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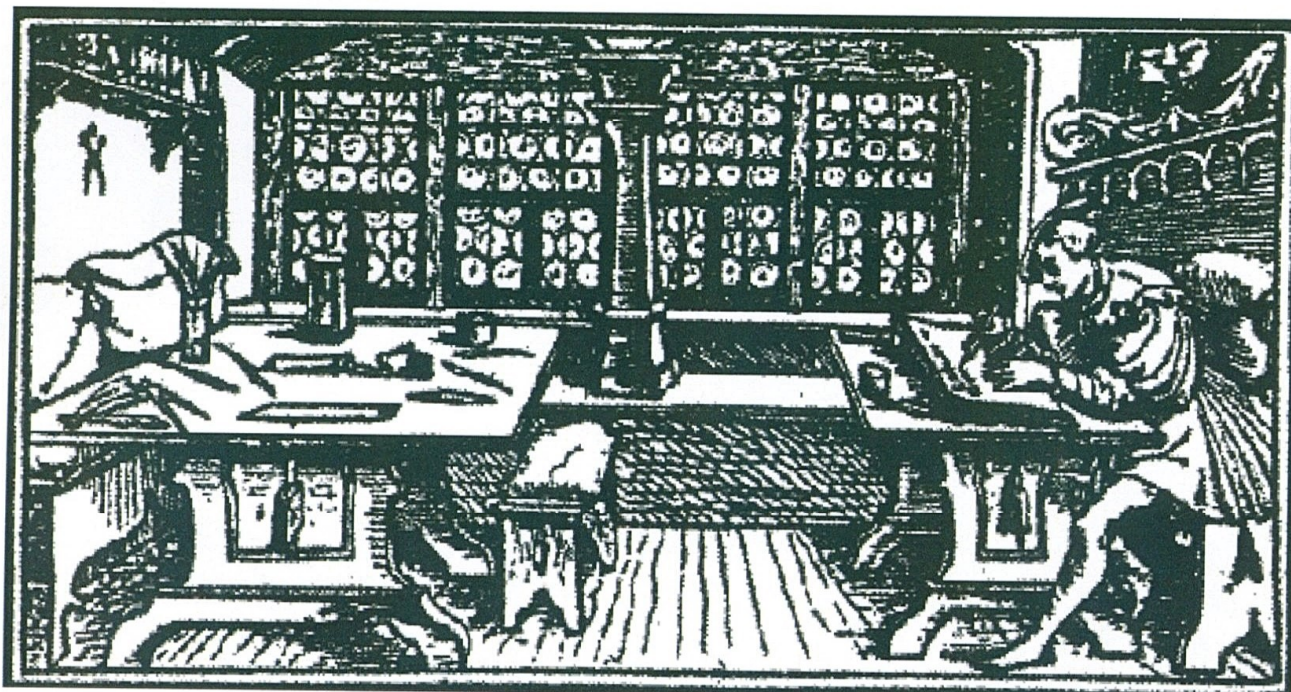


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CUPRINS – CONTENT – SOMMAIRE – INHALT

- CORIN BRAGA, L'attaque rationaliste contre les utopies de l'âge classique *
The Rationalist Attack Against Utopias of the Classical Age 3
- BRIGITTE URBANI, Viaggi in Grecia tra illusione e realtà (Ottocento e Novecento) *
Journeys to Greece between Illusion and Reality (19th and 20th Centuries) 15
- THÉA PICQUET, L'Italie à Paris. Des *Ingannati* des Intronati de Sienne (1537) aux
Abusez, comédie faite à la mode des anciens comiques, traduction de Charles
Estienne (1549) * *Italy in Paris: From Gli Ingannati by the Intronati of Siena*
(1537) to Abusez. Comedie faite a la mode des anciens comiques translated
by Charles Estienne (1549) 29
- RUXANDRA CESEREANU, The Aesthetic Category of *the Uncanny* in the Novel
at the End of the 20th Century and the Beginning of the 21st 41
- FLAVIA FLOREA, Une analyse de texte: le rôle du topique contrastif dans un conte
roumain * *Analysis of a Text: The Role of the Contrastive Topic in a Romanian*
Tale 53
- CARMEN-VERONICA BORBÉLY, Tropes of Oblivion: The Ethics of Forgetting
in the Contemporary British Novel. Julian Barnes' *A History of the World*
in 10 ½ Chapters 65

ANA-KARINA SCHNEIDER, Orhan Pamuk and the Fascination of Books: A Case of Haunting	79
LOUIS BEGIONI, L'évolution du système du démonstratif du latin classique au français moderne : un processus déflexif * <i>The Evolution of the Demonstrative System from Classical Latin to Modern French</i>	87
SOPHIE SAFFI, Présentation comparative latin/italien/français de la conception de la personne et de son espace * <i>A Comparative Approach to the Concepts of Person and Space in Latin, Italian and French</i>	101
ALINA PREDA, From Text to Hypertext. The Constructedness of the Novel Between Artistic Configuration and Technological Reconfiguration.	123
MARIA-IONELA NEAGU, MIHAI MIRCEA ZDRENGHEA, Metaphor, Politeness and Argumentation in the First 1992 American Presidential Debate	135
CHRISTINE BRACQUENIER, Le circonstant de seconde prédication en russe * <i>The "Circconstants" in a Second-Level Predication in Russian</i>	143
AURORA TEUDAN, Marguerite Duras and the Time-Image of Visual Narratives	157
CRISTINA VIDRUȚIU, Staging History and Metaphor. The Haunting Red Death.....	169
ELENA BUTUȘINĂ, Postmodern Voices and Discourses (An Unconventional Analysis of the Narrative Journey of the Self)	175
CRISTINA MĂLUȚAN, Actes de parole dans une méthode d'apprentissage du français langue étrangère * <i>Speech Acts in a School Book of Learning French as a Foreign Language</i>	183
IOANA-ELIZA DEAC, Le surréalisme mis en débat – la perspective critique de l' <i>Internationale lettriste</i> et de l' <i>Internationale situationniste</i> – dissociations et points communs * <i>Surrealism under Scrutiny – Letterist and Situationist Perspectives</i>	193
MIHAELA ANCA CRIȘAN, Analyse du format et du cadre institutionnel des débats électoraux télévisés. Le duel Sarkozy-Royal * <i>Analysis of the Format and of the Institutional Framework in the Television Electoral Debates</i>	213
JUDIT PAPP, Metaphors of Naples, the City of Insects in the <i>Diaries</i> of Sándor Márai (1948–1952)	221
DANA NORA NAȘCA-TARTIÈRE, Getting to Grips with Legal Language	235
ȘTEFAN GENCĂRĂU, OANA-AURELIA GENCĂRĂU, Perceptions of the Future Tense in Romanian	243
MANUELA CIPRI, Eponyms and Word-Formation Processes	253

