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TRIESTE: A BORDER IDENTITY

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A negligible harbour town under Venetian jurisdiction, Trieste became a city proper in 1719 when the Austrian Emperor Karl VI granted it trading privileges, including waiving duty on commercial goods. Thanks to its favourable geographic position (Trieste was the only Austrian outlet on the sea together with Fiume, now Rijeka) and particularly under the Empress Maria Theresia, Trieste became one of the major commercial hubs of the Empire. Population increased exponentially through immigration and whole new quarters were erected according to the most advanced urban planning principles.¹ After the First World War, however, Trieste lost this primary role within the economy of Austria-Hungary and experienced a decline that mirrored in many respects that of its former ruler. The city was handed over to Italy and became progressively weighed down by emerging ethnic and border issues. The demise of its traditional cosmopolitanism coincided with a growing enthusiasm for Italy perceived as an ideal and indeed largely idealised motherland – this was consonant of course with the nationalistic rhetoric that emerged out of the First World War and was soon to be aggressively advocated by the Fascist regime. Between the 1920s and 1930s the Regime attempted to replace the Empire and the powerful loyalties it had inspired. At the same time, however, it aimed to eradicate any residual cosmopolitanism through enforced ‘Italianization’ of the major local commercial enterprises. The moderate ruling class became fascinated with discourses of Italy as a major power and player on a European scale. Trieste became ‘the most Fascist of Italian cities’ – a perception that has continued haunting the city to the present day. After the fall of the Regime, Trieste’s position deteriorated further: its borders continued fluctuating and post-war geo-political readjustments eventually allocated Trieste to Italy in 1954 (officialised 1975). These tortuous re-alignments, however, did not alter the idealized perception, from within Trieste and also outside, of a glorious Triestine past and Trieste itself remained a key feature of long-standing and wider nationalist aspirations to Italy’s ‘just

¹ See Angelo Ara and Claudio Magris, ‘La città nuova’, in *Trieste: Un’identità di frontiera* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982 and 1987), pp.18-42.

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borders'. A symbolically maternal relationship was forged whereby Trieste was described as Italy's 'favourite daughter'.²

As the overview above suggests, the city experimented with and experienced (but also suffered) disparate national cultures, in fact arguably more so than anywhere else in Italy in the modern period. So frequently and so radically questioned and shaken due to fluctuating geo-political frontiers, Trieste's identity also emerges as powerfully unique in Italy. It follows that, as Pietro Spirito argues, 'gli scrittori di area triestina sono costretti a guardare [...] un identico orizzonte'. They perform risky balancing acts between past, present and future, negotiate and re-negotiate between gazing backwards nostalgically, living in the present inevitably experienced as 'static dereliction' and also must be prepared to make disconcerting mental leaps towards the future.³

Through a necessarily cursory survey of modern Triestine literature, this paper discusses a number of features that helped create and sustain a myth of Trieste's irredeemable 'otherness', of Trieste's identity as multi-frontier and, at the same time, all-Italian. The emergence of a self-affirming, eminently local literature provided a vehicle towards creating, developing and asserting Trieste's unique identity: in short its 'triestinità'. This idea of 'triestinità' played a key role in shaping the city's perception both locally and more widely in Italy. At the same time, and paradoxically, 'triestinità' conformed with a perception of Trieste as national and patriotic symbol of 'italianità', seat of an innate, but of course invented (as in a veritable 'invention of tradition') 'Italianness'. Paradoxically Trieste emerged as more Italian, the more it revealed itself as different, 'other', Triestine.

[According to Rosario Assunto, streets and squares can accommodate a landscape. Where the city is built on a hill, as is Trieste's case, cityscape and landscape easily coincide and 'le vie perimetrali segnano esse stesse il limite tra i due spazi-più-che-spazi, quello della città e quello del paesaggio.'⁴ This coincidence emerges in the frequent uphill walks taken by various characters by Italo Svevo (1861-1928), in their elusive pursuit of perfect states of physical or psychological health, or, more recently, in the theme of the abyss explored by Enrico Morovich and the vertiginous verticality recurring in Renzo Rosso and Stelio Mattioni. The zig-zaggings of Svevo's characters (think of Zeno following the wrong funeral, think of

² Cf. K.Pizzi, *A City in Search of an Author: The Literary Identity of Trieste* (London-New York: Continuum-Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp.27-8 and *passim*: this relationship however turned sour and Italy was to be experienced increasingly as a 'cruel stepmother'.

