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A "Study of Truth and Suffering": Matilde Serao's Early Writings on Naples

Jon R. Snyder

Translator's Introduction

"Bisogna sventrare Napoli" [Naples must be gutted]. With these words of disdain, Agostino Depretis, the right-wing Prime Minister of Italy (born in Lombardy), reacted to the 1884 cholera outbreak in Naples that took thousands of lives.¹ During a brief official visit to the stricken urban center in early September, Depretis was shocked by the poverty and squalor of its crumbling, overcrowded Old City, including the notorious *Quartieri Spagnoli* or Spanish Quarters. His call for drastic urban renewal through the demolition of these ancient, decrepit residential neighborhoods and the expulsion of their inhabitants—most of whom belonged to the vast Neapolitan subproletariat—will forever be linked to a young writer who would shortly devote a series of essays to the defense of the subaltern world of Naples.

Matilde Serao was twenty-two years old when in 1878 she published the earliest essay included in the selection of her writings on Naples appearing in this issue of *California Italian Studies*; she was twenty-eight years old when the last four of these texts were collected in *Il ventre di Napoli* (*The Belly of Naples*, 1884), which appeared not long after Depretis' visit.² Serao was born to parents of very modest means, and grew up in a working-class quarter of Naples. However, she had the benefit—as relatively few women in unified Italy still had at the time—of a high-school education in the new public school system. She left her job working for the state telegraph office in mid-1877, and, against all odds, set out on what was to be her brilliant literary and journalistic career in Naples and Rome.

Serao (1856-1927) is today perhaps the least well known, to Anglophone readers, of the leading Italian writers of the final decades of the nineteenth century and the Belle Époque. Since her death, she has been largely relegated to the sidelines in critical accounts of modern Italian literature, in which Gabriele D'Annunzio and Luigi Pirandello (born seven and eleven years after Serao, respectively) overshadow all other authors. Yet D'Annunzio dedicated his second novel, *Giovanni Episcopo* (1891), to her, and in that same year future Nobel laureate Giosuè Carducci called her "la più forte prosatrice d'Italia" (Italy's greatest woman prose writer). Many years later (1924) Benito Mussolini—whose Fascist squads had vandalized the offices and presses of the newspaper of which she served as director—wrote a flattering letter to Serao, stating: "I have read all of your books and have found so much life there!"³ Her contemporary Edith Wharton, who was not known for her generosity toward other women writers, raved about the "glow" of Serao's "powerful intelligence," acknowledging that in Paris salons "when she began to speak

1 Frank M. Snowden remarks that this famous phrase has also been attributed to King Umberto I, with whom Depretis visited Naples during the epidemic, in the early days of September 1884. Frank M. Snowden, *Naples in the Time of Cholera: 1884-1911* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 2002), 165.

2 Patricia Bianchi, "Nota al testo," in Matilde Serao, *Il ventre di Napoli*, ed. Patricia Bianchi (Cava de' Tirreni (SA): Avagliano Editore, 2002), 21. Bianchi notes that this small volume first appeared in print in December 1884, just a few weeks after the end of the cholera outbreak. All texts from *Il ventre di Napoli* included here are translated from this edition.

3 Gianni Infusino, ed., *Matilde Serao tra giornalismo e letteratura* (Naples: Guida, 1981), 7.

we had found our master . . . her monologues rose to greater heights than the talk of any other woman I have known.”⁴ Henry James devoted an extensive essay to Serao, praising her manifest narrative gift and acknowledging her as a “great” woman writer.⁵ Midway between the end of Serao’s long career and the present day, the innovative novelist-essayist Anna Banti (*Artemisia*) produced a pioneering, if often sharply critical, biography of her Neapolitan predecessor.⁶

Among the first women journalists to emerge in Italy after Unification, Serao wrote for newspapers such as the *Corriere di Roma* and the *Corriere di Napoli* before co-founding in 1892—together with her husband Edoardo Scarfoglio—*Il Mattino*, which today continues to be Naples’ leading newspaper. In 1904, after separating from Scarfoglio, she founded yet another daily, *Il Giorno*, which survived until shortly after her death in 1927. Along with numerous works of non-fiction, Serao also published a steady stream of novels and stories from the very outset of her career. More than once she disingenuously denied that she was a truly “literary” writer of fiction, but only a chronicler of the age.⁷ And, to be sure, not all of Serao’s books (whether fiction or non-fiction) are of equal quality or enduring interest. She was certainly not sympathetic to the feminist movements of her era, and endorsed the Fascist regime in the final years of her life.⁸ However, her undeniable successes as a professional woman writer-journalist are a testament not only to her fierce ambition and iron self-discipline (she is said to have died at her desk with pen in hand), but also to her grasp of the social, economic and political transformations that were occurring in post-Unification Italy.

