Naples, centre of *Campania Felix*, different points of view, changing perspectives through the centuries.

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‘See Naples and die’, the old cliché which has contributed to a considerable extent to the building up of an imaginary, or perhaps today one should say virtual, cultural identity for this city endowed with a dual significance. A wholly positive one, on the one hand, as a place of extreme, supreme beauty, the ideal synthesis of all that man can possibly desire, to the point of his almost gratefully accepting death, dying that is, after beholding the perfection which connotes this city. But on the other hand, an entirely negative value if one is to understand that in Naples dying comes easily and for real, be it because of illness, misery, assaults, violence, both of a moral and physical nature, gunshot wounds, or because of organised crime which in Naples is called ‘camorra’, the ragged though legitimate daughter of the Mafia, and thus no less violent.

A present-day intellectual and novel writer, attentive observer of Neapolitan life, Fabrizia Ramondino, wrote in a wonderful work dedicated to her, and my, great city: “Whichever way you choose to look at her, whether you observe, watch, spy, gaze languidly, feast your eyes, peek, wink, goggle, peer, look away or even close your eyes, whether you practise clairvoyancy or voyeurism, whatever eye you choose to cast upon her is much like looking through a kaleidoscope. Shapes and meanings endlessly come together and break apart, governed by chance, ruled by the principle of indetermination rather than that of fortuity.”

This is the way in which we Neapolitans too are forced, accustomed or conditioned to observe our city each and every time we seek to understand her many facets, striving to free ourselves of the memory, the traces which linger on in the depth of our very eyes, left there also by the too many reproductions, mainly paintings, which, throughout the centuries have shown her to the world: Naples, our picture postcard city!

And if so what have the innumerable travellers been able to make of this entangled, chaotic melting pot throughout the centuries? Those who, upon seeing Naples, have most likely loved her immediately but then violated or disparaged her when trying to depict her as they wished her to be, idealising her according to an interpretative yardstick wholly foreign to Naples, or those who have abused, demonised her for being too far removed from their often modest, reassuring and parochial models, born of the logic of industrialised nations of Reformed Christianity?

In this last case the models they used to understand Naples were typical of liberal or enlightened cities, designed and built for different social classes, the poor kept, in a fitting manner, well apart from the aristocracy and the social-climbing entrepreneurs, the nouveaux-riches, those middle-classes which were progressively merging with the true aristocracy thanks to their new money. The rich and powerful had to be kept well away from the poor or the proletariat, if you prefer, as it was once called.

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1 Fabrizia Ramondino & Andreas Friedrich Muller, *Dadapolis. Caleidoscopio napoletano*, Torino, Einaudi, 1992, p. IX.
A social stratification which Naples has, perhaps never known. This may well be a good thing, as I firmly believe, since it has saved her from standardisation, allowed her to retain her vitality, and made of her the unclassifiable, undefinable, small metropolis she is still today, while confirming her status as an unsurpassed cultural centre.

Naples is in fact a city where the rich, the powerful, the aristocratic, the intellectual, the lower middle-classes and the poor, as in the past centuries, still mingle together and live side by side. Where, within the imposing century-old mansions, the ‘palazzi’, one can still find hideous mazes of overcrowded slum dwellings, inhabited, as though they were worthy abodes, by those who have always been poor.

These ‘bassi’, as they are called in Naples, are not dwellings but hovels, where the very poorest, owing to the close proximity, learn also to distinguish, to recognise the corrupting influence of money itself, to despise the nouveaux-riches, the so-called ‘sagliuti’ (those who have ‘climbed up’ or risen too rapidly) when they flaunt their wealth and splendours in the face of those who have nothing; while also acknowledging and paying tribute to the true aristocrats, those who, although their wealth is considerable, are aware how much respect should be granted to the weakest. Thus, true Neapolitan gentlemen are never slaves to fashion and continue to patronise their family tailor, who indeed, often inhabits one of the aforementioned ‘bassi’, and creates highly elegant suits, rigorously grey for both men and women, sadly then copied, unsuccessfully and coarsely, by the nouveaux-riches who add some ostentatious and always excessive detail, to flaunt their wealth and power.

