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The Other Others:

Negotiating Alterity in Postwar Triestine Literature

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Italian

by

Nina Bjekovic

2022

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2022

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Other Others:
Negotiating Alterity in Postwar Triestine Literature

by

Nina Bjekovic

Doctor of Philosophy in Italian

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Thomas J. Harrison, Chair

The present study explores negotiations of alterity in the Triestine literature of Claudio Magris, Boris Pahor, Giuliana Morandini and Giorgio Pressburger. Nestled between the Adriatic and Slovenia, the former major port and commercial hub of the Austro-Hungarian Empire has long been recognized as an intersection of Germanic, Italian and Slavic cultures. In the early twentieth century, however, this diversity became a chief source of ethnopolitical tensions, which persisted for several decades and transformed Trieste into a locus of contention between various ethnic, political, and national entities in the city and its surrounding borderlands. Trieste's complex pursuit of a stable, cohesive identity is documented and thematized in the literature of the diverse voices of the city.

The Other Others unearths contrasting and overlapping perspectives on belonging through an interdisciplinary dialogical engagement with ongoing global discussions of identity in hybrid [and] liminal geocultural contexts in order to rethink the notion of *triestinità* on the local level. Advanced by a select group of Italian Triestine intellectuals, many of whom collaborated with the Florentine journal *La Voce* during the first decade of the twentieth century, *triestinità* was fruit of a collective effort to affirm and promote the localized Italian identity of Triestine writers. The underlying scope of this movement, pioneered by the eminent Triestine intellectual and writer Scipio Slataper, coincided with nationalistic discourse in fascist Italy, which threatened to suppress the marginal(ized) and minor voices that comprised the diverse ethnocultural fabric of Trieste and that forms the analytical focus of this dissertation.

The overarching objective of *The Other Others* is fourfold: (1) to consider how the ethnopolitical conflicts of the twentieth century challenged pre-war conceptions of *triestinità* as an *Italian* localized identity and open this phenomenon up to more inclusive, supra-Italian considerations; (2) to engage with contemporary global debates on difference and identity politics and examine the mechanisms that drive negotiations of belonging and identity construction in and beyond liminal spaces such as Trieste; (3) to uncover points of convergence and points of intersection in the diverse body of these four writers' works, which drive the ontological crux underlying individual and collective approaches to memory and identity construction; and (4) to unearth the destabilizing power of a periphery like Trieste, or the 'centrality' of minor(ity) and marginal perspectives in current humanistic discussions of difference and in an increasingly decentralized world.

The dissertation of Nina Bjekovic is approved.

John A. Agnew

Lia N. Brozgal

Massimo Ciavolella

Elena Coda

Thomas J. Harrison, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2022

*For my family and the others
who have journeyed with me
along the way.*

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NINA BJEKOVIC

2016 MA Italian, University of California, Los Angeles
2014 BA Italian Language & Literature, University of California, Los Angeles

TEACHING AND INSTRUCTIONAL EXPERIENCE

Teaching Associate Consultant UCLA	2015 – 2022
Teaching Associate Consultant UCLA	2017
Content Creator Department of French and Francophone Studies, UCLA	2019 – 2020
Virtual Instructor and Content Creator Department of Italian, UCLA	2016 – 2020

AWARDS

Dissertation Year Fellowship (DYF) UCLA	2021
Distinguished Teaching Award UCLA	2020
Collegium University Teaching Fellows (CUTF) UCLA	2020
Center for European and Russian Studies (CERS) Summer Research Fellowship UCLA	2019
Summer Workshop in Online Instruction (SWOI) UCLA Digital Humanities	2019
Mellon Epic Fellowship UCLA	2019
Cecchetti Award UCLA	2018
Graduate Summer Research Mentorship GSRM UCLA	2018
Cecchetti Graduate Award UCLA	2016

PUBLICATIONS

"Bare Life: Space and the Maternal in Laura Pugno's *La ragazza selvaggia*," *California Italian Studies*, Vol. 10, Issue 2. 2020.

"Italian in the Digital Sphere: Online Teaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Teaching Italian Language and Culture Annual (TILCA)*, Issue 20. 2021 (with Joseph Tumolo).

Book Review: "A Haunted History: The Potency of Memory in Immo Scarani's *Cronache di luce e sangue*" *Carte Italiane*. 2017.

