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Agency and Miraculous Images

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Miraculous images appear to raise the issue of the agency of things in an acute form. They are man-made objects which are treated in ways analogous to human agents and are apparently credited with a capacity to enact change in the world either by acting on something else, such as a sick human body, or by transforming themselves. How are we to deal with such material? In a characteristically direct formulation, Richard Trexler proposed an appropriate starting point for study: '...it needs to be said that ... no object ... has ever been miraculous in either direction.'¹ Trexler's comment questions more than the identification of the agent. Implicit in his sceptical clearing of the ground is the point that images do not work miracles because miracles do not happen. The question is not just who or what is doing something, but quite what is being done. In the context of a discussion of agency, miraculous images are comprehensively problematic.

Take the case of the wall painting venerated as Santa Maria delle Carceri – Saint Mary of the Prison – in Prato which began to be associated with miraculous activity in 1484 and was enshrined in the celebrated church designed by Giuliano da Sangallo and begun in 1485.² The foundation miracle of the shrine rests on the experience of an eight-year-old boy, Jacopino, who is said to have witnessed the Virgin Mary get out of the picture, a fresco of the Virgin flanked by Saints Stephen and Leonard painted above a barred window of the disused and ruinous town prison, and walk around in the prison vaults.³ That spectacular animation was never repeated, but in the early months of the new devotion the figure of the Virgin was allegedly observed by many

¹ Richard C. Trexler, 'Being and Non-Being: Parameters of the Miraculous in the Traditional Religious Image', in Erik Thunø and Gerhard Wolf (eds), *The Miraculous Image in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance*, Analecta Romana Instituti Danici, Supplementum XXXV (Rome: 'L'Erma' di Bretschneider, 2004), 15.

² For the church see Piero Morselli and Gino Corti, *La Chiesa di Santa Maria delle Carceri in Prato. Contributo di Lorenzo de' Medici e Giuliano da Sangallo alla progettazione* (Florence: EDAM, 1982); Paul Davies, 'The Early History of S. Maria delle Carceri in Prato', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 54/3 (1995), 326-35; Paul Davies, 'The Madonna delle Carceri in Prato and Italian Pilgrimage Architecture', *Architectural History*, 36 (1993), 1-18.

³ The fullest account can be found in Giuliano di Francesco Guizzelmi, *Historia della apparitione et altri miracoli di Madonna Sancta Maria del Carcere di Prato*, Biblioteca Roncioniana, Prato, MS 87, fols. 8v-10r. Published in Isabella Gagliardi (ed.), 'I miracoli della Madonna delle Carceri in due codici della Biblioteca Roncioniana di Prato', in Anna Benvenuti (ed.), *Santa Maria delle Carceri a Prato. Miracoli e devozione in un santuario toscano del Rinascimento* (Florence: Mandragora, 2005), 136-7.

to shed tears, open and close its eyes, sweat blood and change colour.⁴ It also became associated with copious healing miracles. The story of one such miracle, from a collection compiled by a local lawyer, Giuliano Guizzelmi, runs as follows:

On 15 September 1484 Francesco d'Andrea di Francesco Guizzelmi of Prato, a boy of two years and eight months, had had a severe fever continuously for two days and in that time had not eaten or drunk anything and had not spoken and slept continuously and lay in his bed as if dead. And fearing this illness, Andrea his father, and my brother, went to the Madonna delle Carceri and there vowed him to Her Majesty. And that boy was as said in bed as if dead and, at the time that his father vowed him to the Madonna, he suddenly came to and sat up in bed without a fever, healthy and liberated, and said to his mother standing there and weeping, 'Mamma, the Virgin Mary has healed me.' And he began to talk and eat and drink as if he had never had any illness and was perfectly healthy and liberated. And lifted out of bed by his mother, he began to run though the house as children of that age do, healthy and in good spirits. Seeing this, the said Andrea, his father, and his mother thanked God and the Glorious Virgin for such grace and miracle and afterwards they went to the Madonna and prayed and offered according to their consciences.⁵

The writer's nephew was healed when the boy's father visited the shrine and vowed him to the Madonna of the Carceri.