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METAPHORS OF NAPLES, THE CITY OF INSECTS IN THE *DIARIES* OF SÁNDOR MÁRAI (1948–1952)

JUDIT PAPP*

ABSTRACT. *Metaphors of Naples, the city of insects in the Diaries of Sándor Márai (1948–1952).* The famous Hungarian writer Sándor Márai spent his first period of exile in Posillipo in Italy between October 1948 and April 1952. He recounted his experiences in detail in his *Diaries*, in which in addition to the numerous descriptions of events concerning Naples, Posillipo and the Gulf of Naples, on several occasions he established and emphasized associations between the everyday life and the various aspects of the Mediterranean city on the one hand and the organization of the insects in the termitarium on the other. This study will, therefore, concentrate on the analysis of these passages.

Keywords: *Sándor Márai, exile, Diaries, Naples, Posillipo, metaphor, termitarium.*

REZUMAT. *Metafore ale Neapolelui, oraşul insectelor, în Jurnalule lui Sándor Márai (1948–1952).* Faimosul scriitor maghiar Sándor Márai și-a petrecut prima perioadă de exil în Posillipo, în Italia, din octombrie 1948 până în aprilie 1952. El își povestește experiențele în detaliu în *Jurnalule* sale, în care, pe lângă nararea a numeroase evenimente ce privesc oraşul Neapole, cartierul Posillipo și Golful Neapole, stabilește și accentuează varii similitudini între viața de zi cu zi și diverse aspecte ale oraşului mediteranean pe de o parte, și organizarea termitelor într-un muşuroi pe de alta. Acest studiu analizează acele similitudini.

Cuvinte cheie: *Sándor Márai, exil, Jurnalule, Neapole, Posillipo, metafora, muşuroi de termite*

“As the termite gives up the individual sight, 'cause it has no need to it, as the mould sees instead [...]”¹

Sándor Márai arrived at Naples at the end of October 1948, and almost immediately he found himself in front of a strange dichotomy constituted by the zone of Posillipo and the city of Naples, that extended before his eyes. Despite the fact that one of his first “experiences” in Posillipo was the landslide on October 31, that left 27 people dead, this quarter represented “one of the magical places of the world”² to the Hungarian writer.

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¹ The English translation is mine. Cf. Sándor Márai, 2009, *A teljes napló 1950–1951* [The Complete Diary 1950–1951], ed. by Tibor Mészáros, Budapest: Helikon, 122: „Ahogy a természet lemond az egyéni látásról, mert nincs szüksége erre, hiszen lát helyette a Boly [...]”.

² Cf. Sándor Márai, 2008, *A teljes napló 1948* [The Complete Diary 1948], ed. by Tibor Mészáros, Budapest: Helikon, 418: „a világ egyik mágikus sarka”.

“These old houses of Posillipo make a whole with the sandy and clayey soil of the hanging gardens of Villanova that form the pedestal of the upper part of the quarter. The tropical rain loosened the clayey base, that buried an apartment block. Police, firemen have already closed the road, the Neapolitan crowd is already clattering at the waterfront, dramatic mothers and wives are whining and injured and dead bodies are already being extracted from the ruins... This natural disaster is the first, authentic impression of Naples.”³



Landslide in Posillipo
Photo: Archive of Riccardo Carbone

The first complex metaphor that refers to the city on one hand belongs to the category of “textile metaphors”. The two Hungarian verbs *sző* and *fon* “weave” evoke the process of weaving, a metaphorical process that in the course of millenniums shaped the aspect of the city. At the same time Naples is strange and even *odvas* “cavernous”. This adjective involves another semantic field in the description, as the Hungarian word *odvas* derives from *odú*, a noun that refers to holes and cavities arisen naturally in tree-trunks or in the soil, which can be inhabited by birds, foxes or badgers. So, in this short and dramatic description of Naples Márai combines artefact with natural elements:

“Posillipo and Vomero, Villanova, these cities, these tumble-down, shaky quarters built through and through, incomprehensibly one in the other, have always these surprises in store for the inhabitants; this strange, cavernous city has been woven by millennia; people are whining silently, when their loved ones are extracted from the ruins...”⁴

³ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1948*, cit., 332: „A Posillipónak ezek a régi házai összeépültek a Villa Nove [Villanova], a felső városrész talapzatát alkotó homok és agyag függőkertekkel. A tropikus eső feláztatta az agyagalapot, amely reászakadt egy bérházra. Rendőrség, tűzoltók, már lezárták az útszakaszt, a nápolyi tömeg már zsidong a parton, drámai anyák és feleségek jajonganak, már hozzák a sebesülteket és halottakat a romok alól... Ez a természeti szerencsétlenség első, igazi benyomásom Nápolyról.”

⁴ Cf. *Ibidem*: „a Posillipo és a Vomero, a Villa Nova, ezek a keresztül-kasul, érthetetlenül egymásba épült városok, roskadozó és rozoga városrészek mindig tartogatnak a lakók számára ilyen meglepetéseket; évezredek szőtték és fonták ezt a különös, odvas várost; az emberek halkán jajonganak, mikor kedveseiket kihúzzák a romok alól...”

“20 September. In the evening I crossed the alleys of the Neapolitan inner city, among the Neapolitan people living in the various cavities of the *bassi*⁵, of the shop opening from the street, of the workshop and of the room, and suddenly, like a warm air wave, I was washed by a kind of consciousness of the human community. As if I could be protected here in Naples, I felt protected in this crowd... This protection is nothing less than the solidarity of the poor people, of the poverty.”⁶

The above mentioned quotation introduces Márai’s favourite metaphor that compares the city to a termitarium. The simple noun *termesz* “termite” occurs only once in the text in a simile in which Neapolitans seem as poor as these tiny insects. The paradox is that there is something noble, something prideful in their poverty, so the image creates a noteworthy tension between the two semantic fields. People live in certain troglodyte conditions not as animals, but worse, as insects.

