

Ex Votos: Rememoration, Remediation and Relocation

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Abstract - In the Catholic tradition, ex votos can be considered texts that channel the cultural memory of a group, not only through specific mechanisms of material object production but also through their organization and the pragmatic modalities of their fruition. Besides their devotional positioning and function, ex votos are also subjected to operations of relocation and remediation that influence their meaning. The practice of offering ex votos as signs of gratitude for the intervention of supernatural helpers in crucial moments of an individual's or community's life has a long history in the Catholic tradition and can be considered a key part of a strategy to collectively process and make sense of crisis events; at the same time, modern and contemporary culture displays a growing tendency to relocate ex votos to museums, thus shifting the meaning and value of these artifacts from the traditional field of devotion to that of history, culture and art. Based on a semiotic reflection on the content, form and pragmatics of ex votos, this paper presents a transdisciplinary inquiry into the relocation of ex votos (mainly through musealization) and remediation in art and literature, in particular by examining Dino Buzzati's collection of fictional ex votos (*I miracoli di Val Morel*, 1971).

1. Introduction

The practice of offering votive objects as a sign of gratitude and proof of divine intervention in human life is widespread across cultures and epochs¹. In Catholic culture, this centuries-long practice has led to a series of well-codified objects, themes, motifs, and ways to archive and display ex votos. Perhaps due in part precisely to its stereotypization, this consolidated tradition has paved the way for forms of re-elaboration and

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¹ G. Didi-Huberman, *Ex voto: image, organe, temps*. Paris, Bayard, 2006; I. Weinryb (ed.), *Ex voto: Votive Giving Across Cultures*. New York, Bard Graduate Center, 2016.

remediation that entail removing ex votos from their traditional religious framework and conferring new meanings on them.

Based on these premises, this essay focuses on two main issues surfacing in modern and contemporary Catholic culture. On one hand, it looks into instances of re-organizing ex voto collections, pointing out the criteria underlying the juxtaposition of individual ex votos and their arrangement in - or outside the sacred space surrounding the image of the character to whom the ex voto offerer turns to request grace or express gratitude for aid received. On the other hand, it explores the dynamics of remediating ex votos. Indeed, especially during the modern and contemporary age, ex votos have often been displaced from their original position inside shrines and increasingly musealized; at the same time, they also traverse the borders of the traditional religious sphere to enter the domain of art and literature. Based on significant examples, our investigation points out how the remediation of ex votos influences their meaning, physical and ideal place in the cultural system, as well as their aesthetic evaluation. This paper is divided into three parts. The first presents a semiotic reflection on the content, form and pragmatics of ex votos, relating the latter to other cultural strategies for processing traumatic events and crucial moments of change. The second, adopting a historical perspective, presents examples and discussions of the displaying of ex voto collections in Catholic churches, the ecclesiastic debates about the position and value of ex votos, and the growing tendency to remove these artifacts from churches and place them instead inside *ad hoc* museal spaces often connected to – albeit separated from – the sacred space of the shrine. The third part presents a case of ex voto remediation in the artistic and literary domain by examining Dino Buzzati's exhibition of fantastic painted ex votos (1970) subsequently collected in a book of short stories and images².

2. Ex votos from a semiotic perspective

2.1 *The meaning and function of ex votos*

Ex votos are a key part of an articulated communicative strategy for the collective processing of critical events. Indeed, they must be considered not only in the framework of a vertical relationship between human beings and supernatural figures, but also as factors in the horizontal or social construction of a certain kind of 'cultural memory', i.e. an externalized

² D. Buzzati, *I miracoli di Val Morel*, Milano, Garzanti, 1971.

and collective memory that makes information and meanings available over time by means of particular ways of inscribing and ritualizing the past³. From this perspective, the *ex voto* can be recognized as a type of text that channels the cultural memory of a group, not only through specific mechanisms of material object production but also through the organization of these objects and the practical ways they are used, embedded in a ritual dimension⁴.

Indeed, the *ex votos* displayed in places of worship constitute archives of testimonial accounts processing and making sense of traumatic events and crucial moments of change, either those as widespread as a war or epidemic, or those as private as a personal illness or the birth of a child; in all cases, they are located in a dimension in which the distinction between private and public becomes blurred and memory becomes collective. The content of *ex votos* can be divided into two major categories. Many *ex votos* process the cultural memory of events that are traumatic⁵ in nature, for example accidents, wars, and calamities. Others, on the contrary, celebrate long desired events (such as marriages, births, and graduations) and represent turning points and changes of status in the lives of individuals (we may call these «rites de passage»⁶). Both traumatic events and *rites de passage* are situations that mark a change between the past and future, breaking the continuity of an individual or collective history. *Ex votos* are therefore useful for conferring meaning on radically transformative events, namely instances of 'crisis' in the etymological sense of the word.

In the Catholic tradition, *ex votos* can take the shape of a wide variety of material objects. Symbols such as church candles and silver hearts are extremely widespread, as are representations of limbs, organs, and other objects semantically related to the grace in question⁷ and made out of various materials (e.g. wax, clay, or wood, but also precious metals). Visual representations of the scene of divine intervention — often sup-

³ C. Demaria, *Il trauma, l'archivio e il testimone. La semiotica, il documentario e rappresentazione del 'reale'*. Bologna, Bononia University Press, 2012, p. 11.

⁴ V. Spera, *Ex voto tra figura e parola. Il potere del racconto esemplare*, Perugia, Gramma Edizioni, 2010.

⁵ Following C. Demaria, *Il trauma, l'archivio e il testimone*, we understand «trauma» as a particular type of experience provoking a shock, sense of alienation and physical-psychical injuries.

⁶ A. Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage*, Paris, Émile Nourry, 1909.

