tane le malate infreddolite dentro le celle,’ where ‘l’erotismo si fa più selvaggio e gradatamente aumenta l’acuto rancido della bestia umana’ (Tobino 2012, p.24 and 28).

## 4. Conclusions: The Psychiatrist’s Gaze

Tobino’s moralistic attitude towards his patients’ sexual mores is evident from the very beginning of *Libere*, in its first fragment: ‘Aveva la camicia aperta sì che si vedeva comodamente un seno. Non aveva alcun pudore, neppure la finzione del pudore’ (Tobino 2012, p.22). Furthermore, as mentioned above with reference to Elsa Galli, in *Libere* he went so far as to depict himself as the object of his patients’ phantasies: ‘Alle “agitate” dai letti, in camicia, nude, si lanciavano verso di me, che fuggivo’ (p.28). The idea of being an unwilling victim of the women’s unbridled sexuality is explicit in this quote, where Tobino draws an image of predatory female sexuality to which, in this case, the male responds by running away. In the case of *la bionda*, conversely, Tobino’s male gaze openly addresses its object through the peephole that allowed the psychiatrist to look undisturbed at his incarcerated patients.

Freud (1962, p.23) defined ‘scopophilia’ as the pleasure in looking. Scopophilia thus implies attaining sexual stimulation through sight by subjecting people ‘to a controlling and curious gaze’: an example of this is a ‘peeping Tom’ (Mulvey 1999, p.835), whose sexual satisfaction completely derives from this activity. Drawing on Mulvey, we can say that *la bionda* – visible through the peephole – plays a ‘traditional exhibitionistic role,’ that is, her body is reduced to a passive sexual object by and for Tobino’s gaze, so that his fantasies can be projected unto her. She thus signifies ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ (Mulvey 1999, p.837). Tobino describes *la bionda* (and also *la Campani*; Tobino 2012, p.41) as a willing participant in this game where she plays the passive object, yet in reality her ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ cannot be a choice, because she has not chosen her condition of reclusion. Conversely, Tobino is an agent of the look, enjoying displaced control and possession of the madwoman through the peephole. Additionally, in this interaction between agency and passivity where the latter is an inflicted condition and not a choice, the viewer’s agency is also reinforced by the factual control he has over the woman’s imprisonment. As her doctor,[[17]](#endnote-17) he could free her from the cell: he does not merely enjoy agency through *looking*, he has the power to end her imprisonment and thus her ‘to-be-looked-at-ness.’

The voyeuristic element is an aspect of Tobino’s work which critics (except for Andreoli) have surprisingly failed to address. In fact, Martinucci (1995, pp.132–33) says that ‘è abbastanza lineare il passaggio che rende il medico/narratore, unico uomo fra tante donne, oggetto dell’amore di queste ultime.’ Furthermore, the women in question are ‘“matte”, o meglio, […] “libere”, svincolate quindi da tutte quelle regole […] che potrebbero inibire l’aperta manifestazione delle passioni […] erotico-amorose.’ That is, while uncritically accepting Tobino’s description of his patients, she also endorses his view that the madwomen were, in fact, *free* to express their desire – hence upholding a problematic and century-old connection between unbridled female sexuality and madness (e.g. in the mid-nineteenth Century, ‘Western psychiatric medicine’ regarded women as ‘far more prone to insanity than men;’ they were believed to be sexless by nature and thus ‘sexual excess’ was ‘offered as explanation for the preponderance of women in asylums’; Brown 1986, p.372).

More generally, critics tend to fall prey to Tobino’s nostalgic and romanticized renderings of the asylum and of madness, so much so that Califano (2011, p.62) even seems to be mimicking his decadent lyricism: ‘Il farmaco […] mette dunque a tacere il magma ribollente che viene così tenuto a freno […]. La materia nera diventa un tessuto plumbeo, un grumo che non prende forma e la malinconia che dentro ribolle viene soffocata.’ She even declares that ‘l’interesse partecipe alle vicende femminili si carica a volte di toni tenerissimi anche se mai esplicitati e tutti sobriamente affidati a un linguaggio asciutto’ (Califano 2011, p.68). Tobino’s language cannot be defined as ‘dry’ (it is, on the contrary, very elaborate and laden with metaphors and similes) and his gaze, I have shown, is certainly not sober and it is very explicit.