CONFERENCES

Con il mare negli occhi IIC (Istituto Italiano di Cultura)	2022
Italian Cultural, Historical, & Political Studies PAMLA (Pacific Ancient Modern Language Association)	2021
Distinguished Teaching Panel UCLA	2020
Interaction, Inclusion, and Active Learning in the Virtual Classroom UCLA	2020
UCLA Conference for Incoming TAs UCLA	2017, 2020
Italian Peripheries in the World Canadian Association of Italian Studies (CAIS)	2019
European Languages and Transcultural Studies Works in Progress Series UCLA	2019
Centers and Peripheries California Interdisciplinary Consortium for Italian Studies (CICIS)	2019
Italian Cultural Borders (Panel) Northeast Modern Languages Association (NeMLA)	2018
Burri Prometheia: A Two-Day Conference on the artist Alberto Burri UCLA	2017

EDITORIAL

Co-Editor in Chief Carte Italiane, UCLA	2019 – 2021
Editor and Reviewer Carte Italiane, UCLA	2015 – 2019
Graphic Designer ELTS Department, UCLA	2019
Researcher, Translator, and Writer Gensler Architecture	2016
Reviewer and Researcher BIGLI	2015 – 2016
Translator, Writer, and Event Coordinator Studiomusica, USA	2012 – 2015

UNIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

Emergency Workshop for Transition to Remote Teaching due to COVID-19 UCLA	2020 – 21
Graduate Admissions Committee European Languages and Transcultural Department, UCLA	2020 – 21
Boundaries of Belonging: Culture, Identity, and Narrative in Southeast Europe. SEEFest	2020
Audacious Storytellers: A Cultural & Literary Salon Southeast European Festival (SEEFest)	2019
Trieste Literary Salon Southeast European Festival (SEEFest)	2018
Graduate Student Representative UCLA	2016 – 2020
Co-coordinator UCLA World Languages Day	2018
Graphic Designer UCLA Department of Italian	2017 – 2018
Co-Coordinator Italian Undergraduate Immersion Day	2017
PhD Student Mentor UCLA Department of Italian	2016 – 2017
Advisor Italian Club, UCLA Department of Italian	2016 – 2017
Reading and Language Tutor Reading Partners	2014 – 2016
Co-Coordinator Italian Undergraduate Immersion Day	2015
Clerk and Coordinator Italian Resource Center at Fondazione Italia	2013 – 2015
Assistant, Recruiter, and Tour Guide UCLA Blue and Gold	2012 – 2014

LANGUAGES

Slovenian	Native language
Serbo – Croatian	Native language
English	Native proficiency
Italian	Native proficiency
Spanish	Intermediate competence (advanced reading comprehension)

Introduction

In his celebrated *Il mio Carso* (1912; *My Karst*), widely recognized as one of the most important works of Triestine literature, Scipio Slataper (1888 – 1915) presents one of the earliest literary expressions of *borderness* in the liminal city of Trieste in northeastern Italy. Through his employment of the conditional ‘vorrei dirvi’ (I would like to tell you), the Triestine author conveys the epistemological challenges embedded in any attempt to articulate an identity that defies stable, homogenous conceptions of belonging. The heritage and echoes of other civilizations that converge within Slataper are, as Angelo Ara and Claudio Magris affirm, “radici e linfe così fuse nella sua persona da non essere precisabili” (roots and saps so fused in his being that they cannot be specified).¹ Sitting at the crossroads of Slavic, Latin, and Germanic cultures, the ‘city with three souls’ has historically occupied an interstitial position in Central Europe. As the former major port and commercial hub of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867 – 1918), it amassed visitors from various parts of the Mediterranean. But at the turn of the twentieth century, with the advent of World War I and the disintegration of the empire, this ethnocultural diversity became a driving source of tension in Trieste and its borderlands. As historian Glenda Sluga observes, “each of the various governments that has administered Trieste has been eager to make it a symbol of its political aims and leave its cultural mark – Habsburg Austria (until 1918), the liberal and then Fascist Italian kingdom (1918 – 1943), Nazi Germany (1943 – 1945), pro-Yugoslav communists (May – June 1945), a British-American Military Government (1945 – 1954), and Republican Italy

¹ Ara, Angelo, and Claudio Magris. *Trieste: Un'identità di frontiera* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982), 3-4. All English translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

(1954 –).² The difficulty of describing the population of Trieste and the Adriatic boundary region surrounding the Italo-Yugoslav border, observes Sluga, “is the difficulty of knowing which perspective to choose.”³ Thus, if the precarious condition of *triestinità* posed rhetorical challenges in the pre-war period, one can imagine the various ways in which the ethnopolitical events of the twentieth century deepened its complexity.