Nevertheless, since Serao’s death her work has been given short shrift by publishers, not only critics, in Italy and abroad. A very limited number of her writings have been posthumously translated or republished in English, although Anglophone criticism has given increasing attention to her work over the past two decades. *Il ventre di Napoli* is of interest to today’s reader for several reasons. First, the original 1884 version portrays a now lost way of life through a lens that is not solely aimed at conveying or magnifying the “picturesque,” and can be coolly critical of its subject matter. By the same token, contemporary European consumers of the “picturesque” also come in for pointed criticism in a chapter of the first edition entitled “The Picturesque” (not included here). An indignant Serao denounces the voyeuristic attraction of tourists, travelers, and other visitors—especially artists—to the colorful but wretched living conditions of the Neapolitan poor, whose daily existence was marked by the cries of street vendors and peddlers of

4 Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998 [1934]), 275-277.

5 James’ essay has been republished in Matilde Serao, *L’anima semplice. Suor Giovanna della Croce*, ed. Rosa Casapullo (Milan: Rizzoli, 2006), 5-24.

6 Anna Banti, *Matilde Serao* (Turin: UTET, 1965).

7 In the preface to *Il romanzo della fanciulla*, Serao demurred: “I do not want to write a novel; I do not want to create a ‘type’; I do not want to resolve a problem of experimental psychology. I dig down into my memory, where recollections are arranged in successive layers, like the traces of geological events in the earth’s crust, and I give you the notes just as I myself find them, without reconstructing fantastic animals, I give you novellas without protagonists, or better still, in which all are protagonists. I do not know if this obeys the laws of art: from the day on which I began to write, I have never wanted and known how to be anything other than a faithful, humble chronicler of my memory. I entrusted myself to instinct, and I do not believe that it has deceived me. In fact, I seem to have heard it said that in ancient tragedies the true protagonist is the chorus, and to have read that in Aristophanes’ comedies the protagonist is the people. Instinct has therefore guided and counseled me well.” Matilde Serao, *Il romanzo della fanciulla/La virtù di Checchina*, ed. Francesco Bruni (Naples: Liguori Editore, 1985), 5, my translation.

8 See, for instance, Matilde Serao, “L’emancipazione della donna: Il segnale della donna” (1895), now in Donatella Trotta, ed., *La via della penna e dell’ago. Matilde Serao tra giornalismo e letteratura* (Naples: Liguori, 2008), 216-217.

every ilk, herds of goats in the narrow alleys, heaps of uncollected garbage, prostitutes, sweatshops, open sewers, and crowds of hungry homeless men and orphans. Second, the revised 1906 edition captures the effects of the dramatic modernization projects (such as the ‘rettifilo’, as Corso Umberto I is commonly known) wrought to the city center by the new Italian state, after the end of the cholera epidemic, through its controversial 1885 “Legge per il risanamento della città di Napoli” (Law for the Redevelopment of the City of Naples). Traces of this urban renewal scheme are still very visible in Naples, even after the extensive destruction caused by WWII and the even more catastrophic postwar building boom.⁹ Third, despite veering at times toward sentimentality, Serao seeks to write experimental prose in a modern key, under the influence of French realism and naturalism as well as Italian *verismo*. It is surely no coincidence that, in “The Tenth Muse,” she does not refer to the Muses of classical antiquity (of which there were nine), but rather to a wholly modern muse first made famous by the renowned French gastronome Brillat-Savarin in his *The Physiology of Taste* (1825).¹⁰

In the works translated here, the point of departure of Serao’s writerly trajectory is to be found in the minutely detailed descriptive prose catalogs of the “Tenth Muse,” as she leads the reader through the labyrinthine street markets of central Naples at Christmastime.¹¹ Here, in contrast to the realist vein in which it is composed, the essay concludes with a high-flown paean to artifice and artistry. The renowned sweets of Naples (the result of skillful manipulation of raw or natural materials) visible in the shop windows are a correlate of the spectacular rhetorical display that Serao offers to the reader, in a sophisticated self-reflexive gesture, in the concluding paragraphs of the essay. The paradoxical title of “The Legend of the Future,” written not long afterward, instead underscores this text’s pronounced affinity for the literary traits of the fable. Although Serao’s narrative language is tinged with scientific vocabulary, and her account is clearly based on direct observation of the spectacular eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 1872, the volcano figures in the tale as a character in its own right—indeed, as the central if inscrutable character, as well as the source and focus of the action.¹² The explosive growth of the contemporary city around the base of Mount Vesuvius, and the very low likelihood of a successful evacuation of the population from the red zone in the case of a major eruption, make “The Legend of the Future” chilling reading even now.

