

Viella Historical Research

10

Disaster Narratives in Early Modern Naples

Politics, Communication and Culture

edited by

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Contents

DOMENICO CECERE, CHIARA DE CAPRIO, LORENZA GIANFRANCESCO, PASQUALE PALMIERI Disaster narratives and texts. A meeting ground for different cultural domains	7
<i>I. Textual Configurations, Narrative Structures and Lexicon</i>	
CHIARA DE CAPRIO Narrating Disasters: Writers and Texts Between Historical Experience and Narrative Discourse	19
FRANCESCO MONTUORI Voices of the “totale eccidio”: On the Lexicon of Earthquakes in the Kingdom (1456-1784)	41
RITA FRESU “The Water Ran with Such Force”. The Representation of Floods in the Early Modern Era: Textual Configurations, Conceptual Models, Linguistic Aspects	73
<i>II. Communities in Fear: Reporting Disasters in Chronicles and Petitions</i>	
PIERLUIGI TEREZI Earthquakes, Society and Politics in L’Aquila in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries	93
FRANCESCO SENATORE Survivors’ Voices: Coping with the Plague of 1478-1480 in Southern Italian Rural Communities	109
<i>III. Communication, Dissent and Propaganda</i>	
DOMENICO CECERE Moralising Pamphlets: Calamities, Information and Propaganda in Seventeenth-Century Naples	129

GIANCARLO ALFANO		
	The Portrait of Catastrophe: The Image of the City in Seventeenth-century Neapolitan Culture	147
LORENZA GIANFRANCESCO		
	Narratives and Representations of a Disaster in Early Seventeenth-century Naples	163
SILVANA D'ALESSIO		
	On the Neapolitan Plague of 1656: Expedients and Remedies	187
IV. <i>A City Under Siege: Rituals and Saints' Protection in Early Modern Neapolitan Culture</i>		
PASQUALE PALMIERI		
	Protecting the Faithful City: Disasters and the Cult of the Saints (Naples, 1573-1587)	207
GIOVANNI GUGG		
	The Missing <i>Ex-Voto</i> : Anthropology and Approach to Devotional Practices during the 1631 Eruption of Vesuvius	221
Indexes		239
Contributors		255

GIANCARLO ALFANO

The Portrait of Catastrophe: The Image of the City in Seventeenth-century Neapolitan Culture

1. *Naples 'transfigured'*

Nello spatio di tre lune, cioè dal decimo quinto giorno di maggio, e per tutti i due seguenti mesi di giugno e luglio, fino al decimo quinto giorno d'agosto, morirono solo nella Città e subborghi SEICENTOMILA, morendo negli ultimi di venticinquemila e trentamila per giorno; e restò quell'eccelsa metropoli spogliata de' cittadini e popolata de corpi morti a guisa d'un sepolcro patente.¹

An *open sepulchre*: a sepulchre that lies exposed before the half-aghast, half-accustomed eyes of the survivors. This is the image used by the chronicler Nicolò Pasquale to sum up the city of Naples in the autumn of 1656, in the aftermath of the appalling plague epidemic that had ravaged it. A gaping space, a void: the most densely populated city in Europe after London and Paris, with over half-a-million inhabitants, now appeared like a deserted stage.

Despite this and other records (letters relaying the events, chronicles, medical treatises), it is indeed difficult to assess the overall number of casualties, but an estimate of only about half the population remaining after the epidemic seems approximately correct. From one year to the next, the capital of the Kingdom had been drastically reduced: agriculture, handicraft and trades would be affected

1. "In the space of three moons, namely from the fifteenth day of May, and throughout the following two months of June and July, up to the fifteenth day of August, SIX-HUNDRED-THOUSAND people died in the city and suburbs alone; and that sublime metropolis was left devoid of its citizens and populated by corpses, in the guise of an open sepulchre" (Nicolò Pasquale, *A' posteri della peste di Napoli e suo Regno nell'Anno 1656 dalla redenzione del mondo racconto*, Naples, Luc'Antonio di Fusco, 1668). Although limited to the events occurred in the capital, Pasquale's account, which is amply deployed in this work, is perhaps the most beautiful amongst the many records of the epidemic due to its detailed information and linguistic strength. It is pre-dated by the report of a doctor, Geronimo Gatta, entitled *Di una gravissima peste che, nella passata primavera & estate dell'anno 1656, depopolò la città di Napoli, suoi borghi e casali, e molte altre città e terre del suo Regno. Familiar discorso medicinale in tre libri diviso*, Naples, Luc'Antonio di Fusco, 1659, and by an account focusing on the social aspects of the epidemic (Michele Florio, *Cladis epidemiae florentissimam neapolitanam urbem devastantis lacrymabilis laconismus per Michaelem Florium*, Verona, Franciscum Rossi, 1661). Other published and unpublished records are used in the excellent work by Idamaria Fusco, *Peste, demografia e fiscalità nel Regno di Napoli del XVII secolo*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2007.

for a long time, while propitious times were about to come for those survivors hunting for easy-to-obtain legacies. The overnight amassing of wealth is very well documented in the political journalism of the time, which carefully assessed the economic repercussions of the catastrophe, as can be seen in *Napoli scontrafatto dopo la peste*, a short poem in Neapolitan octaves composed by Giovanni Battista Valentino, which appears as a conservative reflection upon the key topic of social mobility following the epidemic.²

It is not possible to establish with absolute certainty the modalities of diffusion, the duration, and especially the morbidity of the epidemic that broke out in Naples in 1656 and continued to ravage the South of Italy throughout 1658. Nonetheless, what seems likely is that the plague first broke out in April and the mortality rate peaked in the summer months, until the August rains marked an initial lessening of the phenomenon. The first measures were taken only towards the end of May, however, when some of the alleged plague-spreaders left the city, provisions that were deemed spoiled were destroyed, connections with the other Italian states were officially suspended, and a Board of Health Authorities was established. Other safety measures included the celebration of a high mass in Santa Maria di Costantinopoli, which undoubtedly contributed to the diffusion of the epidemic. Besides, by mid-spring some 150 people were already dying every day, and the rumours about plague-spreaders were beginning to take hold: an alarming phenomenon because the common people often suspected Spanish rulers of being the main culprits. Moreover, the revolt of Masaniello (1647-1648) had left a deep impression that seemed to be consistent with the current situation. Political chroniclers – both those in favour of the viceregal party and those aligned with the positions expressed during the revolt – had made ample use of the medical metaphor, insisting on disease and contagion, as Silvana D’Alessio has demonstrated with great critical attention and a wealth of textual comparisons.³