³ P.Spirito, *Trieste: paesaggi della nuova narrativa* (Florence-Trieste: Stazione di Posta-Lint, 1997), p.8.

⁴ R.Assunto, *Il paesaggio e l'estetica: Natura e Storia* (Naples: Giannini, 1973), p.32.

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Alfonso Nitti's steep uphill walks to Villa Opicina) highlight a wider preoccupation within Triestine literature. We find here an osmotic relation between landscape and cityscape, a reciprocal feeding of the one into the other. However, it is precisely in the period between Ottocento and Novecento, that the intense, rapid urbanization caused Trieste to relinquish progressively its 'carattere epifanico', that is the city's dialogical, dialectic relationship with its landscape, ultimately miniaturising the latter into a caricature of 'Leibnitz's infinity', as Assunto puts it.⁵ A loss, a nostalgia, a conflictual exchange between spaces no longer able to interact and communicate is one of the main features lodged at the roots of modern Triestine writing –this of course was truer of Trieste than elsewhere in Italy because of Trieste's much more rapid industrialisation and commercial and demographic boom.]

This cluster of paradoxes is typical, for instance, of a volume that remains one of the foundation texts, if not the *Urtext* of Triestine literature: *Il mio carso* (1912) by Scipio Slataper (1888-1915).⁶ This part romantic, part D'Annunzio-inspired rebellious volume is constructed on an unresolved dilemma between the urban modernity of Trieste and the self-effacing tradition of its rural hinterland, the Karst. Not accidentally Slataper was the first writer to reflect on this border's, in his words, 'lack of cultural traditions' and on Trieste's alleged all-commercial and business oriented vocation.⁷ Slataper was also a pioneer in effecting an artificial, intellectual re-discovery of his roots from the arch-Italian perspective he acquired during the formative years spent in Florence. From Florence, traditional cradle of Italian language and civilisation, Slataper originally attempted a re-discovery of his most authentically Triestine (read, predominantly Italian) background and was to be the first of a series of Triestine intellectuals who followed in his wake. Florence was seen as acting as a bridge: Florence alone could provide the intellectual anchor sought by those Triestines intent on a painful yet inescapable 'discovery' –or rather invention as mentioned above -of their tormented 'triestinità', of their intensely local 'otherness'.

This elusive, ambiguous idea of 'triestinità' has carried currency both locally and also more widely in Italy at various times and it is worth dwelling on a little further. Some (e.g the historian Diego De Castro) have regarded 'triestinità' as a local 'superiority complex'. Others have relied on an idea of Trieste as spiritual metaphor that 'ceases to be pictured as a social

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp.41 and 50.

⁶ S.Slataper, *Il mio carso* (Florence: La Voce, 1912).

⁷ See Slataper's numerous contributions to *La Voce*, esp. 'Trieste non ha tradizioni di cultura', originally in *La Voce*, 11 February 1909, now in *Scritti politici*, ed. by Giani Stuparich (Rome: Stock, 1925), pp. 3-7.

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environment and is transposed onto an existential plane', in the words of Edward Timms.⁸ An authentic Trieste *d'antan* was frequently associated with a largely imaginary Austro-Hungarian Trieste, through indiscriminate manipulations relying on a rather foggy spectrum of cultural references and connotations. This perception is perhaps inevitable in border cities. Torn apart by powerfully centrifugal forces, Trieste is not at all a 'crucible of cultures' as some myopic readings would still have it.⁹ The border advocates a double status: intersection of cultures, but also, and possibly more frequently, straight-jacket, or divisive and watertight barrier.¹⁰ See for instance the cultural isolation emanating from Umberto Saba's poetry. Saba's close attention to the Italian literary canon to the extent of neglecting contemporary schools and movements produced occasionally anachronistic results. Saba's Trieste is neither a *ville tentaculaire*, nor the dynamic metropolis fantasised by the Futurists. It is rather a small, domestic, provincial ambit predating the Fascist recovery of the 'old town' ('Cittavecchia' – also seat of the Jewish ghetto). It is a town untouched by the demon of modernity and haunted instead by the poet's own feminine spectres: his mother, Lina his wife, his wet nurse. [Trieste is an imaginary city within another imaginary city: the legendary Jewish ghetto of Cittavecchia. (see E.Pellegrini)¹¹]