The unilateral Italianness of Slataper’s imagined and intended interlocutors, the Florentine intellectuals with whom he collaborated on the newspaper *La Voce* in the first decade of the twentieth century, is not tangential in this feat. As Katia Pizzi observes in her seminal book *A City in Search of an Author* (2002), in the early decades of the twentieth century this generation of intellectuals, “invented Triestine literature away from Trieste, in Florence, which not only acted as a bridge between Trieste and Italy but could also be instrumental in bringing Triestines back to their roots.”⁴ The principal aim of the *vocianti* was to act as catalysts in putting their Triestine counterparts in a condition to uncover their ‘Triestine soul.’ Yet, “despite *La Voce*’s calls for modernization and internationalization of literary culture, the force at play here was the pre-eminent *toscanità* of the *vocianti* that triggered an equally powerful idea of a local loyalty and singularity in the Triestines” and thus, “paradoxically, the deep influx of an insular ‘toscanità vociana’ undermined the integration with Italy sought by those Triestine intellectuals.”⁵ But some years earlier, in an article entitled “Trieste non ha tradizioni di cultura” (“Trieste Has No Cultural

² Sluga, Glenda. *The Problem of Trieste and the Italo-Yugoslav Border: Difference, Identity, and Sovereignty in Twentieth Century Europe* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 1.

³ Sluga, *The Problem of Trieste and the Italo-Yugoslav Border: Difference, Identity, and Sovereignty in Twentieth Century Europe*, 1.

⁴ Pizzi, Katia. *A City in Search of an Author* (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 45.

⁵ Pizzi, *A City in Search of an Author*, 45.

Traditions”), published in *La Voce* in 1909, Slataper examined and criticized the political condition of his native city, and accused Triestines “of lacking any cultural tradition, and of being so obsessed with their Italian identity that they ignored the Croatian and Slovenian population in the midst.”⁶ Yet, while Slataper’s recognition and public exploration of Trieste’s complexity led him to try to formulate a new cultural identity for his city, as Elena Coda contends, “he continued at the same time to waver between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*, between tradition and modernity,” and “it is precisely in his attempts to come to terms with Trieste as a modern metropolis that Slataper reveals a modern sensibility and emerges as a unique modernist intellectual.”⁷

These attempts to affirm a localized Triestine literary identity coincided with the nationalistic rhetoric of the fascist regime, thwarting – inadvertently or not – the inclusion of non-Italian Triestine voices in the promoted establishment of this presumed literary tradition, founded on the ‘myth’ of *triestinità* in the Hobsbawmian conception of an ‘invention of tradition.’⁸ Upon its annexation of Trieste at the end of the Great War, the fascist regime enacted a systematic Italianization of the Slavic community in Trieste, prohibiting public use of the Slovenian language, suppressing (and destroying) Slovenian cultural and educational institutions, and Italianizing over 250,000 Slavic last names.⁹ Thus, Trieste’s struggle for stability ironically only generated other

⁶ Coda, Elena. “Introduction” to *My Karst and My City and Other Essays* by Scipio Slataper. Trans. Elena Coda (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), xxvii.

⁷ Coda, “Introduction” to *My Karst and My City and Other Essays* by Scipio Slataper, xxvii.

⁸ See De Castro, Diego. “Considerazioni sul futuro di Trieste,” in Tito Favaretto’ and Ettore Greco (eds.). *Il confine riscoperto: Beni degli esuli, minoranze e cooperazione economica nei rapporti dell’Italia con Slovenia e Croazia* (Milan: Angeli, 1997); Pizzi, Katia. *A City in Search of an Author* (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002). See also: Hobsbawm, Eric. *The Invention of Tradition*. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

⁹ See: De Castro, Diego. *La questione di Trieste* (Trieste: Lint, 1981); Gombač, Boris. *Trieste / Trst: Dva imena, ena identiteta* (Trieste: Tržaška Založba, 1993); Piazza, Francesco. *L’altra sponda adriatica. Trieste, Istria, Fiume, Dalmazia 1918-1998: storia di una tragedia annunciata* (Verona: Cierre, 2001); Pirjevec, Jože. *Serbi croati sloveni. Storia di tre nazioni* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995); Pizzi, Katia. *A City in Search of an Author: The Literary Identity of Trieste* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); Purini, Pietro. *Metamorfosi etniche. I cambiamenti di*

metamorphoses, adding new layers to its existing density of diversity. During the first half of the twentieth century, the city was perceived as the most Italian and most *fascist* of all Italian cities (Italy's 'unredeemed bride'). In the postwar period and onwards, however, it has often been deemed *least* Italian of all, and frequently even recognized as non-Italian by parties on either side of the border. As Claudio Magris observes, "Questa diversità di Trieste è stata ora ostentata ora misconosciuta, ora affrontata con lucida coscienza ora ignorata con arroganza oppure codificata in un comodo e falso cliché, che è divenuto, a scadenze periodiche, l'alibi della sua classe dirigente e della sua inadeguatezza politico-sociale" (This diversity of Trieste has been by turns ostentatious, confronted with lucidity, arrogantly ignored, or encoded as a false, convenient cliché, one which became, periodically, the alibi of its ruling class and its sociopolitical inadequacy).¹⁰