Let us now return to the historical narration. We are now at the end of May 1656: the plague is spreading rapidly and those who have the means begin to leave the city, which thus remains in the hands of clerics and monastics, the Spanish cavalry (which had been summoned to curb possible disturbances), a few doctors, and many of those barber-surgeons who served as healthcare professionals, at first as simple assistants but later with increasingly more important roles. Between 30 May and 2 June, concrete measures were taken in matters of personal and public hygiene; after two more weeks, the average daily mortality exceeded a thousand, perhaps because devotional practices intensified, from crowded pilgrimages to well-attended masses. The number of indoor and outdoor leper hospitals grew proportionally, and repressive measures became harsher, while the means of transport for the infected and the corpses soon became insufficient. Therefore, bodies abandoned along the road had to be amassed in the jails, which had

2. See Giovanni Battista Valentino, *Seconda reale impressione, di Napoli scontrafatto dopo la peste*, Naples, Francesco Pace, 1674.

3. Here I am limiting myself to referencing only her first book: Silvana D’Alessio, *Contagi. La rivolta napoletana del 1647-’48: linguaggio e potere politico*, Florence, Centro Editoriale Toscano, 2003. Now see her essay in the present volume.

meanwhile been emptied of convicts (as they were used to transport the corpses and the infected). The intensity of the disease began to abate at the peak of the hot months, but the state of emergency was only officially suspended in December.

This is the sequence of facts offered by the seventeenth-century chronicle of Nicolò Pasquale, which is condensed into the image of the silent stage, of the city “resa da un momento fatale solitudine, silentio ed horrore” [“reduced to loneliness, silence and horror by a fatal moment”], as the chronicler describes it. The narration thus produces a coherent series of images that are not without allegorical strength, almost offering themselves as cues for moral reflection. In fact, we find similar images in the opening to the collection of sermons by Giacomo Lubrano, the most illustrious Neapolitan Jesuit and the author of the sermon “a la napolitana” [“Neapolitan-style”], which was rich in metaphors and all sorts of rhetorical wordplay. The first sermon in the *Prediche quaresimali postume* (1702), entitled *L’inventario de’ beni temporali scritto nella polvere*, includes this passage:

Nel tempo stesso del contagio non corsero libidini per le vie annegate dal fradiciume? Non entrarono le rapine ne’ palazzi posti a sacco dalla putredine? [...] Mentre le ville erano cimiteri, i posilipi lazzaretti, tutta Napoli una cloaca di scheletri verminosi, tra la confusione di tanti orrori, tra la calca di tanti funerali, in faccia alla fame, in mano alle stragi, col piè nell’Inferno, i pochissimi vivi, sol per peccare, offrivano in rendimento di grazie, su le bare de’ morti, ibriachezze di scandali, empietà di demonii.⁴

As Baroque and turbid as they may seem, these lines highlight a key theme of seventeenth-century consciousness: man’s eminently political nature, his structural belonging to an inhabited world; better still, his being rooted in the city. Whether we consider Giovanni Botero’s reflection upon *The Reason of State*

4. “As contagion spread, did lewdness not hurtle on the streets drowned in rotteness? Did robberies not enter the palaces plundered by putrefaction? [...] While villas were graveyards, the Posilipi leper hospitals, all of Naples a sewer of verminous skeletons, amidst the confusion of so much horror, in the throng of so many funerals, in the face of hunger, in the hands of carnage, with a foot in Hell, the very few who were alive, only in order to sin, would offer in thanksgiving, on the coffins of the dead, the intoxication of scandals, the cruelty of demons” (Giacomo Lubrano, *Prediche quaresimali postume*, Naples, Raillard, 1702). The following edition, Giacomo Lubrano, *Prediche quaresimali postume* [...], Padua, Giovanni Manfrè, 1703, is reproduced in Id., *Scintille poetiche, o Poesie sacre, e morali*, ed. by Marzio Pieri, with a note by Luana Salvarani, Trento, La finestra, 2002. On the construction of images by this extraordinary Jesuit, see Franco Croce, *Tre momenti del barocco letterario italiano*, Florence, Sansoni, 1966; Cosimo Ortesta, “Giacomo Lubrano: il tempo del verme”, *Paragone*, 28 (1977), pp. 18-27; Claudio Sensi, *L’“arcimondo” della parola. Saggi su Giacomo Lubrano*, Padua, Liviana, 1983; Gabriele Frasca, “Il paesaggio del mondo dipinto nella polvere”, *Il piccolo Hans*, 83-84 (1994), pp. 9-39; Vitaniello Bonito, *L’occhio del tempo. L’orologio barocco tra scienza, letteratura ed emblematica*, Bologna, Clueb, 1995; Giovanni Baffetti, *Retorica e Scienza. Cultura gesuitica e seicento italiano*, Bologna, Clueb, 1997; Giancarlo Alfano, “L’eloquenza dell’immagine”, in Giacomo Lubrano, *In tante trasparenze*, ed. by Giancarlo Alfano and Gabriele Frasca, Naples, Cronopio, 2002, pp. 7-31; Gabriele Frasca, “L’angelica farfalla fra i riflessi”, in *Ibid.*, pp. 123-74; Claudio Gigante, “L’immagine ‘generativa’ nel Quaresimale di Giacomo Lubrano”, in *La Predicazione nel Seicento*, ed. by Maria Luisa Doglio and Carlo Delcorno, Bologna, il Mulino, 2009, pp. 209-236.

