

Medieval hagiographic sources and Medical Anthropology.

Thaumaturgic saintliness as a cultural device in the defence of health in 12th-14th centuries Orvieto

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From the hagiographer to the ethnographer

Thanks to its socio-cultural implications, the phenomenon of saintliness within the Catholic culture has always been, and still is, a permanent subject of attention and controversy. Existential endorsement and rational condemnation, participative acts of faith and sceptical intellectual denunciations, ritual devotional behaviour and scathing polemics alternate and interact to form the "fame" of the saint in a joint production which reflects complex social dynamics.

In a lay perspective, the attempts of historiographical and sociological disciplines to interpret saintliness have brought to the fore the relevance and complexity of a phenomenon all too frequently brushed off as naive beliefs of bygone days. In this context, medical anthropology can contribute to the endeavours to conceptualise saintliness by defining the characteristics of the component of the phenomenon.

It should be noted that the fundamental correspondence of saint and thaumaturge goes beyond the limits of time and space dealt with in this paper. Indeed, for the Mediterranean countries and the Early Middle Ages the *presentia* of the saints is instrumental in the affirmation of Christianity, whose relationship with local religious cultures can be synthesised as a «conflict of therapeutic models» (Brown, 1983 [1981]: 164). Moreover in its strategy of Christianising the culture of the popular levels of medieval society, the Church has alternately aimed at obliterating cultural patterns and creating thaumaturgic figures (Cardini, 1989). In the pre-industrial

society of the Early Middle Ages, the saint as thaumaturge is an essential figure who guarantees both a social pervasiveness and recurrent occasions for reaffirmation to the authorities. The broad range of semantics concerning *infirmetas* and the correlated conditions in which the crowd of *pauperes*, *egroti* and *languentes* find themselves may serve as an example. It must also be kept in mind that since there were no strict rules regarding the segregation of the sick into specific places devoted to their care and that secular therapeutic practices were weakly structured, the presence of the sick in the social spaces of the community – piazzas/fairs, churches/ceremonies, streets/pilgrimages – was a daily and almost obsessive occurrence (Agrimi; Crisciani, 1993).

The motivation for these historical facts can be found in the anthropology of power. Power must necessarily attempt to dictate representations of its own of health/sickness. This binomen repropose the cultural “core” of the unstable relationship between biological and social and between nature and culture (Seppili, 1994) and lies at the root of all the connotative extensions that can be schematically traced back to the polarity of positive and negative. The hagiographic text, which lays particular stress on the curing of the illness – either by the direct action of the saint, or as the effect of a ritual act on the part of the faithful – succeeds in capturing and expressing a symbolically “nuclear” aspect of the culture, which produces it. The saint, already an efficacious “monumental” representation of power, constitutes an ideal charismatic protection and serves as catalyst for the attempts to find an underlying reason for the disease, “elementary form of the occurrence” (Augé, 1986 [1983]). This then strengthens the institutional patterns of society because they resist the biological disorder, perceived always as a threat to the social order.

The fabrique des saints

Pietro Parenzo, a figure in whom the political virtues and the noble spirit of charity are brought together, was a prominent member of a family of administrators of the state, active in central Italy in the Late Middle Ages and whose origins go back to the Roman patriciate. According to his *Passio*, an important document in ecclesiastic antiheretic polemics, Pietro Parenzo arrived in Orvieto in February 1199, sent by Innocent III who answered a petition for a delegation of the city. On May 20th he was kidnapped and assassinated by Cathar conspirators. In subsequent actions of retaliation, the identity of the group broadened to include all those who opposed ec-

clesiastic policies. On a local level, the feast of Pietro Parenzo was quickly recognised and appears in an act of submission to the *Comune* as a date on which a candle of twenty *libbre* is to be offered to the *Chiesa Maggiore*. His canonisation, on the other hand, was never to be recognised, coming up against the strict canonisation regulations established by Innocent III (Vauchez, 1989 [1981]). The last initiative for the canonical acknowledgement of Pietro Parenzo was decidedly secular with regards to the figure who made the request, and political with regards to the underlying objectives. This, however, makes it all the more significant. The attempt was made in 1932, over seven hundred years after his death, by the *Podestà* of Orvieto, Pericle Perali. In a pamphlet dedicated to the Head of State, His Excellency Benito Mussolini, the local authorities once more turned to the central authority in an attempt to elect Pietro Parenzo, called saint, as protector of the Italian *Podestàs* (Perali, n.d. [1932?]).

From June 12, 1240, to February 16, 1241, Rainerio the Bishop of Orvieto; Gualcherino the Bishop of Soana and Citizen and Augustinian prior of San Giovanni in Platea, investigated the miracles attributed to the Franciscan thaumaturge Ambrogio da Massa. The notary Rainerio drew up the acts of the trial, which contained 209 testimonies regarding 83 miraculous healings. Pope Gregory IX authorised the investigation in a letter of May 24, 1240. He confirmed that he had received the petition for canonisation presented to him by the Council and People of Orvieto (*Processus*). The petition addressed by the Commune to the Pope gives us an idea of how intimately intertwined the relationship between this civic institution and the Franciscan friars must have been. The mid-13th century decades witnessed the setting up of the headquarters of the friars in the city. Their church was consecrated in 1266. The Pope's letter granting the institution of the investigating Committee bears witness to the assumption of exclusive *potestà* by the Roman Curia in the discipline of canonisation (Goodich, 1975). The *Processus* of Ambrogio da Massa, a document of an investigative situation which in other cases has been defined as "proto-ethnographic" (Burke, 1979), removes the friar from anonymity only with regards to his entrance into the Franciscan Order. It testifies to the friar's ascetic life style; i.e. mortification of the body through exposure to the inclemency of weather, the exercise of restrictions in food, etc. Convent cook and physician, Ambrogio da Massa possessed surgical skills of an empirical nature, and applied sutures and bandages of wax or tallow.