One aspect of this cliché derives from Trieste's reputation as one of Middle Europe's leading cosmopolitan intellectual hubs and home of the canonical trinity: Saba, Slataper and Svevo. Admittedly, while the city is commonly recognized as the loved 'home away from home' of international figures including James Joyce and Jan Morris, some of its own literary talents *still* tend to fly under the radar. The aim of the present study is to bring these marginal(ized), minor(ity) voices to the fore to call for more inclusive and dialogical considerations of difference and belonging in Trieste and the surrounding area. *The Other Others* explores the post-war perspectives of non-canonical contemporary voices in a peripheral context (a border within a border) that has historically been perceived as 'other' on the grounds of an ontological specificity

popolazione a Trieste, Gorizia, Fiume e in Istria. 1914-1975. Udine: Kappa Vu, 2013); Sestan, Ernesto. *Venezia Giulia. Lineamenti di una storia etnica e culturale e il contesto storico-politico in cui si colloca l'opera* (Bari: Centro Librario, 1965); Sluga, Glenda. *The Problem of Trieste and the Italo-Yugoslav Border: Difference, Identity, and Sovereignty in Twentieth Century Europe* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001); Verginella, Marta. *Il confine degli altri. La questione Giuliana e la memoria slovena* (Rome: Donzelli, 2008).

¹⁰ Ara, Angelo, and Claudio Magris. *Trieste: Un'identità di frontiera* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982), 15.

that defies stable homogeneous conceptions of national identity. By exploring these contrasting and overlapping perspectives on belonging through an interdisciplinary dialogical engagement with ongoing global discussions of identity in hybrid [and] liminal geocultural contexts, the study calls for a rethinking of *triestinità* on the local and national level. The writers that comprise the focus of this interdisciplinary negotiation of difference present diverse conceptions of identity and varying perspectives on the question of the past – individual and collective – in the understanding and expression of difference. Their narrative, philosophical, political, and cultural sensibility to these questions in the context of Trieste and Central Europe is inextricably tied to their personal associations with and lived experiences within these geocultural frameworks.

The autobiographical thus emerges with unignorable prepotency and reveals the indissoluble link between the personal and the public, the individual and the collective, thus placing the persistent tension between History and history on center stage. As Thomas Harrison contends, “to be born in Trieste after 1918,” and perhaps to have lived in Trieste after the Great War, “is to be supra-sensitive to how central power relates to the margins; to the vagaries of administration and the delicacy of social interaction; to embedments of language and mores in traditions both multiple and finely rooted.”¹¹ The modern issues that afflict Trieste are not only pertinent, but central to other geocultural contexts, such as that of Europe itself. The city is, after all, a case study of a multiverse *within* a multiverse. As Massimo Cacciari observes:

Europe...designates neither a physical-geographical reality nor a politico-cultural state. Europe is logos in the etymological sense of the word: an idea that gathers in itself different languages and different questions and then tries to express them. The logos that is Europe gathers and expresses the different ways through which it has attempted to respond to the enigma “know thyself.” That Europe has always looked for an identity, for “one” identity, can only be put into doubt by the “nationalist nonsense” that has separated the peoples (and it was Nietzsche who said it!). But

¹¹ Harrison, Thomas. “In the Wake of Musil and Conrad: The Story of History in Claudio Magris’ *Alla cieca*.” (*Compar(a)ison: An International Journal of Comparative Literature*, 2015), 172.

an identity, “one” identity? In what sense? It is only a question of the One that lives in relation to the Many. Once again, philosophy. “One” which is reason, but also history, theory, which is praxis. Universalist as well as pluralistic philosophies without logos both betray the sense of the European search for identity.¹²

