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Journal

California Italian Studies, 3(1)

Author

Serao, Matilde

Publication Date

2012

DOI

10.5070/C331014954

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On Naples, 1878-1884: Six Translations

Matilde Serao

(translated by Jon R. Snyder)

What they eat

by Matilde Serao (from *Il ventre di Napoli*, 1884)

One day, a Neapolitan businessman had an idea. Knowing that pizza is a culinary favorite in Naples, and knowing that there is a vast colony of Neapolitans in Rome, he thought to open a pizzeria in Rome. The copper saucepans and pastry pans sparkled, and the oven was always lit; all kinds of pizza could be found there: pizza with tomato, pizza with mozzarella and cheese, pizza with anchovies and oil, and pizza with oil, oregano and garlic. At first the crowds rushed there; but then they slowly dwindled. Once removed from its Neapolitan setting, pizza seemed out of place, and represented only a stomach ache; its star waned and faded away in Rome; an exotic plant, it perished amid this Roman solemnity.

In fact, it's true: pizza is included in the broad category of foodstuffs costing one *soldo* [five cents] that are eaten for lunch or dinner by a very large number of the poor of Naples.¹

During the night the pizza maker produces in his shop a great many of these rounds of thin, flat, dense dough, burnt on the outside but not cooked all the way through, and laden with nearly raw tomato, garlic, pepper and oregano: these pizzas, cut up into so many slices to be sold for a *soldo*, are entrusted to a boy who goes out to sell his wares on some street corner, where he displays them on top of a pushcart; he stays there almost all day, with these slices of pizza that freeze in the cold, turn yellow in the sun, and are eaten by flies. There are also slices sold for two *centesimi* [cents] to schoolchildren; into the evening the pizza maker resupplies the pushcart whenever the stock runs out.

In the evening there are also boys who walk the alleyways carrying on their head a big convex tin shield loaded with these slices of pizza. With a special cry, they tell the neighborhood that they have pizza with tomato and with garlic, with mozzarella, and with salted anchovies. Poor women seated on the step in front of their ground-floor dwelling [*basso*] buy some slices and dine or lunch, that is to say, have their meal for the day, with one *soldo*'s worth of pizza.²

¹ For a brief explanation of the monetary system of post-Unification Italy, see the introductory essay to these translations.

² The *basso* (or *'o vascio* in Neapolitan dialect) is a typical dwelling of the urban poor in and around Naples. The doors and windows of these small ground-floor apartments open directly onto the street. There is a notable lack of privacy, natural lighting and ventilation in the *bassi*, which were (until recent times) often severely overcrowded. Serao's family, which lived in great poverty after returning to Naples from exile in Greece (where Matilde was born), seems to have inhabited for some time one of these squalid street-level apartments (see Anna Banti, *Matilde Serao*, Turin: UTET, 1965, 13-15). Serao remarks acidly of the 'bassi' in her introductory remarks to *Il ventre di Napoli* (45): "case in cui si cucina in uno stambugio, si mangia nella stanza da letto e si muore nella medesima

For one *soldo*, the poor of Naples have a rather wide selection of foods for their day's meal. A small paper cone containing little fried fish—known as *fragaglia*—that come from the bottom of the fishmongers' baskets may be purchased from a vendor of fried foods; four or five *panzarotti* may be had for one *soldo* from the same vendor; these little fritters contain a bit of artichoke, when no one can stand another artichoke, or a small cabbage core, or a tiny piece of anchovy. For one *soldo* an old woman sells nine boiled chestnuts, stripped of their outer shell and swimming in a reddish juice; the poor of Naples soak their bread in this liquid and eat the chestnuts as a main course. For one *soldo* another old woman, dragging behind her a cart with a cauldron, sells two boiled ears of corn. For one *soldo* the tavern-keeper sells a portion of *scapece*: composed of squash or eggplant fried in oil and seasoned with vinegar, pepper, oregano, cheese, and tomato, *scapece* is displayed on the street in a large, deep jar into which it is packed like a preserve, and from which it is scooped out with a spoon. The poor of Naples bring with them a hunk of bread, which they cut in half before the tavern-keeper pours the *scapece* over it. For one *soldo* he also sells a portion of *spiritosa*, which consists of slices of boiled yellow parsnips soaked in a strong-tasting sauce made of vinegar, pepper, oregano, garlic and chili peppers.³ The tavern-keeper stands at the doorway and cries: “*Addorosa, addorosa, 'a spiritosa!*” [Our *spiritosa* smells so fine today!] Naturally, all of these foods are extremely spicy, so as to satisfy even the most jaded Southern Italian palate.

As soon as they have two *soldi*, the poor of Naples buy a plate of hot pasta with sauce. In every street of the city's four poor neighborhoods, there is one of these taverns with a cook's stall set up outdoors, in which pasta is always on the boil, tomato sauce is always bubbling in saucepans, and there are mountains of grated spicy *cacio* cheese that comes from Crotona.

Above all, this set-up is very picturesque, and some painters have made paintings of it, rendering it clean and almost elegant, with the tavern-keeper looking like one of Watteau's shepherds. And, in those sets of photographs of Naples that the English buy, the *banco del macaronaro* [pasta-cook's stall] can be found together with the *monaco di casa* [the monk who lives at home], the *ladruncolo di fazzoletti* [the handkerchief thief], and the *famiglia di pidocchiosi* [the family of beggars]. This pasta is sold by the plate, in two- or three-*soldi* portions, and the poor of Naples use abbreviations that refer to the price: *nu doie* [“a ‘two’”] and *nu tre* [“a ‘three’”]. The portions are small, and the customer bickers with the tavern-keeper, because he wants a little more sauce, a little more cheese and a little more pasta.