(1589) or the frontispiece of the first edition of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), seventeenth-century European thinking is always conceived in urban terms. It is true that in this period there are still great problems of a jurisdictional nature, and centralism struggles to establish itself amidst the multitudes of feudal rights and claims of small territories. A case in point is precisely the management of the plague and its economic effects by Viceroy Castrillo, who had to deal with the defence of local prerogatives and the unreliability of the Spanish ruling class, which often did not follow his directives. Nonetheless, at least in terms of jurisprudence, the centralistic determination of territorial control – its emanation from an abstract grid radiating from the capital, the seat of power – had already decidedly established itself by mid-century. In different terms and from a different perspective, José Antonio Maravall explained that, if the *Culture of the Baroque* is “conservative”, “of the masses” and “directed” from above, this is due to its fundamental “urban” nature that recognises its centre in an administrative, bureaucratic capital where all forms of collective control are organised.⁵

It is for this reason that Father Lubrano's concepts do not represent a general application of Catholic rhetoric. Of course there is putrescence, there are skeletons and worms, but we also find an altogether peculiar attention to economic fact: “Quanti giubilarono nella perdita de' padri, de' parenti, per vedersi eredi ab intestato di ricchi patrimoni? Quante nozze clandestine per occupar grosse doti?”⁶ Nicolò Pasquale echoed the preacher in his chronicle: “Quale oggetto darà prima materia ed adito alle mie voci? Il modo dell'uccidere o il numero degli estinti? [...] L'heredità estinte o gli heredi?”⁷ This is an insistent series of disjunctive interrogatives which develops a brief but clear reflection upon the sudden availability of legacies left without legitimate claimants.⁸ As mentioned earlier, many witnesses of the time dwell upon this issue, if anything in a pettily conservative tone: Giovan Battista Valentino in his *Napoli scontrafatto* laments the social mobility that followed the plague, while once again Lubrano, in his ode *Eraclito. Sfogo di malinconie per la peste di Napoli* will pithily hold forth that “marciscan senza eredi / patrimoni funesti” [“woeful legacies / rot without heirs”].⁹ In the following period, amidst the sweeping anti-feudal reforms of the mid-eighteenth century, the public administration will even sue the Neapolitan

5. The interpretation of José Antonio Maravall can be read in his *Culture of the Baroque: Analysis of a Historical Structure*, transl. by Terry Cochran, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1986. For a reading of the *Leviathan*, I referred to the observations of Franco Farinelli, *La crisi della ragione cartografica*, Turin, Einaudi, 2009; however, see also the studies by Gianfranco Borrelli, *Ragion di Stato e Leviatano. Conservazione e scambio alle origini della modernità politica*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1993; Id., *Non far novità. Alle radici della cultura italiana della conservazione politica*, Naples, Bibliopolis, 2000.

6. “How many rejoiced the loss of Fathers, of relatives, to see themselves heir intestate of rich legacies? How many secret marriages to seize large dowries?”

7. “Which object will first give substance and heed to my voice? The way of killing or the number of the dead? [...] Lost inheritances or the heirs?”

8. See Pasquale, *A' posteri della peste di Napoli*, p. 45.

9. Lubrano, *Scintille poetiche*, cited edition. For convenience, all of the quotations from poetic texts that will follow over the course of this analysis are taken from the anthology *Tre*

bankers with the charge of having illicitly seized the money of dead creditors at the time of the plague of 1656; the court will rule in favour of the banks, however.¹⁰

That *open sepulchre*, which is the city at the end of the epidemic, is thus also a place full of contradictions and opportunities: during the same weeks at the beginning of autumn, in which the large mass graves of Poggioreale and Ponte della Maddalena can finally be covered, a crowd coming from the countryside camps out at the gates of the city, hoping to find accommodation there. The centrifugal movement of the wealthier classes, which had fled Naples when the contagion had become an established fact, was matched by the centripetal shift from the countryside by the underprivileged, who headed for the city when life seemed to be beginning again.

Such a tension towards the centre characterises the whole seventeenth-century history of the capital of the Kingdom, which enjoyed extraordinary growth during that century, though in keeping with the process of urbanisation in Europe. In order to cope with the housing shortage resulting from the strong process of urbanisation beginning from the early years of the century, the body of Naples itself had a sort of volumetric jolt: while outside the gates of the city, from Capodimonte to the hill of the Vergini, new residential agglomerations were formed which were destined to become fully-fledged urban districts in the future, within the city walls additional structures were built on the roofs of existing buildings. This was the first sign of that illegal development that would become endemic until the complete state of disarray that marked the second half of the twentieth century.

2. *An urban reconfiguration*

The new problems posed by urban crowding and uncontrolled housing development had already emerged a few decades before the plague: in December 1631, Vesuvius – up to then benignly downgraded as “montagna di Somma” [“Mount Somma”] – ‘burst into flames’. Nobody expected its eruption, for its activity had become a memory from the ancient world. While seismic activities in Naples were located to the West, in the Campi Flegrei – with the *sofataria*, the fumaroles, the phenomena of bradyseism – the Vesuvius area was primarily appreciated for its excellent vineyards. The “nuttata” [“night”] of the 15th of December, when clouds of lapilli and explosions of lava threw the population into a blind panic, proved to be all the more formidable.

catastrofi. Eruzioni, rivolta e peste nella poesia del Seicento napoletano, ed. by Giancarlo Alfano, Marcello Barbato, Andrea Mazzucchi, Naples, Cronopio, 2000.

10. Information on the eighteenth-century lawsuit against the banks is found in Eduardo Nappi, *Aspetti della società e dell'economia napoletana durante la peste del 1656. Dai documenti dell'archivio storico del Banco di Napoli*, Naples, Edizioni del Banco di Napoli, 1980. A fundamental reference text is the essay in which Giuseppe Galasso has summarised the results of decades-long studies: Giuseppe Galasso, *Alla periferia dell'impero: il Regno di Napoli nel periodo spagnolo, secoli XVI-XVII*, Turin, Einaudi, 1994.

Due to the telluric origin of the phenomenon, this event was a catastrophe of a different nature from the plague, but it was the eruption of 1631 that established a new Neapolitan mental construct. Damage was limited, and the disaster affected primarily the farmhouses and cultivated lands along the slopes of the volcano, but all the records, reports, short poems, and odes published in quick succession a few days after the event presented it as an eminently urban phenomenon: nothing to do with farmlands and vineyards; the mountain of fire was threatening Naples, which stood before it.

