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978-0-521-10882-9 - The Incorruptible Flesh: Bodily Mutation and Mortification in  
Religion and Folklore

Piero Camporesi

Excerpt

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## **PART I**

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## 1

## THE 'PRODIGIOUS MANNA'

It was said that from the dead bodies of God's virgins and the buried flesh of his saints there gushed forth a healing sap, a wondrous balm. A 'most gentle odour', a 'marvelous odour' were unmistakable signs of the thaumaturgical presence of a saintly corpse, that aromatic liberator from 'all manner of sickness'. The dead might become a source of health, givers of life, indeed. When St Nicholas of Bari 'was buried in a tomb of marble, a fountain of oil sprang out from the head unto his feet; and unto this day oil issueth out of his body, which is much available to the health of sicknesses of many men'.<sup>1</sup> Upon capturing the city of Miren, the iconoclastic Turks opened the 'tomb of St Nicholas' and found his bones to be 'swimming in oil'.<sup>2</sup> Medieval fascination with the behaviour of saintly bodies under post mortem sets the scene for a morbid and nightmarish drama of which their bones, flesh and blood are the tormented protagonists, engaged in a long and restless *iter* which persisted, in some cases, across the ages. One catches glimpses of nocturnal life in convents, of macabre and spine-chilling operations more akin to butchery, of rudimentary dissections carried out with knives and razors by hands which, while devout, shook with inexperience.

Having decided that the body of Sister Chiara of Montefalco, known as 'of the Cross', who had died in an 'odour of sanctity' and had been declared blessed by all, should be opened and embalmed, the Augustinian nuns – whose abbess she had been – deemed that 'it was not proper for that virgin flesh to be touched by any man whatsoever', and that 'her saintly body' which had been a 'living temple to the Holy Ghost', should not be contaminated by the hands of a barber-surgeon. Therefore, one hot and still Saturday night in August 1308, while the convent slept, four of their number, tucking up their sleeves, embarked on a series of (for us) astonishing operations.

They went into the oratory and with the utmost respect undressed the saintly body. Sister Francesca, inexperienced though she was, opened it as best she could with a razor. They

<sup>1</sup> Jacopo da Varagine, *Leggenda aurea*. English translation taken from *The Golden Legend* printed by Caxton, 1483; ed. F. S. Ellis, London, 1900, vol. 2, p. 117.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 117.

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then began to remove the intestines. She noticed that the gall-bladder was white and when she touched it she felt inside it three hard objects like stones, which were round in shape and together formed a triangle . . . . As they continued removing the intestines, they reached the heart and all saw that it was inordinately large, larger than an infant's head . . . . The nuns decided that it was right and proper to put the heart to one side: this they did, and placing all the other intestines in an earthenware jar, they buried them within the oratory itself where the saint had died, to one side of the altar where to this day they are thought to lie. Taking up the heart again, Sister Francesca said 'behold this heart, in which the Lord has worked so many wonders'. Placing it in a wooden bowl, they locked it up in a chest. This done, they dressed the body again and set it to rights.<sup>3</sup>

After being told the results of the autopsy carried out by their four dissecting colleagues, the thought of this heart of extraordinary dimensions caused the nuns to lie awake at night. It began to be suspected that the matter 'was not without mystery'. Some of the nuns then recalled that Sister Chiara had been much given to contemplating Christ's Passion, and that during her final illness

she had more than once repeated these words: 'I bear the crucified Christ within my heart.' All the nuns were agreed that in this heart there lay Christ's cross. 'I am the more inclined to believe this', added Sister Marina, 'since I remember our holy Mother Abbess saying to me seven years ago that Christ had appeared to her in the guise of a Pilgrim bearing a cross on his shoulder, and told her that He wanted to plant the cross in her heart'; the nuns finally decided that her heart should be opened for the purposes of embalming, whether a mystery were found or no.<sup>4</sup>

And so one Sunday night, with this in mind, Sisters Lucia, Margarita, Caterina and Francesca betook themselves to a room where the heart lay locked away in its box; and taking it up they all four knelt. Sister Francesca opened it, uttering with great humility the following words: 'Lord, I believe that in this heart there lies your holy Cross, although I believe my sins to be so many that they make me unworthy to find it.' Thus saying, she took the heart in one hand and in the other a razor and, not

<sup>3</sup> B. Piergilii, *Vita della B. Chiara detta della Croce da Montefalco dell'ordine di S. Agostino*, Foligno, 1663<sup>2</sup>, pp. 193–4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 196.

