

**THE ICONIZATION OF SUFFERING
IN LITERARY AND INTERDISCIPLINARY
PERSPECTIVES**

edited by
Mária Hricková and Simona Klimková

This publication is part of the project VEGA no. 1/0426/17 *Iconisation of suffering and its meaning in verbal, artistic and cultural frame I (Intersemiotic, interdisciplinary and intercultural examination)*.

Reviewers:

Doc. PhDr. Petr Chalupský, PhD. (Univerzita Karlova Praha)

Doc. PaedDr. Jana Waldnerová, PhD. (UKF Nitra)

ISBN 978-80-558-1467-4

Table of contents

The iconization of suffering in literature and visual art: From implicitness to meaning <i>Mária Hricková – Simona Klimková</i>	5
Playing (for) life, suffering (in) the game: On the iconization of “torture-games” in the Cube film series and the Saw franchise <i>Martin Boszorád</i>	12
The iconization of the painful flow of history (Interpretative probes into a theatre work) <i>Miroslav Ballay</i>	22
The iconization of suffering in the intermedial mode of blues <i>Radomil Novák</i>	33
Empathy and qualia: An intersemiotic view on the representation of suffering in fiction <i>Inna Livytska</i>	50
Iconization, diagrammatization and allegorization of suffering in Slovak and North American culture-forming texts <i>Jana Javorčíková</i>	63
Sentenced to life? – First-person narration as legal apologia in Kazuo Ishiguro’s novels <i>Éva Szederkényi</i>	79
The quest for happiness in Blake’s Illustrations of the Book of Job <i>Mária Hricková – Simona Klimková</i>	92
Suffering as one of the determinant factors in the initiation of the main protagonist in the Slovak folk tale O troch zhavranelých bratoch (About Three Brothers Who Turned into Ravens) <i>Nikola Danišová</i>	105
Otherness and suffering in Polish children’s literature: chosen examples <i>Alicja Fidowicz</i>	121

Love story as a potential grief story (The conflict of ideality and reality in prose thematising the loss of a partner)	
<i>Hana Zelenáková</i>	133
An extreme and massive expression of the iconization of suffering: The Cult of the “abandoned souls” in Naples	
<i>Giuseppe Maiello</i>	145

An extreme and massive expression of the iconization of suffering: The Cult of the “abandoned souls” in Naples

Giuseppe Maiello

Giuseppe Maiello (Naples 1962) is an associate professor at the Department of Marketing Communication of the University of Finance and Administration in Prague, Czech Republic. He received a PhD degree in Slavic Philology at Charles University in Prague and another PhD degree in International Studies at the University of Naples “L’Orientale”. He received the title of *Docent* (Associate Professor) of Ethnology at Masaryk University in Brno. His main fields of interests are the study of the culture and beliefs of Southern, South-eastern and East European peoples, with particular attention to issues concerning death and beliefs related to it. He is the author of five monographs and more than 50 specialized studies in anthropology and cultural history.

145

Abstract

*The study offers an example of the iconization of suffering in an analysis of the Cult of the Abandoned Souls which existed in the so-called Fontanelle cemetery in Naples. The particularity of the Fontanelle cemetery is the fact that after the political unification of Italy, it became the location of a special cult based around the skulls of the dead. The skulls were “adopted” by the Neapolitan population and treated with particular care. The Neapolitan cult of the skulls of the dead, called *Culto delle anime pezzentelle*, lasted in the town until 1969. In that year the cult was abruptly abolished by the civic and ecclesiastical authorities. Relicts of the cult are still present among some of the city’s elders. The symbolism of the cult was later picked up by renowned artists, such as Rebecca Horn, who was the author of many installations in Naples and other towns referring to the skulls of the Fontanelle cemetery. Although it is a general opinion that the cult represents an iconization of suffering, very little has been done to understand the deep historical and cultural reasons for this suffering.*

Introduction

There are two particular themes of anthropological interest concerning the southern part of the Italian peninsula, both of which are very fascinating but not yet definitively solved. The first, concerning a special type of possession, provoked, but only on an imaginative level, by the bite of a spider, is called tarantism. Tarantism has ancient roots, it was studied starting in the 17th century mainly by doctors and naturalists and then, starting from the 19th century, by ethnologists and religionists. Tarantism is generally considered the most studied ethnographic phenomenon not only of southern Italy, but of the whole Italian peninsula in general.