⁴ Guizzelmi's text mentions these phenomena only in passing. Guizzelmi, *Historia*, f12r; Gagliardi, 'I miracoli', 137. They are treated in greater detail in an earlier manuscript *Miracoli et gratie della gloriosa madre vergine Maria delle Charcere di Prato, l'anno 1484*, Biblioteca Roncioniana, Prato, MS 86. The transformations are listed on fols. 37r-46r. Published in Gagliardi, 'I miracoli', 121-6.

⁵ 'Francesco d'Andrea di Francesco Ghuççelmi da Prato, bambino di età d'anni dua et mesi octo, havendo hauto dua dì et havendo continuo grandissima febre, et in decto tempo di dua dì non havendo mangiato né beuto cosa alcuna et non favellando et continuo dormendo, et essendo in sul lecto chome morto, et dubitando fusse amorbato, Andrea suo padre, et mio fratello, andò alla Madonna del Carcere, et quivi lo racomandò alla Sua Maiestà. Et essendo decto bambino chome e decto in sul lecto chome morto, in decto tempo che el padre lo racomandava alla Madonna, in uno tracto tornò in se et riçossi in sul lecto sença febre, sano et libero, et dixè alla madre astante et lachrimante: "Mamma, la Vergine Maria mi ha varito." Et incominciò a favellare, mangiare et bere chome se mai non havesse hauto male alcuno, et al tutto fu perfectissimamente sanato et liberato; et levato della madre di su el lecto, incominciò a correre per casa chome fanno e' bambini di simile età, sano et di buona voglia. Il che visto decto Andrea suo padre et la madre Dio ringratorono et la Vergine Gloriosa di tale gratia et miracolo, et dapoì andarono alla Madonna, et ororono et offersono secondo la loro conscientia.' Guizzelmi, *Historia*, fols. 33v-34r. Gagliardi, 'I miracoli', 142.

Guizzelmi frames the healing story in a wholly orthodox way. When the miracle is recognized, he has the boy's parents thank God and the Virgin Mary. God is the source of healing power which is delivered on the intercession of his saintly mother. But the story revolves around an interaction with an image of her. What role is the image understood to play?

The orthodox answer is that prayers to the image are transferred to the saint depicted.⁶ It is, however, regularly questioned whether this nuance was either accessible to, or informed the beliefs and practices of, most devotees. It is usually suggested that the devotees regarded the image as itself generating a sacred presence with the image effectively taking the place of the saint and that this image/saint was regarded as the locus of divine power. This was central to Trexler's own approach in his pioneering study of the Madonna of Impruneta outside Florence: 'in the supplicatory process ... a practical identity existed between Mary and image. ... It was quite clear to the Florentines that they were praying to the image ...'.⁷ The efficacious image was a 'valid, participatory intelligence'.⁸

This basic stance has found widespread support. In their wide-ranging study of miraculous images in Liguria, Jane Garnett and Gervase Rosser claim that 'Evident in all miraculous image stories is an implied assumption that the divinity – usually as we have seen, in the form of the Virgin Mary – is in some sense present in the statue or the painting.'⁹ This 'real presence' response, they acknowledge, embodies a tension: 'The devotee knows the limitations of the image as a compound of natural substances, manipulated by human techniques. Yet he or she also understands this object to be inhabited by a divine presence.'¹⁰ Commenting on a fifteenth-century poem presenting the miracles of Santa Maria delle Carceri in Prato which plays upon this very tension, Megan Holmes suggests that 'it is very probable, however, that many devotees experienced sacred immanence in miraculous images in ways that were more literal

⁶ A formulation going back to St Basil in the fourth century. For a fifteenth-century Italian restatement by Antonio degli Agli see Megan Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 22.

⁷ Richard C. Trexler, 'Florentine Religious Experience: The Sacred Image', *Studies in the Renaissance*, 19 (1972), 18 and 20-21.

⁸ Trexler, 'Florentine Religious Experience', 20.

⁹ Jane Garnett and Gervase Rosser, *Spectacular miracles: Transforming Images in Italy from the Renaissance to the Present*, (London: Reaktion, 2013), 49.