To conclude, I endorse Andreoli’s claim that Tobino should be held responsible for the unprofessional and uncritical representation of the asylum and, consequently, also of mental illness, that he has given in his books. Madness is not an immovable concept – as shown by Foucault, the notion of mental illness changes with history, and cultural products are vehicles through which madness has been portrayed for the general public across the centuries. Being one of the few who described life in an Italian asylum, Tobino ‘ha senza dubbio contribuito a trasferire nella cultura e nell’opinione pubblica una certa immagine del mondo manicomiale e […] della psichiatria contemporanea’ (Andreoli 2008, p.173). Unfortunately, he did so by transmitting conventional and outdated ideas which have no place in modern psychiatry, celebrating a notion of asylum which he draws from old stereotypes, including the idea that madness ‘si adatta molto più facilmente al mondo della donna’ (Andreoli 2008, p.188) in light of her dangerous and obscene sexual instincts. In so doing, Tobino also continued to endorse the century-old view that the mad person, whose beastliness requires confinement, is at the same time a creature ‘beyond the human’ – close to god perhaps, but not really a person: ‘In lei tutto ormai [era] confuso: bestia e dea’ (Tobino 1972, p.46). Moreover, Tobino’s sexualized and sexualizing gaze instigates an objectifying voyeuristic process that is all the more objectionable, because these women were both suffering from a mental disorder and institutionalized: thus, their ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ could by no means be considered voluntary. Tobino projects on them erotic phantasies, freely observing them with what can only be described as a morbid and voyeuristic curiosity. His voice should thus have no further weight in the debate that continues to surround Law 180[[18]](#endnote-18): he was a psychiatrist with wavering ideas who took advantage of his position, ‘compiace[ndosi] della sofferenza’ of those women he depicted as both obscene and dangerous, spying on them in ‘quei camerini dove […] erano state recluse […] perché non dessero fastidio a nessuno’ (Basaglia quoted in Castelli 1978).

