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Preliminary Remarks about Anatomical Ex votos of Southern Italy*

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Craft Production and Symbolic Meanings

Most of the objects present in my collection of anatomical votive offerings, on which I will base my introductory remarks, are ex-votos in silver leaf created in specialized goldsmith workshops in Southern Italy; they date from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. These ex-votos, however, are still produced today in forms identical to the ones of many years ago, though fewer and for tourist as well as for ritual purposes. In Naples - particularly in the very central *Via San Biagio dei Librai* and the adjacent side streets - small goldsmith workshops produce and sell a limited series of these objects (some twenty pieces), with models more and more standardized, for novice collectors and foreign tourists (especially American, French, German and English tourists). The Neapolitan workshops are the most prominent ones, but silver ex-votos are produced in similar forms in Palermo and a number of other places in Sicily, and in other cities – both large and small – throughout the continental South. In Sardinia such typologies are less common, and in any case they are a product of importation; in this, as in other features, the island is quite different with respect to the rest of Southern Italy and Sicily.

The silver ex-votos are executed with small handcrafted or semi-industrial molds, and the silver-plating is created with an electrolyte bath. Goldsmiths sell these articles alongside other, more common, goods of their trade. The latter, however, are also often connected to votive practices (small gold and silver chains, earrings, pins, hairpins, rings, offerings for grace received) or ceremonies (baptisms, confirmations, weddings).

Although they may be dated to the period I have indicated, these ex-votos are an evolution of typologies whose use in Southern Italy - and more generally, the entire Italian peninsula – has been documented since the Renaissance, in very similar forms but featuring different decorative elements. Votive practices were already quite widespread in Greco-Roman antiquity; it is common knowledge that they have been a feature of the Catholic world since before and especially after the Tridentine Reform, in genteel and folk milieus, among peasants, sailors,

* These basic notes are drawn from the observation of the specimens of votive silver and wax present in my collection kept in Rome. This collection includes about two hundred pieces, representative of a wide area of the continental and islander South. It goes without saying that I have observed, for many years, the votive practices in the rural contexts from which the objects of my collection come. The ex votos reproduced in the appendix to the text belong to my private collection. Thanks to Doroty Zinn for the translation of parts of this article.

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princes and merchants. We can see this, moreover, in the *libra miracolorum* of major and minor sanctuaries. The typologies represented in my collection come from folk settings, but the most precious and complex ex-votos – often in gold – were donated by the members of the affluent classes and the aristocracy. Furthermore, even the simple items displayed in the folk context could be plated with gold rather than silver.

Some other objects present in my collection were produced, instead, in wax. They were common both in the continental South and Sicily, in very similar forms.

The use of wax for these ex votos – dating from roughly the same period as those in silver – provides an opportunity to briefly discuss the materials utilized for producing anatomical ex-votos, in Italy as well as in Sicily. As we have seen, these materials were silver leaf, or more rarely, gold leaf; but wax, bread, sweet dough and papier-mâché were also used, and in earlier periods, wood. Comparing these types with the ones in silver, we see that there are close affinities between pieces produced in various materials, something stronger than a wittgensteinian "family resemblance." It is also necessary to keep in mind that throughout Italy, an outstanding tradition of *tabulae pictae* flourished alongside anatomical ex-votos: ex-votos painted on wood plaques, metal and glass; and later, photographic ex-votos created with coarse photomontages narrating the miracle.

Returning to the anatomical pieces, the material selected to represent the body *in conspectu divinitatis* is never a casual choice. Silver and gold are materials which symbolize wealth in impoverished cultures and societies, and therefore they are fitting to represent divine majesty. They are also materials which suggest light, and their barrenness alludes to a supernatural, cold, distant, astral world. Bread and sweet dough - ephemeral and edible materials - instead refer to the providential character of divinity which is deeply present in the Catholic world, especially in Southern Europe.

Wax was certainly chosen for its ecclesiastical and canonical associations with the divine, but in Southern folk culture, it also bears a magical-religious quality. It is, above all, an instrument for relating with the dead, and for this reason its purity must be absolute: in fact, it must burn in a constant, clear and steady way. If the flame smokes, flickers or produces sparks or crackling, it is thought that the dead person is complaining or has bad news for the living. Additionally, wax may be used for magical practices: for molding figurines to be melted in a flame, to stick with pins or to dismember.

Like honey, wax is produced by a laborious and mysterious animal, and it unites opposing qualities in its fluid-solid, kneadable, shapeable body; it is at once pre-human and superhuman. In its association with the Church, the dead and magical practitioners, wax is divine and magical material, but it is also animal material. In short, it surrounds man and is used as a means for a metaphysical communication which unites different cosmic levels planes: it can represent human reality in the presence of supernatural powers, and supernatural powers to man. Wax, then, appears particularly well suited to signifying grace received (and this explains the widespread diffusion of wax typologies in Italy even today), a magical-symbolic form of bodily reintegration.