“They’re as poor as termites. In such a noble, melodic, prideful and human way, that it seems they were far and degenerated family members of an expatriated royal family.”⁷

The allusion to the expatriated royal family can’t be casual; it calls to mind Umberto II, last King of Italy, who on 13 June 1946 became a king in exile.

During his stay in Naples Márai was continuously witnessing the poverty that reigned in many quarters of the city and transformed people in inanimate beings like pieces of stones:

“This poverty is so deep and dense, that it has no sound. It has no voice. They are as poor as a stone. And from poverty they are as hard as stone.”⁸

“Beggars everywhere. They are mucilaginous, such as insects and hum. An old lady is loitering every morning in the inner city, in costume, with feathers and in colourful rags, wearing a bonnet and with a walking stick. She is begging for cigarettes.”⁹

“Again they laugh tensely. They were chatting in the light, such as the gulls were squawking above the sea. Such as insects were humming, when during flight the sun gilded their wings. They were chatting such as moths that were flying in the light.”¹⁰

⁵ The *bassi* are typical Neapolitan street-level houses.

⁶ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1950–1951*, cit., 397–398: „Szeptember 20. Este a nápolyi belváros sikátorain át mentem, a bassik, az utcáról nyíló üzlet, műhely és lakószoba vegyes odújában élő nápolyi nép között, s egyszerre, mint egy meleg léghullám, megcsapott egyféle emberi közösség tudata. Mintha védett lennék itt Nápolyban, így éreztem: védett ebben a tömegben... Ez a védettség nem más, mint a szegény emberek, a szegénység szolidaritása.”

⁷ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1948*, cit., 332–333: „Olyan szegények, mint a természetek. Oly nemesen, dallamosan, büszkén és emberien szegények, mintha valamennyien egy száműzött uralkodócsalád távoli és elfajzott családtagjai lennének.”

⁸ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1950–1951*, cit., 410: „Ez a szegénység olyan mély és sűrű, hogy már nem is szól. Nincs hangja. Úgy szegények, mint a kő. És olyan kemények a szegénységtől, mint a kő.”

⁹ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1950–1951*, cit., 58: „Mindenütt a koldusok. Ragadnak, mint a rovarok, zümmögnek. Egy öregasszony ténfereg minden délelőtt a belvárosban, jelmezben, tollakkal és színes rongyokkal, kalapban, bottal. Cigaretta koldul.”

¹⁰ Cf. Sándor Márai, 2009, *San Gennaro vére* [Saint Gennaro’s Blood], Budapest: Helikon, 96: „Megint nevettek, idegesen. Beszéltek, a fényben, ahogy a sirályok vijjogtak a tenger felett. Ahogy a rovarok zümmögtek, mikor szárnyukat, repülés közben, megaranyozta a nap. Ahogy a lepkék lebegnek a fényben, úgy beszéltek.”

Márai synesthetically depicts the poverty of Neapolitans in a few words, but efficiently, characterizing the abstract concept with different qualities, that involve sensorial effects: dimension (*mély* ‘deep’), consistency (*sűrű* ‘thick’), and hardness (*kemény* ‘hard’). The most striking aspect of this tragic human condition is its silence. Every possible sound related to poverty (lament, moan, protest or weeping) is absent, and readers are in presence of the negation of all the possible actions that could produce hearing experiences. The inhabitants live in a sombre and silent resignation. People are described with the aid of similes or metaphors taken from the world of insects (termites) and the mineral world (stones): these metamorphic processes serve to underline those processes that exercise particular effects on persons. And despite of all this Naples preserved a great level of pride:

“Naples is big, wise and proud. Not in its facade like Rome, but in its doorways, in the bottom of courts and hearts.”¹¹

“In the early autumn light Naples is mellow, aristocratic, wise and noble. In this Mediterranean light there is the completeness, the mellowness, the nobility.”¹²

This first statement on termites is the solid base of the successive metaphors, which represent the city of Naples as a nest or a mound. But even in this huge Mediterranean nest that gives hospitality to the writer, he finds some pleasant places, such as the National Library of Naples:

“This library now is an important gift to me. In the big, hot, droning termitarium, in Naples there is a place, where I feel reasonably at home and find things I mostly, and maybe exclusively, miss from the vital ingredients I left behind me: books, cyclopaedias, every kind of encyclopaedias, dictionaries.”¹³

From Posillipo (via Ricciardi, 7) where he lived with his family, Márai often reached the historic centre of the city for a walk: not only did he visit the most important museums, churches and libraries, but participated in everyday life and got a deep understanding of the local community and culture. The city appears in the form of an organic being, which encircles and captures also the Hungarian writer. In the next passage he uses again a metaphor taken from the organic, animal world: people undergo another metamorphic transformation, as they are represented in a brutish state, such as infusorias, minuscule aquatic beings, that struggle for survival.

¹¹ Cf. Sándor Márai, 2008, *A teljes napló 1949* [The Complete Diary 1949], ed. by Tibor Mészáros, Budapest: Helikon, 151: „Nápoly nagy, bölcs, büszke. Nem a homlokzatában az, mint Róma, hanem a kapualjai alatt, az udvarok és lelkek mélyén.”

¹² Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1949*, cit., 320: „Nápoly a koraőszi fényben érett, előkelő, bölcs, méltóságteljes. A teljesség van ebben a déli fényben, az érettség, az előkelőség.”

¹³ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1948*, cit., 374: „Ez a könyvtár most nagy ajándék számomra. A nagy, meleg, zümmögő természetben, Nápolyban van egy hely, ahol valamennyire otthon vagyok és megtalálom azt, amit leginkább, talán egyedül nélkülözök az otthon hagyott életkellékekből: a szakkönyveket, lexikonokat, az enciklopédiák minden válfaját, a szótárakat.”