And there you have the downfall of class!

But how can the hurried traveller, both today and in the past, be aware of all this? Accustomed perhaps to weighing up a person rapidly and classifying him on the strength of a mere glance? Naples does not clearly reveal a marked distribution of its inhabitants within the traditional social classes, everything is mingled and reshuffled, as when the pauper takes to wearing the aristocrat’s cast-offs, the end result being that perhaps only the ‘parvenu’ is both branded and stigmatised. This ‘parvenu’ nowadays does not only necessarily belong to the ‘nouveaux-riches’, he could also be a member of the ‘camorra’, a purveyor of death, to whom modernity has merely bequeathed the model of easy to come by wealth!

Braudel claimed that Naples was the gateway of the East towards the West and that of the West towards the East, and this can certainly not be denied, much in the same way as Cairo or Beirut.

Her long and tormented history, however, must never be forgotten or taken for granted. From the myth of those lands yearned for and beheld by Ulysses, inhabited by the Sibyl, unheeded prophetess, to the great settlements of the Magna Grecia, with Neapolis\(^2\), its centre, clear evidence of which is still to be found in the excavations, deep in the soft warmth of her entrails.

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\(^2\) And vestiges of the Greek port of Neapolis, dating back to the V century BC, came to the light just a few days ago in the heart of Naples, under our very feet, while excavation work was being carried out to build a missing stretch of the city underground. Thus, the old breaks into the new and forces us to pause for breath, it hinders the present and still today, in February 2004, conditions the future.
Lands trodden by Virgil himself and that became the pathways to the Underworld, the centre of the ‘Campania Felix’, situated along the boundaries of Imperial Rome to whom it offered thermal spas and pleasant places of leisure, from Herculaneum to Pompeii, and from the Phlegraean Fields to Capri, dear to Tiberius, a place of manifold delights and perversions. “Capri, like hashish, is supposed to bring out the demon, whatever its nature, lurking at the bottom of the human personality, and people go ashore at the Marina Grande hypnotised in advance by its reputation” according to what Norman Lewis wrote recently.

As for the Middle Ages Naples was prematurely condemned to becoming a conquered land, the dominion of sovereigns and tyrants, at times enlightened, more often bent on raiding and plundering, with the sole aim of possessing and corrupting her, like a much loved woman made to become a mere meretricious commodity. And later still, the long years of the Spanish dominion which eventually made of her the capital of a kingdom both central and peripheral, destined to foster the proud and noble revolution of 1799, all too soon doomed to failure!

Right up to the unification of Italy which, yet again, relegated Naples to a marginal position, thus favouring the emergence of a ‘Meridional issue’, still to be solved, at the very heart of which stands Naples.

I strongly feel the need to remember all this, without ever forgetting that Naples is a city of extremes, to the point that in 1613 Miguel de Cervantes could say of her that: “...he travelled by sea to Naples... . He, together with all those who had been there, found her to be the best city in Europe and even in the whole world” (1613)

In *Voyage d’Italie* (1776) de Sade wrote:

“It is a source of great sorrow, I admit, to see the most beautiful town in the universe inhabited by the most stupid species.”

In a mere fragment of the whole written by Goethe, the poet seems to be one of the few who understood the city well beyond many other writers:

“The Neapolitan would certainly be far different if he didn’t feel caught up between God and the Devil”

Or the Naples described by Stendhal:

“Naples, January, 11th 1817. A magnificent gateway: it takes an hour to reach the sea down a wide stairway, hallowed out of the soft rock, upon which the city is built. The solidity of the walls... the Albergo dei Poveri (as a matter of fact a poor-house) first building. It is far more impressive than that much vaunted ‘bonbonnière’ which in Rome they call Porta del Popolo.”