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1. Before Tobino, only Corrado Tumiatti in his *Tetti rossi* (1931) had described the experiences of a psychiatrist working in an asylum. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Law 180 dealt with the ‘Accertamenti e trattamenti sanitari volontari e obbligatori,’ and opened with the line: ‘Gli accertamenti e i trattamenti sanitari sono volontari’. Law 180 was soon incorporated into law 833, which established the National Health Service (23 December 1978). Law 180 banned long-term residential facilities for psychiatric health care (such as asylums, psychiatric hospitals and psychiatric wards in general hospitals, and regulated the *Trattamento Sanitario Obbligatorio* (involuntary hospitalization) repealing the main articles of the law 36 of 14 February 1904, ‘Disposizioni sui manicomi e sugli alienati: Custodia e cura degli alienati.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. He was here referring to ‘those “alternative” psychiatrists’ that include Basaglia, thanks to whose political activism ‘the general population was made aware of the backwardness of Italian psychiatry [catching] the attention’ of the psychiatrist Bruno Orsini (b.1929), the Christian Democrat Senator who formulated Law 180 and successfully campaigned for its approval (Sforza Tarabochia 2013, p.2). For Tobino, ‘[s]mantellare le strutture ospedaliere e rispedire i malati a casa […], in funzione di un modello astratto che prescinde da qualunque valutazione specifica del singolo individuo e dalla gravità del suo male’, was ‘una scelta […] semplicistica’ (Bresciano Califano 2011, p.71). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. According to Vecchis (2010, p.183), the article, titled ‘Lasciateli in pace, è casa loro,’ would have influenced the formulation of article 8 of Law 180. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Basaglia (quoted in Castelli 1978) replied: ‘Il rapporto […] fra informazione e disinformazione si squilibra a vantaggio della seconda quando si affidi alla penna cechoviana di uno scrittore l’analisi di un ambiente che è in realtà la tesi dell’ideologia dominante. Oggettivamente il suo scritto rende un grosso servizio al potere.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For a detailed account of ‘anti-psychiatry’ see Sforza Tarabochia 2013, pp.68–74. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. In a comic vignette produced by the art collective *Arcobaleno*, created in 1972 and led by artist Ugo Guarino (1927–2016) in the asylum of Trieste, we read: ‘Noi degenti e lavoratori dell’ospedale psichiatrico di TS siamo tutti nella stessa pentola […]!’ This exclamation is uttered by four sketched people that pop out of a pot: these are the inmates of the asylum but also the workers (a cook and, it seems, a nurse). What this poster suggests is that all the elements of the pyramid are equally subordinated to the institution itself. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. This was the Legge 18 marzo 1968, n. 431 Provvidenze per l’assistenza psichiatrica published in the Gazzetta Ufficiale no.101 on 20 April 1968. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Tobino (1972, pp.155 and 171) returns to Fascism later on, but never engages in a discussion on the ways the Regime had instrumentalized the asylum. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. As a matter of fact, he does not focus on the asylum itself nor on psychiatry as it was practised therein: the confinement ‘all’alga’ is the only practice that is described in some detail. Electroshock (Tobino 2012, pp.87 and 99) as well as force-feeding (p.33) are only referred to in passing (on Tobino’s view of electroshock see De Vecchis 2010, pp.176–77 n.14). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See De Vecchis 2010, pp.175–78. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. For instance, Tobino’s nephew Zappella (2010, p.159) comments on the debates that preceded the formulation of Law 180. Throughout the essay, strong accusations and sarcasm (he calls the ideological movement that culminated with the closure of asylums as ‘la Moda’ with a capital ‘M’; Zappella 2010, p.161) are reinforced by rhetorical reflections (e.g. he writes that the government which passed Law 180 was the same that ‘faceva morire Aldo Moro’; Zappella 2010, p.159). The problems in this essay are repeated in several works by supporters of Tobino’s. They laud his alleged good intentions, which frequently results in an unsubstantiated and blind defence of his viewpoints on 180. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Tobino also referred to former prostitutes in patently judgmental tones: besides *Benni* in *Libere*, we read in *Una vacanza romana*: ‘Ben povera di senso morale, di buon senso, di giudizio’ (1992, p.155). This was the 17th of 24 clinical folders from Maggiano that Tobino included in appendix to this text. Other clinical folders have been transcribed by Martinucci (1995) in her thesis: pp.108–10 (Benni); pp.112–113 (Canti); pp.115–17 (Chiromante); pp.121–24 (Berlucchi); pp.127–29 (Galli Elsa); pp.134–37 (*Cucitrici*). She also included a selection in appendix, pp.145–54 (Lella, Signora Alfonsa, Sbisà, Marzi, Signora Maresca, Fratesi). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. On Tobino’s method in writing his patients’ stories, see Del Beccaro 1967, p.25. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Explicit descriptions are more conspicuous in *Libere*, but we find such references also in *Antiche*: ‘Una bellissima donna […]. Si ricordava Anselmo [che] sotto le vesti, sotto la camicia, continuava la bellezza’; Tobino 1972, p.122). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. The passing of time in *Libere* is signalled by references to the seasons: the first section covers a period of time that goes from spring to summer, the second a subsequent period covering the months from the autumn to the summer of the following year, and the third goes from summer to autumn. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. In the *Professoressa*’s fragment we find another voyeuristic element: ‘In queste lussurie […] né manca di apparire Suor Giacinta, a dirigere tutto ciò’ (Tobino 2012, p.42). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See for instance Battistini 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)