¹⁰ Garnett and Rosser, *Spectacular Miracles*, 22.

than that represented in the poem ..., as if the Virgin and Christ were not just manifest in their transfiguring material effigies but were physically embodied in them.¹¹

The Prato material quoted above can be taken to support this reading. The foundation miracle has the Virgin Mary herself emerge from the image. In the story of Francesco Guizzelmi the boy's father 'went to the Madonna of the Carceri' as if visiting the saint herself and after receiving help returned to give the image/saint gifts in thanks. The child himself asserted that he had been healed by 'the Virgin Mary'. Is the image, then, seen as an autonomous agent with the vowed child as the patient, in both technical and colloquial senses?¹²

Certainly the devotees behave in key respects as if the image were a sacred presence, but the unsatisfying thing about this approach is that it involves attributing to those involved conceptions which we, as Trexler highlighted, do not share. This unease has led others to seek alternative approaches. For Jason Gaiger 'The central requirement of a theory of living-presence response ... is to provide a means of accounting for actions that appear to attribute life or lifelike powers to objects such as stones, carvings, and paintings without having recourse to the problematic assumption that the participants have lost sight of the distinction between animate and inanimate things.'¹³

Some commentators have implied that the participants did indeed succumb to cognitive error.¹⁴ This attitude engages uncomfortably with the motif of deception

¹¹ The poem is Lorenzo di Jacopo degli Obbizzi, *Miracoli della Vergine Maria delle Carceri* of about 1485. Holmes, *The Miraculous Image*, 182-3.

¹² For the agent/patient relation see Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 21-3.

¹³ Jason Gaiger, 'Participatory Imagining and the Explanation of Living-Presence Response', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 51/4 (2011), 367. Caroline Bynum has argued that for the late Middle Ages this distinction was both much less stable, with matter itself regarded as fundamentally changeable and, in some sense, alive, and also much less central. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*, (New York: Zone Books, 2011). Bynum is clearly right to insist that we should not neglect the theories of those contemporary with the objects under discussion (280-1) and a fuller study needs to take them into account. My aim here is more limited, namely to suggest that much of the behaviour at a miracle working shrine can still be understood as purposive in terms accessible to our understanding of the world, that is, even before a reconstruction of period conceptions.

¹⁴ André Vauchez, for example: 'La confusion croissante entre l'image et son modèle impliquait en effet la reconnaissance d'une présence active (capacité d'agir, de se mouvoir) et passive (sensibilité, capacité de pâtir et d'être offensé) dans la représentation.' André Vauchez, 'L'image vivante: quelques réflexions sur les fonctions des représentations iconographiques dans le domaine

which has been central to writing on mimetic art since the classical period when, however, it was employed in literary constructions which do not obviously purport to document the incidence of actual conceptions.¹⁵ The allegation of a related error, or the risk of it, is also involved in concerns about images in the Christian tradition: to worship the stuff of the image instead of God is to fall into idolatry. These ideological entanglements make the assumption of error problematic. It is also not clear that attribution of error is plausible. The Carceri image is, for example, certainly a mimetic image in the western tradition, and in the context of that tradition the identity of the holy figure is readily recognizable.¹⁶ But when it began to be associated with miracles it was already at least a century old and by the standards of the time its pictorial devices were not very sophisticated. Is it plausible to suggest that in the course of their devotions people 'mistook' the picture for the Virgin Mary? Vivid and potentially disorientating mimesis is not obviously an issue.¹⁷

It is increasingly acknowledged that it is necessary to go beyond the perception of the object itself and consider the miraculous image as part of a much wider network. The central role of the devotee was already part of Trexler's proposal and recent work has explored and expanded upon the dynamic interaction between the devotee and the image.¹⁸ The network comprises the physical elaboration of the shrine, as highlighted by Holmes, along with the rituals, both individual and communal, surrounding it, from the lighting of candles and the donation of other gifts to church liturgy and civic processions, and the narrative traditions, formal and informal, which articulate the site

religieux en Occident aux derniers siècles du Moyen Age', in Maurice Aymard et al. (eds), *Biedni i bogaci: studia z dziejów społeczeństwa i kultury, ofiarowane Bronisławowi Geremkowi w sześćdziesiątą rocznicę urodzin* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1992), 239.