The European identitarian malaise, like that of Trieste, is entrenched in the epistemological constructedness of the very premise of identity. As Mark Wagstaff maintains, “All identity is invented. Individuals refine their identities from the ambiguities of their situation and have identity imposed upon them through the perceptions of others,” and as such, they are also products of memory.¹³ Wagstaff also maintains that “there is an important question about how the promotion of shared identity in the European polity relates to European nations’ coming-to-terms with the past” insofar as “the task of the modern state is to manage fear,” which “continually abrades the carapace of certainty, and the state has constantly to smooth away the effects of that friction.”¹⁴ Human beings are thus “erect political societies in the first place because they are afraid of each other’s intentions and this fear of brigandage is only managed, never resolved.”¹⁵ But as Balibar suggests, and as the present study aims to demonstrate, “we must attack the obsessive question of collective insecurity by beginning precisely with the situation of the most ‘insecure,’ [...] who are the source and target of the obsession with law and order that is so closely intertwined with the obsession of identity.”¹⁶

¹² Cacciari, Massimo. *Europe and Empire: On the Political Forms of Globalization*. Trans. Massimo Verdicchio (United States, Fordham University Press, 2016). Fordham Scholarship Online. DOI: 10.5422/fordham/9780823267163.001.0001.

¹³ Wagstaff, Mark. “Critiquing the Stranger, Inventing Europe.” *Dynamics of Memory and Identity in Contemporary Europe*. Eric Langenbacher, Bill Niven, and Ruth Wittlinger (eds.) New York: Berghahn, 2012, 103.

¹⁴ Wagstaff, “Critiquing the Stranger, Inventing Europe,” 115.

¹⁵ Wagstaff, 115.

¹⁶ Balibar, Étienne. *We the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*. Trans. James Swenson (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), 177.

All four authors examined in this study hail from Central Europe, but their understandings of and attitudes to its politics and history differ. This is explained, in part, by their contrasting lived experiences and intellectual interests. But to overlook this element in our study would mean to limit our engagement with and understanding of their works. This reasoning also applies to their essayistic contributions, for these writers frequently approach their own literature, as well as each other's, with the scrutinizing gaze of a literary critic. This aspect of their intellectual identity is one of the traits that Pietro Pancrazi outlines in his problematic definition of literary *triestinità*, along with introspection, the cosmopolitan dimension, and the concern with the ethical.¹⁷ All of these elements converge in the works of each of the four authors, albeit in unique ways. Dialogue with these authors is no less significant than dialogue *between* these authors, and dialogue *with* the dialogue *between* these authors. Comparative scholarship on Trieste is, indeed, outnumbered by single-author or single-text studies. This runs the risk of relegating contemporary writers to outdated and even obsolete categories rather than exposing progressive points of convergence and points of contention, and thus uncovering new possibilities for productive dialogue between the different sides of Trieste's *borders*.

This dissertation aims to contribute to efforts to counter this threat and promote the potential for conversations about difference. The overarching objective of this dissertation is fourfold: (1) to consider how the ethnopolitical conflicts of the twentieth century challenged pre-war conceptions of *triestinità* as an *Italian* localized identity and open this phenomenon up to more inclusive, supra-national considerations; (2) to engage with contemporary global debates on difference and identity politics and examine the mechanisms that drive negotiations of belonging and identity construction in and beyond liminal spaces such as Trieste; (3) to uncover points of

¹⁷ Pancrazi, Piero. "Giani Stuparich triestino." *Scrittori d'oggi*, Serie II. (Bari: Laterza, 1946), 104.

convergence and points of intersection in a diverse body of perspectives that drive the ontological crux underlying individual and collective approaches to memory and identity construction; and (4) to unearth the destabilizing power of the periphery, or the ‘centrality’ of minor(ity) and marginal perspectives in current humanistic discussions of difference in an increasingly decentralized world.

While each chapter implements a distinct theoretical framework, the underlying analytical and structural methodology is consistent across the four literary contexts. The first chapter explores the expansive essayistic and narrative mediations of belonging in the works of Claudio Magris, arguably the most eminent intellectual exponent of contemporary Trieste, and among the most renowned in Central Europe. Through a close analysis of the recurring leitmotif of the sea, the notion of journeying, and the destabilizing narrative strategies employed by the author, the chapter reveals a transcendent conception of belonging that finds resonance in Carlo Michelstaedter’s notion of authenticity. The second chapter segues into the terrain of Boris Pahor, whose approach to difference directly contrasts that of Magris. Magris and Pahor – who openly address the points of contention underlying their disparate perspectives – can be said to represent the competing universalist and particularist narratives that drive contemporary identity politics. Born a Slovene in Austro-Hungarian Trieste in 1913, Pahor is a direct witness and victim of the fascist assimilation that swept the Slovenian minority upon Trieste’s annexation to Italy after the first World War. His works recount the traumatic experiences of the fascist period, as well as his internment in the concentration camp of Natzweiler-Struhof, and his sociopolitical involvement in the Slovenian minority’s fight for equal recognition in Trieste and the surrounding Julian region. Pahor’s strenuous path towards literary recognition in his native city, and Italy more generally, reflects the precarious condition of small nations – the primary focus of his works. The third chapter shifts the attention to Giuliana Morandini, a unique and relatively overlooked voice of Trieste, exposing the