A piece of octopus, boiled in seawater and seasoned with very hot chilies, can be bought for two *soldi*, a business that is handled in the street by women using a small fire and a little cooking-pot. For the same price, one can purchase *maruzze*, that is to say, snails in broth, together with a biscuit soaked in the broth. From a large frying pan the tavern-keeper will, for two *soldi*, scoop up a big spoonful of a mixture of scraps of pork fat and bits of sweetmeats,

stanza, dove altri dormono e mangiano.” According to Antonio Buonomo, “i ‘bassi’ sono monocali a livello strada sui quali campeggia una targa comunale con la scritta ‘Terraneo non destinabile ad abitazione’”: Antonio Buonomo, *L'arte della fuga in tempo di guerra* (Monte Porzio Catone [Rome]: Effepi Libri, 2010), 138. There were, however, even worse places in which to live in the Old City, such as the *fondaci*, described by the nineteenth-century Swedish physician Axel Munthe as “the most ghastly human habitations on the face of the earth”: Axel Munthe, *Letters from a Mourning City: Naples, Autumn 1884*, trans. Maude Valérie White (London: John Murray, 1887), 76.

³ Although here Serao uses the term “peperoni” or “sweet peppers,” most nineteenth-century recipes for *la spiritosa* call instead for “peperoncino” or “[red] chili pepper.”

along with onions and little chunks of cuttlefish, and pour it onto the customer's bread, being very careful not to let any of the hot dark grease spill onto the ground; it all must flow onto the soft inner part of the bread, because the customer wants it that way.

As soon as they have three *soldi* per day for their meal, the poor of Naples— consumed with nostalgia for family life—no longer go to the tavern-keeper to buy pre-cooked foods. They eat at home instead, either sitting on the floor, on the threshold of their ground floor dwelling, or on some collapsing old chair.⁴

With four *soldi* Neapolitans make a big salad composed of greenish raw tomatoes and onions, or a salad with cooked potatoes and beets, or a salad with broccoli rabe, or a salad with fresh cucumbers.⁵

Well-to-do people, who can spend eight *soldi* per day, eat great bowls of vegetable soup, which may contain endive, cabbage leaves, chicory, or all of these together; the latter is the so-called *minestra maritata*, blending harmoniously the different flavors of its ingredients.⁶ Or, in the right season, these people may eat a soup made of yellow pumpkin with lots of pepper, or a soup made of green beans flavored with tomatoes, or a soup made of potatoes cooked in tomato.

However, for the most part, those who can afford it will buy a *rotolo*, or roll, made from blackish pasta of all shapes and sizes—whatever is left over at the bottom of pasta boxes—that have been mixed together haphazardly. This is in fact called *monnezzaglia*, or trash; and it is flavored with tomatoes and cheese.

The poor of Naples love to eat fruit, but never spend more than one *soldo* on it at a time. In Naples, one *soldo* is the price of six small and slightly worm-eaten pears, but that doesn't matter. For the same price are sold a half-kilo of figs, a bit overripe from the sun; or ten to twelve of those small yellow plums that seem to look feverish; or a cluster of black grapes; or a small, bruised and somewhat soggy yellow melon; for one *soldo* the vendor of watermelons sells two slices of a melon that didn't turn out quite right and is whitish in color.

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; one *soldo* supplies enough to nibble on for half a day, stinging the tongue and swelling the stomach as if one had eaten a meal.

Their supreme indulgence is *soffritto*, which consists of scraps of pork cooked with oil, tomato paste and preserve of sweet red pepper, together forming a red heap that captivates the eye, and from which slices are cut for five *soldi* each. It's like dynamite in your mouth.

⁴ Here too Serao employs the term 'basso' to designate these dwellings.

⁵ The term "broccoli" may be used to indicate various kinds of winter or bitter greens in southern Italy. Ironically, at least for this translator, the Italian term *rapini* is now widely used in English-speaking North America to refer to broccoli rabe.

⁶ Curiously, Southern Italian immigrants to North America often translated the *minestra maritata* into English as "wedding soup"; but the name refers in fact only to the "marriage" of the many ingredients in the soup, not to any nuptial ceremony.

Questionnaire

Roast meat? — The poor of Naples never eat any.

Stewed meat? — Sometimes on Sundays or major holidays; but it's either pork or lamb.

Meat broth? — It is quite unknown to the poor of Naples.

Wine? — Sometimes on Sundays: either the wine they call *asprino*, which costs four *soldi* per liter, or the one known as *maraniello*, which costs five *soldi* per liter: the latter dyes the tablecloth light blue.

Water! — Always: and it's bad.⁷

⁷ Serao's book denounces the dangerously unhygienic living conditions of the poor in the inner-city slums of Naples. The contaminated water supply of these populous residential quarters, especially in the Lower City—such as Mercato, Pendino, Porto, Vicaria, etc.—was among the major contributors to the terrible 1884 cholera outbreak. She emphasizes here the poverty of the Neapolitans relative to that of Italian peasants and workers elsewhere, many of whom daily drank (diluted) wine by the liter. See the fourth paragraph of "The Lottery," where a daily liter of wine is listed as one of the chief desiderata of the poor of Naples.

The Lottery

by Matilde Serao (from *Il ventre di Napoli*, 1884)

Well, some great dream must be granted to these exceptionally Southern people, for whom imagination is the greatest, most vital and inexhaustible power of the human soul. For in their blood meet and mingle the sweet, poetic, and passionate heritage of Etruscan, Arab, Saracen, Norman and Spaniard—so that this rich Neapolitan blood grows red-hot with hatred, burns with love, and consumes itself in dreams.

They are a humble and good-natured folk, who would be happy with little, but instead have nothing to make them happy. With sweetness and patience they endure poverty, daily hunger, the indifference of those who ought to love them, and the neglect of those who ought to comfort them.