Or to recall the words of John Ruskin who in 1844 spoke of the Gulf of Naples in these terms:

“And all that was most beautiful within the whole range of islands and sea, I saw... The common English traveller... desires nothing further from this world nor from the next; and proclaims Naples a paradise.”

Or to try and see her as she is described by Maksim Gor’kij in 1911:
“The city, which resembles an ancient print, is generously bathed by a blazing sun; and sings like an organ. The strong waves of the Gulf beat a rhythm against the rocks on the seafront.”

Sigmund Freud was one of the few who fully captured her lacerating contradictions when he wrote in 1902:

“That’s where Naples stands, in the daytime she is unbearable as the noise resembles that of a doghouse or a cage of monkeys, but at night, with her lights, she is almost as beautiful as Vienna seen from the Bellevue.”

As for more recent years, on the one hand one of her great present-day sons, Eduardo De Filippo, wrote of Naples in 1981:

“No, if you want to do the right thing, run away from Naples.”

While, on the other, in 1997 Dominique Fernandez wrote:

“Italy, and by that I mean the real Italy, the one with something to say, the Italy whose disappearance due to an excess of progress would be an irreparable disaster, that Italy begins from Naples. Until Naples, Italy is nothing but the Southern appendage of Europe.”

What I really feel strongly about, here and now, is the desire to try to present the city as a whole, with her areas of light and shadow, her colours and her darkness, where a rich and intricate humanity throbs and pulsates, downtrodden, often buried under aeons of history, a city which has been striving to be heard for far too long now.

In order to try to re-establish her cultural identity which is, indeed, Mediterranean, but also deeply European, as it has preserved its classical roots intact, along with its Baroque shapes and outlines which have long granted it the standing of a post-modern reality.

The enlightenment thinker Montesquieu may well have captured this deeper, more sorrowful side of the Neapolitan people when he wrote:

“The people of Naples, where many have nothing, can be considered a people above all others.” (1728-29)

Or yet again:

“Naples is a town which possesses the structure of a novel. The streets are paved with stories just waiting to be told. But Naples could only be a Baroque or Surrealist novel, though unfinished, unsolved, contradictory.”

It is Tahar Ben Jelloun writing in 1989.

As I possess greater familiarity with English literary culture, it is certainly more appropriate for me to begin with England which, among the great and, at the time, young, future European nations, established in the late Middle-Ages marked cultural relations with Italy and the Campania region.

The contacts and contrasts were, initially, merely of a so-called ‘cultural’ nature, that is to say based upon what the English were able to read about remote lands since travelling was rare indeed and little was known about foreign places. It is a paradox that on this basis and with the passing of time, the English prejudices against the Italians increased both in number and in magnitude. This could well be due to the spread of the Italian humanistic culture which constituted a sought-out backdrop and premise, widely exploited by English culture, by its budding intellectuals, and even
by its Tudor sovereigns in order to establish their modernity which, however, led to complex, unbridgeable rifts and marked irreversible differences.

A clear example of this is the way in which Machiavelli’s political theories made their way across England, nourishing English political thought and moulding the figures of sovereigns, be they real or merely represented, set upon the stage by the great Shakespearian or Jacobean theatre, while in reality the English had a rather superficial knowledge of Machiavelli’s works, and this led them to understand, include and ascribe all the negative aspects of politics to Machiavelli, thus reading ‘Machiavellian’ to mean only sinister, perverse and occult.

Just as, gradually, the reign of the Catholic church, jeopardised by temporal power, the purveyor of indulgences for eternity in exchange for certain benefits and coarse advantages, here on earth, began to be seen as obscure and arcane. And with the Reformation the chasm widens, setting the members of the Reformed Church against the Catholics. The former, according to their Calvinistic credo, torn between good and evil, trapped within irreconcilable reigns and following paths which foresee no return but merely a struggle between salvation and damnation, the latter, on the other hand, namely the Catholics, always willing and ready to mediate, reconcile and redeem, even when it appears impossible and inconceivable, and to forgive through confession, a sacrament which God, or others in his stead, and often corrupt and cruel, handed down to other men.