⁷ E.g. a golden cradle for a birth, a silver pen for a graduation (Martina Corgnati, personal communication). All of these symbolic *ex votos* are often standard objects that can be purchased in shops (nowadays even online): in these cases, the marks of subjectivity and references to the specific story of the donor are limited unless they are accompanied by written texts.

plemented by written indications concerning the date, place and name of the donor — constitute a kind of *ex voto* with a more accentuated narrative character. *Ex votos* always presuppose an indexical relationship with the donor, as the person making the offering is supposed to bring the artifact to the shrine personally, thus leaving a sign of his or her physical presence (see below). This indexical component is, however, particularly intense in *ex votos* consisting of personal objects such as clothes, locks of hair, tools, banknotes, or jewelry. In present times, new types of *ex voto* integrate photography and printed materials⁸. Another particular form of *ex voto* is a pragmatic one consisting in adopting certain behaviors, such as wearing symbols of the saint, entering a religious movement, or even writing a book «as an *ex voto*»⁹. *Ex votos* can also take the shape of monuments and buildings, such as chapels and churches¹⁰.

The actant of the donor can be represented not only by a single actor (e.g. the person miraculously healed or saved from an accident), but also by a collective actor such as the inhabitants of a city or a nation menaced by war, epidemics or natural catastrophes¹¹. Even individual events take on a collective character, however, in that they represent common situations in the life of the community: accidents in the fields, for example, are not strictly individual occurrences in a community of farmers; rather, they represent a concrete risk for everyone.

The helpers thanked in *ex votos* are frequently the Virgin, in the infinite variety of her epithets, Jesus, and the saints. A particular category of supernatural helpers designated in *ex votos* is constituted by sacred objects, working as a metonym (or, more precisely, a synecdoche) of a sacred character, such as the «Sacred heart of Jesus» evoked and thanked as *pars pro toto*. Another interesting case of metonymy is constituted by *ex votos* representing invocations to the Sacred Shroud, which believers identify with the one enveloping the body of Jesus after his death

⁸ F. Marano, *Ex voto fotografici ad Avigliano*, in «Lares», 59, 1993, 3, pp. 441-454.

⁹ B. Cousin, *L'Ex-voto, document d'histoire, expression d'une société/The Ex-voto, Historical Document, Expression of a Society*, in «Archives de sciences sociales des religions», 48, 1979, 1, pp. 107-124.

¹⁰ For instance, the Basilica of Superga in Turin. Cf. R. Grimaldi - S. M. Cavagnero - A. M. Gallina (eds.) *Gli ex-voto: arte popolare e comportamento devozionale*, Torino, Università degli studi di Torino, 2015, pp. 11-12.

¹¹ For instance, the column in front of the shrine of the Consolata, Turin, offered by the citizenry (R. Maggio Serra, *Il voto per il colera del 1835. Cultura artistica e committenza municipale nella Torino ottocentesca*, in *Gli ex voto della Consolata: storie di grazia e devozione nel santuario torinese*, Torino, dicembre 1982 - gennaio 1983 (Catalogo della mostra), Torino, 1983, pp. 30-34.

and which is kept in Turin¹². Similarly, the Virgin is often represented in painted *ex votos* with the traits of specific effigies, often linked to famous sanctuaries. What is relevant in these cases is the mediation of the sacred effigy, as this operation adds a layer to the standard actantial system of the *ex voto*. This function of adding a level of mediation between humans and deity is particularly evident in *ex votos* representing the Shroud: in these images, the shroud is held by sacred figures such as the Virgin. These mediating figures prevent the *ex voto* from sliding into the idolatry of a sacred or magical object, thus enabling the sacred object to function as an indexical or metonymic sign representing the figure of Jesus meant to reinforce in some way the mediating power of the figures holding it.

2.2 Pragmatics of *ex votos*

After the occurrence of the event, a first process of narrativization takes place. This phase is particularly interesting in the case of painted *ex votos* and *ex votos* with an accentuated narrative character in general: in the Catholic tradition, the donor – that is, the recipient of a grace – tells the story of this extraordinary event to an artist or artisan¹³. A second moment of processing occurs when this verbal narration is intersemiotically translated from verbal to visual language by the second-degree narrator constituted by the artisan: this is the moment of inscription in which the testimony becomes part of archived memory¹⁴. Indeed, although most painted *ex votos* adhere to conventional, stereotyped visual patterns, they are also personalized, for instance by faithfully reproducing the beneficiary's features and the places associated with his or her story. This kind of enunciation, rich in signs of subjectivity, is typical of the genre of testimony¹⁵.

The donor brings then the *ex voto* to the place of worship and displays it in proximity to the icon of the supernatural helper. The nature of *ex votos* is essentially public: these objects represent not only personal memories and expressions of thanksgiving; they must be displayed and communicated to the community in the form of public testimony. A further phase characterizing the pragmatics of *ex votos* is that of pilgrimage: ideally,

¹² Some of these *ex votos* are presented in R. Grimaldi - S. M. Cavagnero - A. M. Gallina (eds.), *Gli ex-voto*.

¹³ B. Cousin, *L'Ex-voto, document d'histoire, expression d'une société*.

¹⁴ P. Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Paris, Seuil, 2000, p. 201.

¹⁵ «The specificity of the testimony consists in the fact that the assertion of reality cannot be separated from the self-designation of the testifying subject. From this coupling derives the typical formula of the testimony: I was there» (Ibid.).

the donor should periodically visit the place of worship. This reiterative act has intense identity-based value in that it entails donors re-affirming their devotion to and special relationship with the supernatural helper in the eyes of both the deity and the community while also renewing the memory of a highly important life event¹⁶.

The meaning of *ex votos* can only be grasped in its entirety by considering their position inside places of worship¹⁷. It is well known that saints are attributed particular abilities to help with critical situations in human life (for example, Saint Anne is the protector of mothers and Saint Anthony of Padua the protector of animals). However, the geography of *ex votos* shows that the practice of invoking saints is not carried out on the basis of these individual areas of specialization attributed to saints, but rather according to the devotee's familiarity with specific places of worship¹⁸.