They are happy to live in the open air, which is part of their Oriental heritage. Yet they have no air in which to live; they love the sunshine, but have none; they love bright colors, but live in dismal surroundings. With their memories of the Greek civilization that came before them, they love white arcades set against a sky-blue background; yet the lairs in which they live do not seem fit for human habitation. They have the worst of the fruits of the earth, the same as are fed to swine in the countryside; and there are foods that they never taste.

Every week the poor of Naples nevertheless renew their great dream of happiness. They live for six days with a growing, overwhelming sense of hope that becomes greater and greater, until it surpasses the limits of reality. For six days, the poor of Naples dream their great dream, which is about everything they do not have: a clean house with fresh and healthful air to breathe, a lovely shaft of warm sunshine on the floor, a high bed with clean white sheets, and a well-polished dresser. In this same dream, there are pasta and meat every day, along with a liter of wine, as well as a cradle for the baby, clean linen for the wife and a new hat for the husband.

All of these things, which reality cannot and never will give them, are possessed by them in their imagination between Sunday and the following Saturday. They talk about them and are sure of them; they make their plans, which become almost a reality for them, and over which husband and wife quarrel and make up.

There is deep disappointment and boundless grief at four o'clock on Saturday afternoon. On Sunday morning, however, their imaginations take heart and go back to work: the weekly dream starts over. The lottery, the lottery is the great dream that consoles the Neapolitan imagination. It is the obsession of those overheated minds; it is the great happy vision that appeases the oppressed; it is the immense hallucination that overcomes all souls.

This disease of the spirit is contagious; it is subtle, infallible and inevitable, and its power to spread is incalculable. The contagion of the lottery spreads from the doorman, who also works as a cobbler seated at his bench before the building entrance, to the poor seamstress bringing him old shoes to resole. From her it passes to her lover, who works as a busboy at a tavern. He spreads it to the innkeeper, who gives it to all of his customers, who in turn disseminate it throughout homes, workshops, other taverns, and even churches.

The maid on the fifth floor (right side) plays the lottery, hoping not to be a maid any longer. But all the servants on all the floors play too, whether the housemaid on the first floor who earns thirty lire a month or the *vajassa* [domestic servant] on the sixth floor, who makes eight lire a month and dreams of putting an end to her hard labor. They speak together about their numbers, crowding together on the landings and telling them to one another from the

windows or telegraphing them with sign language. The fruit vendor down in the street, who stands there in the sunshine and the rain, plays the lottery, and, from her street corner on down, there are women who believe in the lottery and who play the lottery faithfully and passionately: the tailor's wife sewing in the doorway, the tinsmith's wife smothered in the stench of lead, the washerwoman whose hands are in soapsuds all day long, the chestnut-vendor who burns her face and hands with the steam and heat of her stove, and the walnut-vendor whose hands are blackened to the wrist by gallic acid.

They all play the lottery, even in the narrow room where eight or ten girls work as seamstresses. One of them gives out the numbers, a second girl has other numbers and the forewoman knows the true ones, while a seamstress' baby sleeps in a cradle and lard fries in a pan on the hearth.

The so-called *capere* or poor women's hairdressers—with their apron rolled up around their belt, and their unkempt hair and greasy hands—do hair for one *soldo* a day. They take the numbers around to their clients, and in turn get others from them: they are the great spokeswomen of the numbers. In every workplace in which Neapolitan workers gather to labor for such long hours at such wretched pay, the lottery puts down deep roots. In all of the schools for the poor, the schoolmistresses play the lottery, as do the older schoolgirls, who pool their lunch money and play as a group. Wherever those unfortunate women, of whom Naples has so many, gather to make a living from sin, the lottery represents one of the greatest hopes: the hope of redemption.

But do not think that this evil belongs only to the poor. No, no: it rises up and assaults the middle class; it works its way into all levels of the bourgeoisie and of business, and even into the aristocracy. The lottery takes possession and dominates, wherever there is a real need that is kept secret, wherever something has been thrown out of balance and cannot be fixed, wherever there is invisible but imminent financial ruin, wherever there is a desire that in every way seems impossible, wherever the hidden hardness of life makes itself most felt, and wherever the only remedy can be money.

All unmarried girls without a single *soldo* for their dowry secretly play the lottery. The many employees of the municipality, the banks, the revenue office and the excise-tax office all play the lottery. The same is true for all the pensioners who cannot live on their pensions and, having nothing to do, practice the Kabbalah or, in other words, study the black magic of the lottery; they play desperately, and always pawn their account passbooks.⁸ All the sales personnel in the stores, who earn forty lire a month, know the sure numbers and play them every week. The magistrates give a great deal of their earnings to the lottery. They are paid only a pittance, but represent the greatest moral equity; although exposed to temptations, they reject these with an inflexibility worthy of a greater reward. Burdened by many offspring and ruined by transfers, their weakness and their hope consist of the lottery.

Shopkeepers, continually struggling with bills and caught in a daily fight against bankruptcy, end up clinging to this unreliable life preserver that is the lottery. Because of their gambling fever, stock-exchange speculators, who live on the razor's edge and are able to dance a waltz upon it, willingly taste the hope provided by the lottery. Because of what I have seen, heard, understood and intuited, I know of all these symptoms of the evil that rises up even to the ruling classes.

Aristocratic ladies play the lottery in part for fun, in part with the hope of a new bracelet, and in part because they are worried about a seamstress' bill that their husbands will never pay.

⁸ For further information on the function of the Kabbalah in Naples, see "More on the Lottery."

Even the *postieri* or employees of the lottery offices, who ought to be immune to this evil because they are so well acquainted with it and find themselves always in the midst of it, cannot resist this temptation. Thus all those with the worst cases of lottery fever, who cannot wait any longer, make their way at four o'clock on Saturday afternoon to the Lottery headquarters, in a narrow street between the Via Pignatelli and the Via di Santa Chiara, to watch the drawing of the numbers.