¹⁵ See, for example, Jaś Elsner, *Roman Eyes: Visuality and Subjectivity in Art and Text*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 1-26.

¹⁶ The best available illustrations can be found in Benvenuti (ed.), *Santa Maria delle Carceri*, 10, 40 and 44.

¹⁷ As argued by Garnett and Rosser, *Spectacular Miracles*, 29-30. See also Gaiger, 'Participatory Imagining', 367-8. Note, however, Holmes's corrective to the idea that cult images are usually archaic in style. Holmes, *The Miraculous Image*, 146-51 and 157-62.

¹⁸ 'what were the active (rather than the narrative or theological) ingredients in the transferral of power? The answer: image and supplicant.' Trexler, 'Florentine Religious Experience', 18. See Bynum's comments in *Christian Materiality*, 111-12.

and object.¹⁹ This rich environment, what David Morgan calls the ecology of the image, also crucially engages the emotions and memories of the devotees.²⁰

In terms of agency, this line of enquiry stresses the contribution of the devotee. The material and ritual network is a conscious and considered dramatic construction, deliberately initiated by the devotees themselves.²¹ The creative aspect of this environment is related to fiction: the devotees act out their devotion to the saint.²² Gaiger has pursued this parallel of engagement with fictional worlds and has suggested that we can find productive insights in the work of the philosopher of literature, Kendall Walton. The field of the avowedly fictional may seem somewhat distant from that of devotion to a miraculous image, as Gaiger admits, but the element of 'play' is acknowledged even by those who wish to stress the perception of presence.²³ The issue is how far their performance is understood to take the devotee. As Garnett and Rosser comment: 'We would agree with the suggestion that there is an element of creative fiction or make-believe in the behaviour of devotees who willingly suspend disbelief in a real presence within the image. Yet if there is a degree of pretence at the outset of personal engagement ..., this is not, for many, where the process of interaction with the statue or picture ends.'²⁴ I would like to reconsider the crucial juncture appealed to implicitly here: the climax of the devotee's engagement with the miraculous image. As Gaiger suggests, Walton offers some considerations which can help to frame an approach.

Walton's argument is based on a thought experiment about a viewer's response to a science fiction film, in which, in one imagined scene, a blob of green slime appears to advance, implicitly threatening the viewer. Afterwards the viewer says that he was terrified.²⁵ The parallel with the experience of a devotee at an image shrine is clearly not very precise because here the whole experience is of something avowedly

¹⁹ Holmes, *The Miraculous Image*, 211-55. David Morgan, 'The Ecology of Images: Seeing and the Study of Religion', *Religion and Society: Advances in Research*, 5 (2014), 83-105. Garnett and Rosser, *Spectacular Miracles*, esp. chapter 3, 109-59.

²⁰ Morgan, 'The Ecology of Images', 90. Garnett and Rosser, *Spectacular Miracles*, 23, 161 and 174.

²¹ Garnett and Rosser relate such practices to formal rites of image consecration in, for example, the Hindu tradition. *Spectacular Miracles*, 110-11 and 159.

²² Robert Maniura, 'Persuading the Absent Saint: Image and Performance in Marian Devotion', *Critical Inquiry*, 35/3 (2009), 649-50.

²³ Gaiger, 'Participatory Imagining', 371.

²⁴ Garnett and Rosser, *Spectacular Miracles*, 22-3.

²⁵ Kendall L. Walton, 'Fearing Fictions', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 75/1 (1978), 5.

fictional. The viewer has gone to the cinema to be entertained: there is no assumed belief in a real alien invasion which is represented in the film. At an image shrine, the holy person for whom the image stands and the idea of divine power are taken to be really existing things. The fictional element common to both is the presentation being viewed which is understood in both cases to be a man-made construction. What makes Walton's thought experiment promising is that it deals with a response involving heightened emotion.

