

# **MIMESIS**

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# FICTIONAL ARTWORKS

## Literary Ékphrasis and the Invention of Images

Edited by Valeria Cammarata and Valentina Mignano

**MIMESIS**  
INTERNATIONAL

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# PREFACE

MICHELE COMETA

*Fictional Artworks* aims to introduce some considerations on the links between literary texts and visual media. It is a matter of carrying on a research about the transformations that the latter has produced on the former and, vice versa, about the contribution that literature has given – at both the poetological and thematological levels – to the constitution of the cultural and social paradigms that preside over the genesis of images. This investigation starts from the ever-increasing role that images have “for” literature, “in” literature and within the “literary system”, a process obviously descending from the resumption of the debate on the twentieth-century debate on the “wechselseitige Erhellung der Künste”, the reciprocal illumination of arts.

The articles here collected come from the investigations of a team focusing on the (artistic) creative process and on the cultural dynamics that underlay the balance/objection relations between literary texts and images.

In the following pages particular attention is paid to the description of images (ékphrasis), which ended up constituting an autonomous field of studies. Ékphrasis has found a fertile terrain in classical studies in Italy (Settis, 1999) and in art history, eventually developing within the field of literary theory (Cometa, 2004, 2005 and 2012; Segre, 2003; Mengaldo 2005) and aesthetics (Härle, 2005). Another important cornerstone of research is constituted by the Anglo-Saxon studies, above all American ones, on classical ékphrasis, with particular attention to the *incunabula* of descriptions, from Homer to Philostratus, to Callistratus and Lucian, a tradition that was grafted onto the dawning one of American “visual studies” interested in a

cultural study of *ékphrasis*, as in the case of W. J. T. Mitchell and J. Heffernan, who have dwelt on the political and gender implications of classical descriptions (Mitchell 1994; Heffernan, 1993). Also fundamental is, in this context, the work of Umberto Eco, whose *Les Sémaphores sous la pluie* (2002) is endowed with the enormous value of the horizon of reception, of that sort of “pact” that the one who describes has to establish with the spectator, that kind of interpretative “participation” that Eco places at the centre of his typology of hypotyposis. The “presence” of the spectator and that of the picture are, in fact, essential aspects of modern *ékphrasis*, as, obviously, its absence.

Attention towards particular technical features of *ékphrastic* theory is also relevant in this book. Several essays diffusely deal with the levels of reality that *ékphrasis* establishes (from the “mimetic” *ékphrasis*, i.e. based on an artistic object that really exists or has existed, to the “notional” one, i.e. that which “creates” its own object). *Fictional Artworks*’ essays investigate *ékphrastic* modalities in a wide range of cultural-artistic fields: from Psychoanalysis to the History of Science, from Visual Arts (sculpture, classic and modern painting, cinema and photography) to travel literature and comics. *Corporeal turn* is also one of the main themes of this volume (particularly in its ability to give rise to real *ékphrastic* performances) as well as creativity as a liminal zone between storytelling and pictorial image. The thread of this collection of essays is however the relationship between the unspeakable and the representable: a conceptual starting point in the attempt to investigate the *limits of representation* and the modalities through which literature – together with artistic practices – tries to overcome them.

The starting idea for this book was born on the occasion of the international conference *Beyond the Limits of Representation* (Palermo, September 2012), in which all the authors laid the groundwork about the modalities through which visual media influence narrative plots and forms, and *vice-versa*.

# MOVING THE LIMITS OF REPRESENTATION: INVENTION, SEQUEL AND CONTINUATION IN BUZZATI'S *MIRACLES*

ROBERTA COGLITORE

Dino Buzzati's *The Miracles of Morel Valley* is actually a *sequel* of a previous work of the author.<sup>1</sup> The beginning and the end of the last Buzzati's iconotext are brought backwards and forwards to prolong the phases of the artistic genesis and to substantiate in the double mediality its *raison d'être*.