'Triestinità' goes hand in hand with 'italianità', particularly during the Fascist period. Predictably, discourses of 'italianità' and 'romanità' peaked at that time. Mainly through poetry written in dialect by Corraj and Carlo Mioni (aka 'Alma Sperante' –another paradox while the regime aimed to stifle dialects and linguistic regional varieties), the Regime celebrated the capitals invested in re-launching the moribund port of Trieste and its attempts to fill in the gaps left open by the disappearance of the Empire. Fascist nationalist rhetoric placated Trieste's national and cultural insecurities and was perceived as an ideal catalyst in pursuing an effortless combination of modernity with tradition. Under Fascism Trieste entertained widespread expectations of an overnight, almost miraculous recovery of its shipping industry. Trieste absorbed and mirrored the current mechanic and military aesthetics

⁸ D.De Castro defined 'triestinità' as a 'superiority complex' in 'Considerazioni sul futuro di Trieste', in *Il confine riscoperto: Beni degli esuli, minoranze e cooperazione economica nei rapporti dell'Italia con Slovenia e Croazia*, ed. by Tito Favaretto and Ettore Greco (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1997), pp.154-5. See also E.Timms, 'Introduction. Unreal city –theme and variations', in *Unreal City: Urban Experience in Modern European Literature and Art*, ed. by E.Timms and David Kelley (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp.1-12 (p.4).

⁹ In this respect, see Elio Apih's apt definition of Trieste as 'crogiolo mancato' ('unsuccessful crucible') in *Il ritorno di Giani Stuparich* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1988), p.75.

¹⁰ Cf. Angelo Ara and Claudio Magris, *Trieste, op.cit.*, p.111: 'una città che avrebbe potuto essere una porta [...] diventa un baluardo.'

¹¹ E.Pellegrini, *Le città interiori* (Bergamo: Moretti & Vitali, 1995), p.55.

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-see F.T.Marinetti's claims that Trieste was 'the most Futurist Italian city' or 'Futurist city par excellence'. Deprived of a past, deprived of history, Trieste could not but project itself forward, hurl at infernal speed towards realising its vocation of urban and industrial modernity. [This national(ist) rhetoric is long lived in Trieste: we find traces of it left even in contemporary authors who are certainly far from being Fascists (e.g. Cecovini).]

Above all Trieste must be regarded as a border city. Perched at the margins of the world, ambivalent, *deraciné*, Trieste articulates an exquisitely modern crisis of identity. Its actual geographic and political borders, cancelled and re-drawn at regular intervals, emphasise this aspect of course. The endemically provisional status of this border, the ideological allegiances or, more frequently, the conflicts it generates, its chameleon-like attitude to adjusting and re-adjusting over and over again to fluctuating circumstances, require repeated reassessments of identity. On the border, reality explodes in a sheaf of centrifugal and contradictory forces. Historical subjects lose coherence and experience fatal neuroses, as shown, amongst others, in the narratives of Fulvio Tomizza (1935-1999) and Enrico Morovich (1906-1994). The border is a malignant stage condemned to a sinister repetition of tormented family dramas. Individuals are torn apart by entangled ethnic and national profiles. The border itself is a mutilated body, a wound, deep scar or excision that, I am quoting from Pellegrini, 'attraversa le cucine di certe case, le camere da letto, divide mogli e mariti, attraversa le tombe, "i vivi e i morti"'.¹²

This oppositional dialectic implies frequent confrontations with the 'different', the unknown and disquieting 'Other'. This is to be understood mainly as a Slav 'Other', widely regarded as irredeemable antagonist and persecutor of 'italianità'. [According to the novelist Carlo Sgorlon, this perception is aggravated by archetypal national configurations, ancient symbols and rituals, surviving in the collective unconscious. Sgorlon identifies the border first and foremost with a mental state that wedges itself almost unknowingly at birth in the subconscious of all border dwellers. The minutely detailed geography haunting his novel *La foiba grande* (1992), set in the villages occupied by the Yugoslav army in 1945, is an all too transparent attempt to reconstruct a coherent whole from the scattered pieces in the jigsaw of a compromised mental geography.¹³ A similarly exacting mnemonic exercise is employed by Enrico Morovich in his re-visitations of his native city Fiume. Morovich's border is the zero absolute, a 'no man's land' progressively charged with regressive fantasies and haunting childhood memories. Irony and surreal humour exorcise the border and relegate it to a

¹² *Ibid.*, p.190.

¹³ C.Sgorlon, *La foiba grande* (Milan: Mondadori, 1992).

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separate sphere. Not accidentally Morovich writes most frequently about ghosts who, unlike humans, inhabit a disembodied dimension quite alien from barbed wire and geo-political divisiveness.