In the framework of a given place of worship, the collection of *ex votos* constitutes a syntagmatic chain of signs the components of which are manifestations of a common *langue* and integrated into an organic whole:

«Once placed on view in the august and public setting of the chapel, the *ex voto* records and validates a personal experience. At the same time, it makes a contribution to a composite image of multiple lives: the collective memory of an evolving community. An *ex voto* [...] does not function in isolation, but works as a metonym for a narrative of personal experience which exists simultaneously within the life of the giver and, as a story shared with the wider community, as an element in a multifaceted and enduring embodiment of the society of participants in the cult. [...] The frame of *ex votos* surrounding the statue of the saint or the miraculous crucifix is the deposit of innumerable personal stories: a palimpsest of particular narratives which have become integrated into a shared history»¹⁹.

¹⁶ G. B. Bronzini, *Fenomenologia dell'ex voto*, in «Lares», 44, 1978, 2, pp. 143-176. This practice can be seen as a way in which people process trauma, a sublimation of the *compulsion to repeat* affecting traumatized subjects (C. Demaria, *Il trauma, l'archivio e il testimone*, pp. 30-38.; it also responds to the need to actively do something in order to regain agency in an experience in which the subject is otherwise passive (V. Plesch, *Come capire i graffiti di Arborio*, in «Lexia. Rivista di semiotica», 17-18, 2014, pp. 127-147).

¹⁷ In many cases places of worship coincide with shrines, but we prefer the first expression because *shrine* technically indicates an official place of worship, while sacred effigies surrounded by *ex voto* are sometimes not located inside *shrines* but rather in places of worship that originate spontaneously and, in some cases, are ignored or opposed by ecclesiastic authorities. See e.g. T. Calìò, *Santuari, reti sociali e sacralizzazione nella Roma del dopoguerra*, in «Mélanges de l'École française de Rome», 117, 2005, 2, pp. 635-660; J. Garnett - G. Rosser, *The Ex voto Between Domestic and Public Space: From Personal Testimony to Collective Memory*, in M. Corry - M. Faini - A. Meneghin (eds.), *Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy*, Leiden - Boston, Brill, 2019, pp. 45-62, here p. 47.

¹⁸ G. Bronzini, *Fenomenologia dell'ex voto*, p. 165.

¹⁹ J. Garnett - G. Rosser, *The Ex voto Between Domestic and Public Space*, p. 54.

Collections of ex votos located in places of worship thus form an archive, i.e. a physical and social space in which inscribed testimonies become independent from their narrators and are collected, organized, and deposited; these ex votos are part of a process of «rememoration», of actively making memory²⁰. The place of worship works as a place of memory where individual experiences are codified within a collective history and individual texts take on meaning from the coexistence of other, similar texts. Such places of memory generally have a centripetal shape in that the archives of ex votos are arranged around the sacred effigies positioned in the center²¹.

Ex votos imbue critical events with meaning and insert them into a well-codified narrative schema: they are often crude representations of sorrow and pain, but together they form an encyclopedia outlining exemplary patterns of behavior and an interpretative framework for coping with traumatic events and moments of change²².

3. Ex voto display over the centuries: from the church to the museum

3.1 Displaying ex votos in churches and shrines

The practice of offering ex votos to the saints, Our Lady or Christ as a sign of thanksgiving for having been graced with a miracle has characterized Christianity since the first centuries AD; it increased significantly during the Middle Ages and has continued in the modern and contemporary ages as well, with the purpose and materiality of ex votos themselves varying according to the context. As argued above, ex votos also constitute memory devices the aim of which, in being offered to the sanctuary, is not only to thank the supernatural helper but also to inscribe the miracle that has occurred into collective memory. Such inscription is one of the main motivations that has led many miraculously healed people over

²⁰ P. Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, pp. 67-68.

²¹ However, there are variations on this shape. V. Plesch, *Come capire i graffiti di Arborio*, for instance, studies an archive of graffiti narrating events such as wars and calamities written directly on the effigies of the saints. Another lay variant of an archive juxtaposing memories of individual accounts is represented by the collections of pictures placed in hospital wards, especially maternity wards, bearing witness to cases of healing meant to give hope to worried parents (Francesco Galofaro, personal communication).

²² For further discussion of the topics addressed in this paragraph, see also J. Ponzo, *Ex voto e memoria culturale: una prospettiva semiotica*, in R. Grimaldi (ed.), *Ex voto d'Italia. Strategie di comportamento sociale, per grazia ricevuta*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2020, pp. 134-152.

the centuries to leave not only anatomical votive offerings, silver hearts and candles in shrines, but also the medical devices or objects that were indispensable during their illnesses, such as walking sticks, crutches, hernial belts, back braces, etc.

In the past, the main function of displaying ex votos in sanctuaries was to demonstrate the supernatural helper's thaumaturgical power (*virtus*)²³. One case that is helpful in recognizing this phenomenon is the cult of St. Angelus of Jerusalem (1185-1220) located in Licata, Sicily and active since the late Middle Ages²⁴. For the period spanning from the second half of the sixteenth century and first two decades of the seventeenth, there exists a text – compiled in the form of a canonical trail investigating the miracles said to have occurred – titled *Miracula et beneficia* and written between 1625 and 1627 that represents an important source documenting a collection of miracles. *Miracula et beneficia* describes how ex votos were placed inside the symbolic and miraculous fulcrum of the church of St. Philip and James – subsequently the church of St. Angelus – where the saint's reliquary-urn was kept²⁵. The source refers to multiple different types of ex votos: walking sticks (in Sicilian, *crocci*), hernial belts (*bracali*), illustrated or engraved tablets (*quatretti* or *tabelle*), prisoners' chains, and ships' hawsers for miracles at sea. According to the sources, at least, it was much less common for people to leave anatomical votive offerings made of silver or wax. All of these 'signs' of miraculous intervention were brought personally by the people who had been healed and placed – usually by the Carmelite friars officiating in the church – near the saint's chapel or hung on the large iron grate that prevents worshippers from entering but affords them a view of the objects within. In this case, therefore, the ex votos were arranged inside the devotional heart of the sanctuary, implicitly indicating to devotees that St. Angelus performed miracles and that many supplicants before them had prayed to him and obtained healing. Many of the people making witness statements in the trail into the saint's miracles – in itself a powerful archive of memory – reported on the votive offerings found in the sanctuary, underlining that they were well aware that the function of the objects in question was to attest to the virtuous efficacy of St. Angelus' relics.