Giacomo Scalza, a contemporary of Vanna da Orvieto of whom he was the Dominican hagiographer, is an example of a male figure who, first, counsels spiritual itinerary and subsequently constructs the literary identity of a

saint (*Legenda*). This was common practice in the history of the women connected to the mendicant Orders and obviously raises questions as to how the prevalently female mystical experience is translated into the hagiographic text (Coakley, 1991a and 1991b). *Contemptus mundi* and defence of virginity are combined with the usual ascetic practices of fasting, vigils and meditation, which become frequent once the habit has been donned. These experiences of “real mysticism” lend themselves to multiple interpretations, which can, on the one hand, be related to forms of mystic nuptials. On the other hand, immobility, exposure to the inclemency of the weather and sweating can be an exercise in “body techniques”. Mental processes of meditation and “body techniques” produce states of consciousness through which Vanna da Orvieto moved into the ecstatic repertory of catatonics, of stiffening of the body and levitation. The only non “legendary” document regarding Vanna is the resolution of the *Consiglio dei Sette Consoli delle Arti* dated May 7, 1307, regarding the offering of a candle. The day on which the office for Vanna is celebrated, a candle of twenty *libbre* is taken to the Dominican church, where the Podestà, the Capitano del Popolo and the Sette Consoli bury the Blessed Vanna. Vanna, the church of the Dominicans, receives a significant homage. The weight of the wax offering is one of the highest, second only to that which the civic institution offers the Cathedral church.

In the summary descriptions given above of Pietro Parenzo, Ambrogio da Massa and Vanna da Orvieto, these figures have nothing in common. The biographies on which the construction of their sainthood is grafted are diverse, as is the historical period in which each of them lived their earthly lives. Different, and identifiable, are the interests of the social groups which motivate the construction of the saint and the forms of hagiographic writing which constitute testimony and documentation of the earthly activities of each of the three are also different.

A historical-anthropological approach to saintliness cannot but see it in the light of a social phenomenon concretely bound to a historical situation. The focal point of reflection on saintliness is defined by the study of the continuous fluctuation between the unique characteristics of a subject considered saint, and the ways in which the community, or its hegemonic social classes, construct the mental and practical reasons, which makes it credible. This is the *fabrique des saints* (Schmitt, 1984), in the understanding of which the conceptual equipment of philology, history, sociology and anthropology concur, and it, therefore, becomes a relevant object of study. As Pietro Parenzo, Ambrogio da Massa and Vanna da Orvieto are concerned the *fabrique des saints* shows us how types of saintliness reflect the

lines of modification of social leadership. The case of Orvieto confirms the transition, which in the history of saintliness accompanies the passage from the Early to the Late Middle Ages, from a remote exemplarity referred to hierarchic institutions of sacred regality to a humanisation of people close to the emerging social and urban classes (Vauchez, 1989 [1981]). The case of Orvieto is also the empirical confirmation of how the stories of the saints constitute a privileged observatory from which the dynamics of the social relationships within the society can be reconstructed. They reflect the organisational and value system of the society in which they are defined (Boesch and Sebastiani (eds.), 1984; *Ecole Française de Rome* and *Università di Roma "La Sapienza"*, 1991; Golinelli, 1991).

The methodological option, which derives from the considerations above, allows us to force a philological individualising interpretation of the texts we have chosen in order to compose them into a unified hagiographic corpus. A *Passio*, a *Legenda*, and a *Processus* for canonisation have, obviously, prerogatives of compositional structure and a stylistic-formal nature, which are peculiar to the types of hagiographic writing to which they can be referred. The analysis integrated on the level of content, by the three narration-documents makes them mutually subsidiary to each other. It increases the amount of information provided by the texts and makes the interpretative itineraries much richer (Boesch, 1982). The selected hagiographic corpus thus seems to form a series of comparative contexts which can be traced back, as far as the problems connected with the defence of health and of the individual and collective psychic equilibrium are concerned, to a common cognitive, emotive, behavioural and practical paradigm. The *Passio* of Pietro Parenzo, the *Processus* of Ambrogio da Massa and the *Legenda* of Vanna da Orvieto appear as particular conjugations of this paradigm.

The saint as agent of re-connotation of the civic cosmos

The first element in the characterisation of the saint – with a view to qualifying him as charismatic operator and axiological agent – is his capacity to re-connotate or redefine a civic cosmos. Through the events in his life and his presence, including the future management of his body as source of relics, the saint re-semantises the spaces and times of society. These are the structural supports of a collective cosmology as well as the forms required for all possible experiences on an individual level. Sacralized calendars and topographies draw their origins from the saint and, used ritually, they

are presented as concrete itineraries of the exteriorisation of experiences and of the introjection of orthodox values and norms.

