

16

Parthenope on the Metro

*or, Links with the Past, on the
Journey into the Future*

Luigi Spina

The metropolitan network of Naples will soon be finished, with all its stations working from Piazza Garibaldi to the highest and furthest points of the city. The diverse people and places of the Neapolitan territory will be connected at every moment of the day, in the latest manifestation of the contiguity and promiscuity that have characterized the city throughout its long history. Creating these new spatial connections has taken several exhausting years; during this time, the digging machines have brushed against ancient layers, bringing to light some precious evidence of the past. They have raised—perhaps involuntarily—new questions for the engineers of urban transport, such as how to connect different time periods and how to locate oneself within time. Is it possible (without constructing an actual time machine) to foster an awareness of a past that we might visit more often, and that we might make more accessible and understandable? What type of cultural machinery might we devise to facilitate these links and help us value the diversity and variety of all these layers?

These are indeed difficult questions, and they can give rise to some different answers—answers that are not always reassuring, if we look at the history of recent years. But perhaps Parthenope herself might suggest a way of preserving and of making usable the ancient culture

of Naples, while also preserving it for future generations.¹ According to the tale told by Lycophron in his *Alexandra* (ll. 717–25), the Siren Parthenope was one of the victims of the lethal cunning of Ulysses (as were the Trojans of Aeneas, who managed to disembark alive some kilometres further north, thereby beginning the history of Rome). Parthenope, like her Siren sisters, was almost certainly the daughter of the river Acheloo and one of the nine Muses; this divine origin may account for the Siren's ability to incarnate *both* the threatening, hidden dangers of a song which simultaneously fascinates and bewilders, which both distracts one from everyday life and consigns it to oblivion, *and* the wise and beneficent presence which can grant favourable conditions for a journey and inspire the foundation of a city in a suitable location, endowing it with her feasts and her rites.

In fact, the body of the Siren was itself dual-natured, the remnant of an ancient metamorphosis. The Sirens, Ovid tells us in his *Metamorphoses* (5.551–63), were young girls, playmates of Proserpina, the daughter of the goddess Ceres who was kidnapped by Pluto and taken to Tartarus to be his queen. The Sirens asked the gods to be transformed into birds so that they could search for their friend in the most remote parts of the world. In the earliest phase of the myth, then, they were half-woman, half-bird; then, over the course of the centuries and via routes that are not entirely clear, the Sirens' bird-half turned into a fish-half, and this remained the most familiar image of the Siren until our own times. The hybrid nature of the Siren's body refers to a duplicity, a complex nature that cannot be reduced to a reassuring uniformity. Neapolis, as Strabo underlined, was at the same time a Greek city and a Campanian one. For this reason, the ancient name of the city evoked the hybridity of the population that lived there, as well as the Siren who had chosen to die there. Modern Naples, too, seems to adapt itself to this deep meaning of the myth: is not the Naples of our own time a kaleidoscope of different worlds, social classes, tastes, and abilities, which are held together and represented as single 'body'—a body that is recognizable by its fascinating 'monstrosity'? And is it not perhaps the case that this 'monstrosity' can explain the city's 'extremes', which range from the highest peaks

¹ For more on the myth of the sirens, Parthenope and the 'nostalgia' for the antique, see Bettini and Spina (2007); Spina (2009), 23–7; Spina (2010a); Spina (2010b).

of genius to the abysses of *Gomorra*?² We need to acknowledge these clashes before we can understand whether or not it will be possible to connect in a meaningful way with the history of this dynamic (and often destructive) city.

In May 2013 Naples hosted the second round of the 'Olimpiadi del Classico', a contest organized by the Ministry of Education which constituted a sort of 'national final' for the winners of the various classical language competitions (*certamina*) that had taken place in schools and communities across Italy. Young students who were passionate about Graeco-Roman culture, but who were at the same time resolutely contemporary (with all the characteristics of the 'digital generation'), challenged, and were themselves challenged by, a city and its chaotic everyday routines. This too resonated with the notion of hybridity, for these young students tried once again to interpret the antique, to translate and understand the ideas and passions of women and men who had lived many centuries before them. I say 'once again' because this is what the students of Statius' father did in this same city; this is what Leopardi wrote about; this is what dozens and dozens of other students did, before they became teachers in our schools and universities. This, in the end, is the scope of the present book. So far, all these efforts have kept the study of ancient culture alive, but we have arrived at a turning point, at a crisis more extreme than those of other eras; even if, looking back, Classical Studies have shown a surprising capacity for self-renewal, and for fostering receptions and cultural memory in later periods.