The second theme is called the Cult of the Abandoned Souls (*Culto delle anime pezzentelle*) and can be placed in a well-defined temporal and spatial space, which covers the period from the political unity of the Italian peninsula until the end of the 1960s and concerns only the city of Naples and its surroundings. However, unlike tarantism, the Cult of Abandoned Souls has been studied only in an extremely limited way. The study of this particular cult can help the large-scale understanding of the relationship between man and death and the relationship between suffering and hope.

146

The Cult of Abandoned Souls was developed and preserved (officially until 26 July 1969) in the hypogeums of some Neapolitan churches, and in a large ossuary located in the historic district called Sanità. Of the various structures present in the historic centre of Naples, the most important and well known is the Fontanelle ossuary, called a “cemetery” only for theological reasons, also because the district Sanità is located in an area that since the Greek era had represented the cemetery of the whole city of Naples (Licciardo, 2008). It is a large quarry of about 3000 square metres, dug completely in the yellow Neapolitan tuff. This material covers almost the entire city and for centuries has been used as building material for Neapolitan houses.

Direct evidence of when the use of the quarry for cemetery purposes started is lacking. In the careful documentation provided by Salvatore de Renzi (1800–1872) on the plague epidemic that hit Naples in 1656 there is no direct reference to the possible use of Fontanelle as a burial place for the dead of the plague. However, it can be assumed that when in June of that year the terrible epidemic raged over Naples, the Fontanelle quarries could have been used as one of these places, since

they were outside the walls and near one of the two major lazarets of the city, that of Saint Januarius (Nappi, 1989, p. 15).

Another emergency situation that most likely concerned the Fontanelle quarry was a famine that affected The Kingdom of Naples and the capital in 1764 (Botti, 1990, p. 96) with the consequence that the so-called *Terresante* (the part of the hypogeums of the churches where the corpses were left to decompose, before providing a definitive burial) could no longer receive the bodies, except for a few hours, due to their very high number. These were therefore immediately exhumed and then transported to other places, such as pits or, in fact, quarries.¹

However, in memory of the dramatic epidemic and of the sad function carried out by the quarries, at the official opening of the Fontanelle ossuary, in 1872, a tombstone was placed. In the meantime, the ancient lazarret of Saint Januarius, transformed in 1669 into a hospital, had also become a hospice for the poor starting from 1726 (D'Ambra, 1845, p. 47). It is not known when exactly (but it had happened in any case during the 18th century) the poor elderly of this hospice used to accompany the funeral processions that extended along the streets of the city (Carnevale, 2008, p. 538-539). The customs were made official by the Napoleonic government, established in Naples in the years 1806–1815, and continued also in the following years. The topographer Raffaele d'Ambra (1813–1892) talks about it and also provides us with a very useful description of the funeral procession in Naples, followed by the so-called poor of Saint Januarius, which can be useful for understanding the birth of the Cult of the Abandoned Souls. In particular, we are fascinated by the description of a distinctive sign that was raised by the “poor of Saint Januarius” following the dead: the emblem of a skull (D'Ambra, 1845, p. 45-48).

In addition to the fresh memories of cholera in Naples and the continuous gloomy processions of the “poor of Saint Januarius”, there are two other elements that underlined a dismal presence in the ancient capital of the Kingdom that was about to end:

- the underground labyrinth that often flows into ancient Greek or Roman tombs, which can be accessed from almost all the basements and trapdoors found on the lower floors of the historic city centre;

¹ It was the gravediggers who transferred the bodies at night, without informing the family of the deceased. This type of behaviour, which was continued for the rest of the 18th century by the Neapolitan gravediggers, is confirmed by the Neapolitan ethnographer and archaeologist Andrea de Jorio (1835, p. 17).