All the serving-women, women vendors, male and female workers, girls and office employees cannot move from where they are. So a street urchin is sent out to the nearest lottery outlet to get the numbers while everyone waits. The least inhibited show themselves in the doorway or at the window, while the shier ones stay inside but keep their ears open. The boy returns running and out of breath; he stands at the head of the alley and shouts out the numbers with a theatrical flair:

—*Vintiquatto!* [Twenty-four!]

—*Sissantanove!* [Sixty-nine!]

—*Quarantaroie!* [Forty-two!]

—*Otto!* [Eight!]

—*Sittantacinche!* [Seventy-five!]

A universal silence: everyone turns pale.

But like all dreams that are too pronounced, the lottery leads to inaction and idleness. Like all visions, it leads to falsehoods and lies. Like all hallucinations, it leads to cruelty and ferocity. Like all sham remedies born from poverty, it produces poverty, degradation and crime.

The poor of Naples stay sober, and do not turn to hard drink; they do not die of alcoholism; they instead turn to, and die for, the lottery.

The lottery is the true intoxicant of Naples.

More on the Lottery

by Matilde Serao (from *Il ventre di Napoli*, 1884)

Rooted in an oral tradition, like certain fables and legends, the lottery has an elementary, rudimentary, illiterate form of writing. All Neapolitans who do not know how to read, such as old people, children and women (especially women), know by heart the *smorfia* or *Key to Dreams*, and promptly apply it to any dream or anything that occurs in real life. Did you dream of a dead man?—47—but he was speaking—then 48—and weeping—65—which frightened you—90.⁹ A young man was stabbed by a woman?—17, misfortune—18, blood—41, knife—90, the poor. If a pot falls from its hook, a child takes sick, a horse runs away, or a large rat appears: these call for numbers, right away.

Whether big or small, all events are considered to be a mysterious source of gain. A young girl dies of typhoid; her mother plays the numbers; when they are drawn, the woman exclaims: “*M’ha fatte bbene pure murenne!*” [She did well by me even in dying!]

A wife speaks of the love that her late husband had for her before he died. Then she adds, melancholically, that if his love for her had been truly great, he would have appeared to her in a dream in order to give her the numbers. And because he has forgotten to do so, he is an ingrate, for he knows that she is a poor woman and that he ought to help her.

Salvatore Daniele dismembers that Gazzarra woman: a lottery ticket. The poor say: “*Chella è mmorta, mo, almeno ce refrescasse a nuie, che simmo vive*” [She’s dead, now she could at least feed those of us who are still alive]. Salvatore Misdea kills seven soldiers: a lottery ticket. The law kills Misdea: a lottery ticket. In the doorways, in the *bassi*, and on the street corners, committees and subcommittees decide on the numbers. The ticket is chosen; but the numbers are not drawn. They must have made a mistake; they should have used this number and that one, which were instead those drawn.

This science of the *smorfia* is so deeply engrained that, to call someone crazy, people say: “*È nu vintiroie*” [he’s a twenty-two], since 22 means “crazy.” Because every insult has a number of its own, the jargon of the lottery can be used to deliver insults as one’s anger slowly mounts. A woman punches another woman, smashing her face. The assailant tries to exculpate herself in front of the judge by saying: “*M’ha chiammata sittantotto*” [she called me a “seventy-eight”].¹⁰ The judge has to consult a copy of the *smorfia* in order to see what is insulting about that number.

The Kabbalah exists more for the upper than the lower classes: but it does trickle down to the latter. To be sure, the poor do not purchase any of the many weekly papers about the Kabbalah, for which an annual subscription costs ten lire. Bearing strange titles like *The True Friend*, *The Treasure*, *The Lightning-Bolt*, and *The Horn of Plenty*, these are produced anonymously. The poor do not write to those “math professors” living at No. 12 Vico Nocelle, or No. 44 San Liborio, or No. 3 Vico Zuroli, who advertise in the newspapers, promising success to anyone who pays for a subscription to their publications.¹¹ But something of these leaks out. A

⁹ The *smorfia* is another, and rather ancient, term for the codified practice of dream-interpretation also known in Naples as the “Kabbalah” or “key to dreams.” The (very different) esoteric Jewish tradition of mystical Kabbalistic interpretation of the Hebrew Bible is one of the most important possible sources of this practice in Naples and elsewhere in Italy, although origin of the term *smorfia* may perhaps lie in a reference to Morpheus, the god of sleep.

¹⁰ A prostitute.

¹¹ Here Serao employs the words “quarte pagine” to refer to the fourth page of the nineteenth-century daily newspaper, which carried paid advertisements.

certain man knows what the numbers are; people wait for him in the street and put a couple of lire in his hand; he is satisfied by this little transaction.

L'assistito (an individual “assisted” by the spirits) is a cancer gnawing at the bourgeois families of Naples.¹² This person is a pale convulsive who eats a lot, pretends to—or does—hallucinate, does not work, speaks in riddles, claims to suffer cruelly, and lives off of those who worship him. The reputation of the *assistito* reaches the poor from the bourgeois household by way of the maid, the manservant, and the laundress; and the *assistito* extends his acts of mysticism and fantasy to this sphere too, earning small and un hoped-for amounts while gaining followers. He ends up, when walking in the streets, always surrounded by four or five people who court his favor and study his every word.

