

## THE FORCE OF THE *VOLCANO*: COLLECTIVE ANTIDOTES AND DEFENCES

### ABSTRACT

It's not Vesuvius that belongs to Naples, it is Naples that belongs to Vesuvius. This is what the Spanish writer Pedro de Alarcon said, fully catching the power of that "crossing of history and nature" connecting the city, paved with lava, to the volcano, which dominates Naples. It could be said Naples without Vesuvius would not be Naples. Friend and enemy, poetic fantasy and terrifying presence, reason for anxiety and postcard picture, inspiration for songs and location for the movies.

It is the mouth of fire, which buried Pompeii and Herculaneum, the "sterminator Vesevo" (Vesuvius exterminator) that inspired Leopardi for the incipit of the poetry "La ginestra" (The Broom), and that inspired a century later, the song "Funiculi Funiculà". This continuous capability to produce mythology makes Vesuvius a place for the soul, more than a geographical place.

It is at least two thousand years that the fire mountain is observed, worshipped, narrated, sung and studied as a symbol of the earth's damning power.

The plain between the Sirens' gulf and the "Volcano's saucepan" connects its life, its memory, its image to the deep breathe of the crater and the fatal starts of telluric force, which is that powerful to seem supernatural.

In Medieval Age, already, the memory of the frightening eruption in 79 AD, which erased Pompeii and Herculaneum, creates a mythology that transforms the volcano into a kind of infernal cavity, inhabited by the powers of darkness.

That is when the legend of Virgil the Magician originates, which tells about the great Latin poet, Dante's guide through Hell, who built a bronze man able to magically stop the infernal lava and the burning clouds by raising his arm. These phenomena will be considered, in Christian thought, as a sign of divine anger; Vesuvius will become a death machine ready to discharge torrents of fire against the sinners.

Saint Pier Damiani said that each time a wicked person died in some part of the world, Vesuvius turned on as an infernal display.

The image of the volcano as a Hell in a small scale and as a thermometer of God's anger is hard to die. Later in time, Saint Gennaro, the patron of Naples, will inherit from Virgil the role of miraculous dike against Vesuvius' disruptive power.

As a matter of fact, the saint's right arm often raised, just like that of the bronze man, in order to protect the town.

Many great travellers explained Neapolitans' behaviour through the incumbent presence of the volcano. Goethe described them as they were trapped between beautiful and terrible things, between the heavenly harmony and the infernal fury. He also said Neapolitans would be different if they would not feel themselves placed between God and Satan.

In 1891, Anton Cechov, after his usual visit to Vesuvius, wrote to his wife Marija: "now I believe in Hell".

So, Vesuvius is not simple nature, but a kind of logo. Andy Warhol, the ingenious inventor of pop-icons, perceived that, and so he placed Vesuvius next to Mao, Campbell, Coca-Cola and Marilyn. He made it a global emblem, almost a monument to nature.

The volcano is so famous and visited, that a very snob person like Thomas Bernhard said: "Vesuvius, what a catastrophe! Millions, maybe billions of people saw it before me!".