- a sad and morbid song named *Fenesta ca lucive* ('Window Illuminated') that right on the twilight of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies became what we would call a hit today.

Until the fall of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, there is no mention of a possible cult of the abandoned souls, neither in the capital nor elsewhere in the provinces of the Kingdom itself. Not only this. Both from the brief references of De Jorio (1835, p. 16-17) on the Fontanelle and from the novel by Francesco Mastriani *Le caverne delle Fontanelle* (1879, p. 41) it shows that the ossuary was almost unknown until the mid-19th century to the vast majority of Neapolitans. Finally, also in the curiosities concerning Naples written by the German historian Karl August Mayer (1840), who had observed Neapolitan funeral customs, although we find a fairly detailed description of the *Terresante* and a description of dressed mummies that recall the characters that will later become famous in the Cult of Abandoned Souls, there is no reference to a particular form of worship.

148 The cult

It is not possible to establish the exact moment when the people of Naples began to crowd every Monday the Fontanelle ossuary and the hypogeums of the various churches of the historical centre of the town which exposed skulls and other bones of the human body. We know, however, that Naples was struck by two other disasters that brought the city into a state of extreme suffering:

- the entry of the Garibaldi's soldiers into the city on 7 September 1860, hailed, it is true, by the Neapolitan liberals as a victory, but also cursed by the rest of the population of the city;
- a strong cholera epidemic that plagued the town in 1865.

The explosion of the Cult of Abandoned Souls must, therefore, have taken place in these moments of desperation, also taking into account the fact that because of cholera the city was continually crossed by long votive processions.

As we have seen the field was in Naples particularly favourable to the birth of a cult centred on suffering. But we will not dwell on the stereotype of "Naples as a pagan city" because otherwise we would have to question the whole cultural evolution that led to the acceptance of Purgatory within Catholic theology. It is certain that at the end of the 1860s or at the beginning of the 1870s a canon named Gaetano Barbati

took the trouble to organize the work of orderly arrangement of the bones, most likely aided by the women of the district of Sanità.²

In March 1872 the Fontanelle “cemetery” was officially opened to the public. Thanks to Canon Barbati and Cardinal Sisto Riario Sforza, and a foundation for the souls of the Fontanelle was established, “... using the first quarry as a temporary church, evacuated by the bones with great help from the people ...” (Sola, 1996, p. 22). On May 13, 1877, a first religious event was celebrated in the ossuary in the presence of Cardinal Sforza who also took part in the procession that followed the rite of piety and atonement (ibid., p. 23).

From the early 1870s, Neapolitan citizens could therefore freely and lovingly turn to the souls in purgatory and offer so-called *refrisco* (refreshment) to those who found themselves in purgatory wrapped in the flames of inner or “real” fire.

At the Fontanelle the ritual took place in the following way. First of all the person who wanted to devote himself to the Cult had a dream where a soul told him which part of the great ossuary he was in. Then the practitioner went to the ossuary, or to the cemetery, as the place was now called, he recognized the skull of the soul that had appeared in his sleep, cleaned it, polished it, placed it on a white handkerchief and adorned with candles and flowers. For the Neapolitans, the refreshment was represented by the activity of care for the skull. The moment the skull was placed on a handkerchief, it meant that it had been adopted exclusively by a specific person, and no one else could adopt it. A rosary was then placed at the neck of the skull and finally, if the relationship continued successfully, the skull would also have obtained a soft cushion often adorned with embroidery and lace and also a kind of wooden house in which he would find further shelter. The shrine was very similar to the Roman stone funerary shrines containing the bas-relief or urn of a deceased, with which the Neapolitans had a certain familiarity since they were still visible in the basements of many houses in the centre and above all in the Sanità district. For each skull, there was a little light or a candle that was always lit. The person who had adopted the skull caressed him with a gentle gesture.

In addition to these material features, the refreshment consisted above all in dedicating prayers to the soul of the anonymous deceased. It was above all a repetition of the recitation of the prayer “*Requiem*

² The style of the bony arrangement is similar to that of the other Italian ossuaries of the time, i.e. bones leaning against the wall and grouped by type: skulls with skulls, femur with femur and shins with shins.