In the case of Pietro Parenzo, the reasons and the forms of the *elevatio corporis* are associated with his rank as ruler of the traditional *battagliolae* of Carnival. The controversies in the city as to where the saint is to be buried reflect the social equilibriums and perceptions of civic spaces. The body of the saint is removed from San Andrea, the church of the *Comune*, and transferred to San Costanzo's church, near the Bishop's palace, which is perceived as sacred because it probably communicated with an Etruscan necropolis and where the new cathedral was then to rise. The archaeological fact can be correlated to a line of reasoning which, thanks to morphological comparisons, might be used to illustrate the continuity and contiguity of the cultural patterns from Etruscan and Roman antiquity to the Early Middle Ages, up to the beginning of the 12th century when the terrestrial and hagiographic story of Pietro Parenzo takes place. Keeping at arm's length any evolutionary reductionism and conjecturally overcoming the limits which derive from the absence of documentary data, we can indicate a few cultural "agglutinations": limping, head covered with animal skins, reference to the world of the hereafter, *Caeculus*, *Hades*, seasonal cycle, Carnival, which seem to form at least a part of the "symbolic capital" from which the canon Giovanni draws when he writes the *Passio* of Pietro Parenzo. There is no reason why we cannot suppose that this body of contents is organized on various levels of awareness in relation both to the acculturational modes through which it is acquired, and the occurrences of its sedimentation, which in any case is common to the collective mentality.

The *Passio* of Pietro Parenzo also furnishes the particular elements that allow to reconstruct the phases of the progressive connection between this martyr and the entire urban space of Orvieto as opposed to the wilderness, the receptacle of the dregs of humanity, the hut, which express a negative elsewhere, physically *extra civitatem*, cognitively *extra communitatem*, which only the saint, a liminal figure, can dominate. The body of Pietro Parenzo adheres to the ground and it is impossible to raise it. It closes its mouth so that the conspirators are unable to throw in the saint's remains. A dead walnut tree comes back to life on contact with the body. Pietro Parenzo can be considered *munitor urbis* in all those cases where a society is threatened or feels it to be threatened materially and spiritually by heresy.

A more adequate exhibition of the body of the Blessed Vanna, who will have a "double burial", and the resulting increased publicity, are the symbolic correlation and the ideological justification for an actual settlement.

In using the remains of the local saint to set in motion a line of communication that can leave its mark on the re-connotation of the significance of the sites, the preacher friars reveal their awareness of the different levels of the 13th Century Orvieto community and their desire to permeate these levels. The complex of *San Domenico* is at the edge of the city, near *Porta Vivaria*. Beyond it the *Campo degli Omodei*, the unconstructed part of the city, stretches. It stands on a site where there was once a temple and it has to deal with a negative fame deriving from the fact that the environs were the habitual haunts of procurers and prostitutes.

Referring to the north-south axis, on the other side of the city, in the district of Serancia, near *Porta Pertusa* and diametrically opposite *Porta Vivaria*, is the church of the Friars and the *Processus* of Ambrogio da Massa shows us how important, in this case too, was the association of the local saint with the mendicant church, built or under construction, which, according to the testimony of his followers, was to bear his name.

The intertwining of similarities between the construction yards – which define the urban physiognomy of Orvieto in the 13th century – and the “making of the saint” through which, officially, the cultural identity is constructed, is particularly strong. Patterns of civic settlement, natural restrictions that depend on the nature of the tufa mass on which Orvieto stands and the system of values of a community interact. The bodies of the saints, placed in sepulchres, which permit ritual action, shape the city, which thus finds a meaning for its projections in space. The liminality of the saint and the location of the churches at the edge of the city are aspects that are consonant with a collective mentality, which takes a stand against a morphological-environmental diversity in an endeavour to reinforce its processes of defining its identity. This is taken up and formalized in the procession of *Corpus Domini* «sanctifying circumambulation of the urban agglomerate» (Dupront, 1993 [1987]: 538). The route of the *Corpus Christi* procession, established in Orvieto by Ermanno and his brother Beltramo Monaldeschi – Lord the former and Bishop the latter of Orvieto – in 1337, includes the churches which we have mentioned as sepulchres for the local saints.

Homo homini salus

The ethnography of the connections between civic sites and bodies of saints has revealed one of the perspectives used by hagiographic writing in its attempt to collocate the saint pervasively as an agent of re-connotation of

the civic cosmos. Ethnography applied to the anatomy and physiology of the holy bodies as revealed in the rhetorical strategy employed provides us with another essential aspect that throws light on the specific meaning of these bodies, the value attributed to them and how they interconnect with the civic spaces.