Four-hundred years later, all this may seem obvious, not only because today – as we sit at the Belvedere di San Martino, for example – we are used to the view of the urban sprawl irresponsibly accreted around the volcano, but also because over the centuries, and at least until the mid-20th century, Vesuvius with its plume of smoke has remained the emblem of the city. This image did not exist before December 1631; afterwards, it appeared especially on the frontispieces of almost all printed works dealing with the event, which were regularly introduced by a lithograph depicting the smoking volcano. What occurred could thus be called a semiotic reconfiguration: before 1631 no seismic character was attributed to the capital of Campania, but after that date Naples became the quintessential volcanic city.

This is interesting for at least three reasons. Firstly, it allows us to assess the birth of a myth, of an image destined to influence for centuries the way of conceiving of, and representing, the real city. As a countercheck, it is sufficient to list some of the titles of the many works that described the eruption. A sampling includes the following: the *Relazione dell'incendio fattosi al Vesuvio* (Naples, 1631); the *Novissima relatione dell'incendio successo nel Monte di Somma* (Venice, 1632); the 'discourse' of *Bacco arraggiato co' Vorcano* ["Bacchus angry with the Volcano"] (Naples, 1632); the poem on *Vesuvio fulminante* (Naples, 1632); the ode by Girolamo Fontanella entitled *Al Vesuvio. Per l'incendio rinnovato* (Naples, 1632); the octaves of the *Incendio del Vesuvio* (Naples, 1632); or the unbelievable *Trattato scientifico delle cause che concorsero al fuoco e terremoto del Monte Vesuvio* (Naples, 1632), in which, by dint of naturalistic observations and Biblical quotations, Agnello di Santa Maria degli Scalzi incontrovertibly concluded that "il fuoco di Vesuvio non è infernale, ma naturale" ["the fire of Vesuvius is not infernal, but natural"].¹¹ Secondly, the event confirms the urban character of Baroque culture (we have already said that damage mostly concerned vineyards, lands and farmhouses, not the city) and thus the peculiar role that the presence of the masses (and the necessary control thereof) plays in it. Finally, the collective nature of the phenomenon and its direct influence on the formation of a descriptive stereotype reaffirm the specific political nature of this culture, which assesses the events in terms of collective determination and consequently of power relations; this is the third reason that motivates our interest in the reactions spurred by the eruption of 1631.

11. See Agnello di Santa Maria degli Scalzi Agostiniani, *Trattato scientifico delle cause che concorsero al fuoco e terremoto del Monte Vesuvio vicino Napoli [...]*, Naples, Lazaro Scoriggio, 1632.

If all the complex jumble of material pertaining to political journalism or literature devoted to the eruption revolves around the three pivotal points I have highlighted, I believe it is legitimate to confirm what I mentioned above about the ‘semiotic reconfiguration’ of the city. First of all, this is a topographical repositioning, for cultural attention shifts – as already mentioned – from the western to the eastern side, moving from the Campi Flegrei to Vesuvius. We will see shortly in what way the new spatial orientation was realised, and what ideological and political needs it sought to fulfil. Meanwhile, it seems useful to recall some reflections by Yury Lotman, who, while studying the symbolism of St Petersburg, considered the overall “problems of city semiotics.” In particular, the Russian scholar observed that in the history of culture there are two opposed models of the relationship between the city and the earth. The first appears as a concentric structure and tends to “have a close character”, as well as “being separate from what surrounds it”; consequently, the second tends to “be open to cultural contacts.” Moreover, the “eccentric city is situated ‘at the edge’ of cultural space: on the seashore, [or] at the mouth of a river;” it is therefore a city that “is founded as a challenge to Nature and struggles with it”.¹²

Situated close to the volcano, and stretching along the curve of the eponymous gulf, Naples clearly follows the model of the eccentric city. However, it is remarkable that nobody noticed this before the eruption of 1631. Of course, the eruption of AD 79 in the Roman era was already well known before the unearthing of the ruins of Pompeii, and the account of Pliny the Elder was an integral part of the corpus of stories and accounts that defined the past of the city. Nonetheless, it was an inert memory, so to speak, devoid of an effective role in the symbolic definition of the capital of the Viceroyalty. On the contrary, the cultural mental construct of Naples had been feeding for centuries on the images of places situated west of the city: starting from Virgil’s tomb at the foot of the hill of Posillipo, and gradually opening towards the *sofatarata* (the poisonous effects of which had already been sung by Giambattista Marino at the beginning of the century), passing Pozzuoli and its earth movements due to bradyseism, and finally arriving at Lake Averno and the Cave of the Cumaean Sybil sung in the *Aeneid*. An extraordinary stock of images, themes, artefacts and attractions, which had maintained its function unaltered from antiquity, through the Middle Ages, to the Renaissance, with the result that, in 1520, Girolamo Morlini’s Latin *Novellae* could situate Polyphemus’s abode in the caves of Coroglio, on the western slope of Posillipo.

With the seventeenth-century eruption, the centuries-old orientation of the ‘image of the city’ of Naples was suddenly, and irreversibly, changed. Fontanella’s already mentioned ode – which is also one of the very first texts published after the event (its dedication is dated 10 February 1632) – can give us the first useful clues to describe the substance of such a transformation. In order to bring the disaster within known cultural coordinates, the author in fact turns Vesuvius into a “furioso gigante

12. Yuri M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, transl. by Ann Shukman, with an introduction by Umberto Eco, London/New York, Tauris, 1990, p. 192.

/ ribelle al Ciel, vittorioso duce, [che] superbo fremendo / antico autor di temerarie prove / va sui turbini orrendo / a farsi il trono ove l'imperio ha Giove".¹³ The volcano is thus represented according to the mythological model of the Giants and the Titans, the children of Gaia and Uranus, who are guilty of rising up to the heavens in order to oust Jupiter from Olympus and thus overthrow him. It is immediately clear that the eruption is no longer represented as a natural phenomenon but becomes an event positioned outside the realm of legality, indeed a cruel subversive act. This very same meaning also justifies the publication of the already mentioned *Trattato scientifico delle cause che concorsero al fuoco e terremoto del Monte Vesuvio*, in which it is demonstrated that the flames of the eruption do not have an infernal character but are of natural origin. If one felt the need to demonstrate this, it is clear that he had to do it because the most widespread explanation – disguised in pagan mythology (Jupiter and the Titans) or dressed up in the Christian attire of the clash between God and Lucifer – aimed at understanding a physical phenomenon by transferring it onto the level of conflict, be it moral or theological, or political. Besides, Giovan Francesco Maia Materdona wrote, also in 1670, that “in Napoli [...] nel 1631 penetrarono i petti e dipinsero i volti umani più fulmini di spavento e più ceneri di timori che non erano i fulmini e le ceneri che per la bocca del Vesuvio vomitò l'Inferno”:¹⁴ or at least this is what “credeva, o creder poteva, eziandio fra i più dotti, la molto più morta che viva gente”.¹⁵