The question, for Walton, is how we understand the viewer's professed fear. In some respects Walton's viewer responds as someone who is really frightened: adrenalin courses through his body, his heart rate increases, his palms sweat, and he tenses his muscles. But in other respects he does not behave like someone who is really frightened. He does not, crucially, run away or try to warn others of the apparent danger. He remains in his seat and continues watching the film. Walton's contention is that, even at the highest pitch of his involvement with the film, there is no point at which his viewer believes that he is actually in danger. At no point does he suspend his disbelief in the fiction.

Walton, indeed, questions what the suspension of disbelief could mean.²⁶ If it means that at some point the viewer begins fully to invest in the reality of the depicted scene, then we would expect a fuller manifestation of fear, but that does not happen. Critically, this state of suspension cannot be understood as a momentary achievement insufficient to allow a full manifestation of responses. Our engagements with fictions, scary or otherwise, are sustained over long periods. If, on the other hand, by suspension we understand merely uncertainty then this cannot explain the behaviour: if the viewer is simply not sure whether or not the scene is real, real fear would still be the most appropriate response. For Walton, the idea of the suspension of disbelief is misleading.²⁷ Rather, he proposes, the viewer's involvement with the fiction is itself another fiction: 'On my thesis we accomplish "decrease of distance" not by promoting fictions to our level but by descending to theirs. ... Rather than somehow fooling

²⁶ The 'willing suspension of disbelief' is proposed in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria Or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (London: Rest Fenner, 1817), vol. 2, 2.

²⁷ Walton, 'Fearing Fictions', 7-10.

ourselves into thinking fictions are real, we become fictional.²⁸ The point I wish to stress here is that Walton's proposal challenges the idea of a tipping point in the response of a viewer to an image. If the viewer starts out aware that what is viewed is a fiction, is it plausible to suggest that even at a point of great emotional involvement it starts to be viewed as real?

The lack of precision of the scary film analogy is admittedly limiting. In particular, it is not clear that there is a tell-tale sign of the perception of a real presence in a devotional context such as Walton suggests running away would be for the perception of the reality of something fearful. This is at the heart of the problem. Everything that the devotee does, it seems, is 'as if' the image were a holy person. However, the idea of a 'willing suspension of disbelief' is still problematic. If we allow that the devotee accepts the artefactual nature of the cult image, how are we to understand a shift to taking it as a holy person? There seem to be only two alternatives. The first is to bring back into play the collapse into cognitive error that most commentators agree is implausible as a starting point, with the devotees, in Walton's terms, somehow fooling themselves. It is not clear that it is possible willingly to fool oneself, to decide to be deceived. The second is to question whether the willing suspension of disbelief is distinct from pretending. Can consciously deciding to take the image as a holy person be anything other than itself a creative fiction?

The proposal that the behaviour of the devotee at an image shrine remains self-consciously a fiction, admittedly seems unsatisfying. As Frank Graziano remarks of the implications of the church's insistence on the distinction between image and sacred figure, were it observed in practice 'the passion of devotion before images would be reduced to a form of improvised theater, a make-believe, an emotional performance for a mannequin when prayer could venerate more authentically. A prop recognized as such cannot inspire or accommodate emotional intensity; devotion wants its object to be real.'²⁹ But does devotion get what it wants? I propose that we can find cases in which props do inspire high levels of emotional intensity. It all comes down to what the prop is taken to deliver.

²⁸ Walton, 'Fearing Fictions', 23. I advanced the related idea, drawing on Taussig, of an extension of the mimetic field to include the actions of the devotee. See note 21 above.

²⁹ Frank Graziano, *Miraculous Images and Votive Offerings in Mexico* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 16.

The role of the image at the miracle working shrine is seen in too polarized a way - as mere representation on the one hand or as real presence on the other. Images can be understood to have capacities which are not necessarily accommodated by these two extremes. Images can, for example, be understood as prosthetic devices, helping the viewer to see beyond the capacity of the unaided eye and, in some cases, enabling the viewer to see what is not physically present to them. Our own culture is very familiar with this idea in live television broadcasting and I propose that this can inform our thinking about miraculous images and the behaviour surrounding them.