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knowing where to make her incision because the heart, consistent with the general condition of the body, was all covered in fat, she finally decided to start the incision at the top where the heart is broader, took it to the lower extremity, and thus opened the heart easily with one cut.

The excess of blood was such that they did not at first see what was contained therein; they knew well enough that the heart is concave and divided into two parts, being a whole only in its circumference; then Sister Francesca felt with her finger that in the middle of one section there ran a nerve; and when she drew it out, they saw to their amazement that it was a cross, formed of flesh, which had been ensconced in a cavity of the same shape as the cross. Upon seeing this, Sister Margarita began shouting, 'A miracle, a miracle' . . .

It occurred to Sister Giovanna, after observing this phenomenon, that the heart might harbour other mysteries: so she told Sister Francesca to continue her inspection with greater attention . . . And in so doing, she encountered another small nerve standing up in the heart, like the Cross; and studying it carefully, they realized that it represented the Whip, or Scourge, with which Christ was beaten at the Pillar.

The nuns were so astonished at the extraordinary nature of these mysteries, that they could do no less than praise the Lord, who worked such miracles.<sup>5</sup>

The news spread like wildfire outside the bounds of the convent and an 'heretic of the sect of the Little Brothers' [Minorite Friars], feigning devout orthodoxy, and at the instigation of the Devil, hastened to the Bishop at Spoleto, Berengario Donadei, in order to denounce this 'credulousness born of gossip and the fantasies of women' and the probably bogus nature of the operation performed by 'meddlesome hands'. Having thanked the heretic, Berengario set off for Montefalco to 'bury the news which he already considered scandalous and foolhardy and severely to punish those nuns'.

Before a chosen gathering of theologians, judges, doctors and churchmen of every kind and persuasion, Berengario caused the heart to be brought to him. He took it and 'with a gesture of scorn and disdain he opened it'.

Whereupon he observed both Cross and Scourge with great circumspection, as he did the whole heart. And behold an even greater miracle: both he and the others foregathered discovered,

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Ibid. pp. 196-7.

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when they touched the heart and examined it carefully, that there were other mysteries of the Passion, to wit the Pillar, the Crown of Thorns, the three Nails, the Spear and the Pole with the Sponge, all so truly represented that Berengario on touching the point of the Spear and the three Nails was pricked by them as though they had really been of iron. At this point everyone was awe-struck and filled with amazement . . .<sup>6</sup>

The same fate awaited the gall bladder which, when disinterred and taken from the jar together with the other intestines, and separated from the liver and dissected by Sister Francesca again with the same razor, yielded three globules or balls, linked together to form a triangle. These were washed in wine by Sister Tommasa, dissected and examined by the theologians, who decreed that ‘the three globules were without doubt a symbol of the ineffable mystery of the Holy Trinity’. It was found that the heart and its mysteries remained miraculously intact

since these were never kept in any preservative; indeed, for a period of some years at a time, the chaplain or some other priest exhibited them, and taking the heart he would open it, remove the Crucifix and the Scourge from its cavity; after showing these to the congregation, he would replace them . . .<sup>7</sup>

The blood which ‘was collected from the heart of this saintly woman . . . is still today to be seen in a phial and it is red in colour just like a ruby’. At times this blood would boil, portentously and ‘terribly’, especially in periods of mourning or catastrophe, war or epidemic.