Æternam”, recited in Italian or in Macaronic. As an exchange, the soul was asked for advice, intercession, and even concrete magic interventions such as receiving the winning numbers of the lottery in a dream.³

The ritual was the same for all the ossuaries in the city, even though the crypts or hypogeums of the churches were far smaller than the Fontanelle quarry.⁴

In all the ossuaries there were also particular skulls that represented special characters, recognizable by all the cult participants not only in their bony form but also when, with the clothes that are supposed to be worn by the living, they sometimes appeared in the dreams of the Neapolitans. The names are preserved in the memories not only of the last participants in the cult but also in those of their children, who had heard parents speak when they accompanied them in the ossuaries. There was always a Virgin’s skull and a skull called the Doctor, capable of healing in the afterlife. Among the most famous skulls, there were those of “Fratello Pasquale”, of the young bride, called “Lucia”, that of “Donna Concetta” (also called the head that sweats) and, above all, that of the “Capitano”, or the Neapolitan version of the ghost of the character of literature known as Don Giovanni. According to the participants in the cult, the souls of these latter characters had special powers greater than those of all others. The Capitano, for example, could drag with him into the world of the dead, those who “lacked him respect”.

Popular participation was immense. The makers of the cult were mainly women, but not exclusively.⁵ However, it is surprising that for almost a hundred years the cult has not attracted particular interest from the academic community. Probably more than a lack of interest, it was a certain form of respect towards the Catholic Church that seemed, given the premises, to officially cover up the cult.

³ The question of the demand for lottery numbers is the one that has done most to lead some to suspect a strong pagan influence in the Neapolitan cult of abandoned souls (De Matteis, 1997, p. 31). Rather than paganism, it would perhaps be more correct to speak of an animist conception still present among the Neapolitans, which expressed itself in all its tenacity during the period in which they dedicated themselves to the care of abandoned souls.

⁴ The only difference was found by the anthropologist Marino Niola (1997, p. 94) who reported that the soul of the anonymous dead manifested himself in the dreams of those who adopted a skull of the Church of San Pietro ad Aram, only after they had begun already taking care of the skull itself.

⁵ According to the writer Francesco Terranova, who at the beginning of the 20th century observed the ranks of Neapolitans who on Monday moved towards the Fontanelle, the male / female ratio was one to four (Terranova, 1906, p. 8).

End of the cult

The first attempts to liquidate the Cult of the Abandoned Souls began in 1950 when two articles appeared on the pages of the Liberal newspaper *Il giornale d'Italia* asking for the immediate closure of both the Fontanelle quarry and all the other Neapolitan places where the same cult was celebrated. In the first article signed "A.R." and dated 21 October 1950, quotation marks are used around the word "Cemetery" and the Fontanelle quarry is referred to as a place where "scenes of hysteria and fanaticism" are seen and where the trade of bones would be practised for magical purposes. The next day, 22 October 1950, the same journalist talks about the Church of San Pietro ad Aram in the same tones as the Fontanelle, with the difference that the skull trade would not take place there. On 29 October of the same year, the Archiepiscopal Curia of Naples, through its newspaper *La croce*, defended the name "cemetery" for the Fontanelle quarry over the term ossuary, because "a place destined to receive the mortal remains of Catholics is called a cemetery."⁶ The Catholic newspaper also viewed positively the fact that the believers took care of the bones. The Curia, however, admitted not to rule out the presence of sorcerers and diviners in search of bone dust in places of worship but delegated the punishment of these to the civic authorities, which moreover were the owners of the quarries. There was a certain annoyance on the part of the Curia, also with those who asked the skulls for lottery numbers.

From the public point of view, however, it seemed that the Curia had silenced the critics. In reality, the problem for the Church existed and had to be solved in some way.