Through olfactory, visual and tactile metonymies, the *Passio* of Pietro Parenzo expresses the “vitality” of the corpse, the object of the attention of the religious of the Chapter of San Costanzo and their following. The significance of the post-mortem incorruptibility of the body of Pietro Parenzo is stressed, by contrast, in the chronicle of his martyrdom, brutal crime, which dramatically describes the blows dealt by the heretics, the wounds inflicted, the fury unleashed against the lifeless body, the final scalping. The *Passio* lets us reconstruct the associative chain that has its origins in the body of Pietro Parenzo: the aromatic corpse, the sepulchre of healing, and the elevation of the site of burial to a point of arrival for itineraries in which the community finds a common identity. In this case, too, by contrast – almost the result of a basic logical symmetry – the significance is stressed. A damned corpse is associated with the swelling of the body, the foetid miasmas that it emanates, the diseases and disasters it provokes, and lastly the contaminated and dangerous places of the *damnatio memoriae*.

The use of the olfactory canal in the corporeal code of determining saintliness, composed on an official level in a “doctrine of aromas” (Albert, 1990), continues, in the various social strata, throughout the Christian Middle Ages. It is obvious that in testifying to the saintliness of their local figures, Ambrogio da Massa and Vanna da Orvieto, one of the arguments used by the respective hagiographers of the mendicant Orders was that of the “divine fragrances” emanated by the corpses. In particular, the *traslatio corporis* of Vanna da Orvieto relates the appearance of balsamic oils, to sprinkle and inundate, and a prodigious manna covering the body. These are additional elements that serve to qualify the prodigious impassibility of the holy corpse, which appears as an instrument of collective health. The mutilated body of the martyr and the holy liquors of the virgin both broaden the spectrum of efficacy of a sacred pharmacopoeia, which is the religious transposition of the profane *homo homini salus*.

The *Legendae* of the saints are concrete examples of a strategy of charismatic accreditation of the salvation prerogatives of the institution, which produces them. By means of an allegorical text, which transposes them on a symbolic level, they succeed in reconciling the demands of an institutionally constituted power with medical practices of remote and diffused ori-

gins, which use parts, excrement, and body exudations in preparing curative remedies. These practices are so deeply rooted that up until recently, doctors and charlatans sought the raw materials they needed to prepare their medications in cemeteries or in an ambiguous trade with hangmen, torturers or simple barbers (Camporesi, 1980 and 1983).

Clinical hagiography and construction of the disease

The *Processus* of Ambrogio da Massa allows us to verify the relevance of the considerations developed by medical anthropology, beginning with the identification of the disease as an “elementary form of the occurrence” and the concept that the individual diseased body functions as a “social signifier”. It also gives us insights into the ways in which hagiographic writing organizes bi-directional passages of meaning from the biological order of the corporeal occurrences, to the social order of moral and religious occurrences and how construction of the representation of the disease is determined in the concrete play of cross-references between the two.

If we adopt a hermeneutic mindset which reconciles the methodological circumspection imposed by the nature of the records (a notary document of a clerical investigation) with an attention to the risks, which a historiographical operation “based on an a priori hypothesis” almost inevitably entails. We seem to have at our disposal a significant sampling to help us reconstruct the attitudes and cultural strategies adopted by the community in the process of determination and interpretation of the disease. The *Processus* of Ambrogio da Massa is therefore representative of the pattern of disease in 14th Century Orvieto, with all due recognition of the fact that as a cultural product, the filter of the “hagiographic *langue*” acts as censure in the service of power tactics. It is a document of considerable cultural complexity.

Generally speaking, comparison of the disease to a kind of performance is not a generic metaphorisation, but a precise form of the relationship that the community establishes with the disease. In a body that is diseased, and which is therefore of social significance, the disease itself is acted out for the benefit of a public, which reacts as a social body. Moreover, the disease is therefore no longer an abstract notion but a concrete representation. Spectators (p. 12) of the drama acted out through the body of a sick person are the relatives, but also all those in the neighbourhood who participate in the pressing demands of the “inquisitors” and who fill the house at all

hours of the day and night. The members of the commission themselves are morbidly interested, *ex post*, in the search of a sign on the body.

The pathological is expressed and perceived thanks to the fact that the horrible is turned into a spectacle, monstrously dramatized as one-deposition follows the other. For the family, mostly women – incidentally, the woman continues to be the statistically dominant figure, in the two versions of mother and wife, in taking care of the sick person – the gravity of the perturbation caused by the pathological aggression of what is considered the normal disposition of the body is expressed by the horrible sight. The sensation of risk to which they are subjected by this eruption into society of a biological degeneration is what is burned into the consciousness of neighbours and acquaintances as they participate in a performance, which could potentially include their own persons. The sick body is a breach in the dam which society has built to defend it from the horrible. The horrible that can contaminate society is inscribed and put on stage in the sick body, but since the diseased body is the visible aspect of the social symbol it also, transitively, exposes the entire community to the risk of a regression into the horrible. Actors and spectators of the drama of the disease initially find a reason for falling prey to the disease. On this basis, the performance of the ritual therapy will take place, in the continuous intertwining of roles and reciprocities.

The *Processus* of Ambrogio da Massa permits the identification of a phenomenology of the horrible constructed around pain and its perception. The pain can be so intense that it feels as if parts of the body are being detached, rebelling against the organism. This corporeal dimension of the expression of pain immediately connects to the social aspect of the individual through the faculty of speech. This can, in turn, be compromised by incoherent shrieking or, to the contrary, by mutism to which pain, incorporated in an inextricable tangle of the biological and the social, leads.