The original core of the work is composed by thirty-four votive panels dedicated to the miraculous intervention of Saint Rita in Morel Valley, accompanied by short texts, displayed in a solo exhibition in 1970 and collected in its catalog entitled *Unpublished Miracles of a Saint*<sup>2</sup>, together with a short story entitled *Explanation*. In the following edition published by Garzanti in 1971, a second expanded and more complex version of the introductory story presents the narrative background that has generated, in an imaginery way, the pictorial creation using a fantastic guise and the first person narrative. The realization of yet another panel devoted to Saint Rita was exposed post-mortem in Limana in 1973, in a little chapel specially built at the request of the mayor in honor of the writer, who loved walking in the

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- 1 Gerard Genette, *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982). See the difference between *continuation*, as a completion of the unfinished or suspended work by a different author (chapter XXVIII ff.), and *sequel*, as a re-launching of the original project beyond the work of the author him- or her-self (chapter XXXVIII ff.).
  - 2 At the series of thirty-four panels of *Unpublished Miracles of a Saint* (Venice: Del Naviglio, 1970) should be added five more panels (*The Colombole, The Mammon Cat, The Giant Robin, The Martians, Fall of the House of Usher*) and the introductory explanation at the volume entitled *The Miracles of Morel Valley* (Milano: Garzanti, 1971).

valleys around Belluno. It later become pilgrimage destination for curious and mountain enthusiasts as well as admirers of Buzzati, representing the pictorial *sequel* and the architectural *continuation* towards an expansion of artistic forms.

A literary practice invents, therefore, both the original images, the real ex-voto – that is three-dimensional objects offered “for grace received” –, and the votive paintings – that is two-dimensional pictures that Buzzati says he observed in the votive paintings made by the caretaker of the shrine of Valmorel and then disappeared along with the entire chapel at his second visit with his grandchildren after the war. In the literary fiction introduced by the frame story Buzzati’s paintings are nothing but the reproduction of images *de visu* observed by the author in the shrine and of those copied from a sketch found in his father’s library. According to Genette it is a *sequel* pretending to be a *continuation*.

The iconotext comes from the imaginery disappearance of the images and of the sanctuary – once as a catalog, once as an illustrated book –, and then also a shrine after the will of the mayor of the city of Limana, for whom Buzzati paints a final table depicting Saint Rita and the misfortunes she has to face. It is a fake *continuation* of the work of other authors and by means of different media, but also a real, even if partial, *sequel* present in the statements of the author.

Two inverse trails that branch off in two opposite directions, those of writing and painting, but contributing together to invent a pseudo hypotext and a real hypertext, relaunching the production of the work beyond its initial design.

A notional *ékphrasis* invents the three-dimensional and then the two-dimensional works of art; the same way as the production of an additional painting, the last of Buzzati, gives credibility and makes real the invention of the *Miracles*. Literature invents the artistic background that generated the iconotext, and painting provides evidence to the reality of imagination.

### *Advanced Genetics*

Because of the composition of the two arts *The Miracles of Morel Valley* could be considered as a metanarrative, where a frame story includes thirty-nine micro-tales illustrated by the same author,<sup>3</sup> or they could be analyzed as a catalog of paintings accompanied by an extensive caption or even as a modern emblematics.<sup>4</sup> From the point of view of the locations they have been appreciated as a tribute to the place of origin of the author, an anthropological rewriting, with images and words, of his own traditions.<sup>5</sup> Considered in their subversive drive they are a “joke”, as the author liked to call them,<sup>6</sup> or in an autobiographical reading an attempt to show, while concealing them, his innermost