The final decision to ban the Cult of the abandoned souls took place 17 years later, on 26 July 1969, and was taken by the then Archbishop of Naples Corrado Ursi (1908–2003). The prohibition was promulgated after an analysis conducted by the ecclesiastical court in which it was underlined that from the Catholic point of view, a prolonged cult of mortal remains can only be performed in honour of the saints officially recognized by the Church, and not for anonymous bones.⁷ Direct

⁶ In a letter to the Cardinal of Naples in November 2012 the parish priest of the Fontanelle Evaristo Gervasoni also used the word "ossuary", since the place is now considered only a place of attraction for tourists and "testimony of the sufferings of the Neapolitan people" (Civitelli, 2014, p. 39).

⁷ The entire declaration of the Ecclesiastical Court for the cause of the Saints of Naples concerning the Cult of the Abandoned Souls in Naples and the relative decree of the Cardinal Ursi are published in Niola 1997 (p. 138-139).

contact with the bones of the dead was therefore forbidden to the Fontanelle's visitors and other places of worship.

Epilogue

Several attempts were made to reopen the ossuary, but it was only from May 2010 that it has been possible to access it without problems, even if the administration of the city of Naples still does not know how to frame the structure: whether to include it among the cemeteries, consider it as an ossuary monumental, a museum or other. In recent history, some publications have appeared, but only in very few cases have they risen above the journalistic level.

Part of the Neapolitan population, belonging in particular to the younger generations, turned to forms of popular religiosity more akin to expressions of the contemporary world which have little to do with religion, such as the cult of footballers or singers. We refer to the cult of the Virgin and the Saints, which never diminished in Naples, but which, especially in the most disadvantaged areas of the city such as the Sanità district, seem to have been almost relegated into second place compared to the cult of the so-called abandoned souls. In addition to those of the Saints and of the Madonna, it is also possible to see votive shrines dedicated to charismatic personalities of the Catholic Church such as Saint Pio of Pietrelcina (1887–1968) or Pope Francis (b. 1936) on the streets of Naples.

152

Many old people who until 1969 were frequent visitors to one of the ossuaries or hypogeums in which they had dedicated themselves to the care of a skull, or rather to an anonymous soul of purgatory, are still alive. Some of these people, as far as possible, still have their skulls to care for and sometimes even manage to pass on the belief to some of the younger generations. The activity, however, is semi-clandestine: the world of those who still practice the Cult of Abandoned Souls has been completely withdrawn from the surrounding world. The places where instead the cult was very lively until the end of the 1960s have instead become the destination of a great intellectual or semi-intellectual tourism.

The skulls are therefore no longer objects of worship, but a theme also for photographic exhibitions and art installations. The most famous dates back to 2002 when the German sculptress Rebecca Horn installed 333 cast iron skulls illuminated by 77 neon rings in the main square of Naples, *Piazza del Plebiscito*. The installation, in post-minimalistic style,

was called the Spirits of Mother of Pearl. Rebecca Horn was fascinated by the skulls but also by the name the Neapolitans gave to them: *capuzzelle* (little heads). The *capuzzelle* from Naples were exhibited also in Berlin, New Delhi, Maribor, Moscow and Palma de Mallorca, despite the fact that the performance in Naples had been strongly criticized for being too “goulish”:⁸ According to Joachim Sartorius the *capuzzelle* thanks to the artistic performances of Rebecca Horn “have evolved into beings – symbols not only of our individual confrontation with death but also of a life-extending force, as protecting spirits similar to a wall around the earth’s glowing core”.

However, the question of the birth of the cult that from the beginning has been an expression of profound political and human suffering remains outstanding. The element of suffering derived from political events had been probably deliberately ignored, while the human element has entered the hetero-stereotype, but sometimes also into the auto-stereotype of the city of Naples.