The monk is the great helper and the providence of the poor; their faith and their unshakable belief in him is due to the fact that the monk knows the numbers. This is the dogma of the poor. If a monk does not give out the numbers, it is because the Lord has forbidden him to help sinners; if he gives them out, and they are not the ones drawn, it is because the player lacked true faith; if he gives them out, and they are drawn, the news spreads in a flash, and the poor monk is plagued by a dangerous popularity. He is like an artist who has created a masterpiece; woe to him who does not keep it up; he is lost. A monk who has only given out a winning double may hope to live in peace. But any monk who has given out three numbers, and all three have been drawn, had better beware. For they will try to seduce him in every possible way: with gifts, with money, with offerings, with masses, and with alms; they will have children, women, and old grandmothers plead with him; they will wait for him in the street, at the entrance to the church, by the confessional, at the monastery door; they will take their case to his mother, his brother and his aunt; they will besiege him morning, noon and night; they will beat him up; they will kidnap and torture him; they will let him starve to death so that at least, with his dying breath, he will give them the numbers. Such things have happened. Often, in order to save himself, a monk will get his superior to transfer him to another town. When he vanishes, the poor say that the Virgin Mary took him away.

The poor of Naples play the lottery with as much money as they have. No matter how destitute they may be, on Saturday the poor always come up with six *soldi* or half a lira to play. They make recourse to every expedient; they put their imaginations to work, have a look around, and end up finding a way. The greatest misery consists in saying not that there was nothing to eat at mealtime, but rather that “*Nun m’aggio potuto jucà manco nu viglietto*” [I wasn’t able to play even one ticket]. These words are enough to horrify anyone who hears them. Between Friday evening and Saturday morning, the streets are swarming with people who want to play but have no money. Workers ask for a day’s pay in advance; maids shamelessly steal from the grocery money; the number of beggars in the streets multiplies from Friday to Saturday; people sell whatever can still be sold, and pawn whatever can be pawned.

For the poor there are, first of all, the usual tickets to play: those that are always played because it is a tradition, because it is a must, or because no one can do without them, such as the famous double—six and twenty-two; the famous triple—five, twenty-eight and eighty-one; and the so-called Blessed Virgin’s triple—eight, thirteen and eighty-four. Fortunately for the government, these triples are drawn only about once every twenty years. Once, when the famous double—six and twenty-two—was drawn after many years’ wait, the government paid out two

¹² Another common term for the *assistito* is “cabalista,” i.e. a person who is versed in the Kabbalah and who can provide lottery players with the right numbers, in exchange for payment. The *assistito* or *cabalista* often was also a charlatan who would perform other “miracles” or acts of magic unrelated to the lottery.

million lire in small winnings worth five or ten lire each. The streets of Naples were suddenly filled with *tavolelle*, that is to say, everyone lunched or dined with their winnings before starting again, the following week, to play with even greater zeal.

And everyone has a special ticket that is played each week for years and years, with a faith that never wanes. A bootblack who played the same ticket for thirty years had inherited it from his dying father, together with his shoeshine kit: the double had been drawn three or four times in thirty years; but never the triple.

A doorman played the same ticket for forty-five years without ever winning anything. The first time that he accidentally forgot to play, the triple was drawn—and the doorman died of grief.

And there is always the ticket for exceptional events, whether a brawl or a suicide, a pistol shot or poison. Last but not least, there is the ticket based on the Kabbalah that was gotten out of the *assistito* or the monk.

These four tickets must be played, no matter what; on average they cost from fifty cents to two lire per week. When someone in Naples has only two *soldi* left, he or she instead plays the underground lottery, called *il gioco piccolo*.

For the most part, it is women who work—like procuresses—for this great fraud. Filthy and dressed in rags, one of these women carries a register in a deep pocket underneath her petticoat. When the players—male or female—come to her, they put down two *soldi* and give her the numbers. In exchange, they are given a small dirty scrap paper on which the numbers are scribbled in pencil, along with a promise that never changes: one *scudo* for the double, and forty *scudi* for the triple.¹³ The woman does the rounds of the neighborhood, where everyone knows her, knows what her work is, and is expecting her to come. Denounce her to the authorities? No one would dare to turn her in; for she is a benefactress.

There are big profits to be made, of course. All these two-*soldi* tickets add up to hundreds and hundreds of lire, and almost all the operators of the underground lottery grow wealthy.

Along the Riviera of Naples can be seen the elegant carriages of rich bourgeoisie whose fortunes were made with the underground lottery. Everyone knows who they are, but these individuals are not directly involved in it, because they work through agents. The poor have blind faith in those who run the underground lottery. Yet often, if there are many winning tickets to pay out on Saturday afternoon, the operators suddenly vanish from view with all of the registers. No one collects any winnings, but what does it matter?

The next week another woman makes the rounds again and, as if fatally attracted to the *gioco piccolo*, people come to her once more. What joy—both for the players and for those who take their money—to cheat the government!

Every so often the police arrest four or five of these agents, or these panderers; they are convicted and sent to prison; they are fined. What of it? They serve their sentence, pay the fine, get out of jail and start over again, with even greater zeal. One individual has been convicted five times for involvement in the underground lottery; this person owns an entire building, and complains of being persecuted by the government, while calling these convictions “*na disgrazia*” [a misfortune]. It was useless for the government to lower the price of a lottery ticket to two *soldi*, for the same fraud has continued, more popular than ever, fed by this great mass hallucination.

¹³ See my introductory essay for a brief account of the value of the *scudo* in the new decimal-based monetary system.

Statistics now show that more household thefts are committed between Thursday and Saturday; more possessions are pawned on these same three days at the Monte di Pietà [state pawn shop]; the private pawnbrokers are extremely busy on these same three days; more brawls occur on these same three days, but especially on Saturday afternoon; the ugliest, foulest, most shameful and violent acts occur in this fatal period of the week. It is in these same three days that the poor of Naples deliver themselves to the moneylenders: and this is the deadly cancer that devours them.