The idea of live television coverage as prosthesis is especially forceful in the context of sporting events. To see the live television coverage is to be enabled to see the event. It is no real substitute for being there – it is not understood to be equivalent to being in the presence of the prototype – but it is taken to put the viewer in visual contact in a meaningful way. This is a very suggestive model for the force of the cult image. The image places the devotee in visual contact with the holy person. Pace Alberti, it is not that the image makes the absent present, but that it makes the absent visible.³⁰

It is important that watching live television coverage not only allows the viewers to see the event, but also allows them to participate in it in a way that is emotionally involving. It has become commonplace to watch major sporting events on screens in public places and this is where the analogy with the image shrine becomes most productive. At such gatherings the viewers/supporters shout their encouragement, sing, wave flags and scarves, cheer and weep, just as they would do at the match: they behave ‘as if’ they were present at the event itself. Here the prop, the viewing screen, is indeed capable of accommodating high levels of emotional intensity, and this even without any promised benefit to the 'devotee'.

One reason for this capacity is that the view of the screen displaying the event is only part of the experience, which also includes interaction with the other people gathered

³⁰ 'Painting possesses a truly divine power in that not only does it make the absent present (as they say of friendship), but it also represents the dead to the living many centuries later, so that they are recognized by spectators with pleasure and deep admiration for the artist.' Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. Cecil Grayson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 60.

there. Those others witness an individual's performance and their performances in turn inform and affirm it. The experience is a shared and mutually supportive one. Similarly, at an image shrine the viewer's encounter with the image is only one element of a more complex interaction. Miracle stories routinely articulate a lively awareness of the communal nature of the experience in the devotee's concern to communicate their story to others. Giuliano Guizzelmi's collection of miracles of Santa Maria delle Carceri in Prato has significant number of stories in which the devotee is said to 'publicly announce' their miracle.³¹ In some cases a stress is placed on the large numbers of people present to hear the testimony.³² In others there is a stress on the emphatic nature of the narration: Mona Catherina di Nicolò del Grasso of Querceto proclaimed her healing 'in a loud voice'.³³ In a number of the earliest dated stories, placed in August and September 1484, including that of Mona Catherina, the beneficiary of miracle was crowned with olive and processed to the established shrine of the Virgin's girdle in the nearby church of Santo Stefano.³⁴ In some cases the procession is said to be either witnessed, or participated in, by 'all the people'. The visit to the shrine is a public performance. We should consider the possibility that the shrine image is indeed a prop. Just as there is nothing inherently special about the TV screens at the bar where people congregate to watch a sporting event, there is not perceived to be anything inherently special about the image at the shrine. What marks it out is the convention that has arisen that this is a good place to come to see the saint in the company of fellow devotees. The image acts as a focus and generates a supportive space in which one can perform one's devotions. In an important sense the devotion at an image shrine is a form of theatre, but to propose this is not to render it trivial.

However, even if the image at the shrine is understood to deliver visual contact, like the screen at a sports bar, what apparently sets it apart is the association with miracle.

³¹ Guizzelmi regularly uses the formula 'publicamente manifestò tale grazia/miracolo'. For example the sequence of stories of Giovanni di Pichone, Ser Lorenzo di Bartholomeo di Francesco, Mariotto di Pavolo, Meo d'Antonio di Francesco and Mona Sancta. Guizzelmi, *Historia*, fols. 60r-62r. Gagliardi, 'I miracoli', 149.

³² For example in the stories of Marietta di Chimenti di Domenico ('presenti molti persone'), Giovanni detto Malacarne ('presente gram popolo') and Agnolo di Jacopo del Gaio ('a infinite persone'). Guizzelmi, *Historia*, fols. 41v, 50v and 64r. Gagliardi, 'I miracoli', 144, 146 and 150.

³³ Guizzelmi, *Historia*, fols. 27r-v. Gagliardi, 'I miracoli', 141.