The nosological gallery, which the *Processus* of Ambrogio da Massa permits us to reconstruct, can be considered a representation of degeneration of the human via the loss of the control and exercise of the “social regulations” governing the body and language. The disease, subversion of the normal order of things brought about by the irruption of the biological imponderable, condemns the individual to marginalisation, which he experiences publicly and which is publicly perceived by the community. In overriding perception, the normal attitudes and behaviour of the body and the use of language, the disease is the occasion and site of the alienation of the individual.

From the clinical medical point of view adopted by hagiography, the horrible nature of the disease appears in relation to diseases of the osteo-muscular apparatus and the integument system. This is shown by the frequent occurrences of those with “contractions” and those afflicted by “abscesses” in the lists of those imploring the thaumaturgic intervention of Ambrogio da Massa. The pathological degenerations of anatomical-physiological characteristics furnish the categories – and are interpreted via the categories – of the dry, the rigid and the arid, to which those of the rotten and the putrid are contrasted. The legion of paralytics, arthritics, cripples and the barren show the various phases of degeneration at the larval state, of the monstrous deformation, of the leanness which also concerns the *vis generandi*. Significantly the disease seen as the drying up of the entire body around deformed skeletons producing arid larvae, has its counterpart in the disease seen as an exuberant decomposition of the organic, which produces festering liquids and miasmas of putrefaction. Abscesses, ulcers, fistulas, emphysemas, cysts, phlegm, which erupt in serous emissions and secrete haematic suppurations and with purulent sores, coloured by the rotting decomposition of the organism are examples. The nose replaces the eyes in defining of the senses of abnormality and the disease is recognised by its stench.

Cultural strategies and ideological tactics are ranged around the disease and pain. The *Processus* lets us reconstruct the area of significance of the *laborare* of the *infirmis*. In addition to *laborare*, whose semantic area includes suffering and being in danger, the verbs used to express the action of the sick person are: *occupare*, which means taking over, surprising; *tenere*, which means holding, occupying, surprising; *tangere*, which means striking, hitting, but also for violating; *adripere*, which means grasping, dragging, assaulting; *torquere*, which means twisting, bending, tormenting, torturing, afflicting; *vexare*, which means upsetting, mistreating, devastating, harassing, tormenting.

In the continuous intertwining of the denotative and connotative levels involved in the description-interpretation of the disease, two guiding principles of meaning can be identified. The first refers the disease to animality. The disease attacks like an animal and lacerates the body. In consideration of the characteristics that the disease assumes in the context of community, what we have here is a polar contraposition between the binary opposition humanity-health and animality-disease.

The second guiding principle refers to the demoniac and sacral for the disease. In this case, due to the acute perception of the core significance of

the disease, an ideological design for subduing the disease comes to the fore, in which the forms of power are expressed, in relation to the administration of the charismatic virtues of the thaumaturge.

The continuous overlapping of denotation and connotation, of description and interpretation to which medical-hagiographic clinical medicine is reduced makes it impossible to trace a clear line between the first and second guidelines of significance, between the bestial and the demonical-sacral components of the disease. In any case, the representation of the *morbo caduco* can be taken as the keystone of this process of constructing the meaning of the disease, giving a name and form to the biologically horrible through the symbols of animal degradation and demonic possession. To suffer from the *morbo caduco* means to appear possessed. The symptoms of epilepsy, above all the sudden falling to the ground described by listing the number of times it happens by day and by night, but also convulsions and the emission of saliva, are the corporeal signs of possession which can be resolved only near the saint's sepulchre. Possession by the demon corresponds, almost for the necessity of symmetry, to the *morbo caduco*, the disease of the body described by a demonic-sacral semiotics of possession. The manifestation of possession by the demon is described as an oppressive syndrome, which cannot be contained. Its solution, after exorcism, is proved by the disappearance of all corporeal signs.

However, it is in the "anamnesis" phase that the construction of the disease can be more easily referred to an ideological horizon, taking into account the importance that the administration of the charismatic treatment of questions concerning health/disease in a community assumes. In the same way it is also aware of the possibility that this administration offers for the strengthening of a power that has been concretely defined and is searching for symbolic strategies of legitimisation. It is when the hagiographic document moves on to treat what we might call interventions of retaliation on the part of the saint that the ideological administration of the charismatic operator of health comes most strongly to the fore. Generally, blasphemy is what gives rise to a circuit of transformation so that, through the susceptibility of the saint, which becomes a precise etiological factor, a verbal offence directed at the saint becomes a somatic offence, which strikes the blasphemer. A linguistic act, which expresses an intellectual and ideological deviance, is thus impressed in the body of an individual. Since the body is endowed with social significance, it is interpreted as a stigma for the entire community and the Orvieto hagiographic corpus proposes a considerable range of results of the breaking of the linguistic taboo, which surrounds the name of the saint.