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- 3 On the importance of the paratext see Marie-Hélène Caspar, ‘A propos du paratexte buzzatien’, *Studi Buzzatiani*, 5 (2000), 27-46 (p. 27): «It is a text or more exactly a number of texts composed as micro-stories, but their unit, their consistency is not immediately manifest. And this is why the paratext becomes a necessity».
- 4 Zugni Tauro does not agree on the assimilation to the emblematic form. In order to strengthen the internal logic in the succession of panels and especially the strong link between the two elements of expressive images and captions he writes: «the marginal explanations of Buzzati are not for the image what the motto is for the emblem, rather they play a modern and original echo that cannot be dismantled», Anna Paola Zugni Tauro, ‘L’affabulazione fantastica ne «I miracoli di Val Morel»’, in *Il pianeta Buzzati*, ed. by Nella Giannetto (Milano: Mondadori, 1992), 341-73 (p. 342).
- 5 Patrizia Dalla Rosa, ‘Geografia e onomastica de “I Miracoli di Valmorel”’, in *Dove qualcosa sfugge: lingue e luoghi di Buzzati, Quaderni del centro Buzzati*, 3 (2004), 101-11; Zugni Tauro says that «the “Oedipal relationship” with San Pellegrino is the basis of his original tone, of his atmosphere, of his writing and painting, rather than the Italian twentieth-century “magical realism”, to which the work of Buzzati can be juxtaposed but not organically connected», Zugni Tauro, p. 344.
- 6 Emilio Pozzi, ‘Dino Buzzati a Radio Lugano: l’ultima intervista’, *Studi Buzzatiani*, 7 (2002), 101-11 (p. 108): «No, there was no intention to imitate the classic ex-voto: my intention was to make them all-new, telling a story in each one, a mostly fantastic and also, let’s face it, unlikely story. So ... there is no need to take these ex-voto seriously, from the point of view of the chronicle!».

thoughts<sup>7</sup> or to avert his own death.<sup>8</sup> In the view of an iconotext theory they could be an example of a compensatory poetics,<sup>9</sup> or they could play as a pastiche of the ex-voto religious genre, denouncing in a new formula the metariflexive need of the two arts.

The ex-voto are offered to Saint Rita, evoking the well-known religious tradition of votive images, to show gratitude for solving small and big troubles of the inhabitants of Morel Valley. The intervention of the saint, a regular feature of votive paintings,<sup>10</sup> occurs in two ways: Saint Rita in action along with the other main characters of the scene or shown in a frame that stands her out, for nature and moment, from the scene represented. In both cases, through the lines of the drawing and the kind of action, the different nature, ultramundane and miraculous, is still depicted next to the mundane and plagued one of the other characters.

One year after the exhibition *Unpublished Miracles of a Saint*, Buzzati publishes the book with the title *The Miracles of Morel Valley*, with thirty paintings and as many stories. Each table is

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7 Marie-Hélène Caspar, 'Les Miracles de Val Morel. Un bestiaire fantastique?', *Chaiers Dino Buzzati*, 3 (1979), 139-72 (p. 172): «So when considering the *Miracles* as the anarchic reappearance of ghosts and obsessions of the unconscious ego, it is better understood the systematic use of the *brouillage* technique in Buzzati. The obscurity of the text, its ambiguity, its hard decipherability are nothing but the camouflage of the innermost and haunting thoughts of the author». Caspar, p. 45: «It is therefore, in some way, a testament-book that contains numerous obsessions of Buzzati, his unconscious ghosts and a writing technique refined over time». See also Marie-Hélène Caspar, *Fantastique et mythe personnel dans l'oeuvre de Dino Buzzati* (La Garenne-Colombes: Erasme, 1990).

8 Lorenzo Viganò, *Postfazione: Dino Buzzati e il miracolo della vita*, in Dino Buzzati, *I Miracoli di Val Morel* (Milano: Mondadori, 2012), pp. 93-110.

9 To be understood not only in a synchronic but also in a diachronic way. As Crotti claims, painting in Buzzati recovered «that fantastic deviation and that clear imagination that characterizes the first narrative production. It is what happens in *The Miracles of Morel Valley*, one of the best works of the late Buzzati precisely because it seems to approach a dazzling and clear color component, a fairy and surreal tone, a sense of the fantastic that had been gradually running out in the narrative». Ilaria Crotti, *Dino Buzzati* (Milano: La Nuova Italia, 1977, p. 105).