This model of representation soon became typical of the literature and political journalism of the time as it served as the dominant interpretive code, all the more so as volcanic and telluric phenomena recurred with impressive frequency (1649, 1660, 1682, 1685, 1688, 1694, and again several times at the beginning of the next century). Thus we find the same imagery in many authors, such as the little-known Francesco Matteo D'Adamo, who talks about a “tartarea lampa” [“infernal light”] (1632); or in Francesco Antonio Tomasi, who succinctly refers to the ‘haughtiness’ of Vesuvius (1632); or also in Giuseppe Battista, who, in the opening to a sonnet on *Lo 'ncendio del Vesuvio*, talks about a “gigante [...] fulminato” [“lightning-struck giant”] (1653). After the mid-century, Antonio de' Rossi will then refer to the “empio” [“impious”] ardour of Vesuvius (1661), which Francesco Dentice will present as a “sconfitto gigante” [“defeated giant”] (1667), while Biagio Cusano – to end our excursus at 1672 – will instead talk about “tartarei Tifei” [“infernal Typhons”] who shake big “moli fumanti” [“smoking mountain”] threatening the “gran Reina” [“great Queen”], Our Holy Lady of Mount Carmel.

13. “Furious giant / rebellious to the sky, victorious leader, (who) magnificent, shuddering, / ancient author of daring challenges / goes onto the terrible whirlwinds / to make his throne where Jupiter reigns supreme” (Girolamo Fontanella, *Al Vesuvio. Per l'incendio rinnovato*, in *Tre catastrofi*, p. 37).

14. “In Naples [...] in 1631 more thunderbolts of fright and more ashes of fear penetrated chests and painted human faces than the thunderbolts and ashes themselves which Hell vomited through the mouth of Vesuvius” (Giovan Francesco Maia Materdona, *L'utile spavento del peccatore overo la penitenza sollecita*, Venice, Antonio Tinani, 1670, p. 134a).

15. “People who were more dead than alive believed, or could believe, even those amongst the most learned ones” (*Ibid.*).

3. *The coherence of imagery*

If revolt against the established power was the basic image used to explain the eruption, the mythological memory of the revolt of the Titans must have seemed all the more pertinent to represent yet another, and rather different, catastrophe that upset Neapolitan history of the century: the so-called ‘revolt of Masaniello’.¹⁶ Many poets and chroniclers adhered to that imagery; for example, Giuseppe Battista, who in his *Poesie meliche* (1653) described the insurgent populace as “Tifei / ch’han di barbara strage avida sete”,¹⁷ while Spanish power appeared to him as “Jupiter” who “fears” because he is temporarily out of his “folgori di morte” [“thunderbolts of death”] (awaiting the arrival of Don Juan of Austria with the Spanish troops). By analogy, a conceptual structure of Christian religious inspiration is superimposed onto this classical imagery, one which interprets the gesture of the rebels as the product of a demonic impulsion. The infernal dimension that characterises Typhon and his companions, who are punished for the crime of lese-majesty with imprisonment in the Pit of Tartarus (or under Mount Etna, in another version of the myth), is amply exploited by the poets who deal with the revolt: Antonio Muscettola draws on this repertoire in his ode *Per i tumulti di Napoli* (1659), while Lubrano explains the “insolenza plebea” [“plebeian insolence”] as the effect of a “fascino d’Inferno” [“infernal fascination”] in his *Per le rivolture popolari di Napoli nell’anno 1647*.¹⁸ The series of collective disturbances, of such a different nature, is thus made homogeneous by means of a system of analogies. This is confirmed in a number of texts, including two sonnets: the first is by Baldassarre Pisani, in which the eruption is described as the spreading of “Stigie fiamme” that come “de l’Olimpo a spaventare i Numi”;¹⁹ the second, Vincenzo Zito’s *In tempo di tumulti*, who explains that the “schiera imbelle e plebea” is made “pugnace” by the Fury Alecto, so that the city is reduced to a “novo inferno d’anime languenti”.²⁰

16. After the now classic studies by Michelangelo Schipa, *Masaniello*, Bari, Laterza, 1925 and by Rosario Villari, *Elogio della dissimulazione: la lotta politica nel Seicento*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1987, the scholar who has dealt with the Neapolitan revolt in the most trenchant manner is Silvana D’Alessio, whose *Contagi: la rivolta napoletana del 1647-’48* I have already mentioned, and whose overall reconstructive monograph should be mentioned: *Masaniello: la sua vita e il mito in Europa*, introduction by Aurelio Musi, Rome, Salerno, 2007. On politics and contagion, it is also useful to signal the analysis by Giulia Calvi, “L’oro, il fuoco, le forche. La peste napoletana del 1656”, *Archivio Storico Italiano*, 507 (1981), pp. 405-458. A comprehensive study is in Paolo Preto, *Epidemia, paura e politica nell’Italia moderna*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1987.

17. “Typhons / with an avid thirst for barbaric carnage” (Giuseppe Battista, *L’argomento stesso*, in *Tre catastrofi*, p. 100).

18. Giacomo Lubrano, *Per le rivolture popolari di Napoli nell’anno 1647*, in *Tre catastrofi*, p. 119.

19. “Stygian flames (that come) from Olympus to frighten the Gods” (Baldassarre Pisani, *In occasione dello ’ncendio del Vesuvio così parla alla sua ninfa*, in *Tre catastrofi*, p. 64).