This abyss was further widened by the obscure, occult, but sadly notorious activities of the Inquisition which fed the fantasies of both scholars and, to a greater extent, the common people.

Thus Italy gradually loses her Renaissance aura and becomes a land of barbarity, backwardness, moral and physical degeneration. And Naples too, more than other places which are spoken of or written about, but which nobody truly knows!

It was only during the second half of the 18th century that a renewed love for classicism causes the Enlightenment culture of Northern European states to turn again to Italy. England draw new inspiration from classicism when redesigning its urban landscapes and flaunting the magnificence of that era which they themselves could but call the Augustan Age.

And if neoclassicism is to be the model to imitate, then Italy must indeed be visited, or rather, she must be visited to then be imitated. The wealthy and/or learned Englishmen, who had discovered Piranesi, start to hear about Herculaneum and Pompeii, where the excavations had recently begun.

Although they had been building Palladian villas for some time, the English now began to design their streets and buildings according to the parameters of harmony, balance and proportion, labelling the whole ‘neoclassical’ and feeling a strong urge to see Italy with their very eyes, that country being known as the cradle and mother of ancient Rome which, in turn, had been nourished and born of the culture of the Magna Grecia. Italy, which up to then had been above all else demonised, although there had always been an awareness of her seductive powers too and of her ‘picturesque’ nature, as the English were wont to say, at least those who admired the works of Salvator Rosa. Though wild and rupestrian his paintings appealed to that
part of a possible observer who had managed to maintain a certain degree of irrationality, desire, even violence. A reflection on man as he truly is, a mixture of good and evil, soul and body, but also sin and forgiveness.

Often, however, Salvator Rosa’s reproductions/representations of the landscape become so well-known and familiar that they form a sort of barrier even in the case of great intellectuals such as Thomas Gray and Horace Walpole to the point that Walpole wrote: “Precipices, mountains, torrents, wolves, rumblings, Salvator Rosa – the pomp of our park and the meekness of our palace! Here we are, the lonely lords of the glorious desperate prospects.”

I would now like to focus my attention upon Naples from the 18th century on, as it is at this point that the eye which the visitor, the ‘Grand-Tour’ traveller, casts upon the city – which up till then had hardly ever been seen but only imagined or written about on the basis of an abstract idea concerning a place rich in stratified, age-old culture – this eye now comes to life and sees, visits, describes, illustrates, depicts, narrates, but also, often, deceives.

The ‘Grand-Tour’ in fact had been slowly becoming a consolidated practice and Naples was considered the capital of a Reign which one must indeed visit, but not get to know. It is at that time, when the first visitors begin to flock to her, that Naples ironically becomes a stereotype: a place in which to seek only what one wishes to find, and not to truly see. She started to be reduced to a picture postcard!

This is what Walpole clearly states when he writes: “One hates writing descriptions that are to be found in every book of travels.” (Ibidem, June 14, 1740, p.48)

While his sensitivity leads him to describe in such passionate terms the magnificence of Herculaneum: “...we have seen something to-day that I am sure you never heard of. Have you ever heard of a subterraneous town? A whole Roman town, with all its edifices, remaining under ground? ...this is one of them...called Herculaneum... This under-ground city is perhaps one of the noblest curiosities that ever had been discovered. It was found out by chance.”

But if Walpole as a man favours the darker, more obscure and mysterious side to Naples and to those parts of Italy he visits, as these match his complex personality which is, to a great extent, pre-romantic one must always remember that he was the son of the English Prime Minister, and did not hesitate to play his part against the Papacy in Rome, an almost obsessive anti-papist crusade.