The Physical Body and the Imaginary Body

Whether they are made in silver leaf, wax or other materials, this kind of ex votos features parts of the human body: breasts, an ear, lungs, kidneys, a torso, internal organs, a belly, eyes, arms, legs, hands and feet. Above and beyond what we see in my collection, in contemporary Italy, it is also possible to find mouths, tongues, throats, stomachs, livers and noses executed in silver or gold, as well as these same organs, plus male and female genitals, in wax.

Taken as a whole, these artifacts form a precious document for understanding the ideology of the body among the lower classes in Southern Italy, up to a very recent past. First of all, they testify to the state of knowledge that devotees and artisans possess of the body: its volume and anatomy, the coherence and reciprocity relating its parts, its physiology and pathology. Of course, as always happens when we speak of images, it is necessary to recall that these votive objects transmit information which not only has to do with reality, but also – and especially – the mythical-symbolic level. In short, each figure offers up fragments of realistic knowledge, but also imaginary models connected to the body: processes of em-

bodiment, insecurities, phobias, states of anxiety and neurosis. By analyzing this imaginary (and imagined) anatomy, we can observe that the exterior appears to be an armor, especially with regard to the male body, while the interior appears fragile and delicate. Intestines, lungs, kidneys, the heart and the stomach are the internal organs represented most often. Arms and hands allude to work, and they are of great importance because they are considered the indispensable instruments of sustenance. In societies which require dexterity and rapidity, especially of men, legs suggest mobility and vigilance. Breasts, instead, refer to fertility, procreation and nursing: they form a delicate and precious part of the female body, highly subject to *fascinazione* [bewitching] and *malocchio* [evil eye], and greatly in need of protection (the theme of the magical capture of milk - the breast's prodigious drying up - is central to Southern Italian peasant culture).

Still can be found male genitals, as I noted above, and together with the liver they connote virility, courage, physical strength and reproductive capability.

Some time we can find the image of the home offered as an ex voto (in silver leaf); this image is ideally connected with that of the body: in Southern Italian folk culture, indeed, the home is an extension of the body. It is a lasting version of the body, a protective covering; it is the preferred locus for the construction of the self, and the place which guarantees individual and family identity. Other times, instead, we can find images of animals, such as donkeys, mules, goats or cows, as votive offerings (in silver leaf or in wax). Even the bodies of these animals (vital in the rural economy of Southern Italy; their illness could be an even greater misfortune than that of a human being) appear as an extension of the human body, as they guaranteed, in peasant society, the very life of the person and the family.

Saint Lucy's Eyes

Eyes are the dominant object in all the collection of Italian ex votos, both in private ones, like mine, and in those that appear in the great catholic sanctuaries, especially in the South. These models bear very close typological and stylistic resemblances to all of the votive materials documented in the Euro-Mediterranean area from ancient times to today. In the folk culture of Southern Italy, eyes are the body's fundamental organ, powerful, and at the same time delicate. A person's eyes contain his life, but they also contain a mysterious quality that is seductive and enchanting, evasive and grasping. Eyes have a *bewitching* quality which captures and can potentially be negative and hostile. For this reason, it is necessary to protect oneself from the eyes of others; in particular, it is necessary to protect one's own eyes from actual diseases as well as magically induced ones.

Lucy is the patron saint of vision, particularly in Sicily, and a majority of the ex-votos depicting eyes are offered to her, especially during the great feast-day of December 13. This feast-day is also a celebration of light, of the winter solstice (which is quite near to that date in Italy), and of defeating darkness (St. Lucy's bonfires and eye ex-votos often go together). In short, these artifacts tell us about a society in which the status of the eye and the gaze is meticulously regulated. It is a society in which visual interdiction and ritual ostentation alternate and integrate with one another. It is also a society in which vision is the basis of all strategies of social relation: from the simplest ones of self-representation on the public stage, to more complex ones regarding the control of the gaze for constructing political power or for spiritual and religious domination.

The eyes in silver leaf present in my collection (some of which are older than the period extending from 1850 to 1950 that I have indicated for dating the majority of my objects) are, then, connected to eyes hidden under the pointed hood of a Lenten brotherhood; to eyes that admire competition between rival groups on patron saint feast-days; to eyes painted on the bows of Calabrian or Sicilian boats to protect against misfortune at sea; and to eyes symbolized with water, egg yolks, oil or other materials in women's divinatory or apotropaic practices.

Ex-Votos, Personhood and Society

Many ex votos, both silver, both wax made, display faces and hearts. In the figurative tradition of this area of the world, both the face and the heart symbolize a person, a *cristiano*, as people say in the peasant dialects of Calabria and Sicily.