10 Only in one of the thirty-nine panels, n. 6 entitled *A kidnapped girl*, Santa Rita is not represented.

accompanied by a page where there are a number, a title and a narrative part, micro-narrative or substantial caption, with different functions from time to time or multiple within the same verbal text. The verbal part can tell the episode to which assists the protagonist of the scene, the background or the conclusion; it can describe the image represented or even integrate and reconstruct the legend that gravitates around the episode more or less known to the inhabitants of the valley of Belluno; it can even revive the emotions felt in front of the observation of the ex-voto, but also the doubts and uncertainties felt by the extradiegetic narrator for what is represented and the news stories of the valleys. It can also provide more than one of the functions now listed, mixing the discourse of faith with that of information, the folk with the erotic one.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the thirty-nine notes Buzzati adds a frame story, entitled *Explanation*, which reconstructs the background to the pictorial creation. The grandfather and the father of a certain Toni Della Santa were the keepers of the votive offerings in honor of Santa Rita, gathered in the sanctuary of Val Morel. The father of Dino Buzzati had kept a notebook full of notes in a «pure language, ungrammatical and intensely dialect»<sup>12</sup> on a long series of miracles performed by the saint until 1909, and witnessed by the ex-voto panels gathered in the sanctuary. In 1938, after the discovery of the notebook, Buzzati went searching for information on the sanctuary and a friend of his father, the architect Alberto Alpago-Novello, suggested that it was just a literary joke. The priest of Limana, on the contrary, indicates the site of an aedicule where pilgrims stop and pray attributing «extraordinary powers

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11 On the eroticism in Buzzati's images Radius comments: «Mostly a sexual education for adults, started from rough to reach the natural. It is certain that the eroticism of Buzzati coincided with the wave of eroticism and pornography that has fallen on the so-called quietly civil world. He didn't help to anticipate it: he followed it», in Enrico Radius, *Leggendo i suoi quadri*, in *Buzzati pittore*, ed. by Raffaele De Grada (Milano: Mondadori, 1991), pp. 18-104 (p. 98).

12 Buzzati, *I miracoli di Val Morel*, p. 7.

to an image of Saint Rita, from immemorial time placed in one of those tiny chapels, open to the winds and the rain».<sup>13</sup>

Then the meeting occurs with Toni Della Santa, who tells him that the notebook and the tables in the sanctuary are the result of his work, a work done to give testimony of the power of the Saint:

There came poor and gentlemen to ask the most amazing graces, to pay tribute to the great Saint Rita. Even abroad, he said, even from distant continents. They brought hearts, legs, heads, arms, portraits of silver (I had a box nearly full) and they explained him the story, commissioning him a proper ex-voto to be painted, the modest art that his grandfather and father transmitted him. He had written the notebook on his own initiative, once he had know that my father was interested in “important” things of the Valley around Belluno. And, if I wanted, he would have reported other miracles that occurred after 1909, when the written account stopped.<sup>14</sup>

When, a few years after the meeting with Della Santa, in 1946, Buzzati comes back in Valmorel with his grandchildren in search of the sanctuary he does not find anything:

The path leading to the “sanctuary” no longer existed. I looked for it at length. I asked information. Nobody knew anything. No one had ever heard of a shrine of Saint Rita. No one had ever known Toni Della Santa. It seemed to find myself in the shoes of Rip Van Winkle. Centuries had passed since then? Was I in the grip of a drug? In a spell? Yet I carried with me the notebook, now yellowed, and the notes taken eight years earlier.<sup>15</sup>

Once again the strategies of the fantastic confuse the planes of reality. How is it possible that Buzzati keeps the notebook with the drawings of the ex-voto copied by the hand of the author himself, if there is no trace of the sanctuary, and it seems to belong only to the realm of dreams? Where did Buzzati meet his benefactor and at what level of reality does he belongs to?

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13 Buzzati, *I miracoli di Val Morel*, p. 9.