²³ P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints. Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, Chicago IL, The University of Chicago Press, 1981.

²⁴ L. Saggi, *S. Angelo di Sicilia. Studio sulla vita, devozione, folklore*, Roma, Institutum Carmelitanum, 1962.

²⁵ M. Papasidero, *Miracula et beneficia. Malattia, taumaturgia e devozione a Licata e in Sicilia nella prima età moderna. Con l'edizione del processo sui miracoli di sant'Angelo (1625-1627)*, Roma, Edizioni Carmelitane, 2021.

Collections of ex votos in their original locations can be found in churches in several European countries. In French churches, for example, it is very common to find the walls completely covered by stone tablets engraved with inscriptions (even simply the name of the healed person and date on which the offering was made). The thousands of examples of this kind include many churches in Paris, such as the Basilica of Saint Clotilde – the location that also houses the saint’s mortal remains – and Basilica of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. In the latter, all the walls of the transept are covered by hundreds of stone ex votos offered not only in honor of Our Lady, but also in honor of St. Gerard Majella, beatified in 1893 when the work to build this church was in progress²⁶. A similar aesthetic custom can be found in the crypt of the upper basilica of Our Lady of Lourdes, consecrated in 1866. The walls of this space are completely covered in votive tablets bearing the engraved names of miraculously healed people. Another example, this time from Germany, is the shrine of Our Lady in Altötting; here, the small chapel (*Gnadenkapelle*) where the medieval wooden statue of the Black Virgin is enshrined is surrounded by hundreds of tablets depicting miracles occurring over the course of the centuries. During their visit to the chapel, pilgrims walk through this space, looking at the miraculous scenes represented in the tablets and thereby learning how Our Lady has given her aid in the past.

3.2 *The ecclesiastic debate about the positioning and value of ex votos*

The practice of displaying ex votos has not always met with the favor of those who, especially following the Council of Trent, have questioned their value and the appropriateness of displaying them in churches. Jan van der Meulent (Johannes Molanus), for example, in his *Historia SS. Imaginum et Picturarum pro vero eorum usu contra abusu*²⁷ published in 1594, justified the presence of ex votos in churches in view of the importance of preserving a memory of graces received. Molanus’ position was drawn in turn from *Graecorum affectionum curatio* by Theodoret of Cirrus (393ca. - 458ca.) which focused on the ex votos enshrined in the sanctuaries of martyrs²⁸. However, Cardinal Carlo Borromeo (1538-1584) had a very different perspective. In 1577, he published *Instructiones fabricae et suppellectilis*

²⁶ J. Beco, *Les Rédemptoristes français dans la tourmente des années 1880-1903*, in «Spicilegium Historicum Congregationis Ssmi Redemptoris» 58, 2010, pp. 47-84.

²⁷ J. Molanus, *Historia SS. Imaginum et Picturarum pro vero eorum usu contra abusus* [1594], Lovanio, Typis Academicis, 1771.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

ecclesiasticae, a treatise in which he outlined guidelines for ensuring that sacred buildings were environments suitable for performing sacred rites in an aesthetic sense as well. Borromeo wrote that priests should be careful in choosing votive objects to be exhibited in churches (tables, gifts, wax images and so on) because such objects do not always bear depictions appropriate to the place or that conform to Church doctrine; on the contrary, he warned, they are frequently ugly, superstitious and indecorous («cum saepe falso, indecore, turpiter, superstitioseque effingantur»)²⁹.

If we look again at the example of St. Angelus, these contrasting positions are reflected in two different authors' divergent approaches to the relic chapel. In 1641, the Carmelite Giovan Antonio Filippini in his *Life of the Saint* wrote about the relics stored in the silver urn, noting that they «have been preserved until today, in a particular chapel, befittingly decorated, and all full of votive offerings and the remains of healed sick people»³⁰. The author implicitly confers his approval on the practice of displaying votive offerings, underlining that the chapel is *befittingly* decorated and full of such offerings³¹.

In much more recent times, Vincenzo Bruscia instead wrote in his 1950 essay on St. Angelus that «The chapel of the saint was full of ex votos: pockmarked faces, wounded arms, ulcerated legs, burnt breasts [...] all made of wax for graces beseeched and received. It is now forbidden to display such foulness to public view»³². In this case, the author's words betray a vision much more akin to that of Carlo Borromeo, in which ex votos are an expression of a folkloric culture that fails to take notice of the appropriate place and contexts for displaying these offerings. Bruscia refers in particular to wax ex votos, probably offered between the end of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth, depicting wounds and injuries. At any rate, he clearly viewed ex votos, particularly the aforementioned types, as something that should be hidden from view and perhaps not even safeguarded with particular care.

²⁹ C. Borromeo, *Instructionum Fabricae et Suppellectilis ecclesiasticae Libri II* [1577], Città del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000, pp. 74-75.

³⁰ The original Italian text reads: «si conservano sin'al giorno d'hoggi, in una particular cappella, decentemente ornata, e tutta piena di voti e di spoglie d'infermi guariti». All translations from the original Italian are by the authors unless otherwise specified.

³¹ G. A. Filippini, *La vita e molti de i miracoli di S. Angelo vergine, et martire gerosolimitano*, Roma, Stamperia d'Andrea Fei, 1641, p. 118.

³² V. Bruscia, *Un amico di S. Francesco morto a Licata*, Milano - Roma, Gastaldi, 1950, p. 31. The original Italian text reads: «La cappella del santo era zeppa di voti: facce butterate, braccia ferite, gambe ulcerate, mammelle ustionate [...] tutte in cera per grazie implorate e ricevute. Ora è vietato esporre tali sconcezze alla vista del pubblico».