The future of the study of Naples' ancient past is now entrusted to this same hybrid, in the hope that it will be capable of keeping alive the historical contexts that have produced such a valuable culture. This is the only way that we can avoid transforming antiquity into an empty 'classicism of manners', from which we can only reap nostalgia. The ruins of ancient culture reflect the true nature of Time. History has never been afraid of Time itself, but only of abandonment and rejection, which reveal a conscious, inexorable deafness, as well as the inability to imagine a future.

² I refer, of course, to the celebrated 2006 book by Roberto Saviano, the English title of which is *Gomorra: Italy's Other Mafia*. The title *Gomorra* is a pun on *Camorra*, which is the name of the mafia-type crime syndicate originating in Naples and Campania.

But let us return to our Metro, whose route should now (with the help of the four old funicular railways) cover the entire urban space of Naples. The metaphor of the journey is, of course, one of the most frequently recurring since antiquity, but it took an extraordinary Argentinian writer, Julio Cortázar, to imagine *un viaje atemporal París–Marsella*—a journey of over a month which covered the unremarkable distance between two motorway toll-booths, without ever leaving the motorway or tasting the undocumented life of the service stations.³ Here, we find a model for a journey made not only in space, but also in ‘Neapolitan time’—a journey that is able to project itself into the future without losing the concrete dimension of the present. The new stations of the Metro, which are both functional and artistic, already offer a great deal of symbolism and meaning.⁴ They do not deny the existence of the hybrid; rather, they represent the best part of its nature; they are subjected every day to vandalism and degradation, but, almost miraculously, they bear far fewer scars than even the most pessimistic would ever have imagined.

Along with the compulsion for rapidity and precision of connection, one needs to be capable of valorizing, with a certain determination, moments of pause, of slowing down; that is, to use the stations not simply as interchanges between the above and below of the city (or, better, as an underground connection between two of the city’s ‘aboves’), but rather as pathways between the past and the present, as the materialization of a dialogue between different entities in a language that is nevertheless still comprehensible. Travelling like this, the journey of Parthenope would truly be a journey *towards* the future *with* the past—not simply a nostalgic journey *towards* the past. Parthenope certainly needs to respond to the needs of the present, but she should also exploit the new hybrid that is made from combining the *above* and *below* of the city, which are almost equivalent to its *before* and *after*. She should try to keep these connections open and alive, refusing to sacrifice to speed (which makes everything uniform and almost invisible) the beauties of an ancient country that still promises new discoveries to those who know how to slow down at the right time.

³ This is the subtitle of the book by that Cortázar wrote with his wife, Carol Dunlop: *Los autonautas de la cosmopista* (1983).

⁴ <<http://www.danpiz.net/napoli/trasporti/MetroArte-Frames.htm>>.

Parthenope on the Metro

321

The future of the classical heritage of Parthenope, whose complex identity is visible to all, is therefore entrusted to the creation and consolidation of entities that are stable but still mobile—entities like the new Metro stations, which are used by people and are therefore alive. The stations—the stopping points of this journey—do not need to be created because they are already present in the urban landscape. Meanwhile, the people who are shaped, taught, and guided in the educational institutions, centres of research, libraries, theatres, and in the countless initiatives taking place in the piazzas and streets of Naples—*these* are the new protagonists, the actors who are capable of making Parthenope once more the Siren who attracts people with her charm and her ingrained wisdom. This volume testifies to the fact that the challenge is not a new one, although today it is arguably more difficult. To know that in the past others have succeeded in the face of similar challenges should help us, perhaps making future generations conscious of the fact that they need to confront problems and overcome them with determination, in order to make the ‘above’ and ‘below’, the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of this city come alive with equal passion.