Recurring symbols relating to this border have been national –as, for instance, happens in Pier Antonio Quarantotti Gambini (1910-1965) –and also feminine and maternal, as is the case with Biagio Marin (1891-1985).] In the novelist Pier Antonio Quarantotti Gambini the border remains clad in nationalist vestiges. The young protagonists of his novels and stories contemplate a border lacerated by national conflict and antagonism, a border that also crucially reveals itself as poised at the psychological threshold between adolescence and adulthood. In the novel *Il cavallo Tripoli* (1956) the flight of the superb horse named Tripoli (after the Italian colonies in Lybia) is both metaphor of the demise of the Italian African Empire and of a parallel loss of innocence for Paolo, the protagonist.¹⁴ Gambini's borderland is essentially bourgeois and Italian and, as such, in stark contrast with the impure/métis/bastardised, peasant borderland of his contemporary Fulvio Tomizza (1935-1999) whose protagonists, while thinking of themselves as Italian nationals, yet pray to God in a Croatian dialect. Tomizza's border equals rootlessness, coarse amalgamation of incompatible bloods and ethnic groups. The border coincides with a thoroughly existential experience for Tomizza's autobiographical characters. Historical events remain locked in an official, urban, and bureaucratic Trieste, and therefore desperately alien from the city's rural, incoherent, and largely Balkanised hinterland. [Tomizza's Trieste is an absolute city, dominated, in the words of Lorenzo Mondo, by 'il fascino di una tradizione culturale che assorbe e insieme smorza le precedenti opposizioni e lacerazioni.'¹⁵

In Biagio Marin, the symbolism associated with the border is predominantly maternal and Catholic, employing mythical motifs relating to fertility and maternity. The poet's mother/Madonna is powerfully assimilated to the Grado lagoon in her capacity as giver of life and also high priestess of death through her pivotal role at the borders of life. This association of the border with maternal, life-giving waters, emerges more recently in the poet Marisa Madieri (1938-1997) who dwells on the 'clarity' that 'fa apparire le cose nella loro verità', 'mentre il limo dei fondali nasconde relitti di naufragi e torbide scorie del cuore.'¹⁶

¹⁴ P.A.Quarantotti Gambini, *Il cavallo Tripoli* (Turin: Einaudi, 1956).

¹⁵ L.Mondo, 'Fulvio Tomizza', in *Trieste nella cultura italiana del Novecento: Profili e testimonianze*, ed. by G.Tombesi and B.Maier (Trieste: Circolo della Cultura e delle Arti, 1985), pp.236-40 (p.237).

¹⁶ M.Madieri, 'Acqua è poesia –Water is Poetry', *Cigahotels Magazine*, 81(1989), pp.64 and 71.

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On the Austro-Hungarian model, women in Trieste enjoyed relative emancipation and fuller, more sustained access to further and higher education than happened in the rest of Italy. Trieste nourished a high number of journalists and writers who were women and articulated with lucidity and incisiveness Trieste's cultural peculiarity throughout the twentieth century. When relegated to the margins of the literary Establishment, Triestine women overwhelmingly chose to write in the local dialect, the language of maternal love and family affections, or adopted alternative, refreshing angles and perspectives, de-mystifying in many cases the rhetoric of 'triestinità'. While the maternally inclined nationalism of Haydée (1867-1946) and the anti-Slav attitude of Lina Galli (1899-1993) conform largely to widespread local discourses, Anita Pittoni (1901-1982) is, in Curci's and Ziani's words, 'unica *femme de lettres* veramente militante' of the post-war period.¹⁷ Gifted with both eclectic creativity and incisive personality, Pittoni hosted in her own home in Via Cassa di Risparmio possibly the most influential literary salon in post-war Trieste. She also devolved boundless energies in creating, funding, and running the local publishing house 'Lo Zibaldone', together with her partner Giani Stuparich. Lo Zibaldone published her Kafkaesque *Passeggiata armata*, featuring her alter ego walking up and down Trieste's tortuous streets and alleys.¹⁸ This dialogue between closed and open spaces is not merely reminiscent of the restlessness of Svevo's characters mentioned above. In its capacity as metaphor of unresolved intellectual, moral and existential imperatives, this dialectic has been extremely influential on a younger generation of Triestine writers (see for instance the contemporaries Stelio Mattioni, whose novels feature a city conflating and merging at all times with the Self of the restless, autobiographical protagonists, or Giuliana Morandini characterised by a 'constant interplay between subject and environment where dream and reality are one, reaching a symbiosis where neither dominates.'¹⁹)