“Then the streets of the inner city always pull me in a life feeling, in which there is no consolation, but some invincible strength, irresistible organism. I’m looking for the narrow, dirty streets, this dense muck, where people and fruit, fish, meat, vines scuffle in a certain gummy, relishable stinky jam. Roll here; in this human muck... already this is not dirt; this is a certain cuticle of life, and everything is sticky as the outer skin. Already this dirt doesn’t disturb me. The infusorias live in this substrate with prolific, scrummy avidity, they flourish, luxuriate, multiply, scream, merchandise. Already they’re neither poor... how can be an insect poor? [...] The Dom as well appears from the ambush of such a dirty street. This kind of density of the buildings recalls the construction plan of the termitariums. The Dom was built according to the plans of the French Gothic, then later they spread every kind of carnival masks, Renaissance, Baroque on it.”¹⁴

Márai was really impressed with the fertility, with this prolific existence he witnessed everywhere in the city:

“Hot evening in the city. Outside the café the Neapolitan women walk in groups of three or four, and it’s very rare to find someone among them who is not pregnant. It seems that the expectant condition here is not an individual destiny, but a kind of popular custom, such as yodelling in Tirol.

If Italy is a woman, then Naples is its genital organ.”¹⁵

This last aphoristic statement seems rather witty, although it is based on realistic grounds. And after a few months stay in Naples, Márai confirms his earliest impressions once more using the rhetorical figure of the simile:

“Because of L’s illness I go down in the city the first time after many days, to buy medicines. I live here for three months, and the impact of Naples is not so urban; on the streets of the inner city I always feel myself as if I would going down in a beehive or termitarium and not in the city.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1948*, cit., 378–379: „A belső város utcái aztán mindig magukkal rántanak egy életérzésbe, amelyben nincs vigasz, de van benne valamilyen leküzdhetetlen erő, ellenállhatatlan organizmus. A szűk, a koszos utcákat keresem, ezt a sűrű szutykot, ahol az ember és gyümölcs, hal, hús, borok verekednek valamilyen ragadós, ízes bűdös lekvárban. Itt hemperegni, ebben az emberi szutyokban... már nem is piszok ez; valamilyen felhámja az életnek, mint az epidermisz, úgy ragad minden. Már nem zavar ez a piszok. Az ázalagok szaporodó, sürgő mohósággal élnek ebben a táptalajban, virulnak, tenyésznek, sokasodnak, gajdolnak, kereskednek. Már nem is szegények... lehet egy rovar szegény? [...] A dóm is ilyen szennyos utcásor rejtekéből válik elő. Az épületek e sűrűsége a természetbolyok építési terveire emlékeztet. A dómot a francia gótika tervrajzai szerint építették, aztán később rákentek mindenféle kameváli jelmezt, reneszánszt, barokkot.”

¹⁵ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1950–1951*, cit., 165: „Forró este a városban. A kávéház előtt hármával-négyesével járnak a nápolyi nők, s nagyon ritka közöttük, aki nem állapotos. Úgy látszik, az állapotosság itt nem egyéni sors, hanem egyféle népszokás, mint Tirolban a jódlizás. // Ha Itália egy nő, akkor Nápoly a nemi szerve.”

¹⁶ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1949*, cit., 40: „L. betegsége miatt napok óta ma először megyek le a városba, gyógyszert vásárolni. Harmadik hónapja élek itt, és Nápoly nem hat teljes városszerűséggel reám; mindig úgy érzem magam a belső város utcáin, mintha egy méskasban vagy természetbolyba szállnék alá, nem is városba.”

In case of Naples the idea of the termitarium is rather appropriate considering not only the horizontal, superficial organization of the urban area, but also its vertical extension; the Mediterranean termitarium expands also downwards with Napoli underground, a singular system of caverns and passageways beneath Naples. During the war more than two hundreds of these caverns were transformed into air raid shelters.

So, as time passed, Márai became aware of the fact that Naples is not really comparable to a metropolis, but it has another kind of structure characterized by a strange confusion, hurry, a continuous coming and going of persons according to an intrinsic pulsation and law.

From various passages of the *Diaries* the stark dichotomy of the city emerges undoubtedly: on one hand there is all the richness of Naples' historical and cultural buildings, on the other the grinding poverty of the post-war city described also at the first part of Márai's novel *San Gennaro vére* (Saint Gennaro's Blood). There is a longer passage in *The Complete Diary 1949*, in which the emigrant defines the function and meaning of the countless number of churches for the Neapolitans and then he depicts a common everyday scene:

“The Neapolitan churches – there are about three hundreds – mostly are not real churches, but tabernacles built in blocks of flats; these churches are lived-in as well, upon the entrance nappies and underpants are hanging from the window of the sacristan's flat, people are cooking too in the areas belonging to the church, and most probably the religious, secular, half-secular and half-religious persons belonging to the church-building exercise all the various life activities: reproduce, procreate, ail, and die in the church and around the church. By itself the church doesn't exist, from the three hundreds buildings only a few are detached, characteristic and has a cupola as in the West –, the church comes together with life, it belongs to it, and obviously in this organic-confidential union, in which human and divine needs are completely mingled, life can't be in consideration of the privileges of the Church. And near the church, to the left and to the right there are blocks of flats with workshops, taverns, brothels, and Neapolitans, giving in their spontaneous inclinations, enter for a moment with the same haste in the tavern, workshop, brothel or church, because something came to their mind, because they need something. Then they, the young Neapolitan men, step out from the church or from the brothel, solemnly and ceremoniously look around on the street; with one hand they adjust the line of the tie, or the waves of their pomaded hair, because in the passion of the prayer or love-making, or while they wolfed the occasional, daily cheese pizza down, the line of their clothing or hair became crumpled, then satisfied they saunter in the swirl, in life, in the beehive, in the termitarium, in Naples.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1949*, cit., 48–49: „A nápolyi templomok – van vagy háromszáz – nagy többségükben nem is igazi templomok, inkább csak aféle bérházakba beépített imaházak; e templomokban laknak is, a bejárat fölött pelenka és gatyá lóg a sekrestés lakásának ablakából, itt főznek is, a templom mellékhelyiségeiben, s valószínű, hogy az élet minden cselekedetét itt művelik a templom-házhoz tartozó egyházi, világi és félvilági, vagy félegyházi személyek: szaporodnak, nemzenek, betegeskednek, meghalnak a templomban és a templom körül. Nincs külön a templom, a háromszáz épület közül csak néhány olyan kupolás, különálló, jellegzetesen templom, mint Nyugaton –, az étellel együtt van a templom, hozzá tartozik, s az élet ebben a szerves-bizalmas közösködésben, ahol az emberi és isteni szükségletek teljesen elvegyülnek, természetesen nem lehet tekintettel