Works cited

- Botti, G. 1990. ‘Febbri putride e maligne’ nell’“anno della fame”: l’epidemia napoletana del 1764. In: Frascani, P. (ed.). *Sanità e società. Abbruzzo, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria, Secoli XVII-XX*. Udine: Casamassima, pp. 75-100.
- Capasso, B. 1905. *Napoli greco-romana*. Napoli: Società napoletana di storia Patria.
- Carnevale, D. 2008. ‘La riforma delle esequie a Napoli nel decennio francese’. In: *Studi Storici*, Vol. 49, No. 3, pp. 523-552.
- Civitelli, R. 2012. *Il cimitero delle Fontanelle. Una storia napoletana*. Napoli: Dante & Descartes.
- Civitelli, R. 2014. *Il cimitero delle Fontanelle dal secondo dopoguerra al Concilio Vaticano II in alcuni articoli di stampa con il racconto „Purgatorio” di Domenico Rea*. Napoli: Dante & Descartes.
- D’Ambra, R. 1845. *Gli odierni campisanti napolitani preceduti da alcune notizie su gli antichi sepolcreti descritti da Raffaele D’Ambra*. Napoli: Stamperia dell’iride.
- D’Antonio, D. 2002. ‘Emozione Plebiscito: 333 teschi’. In: *la Repubblica.it*, 12 december 2002 [qt. 4 April 2019]. Available at: <<http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2002/12/15/emozione-plebiscito-333-teschi.html?ref=search>>.

⁸ But the then Governor of the region, Antonio Bassolino, declared that “every Neapolitan should adopt a *capuzzella*, and talk to it, caress it affectionately” (D’Antonio, 2002).

- De Jorio, A. 1835. *Indicazione del più rimarcabile in Napoli e contorni*. Napoli: Stamperia e cartiera del Fibreno.
- De Matteis, S. 1997. 'Antropologia storica e simbologia religiosa: Il culto delle anime del purgatorio a Napoli'. In: De Matteis, S. and M. Niola (eds.) *Antropologia delle anime in pena 2. vyd.* Lecce: Argo, 1997, pp. 19-84.
- De Renzi, S. 1867. *Napoli nell'anno 1656 ovvero documenti della pestilenza che desolò Napoli nell'anno 1656, preceduti dalla storia di quella tremenda sventura*. Napoli: De Pascale.
- Forti Messina, A.L. 1976. 'Il colera a Napoli nel 1836-1837. Gli aspetti demografici'. In: *Mélanges de l'école française de Rome*, Vol. 88, No. 1, pp. 310-336.
- Licciardo, G. 2008. *I quartieri di Napoli*. Roma: Newton Compton.
- Mastriani, F. 1880. *Le caverne delle Fontanelle*. Napoli: Gabriele Regina.
- Meyer, K.A. 1840. *Neapel und die Neapolitaner. Erste Band*. Oldenburg: Schulze.
- Nappi, E. 1989. *Aspetti della società e dell'economia napoletana durante la peste del 1656*. Napoli: Edizioni del Banco di Napoli.
- Niola, M. 1997. 'L'ospite sconosciuto, ovvero il convitto delle anime'. In: De Matteis, S. and M. Niola (eds.) *Antropologia delle anime in pena 2. vyd.* Lecce: Argo, 1997, pp. 85-125
- Niola, M. 2003. *Il purgatorio a Napoli*. Roma: Meltemi Editore.
- 154 Sartorius, J. s.d.: *Rebecca Horn. Biography/Bibliography/Filmography/Contact* [qt. 4 April 2019]. Available at: <<http://www.rebecca-horn.de/pages-en/GlowingCore5.html>>.
- Sola, L. 1996. *Il Camposanto delle Fontanelle*. Sarno: Edizioni dell'Ippogrifo.
- Terranova, F. 1906. *Napoli che non muore*, Napoli: Morano.
- Tognotti, E. 2000. *Il mostro asiatico. Storia del colera in Italia*. Bari: Laterza.

**THE ICONIZATION OF SUFFERING
IN LITERARY AND INTERDISCIPLINARY
PERSPECTIVES**

Publisher: Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra
Editors: doc. PhDr. Mária Hricková, PhD.
Mgr. Simona Klimková, PhD.
Reviewers: Doc. PhDr. Petr Chalupský, PhD.
Doc. PaedDr. Jana Waldnerová, PhD.
Cover: Mgr. Martin Boszorád, PhD.
Proofreading: Marcos Perez
Lay-out: Mgr. Peter Horváth
Extent: 155 pages
Edition: first
Copies: 50
Published: 2019

ISBN 978-80-558-1467-4