The remainder of the body was placed in a coffin and lowered into a deep grave inside the church of Montefalco. It became necessary, nonetheless, to satisfy the ‘devout importunings’ of the populace which ‘clamoured repeatedly to be allowed to see Chiara’s saintly remains’, and the chaplain of Montefalco ordered ‘that the body be disinterred and kept in a place where it might be seen by all’.

As in the case of the intestines hidden away in a jar which, when exhumed were found ‘to have no unwholesome odour’,

it being the fifth day since the death of this saintly woman: her body, despite its being plentifully covered in flesh and fat, and although it had not yet been embalmed, the day being hot too – for it was the twenty-first of August – not only remained intact and unblemished in every way but with a countenance fresh, nay, almost resplendent, she exhaled a gentle odour, a heavenly fragrance.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 200.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 217.

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The nuns had requested of the apothecary, Tomaso di Bartolone, the necessary ointments in order to embalm the body. It was God's will that the apothecary should bring the said ointments ten days after the death of the holy woman. He delivered them into the nuns's hands and showed them what to do. Accordingly, the nuns undressed the body and following the apothecary's instructions, removed the brain and embalmed the body in its entirety. They then wrapped it in the fine cloth which they sewed up, allowing face, hands and feet to show – just as they may be seen today.<sup>8</sup>

Every year on the eve of the feast of St John the Baptist, the remains were taken from the coffin and placed upon the altar. The night prior to the solstice (*sacrum*) of antiquity, 'they undress the body, cleanse it with a powder and dress it again', to show it the following day to the multitude of the faithful. The uninhibited familiarity with which the nuns of Montefalco opened corpses, removed intestines, heart, liver, gall, dissected the organs, bored into skulls, extracted brains, embalmed bodies, powdered mummies, opened and shut coffins, repeatedly manipulated age-old cadavers, may be disconcerting nowadays, but the nuns of Montefalco were only one among a number of communities indulging in such activities. In Ferrara, the body of the most noble and blessed Beatrice II of Este 'was often exhumed and found to be undecayed',<sup>9</sup> wrote her anonymous seventeenth-century biographer who, barring certain additions, virtually reproduces the biography compiled by the Archpriest of Cento, the plagiarist, Girolamo Baruffaldi. It is true that the cadaver of one who had been blessed represented a useful source of exploitation in all sorts of ways, although this only provides us with half an explanation for the unreservedness with which the physical side of death was treated – something incomprehensible to us.

There exuded from the grave of the saintly Beatrice d'Este 'a supernatural fragrance so sweetly aromatic and unlike any earthly odours, that it filled any who drew near to that holy repository with joy, solace and enchantment'.<sup>10</sup> This extraordinary perfume had a tendency to grow stronger, according to the chronicles of old, 'at times when Holy Mass was celebrated, almost in token of her pleasure at the entreaties addressed to her'.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 216.

<sup>9</sup> *Vita della Beata Beatrice seconda d'Este. Fondatrice dell'Insigne Monastero de S. Antonio in Ferrara della Regola di S. Benedetto*, Ferrara, 1777, p. 91. This biography of the Este saint (mentioned also in *Orlando Furioso*) compiled by Girolamo Baruffaldi, was printed in Venice in 1723.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 92.

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In descriptions of the past [the goodly lady was born during the first half of the thirteenth century] it was especially noted how the sick who drew near to her sepulchre to pray for a return to health were overwhelmed by this remarkable fragrance which, far from being ephemeral, was of a lasting nature, to such an extent that a nun who was visiting the tomb in order to renew her votive offering marvelled so greatly and for so long at the fragrance, that she fell to her knees and recited the whole Office never once losing her perception of the sweet scent, which grew from moment to moment.<sup>11</sup>