Recent years have witnessed a revalorization of *ex votos* in which they are often collected, rearranged according to new criteria (by form, type, date, and material) and generally exhibited in rooms set up as museums adjacent to sanctuaries. The case of St. Angelus is not an example of this trend, as today there is no longer any trace of the rich ‘treasure’ of votive offerings documented in the seventeenth century and probably still partly on display in the middle of the last century, given Bruscia’s aforementioned observations. Elsewhere in Sicily, however, a very illustrative example of musealization is represented by the sanctuary of St. Alphius, Philadelphus and Cyrinus in Trecastagni, not far from Catania. Here, the hundreds of illustrated tablets³³ depicting the many miracles attributed to the three martyrs have been relocated to a special room – that are part of the sanctuary building but separate from the place of worship – where they are arranged for display according to chronological and typological criteria. The wax and silver votive offerings are separated from the tablets. The fact that the latter are arranged on panels indicates the marked intent to musealize *ex votos*. At the same time, however, the exhibition room is located in the building itself, separated from the place of worship by a corridor: this positioning makes it clear that the intent is not only to musealize, but also to offer extensive documentation of the thaumaturgical power of the saints over the centuries, in particular since the modern age. The new votive offerings, the result of recent miracles, are also placed in the room. This choice likewise reveals the room’s function as an «open archive» in which the memory of a saint’s miracles can be continuously updated and extended, but always on the basis of the same «accumulation» established over the previous centuries.

A similar example is the numerous churches in Turin – especially the Basilica della Consolata³⁴ and the church of St. Rita – in which hundreds of illustrated tablets and silver hearts hang on the walls, not only in the buildings’ main spaces but also in secondary ones, organized according to both aesthetic criteria (with the hearts placed at the top, following the architectural lines of the building, for instance) and pragmatic ones (the tablets, which require direct observation, are also placed at the bottom and arranged so as to completely cover the walls). The sanctuary of St. Pancras in Pianezza, just outside the Piedmontese capital, is a similar case, in which the numerous *ex votos* – this collection likewise includes many votive tablets – are placed on the walls not of the church itself, but

³³ Some examples appear in R. Grimaldi (ed.), *Ex voto d’Italia*, pp. 109, 110, 162, 185, 499, 501.

³⁴ *Gli ex voto della Consolata*.

rather of the spaces and corridors leading to the crypt in a sort of display of the miraculous that accompanies devotees as they make their way into the most hidden part of the building.

The case that best represents the process of musealization, however, is the basilica of Our Lady in Superga located on the hill of the same name a few kilometers from the Turin city center³⁵. In a venue to the side of the church accessed by a door to the right of the main altar, preparations were underway until a few months ago (November/December 2021) to set up an *ex voto* museum. During a brief interview, one of the volunteers explained to us the aims of the exhibition and the sorting criteria. The *corpus* of votive offerings, consisting of numerous silver and metal hearts and a smaller number of illustrated tablets, had been placed on the walls of the room according to two criteria: chronological (the oldest tablets were placed near each other) and typological (the tablets on one side, *ex votos* in silver or metal on the other). The purposes of this installation, according to the volunteer, lay in a desire to take the *ex votos* that devotees had offered to Our Lady in Superga over the years and render them usable as testimonies. The move to reorganize these objects thus reflected both a strong spiritual purpose and an incentive. In fact, one of the curators' aims was precisely to encourage visitors to reawaken the practice of offering *ex votos* to the sanctuary, an invitation stemming implicitly from visitors' observation of the votive offerings hanging in the museum hall.

In the current moment, therefore, musealization constitutes a strong force of revival for the valorization of *ex votos*³⁶ as well as a precious historical testament to «popular» culture³⁷. For all intents and purposes, the act of recovering these objects from old drawers and boxes and putting them on display constitutes a desire to reconstruct the spiritual bond between devotees and the saints, Our Lady or Christ. At the same time, the loss of this patrimony – as in the case of Licata – instead marks a sort of cancellation of the miraculous in which it is removed from the sight of devotees until its only remaining traces are found in writings (in this case, texts documenting the trail investigating the miracles). In terms of musealization, therefore, *ex votos* end up being treated differently depending on their aesthetic value, or symbolic value in the case of those

³⁵ R. Grimaldi, *Gli ex-voto della parrocchiale di Superga*, in L. Fontanella - A. Vitale-Brovarone (eds.), *Superga: storia e memoria*, Torino, Celid, pp. 431-439.

³⁶ G. A. Gilli, *Manuale di ex-voto*, Saluzzo (CN), Fusta, 2016.

³⁷ It is important to underline that *ex votos* are not offered only by individuals of lower socio-economic classes, but also by people with high levels of education. The word «popular» in this case is linked more to the practice itself than to the people performing it.

lacking any aesthetic value. Illustrated tablets and silver votive offerings are thus often exhibited in museums, in the rooms set aside for this purpose in sanctuaries or in the sanctuaries themselves. Tablets bearing only the dates of miracles are more often welcomed within the walls of the sanctuary, as their sole purpose is purely symbolic rather than aesthetic; their only task is to testify to the grace received. In recent years, moreover, this musealization and valorization has also begun to take place online. In fact, there are currently numerous projects aimed at organizing, cataloguing or simply exhibiting these objects (especially in the case of illustrated tablets), such as the exhibition on the website [pergraziericevute.it](https://www.pergraziericevute.it) (<https://www.pergraziericevute.it/mostra>).