If we compare various passages of the *Diaries* and the novel, we find that there are numerous correspondences, but this kind of analysis is not part of the present article. So I limit myself to mention this particular passage, which despite of its comic effects, narrates the simple reality of those years. Later on Márai worked on it, shortened it slightly and inserted it in his novel, maintaining his emblematic reference to the termitarium:

“Churches and saints were so near to everything belonging to life and people, that people didn’t consider the church a railed off, detached place surrounded by rights and respectability, than elsewhere. Therefore, by turns, hastily they went to the church, café, workshops, distilleries or brothels, giving in to sudden needs, as their body or soul were in want of something. And body and soul in these persons were not separated completely. Their soul, as their body, was always thirsty or hungry, or afraid of something, or craved for something. They lived in this way. And they were always in a hurry. On the street, either coming from the church, or from the workplace or from the brothel, with a hand they adjusted the ruffled line of the tie, or the waves of their pomaded hair, that in the passion of the quick prayer, or love-making, or business and practical activity became ensnarled. And then with hope in their heart, that the saints can do something they went on, crawled among churches and saints, such as termites move on in the termitarium. People used to walk like this in Naples. The saints knew it.”¹⁸

This is one of those qualities that distinguish Naples from the other cities: in the inner city there is always a great traffic, a strange frenetic movement that involves everybody.

a templomiság előjogaira. S a templom mellett, jobbról és balról, bérház van, műhelyekkel, kocsmával, bordélyal s a nápolyi, spontán hajlamainak engedve, egyforma sietséggel tér be egy pillanatra a kocsnába, a műhelybe, a bordélyba, vagy a templomba, mert eszébe jutott valami, mert szüksége van valamire. Aztán kilépnek, a nápolyi fiatalemberek, a templomból, vagy a bordélyból, komolyan és ünnepélyesen néznek körül az utcán, félkézzel megigazítják nyakkendőjük vonalát, vagy brillantinos hajzatuk hullámát, mert az ima, vagy a szeretkezés hevületében, vagy alkalmi, napközi sajtoslepény falása közben elcsúszott a ruházatuk, vagy hajzatuk egy vonala, s elégedetten ballagnak tovább a forgatagban, az életben, a kasban, a bolyban, Nápolyban.”

¹⁸ Cf. Márai, *San Gennaro vére*, cit., 81: „A templomok és a szentek olyan közelségben voltak mindenhez, ami az élethez és az emberekhez tartozott, hogy az emberek már nem érezték a templomot olyan elkerített, területen kívüli jogokkal és tisztességgel övezett helynek, mint máshol. Ezért felváltva, sietős léptekkel, ki-és bejártak a templomba, a bárba, a műhelybe, a kifőzdébe vagy a bordélyba, hirtelen szükségnek engedve, mert testüknek vagy lelküknek szüksége volt valamire. És a test és a lélek ezekben az emberekben nem volt teljesen külön. Lelkük, mint a testük, örökké szomjas volt, vagy éhes volt, vagy félt valamitől, vagy vágyakozott valamire. Így éltek. S mindig siettek. Az utcán – akár a templomból léptek ki, akár a munkahelyről, vagy a bordélyból – fél kézzel megigazították nyakkendőjük elborzolt vonalát, vagy pomádés hajzatuk hullámát, mely a heveny ima, vagy a szeretkezés, vagy üzletkötés és gyakorlati tevékenység hevületében elkuszálódott. S aztán mentek odébb, a templomok és a szentek között, szívükben a reménnyel, hogy a szentek tehetnek valamit – kúsztak, ahogy a természet halad a bolyban. Így jártak az emberek Nápolyban. A szentek tudták ezt.”

“Like mice. Like birds. Gnawing, winking in the light, chirping. People lives here so. And we live here in the same way. This is not the worst. Maybe it’s not even “hopeless” – the aim of existence here is not to be “hopeful”. Only to exist.”¹⁹

There are at least two different ways to observe the city: one is just walking along the streets, another is to reach one of the finest panoramic areas, such as the complex of San Martino and enjoy the magnificent view over the bay. In fact, when Márai visited the Museum and finally he was overlooking the plan of the city he had something like a revelation; he saw the entire body of this living thing on the seaside:

“In the afternoon I’m in San Martino; from the angle of the *bella vista* finally I understand Naples. The cityscape that I see from the balcony of the museum is neither European nor African. It’s obvious that this city was built according to other plans, inner laws, than any other city in Europe, than the Greek and later the Latin cities. [...] Here everything was built by the organic necessity. This city has no forum, nor agora. A unique narrow street traverses the whole long – more than ten kilometres long – cityplan. The city was built on this street, with elbow, teeth and nails; people built human lodgings, hives, nests, everything possible. Between the quarters Pizzofalcone and Vomero was built something that wanted nothing else than to live.”²⁰

The description lets us discern the tenacity of the local population living in a close relationship with nature, but also the fact that they are all elements of a particularly complex organization. In the *Diaries* and in *San Gennaro vére* [Saint Gennaro’s Blood] Márai offers to the readers numerous descriptions of everyday scenes, in which the protagonists are simple local people with the most variegated functions: shoeshine man, *jettatore*²¹, seller of hazelnuts, seller of eggs, postman, etc. And in this social organization everybody finds his own function such as termites in the nest.

Also, it focuses on the two possible perspectives, one horizontal and another vertical. The first implies that we dip into the termitarium; we try to understand it from inside, from the point of view of the population, while the second possibility is to observe the termitarium from a certain distance as an outsider. In this case the apparently confused weave of streets and passages appear before the eyes in a certain order and clarity, and it’s much easier to orient oneself.

¹⁹ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1949*, cit., 321: „Mint az egerek. Mint a madarak. Rágcsálva, pislogva a fényben, csiripelve. Úgy élnek az emberek itt. Úgy élünk mi is itt. Ez nem a legrosszabb. Talán nem is „reménytelen” – a létezésnek itt nem az a célja, hogy „reményteljes” legyen. Csak az, hogy legyen.”

²⁰ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1948*, cit., 381–382: „Délután a San Martinóban járok; a *bella vista* szögletéből végre megértem Nápolyt. A városkép, melyet a múzeum erkélyéről látok, nem európai. Nem is afrikai. Nyilvánvaló, hogy ez a város másféle tervek, belső törvények szerint épült, mint minden más város Európában, mint a görög s később a latin városok. [...] Itt mindent az organikus szükség épített. Ennek a városnak nincs fóruma, sem agorája. Egyetlen könyök széles sikátor szeli végig az egész, hosszú – tíz kilométernél hosszabb – várostervet. Erre a sikátorra épült reá a város, könyökkel, foggal és körömmel; fűrtökben építettek emberi szállást, kast, bolyt, amit lehetett. A Pizzofalcone és a Vomero között épült valami, ami nem akart mást, csak élni.”