author's employment of the fragment, and of narrative 'fragmentariness' as a strategy to convey the existential dissonance and laceration caused by memory and rupture with the past. Furthermore, the chapter also considers Morandini's concern with historical materialism as fruitful terrain for insight into the convergence of art, identity, and politics. Her authentic engagement with the border(ed) unearths the margin *within* a margin, similarly to Pahor. Both are deeply concerned with memory, but while the Slovene promotes its preservation and potential to advance faithful historical reconstruction, Morandini underscores the *difficulty* of the former by way of its inexorable vacillation. Finally, the fourth chapter navigates the oeuvre of the Hungarian and naturalized Italian writer – as well as theater and film director, playwright, and television producer – Giorgio Pressburger, who fled to Vienna and subsequently to Italy after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. Exploring the overarching theme of ancestry, the limits of rhetoric, and the leitmotif of the network, the chapter uncovers the author's conception of belonging as inherently unstable, multiplicitous and impenetrable.

While each chapter focuses on one author, each also explores and creates opportunities for fruitful comparative considerations. Rather than restricting itself to the same set of thematic concerns across all four authors, which would generate a limited and arguably skewed understanding of their all-embracing individual negotiations of difference, the study examines patterns in the oeuvre of each author to subsequently expose commonalities and divergences between them. Moreover, each chapter engages with other European voices to underscore the universal value of this quadripartite investigation. In an effort to make the insights accessible to non-Italian (and non-Slovenian, in the case of Pahor) speaking scholars and audiences, the study includes English translations of (and along with) the original texts, with some exceptions.¹⁸ As a

¹⁸ In the second chapter, dedicated to the Slovene Triestine writer Boris Pahor, I provide transcripts of the original Slovenian texts whenever possible.

vital constituent of identity, language is of central concern to this investigation. Because linguistic *borders* also denote being, nuances, especially when (and inevitably so) lost in translation, carry significant implications. With these considerations in mind, the study dialogues with the evolving diversity of Trieste to reveal the particular *within* the universal, and the particular as an expression *of* the universal.

Chapter 1: Claudio Magris's Transcendent Triestine Other

Er liebte das Meer aus tiefen Gründen: aus dem Ruheverlangen des schwer arbeitenden Künstlers, der von der anspruchsvollen Vielgestalt der Erscheinungen an der Brust des Einfachen, Ungeheueren sich zu bergen begehrt; aus einem verbotenen, seiner Aufgabe gerade entgegengesetzten und eben darum verführerischen Hange zum Ungegliederten, Maßlosen, Ewigen, zum Nichts.

(His love of the sea had profound roots: the hardworking artist's desire to rest, his longing to get away from the demanding diversity of phenomena and take shelter in the bosom of simplicity and immensity; a forbidden penchant that was entirely antithetical to his mission and, for that very reason, seductive—a proclivity for the unorganized, the immeasurable, the eternal: for nothingness.)

— Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*

And so man, as existing transcendence abounding in and surpassing toward possibilities, is a creature of distance. Only through the primordial distances he establishes toward all being in his transcendence does a true nearness to things flourish in him.

— Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Reasons*

In *Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha suggests that “what is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial” in studies of difference and identity “is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural difference.”¹ It is in these ‘in-between spaces,’ argues Bhabha, that we discover the “terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.”² Bhabha’s concept of ‘in-between spaces’ finds particular relevance in the oeuvre of Claudio Magris (1939), where boundaries are, in Martin Heidegger’s words, “not

¹ Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 65.