Heterogeneous voices from the Triestine border include Jewish writing at the twilight of the Mitteleuropa, writing of psychoanalytic interest or inspiration, outsiders who lived and wrote, however fleetingly, in Trieste (Stendhal, Burton and, of course, James Joyce), and, last but not least, writing in Slovene emanating from the local Slovene community. The *Bildungsroman Il segreto* (1961) by Anonimo Triestino (Guido and Giorgio Voghera), charts the existential trajectory of Mino Zevi, a Triestine Jew incapable of leaving any significant

¹⁷ Roberto Curci and Gabriella Ziani, *Bianco rosa e verde: Scrittrici a Trieste fra '800 e '900* (Trieste: Lint, 1993), p.375.

¹⁸ A.Pittoni, *Passeggiata armata* (Trieste: Lo Zibaldone, 1971).

¹⁹ L.Quartermaine, 'Introduction', in G.Morandini, *The Café of Mirrors* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), pp.vii-xvi (p.xi).

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traces on the surface of a reality lacerated by centrifugal forces. The authorial voice is silenced here by an Oedipal, booming parental echo determined to reduce it to silence.²⁰ ‘Da qualche parte c’era una sofferenza’: this must apply to the precociously withered and self-imploded Mino Zevi and also to the dangerous acrobatics performed on the threshold of nothingness by the characters of the contemporary Giuseppe O.Longo.²¹ The Jewish cemetery featured in the *Giacomo Joyce* regurgitates corpses lying ‘about me rotting in the mould of their holy field’ while the living are ‘brooding upon the lore of their *Summa contra Gentiles*’: both dead and living are treated as cadaverous matter set in motion automatically, almost mechanically like automata, on the stage of a foggy and sombre Trieste, where candles reflect spectral images on the surfaces of polished mirrors.²² ‘Microcosmo nel microcosmo, la letteratura triestina di madrelingua slovena è quanto mai vivace e attiva [...] anche se talvolta rimane circoscritta negli ambiti della comunità di appartenenza.’²³ The romantic and collective inspiration prevalent in Šrečko Kosovel, the confessional manner of Francé Bevč, the authoritative realism of Alojz Rebula (‘uno dei massimi narratori sloveni contemporanei’ in the words of Miran Košuta) are only recently beginning to rise to international recognition thanks to Italian, and especially French, translations.²⁴

The contemporary Trieste is the city of Bobi Bazlen and Claudio Magris (but also Mauro Covacich, Pino Roveredo, Kenka Lekovich and many others), a city that remains heterogeneous and centrifugal. Of all the cities capable of ‘restituirci nel cuore del presente, e senza modificare il presente, tutto il loro passato’, contemporary Trieste claims to have successfully shed the stale rhetorics of ‘triestinità’ and ‘italianità’ –in short all the rhetoric that survived locally –and to have become a disillusioned, open-eyed city.²⁵ However, Bazlen’s apprehensions over the written word, the fragmentary and inconclusive nature of his writing, his courtship of literary creativity through glossing, hermeneutics and paraphrasing are all metaphors of the afflictions of contemporary Triestine writing. Writing in Trieste is

²⁰ Cf. K.Pizzi, ‘Guido and Giorgio Voghera: A “Secret” Anxiety of Influence’, *Italian Studies*, L(1995), pp.112-122, *passim*.

²¹ G.O.Longo, *L’acrobata* (Turin: Einaudi, 1994), p.58.

²² J.Joyce, *Giacomo Joyce*, introduction by Richard Ellman (Parma: Guanda, 1991), pp.47-51.

²³ P.Spirito, *Trieste*, *op.cit.*, p.23.

²⁴ M.Košuta, *Scritture parallele. Dialoghi di frontiera tra letteratura slovena e italiana* (Trieste: Lint, 1997), p.167. Per una sintesi sulla letteratura slovena a Trieste tra le due guerre, cf. Elvio Guagnini, ‘Una fisionomia difficile’, in *Trieste*, ed. by E.Apih (Bari: Laterza, 1988), pp.271-383. On translation, see declaration by Boris Pahor during conference Confini (Trieste, Nov.2002).

²⁵ R.Assunto, *Il paesaggio*, *op.cit.*, p.54.

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seemingly synonymous with plunging in the muddy waters of 'triestinità', of border anxiety, of 'italianità'. In short, writing is a self-defeating, tautological exercise. Such exercise, however, is valuable and must be celebrated: there is clearly no salvation other than pouring ink on more and further more reams of paper.

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