²¹ Neapolitan word meaning ‘spellcaster’.

Through Márai's *Diaries* and *San Gennaro vére* readers discover even the fascinating residential quarter of Posillipo with its hanging gardens and population and the natural charms of the bay that embrace the living body of the city:

“Before breakfast and work every morning I walk for an hour toward Parco Virgiliano, cape of Posillipo. It's not impossible that even Vergilius chose this place for his Neapolitan stay and work: this hill is unique, there is nothing similar in the world. The walk among the hanging gardens conducts with a slight slope to the viewpoint, from which you can see the whole Neapolitan bay: to the west Capo Miseno, Baia, the hillside of Cuma, where now they are excavating the traces of the first Greek settlement of three thousand years, then Pozzuoli, Bagnoli, and behind Baia Ischia. To the south you can see Capri, to the east and north Sorrento and the Vesuvius, and in the middle the enormous and torpid body of Naples, that lies on the seashore with the slothful of prehistoric beings. You can see all this with a glance from the knoll of Parco Posillipo.”²²

Just as in the previous passage, Sándor Márai perceived and considered Naples a body willing to live and breathe, a torpid prehistoric animal or a termitarium with its inner configuration situated on the coast. This is always in the base of Márai's thought and leads to a powerful and complex metaphorical image in his writing.

From a certain distance Márai is able to see the whole “body” of this being and therefore as we've just seen along the termitarium he uses also other kinds of metaphors, while walking on the streets he focuses mostly on the many tunnels and passages of the human termitarium.

And in addition to the library this human mould had some other surprises to him:

“Naples surprises me always: today I took the tram no. 20 from Piazza dei Martiri to the terminal, and this half-hour trip through Villanova showed me a completely new Naples, a rich, precious, choosy Naples with palaces. This is a mysterious city, that lives inwards, and it has zigzags as beehives and moulds, and at the same time it's surprising, as if the external face is not else, than a draught-screen.”²³

“In the afternoon in the Museum of Filangieri on Via Duomo. The Filangieri come from an aristocratic Neapolitan family, they collected porcelains, books, paintings and arms, and then they left the collection and their Renaissance Palace to the city of Naples. This other, aristocratic Naples in ambush, along to the sluttish one that

²² Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1948*, cit., 383: „Reggeli előtt és munka előtt minden reggel egy órát sétálok a Posillipo felső tetőzete, a Parco Virgilio felé. Nem lehetetlen, hogy Vergilius csakugyan ezt a helyet választotta nápolyi tartózkodásai és munkája számára: ez a dombtető egyedül való, nincs hasonló a világon. A séta függőkertek között, enyhe emelkedéssel vezet a kilátóponthoz, ahonnan az egész nápolyi öblöt belátni: nyugat felé a Cap Misenát, Baiát, a cumai hegyoldalt, ahol most ássák ki a háromezer év előtti, első görög település nyomait, aztán Pozzuoli, Bagnoli - Baia mögött Ischia. Délre Caprit látni, Keletre és Északra Sorrentót és a Vezúvot, s közbül Nápoly nagy, lomha testét, amint az őskori lények tunyaságával hever a tenger partján. Mindezt egyetlen pillantással látni át a Parco Posillipo dombtetőjéről.”

²³ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1948*, cit., 420: „Nápoly mindig meglep: ma a 20-as villamossal a Piazza dei Martiriról a végállomásig utaztam, s ez a félórás út a Villa Nován át egészen új Nápolyt mutatott, egy gazdag, finnyás, kastélyos, választékos Nápolyt. Titokzatos város ez, befele él, zezugos, mint a méhkasok és természetbolyok, s ugyanakkor meglepő, mintha a külzet csak spanyolfal lenne.”

is simile to an anthill – the Naples of the aristocracy ambushing in the alleys and building palaces with senseless wastage of material and space, in which the Filangieri, who read the humanists, and in the meanwhile on their lordships in Campania and in Sicily the peasants oppressed by the tenants were working.”²⁴

Despite poverty, ruins, dirt, etc. this Mediterranean city and its historic centre is also able to give relief to the emigrant Márai:

“I pass along on Santa Clara’s street towards Monteoliveto. In these corners Naples is magic, and solaces and seduces me. There is no other place, where life is so good, than in Naples. Rome and Florence are elegant, but in Naples life has a *better taste*.”²⁵

Among the various means of transport of the city the Hungarian writer was particularly fascinated by the funiculars, precisely because crossing through the city on them he understood better its organisation from on high, from where he could observe all the termites moving frenetically. And consequently Márai is capable to describe the Neapolitan funicular system as integral part of this strange termitarium.

“These funiculars, these cable railways run through and through the hills, pitches and cavities of Naples; they run under and over the densely populated quarters, through long tunnels, such as the narrow tunnels in the cities of the termites or in the beehives. This method of transport evokes spookily the truer nature of this city of insects.”²⁶

In occasion of one of these trips he arrived to assert that the Neapolitan lifestyle is Central-European and African:

“In the afternoon, the first time in weeks, a long walk in the city: the funicular takes me up to Vomero, from where a two hours squiggling walk leads me down, through the alleys, to the squares of Pizzofalcone and Santa Lucia. Now I understand clearer this singular, Mediterranean cityhive. Life here is not “western”, nor “eastern”: it’s rather Central-European and African.”²⁷

²⁴ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1949*, cit., 166: „Délután a Filangieri múzeumban a Via Duomón. A Filangierik előkelő nápolyi családból származnak, porcelánokat, könyveket, képeket és fegyvereket gyűjtöttek, s aztán a gyűjteményt, reneszánsz palotájukkal együtt, Nápoly városára hagyták. Ez a rejtőző, arisztokratikus, másik Nápoly, a szutykos, ma hangyabolyszerű mellett – a sikátorokban meghúzódó, esztelen anyag- és tépazarlással palotákat építő arisztokrácia Nápolya, amelyben a Filangierik, akik a humanistákat olvasták, s közben a campaniai és szicíliai birtokaikon a bérlők által nyüzsgő paraszt dolgozott.”