The three essays taken from *Il ventre di Napoli* appear at first glance to belong instead to the genre of reportage, of which Serao the working journalist was a prominent proponent in the new Italy. Yet these texts were in fact published in a Roman newspaper, *Capitan Fracassa*, in serial form during the 1884 cholera outbreak in Naples, which Serao, who was by then living and working in the capital, did not witness first-hand.¹³ The essays therefore are designed to sustain

9 See Francesco Rosi’s classic film *Mani sulla città* (1963) for a still-relevant look at the corruption, greed and political maneuvering that accompanied this boom.

10 See “To the Tenth Muse,” note 34, for full bibliographical information on Brillat-Savarin’s treatise.

11 This essay, dated “Christmas 1878,” was collected by Serao in a volume bearing the significant title *Dal vero* (Milan: Perussia e Quadrio, 1879). See Nunzio Ruggiero, *La civiltà dei traduttori* (Naples: Guida, 2009), 97, where he contends that this essay was supposed to appear to contemporary readers to be a pastiche or parody of Zola and Dickens, and Wanda De Nunzio Schilardi, *L’invenzione del reale: studi su Matilde Serao* (Bari: Palomar, 2004).

12 This text was published by Serao in her oft-reprinted volume of ghost stories and fairy tales, *Leggende napoletane*, where it serves as a coda to the collection. See Matilde Serao, *Leggende napoletane* (Milan: G. Ottino, 1881), 261-272.

13 Bianchi, “Nota al testo,” 21-22: “i capitoli del libro ripropongono gli articoli che Matilde Serao aveva pubblicato nel giornale romano *Capitan Fracassa*, diretto da Arnaldo Vassallo Gandolin, a partire dal n. 258 del 17 settembre (*Sventrare Napoli*), per un’inchiesta appassionata sulla Napoli colpita dal colera. Negli articoli successivi compare, come titolo generale di un libro a progetto unitario pubblicato a puntate, l’intitolazione *Il ventre di Napoli*, a cui

an aestheticized illusion of reality, or reality-effect, i.e. that hers is not a highly mediated work of memory, but rather a kind of “photograph” of the existence of the urban poor (like the picturesque postcards sold to foreign travelers to Naples). Indeed, this reality-effect underpins all of *Il ventre di Napoli*. In point of fact, however, “What They Eat,” “The Lottery,” and “More on the Lottery” make frequent use of stylistic and rhetorical devices that are more often associated with literature than journalism (metaphor, metonymy, irony etc.).¹⁴ A far cry from the ornate, classicizing and/or Tuscanizing style favored by many late nineteenth-century Italian novelists and essayists, Serao’s prose dares at the same time to seem almost spontaneous in its repetitions, inconsistencies, syntactical or orthographic irregularities, lexical oddities, and—above all—affinities with the dialect spoken in the streets of Naples.

This essentially hybrid prose writing, blending traits of narrative and essay, literary and oral traditions, is perhaps the most prominent feature of these 1884 texts from *Il ventre di Napoli*. There is no recognizable “plot” or “character,” as there would be in a three-decker nineteenth-century novel; there is no dialogue, only reported speech; and each text offers the reader only a fragment or sliver of the existence of the poor in the inner-city slums, making no claim to a total representation or authoritative account of life there. Figures such as the *assistito* and the monk are sketched in what Patrizia Bianchi has termed “micronarratives” that are embedded within a heteroclitic text incorporating lists of objects, dialect words, polemical remarks, references to statistics, street addresses, bureaucratic jargon, questionnaires and so on, all bound together by the author’s impassioned narrative voice—never more clearly so than in the brief “Farewell” to the reader, which is included here.¹⁵ Serao’s influences in *Il ventre di Napoli* include Balzac, Dickens, the Goncourt brothers, Verga, and even Zola; nevertheless, her work makes an original and intriguing contribution to post-Unification Italian literature, opening a window for many bourgeois readers and newly minted Italians onto the condition of the urban underclass in what was the new Italy’s largest city.