14 Buzzati, *I miracoli di Val Morel*, pp. 10-11.

15 Buzzati, *I miracoli di Val Morel*, pp. 11-12.



In his *Explanation* Buzzati presents Toni Della Santa as a nice “old man” of fifty-seven:

He was a strange man, who apparently had got a screw loose, but expressing an extraordinary openness, humility and goodness; also a certain fantasy, which is rare in people of none or minimal culture [...]. I was surprised by the light coming from those eyes. Was a saint himself? Was he – as I asked myself repeatedly – a sort of inspired pixie, kind of magician of our mountains?<sup>16</sup>

Character in-between the world of fantasy and reality, that appears and disappears, making fantastic the story and the discovery of the boards, Della Santa is a kind of alter ego of the author. Some years later Buzzati tries to repeat with his grandchildren what Della Santa had done according to the family tradition: making ex-voto to be dedicated to the Saint. Della Santa mixes reality and fiction as well as the main character and the narrator of the frame story, being a fictional character confused with the real-life of Buzzati himself. The two grandchildren, characters of the *Explanation*, are those for which Buzzati has already written *The Famous Invasion of Bears in Sicily*.<sup>17</sup> They are readers willing to believe in fairy tales, as well as the places where the action is set mingle with the real ones of the valley around Belluno. Imagination and reality are perfectly mixed, as in the most classic fairy tales.

However, the *Miracles* have also had a second life. After the successful publication of the work, local authorities asked Buzzati himself to paint a panel dedicated to Saint Ritato be displayed in a specifically constructed shrine.<sup>18</sup>

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16 Buzzati, *I miracoli di Val Morel*, p. 11.

17 Dino Buzzati, *La famosa invasione degli orsi in Sicilia* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1945).

18 As evidenced by Nicoletta Comar “local notables” «prayed Buzzati to create a painting that would have been shown in a specifically designed aedicule. Thus the Capital of Val Morel was born, opened September 3, 1973 and still on-site, [...] in the capital is now a copy of the work, while the original is kept in the Municipality of Limana. Precisely because of this joint initiative, in order to make known the places that inspired the artist, “Buzzati Path” was created in 2002. It starts from the Sanctuary of Madonna Parè and reached the

What is great is that, since it is life that imitates art, not vice versa, after my exhibition in Venice, a professor in Belluno suggested parish priest of Limana to build in a place similar to the one I described a chapel devoted to Santa Rita, where presumably the testimonies of who knows how many miracles she performed would come. If they really do that, it will be for me, a writer and painter, the greatest satisfaction.<sup>19</sup>

The devotion expressed in the votive panels and the hope placed by the author in the *Explanation* found an architectural achievement in the sanctuary devoted to Saint Rita and in the last votive painting added to the corpus made of thirty-nine panels that Buzzati seems to anchor to the reality of religious practice in Veneto and Italy.

The last votive panel that Buzzati painted for the sanctuary sums up all the miracles that Saint Rita could have miraculously made in the everyday life of the Venetian lands: shipping and railway accidents, rescue from a burning house or an automobile robbery.<sup>20</sup> Nothing comparable to the imaginary votive paintings designed for the exhibition and then republished in the book. No transfiguration of the evils of man and of his ancestral fears but a portrait of Saint Rita in the foreground, with a halo and roses, and, at the four corners of the picture, some variants of her probable and real interventions. This representation, being ideally situated at the end of the sequence of votive panels, gives the whole work a religious tone, even a truthful one, allowing the beholder to read differently the irony of the earlier paintings as well.

The second sequel, therefore, is a pictorial sequel within the architectural continuation (characterized by a religious and tourist vocation) of a work initially introduced in a pictorial sequence,

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small village of Valmorel», Nicoletta Comar, 'I miracoli di Valmorel: le scatole della realtà', in *Dino Buzzati: Catalogo dell'opera pittorica* (Gorizia: Edizioni della Laguna, 2006), pp. 32-35.

19 Maria Teresa Ferrari (edited by), *Buzzati racconta: Storie disegnate e dipinte* (Milano: Electa, 2006), p. 85.

20 The devotion to Saint Rita was also common to his friend and painter Yves Klein. I would refer to my *Storie dipinte: Gli ex voto di Dino Buzzati* (Palermo: Edizioni di Passaggio, 2012).

and that in his first sequel had taken an iconotextual form in the book.