³⁴ In the stories of Mona Pippa, Mona Camilla, Lorenzo di Pippo, Mona Catherina and Luca d'Antonio di Nanni. Guizzelmi, *Historia*, fols. 17r-v, 23r, 27r, 28r-29r. Gagliardi, 'I miracoli', 138-41.

The devotees' interactions at the Carceri, cited above, are from stories of miracle. Even if we allow the force of the devotees' creative performances, how do we construe the devotees' understanding of the outpouring of divine power and its relationship to the image?

It is important that in the cases in Guizzelmi's collection cited above, the devotees announcing their miracles publicly at the shrine did so on arrival having obtained the miracle elsewhere in response to a vow.³⁵ This phenomenon of the remote miracle makes any straightforward understanding of the shrine image as the source of miraculous power problematic.³⁶ Even if the vow is addressed to 'Santa Maria delle Carceri' and entails a visit to the shrine, can the image be construed as the agent when the miracle is achieved at a distance from it? Christopher Nygren has recently shown just how statistically significant this feature is for miracles associated with image shrines and has highlighted the implications for the issue of agency.³⁷ If, as proposed above, we drop the assumption of the saint's presence at the shrine, this diffusion of power is less perplexing: the saint's power is not strictly localized just as the saint is not strictly localized.

Ultimately, however, miracle itself is not the clear cut issue that it might first seem to be. Take the story from Guizzelmi's collection about his nephew Francesco, quoted above. The boy was sick. His father went to the Carceri, vowed him to 'Her Majesty', and the boy got better. What does the miracle consist in? There is no traceable process. The miracle lies in the votary's conviction that a miracle has occurred. The parents judge that it is the vow to the Carceri that has been decisive factor. Elsewhere I have proposed that miracle is the devotee's redescription of the world to

³⁵ As in the case of the sequence of stories in note 30 above. Altogether 61 of the 94 miracles related in Guizzelmi's collection are said to take place away from the shrine.

³⁶ Robert Maniura, *Pilgrimage to Images in the Fifteenth Century: The Origins of the Cult of Our Lady of Częstochowa* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2004), 112-5; Robert Maniura, 'Image and Relic in the Cult of Our Lady of Prato' in Sally J. Cornelison and Scott B. Montgomery (eds), *Images, Relics, and Devotional Practices in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* in the series *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), 206-8.

³⁷ Christopher J. Nygren, 'Non-Agentive Efficacy: Some Data on Presence, Absence and the Ontological Entanglement of Miraculous Images', in *Presence and Agency* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, forthcoming). I am grateful to Dr Nygren for giving me access to his article.

accommodate divine aid.³⁸ Graziano puts the point succinctly: 'Miracles are not events; they are interpretations.'³⁹ The construction of miracle itself is part of the work that the devotees do.

This may sound like another form of self delusion, but recent work in psychology has pointed to the potentially beneficial effects of such seeming passivity as a way of retrieving something positive from apparently hopeless situations. What has been termed secondary control, defined as the process by which people 'adjust some aspect of the self and accept circumstances as they are', has been shown to help in managing feelings of helplessness and assist in coping strategies.⁴⁰ Deferring to an external authority, be it a health professional, a saint or a picture of a saint, is itself an action that can lead to the recuperation of at least a sense of control in adversity.⁴¹

The miraculous image can be understood as a device manipulated by the devotee in making an accommodation with circumstances.⁴² This approach insists on the devotee as the primary agent, in Gell's terms, but it does not deprive the image itself of agency.⁴³ The image is not just a prosthetic aid to sight, but a tool of crisis management which, when wielded, feeds back on the user, changing the user's relationship to the world.⁴⁴ The devotees interact with the image 'as if' with the saint in mutually supportive collective performances of hope, reassurance and consolation.

The image's role in this network is by no means arbitrary. Images draw the eye: they are, as Gell argued, mechanisms of captivation and even entrapment.⁴⁵ It is significant that many images associated with miracle, like that at the Carceri, were originally located outside in accessible spaces.⁴⁶ We cannot know what the old prison in Prato

³⁸ Robert Maniura, 'Ex Votos, Art and Pious Performance', *Oxford Art Journal*, 32/3 (2009), 422; Maniura, 'Persuading the Absent Saint', 652-3.