Although Serao switches prose genres, all of the texts on Naples published here return insistently to the question of the body, which appears as a governing or organizing principle of them.¹⁶ In the case of *Il ventre di Napoli*, the “gut” of Naples is suffering from a disease (cholera) for which a cure is urgently needed. In Prime Minister Depretis’ perspective, the cure would be the evisceration of the Old City, while Serao sees that cure as a superficial bandage that does not address the structural causes of poverty in Naples (illiteracy, unemployment, lack of decent housing, the absence of the State and its authorities). Cholera is, in her view, only a symptom of a much more serious malaise in the body politic of Naples. She outlines some other symptoms of this same malaise in her two essays on the lottery; according to her, the lottery brings—in its own unique way—mass suffering and death to the citizens of Naples. The city, in experiencing a kind of collective hallucination or derangement each week before the numbers are drawn, acts like a living organism. “To the Tenth Muse” and “What They Eat” obviously focus

seguono i sottotitoli, ripetuti nei capitoli del libro: così, ad esempio, *Il lotto*, 24 settembre, n. 265, e *Il lotto*, 26 settembre, n. 267, che però nel libro diventa *Ancora il lotto*.” For a useful analysis of Serao’s journalism in the period immediately preceding her intervention in the national debate over Naples, see Rossana Melis, “Una ‘novella ignobile’: *La virtù di Checchina*,” in *Matilde Serao: le opere e i giorni. Atti del convegno di studi* (Napoli 1-4 dicembre 2004), ed. Angelo R. Pupino (Naples: Liguori, 2006), 199-205.

14 Maryse Jeuland-Meynaud notes the correspondences between Serao’s writings on Naples and Zola’s *Le ventre de Paris* (1873). See Maryse Jeuland-Meynaud, *Immagini, linguaggio e modelli del corpo nell’opera narrativa di Matilde Serao* (Rome: Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1986), 61-62.

15 Bianchi, “Nota al testo,” 28.

16 Bianchi, “Nota al testo,” 26, takes a somewhat different approach to this same question.

on questions of food, providing a clear picture of class differences dividing the residents of late nineteenth-century Naples. The foods for sale in the Christmas markets portrayed by Serao are beyond the reach of most inhabitants of Naples, who instead subsist on low-cost street fare, when they have anything to eat at all. There is the healthful bourgeois body, with fresh fruits and vegetables to eat, as well as warm, well lit rooms in which to dwell; and there is the diseased body of the masses, who must scrounge for scraps in the muddy streets and sleep in dank, fetid hovels.

Finally, the vast bulk of Vesuvius, which looms over the city like its latent doom in “The Legend of the Future,” will—when it erupts cataclysmically—bring to an end the bodily joys and pleasures of the Neapolitan populace, which is represented by Serao as being immersed in the life of the senses. The author’s vocabulary follows here the same oppositional logic found in her other writings, using “sunlight,” “scents,” “dances and songs,” “loving,” etc., to set the life of the city and its inhabitants in stark contrast to the mountain’s dark, menacing presence. Ironically, the apocalyptic vision of a catastrophic eruption of Vesuvius offers for Serao the only possible moment of resolution, in the writings translated here, to the seemingly insuperable economic and social inequalities that divide the citizens of Naples in the late Ottocento. Although all bodies will share the same fate when the city is destroyed in “an ocean of fire,” this thought nevertheless brings a “smile” to the lips of the young woman to whom the narrator tells the legend of the future: for only thanks to this terrible natural disaster, bringing universal annihilation to Naples, will all forms of difference finally be erased.

On the Translations

As noted above, all of the texts included here belong to the same early phase of Serao’s career as a writer (1878-1884), but are in some ways quite heterogeneous. I have chosen not to arrange them in chronological order, in order to avoid any suggestion (so dear to biographical criticism) of a gradual ‘progress’ or ‘evolution’ in her writing. With apparently protean ease, Serao switched stylistic and generic codes and registers throughout her working life as a writer, just as she moved tirelessly between journalism, fiction, and essays. A text such as “The Legend of the Future,” which was published several years prior to *Il ventre di Napoli*, was subsequently republished numerous times by the author; it was a work that accompanied her almost from the beginning to the end of her trajectory. I count at least thirteen editions of *Leggende napoletane* that appeared in print (in various versions) before Serao’s death. On the other hand, *Il ventre di Napoli* was published in 1884 and revised in 1906, but was not otherwise reprinted during the author’s lifetime. The first four translated texts included here, including the brief “Farewell” to the reader, did appear in this same order, although not as consecutive chapters, in *Il ventre di Napoli*. Some English-language readers may prefer to juxtapose “What They Eat” with the reading of “To the Tenth Muse,” as both essays consider food culture in late nineteenth-century Naples, although from opposite points of view.