4. Dino Buzzati's «magnificent facts»

4.1 Fictional remediation through words and images

Recent Italian literary history offers an interesting example of the fictional remediation of the *ex voto* phenomenon in a collection entitled *I miracoli di Val Morel* published in 1971 by Dino Buzzati, an important twentieth-century writer, painter, and journalist. Buzzati's work was preceded by an exhibition of paintings held in Venice; one year later, those images, accompanied by captions and short stories, were published in a book, the last of Buzzati's works to be published during his life. *I miracoli di Val Morel* is thus a collection of short stories mostly comprising an ironic narration of the context surrounding a crisis in which St. Rita of Cascia is called on to act or simply chooses to do so. Each of the left-hand pages hold the story while those on the right present an image (a painting): the latter usually completes the narration or points to a specific moment of the miracle. As required by tradition, the images contain the inscription «P.G.R.» or, written out in full, «Per Grazia Ricevuta» («for grace received»). A number of images also contain further captions that complement the short story. Anna Paola Zugni Tauro³⁸ defines *I miracoli di Val Morel* as a series of «delicious lies» – treating as it does the imaginary miracles of St. Rita of Cascia – but in the course of her investigation she finds an actual case, quite fantastic but documented and considered to have really occurred, of the miraculous healing of oxen in a village close

³⁸ A. WP. Zugni Tauro, *L'affabulazione fantastica ne 'I miracoli di Val Morel'*, in N. Giannetto (ed.), *Il pianeta Buzzati*, Milano, Mondadori, pp. 341-373, here p. 341. This exhibition took place in 1970 at the «Il Naviglio» Gallery.

to the places where Buzzati set his short stories about St. Rita³⁹. The ox-healing miracle has been only addressed by the above-mentioned artistic source⁴⁰. In working on his last project, Buzzati referred to a codified Christian *ex voto* tradition but also – as can be understood from reading Zugni Tauro's analysis – to an artistic use of these objects in that some of them are popular, such as certain types of *ex votos* hand-made by local artisans or directly by the beneficiaries of miracles, while others have considerable artistic value. As noted above, the *text* of *I miracoli di Val Morel* consists of three complementary components: images, captions placed directly on the images, and short stories. As certain scholars have remarked, the visual component unfolds in the direction of the fantastic. In our opinion, the verbal part instead takes the opposite path, one in search of realism. According to Ilaria Crotti⁴¹, the verbal components of *I miracoli di Val Morel* are «basic captions» that enable an «osmosis of topics and forms». We believe that the short stories, captions, and images are parts of a communicative *continuum* organized by degrees, but it is important not to analytically merge the various parts. A dialogue between verbal and visual text is created to illustrate each miracle and to grant the work a unitary character: «the image neither replaces nor illustrates the text; it is born together with the text and offers an instantaneous revelation, forming an inseparable whole that is simultaneously visionary and reflective»⁴².

4.2 *The short stories*

Although the verbal narratives are each very short, they display a certain degree of complexity. In fact, the purpose of Buzzati's work is not only to give (fictional) information, but also to show the narrator's stance on the facts being described, that is, an ironic viewpoint. While existing studies of *I miracoli di Val Morel* have been insightful as far as the book's representation of the fantastic in its visual part is concerned, it should also be noted that the short stories present a meta-linguis-

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

⁴⁰ Zugni Tauro refers to an eighteenth-century oil on canvas found in Sant'Antonio di Tortal, in the bell tower of the St. Anthony church. It represents a diminutive devil escaping from a herd of oxen. Above, the Sacred Family is represented, while in the field there is a parish priest and peasants. See *Ibid.*, p. 342.

⁴¹ I. Crotti, *Buzzati*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1977, p. 104.

⁴² A. P. Zugni Tauro, *L'affabulazione fantastica ne 'I miracoli di Val Morel'*, p. 343: « [I]'immagine non sostituisce né illustra il testo, nasce assieme e propone una rivelazione istantanea, formando un'inscindibile unità visionaria e riflessiva a un tempo».

tic and meta-narrative attempt at realism. That is, the narrator follows a system of rules governing ways of recounting mystery in the «daily legality» of the universe⁴³, a system of rules that is uttered through a series of rules related to the ways of narrating miracles in hagiographic and canonical literature. It is the clash between this characteristic of rule-based narration and all the fabulous visual elements that creates the grotesque effect reigning over the entire collection.

Starting with Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, a prototype for the genre of hagiography, this type of written account slowly evolved after the Council of Trent hand in hand with Church discourse about how to postulate sanctity. The methods for establishing sanctity that gained ground in this period involved conducting documentary and historical research to prepare for new postulations⁴⁴. As a consequence, the language of recounting both sanctity and miracles developed in the direction of scientificity and away from medieval legends with their habit of including a component of the fantastic. Buzzati expertly plays with this tension by building a *mise en abyme* through both short stories and paintings, at the intersection of the linguistic and the visual. For example, let us take a closer look at the opening short story, the one that acts as the frame for the entire collection, entitled *Spiegazione (Explanation)*. The protagonist, who presents himself as Buzzati, discovers a very small chapel and by chance encounters a bizarre old man named Toni Della Santa who tells him about the miracles of St. Rita of Cascia, both patron of the strange chapel (referred to as a «sanctuary») and performer of the miracles in honor of whose help beneficiaries have offered countless *ex votos*, then collected up by Della Santa in a hut in the mountains⁴⁵. Della Santa defines the miracles as «magnificent facts [...] Documented facts» of which the *ex votos* constitute the evidence⁴⁶. The extraordinary character of this situation is revealed when Buzzati once again searches for the sanctuary and its guardian only to find out that both have disappeared. The narrator's curiosity is sparked when he comes across a notebook full of handwritten stories recounting these miracles performed by St. Rita. In Buzzati's book, this handwritten manuscript is described as if it were a valuable artifact. In this first story, significantly longer than the others, Buzzati divides up the types

⁴³ T. Todorov, *La letteratura fantastica*, Milano, Garzanti, 2000, p. 30.

⁴⁴ Early documentation of this process can be found in the proceedings of the Council of Trent, while the mature stage is codified in *De servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonizatione* (1734-1738) by Prospero Lambertini (later Pope Benedict XIV).

⁴⁵ In Italian, this surname is the female form of the phrase «of the saint».