²⁵ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1949*, cit., 20: „Végigmegek Szt. Klára útján, a Monteoliveto felé. Nápoly ezekben a szögleteiben varázsos, mindig megvigasztal, megejt. Sehol nem olyan jó az élet, mint Nápolyban. Róma és Firenze előkelő, de Nápolyban jobb íze van az életnek.”

²⁶ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1949*, cit., 54: „Ezek a *funicolarék*, ezek a drótköteles vasútak keresztül-kasul járnak Nápoly dombjait, magaslatait és barlangjait; sűrűn lakott városrészek alatt és fölött vonulnak, egészen úgy, hosszú alagutakon át, mint a természetek városaiban, vagy a méhkasokban a vékony alagutak. Ez a közlekedési módszer is kísérletesen emlékeztet e rovarváros igazibb jellegére.”

²⁷ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1949*, cit., 283: „Délután, hetek óta először, hosszú séta a városban: a funicolare felvisz a Vomeroóra, ahonnan kétórás, tekerdő séta visz le, sikátorokon át, a Pizzofalcone és a Santa Lucia tereihez. Ezt a különös, déli városkast most már tisztábban látom. Az élet itt nem „nyugatis”, nem is „keleties”: inkább közép-európai és afrikai.”

At the same time Naples is also tedious and leads our writer to tiredness. Mostly during summer the city is rather boring and the heavy humidity peaking caused a rather unpleasant and uncomfortable sensation and made for a rather unpleasant smell from the canals and streets:

“Neapolitan summer is soggy and tropical. Humidity is flowing from the air, as waste water from the mop. In addition Naples is a boring city. In summer it’s particularly boring. Anyway, it’s always beautiful. It has no soul. It leads a completely carnal, meaty, animalistic life. But there is nothing better. The world is in the state of putrefaction. Everywhere the same thing is putrescent: the soul. // Posillipo is beautiful, surprising, smelly and stenchy, colourful and particular. The sea is always new, it’s always an event, his touch and smell is always an experience.”²⁸

The previous description illustrates very efficiently the existing dichotomy between the city and Posillipo: the latest is always in the heart of Márai, it’s never boring and always exciting with its daily life, smells and sea. On the other hand, Naples is contradictory: it’s boring, nevertheless it’s always beautiful... and in this passage it becomes a powerful metaphor of the whole world. The city has no soul, it’s not a human being, but it’s rather an animal, something really fleshy and its putrefaction evokes the state of degeneration of the world.

“Middle of December. After two squally days, summer-end swelter, shine, blue sky. In the morning I go in the deep hive of the city and I’m getting tired. This clamour, this rush of termitarium, this melodic disorder fatigues me. At least Posillipo is what it is: sea, hill, silence, village and world all together. I have nothing to do with Naples.”²⁹

In this last quotation the writer is getting tired of the city even in December because of its frenetic, noisy and chaotic life. And again, on the opposite pole we find the tranquillity of Posillipo. The weariness just makes Márai to affirm that he has not a great deal in common with this city.

And finally we have another piece in the *Diaries* describing Naples a boring place:

“Naples is a boring city. But this place, Naples and everything around it is not boring. Here something is always flowing, from the volcanic soil, from the sea, from the southern seashores. Naples is the most vociferous city of the world. But the “place”

²⁸ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1949*, cit., 251: „A nápolyi nyár lucskos, tropikus. A pára úgy csurog a levegőből, mint a szennylé a mosogatórongyból. Ezenfelül unalmas város Nápoly. Nyáron különösen az. Lármás, zsúfolt, s ugyanakkor üres és unalmas. Közbul, mindig, gyönyörű. Nincs lelke. Teljesen testi, húsos, animális életet él. De nincs jobb. A világ a rothadás állapotában van. Mindenütt ugyanaz rothad: a lélek. // A Posillipo szép, meglepő, szagos és bűdös, színes és különös. A tenger mindig új, mindig esemény, érintése, szaga mindig élmény.”

²⁹ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1949*, cit., 410: „December közepe. Két szélviharos nap után ernyesztő, nyárvégi hőség, ragyogás, kék ég. Délelőtt a város kasmélyeiben járok és elfáradok. Ez a láрма, ez a természetlenség, ez a dallamos rendtelenség elfáraszt. A Posillipo legalább az, ami: tenger, domb, csend, falu és világ egyszerre. Nápolyhoz nincs sok közöm.”

after all is deeply silent. And in this silence, from the distance, mermaids are singing. Something is happening. Here man is near to something: life.”³⁰

Even this description introduces the next argument: even if Naples seems a boring place, its surroundings are really exciting with the Vesuvius, the sea and the volcanic areas. Márai seems to appreciate the forces of the inhabitants who tried to “tame” this soil, this beast that he paragon to a wild dog that needs to be domesticated:

“In the evening from the height of Posillipo I was looking to the hanging gardens in the depth that give towards the sea, and this soil cultivated in all its portion, all its fibre. Man, through three thousand years coped here with the tightwad soil, managed to tame this volcanic beast as a wild dog: patterned after a domestic animal he made from it a domestic soil, constrained it to serve and to obedience.”³¹

The volcanic soil is the result of the Vesuvius that towers majestic over the Gulf as an old king. And when its peak is covered in snow, it seems that he is just wearing a royal mantle:

“This night the whole peak of the Vesuvius – around the crater and down till the edge of the observatory – was covered in thick snow. This mantle of snow is like an ermine cloak over the shoulder of a lonely, fearful, old king.”³²

Vesuvius continues to be a really frightening existence in the whole region, and that’s why it’s also seen as a plutonic beast, that could wake up all of a sudden. Its ominous presence substantially and intrinsically conditions everyday life:

“And this plutonic beast after all is a Great Reality in this region. His presence somehow affects everything in the life of people, who live here. Man doesn’t pay attention to it, but at the foot of a volcano lives somehow different than on the plain.”³³

So, Naples is a termitarium and sometimes a beast, Vesuvius is a beast and finally even the sea of the Gulf of Naples is a beast. So during the years of the Neapolitan

³⁰ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1949*, cit., 297: „Nápoly unalmas város. De ez a hely, Nápoly és ami körülötte van, nem unalmas. Itt valami állandóan áramlik, a vulkánikus talajból, a tengerből, a déli partok felől. Nápoly a világ egyik leglámásabb városa. De a „hely” mégis, mélyen csendes. És ebben a csendben, messziről, a szirének énekelnek. Valami történik itt. Valamihez közel van itt az ember: él.”.