The identification and demonstration of the thaumaturge saint: body techniques and oneirism

The thaumaturge saint is allotted a specific role in the construction of the representation of the disease and a specific function in the pervasive occupation of symbolic spaces by power. This role and function must be given a precise place in the social agencies or groups where the culture that gives meaning to the experience of disease circulates and takes shape. What we have here is a real system. What characterizes this system, which is at the same time identification and demonstration of the thaumaturge saint, is the use of two codes of expression. One organizes the ensemble of somatic signals, which are assigned to the body of the saint; the other organizes the body of signals, which comes from the oneiric states of consciousness. On the one hand, it is the quality of the thaumaturge saint's biography that serves to indicate charismatic virtues, depicting him as a figure that mortifies his biological component and uses body techniques to overcome what is considered the normal anatomic-physiological state of man. On the other hand, the body of oneiric manifestations consisting of vision-dreams, which revolve around the figure of the thaumaturge saint, are what furnish credible origins to the rite and the cult that will develop.

For Pietro Parenzo, the *Passio* proposes a picture of eminently political personal virtues and intimates a genealogical relationship of his social rank with the charisma of the thaumaturge. In one sense the *Processus* of Ambrogio da Massa and the *Legenda* of Vanna da Orvieto are presented as a "comparison", shown by the radical change in the social typology of the saint introduced by the pedagogical and pastoral activities of the mendicant Orders. In both texts, indeed, one finds what has been called the "hagiographic staging" of the biographical aspects of a saint, who is no longer, an aristocrat but belongs to the bourgeoisie (Vauchez, 1989 [1981]).

The obedience of Ambrogio da Massa overcomes the physical and physiological bonds of the alternation of the day-night cycles, of atmospheric adversities and biological needs. The *Officio* of the Virgin is recited *per viam publicam*, along a civic and community space. Ambrogio da Massa's falling to his knees is a typical ritual behaviour chosen by the ceremonial gesture expressiveness of the Christian West to reinforce the value of prayer through the use of the position habitually adopted by the entire body (Dupront, 1993 [1987]). However, what is most striking is Ambrogio da Massa's nakedness. This finds appropriate references in addition to the mendicant precepts, which muster, and contextualise the ascetic adage "*Nudus nudum Christum sequi*". Exposure to cold, the significance of which is emphasized

by the adoption of ritual denuding, complete or partial, belongs to that logic of mortification of the body which induces particular states of consciousness that reinforce spiritual meditation and prayer. The overall picture attributed by the *Processus* to Ambrogio da Massa can then be seen in terms of an ascetic complex characterized by abstinence, fasting and vigils and by testing resistance to physical pain.

The *Legenda* of Vanna da Orvieto documents the persistence of the complex of behavioural practices that form an “ascetic whole”. At the same time it shows us how ascetic practices as a whole are geared to that “syndrome of real mysticism” which emerged, above all from the 12th century on, and which deals specifically with female religiosity. Vigils, fasting and abstinence are connected, in the experience of Vanna da Orvieto, to trances, ecstasy, levitation, catatonia and catalexis to form an actual ascetic-ecstatic syndrome. Nudity and transcendence, which are a condition of the body and a level of reality different from the habitual and contingent to it, are still interconnected. This allows us to believe that they both belong to cultural ambits of bodily representation that are much broader than those codified by the mendicant precepts. The bodies of the saints, as is clear from the treatment reserved for their corpses, are social bodies on which the worshippers exercise a sort of anatomical voyeurism, searching for meanings that can be interpreted in a community sense. The nudity of the holy bodies is then a socially relevant aspect of the saints. It is a social nudity. The valences and ambivalence of other social nudities such as, for example, prostitutes, heretics and the condemned, converge around this social nudity. In the *Legenda*, we have a description of the catatonic state induced by prayer, but we have no indication of the way in which the entourage or the worshippers demonstrate the actual insensibility of the saint during this cataleptic trance. In many hagiographic texts a great deal of attention, however, is paid to the kinds of “stimulation” to which the body of the saint is subjected. This has led to comparisons with pornography in the ingenious morbidity of the *experimenta* (Bornestein, 1995). Catalexis is described in terms of death, and the resolution of the altered state of consciousness and bodily insensibility is interpreted in terms of a resurrection to life. The saint thus becomes the cultural intermediary capable of subduing death, both in relation to defined structural, economic and social characteristics, and to the existential needs of a community.

In addition to the code, that systemically group together somatic signs, the identification-ostension device of the thaumaturge saint makes use of a code, that includes the oneiric signs of dreams and visions. Analysis of the

vision-dreams, which appear in the hagiographic corpus of Orvieto, identifies both a general picture of functional references and a specific formative quality in the oneiric state and the oneiric forms of experience. With regards to the former, the dream or vision serves to manifest saintliness and indicate the mode of worship; with regards to the latter, the dream, the vision and their oneiric container, the *incubatio* with the relative practices, directly or indirectly produce thaumaturgic effects.

Dreams, visions or, more generally, oneiric states of experience systematically appear in the *Passio* to lay the foundations for the cult and the rite, to resolve existential states of crisis and to accompany practices of devout ritual with therapeutic effects. The *Processus* of Ambrogio da Massa is an example of how much care hagiographic writing takes to place every episode in a context of plausibility which is determined by a socially defined situation of marginality (for example, wandering *extra moenia* or the personal matters of a dying person). Contemplation and prayer, two aspects of a complex performance, which formalize the syndrome of real mysticism, are presented by the *Legenda* as a condition for the manifestation of the prophetic spirit of Vanna da Orvieto. In all cases, dream and vision are connected to the founding of the cult and rite. This is why interpreters who are the protagonists of oneiric experience and its promulgation are needed. The dream and the vision are then nothing but an organically structured cultural device in the service of that complex of needs and expectations, which in the realm of health/disease turns to forms of ritual medicine and sacred therapy.