Farewell

by Matilde Serao (the conclusion of *Il ventre di Napoli*, 1884)

Here ends this brief study of truth and suffering. It is too small to hold the whole truth of Naples' poverty: too small, if I may be allowed to say so, to contain the modest, deep love of my Neapolitan heart. It is the unfinished work of a reporter, not of a writer; it is a cry that came from my soul; may it serve as a reminder and as a plea. May it serve to plead with those who can, and to remind those who should: do not abandon Naples, now that the cholera outbreak is over.

Do not abandon Naples again, when you are caught up in politics or business; do not leave this place—which we all must love—once more to its death throes. Of all the beautiful and good cities of Italy, Naples is the most graciously beautiful and the most profoundly good. Do not leave Naples in poverty, filth, and ignorance, without work and without help: do not destroy, in her, the poetry of Italy.

To the Tenth Muse

by Matilde Serao (Christmas 1878)

“Noël, Noël! Joy, joy!”

Up above: a calm and quiet little room, with a sweetly warm ambience. A lamp pours its even, restful light over the pages of a good book; here and there a smile of friendship, or of love—the hours pass slowly and placidly, like lovely, languid people. Down below: the wet and muddy street, slippery with mire, [is] trampled by thousands of feet; a thick fog made of smoke, dampness, *scirocco*,¹⁴ people’s breath; the darkness violently pierced by gaslights, smoking oil lamps, the reddish light of torches, the vivid colors of the *bengala*,¹⁵ the comings, goings, encounters and cries of a crowd that is dense, constant, ever-changing, and that talks, laughs, shouts, makes a din, sings, and yells;—a clamor that courses the whole range of pitch from the highest to the lowest tones, with the wildest shifts from an extremely high-pitched racket to a deep thunder-clap. Although the shutters are closed and the double walls are lined, echoes of that uproar make their way to the reader; distracted, he listens and smiles. The room’s temperature is pleasant, the carpet is soft, the light is soothing, the book displays the appeal of its pale yellow paper, its tapered lettering, its whimsical ornaments and verses; but all in vain; the great voice of the crowd is insistent, rising and resounding like a powerful summons. Then the reader is possessed by nostalgia for the street, the fog, the hustle and bustle; he feels a sharp desire to go down into that tumult, to enjoy that scene, to contribute his part to it, to feel small, insignificant, and lost in it; he no longer fights against this desire, but yields to it; and with an enormous sigh, the street triumphs over the little room.

All the riches of the vegetable and animal kingdoms lie jumbled in profusion in the squares and streets. Here is the triumph of meat: there are rows of chickens hung by the legs, with their yellowish, firm skin lightly dotted with brown and veined with pale light blue; there are turkeys, fat and round, swinging somberly in the *scirocco* with the same seriousness as if they were still alive. The flickering torchlight puts into strange profile enormous heaps of veal, whose white flesh is bloody, with long strong muscle fibers and smooth, polished, unblemished bones; and fully illuminates the white suckling pigs, with their almost elegant figures, which are the tender, juicy and preferred meal of fine ladies and priests. You walk forever and see only meat—and then that smell of freshly slaughtered animals, that dripping reddish-brown blood, those sharp and decisive knife strokes, lead you to feel melancholy and disgust: the triumph of full, fat, heavy, insolent matter, smiling at its own death that is a new life, and at once provocative and sickening, ends up crushing you. With a sense of fear, you think of that luxury, that excess, that exuberance, that enormity—and anxiously you seek out milder sensations.

Next there come into view herbs, greens, fruits: a veritable vegetable sweetness, the tribute of the countryside, the offering of the fields and forests. The little mounds of green broccoli, whose flowers look like pointed lace-work, gaze with disdain at the humble little chicory, harvested in small bunches, on which droplets of water are shining; the large, tightly-

¹⁴ The usually oppressive, very strong south wind that sometimes blows into Italy from the Sahara.

¹⁵ The *bengala* are small traditional holiday fireworks resembling flares.

closed white cabbages seem to want to burst from their wrapper of light green leaves, while the black cabbages blend with the darkness, almost as if seeking solitude. The rippling light when people or carriages pass by, a sudden burst of fireworks, a supervening shadow; all these contribute to the fantastic nature of this scene: proportions seem to grow in size, you lose your sense of reality and seem to be walking in fields of marjoram and clover, between two hedges made of vegetables, while at the end, as a horizon, the yellow flame of a pyramid of oranges is lit, like a souvenir of Sicilian sunsets. The sharp, sometimes inebriating scent of apples reaches your brain; there is also the sweeter and seemingly older scent of pears brought out of winter storage, and the subtle, light and exhilarating effluvium of mandarins. But a stronger and healthier smell drives away all the others, replacing them and becoming the sole ruler.

You now enter the domain of the sea; in small fringed seaweed baskets, looking like the loose hair of a beautiful dead water-nymph, eels with brown backs and pale bellies quiver, writhe, and twist themselves in knots, while lobsters, usually so calm and resigned, agitate their long pointed legs. Pink mullet move their fins a little in order to breathe, oysters open their shells ever so slightly, and *cannolicchi* (also called *soleni*) slip out of their long cases, almost as if seeking freedom.¹⁶ Codfish have died in a desperate position, their bodies half twisted with tails raised, almost as if they had suffered a slow and painful end; other more dignified fish, convinced of their fate, stayed still and proud. There is non-stop spraying of seawater, and loud, robust cries coming from the chests of men who have battled gales; these are sinewy, swarthy fishermen with bare legs and arms, who are happy to offer you their wares. The sea—the good old sea, that beneficent curmudgeon, that lavish eternal grumbler—very willingly gave up a little of its wealth, and left its grandiose calling card, in this colossal display. Let's have a smile and recall playful summer swims, the coolness of the waves, and rocks crowned with sea-foam!