³⁹ Graziano, *Miraculous Images*, 128.

⁴⁰ Beth Morling and Sharrilyn Evered, 'Secondary Control Reviewed and Defined', *Psychological Bulletin*, 132/2 (2006), 269–296. The proposed definition on 272.

⁴¹ The relevance of these ideas to miracle-working shrines is discussed in Graziano, *Miraculous Images*, 166-8.

⁴² For the image as interactive device, see Morgan, 'The Ecology of Images', 87-90.

⁴³ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 20.

⁴⁴ For the tool acting on the user see Gell, *Art and Agency*, 21.

⁴⁵ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 68-95.

⁴⁶ As at the Carceri, this is sometimes verifiable, for example Santa Maria al Calcinaio outside Cortona and the Madonna dei Ricci in Florence. Pietro Matracchi, *La chiesa di S. Maria delle Grazie al Calcinaio presso Cortona e l'opera di Francesco di Giorgio* (Calosci, 1992); William J.

looked like, but it seems likely that the wall painting of the Virgin and Saints was conspicuous. In the context of a given set of iconographic and devotional conventions, such images represented a ready devotional resource, ripe for exploitation by a community whose expectations were fed by news of similar activity elsewhere.

These remarks do not pretend to constitute a complete theory of response to miraculous images. I have engaged most extensively with the image's apparent action on the devotees through miraculous healing but hardly at all with the miraculous transformations of the image itself. These transformations apparently challenge the interpretation advanced here by openly articulating the image as animated, but I suggest that they stand in a different and less immediate relationship to the devotee. In the case of the Carceri, the most spectacular transformation was Jacopino's experience of seeing the Virgin get out of the picture and walk around. This transformation was, however, witnessed only by him and we have no direct access to that experience: the available accounts were written by other people. Everyone else involved in the cult encountered his experience, like us, as a story in circulation: it is something that articulates the site but is not part of a more general experience. The miracles of transformation which were reported to have a more general audience – the colour changes and eye movements – were of a much more limited kind and the available accounts of them, concentrated in the earliest months of the cult, evoke a purely visual engagement with crowds gathering to gaze at the image.⁴⁷ My point in stressing Guizzelmi's accounts of healing miracles, which are the exclusive focus of his book, is that his writings show that the perception of healing associated with the shrine was, by contrast, widespread, long-lasting and, on the evidence of his own first-person testimony, something with which people felt intimately and actively involved. The enduring power of Santa Maria delle Carceri as a social phenomenon was experienced preeminently in terms of widely distributed healing.

The distinctions discussed here between creative fiction and perceived presence are perhaps too close to call on the available evidence. One can appreciate the suppleness of Trexler's foundational proposal of 'practical identity' between image and saint: the

Connell and Giles Constable, 'Sacrilege and Redemption in Renaissance Florence: The Case of Antonio Rinaldeschi', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 61 (1998), 53-92.
⁴⁷ *Miracoli et gratie*, fols. 37r-38v. Gagliardi, 'I miracoli', 121-2.

behaviour of the devotee is the same whether we suppose that the devotee came to believe that the image was the saint or retained an awareness of it as an artefact. Indeed, I would argue that it is precisely the devotee's actions and not the ontological status of their focus that is the crucial devotional issue.⁴⁸ However, my purpose in contesting the idea of a perception of 'real presence' has been to argue that we do not have to assume this in order to make sense of what goes on at an image shrine. My lingering concern is that the real presence argument threatens to efface the image by collapsing the shrine encounter into an unmediated experience of the divinity. It seems to me more interesting to keep the image in play and consider how devotees used it to celebrate, plead with and cajole their tantalizingly remote saints. In a discussion of agency, the miraculous image challenges and extends our understanding of what people could do with images, or make images do to them.

⁴⁸ This engages with the approach of anthropologist R. R. Marett for whom 'religion [for him 'savage religion'] is something not so much thought out as danced out'. R. R. Marett, *The Threshold of Religion* (2nd edn, London: Methuen, 1914), xxxi. I am grateful to the anonymous readers for this observation.