⁴⁶ D. Buzzati, *I miracoli di Val Morel*, p. 9.

of miracles into the categories of traditional ones («falls from horses, injuries in war, fires, floods»)⁴⁷ and ones that are either improbable or grotesque, such as the trial initiated by «rhino-head trophies against the Marquis Ermanno Seborga Sònego»⁴⁸, a story to be told despite its fantastical character. The notebook collects up accounts while the ex votos are placed not in the chapel mentioned above but rather in a hut hidden away from the eyes of the world, guarded by the old man:

«The walls, if they could be called walls, were all covered in numerous ex votos. It would be an understatement to define them as 'naïf', they were of such crude workmanship. It was clear at first glance that they were all made by the same hand. His hand»⁴⁹.

As the narrator declares, what made it possible to write *I miracoli di Val Morel* were the notes he took during his meeting with Della Santa years before⁵⁰. The opening story is followed by a list of 39 short stories and paintings in which Buzzati (the narrator and painter) represents the ex votos as they are etched in his memory. The verbal accounts present a series of utterances that create a meta-narrative effect of realism, sentences such as:

«These are historical events narrated in all the history and natural science textbooks» (*La Balena volante*)⁵¹; «Fact [...] makes miracle itself problematic» (*I dischi volanti*)⁵²; «Already far advanced in age, we might even say over ninety, we were able to track down this woman [...] [Serafina dal Pont, the beneficiary of a miracle] reiterates firmly, almost angrily, the veracity of the incident» (*Il Gatto Mammone*)⁵³; «in no treatise on demonology does the hedgehog turn out to have been an incarnation of the Devil. [...] The data provided to me by Della Santa seem truly incontrovertible»; «the event has been passed down to us through oral accounts» (*Il Diavolo Porcospino*)⁵⁴; «the good Toni Della Santa was quite free and imaginative in his note-taking» (*Il Serpente dei Mari*)⁵⁵; «But no matter how much research I did, I could find no trace of a Doctors' Tower in the chronicles of Valdobbiadene» (*La Torre dei Dottori*)⁵⁶; «It seems that, in Longarone and Zoldo Valley, in the year 1871, there was indeed

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 7.

⁴⁹ Ibid., «Le pareti, se potevano dirsi pareti, erano tutte ricoperte di tanti ex-voto, che definire «naïfs» era eufemismo, tanto erano di fattura primordiale. Tutti della stessa mano, lo si capiva al primo sguardo. La mano sua» (my translation).

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 16.

⁵² Ibid., p. 18.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 20.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 22.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 36.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 40.

a brief invasion of mind ants, reportedly emanating from the Balkan region» (*Le formiche mentali*)⁵⁷; «Even more problematic is the presence of an ex-voto in Morel Valley concerning such a distant event» (*Il formicone*)⁵⁸; «I found some details in the newspapers of the time» (*La casellante*)⁵⁹; «The date, evidently erroneous because of that D, was transcribed verbatim by me from Della Santa's register» (*Il robot*)⁶⁰; «the Balest must not have been from Val Belluna but, more likely, from Val di Genova or Val di Non where Giudicarie bears, a species now almost extinct, at that time boasted a thriving colony of more than ten thousand individuals» (*L'orso inseguitore*)⁶¹; «this information derives from a letter of his preserved in the archives of the Baldovin counts» (*I lupi*)⁶².

These sentences convey skepticism together with a search for evidence, proof, and documentation as well as the narrator's move to distance himself from the events being described. As such, they clash not only with the prevalingly fantastic character of the visual component but also, in many cases, with the written parts directly following. There is thus a meta-narrative endeavor that helps to create an immediate effect of irony and grotesqueness starting from the short story itself. The meta-narrative then works together with the visual communication, that is, the paintings representing the ex votos. This way of writing conveys the same tension that can be found in the paintings themselves. Zugni Tauro⁶³ argues that the levels of fantastic *versus* realistic do not give rise to a contradiction – nor in the narrative universe, as we know from Todorov⁶⁴.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 50.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 56.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 60.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 64.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 76.

⁶² Ibid., p. 78: «Si tratta di avvenimenti storici narrati in tutti i testi scolastici di storia e scienze naturali»; «Il fatto [...] rende problematico il miracolo stesso»; «Già molto avanti con l'età, diciamo pure oltre i novanta, siamo riusciti a rintracciarla [...] [Serafina dal Pont, the beneficiary of a miracle] ribadisce con fermezza, quasi con rabbia, la verità dell'incidente [...]»; «in nessun trattato di demonologia il porcospino risulta essere stato incarnazione del Diavolo. [...] I dati fornitimi dal Della Santa mi sembrano realmente inoppugnabili»; «l'avvenimento è giunto a noi attraverso una tradizione orale»; «il bravo Toni Della Santa era piuttosto libero e fantasioso nelle registrazioni»; «Ma per quante ricerche io abbia fatte, non sono riuscito a trovar traccia di una Torre dei Dottori nelle cronache di Valdobbiadene»; «Pare che effettivamente a Longarone e in Valle di Zoldo, nell'anno 1871, ci sia stata una breve invasione di formiche mentali, provenienti, a quanto risulta, dalla regione dei Balcani»; «Ancor più problematica è la presenza in Val Morel di un ex-voto riguardante un avvenimento così lontano»; «ho trovato sui giornali dell'epoca qualche particolare»; «La data, evidentemente erranea per via di quel D, l'ho trascritta pari pari dal registro del Della Santa»; «il Balest non doveva essere della Val Belluna ma, più probabilmente, della Val di Genova o della Val di Non, dove, a quell'epoca, l'orso delle Giudicarie, specie oggi quasi estinta, vantava una prospera colonia, di oltre diecimila capi»; «lo si apprende da una sua lettera conservata appunto nell'archivio dei conti Baldovin».

⁶³ A. P. Zugni Tauro, *L'affabulazione fantastica ne 'I miracoli di Val Morel'*, p. 350.

⁶⁴ T. Todorov, *La letteratura fantastica*.

Zugni Tauro's study is exhaustive as far as the paintings are concerned, but her insights can be supplemented by an examination of the stylistic choices behind the short stories included in *I miracoli di Val Morel*. As shown here, such an examination suggests that there is a clash between the realistic and fabulous aspects characterizing Buzzati's collection.