The ritual performance

In the range of rites, which refer to saintliness and regard the charismatic treatment of biopsychic discomfort, the hagiographic corpus of Orvieto herewith analysed reveals an inextricable confusion of roles in this field. A comparison with the theatre lends itself also to a ritual situation and the two groups involved can be defined as operators and as spectators of the rite (Schechner, 1984). Strictly speaking, we shall see that, in view of this confusion of roles, the validity of this distinction between actors and spectators depends on ascertaining that the dynamics of the ritual performance have succeeded in overcoming this distinction.

In this sense, it can be noted that, in most cases, it is the sick person himself who turns into the operator of the ritual. In the application of sacred therapy on oneself, the qualification of ritual operator derives from that of

sick person. When he is in a condition of inferiority, (physical, deriving from the disease; jurisdictional and social, since he is a child) the ritual relevancy – in the form of expanding concentric circles – includes the entire system of tutelage, relationally immediate or remote, which refers directly or indirectly to the sick subject.

Most often, it is a relative, from the immediate family, who becomes the key figure in the acting out of the ritual. Collective ritual undertakings also are documented in which the role is assumed by the relational network of the extended family, the quarter and the regions of the city, associations whose members have the same profession, representing hamlets and bordering towns and it is they who put into effect a collective performance of a vow or pilgrimage or burial rites.

Together with the lack of discrimination or confusion between operator and spectator of the rite, the *Passio* of Pietro Parenzo, the *Processus* of Ambrogio da Massa and the *Legenda* of Vanna da Orvieto present another confusion, that of the sacred and profane. Above and beyond the rhetorical confrontations, which emerge between prototypes of sacred and of profane therapy offered by hagiography, it is possible to identify a continuous mutual overlapping of knowledge and practices from one field to the other. The ritual, for instance, seems to have no difficulty in accepting the results of medical empiricism, which in turn unhesitatingly makes use of forms of sacred therapy. For example, the midwives who surround a woman in childbirth have at their command a real “multiple medical competence”. The body of knowledge in their possession regarding the interpretation of questions concerning health and disease enables them to operate both empirically and ritually in treating their patient. In a difficult childbirth they remove a dead foetus and certify the death by means of an empirical procedure. Subsequently they become ritual operators in the invocatory act meant to bring the infant back to life, up to his baptism. Applying medication or making a votive offering in wax are both aspects of the same type of handwork, a concrete manual skill, of a materiality of action which moves with ease from the domain of the sacred to that of the profane and back again.

The hagiographic corpus of Orvieto permits dreams and visions to be reconstructed as performance in the ritual of healing. In particular it permits the reconstruction of the general conditions, to which the oneiric experience leads, of the effects procured, directly or indirectly, immediately or extended in time, of the forms through which the oneiric experience is translated into the thaumaturgic ritual.

Sleeping and dreaming are connected both with the perception of the sacred and with ritual. In the *Legenda* of Vanna da Orvieto, a vow and the act of appending the relics are effectual during the sleep of the one who makes the vow. In the *Passio* of Pietro Parenzo, the pilgrimage and the vow before the sepulchre induce a thaumaturgic sleep, which completes a ritual clearly related to the classical *incubatio*. In the *Processus* of Ambrogio da Massa, a pilgrimage brings about a thaumaturgic sleep, with the manifest apparition of the saint in dream, only after the ritual actor is back home. While this is not the place to present a survey of the variations in the relationship between sleep-dream and ritual, we may conclude that in hagiographic writing, the dream vision presents itself as an indispensable correlate of the ritual performance. It expresses a cultural schematism, which indicates that the nocturnal half of man has not severed all relations with his diurnal half (Bastide, 1976 [1972]).

It is of interest to note that the preferred way for the thaumaturge saint to manifest himself is the dream vision, which also plays a part in resolving a situation of bondage or the corporeal effects of an improper detention. This trespassing into the realm of justice exists for Pietro Parenzo, as it does for Ambrogio da Massa and Vanna da Orvieto. The agent involved in the performance of the sacred therapy is the same as that with which the saint removes the effects of imprisonment. The underlying reasons for the construction of the thaumaturge saint in hagiographic texts are the same as those, which turn him into a charismatic operator in the political sphere of administrator of justice. The two realms, health and justice, are inescapably intertwined. Deductively formulated arguments of this sort generate lines of interpretation, which provide occasions for empirical verification of the bonds. In the making of the saint, the hagiographic text maintains these bonds with the society it expresses. It hardly needs mentioning here that Pietro Parenzo was the Rector of Orvieto and that in the middle decades of the 13th century the Franciscans and Dominicans took turns at presiding over the Inquisition Tribunal of Orvieto.

The ritual is preferably performed around the sepulchre of the saint: permanently inhabited by an ensemble of personages, who comprise the active public during the thaumaturgic performance, it is the animated stage of the ritual.