² Bhabha, *The Location of culture*, 65.

something at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, [...] that from which something begins its presencing.”³ In his essayistic and narrative journeys through such interstices – be they cultural, geographical, historical, philosophical, or temporal – Magris unstitches the narrative of History by adopting an inherently ‘Triestine’ gaze, one that *extends* to the boundary or *to the periphery* and is in and of itself *peripheral*. Exploring the precarious condition of liminal identities, such as that of Trieste and of Triestines, in work after work the author engages in a fruitful negotiation of identity, thus offering authentic insights to Bhabha’s query, “how are subjects formed ‘in-between,’ or in excess of, the sum of the ‘parts’ of difference?”⁴

A recurring leitmotif in Magris’s genre-spanning corpus, identity is also the subject that inspired his first illustrated book, *Storia di Gali Gali* (2019; *The Story of Gali Gali*). While the fable marks a point of deviation from the author’s previous, and certainly diverse array of narrative works, such as his intricate and philosophically laced novels, *Alla cieca* (2005; *Blindly*) and *Non luogo a procedere* (2015; *Blameless*), it also attests to Magris’s ability to produce a sensible representation of a global ideological debate in fourteen brief pages (forty-four including Alessandro Sanna’s captivating illustrations). While this choice of genre is atypical for Magris, the tale’s central theme of alterity is anything but extraneous to the Triestine author. A pungent allegory about confronting ethnocultural difference in the time of globalization, *Storia di Gali Gali* ponders the persistent cultural struggles of contemporary Europe through the (mis)adventures of Gali Gali, Magris’s unconventional protagonist and symbolic incarnation of the nationalistic connotations underlying the rhetoric of particularist approaches to identity, both in the ontological and national sense.

³ Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter, (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1971), 1.

⁴ Bhabha, 65.

The tale centers on Gali Gali, a white seagull who forms an unusual friendship with a certain Signor Kučić and his dog Zivil, who patiently await his daily visit at sunset. While Gali Gali is able and willing to form a close bond with the two despite their obvious differences, he is fervently unaccepting of the gray seagulls from distant islands who impose on his territory in search of food. Gali Gali, who describes himself and his fellow white seagulls as ‘Gabbiani Reali,’ or ‘Real Seagulls,’ admonishes the behavior of these daring gray impostors, reprimanding them with “dure beccate” (harsh pecks) for they have no right to frolic “fra quegli scogli come se fosse casa loro” (on those rocks as if it were their home).⁵ One day, however, when a storm drags him to a remote and unfamiliar shore, Gali Gali finds himself alone with a female gray seagull. For the first time, he feels “qualcosa che fino a quel momento gli era sembrato impossibile nei confronti di qualsiasi gabbiano grigio” (something that until that moment had seemed impossible towards any gray seagull), discovering that “nel mondo non c’erano solo i gabbiani bianchi con i quali era bello stare insieme” (in the world there were not only white seagulls with whom it was nice to spend time).⁶ Despite this brief moment of respite, Magris leaves the reader with a vague ending: Gali Gali suffers a deep wound when a human, or “uno di quegli animali dalle lunghe zampe non palmate, animali spesso selvaggi e feroci” (one of those animals with long un-webbed paws, animals who are often wild and fierce) targets him with a rock, and when he is unable to find help, he disappears and is never heard from again.⁷ This pleases the Gabbiani Reali who find his suffering a fitting consequence of his blatant engagement with ‘the Other.’ Similarly, the female gray seagull from the shore leaves no trace behind, but as Magris’s shrewd narrator remarks with

⁵ Magris, *Storia di Gali Gali* (Milan: Bompiani, 2019), 22. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

⁶ Magris, *Storia di Gali Gali*, 33.

⁷ Magris, 33.

a tang of sarcasm, “era presumibile che nessuno si interessasse di una gabbiana comune qualsiasi” (it was to be presumed that no one would be interested in a common female seagull).⁸

Through satire in this uncharacteristic engagement with the genre of the fable, Magris expounds his concerns, affirming his critical stance against particularism, be it epistemological, historical, political, or cultural. The moral of the fable finds an appropriate description in Christian Karner’s contention that “national cultures turn out to be intrinsically heterogeneous, multi-vocal and – especially in times of global flows – inevitably hybrid [and] at the same time, [...] ideologically contested, with a complex politics of (cultural) representation unfolding around the competing discourses of inclusion and exclusivity.”⁹ On a more granular level, *Storia di Gali Gali* may also be interpreted as a poignant allegory of the disparate ethnonational perspectives on questions of identity in hybrid ethnic contexts such as Magris’s native Trieste. Whilst the fable is but one of Magris’s numerous genre-crossing contemplations of alterity, it proves useful in setting the tone for the present study, which will examine the author’s engagement with ‘otherness’ to bare its underlying implications within the context of *triestinità*.