Thus, the true traveller often finds himself torn between a stereotyped image which stems from classical culture, and the need to demonise Italy, seat of the Papacy, and more specifically Naples which, within its few square kilometres, seems to comprise the worst possible horrors.

A city entrenched upon itself, whose borders are formed by the sea and the hills, a city made up of layers, where magnificent ‘palazzi’ can stand side by side with miserable hovels, where luxurious arcades provide shelter for the beggars, scoundrels and outcasts, while bejewelled ladies stroll to the theatre or to the comic opera, a

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4 Ibidem, June 14, 1740, p.49
genre to which the Naples of the time, caught between past and future, copiously contributed.

How can the traveller, an aristocrat or a scholar used to the reassuring comfort of the English countryside and to the new London streets designed according to a neo-classical model which cuts and dissects the city, emphasising the class divisions and keeping the rich as far as possible away from the poor, understand all this?

So they quite often tend to reproduce a conventional representation of Naples yielding at the same time to the temptation to portray, in a paternalistic manner, common people, inebriate and dancing, the heirs, through reproduction, of drunken Sileni, together with Pompeian scenes depicting cupids and Dionysii during the harvesting and grape-picking. And common people are seen dancing as though they had stepped down from the walls of the houses in Pompeii.

How indeed can this traveller understand and not be troubled, upset, even shocked by Naples? When her Gulf unfolds before his very eyes, pliant and bathed in light, enclosed, embraced on the one side by Vesuvius, the volcano which frequently and violently erupts with devastating effects, and on the other by Capo Posillipo, with its wild, rupestrian, wooded landscape whose hues and shapes seem to have flowed from the paintbrush of Salvator Rosa, a royal promontory which bleakly looms over an azure sea which merges out there with the sky.

The picturesque style seems to offer the grand tour traveller an insight into the relationship between art and nature and becomes a way to portray a benevolent nature, filled with folkloristic scenes, depicting common people, even in the 19th century, in a purely oleographic way, with scenes of working-class people viewed with a paternalistic slant.

And this is also the possible explanation for Fabris’ sublime paintings, Hamilton’s scientific observation and the reproduction of cheap and more and more numerous gouaches, made from vegetable matter, genuine souvenirs, inexpensive and easy to carry, which stir up a sort of frenzy for antiques, a need for real evidence, taken from life or reproduced in a workshop and easy to export. Veritable picture postcards!

As for the violent, sublime Vesuvius, I wish to recall Hester Lynch Piozzi’s vivid description, as she is, I believe, one of the few visitors to Naples endowed with her own personal vision and emotions. We are in the year 1785: “We have been entertained” she writes “by a beautiful eruption of Mount Vesuvius – which on the night of our arrival flamed away so as to be easily seen 35 miles off; and there was a prodigious storm at sea besides, with the most horrible lightning I ever saw – and the bluest... The thunder here too is singularly laud and awful... while I write this the sea rages with a violence I never saw surpassed.”

Indeed, what could be more sublime than that landscape for this English lady, whose heart brimmed with love for Italy, as she serenely gazed from afar upon that seething, bubbling nature, safe perhaps in the arms of her handsome tenor Gabriele Piozzi to

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the point of writing: “... I never want for amusement nor much seek those of society.”

It is from this description - which Ann Radcliffe heartily draws upon - that the Naples described in vivid traits in The Italian, takes its body and soul, not to mention its fire. Besides what the travellers could see, Naples had always had its share of intellectuals, who loved and lived their city, whose voice was yet seldom heard beyond the Alps, due to the existing language barriers. These scholars were men such as Antonio Genovesi, Ferdinando Galiani or Gaetano Filangieri who had already taken a critical stand against the prevailing excesses of the rationality of the Enlightenment (“the dolls of reason” as Genovesi defined them) in order to curtail an excessively optimistic outlook while trying correctly to emphasise true reality, not only that of Naples, the real reality, and then envisage and plan a possible transformation. Seeking a more moderate and more humanly acceptable interpretation than that offered by the ruling and prevailing Enlightenment, founded on the ethics of utility and gain, Genovesi managed to fall into line with, or even to anticipate, certain traits of the more mature Enlightenment movement.