Through the medium of the ‘saintly cadaver, which, the tomb being opened to reveal the ‘miracle of the aroma’, ‘was seen to be intact, beautiful and resplendent as though still alive’, those heavenly odours permeated the earth, sweetened the air, inebriated and stunned the senses. A fragile, precarious and ephemeral transmission system was formed, with the holy cadaver at its centre, from which there flowed an aromatic radiation. The ‘odour of sanctity’ was no mere metaphor but a matter of deep importance: it was a tangible presence fed by collective hallucinations. The aromas of paradise, transmitted through the bodies of the blessed were regarded as real by an emotional, impressionable and easily excitable sensibility always ready – in a manner totally alien to us today – to capture the essence of the supernatural, the emanations of the uranian, the taste of the ineffable. This hallucinated sensitivity was a direct product of the high degree of religiosity which permeated people’s everyday lives, people who were used to illogical and irrational forms of perception and knowledge, which were nonetheless soothing and comforting in themselves, and at once stimulating. This experiencing of the sacred (or magic – which is almost the same thing) by absorption all one’s waking hours, day after day, at table, at work, in the street, in bed, brought with it a form of fideistic knowledge, based on contacts and conversations with impossible and ultrasensitive worlds; it was stranger to the subtle yet tormenting, illuminating yet destabilising notion of Reason. The most subtle logic and honeyed arguments were brought to bear to justify a world whose order was based on the irrationality of faith, on the paradoxical myths of oriental fables or the tightrope acrobatics of fanciful theologians. The Montefalco nuns who opened Sister Chiara’s heart and thought they found there the Mysteries (the instruments in miniature) of the Passion, the Vicar-General and theologians who confirmed their discovery and set the seal of authority on the miraculous event: every one of them participated in a fantastic drama produced by collective hallucination and set upon a dark and gory stage. The three

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. pp. 92–3

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'globules' discovered in the gall-bladder – 'a proven symbol of the ineffable mystery of the Holy Trinity' according to the theological doctrines of the time – were found when placed upon a pair of scales to be of equal weight and quality. But far greater was the

astonishment when, after deeper examination, it was found that not only were they equal in weight, but that if one were placed in one tray and the other two in the other tray, the two weighed as much as the single one; and upon weighing two together and then all three, the two weighed as much as the three; and the one weighed the same as all three together: a tangible proof of the profound mystery of the Holy Trinity, whom St Augustine described as follows: 'One Person is as great as the three at once, and two are in no way greater than one; and in Themselves They are infinite things in each singly, and also all things in each singly, and single things in all, and all things in all, and the one is all things.' . . . And so with the stones, as verified by other reliable books and by many proven tests; one weighs as much as two and two as much as three. In our present day, this test was carried out in the presence of more than thirty people and was found to be thus – and may God who allows me write on such matters be witness thereof – but I believe that when someone seeks to discover something which is of curiosity, God would not make him worthy of discovering it *for he who hides his knowledge only reveals his own smallness of mind*.<sup>12</sup>

To the eighteenth-century biographer of this Augustinian nun, a layman from Bevagna called Battista Piergilli, the 'rational experiments' of Galileo take place in a remote, improbable and demoniacal setting pertaining more to the sphere of pseudoscientific 'curiosity' inspired by the Evil One; they are inimical to the magical order upon which the revealed world rests. Many continued to think like this obscure village intellectual for a long time after him. They were probably wrong. But they found in the impossible, improbable and visionary, a heavenly consolation such as modern science with all its 'objective' equipment has failed to provide.

After being transferred to its new sepulchre, the disinterment of the body of the noble Benedictine abbess of the Eremite monastery of St Anthony of Ferrara became a ritual and every year, on the anniversary of her death, on 18 August:

They brought that saintly body from its sepulchre and laid it on the marble slab near to the altar so that they could array it in

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B. Piergilli, *Vita della B. Chiara*, pp. 206–7.

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clothes and carefully wash it, anointing it with cotton soaked with wine and water, and the flesh was found to be still soft, as though living, and firm . . . .

For this fluid and the impregnated cotton rags with which the holy body had been washed and wiped, another use was found: they were distributed among the sick of the town and hospitals, because their beneficial qualities, which derived from Beatrice herself, were such as to cure all manner of disease.