But the glow of gaslight—refracted in shiny faceted crystals, in gilded ornaments, in silver sequins, in brightly colored satins—draws your gaze to a store window, or two or three. Here are the sweets, with light, graceful, simple forms resembling flowers, fruit, hearts and butterflies; with delicate, soft colors, such as translucent pink, opalescent green, grayish white, and pale violet, all of which melt together and blend into a palette of pastels pleasing to the eye. There are soft, fluffy foams looking as though they might vanish if a single puff of air were to touch them; wobbling creams, either white or yellow; candied fruit, covered with a silvery transparent film, in shiny cascades; the solemn weightiness of nougats, and dark brown chocolate in all its forms and aspects; light puff pastries that dissolve when you bite into them; dates stuffed with pistachios in a most noble union, like that of milk and honey. It is, in short, the gathering of all that is finest, most tender and elegant; these are caresses for the senses of sight, taste and smell; in these sweets, refinement and deliciousness are given their most complete embodiment. We may find here the culmination of every desire, no matter how extraordinary; the highest and purest poetry of human sensations; fantasy that has been brought to life; the artistic ideal made real; the summum of art itself.

With this sublime lyric flight concludes the splendid hymn that the people of Naples have dedicated to the tenth muse: Gasterea.¹⁷

¹⁶ *Cannolicchi* are razor clams; *soleni* is a Neapolitan dialect term for them.

¹⁷ Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste, or, Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy* (New York: Courier Dover Publications, 2002 [1925]), 244: “Gasterea is the Tenth Muse: the delights of taste are her domain. The empire of the world were hers, would she but claim it; for the world is nothing without life, and all that

The Legend of the Future by Matilde Serao (1881)

So you smile, my good and bold girl, at the end of these fantastic tales of mine.¹⁸ And I, who am only a poor author, am doomed to try to decipher the face of any reader in my company, or to guess the thoughts of absent readers. I want to explain what the flashing of your black eyes, and the ironic arching of your lips, which are as red as a pomegranate blossom, might mean. And I can almost understand the meaning of your mute and intelligent laughter, o my lovely and inscrutable Sphinx, whose face is as pure and whose complexion is the same color as the granite of which those statues are made. These fantastic tales, in which so much of Neapolitan life is reflected, did not frighten you; and, even if in your mind you chased after some elusive phantom or hobgoblin, you were not afraid. These little tales are ancient—some of them are extremely ancient—and they belong to a remote past to which we will never return; they were life, and they perished; they were love, and now they are just a vague memory; they were human drama, and now they are mere words, part of a dark and foul tradition. What remains of these tales is sometimes a painting, a statue, a church, a tomb, or a woodland; sometimes it is a simple idea or name; but in any case it is a part of the past. Proud young woman, who smile in the present and at the future, you cannot turn back but only look ahead, where your lovely reality of sunlight and scents may be found. You read stories from the past, but these do not move you. Sirens, knights and ladies, monks, fat burghers and pale poets: you give them no more than a smile of pity, for they are dead, while Naples is alive and beautiful and immortal, just as joyous youth, the bluish-green sea, and the charming hills are also alive. The vast future unfolds before you. I know. But I want to punish you, naughty girl, for the sarcastic smile with which you mock my dear phantoms, conjured up from tradition or folk imagination. I want to create a cruel and dishonest work: in telling you the flaming legend of the future, I want—through dread and horror—to destroy your mordant smile, make your cheeks grow pale, and set quivering every fiber of your body and every fold of your soul.

Today the city is beautiful because it is the will of the Lord, not of men, who only rarely desire it to be thus. But when the drive to take action and to work hard enters into the soft, idle nature of mankind, and is not lost in empty chatter, vague aspirations and grandiose dreams; when an active consciousness—which searches for better ways and is never content with any of them, tirelessly seeking to attain its lofty goal—takes over from a dull consciousness that willingly slumbers in self-regard; when our inert arms no longer disobey our creative imagination, inquisitive mind, and intuitive intelligence; when the poor man understands, the bourgeois thinks and the aristocrat feels, alongside the artist who dreams: only then will the city be truly a wonder. Naples is now decked with flowers, but she is poor; she smiles now, but her torn dress, which was once royal purple, just barely covers her lovely limbs; she is gay now, but can hope to be cleansed only by beneficent rains that will wipe the filth from her blackened streets; she dances and sings now on her sweet-scented shores, where the sea accompanies her dances and songs, but broad-beamed ships, loaded to the gunwales with merchandise, do not yet

lives takes nourishment.” Brillat-Savarin’s influential work was first published in Paris in 1825, and was well known in late nineteenth-century Italy.

¹⁸ This is the final tale included in the original 1881 edition. I have examined subsequent published versions of “La leggenda dell’avvenire”; the author appears to have made over the years a few revisions to the text, none of them substantial. This translation is of the 1881 version.

speed through her port; her hillsides are adorned with villas that shine white in the sunlight, but the grey smoke—the welcome incense—of a thousand factories does not yet rise into the sky. No matter! This day will come, and then the city will at last be holy. Think, my poetic friend, of the happy marriage of art and nature; think of the celestial harmony between men who create and the world created by them; think of the beauty and goodness of the city, at once all white and colored by the sun, free of blemishes and rags: o then, then! O distant future, o splendid day that—like Faust’s—would deserve to stay forever . . .