4.3 Recounting *ex votos* in the twentieth century

The reasons behind Buzzati's stylistic choices can be found in a modern sensibility applied to the language of the miraculous. The author both emphasizes and criticizes established ways of narrating the phenomena surrounding *ex votos*, that is, the elements that are juxtaposed so as to clash: the fabulous, an aspect that is more typically medieval, *versus* the more documentary and less fantastic manner of representing miracles⁶⁵ typical of the modern era. If, as Zugni Tauro⁶⁶ (*passim*) argues, the element prevailing in the visual part of Buzzati's collection is the fantastic, the short stories instead imitate the modern descriptions of the miracles on the basis of which the *ex votos* are produced.

Buzzati's fictional work presenting a collection of *ex votos* is usually investigated by scholars through focusing on the aspects of the fantastic, but the meta-narrative endeavor typical of all the linguistic part reinforces the clash with the fantastic. Crotti⁶⁷ also notes that Buzzati presents his representations in the short stories as rational. In another study, the scholar⁶⁸ also recalls that, as a journalist, Buzzati was particularly sensitive to the differences between types of information and well aware of the potential of messages that are ambiguous or contain more than one meaning. While traditional hagiographic literature – the body of writing linked to miracles – retains a «double-stranded connection with the cult»⁶⁹, Buzzati's collection could be seen as representing the opposite position.

Before concluding, we would like to point out that there is always a potential for further remediation. In the part of Italy in which *I miracoli di Val Morel* is set, where Buzzati (the author) was born and grew up, a

⁶⁵ To cite just one of many possible examples, to certify an alleged miracle the Church requires a medical study to be conducted.

⁶⁶ A. P. Zugni Tauro, *L'affabulazione fantastica ne 'I miracoli di Val Morel'*.

⁶⁷ I. Crotti, *Buzzati*, p. 105.

⁶⁸ I. Crotti, *Tre voci sospette. Buzzati, Piovene, Parise*, Milano, Mursia, 1994, p. 16.

⁶⁹ M. Badas, *La letteratura consegnata 'al popolo': le vite dei santi nel Medioevo romanzo*, in D. Caocci - M. Guglielmi (eds.), *Idee di letteratura*, Roma, Armando Editore, pp. 120-131.

«Sentiero Buzzati» (Buzzati Trail) has been set up so visitors can walk along a mountain path leading to Valmorel (the real name of the small village near Belluno). Buzzati's invention has been implemented in a broader sense considering that in this same area, in 1973, a small «chapel of St. Rita of Cascia» was built and adorned with a painting (a replication of Buzzati's image) depicting the saint⁷⁰. In this case, fantastic remediation found a real-world location. Perhaps this will go on to create a new (real and fabulous) link with the whole community (of readers and/or faithful?) to whom this last remediation is addressed⁷¹.

5. Conclusion: Relocation and Remediation

Finding new places – real and fantastic – for ex votos is a growing phenomenon: it is increasingly common for them to be relocated to places characterized by a semi-sacred or a purely cultural character rather than a sacred one. In several cases, ex votos have been displayed in exhibitions in secular contexts, and even stolen and sold to private art collectors; on other occasions, they have been removed because they were judged to be not aesthetically pleasing and damaging to the appearance of historical buildings⁷². The relocation of ex votos to museums entails a shift of meaning. Ex votos gain importance as historical⁷³ and, in some cases, even as artistic forms of testimony, but their decontextualization risks obliterating their value as a significant «religious and social rite»⁷⁴.

In reality, the relocation of ex votos should be considered in the framework of a broader operation of remediation: ex votos are part of the general encyclopedia of cultures related to Catholic tradition, and for this

⁷⁰ M. Restelli, *Viaggio nel Bellunese. Cercando Dino Buzzati tra monti, leggende e arte*, in «Io Donna, Corriere della sera» (online edition), January 21th. <https://www.iodonna.it/lifestyle/viaggi/2022/01/21/belluno-dino-buzzati-monti-leggende-arte/>

⁷¹ M. Badas, *La letteratura consegnata 'al popolo'*, p. 124.

⁷² See T. Calì, *Santuari, reti sociali e sacralizzazione nella Roma del dopoguerra* on the removal of the ex voto surrounding an image of the Madonna del Divino Amore on the Aurelian walls in Rome. A similar lay case is the removal of the numerous locks symbolizing a promise of love at Ponte Milvio, in Rome, a practice deriving from a teenager novel and film (*Tre metri sopra il cielo*, novel by Federico Moccia and film by Luca Lucini, 2004), see <https://bit.ly/2tBPKXA> (accessed February 10, 2020).

⁷³ G. Bronzini, *Fenomenologia dell'ex voto*, p. 143.

⁷⁴ J. Garnett - G. Rosser, *The Ex voto Between Domestic and Public Space*, p. 49.

reason they are remediated in literary texts⁷⁵, figurative art⁷⁶, music⁷⁷, and even fashion⁷⁸. Just like their relocation, the remediation of ex votos reshapes their meaning, introducing a second-degree narration and alternative systems of archiving, and in so doing it demonstrates how vital these particular texts are in our semiosphere. Despite their apparently naïve character, ex votos are therefore complex texts the meaning of which depends on a changing equilibrium between a set of tensions: high vs popular culture, devotion vs art (i.e. liturgical and thaumaturgic functionality and aesthetics), and sacred vs profane space.

⁷⁵ E.g. Rilke's poem *Ex voto*, available here: <https://www.textlog.de/22407.html> (accessed February 10, 2020).

⁷⁶ E.g. in Frida Kahlo (M. A. Castro-Sethness, *Frida Kahlo's Spiritual World: The Influence of Mexican Retablo and Ex-voto Paintings on Her Art*, in «Woman's Art Journal» 25, 2004-2005, 2, pp. 21-24).

⁷⁷ E.g. the music album *Ex voto* by singer-songwriter Aiello (2019).

⁷⁸ Several online shopping platforms (e.g. Amazon.it) sell earrings, bracelets, and clothes inspired by ex votos.