³¹ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1949*, cit., 133: „Este a Posillipo magaslatáról néztem a mélyben, a tenger felé hulló függőkereteket, ezt a minden porcikájában, minden rostjában megművelt földet. Az ember, háromezer éven át megbirkózott itt a zsugori földdel, teljesen domesztikálta ezt a vulkánikus vadállatot, mint a vadkutyát: háziállat mintájára házi földet csinált belőle, szolgálatra és engedelmességre kényszerítette.”.

³² Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1950–1951*, cit., 34: „Éjjel a Vezúv egész csúcsterületét – a kráter körül és le, az obszervatórium pereméig – vastag hó borította. Ez a hóköpeny igazán olyan, mint a hermelinpalást egy magányos, félelmes, öreg király vállán.”.

³³ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1950–1951*, cit., 365: „És ez a plutonikus dög mégis a Nagy Valóság ezen a vidéken. Jelenléte valahogy befolyásol mindent az emberek életében, akik itt élnek. Az ember nem figyel oda, de egy tűzhányó tövében mégis másképpen él, mint sik földön.”.

exile Márai feels himself encircled by these huge, living and beastly presences that dictate the rhythm of his everyday life in the Parthenopean chief city:

“I’m living on the seashore for one and a half years, I observe this terrific huge body day and night. It’s evident, that the sea is not only “element” and “volume”, but also a living being: this enormous body lives, gnaws, feeds, heaves, moans, slumbers, feels displeased, roars, fights, deliriously is adrift, destroys, then conciliated lies down, snores under the sun, suns its belly, is bored. Sometimes it has spleen like an English poetess. Sometimes it’s scurrilous as a drunken peasant of the Campania. Now, while I’m writing this, it is nervous at the touch of the December wind and rain, like a lord in an office.”³⁴

Finally, Márai uses another kind of metaphoric images and similes to describe particular conditions of the city and its inhabitants recurring to the world of the reptiles, and in particular to the lizards:

“Naples is suffering from the chill, as an animal on the *vivisectios* rack. It is green from the chill, numbly lies down, as a lizard, when the current of the bay is growing cold.”³⁵

In the next description, the simile taken from the animal world serves to depict powerfully the extremely poor existence of Neapolitans suffering from the humidity and cold of the Mediterranean winter:

“As if God would invent new species of flowers every winter, while people, as dead lizards, were sleeping in rooms with floor with marble bricks, in the chilly winter night on the floor.”³⁶

Even the hidden inhabitants of the inner heart of Posillipo conduct a life simile to that of the lizards who survive in arid places, on stones and cliffs:

“In the afternoon I go up to the floor of the rear wing of the settlement called villa Ricciardi: ahead in the fine cottages are ranging we, the rich Neapolitan bourgeoisie and the strangers; but behind the nice gardens and pavilions, in the brae clings this stony nest of shells, where about a thousand of people are ranging holding on to

³⁴ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1949*, cit., 405: „Másfél éve élek a tenger partján, nappal és éjjel figyelem ezt az irtózatot nagy testet. Nyilvánvaló, hogy a tenger nemcsak „elem” és „térfogat”, hanem élőlény is: ez a nagy test él, emészt, táplálkozik, háborog, nyög, szendereg, haragszik, ordít, verekedik, eszelősen hányódik, pusztít, aztán engesztelten elterül, horkol a nap alatt, puha hasát sütteti, unatkozik. Néha spleenje van, mint egy angol költőnőnek. Néha trágár, mint egy részeg campaniai paraszt. Most, amíg ezt írom, a decemberi szél és eső érintésére ideges, mint egy nagyúr a hivatalban.”

³⁵ Cf. Sándor Márai, 2009, *A teljes napló 1952–1953* [The Complete Diary 1952–1953], ed. by Tibor Mészáros, Budapest: Helikon, 26: „Nápoly úgy szenved a hidegtől, mint egy állat a *vivisectios* kámpadon. Zöld a hidegtől, dermedten elfekszik, mint a gyíkok, amikor a Golf-áram kihül.”

³⁶ Cf. Márai, *San Gennaro vére*, cit., 58: „Mintha az Isten újfajta virágokat talált volna ki minden télen, amíg az emberek, döglött gyíkok módjára, a márványtégla padozatú szobákban, a hideg téli éjszakában a földön aludtak.”

the crevice of the stones with nails, as swallows, or torpidly live a kind of reptilian life, as lizards...”³⁷

The Mediterranean climate marks the inhabitants’ life that managed to adapt to these particular environmental conditions:

“As some species of animals hibernate, so the Neapolitan invented himself a kind of existence: he’s sleeping his summer dream, manage to live with decreased vital movements for a long time... Now, in autumn, he wakes up from his summer dream, he’s scrambling his feet with careful movements.”³⁸

The study of these quotations describing Naples and its surroundings put in evidence the idiosyncratic vision of the nature encircling the Hungarian writer living in exile, his characteristic way to use metaphors and similes taken mostly from the animal reign that evoke with particular lucidity the existential conditions of the Parthenopean area. Finally, in my opinion this study is useful not only because it contributes to a better understanding of Márai’s style in the *Diaries*, but also because it helps us to understand better the post-war conditions of Naples that gave hospitality to him.

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³⁷ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1949*, cit., 138: „Délután felmegyek a villa Ricciardinak nevezett település hátsó traktusának emeletére: elől, a szép villaházakban tanyázunk mi, a pénzes nápolyi polgárság és az idegenek; de a szép kertek és kerti házak mögött megtapad a domboldalban ez a köves kagylófészek, ahol vagy ezer ember tanyázik, karmokkal kapaszkodva a kövek hasadéékában, mint a kövi fecskék, vagy meggémberedve valamilyen hullőéletet él, mint a gyíkok...”.

³⁸ Cf. Márai, *A teljes napló 1949*, 320: „Mint ahogy egyes állatfajták téli álmat alszanak, úgy talált ki magának a nápolyi ember egyféle létezését: nyári álmát alussza, lecsökkentett életmozdulatokkal tud élni hosszú időn át... Most, ősszel, ébred a nyári álomból, óvatos mozdulatokkal tápászkodik.”.