But the divine city that we love must die; we believe it to be immortal, and it is consecrated to death; we believe it to be eternal, and the thread of its life is as slender as a child’s. The city must die, and it will die; the pensive, melancholy wayfarer will have to say: this was once Naples. We can give everything to the city: work, to ennoble it; trade, to create its wealth; water, to cleanse it; sunlight, to fill its wide streets; but we will not keep it from dying. Naples may be a laughing, sky-blue, pinkish, sun-blond nymph, full of youth and vibrant with life, but one day she will perish. So says a prophetic legend, spread by word of mouth and circulating through the streets, entering into the shops, and ascending to the aristocrats’ salons. The Day of Judgment will come. Do you see that mountain, at whose foot are strewn lovely seashore towns, and on whose green flanks grow vines that make full-bodied wine; do you see that mountain, streaked with gloomy black bands? According to the prophetic legend, that mountain will bring death to Naples. Liquid fire burns, bubbles and foams within the mountain’s flanks; it has been accumulating there for centuries in anticipation of the fateful day; on the outside, just the slightest puff of innocent white smoke reveals what is happening deep underground. There were once chariots and quadrigas on the streets of Pompeii the beautiful.¹⁹ Graceful boys in white tunics and girls in white mantles loved in the sunshine; seductive courtesans wore sea-silks and scented themselves with nard oil; young and old alike rushed to the Forum, to the baths, to the theaters; wreaths of sweet-smelling roses hung on the doors of the houses; but the mountain wanted otherwise, and Pompeii perished. When the mountain so desires, Naples will be destroyed; and the terrible, beautiful neighbor at whom we gaze with admiration, and almost with affection, so greatly is it a part of Naples’ beauty, will be its executioner.

No one will know when. The city’s unruly residents will continue to go about their business, rushing wherever pleasure may lead them, loving, hating, enjoying, weeping, living—in short—as if nothing were amiss. The stars will shine in the cloudless sky; the slender plume of smoke will rise in the still air. Then a red dot will appear on the crater, as if a little wick had been lit up there, or like a small ember; Neapolitans will shrug their shoulders and say: “the usual nonsense.” The eruption will grow very slowly, and the scientists of that era will study the phenomena before announcing that it will soon come to an end; but the eruption will continue to grow, ceaselessly and without pause. An underground rumble will begin to make windowpanes quiver throughout the city; three glowing ribbons of lava will flow down the mountain’s flanks; the dark sky will redden, and the sea-floor will look red; people will arrive from out of town to observe the remarkable show; the awestruck locals will flock to the pier, to Santa Lucia and Mergellina, to terraces and hillsides. Frightened residents will start to flee from the towns that lie at the foot of the mountain and will pour into the city, where they will be welcomed with open

¹⁹ Excavations at Pompeii had begun in the mid-eighteenth century, but were given new prominence after the Unification. The Neapolitan archaeologist Giuseppe Fiorelli directed work at the site from 1860-1875, and his successors continued to uncover the buried Roman city throughout Sereno’s lifetime, often making remarkable discoveries as the digging proceeded.

arms—and the lava will keep on coming. New fissures will appear. By now the lava has reached Resina.

But the people of Naples are not afraid. Vesuvius is their old friend; he's just kidding around; he's out of sorts, but will soon fall silent. And then there's San Gennaro, whose upright fingers, in a gesture that commands obedience, order the lava to go no further.²⁰ Women plead with the priest at the cathedral to have the silver reliquary statue of San Gennaro, or his precious blood, kept in glass vials, carried out into the square. Prayers are heard in some of the small churches.

One morning the sun does not come out, a thick grey cloud hides the sky, and it rains ash; the people of Naples smile once more, and go about their business under this strange rain. But the next day the rumble grows to a roar, one earthquake after another is felt, the mountain shakes with horrible convulsions, fiery new fissures appear all over its flanks; the lava flows join together, merging into a single mass; a mountain of lava moves toward the city, together with streams of fire; the air is poisoned by the suffocating stench of sulfur; hot and heavy ash, together with boiling water and burning lapilli, rains down from the sky; joining with the great volcano, as if reawakened by some frightful miracle, Mount Echia, Mount Epomeo, and the Phlegraean Fields also erupt.²¹ It rains death. Amid the desperate cries of the dying, the crash of collapsing buildings, the thunder of earthquakes, the terrifying stormy seas that rise up in wrath and revolt, and the blood-red glare that barely pierces the deep gloom, the lava—wreaking havoc as it overthrows nature and the order of things—enters Naples in triumph; and Naples perishes in a colossal fire.

What? Are you still smiling, proud being? I understand you: I read your thoughts as if these were an open book. You're thinking what I'm thinking; you smile at that death. Naples was created by love, and lived in the passion of the sunlight, dazzling colors, intoxicating scents, and nights of love-making; it lived in the grandiose luxury of nature and in a magnificent effusion of emotions. This passionate city will die a good death; it will die worthily, in that immense flaming apocalypse of an ocean of fire.

²⁰ San Gennaro (St. Januarius) is the patron saint of Naples, and is believed by the faithful to protect the city from volcanic eruptions on nearby Mount Vesuvius. His relics are kept in the Cathedral, but are regularly taken in a procession through the streets of the old city in order to forestall future eruptions or to end current ones. Two vials containing the dried blood of the saint are among the most precious of San Gennaro's relics; the blood in these vials miraculously liquefies (though not always) three times per year, in a symbolic representation of the saint's control over the lava of Mount Vesuvius. See, among others, Marino Niola, *Il corpo mirabile: miracolo, sangue, estasi nella Napoli barocca* (Rome: Meltemi, 2002 [1997]), 77-94.

²¹ These are areas of past or present volcanic activity in the Naples area. Mount Echia is the ancient hill known as Pizzofalcone (Monte di Dio), on the southwest edge of central Naples; made entirely of yellow 'tuff' rock of volcanic origin, it is not the foremost candidate for the site of a future eruption, although it forms part of an ancient caldera. On the other hand, Mount Epomeo is the volcanic seamount (whose last major eruption was in 1302) known as the island of Ischia in the Gulf of Naples, while the Phlegraean Fields is a supervolcano or giant caldera—still very active today, though largely underwater—whose center lies near the western outskirts of the city.