In Southern Italy, the concept of personhood is linked to a complex code of symbolic relations and it is maintained with an equally complex set of symbolic

practices, within which *dedicatio* [self-devotion] to divinity plays a key role. In the rural society described by these artifacts – and in urban society, too, though to a lesser extent – one is not born a person, but rather he becomes one through a slow and gradual labor of assuming social responsibility, a process marked by ritual passages. It is difficult to emerge from an indefinite and liminal status; on the other hand, it is quite easy to fall back into it.

Personhood is secured by recognition from the social group to which one belongs. For men, this is developed, for example, through public sociality and public esteem, while for women, it is through full control of children and the domestic sphere. But personhood is also secured by a set of magical-religious practices that bolster physical health and social condition. Self-devotion for grace received is an integral part of this supernatural support, which is the basis of a reciprocal, often lifelong, relationship. In this perspective, one can offer an ex-voto because he was completely cured of an illness, but also because he escaped an assault by bandits, an unjust imprisonment, heavy debt, the oppression of a powerful person, or a fight with his family or with his allied social group. Misfortune – an attack on the integrity of one's personhood – can be physical as well as social.

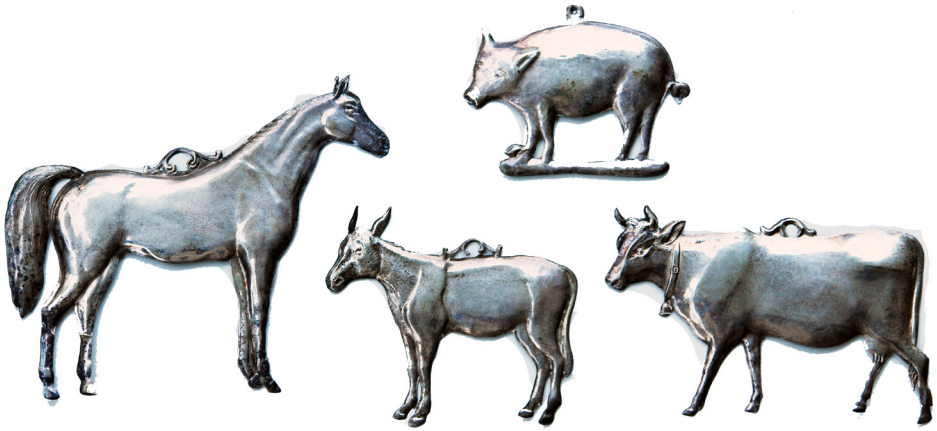
Ex-votos and Their Ritual Contexts

Quite often the ex votos represent the whole person: men, women, children and newborn infants (until recent decades, the latter were the most vulnerable group in a society with a very high infant mortality rate). Their bodies are represented in their entirety and in a frontal position.

In numerous sanctuaries and churches of Southern Italy, in rural as well as urban settings, silver ex-votos (and also ones made of wax, painted on plaques or composed with rudimentary photomontages), are offered above all on the patron saint's feast-day. Sometimes they are adorned with ribbons, colored paper or flowers; they are brought to the altar by the person who received grace, often accompanied by a group of extended family members. This is yet another fine opportunity to celebrate family intimacy and to flaunt it on a social level, whatever may be the real nature of its inner relations, which are not always idyllic. We often find a written reference to the grace on the artifacts or their containers (VFGA, *Votum feci, graziam accipi* [I made a vow, I received grace]). Grace is received by a person, but since he (or she) is at the center of a more or less extended family network justifying that person's presence and making it meaningful on a social level, a close-knit group renders thanks along with him (or her).

The festivals and rites in which the artifacts appear are often striking and involved, and they are an occasion for a complex interaction between social and symbolic mechanisms. The act of giving thanks through an ex-voto is part of a varied and articulated ceremonial and ritual context: public display of the divine simulacrum on altars and in sacristies, surrounded by ex-votos and offerings; auctions among devotees to win the privilege of carrying the simulacrum in the procession; adoration and genuflection of the faithful; processions through the streets of the town or city; encounters with people particularly in need of intercession, who approach the simulacrum imploringly; offerings in money or in kind; public banquets and public blessings; penitential acts, such as walking barefoot or on one's knees, beating one's chest, even brutally whipping oneself or covering oneself with a cloak of thorns; fireworks displays. This multifaceted ritual context performs the local social structure and permits the protagonists to be onstage with abundant opportunities for expression and self-representation (opportunity that often greatly exceed the single actor's material resources and position in the social hierarchy).

In conclusion, to offer an ex-voto in the context examined here - a context in which the festival is essentially an instrument of political confrontation and struggle - means performing a social role of key importance on the stage offered by religious *pietas*, starting from a personal experience of suffering or deprivation.

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