Skipping decades throughout which many clichés about Naples grew and gained strength within both the European and the American imagination, all of this comes to an end around 1839 with the advent of photographic reproduction and the very first package tours. But the capital of the Reign of the two Sicilies continued to be depicted or more frequently photographed in ever-bleaker hues, by those, intellectuals or common travellers, who continued to look upon her with eyes inured to the logic of full industrialisation, nature beaten into submission, quashed by the rationale of a prevailing capitalism, which places all the inhabitants of one country, or of one town in different social strata, almost castes, which often do not even communicate.

Naples, to a certain extent, has managed not to fall into this trap at the cost, however, of an ever-increasing poverty but has led the entire population to live elbow to elbow within the space of a few square kilometres, in a joyful, and certainly tolerant conviviality.

Apart from the usual, numerous descriptions of Naples, the pages of the greatest writers in the world who have gone on describing the city and the whole of Campania with its classical excavation sites, the sea and its beautiful colours, the marvellous, unique islands scattered across the Gulf like a necklace of rare pearls or the amazing Vesuvian eruptions, which took place in succession until the end of the 2nd world war, when the volcano locked itself away in a discreet but threatening silence, which has lasted until today. I have also come across a number of more recent texts, novels, short stories and diaries written by those who have perhaps known and made a real effort to understand the true city, the sorrowful one, wrecked and broken after two world wars but able to regain fresh vigour and rise again, to establish its foundations upon roots which were deep and ancient, and thus often ignored, full of sorrow and hope, full of sea and sun.

Ibidem, p. 176
There was, for example, a German writer, the Jew Victor Klemperer, who spent a short time in Naples and wrote a diary in 1914/15, entitled *Neapel in Krieg*, in which he attempts to capture and accurately convey the *Volksgeist*, the true spirit of our people and of their continuous passing back and forth from high to low culture. While the city then went on to become a theatre of war and a land immersed in the struggle for freedom, at the end of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} world war, Naples left her mark in the pages of works, and not only Italian ones, whose authors were able to look at her and understand her, it seems to me, finally ridding her of the usual, useless clichés, antithetical syntheses of good and evil, as is customary in Calvinist culture, and to restore her to her full-bodied, sorrowful vitality. Among others I refer to authors such as Norman Lewis, Douglas Allanbrook, Robert B. Ellis, John Horne Burns, John Steinbeck and others. Or to the Italian writer Curzio Malaparte, right up to the voice of Edoardo de Filippo or Anna Maria Ortese all of which are beautiful, profound texts, brimming with emotion, in which the city lays herself bare. Thus, observing her from afar, Norman Lewis wrote: “All Naples lay spread out beneath us like an antique map, on which the artist had drawn with almost exaggerated care the many gardens, the castles, the towers and the cupolas. For the first time, awaiting a cataclysm, I appreciated the magnificence of this city, seen at a distance which cleansed it of its wartime tegument of grime, and for the first time I realised how un-European, how oriental it was.” And again: “Here the spell remained, and here the sense of grandeur of the past was overwhelming.” I would like to end this headlong race with the words of Shirley Hazzard, a famous Australian writer, still alive who, in *The Bay of Noon* (1979) wrote: “The city itself was marked by a volcanic extravagance. Its characteristics had not insinuated themselves but had arrived in inundations – in eruptions of taste... in a positive explosion of the baroque... Nothing in moderation might have been the motto of these people; who were yet, like their city, ultimately a secret.” She wrote these words years ago after the first visit: since then, and still today, she spends half of her time between New York, Naples and Capri. And then, then ........ to Naples and to what a group of young scholars, belonging to various European literary fields, will be telling us during the Convention in Naples!