The disinterment and the practice of washing the body continued for many years . . .<sup>13</sup>

The practice was abandoned at the beginning of the sixteenth century, however:

The nuns had already decided to abandon the practice of washing the holy remains, whether with water or any other fluid, their supply of the ointment being finally exhausted, when there began to flow from the marble slab of her altar a copious stream of the purest water . . .<sup>14</sup>

This 'wondrous nectar' with supernaturally therapeutic powers could be used to correct nature's excesses, by controlling the processes of preservation and stabilization of wine. If, as sometimes occurred, during its long sojourn in the dark recesses of a cellar, the wine lost, through some unforeseeable cosmic and meteorological disturbance, its normal relationship with the sun, which while remote and invisible, nonetheless governed the lengthy process of ripening, gradual fermentation and ageing; if the wine turned sour in its barrels, if it seethed and bubbled, the supernatural liquid originating from the cadaver had power to restore peace and order to the turbulent barrel. It might indeed be that the wine in turning was trying to subvert its preordained rôle as mere neutral begetter of riotous drunkenness in men; instead, it 'had gone mad' itself and become drunk on its own account.

In the month of July of 1501 on the eve of the feast of St James the Apostle, so great was the heat of the season and so ardent the fiery vapours that descended from heaven, that even the wines in their subterranean casks boiled as though they had been placed before a fire, and the corks began to shoot out impetuously from their bung holes as though from a cannon. The nuns in charge ran to the scene and found that all the casks were affected by the boiling. Great was their dismay, and they prayed to the holy Beatrice that she might help them preserve some of their wine to

<sup>13</sup> *Vita della Beata Beatrice*, p. 95.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 105.

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bring to table; they deemed it prudent to place a few drops of saintly nectar or the water with which her body had been washed in each of the barrels. Later when the hour of supper arrived the nun appointed to fetch wine confidently descended to the cellar expecting to find things changed; and indeed, she found all the wines sound and incorrupt, and wholesome and good in flavour, as though they had never suffered any evil effect whatsoever.<sup>15</sup>

The wine thus 'laced' with sap from the incorrupt bones and flesh of Beatrice who 'placed among the ranks of the saintly / shall be honoured with incense and votive offerings' (*Orlando furioso*, XIII, 64), and the decay of the dancing and rebellious enzymes of fermentation thus having been overcome (the enzymes and fermentation tended to be identified with hobgoblins and the spirits which presided over the phenomena of leavening, ripening, curdling and putrefaction), cosmic order was restored to the once turbulent cellar. This episode, if true, fits in perfectly with the Egyptian thaumaturgic-cum-pharmacological logic of the old world, according to which the human body and its derivatives possessed a great variety of medicinal and curative properties. *Homo homini salus*: human beings were a source of precious medicaments for their fellows, both dead and living, by providing excrements and other by-products of the body, and 'we can see how by its various parts and functions the human body can benefit human health'. So wrote a canon of the Reformed Lateran Order in the seventeenth century, Ottavio Scarlatini, archpriest of Castel San Pietro and member of the 'Gelati' academy of Bologna: 'since it is inevitable that the body dies, whether anointed and embalmed artificially or naturally, it may yet provide medicaments vital to human health'.<sup>16</sup>

Only a few generations divide us from 1685, the year in which these observations were made, yet these words seem to come from a very different age and imbue us moreover with a sense of discomfort and unease by evoking ghosts we thought buried in the anthropophagic pharmacology of a past which saw in a seasoned, embalmed – or otherwise manipulated – human being a first-rate remedy for the conservation of human health. Modern sensibility, however, bridles at the idea that the body of another man, our neighbour, might be used to safeguard our health. The relationship between man and his body, and that between a man and the bodies of others, has undergone a radical change in a very short period of time. The bacteriological revolution of

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. pp. 134–5.

<sup>16</sup> O. Scarlatini, *L'uomo e sue parti figurato, e simbolico, anatomico, rationale, morale, mistico, politico e legale, raccolto e spiegato*. . . , Bologna, 1684, part II, p. 180.