Any translator of these texts must, first of all, contend with Serao’s use of the slippery term *il popolo*. Although it may of course be used to indicate “(the) people” or “(the) populace,” in the context of *Il ventre di Napoli* that would be far too general. Whenever Serao employs the term here, she is instead referring—with a constant concern for the effects on the South of the

new liberal Italy's capitalist economic system—to all those Neapolitans who were not members of the privileged middle or upper classes. The mass of the city's population in the late nineteenth century was comprised of the working poor, the underemployed and the unemployed, including the desperately impoverished and disenfranchised, not a few of whom were still living like the *lazzari* of the early modern era, and who were the principal victims of the cholera epidemic. Among the slum-dwellers there were also, however, a great many artisans, clerks, workmen, domestic servants, day laborers, and the like, who toiled long hours to eke out a precarious living on the margins of the urban economy. Serao in fact devotes a considerable amount of *Il ventre di Napoli* to a searing portrayal of the difficult conditions of existence of the working poor. I have therefore rendered “il popolo napoletano” throughout as “the poor of Naples,” unless the context (as is the case in “To the Tenth Muse”) clearly indicates otherwise.

Dialect words are frequently incorporated into these texts, but rarely translated directly into Italian by the author. These Neapolitan words were instead originally set in italics by Serao or by her publisher, in order to indicate through graphic signs the difference between modern Italian and the language of Naples. Often the sentence immediately preceding or following the appearance of dialect words is sufficiently periphrastic, or provides enough contextual information, to allow the reader to grasp their meaning. The Neapolitan language had a long and distinctive literary and theatrical tradition of its own, but by the 1870s it was increasingly being supplanted by the “new” national idiom. I have usually chosen to include the original dialect words in the translation, in order to signal to the reader that Serao is stepping beyond the bounds of modern Italian, and I provide an English-language equivalent in square brackets or in a footnote wherever necessary.

The same could be said of certain local foods, which constitute a rock upon which many translators have foundered. For instance, “pizza” and “mozzarella” are linguistic borrowings that have become part of the English language, although the former was largely unfamiliar to Italians living outside of the South until after World War II. There is no need to set these in italics in the translations published here. To translate *'a spiritosa* or *'a scapece* into English, however, would necessarily involve the inclusion of a rather lengthy gloss. Fortunately, Serao herself often provides such a gloss for her contemporary Italian readers, many of whom would have been perhaps as mystified by some of these terms as English-language readers may be today. Here is an example of this tactic of hers in *Il ventre di Napoli*: “Another treat of which the poor of Naples are fond is *spassatiempo* or, that is to say, the oven-roasted seeds of various melons, along with fava beans and chickpeas.” As elsewhere (see above), I have preferred to provide the English-language reader with the original dialect word or words in the translation.

Terms for different kinds of money offer another notoriously difficult crux for the translator of texts from earlier eras. In this case, the difficulty is compounded by the recent superimposition of a new Italian national monetary system, based on the lira, in the wake of Unification. Coinage from the Bourbon era was supposed to be withdrawn from circulation, but in Naples—with its largely illiterate populace—old coins and/or old names for them (such as the *baiocco*) continued to circulate for some years. The *soldo* was a term of considerable antiquity, and in late nineteenth-century Naples it represented the basic unit of monetary exchange. One *soldo* equaled five *centesimi* [cents], or 1/20th of a new lira. The five-cent coin—commonly called a *soldo* in Naples and elsewhere—was not the smallest one introduced with the new

Italian lira, which was based on the decimal system, but the one- and two-cent coins were of relatively limited purchasing power, even for the very poor. As Serao makes clear in “What They Eat,” portions of food were sold on the streets of Naples for a single *soldo*. The largest coin circulated by the new Italian state was instead the solid silver *scudo*, which equaled 5 new lire (see “More on the Lottery,” where this term appears).¹⁷ I have chosen to include the original terminology in these translations, because there is no satisfactory equivalent for it in English.

Serao’s punctuation is often idiosyncratic. In part this may result from her efforts to hybridize literary and non-literary practices of writing (journalism, reportage, etc.); in part it may reflect her desire to evoke an “oral” dimension in the text, often through recourse to rhetorical devices such as parataxis, ellipsis, accumulation, etc.; and in part this is simply one of her most strikingly personal stylistic traits. She does not seem to have been particularly interested in subsequently correcting or revising her published work, so there are likely some printer’s errors in punctuation included in the originals that I have translated here. I have sought to respect her use of punctuation as far as possible, although I have sometimes had to divide or truncate her (periodic) sentences, whose length is not compatible in every case with twenty-first century English.

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¹⁷ The *scudo* is a name used in centuries prior to Unification in many parts of the peninsula to refer to a valuable gold or silver coin.

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