First of all there are the “custodians of the body”, military and presbyters for Pietro Parenzo, Franciscans and Dominicans for Ambrogio da Massa and Vanna da Orvieto. It is they who are entrusted with the manipulations required to maintain the corpse’s prerogatives of saintliness. It is they who administer the liturgy and the formalization of acts of faith.

Languentes is most often used to indicate the persons as a group who regularly gather around the remains of the saint. The *egroti* can remain prostrate near the sepulchre for periods as long as a month. This and the details of their transportation on litters and their lying on sandals or linen shrouds let us presuppose that there is an organization for assistance as well as continuous habitation of the site. The participating crowd drawn into the ritual performance is never anonymous, and is there in the form of civic delegations or social representatives to bear witness to a blessing granted or to take part in a ritual pilgrimage. The “animated scenario” around the sepulchre makes the sacred dimension of the space tangible as personages of various social standing approach, presenting themselves as their social rank prescribes: prisoners penitential dragging the instrument of their detention or aristocrats arriving on horseback, to cite only the extremes. Various types of behaviour indicating the individual and collective predisposition to the miracle circulate through the crowd. Everything is interpreted, theologically, as a sign of the miracle. The forms and practices of the ritual and the participation of the public bear witness to the way in which the sacrality of the site and the oneiric forms of support merge. Together they are the coefficients, environmental and situational, of the ritual performance: definitions of its forms of the efficacy of its effects. The pilgrimage to the sepulchre, the exposure over the sepulchre, a prayer vigil by night and a healing in the morning hours all appear in the three texts of the hagiographic corpus of Orvieto. This is the hagiographic rewriting of the classic thaumaturgic institution of the *incubatio*.

The “ritual performance” takes shape in this context. It is centred on the death throes of the saint, a social instrument of health. The hand of the dying saint is guided, in a sort of self-imposition, to touch and indicate the diseased limb. The theme of the increased power of the saint on the day he departs from the world appears. The touch of the saint, *eo die quo migravit*, heals. On the one hand, this can be traced back to an intrinsic characteristic of Christian saintliness, which stresses the prodigious nature of the moment of earthly death. It is a hagiographic *topos* that obviously also invests the local Orvieto saints. On the other hand, the effective circumscribing of the touch to the period of the death throes, with what this means in terms of collocation in situations and places controlled by the entourage of the saint, may also be in antagonistic relationship with the thaumaturgic practices of the Cathar Perfects whose presence in Orvieto is documented in the sentences of the *Liber Inquisitionis*. Their practices in their extra-urban havens used touch and the lying on of hands.

Vows, devotional offerings and pilgrimages, as dictated by the hagiographic cliché, are the conventional forms of ritual. Nevertheless, the Orvieto corpus also reveals the importance assumed by the body of practices based on attempts at contact with the sepulchre. The prostrations, genuflections and lying on the tomb make generic reference to contact with the sepulchre. They are all strongly formalized forms of ritual behaviour pertaining to gesture modes of devotion singled out and adopted by Christianity. In this sense, our texts document the spasmodic nature of attempts at contact with the sepulchre to the point of taking on tones of a paroxysmal attempt to adhere to the tombstone with the body, thus affirming the positiveness of contact between the corporeal site of the disease and the natural element that serves as intermediary for the thaumaturgic virtues of the saint. In the case of children, there is explicit reference to exposures on the tombstone, but within the limits of the “sacred enclosure” even the earth and the sweepings, which are used for making amulets, have apothropaic and thaumaturgic properties.

Notes

⁽¹⁾ This paper summarizes the research carried out in the course of my Dottorato di ricerca in the Methodology of ethno-anthropological research (X cycle, Universities of Siena, Perugia and Cagliari) which was concluded in 1999 with the discussion of the dissertation *La santità taumaturgica come dispositivo culturale. Antropologia medica del corpus agiografico di una comunità medievale (Orvieto secc. XII-XIV)*.

The following have already been published: Petrangeli Enrico, *il Podestà e taumaturgo. Focalizzazioni verso una comprensione antropologico-medica della leggenda di Pietro Parenzo*, *Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia*, 2, Studi Storico-Antropologici, volume XXXI-XXXII, nuova serie volume xvii-xviii, 1993/94-1994/1995, pp. 89-109 and Idem, «Podestà o mendicante o sarta, comunque taumaturgo. Cambiamenti tipologici e persistenza del ruolo terapeutico nella “fabbrica del santo” attraverso la letteratura agiografica orvietana dei secoli XII-XIV,» *AM. Rivista della Società italiana di antropologia medica*, n. 3-4, ottobre 1997, pp. 219-245. It's publishing Petrangeli Enrico, *I poteri del santo taumaturgo. Antropologia medica del corpus agiografico di una comunità medievale (Orvieto, secc. XII-XIV)*, prefazione di Franco Cardini, Argo, Lecce, 2003, 200 pp.

This article proposes a framework for the last paper mentioned above and also its basic contents, necessarily in an apodictic form. While preparing it, I felt as if I was working at a patchwork, which I was tempted to justify epistemologically. But then I decided that even in a schematic form it was opportune to let the various lines of research and thematic nodes which I had discovered be known. I obviously leave it to the reader, whom I thank for the attention he dedicates to this paper, to have the final word regarding the value of this work.

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