20. “Unwarlike and plebeian crowd (is made) pugnacious (by the Fury Alecto, so that the city is reduced to a) new hell of languishing souls” (Vincenzo Zito, *In tempo di tumulti*, in *Tre catastrofi*, p. 116). On ‘blind fury’ as possible interpretation of popular behaviour during the

The coherence of this interpretive model – for such is the system of images that had formed since 1631 – is splendidly illustrated by another sonnet, this one by Tommaso Gaudiosi, a native of Cava de' Tirreni. Gaudiosi described the volcanic event of 1660 (therefore after both the revolt of Masaniello and the plague) by categorically asserting that on that occasion “Uscì Stige dal letto et Acheronte / tra fiamme e sassi a vomitar sua peste”.²¹ After the eruption of Vesuvius (1631), and the revolt led by Masaniello (1647), we have now returned to the plague (1656), which in Gaudiosi's verses is no longer a very serious episode of a medical nature but a ‘concept’, namely a metaphorical argument used to describe a new volcanic eruption (1660). This seems to me a clear demonstration of how coherent imagery, in which ancient mythology is reinterpreted through Catholic mythology, was applied to events of a very different nature (natural catastrophes, political uprisings, health emergencies) and turned into a code for interpreting Neapolitan urban life in the middle decades of the seventeenth century. This is summarised in a sonnet published in 1661, in which Antonio de' Rossi *Describe la peste di contagio* [“Describes the plague widespread by contagion”], asserting that it has been “tolta di grembo a Pluto” [“taken from Pluto's lap”] (that is, from the depths of Hell).²² While doctors were discussing the nature of the plague, a poet represented it as the result of an infernal revolt, just as thirty years earlier – as witnessed by Brother Agnello – the rumour had spread in the city that “nel Monte di Vesuvio sii sboccato l'inferno; il che ogn'uno stima non possa esser se non per miracolo e special ordine della divina giustizia”.²³

The widespread presence of this material – from the Stygian Swamp to the Pit of Tartarus, from the Titans to the Furies – demonstrates that the three disturbances (Vesuvius, revolt and plague) were associated in the urban consciousness. Nicolò Pasquale affirmed it very clearly: with the “eruption of Vesuvius”, divine power

fece divider, come in cifra, nell'aborto del suo seno, il parto calamitoso d'un secolo intiero: nelle scosse i moti della terra e le soversioni delle Provincie; nelle viscere d'acciaio insieme e nel fuoco vomitato, il ferro e le fiamme nelle rivolution popolari del 1647 [...]; ne' tiepidi e roventi fiumi sgorgati, i fumanti rivi di sangue; nell'aperte fauci, la fame; nella mefite, la pestilenza; nel zolfo, o il rimedio o il fetore.²⁴

“tumults”, see Peter Burke, “The Virgin of the Carmine and the Revolt of Masaniello”, *Past and Present*, 99 (1983), pp. 3-21.

21. “The Styx overflowed its banks and Acheron / amidst flames and stones vomited its plague” (Tommaso Gaudiosi, *Per l'incendio del Vesuvio del 1660*, in *Tre catastrofi*, p. 66).

22. Antonio de' Rossi, *Describe la peste di contagio*, in *Tre catastrofi*, p. 130.

23. “On Mount Vesuvius Hell poured forth; which everybody believes cannot be if not by miracle and special order from divine justice” (Agnello di Santa Maria, *Trattato scientifico delle cause*, p. 10).

24. “Intimated, as if in code, in its aborting womb, the calamitous birth of an entire century: in the tremors the motions of the earth, and the subversions of the Provinces; in the steel bowels together and in the vomited fire, the iron and the flames of the popular revolutions of 1647 [...]; in the tepid and scorching gushed-out rivers, the steaming rivers of blood; in the gaping jaws, hunger; in the foul smell, pestilence; in sulphur, either remedy or stench” (Pasquale, *A' posteri della peste di Napoli*, p. 2).

For Pasquale, the eruption therefore anticipated the series of unfortunate events that would continue throughout the century. Here is the core of the semiotic reconfiguration discussed earlier. This is produced by the upsetting series of catastrophes that had fixed itself on the urban body in a traumatic manner, making it necessary to re-discuss and re-calibrate the images and the system of signs traditionally connected to its cultural identity.

In this regard, it is useful to refer to a research effort coordinated by Françoise Lavocat, emphasising the ways in which the “narrative, poetic, discursive fabrication of an event” occurs, often due to a “conflict of interpretation” consequent to a collective ‘shock’.²⁵ These are valuable observations that seem to interlace perfectly with Lotman’s methodological guidelines, as in his previously mentioned essay on St Petersburg he talked about the “city as a complex semiotic mechanism, a culture-generator” that “makes it so productive of semiotic encounters”.²⁶ The Russian scholar added that such a conflictual character is motivated not only by the synchronic presence of opposed formal, ideological and axiological conceptions (for example, in the case of the political clash at the time of Masaniello’s revolt), but also by what could be called the ‘diachronic consistency’ of different images. The city is in fact “a mechanism, forever recreating its past, which then can be synchronically juxtaposed to the present” as if past and present were on a synchronic level.²⁷ Giants and Viceroy, archaeological memory, mythological substratum and current historical contraposition merge and reconfigure themselves in the imminence of the traumatic event as they undergo a profound process of re-semantisation often expressed in allegorical terms.

Come in cifra [“As if in code”] Nicolò Pasquale in fact writes in his *Account*, as if the event were presented to human beings to be interpreted; thus the coherence of a project can be grasped through the apparently tragic chaotic nature of the catastrophe. The firstly shaken, then upset, and finally “scontrafatto” [“transfigured”] body of the city reveals the stigmata of a further, ultimate conflict between good and evil: God and Satan, but also Don Juan and Masaniello, or the Jesuit martyrs who do their utmost for the infected as they fight the plague, or further still the boiling blood of St Januarius against the hellish heat of the volcano, or the sea of grace of the Virgin, who extinguishes the eruptive flames.

The *open sepulchre* offered to the reader’s gaze is then the result of a conflict that spread on every level, ultimately fixing itself on the arches of all the gates to the city, where, between June and September 1656, Mattia Preti received the public mandate to depict the image of the *Immaculate Conception* (a surviving example can be admired today on Porta San Gennaro, in the vicinity of piazza Cavour). The painter had to fulfil very precise instructions: the Virgin Mary had to be at the top; St Januarius, St Francis Xavier and St Rosalia a little lower down;

25. The quotations come from, respectively, Françoise Lavocat, “Avant-propos”, in *Pestes, incendies, naufrages. Écritures du désastre au dix-septième siècle*, ed. by Françoise Lavocat, Turnhout, Brepols, 2010, pp. 9-28: 16; Ead., “Racontar la catastrophe”, *ibid.*, pp. 31-65: 32.

26. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind*, p. 194.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 195.

“l’istessa città con la strage fatta dal contagio e gl’illustrissimi signori eletti e deputati” at the bottom (also from Pasquale’s account).²⁸

4. *A world model*

Such a precise iconographic scheme responds to the model of the polarised representation between top and bottom, which synthetically interprets the urban conflicts in their entirety. This model also came to be organised thanks to cartographic representation, for in 1648, immediately after the revolt, the Burgundian Pietro Miotte executed a map of Naples inspired by Alessandro Baratta’s bird’s-eye views of the city (the *Patroni fidelissimae urbis Neapolitanae* of 1626 and, even more, the *Fidelissimae urbis Neapolitanae delineatio* of 1627-29), from which he also took the representation of the patron saints placed around the Virgin and laid on layers of clouds. The novelty introduced by Miotte consisted in making direct reference to the political reality: he placed along the lower area of the image a series of precise sections indicating the various places in the city which had been occupied by, respectively, the Spanish troops and the people in revolt: the vertical city, with the saints in the heavens, explained the horizontal city, with the opposing groups confronting each other in arms.

In a recent book, Cesare de Seta has observed that, beginning from the mid-sixteenth century, the ‘portrait of the city’ becomes a current practice in use for large and small Italian and European cities. This model of representation appears a veritable “manifesto” that aims to offer “the urban image in its maximum extension and in its entirety, thereby rendering the *forma urbis* in all its spectacular potentialities”.²⁹ Art and science equally contributed to the multiplication of portraits, views, plans, frescoes, woodcuts and other kinds of urban images: it is in fact “the result, on the one hand, of the invention of perspective and the increasingly elaborate topographical instrumentation to measure from a distance, and, on the other hand, of the progress achieved through the establishment of cadastres and the new cartography representing the territory”.³⁰ The ‘portrait of the city’ is the visual side of the new humanistic culture, which found in the *laudatio urbis* one of its most typical forms because the terms *splendor* and *decus*, economic floridity and civic decorum, converged in it. It is also the ideological tool used to express the current political model and the effectiveness of its dominance through the body of the city, or its physicality. By his own admission, de Seta decided to omit “the *representations* of the city *by parts*”, because they have “other intents which differ from that other kind of ‘portrait of the city’, whose overriding aim is to celebrate the city”.³¹ However, Miotte’s example actually demonstrates how

28. “The city itself with the carnage done by the epidemic, and the very illustrious elected and appointed gentlemen” (Pasquale, *A’ Posterì della Peste di Napoli*, p. 16).

29. Cesare de Seta, *Ritratti di città. Dal Rinascimento al secolo XVIII*, Turin, Einaudi, 2011, p. 8 (transl. by E.M.F).

30. *Ibid.*, p. 49 (transl. by E.M.F).

31. *Ibid.*, p. 8 (transl. by E.M.F).

political sedition – with the consequent fragmentation of the urban body – imposes an interesting dialectic between “parts” and whole, ultimately offering a visual synthesis of the city which is also the interpretation of the conflicts that shake it.

Besides, in an important essay published in 1983, Louis Marin explained that “a map of the city represents the production of a discourse on the city”.³² A possible out-of-scale representation of some buildings executed to signify their relevance is therefore not only an element to be reckoned with in terms of greater or lesser ‘realism’ but also the formal outcome of a certain cultural and ideological orientation. In the example of the map of Strasbourg discussed by the French semiologist, “the buildings of the city, its houses and churches, are well represented from a bird’s-eye view, but [...] it appears from the concentric arrangement of the buildings that the site from which the map is seen is located directly above the space in its center”. Consequently, Marin concluded, “it is as if the viewer of the map were contemplating the whole of the city from ‘there,’ that is, from a celestial place whose projection onto the surface of the ground represented could be inscribed by default, in the form of an absence, a central blind spot”.³³

At this point, we can attempt to explain more precisely what happened in Naples beginning from the 1630s, when a series of traumatic collective events required an overall reconfiguration of the urban image. It was during those years that the discourses of politics, science, medicine, and jurisprudence settled into a coherent cultural model which combined the value system with a shared visual grammar. Such a model then provided the genetic ground for the diverse interpretations of disasters.

From the point of view of visual construction (and not only of ‘iconography’), the diffusion of the ‘northern’ bird’s-eye model in seventeenth-century Naples – introduced by the works of Baratta and the Catalan Didier Barra (the latter being responsible for the birth of the icon of Vesuvius on fire) – shows the coherence of the discourses produced in those decades to illustrate what was happening in the capital of the Kingdom, crushed in a terrible conflict between antagonistic forces. As an example, two images present the same spatial module applied to opposite political contents. The first image is *Portrait of Masaniello* (1650) attributed to Onofrio Palumbo, in which the demagogue is seen looming in the foreground against the backdrop of a Naples inspired by Didier Barra’s views. The second is Josepe de Ribera’s etching *Equestrian Portrait of Don Juan of Austria* (1659), in which the Spanish military leader occupies much of the foreground, with a bird’s-eye view of the city in the backdrop.³⁴ This seems to me a particularly noteworthy

32. Louis Marin, “The City in Its Map and Portrait” [1983], in Id., *On Representation*, transl. by Catherine Porter, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002, pp. 202-218: 203.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 214.

34. The pictorial representation of the capital of the Kingdom has been amply studied. A first approach is possible thanks to the essays collected in the catalogue *Civiltà del Seicento a Napoli*, 2 vols., Naples, Electa, 1998, particularly: Giancarlo Alisio, “L’immagine della città”, vol. I, pp. 80-98; Raffaello Causa, “La pittura a Napoli da Caravaggio a Luca Giordano”, vol. I, pp. 99-114; Luigi di Mauro, “L’eruzione del Vesuvio del 1631”, vol. II, pp. 37-43; Katia

case of how opposite interpretations are organised within the same visual syntax: the partisans of the ‘popular bloc’ and the supporters of viceregal power could only organise the forces deployed according to the same world model.