### *True Descriptions All Too Fake*

Thus, the *Explanation* had provided personal testimonies and the factual evidence of the pictorial genesis of the whole work; the fortieth votive painting of Saint Rita had consecrated its truthful vocation even in an atmosphere of firm religious beliefs; now the notes alongside the reproductions of the panels in thirty-nine iconotexts forming the volume emphasize the necessity of the dual artistic experience of the author, in addition to the variety of relationships between the two arts.

Compared to the chance of reviving the work beyond the limits it has originally imposed on itself (namely the representation in painting of organic ex-voto, as we are told by the author in the frame story following the work) the notes represent another form of *sequel*, an *intermedial* one, since it revives the work through a different art, from painting to writing. Almost as if Buzzati's *Doppelbegabung* could fully express itself only by giving a verbal sequel to its own visual work.

In this case it is actually a sequel produced by the same author and published according to the rhythm of the double-page of *The Miracles* book. However, the writing in this brief note is so varied to simulate different enunciators, not coincident with the painter of the next page.

Generally, the function of the notes is to provide evidence of the truthfulness of the scene represented, achieving this goal in different ways and writings. Buzzati's notes are therefore literary hypertexts inasmuch they deform high-value or popular stories already existing, but even inasmuch they take non-fictional prose, including pseudo autobiographical or journalistic prose; they are extraliterary hypertexts inasmuch they resemble administrative or archive reports; they could be considered artistic metatexts inasmuch they comment the picture next to them, or extra-artistic metatexts inasmuch they take popular or materials pictures that are not part of the artistic tradition, such as comic books and photo

story; and they are also iconotextual metatexts inasmuch they objectively and subjectively comment real episodes, the stories that come after them and the images representing or deforming other iconotexts by Buzzati.<sup>21</sup>

Another variation should be added to this already complex hypertextual and metatextual, the description. If we consider the description of the images a way of narrating events, a series of routes that the narrator can make through narration in his eyes or a chain of episodes in sequence, or even the story of the making of the artifact, then *ékphrasis* can be considered a hypertextual amplification as well, and in turn an opportunity to give a pictorial comment, and therefore a meta-artistic opportunity.

Within iconotects, the forms of description have the ability to move the limits of representation, from one art to the other, both in the case of the *mimetic ékphrasis* and of the *notional* one.<sup>22</sup>

In the first case the sequel of the pictorial work traditionally extends in the field of art criticism, thus moving writing borders towards the territory of the critical language trying to restore an unreachable vividness, while the original painting reproduced by its side is falsified and de-materialized by the words that represent an extension of the image in the other half of the iconotext. In the second case the description not only quotes or alludes to most famous writings and images, rather it transforms them and invents new artistic or ordinary ones. In this way it obeys the attempt to make true something that has never existed at all or that has gone lost, and that in any way it tries to link to reality.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, a complex paratextual strategy is drawn, which removes the original painting to be described while trying to prove its

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21 It works for the informative notes as well.

22 Hollander defined the difference between *mimetic ékphrasis* and *notional ékphrasis*, the one concerning works of art never existed (Hollander, 'The poetics of *ékphrasis*', pp. 209-19).

23 Michele Cometa claims: «Every *mimetic ékphrasis* can be regarded as the "falsification" of an original, its de-essentialism, its de-materialization in a verbal form, and, conversely, every *notional ékphrasis* is a kind of "making true" a fake, a picture never existed (or lost) that literature simply makes "real" with its means», Michele Cometa, *La scrittura delle immagini* (Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2012), p. 53.

authenticity. It had already happened in the fictional background about the former organic ex-voto and the paintings of Della Santa, no more existing.

All *ékphrasis* pretend to be mimetic within each iconotext, for they provide minute details, emphases of missing details in the paintings by their side, or even stages of their creative genesis. They are in fact notional descriptions, providing documented evidences of the truthfulness of the picture beyond the picture itself, looking for proofs in the reality of the Venetian community and in the heritage of legends or facts that constitute the collective memory of its inhabitants.

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