The vertical module also triumphs in the pictorial and literary representation of St Januarius. In the paintings by Battistello Caracciolo and by Ribera, the saint increasingly takes on the traits of the “Ercole celeste” [“celestial Heracles”] depicted as he flies over the city. Januarius also flies in the *Vesuvius Eruption* by Micco Spadaro, in which the saint’s protective function is made explicit by the hands stretched against the plumes of smoke that threaten the crowd in procession. Similarly, in the cycle of sonnets devoted to the saint by Biagio Cusano, the “rio bogliente” of his blood extinguishes “l’accese orride fiamme” of the volcano, while the “gran volar de’ sempiterni allori” advances against the “fulmini sonori” of Vesuvius and “l’avanzo [...] del martire” defeats “le fiamme del tartareo Tauro”,³⁵ a miraculous action in this case already made explicit by the title of the composition: *Le reliquie del glorioso martire San Gennaro riparano Napoli del fuoco del Vesuvio*.³⁶

In short, it appears evident that a tight and coherent metaphorical web lies over the Naples of catastrophes, which gives shape to the interpretation of the events, be they of seismic, epidemic, or political nature, according to an efficient system of figural and semantic oppositions. The vertical suspension is thus transformed from a ‘simple’ perspective point of view into an axis of values, in axiological scale. Last in a series of tragic disturbances, the plague summarises all previous catastrophic events because of its double – that is, natural and political – nature, and because it perfectly fits into the web of images that came to be established in the twenty-five years after December 1631.

A web that sends back the image of an ‘organic’ and compact city over which opposed forces are stirring. The conflicts of history thus become over-historical, with politics and nature being reabsorbed in a sphere of superior meaning. It is not difficult to recognise here the connection proposed by Walter Benjamin between allegory and Baroque culture.³⁷ We have seen this in Pasquale’s reference to the *code* with which God may have anticipated the chain of disasters; this seems almost the didactic application of what the German philosopher observed

Fiorentino, “La rivolta del Masaniello del 1647”, vol. II, pp. 45-50; Antonio Porzio, “Immagini della peste del 1656”, vol II, pp. 51-59. Also to be consulted: the works of Giancarlo Alisio, *Napoli Barocca*, photographs by Sergio Riccio, Naples, Edizioni del Sole, 1988; Cesare de Seta, *Napoli*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1991; Gaetana Cantone, *Napoli barocca*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 1993. On Alessandro Baratta, see also de Seta, *Ritratti di città*, pp. 197-207.

35. “The boiling river of his blood extinguishes the horrid blazing flames of the volcano, while the great flight of the sempiternal laurels advances against the sonorous thunderbolts of Vesuvius and the remains [...] of the martyr defeats the flames of the infernal Taurus” (Biagio Cusano, *Le reliquie del glorioso martire San Gennaro riparano Napoli del fuoco del Vesuvio*, in *Tre catastrofi*, p. 76).

36. “The relics of the glorious martyr Saint Januarius shelter Naples from the fire of Vesuvius”.

37. For Walter Benjamin’s well-known reflections, see Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of Tragic Drama*, transl. by John Osborne, London/New York, Verso, 1998 [1st ed. 1928], p. 166.

regarding Baroque allegory, in which “the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape”. History is reduced to unredeemed nature, a landscape of ruins, a Hippocratic face furrowed by the scars of writing (which is the opposite of the honey of the Scriptures) and offered to the reader for meditation as an image of the human condition.

It so happens that these Neapolitan texts do not accord any redeeming features to the tragic collective events narrated by making them part of a superior divine plan of salvation but abandon them instead in a temporal, contingent dimension, devoid of meaning. History is reduced to time that unfolds and dissolves, as can be read in the sonnet *Terremoto orribile accaduto in Napoli nel 1688*, in which Father Lubrano addresses the reader by intimating “Mortalità, che sogni? ove ti ascondi, / se puoi perire a un alito di Fato?”³⁸ With the chasm of earthly life wide open, “le nostre eternità” [“our eternities”] prove to be nothing but a “breve tremoto” [“brief earthquake”]: it is then necessary to recognise that “di ciechi spirti un’invisibil guerra / ne assedia, e cova un vacuo ignoto”.³⁹

A “vacuo”, Lubrano says: a “void”. So we return to that terrible opening of the *open sepulchre*, an image that must have been quite widespread in the years following the epidemic if we find it in a sonnet by Tommaso Gaudiosi, *Il pozzo ove stan sepelliti 700 appestati* [“The well where 700 plague-ridden people are buried”]. The water that once quenched thirst is now infected by corpses, at a time when – through a definitive figure that superimposes plague and earthquake – “dopo quello degli uomini, era seguito il contagio a’ palagi, quasi che, estinti gli abitatori, non volessero soprastare, ma, per dolore ruinando, dare ed a quegli ed a sé stessi sepulcro con le ruine”.⁴⁰ It is this *code* that Nicolò Pasquale offers *A’ posteri* with his account of the “peste di Napoli”: the image of an unrecognisable face, collapsed onto itself, mixed up in a very dense web of scars. This face of a city devastated by the unleashing of opposite forces would be covered in heavy makeup a few decades later. The gouaches of the times to come would transform the plume of Vesuvius into the trivial icon of a sunny and happy city; the “ruine” [“ruins”] of the palaces would be camouflaged as innocuous scenery: the eternal “bella giornata” [“lovely day”] of the city of Naples.⁴¹

38. “Mortality, what do you dream of? where do you hide / if you may perish at a blow of Fate?” (Giacomo Lubrano, *Terremoto orribile accaduto in Napoli nel 1688*, in *Tre catastrofi*, p. 83).

39. “An invisible war of blind spirits / besieges them, and harbours an unknown void” (*ibidem*).

40. “After that amongst men, there followed contagion in the palaces, almost as if, with the inhabitants extinct, the palaces did not want to dominate but, making ruins out of sorrow, wanted to give both them and themselves a sepulchre with the ruins” (Pasquale, *A’ Posteri della Peste di Napoli*, p. 47).

41. The “lovely day” was discussed by Raffaele La Capria, “L’armonia perduta. Una fantasia sulla storia di Napoli” [1986], in Id., *Opere*, ed. by Silvio Perrella, Milan, Mondadori, 2003, pp. 646-51.