The question of identity in Magris’s essayistic and narrative works has certainly not escaped the attention of scholars and critics. Ernestina Pellegrini’s *Epica sull’acqua. L’opera letteraria di Claudio Magris* (2017) contemplates Magris’s vagrant Mitteleuropean subject in relation to the sea, while Natalie Dupré’s focused study, *Per un’epica del quotidiano. La frontiera in Danubio di Claudio Magris* (2009), examines Magris’s complicated border in his celebrated novel, *Danubio* (1986; *Danube*). In the first English language book-length study of Magris’s

⁸ Magris, 39.

⁹ Karner, Christian. *Negotiating Globalization, the Past and ‘the Other’* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011), 208.

works, *The Works of Claudio Magris: Temporary Homes, Mobile Identities, European Borders* (2015), Nicoletta Pireddu offers a rich investigation of identity, location, and ‘home’ in Magris’s works through the theoretical lens of De Certeau, Tuan, and Bachelard. Other scholars, such as Licia Governatori and Simone Rebora, touch on issues of identity in their single-text analyses of Magris’s works. Yet, the question of alterity in Magris has yet to be examined in relation to the question of Triestine ‘otherness,’ which Magris addresses in *Trieste. Un’identità di frontiera* (1982) when tracing the origins of the earliest literary attempt to articulate this *triestinità* back to Scipio Slataper’s *Il mio Carso* (1914; *My Karst*).¹⁰ More specifically, Magris examines Slataper’s poetic desire to capture his Triestinity through the emblematic repetition of the conditional “vorrei dirvi” (I would like to tell you). In one of the most cited and renowned excerpts of Triestine literature, Slataper employs this rhetorical device to express to his fellow intellectuals, the Florentine *Vociani*, the hybrid localized identity of Triestines – their *triestinità* – which deviates from Italian nation-state ideals. In another essay, published in the volume *Utopia e disincanto*, Magris revisits this topic:

Lo scrittore che ha inventato il paesaggio letterario triestino ed è morto combattendo affinché Trieste si congiungesse all’Italia, Scipio Slataper comincia *Il mio Carso* cercando di dire chi egli sia e scopre che, per rappresentare la sua identità profonda, deve inventarla e dire di essere un altro, nato altrove, in qualche luogo di quel mondo slavo che si trova in conflitto con l’italianità di Trieste, anche se fa parte della civiltà Triestina.¹¹

(The writer that invented the Triestine literary landscape and died while fighting for Trieste to join Italy, Scipio Slataper, begins *My Karst* with an attempt to say who he is, discovering that to represent one’s profound identity, one has to invent it and to say that he is (an)other, born elsewhere, in some part of that Slavic world

¹⁰ Magris and Ara devote the first chapter of *Trieste. Un’identità di frontiera* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982), entitled “Vorrei dirvi,” to an extensive analysis of Slataper’s literary *triestinità*. The Karst Plateau is a geographical region located across the border of southwestern Slovenia and northwestern Italy.

¹¹ Magris, Claudio. *Utopia e disincanto* (Milan: Garzanti, 2001), 52.

that finds itself in conflict with the Italianness of Trieste even if it is part of the Triestine civilization.)

The question of *triestinità* arises naturally in Magris's works for he is, to use the words of George Steiner, "a local universalist," who is "rooted in the cultural space of his beloved native city of Trieste," but simultaneously, as Pireddu explains "open to the other, to the most authentic meaning of humanism as *nihil alienum*" (*I am human and think nothing human alien to me*).¹²

The present chapter will contemplate the issue of 'otherness' in Magris's literary works to identify the philosophical and sociopolitical underpinnings of the author's disinclination towards particularist conceptions of identity in preference of a 'pluralist universalism.' Magris's conception of Triestine 'otherness' does not advance nor reject Slataper's inscription of it as a localized *Italian* identity, but rather offers an alternative understanding of *triestinità* as a supra-Italian condition, shared by the ethnoculturally diverse members of Trieste who are bound by their joint liminality. Trieste's interstitial position between Slovenia and Italy generates an understanding of Self as a perennial 'Other,' a subject whose identity is consistently evolving and reinventing itself through engagements with different 'others.' In other words, Magris's *triestinità* emerges as a kind of transcendent condition of irreducible plurality, which allows the subject to discover a sense of Self, and thus one's own 'otherness,' precisely through a constant engagement with an 'Other.'

Alterity figures prominently in Magris's nuanced contemplations of the postmodern subject, and the 'Other' is problematized when the Self in question lies on the margins on society, culture, and, most importantly, history. Magris's works, particularly his novels, *Un altro mare* (1993; *A Different Sea*), *Alla cieca* (2005; *Blindly*), and *Non luogo a procedere* (2015; *Blameless*),

¹² Pireddu, Nicoletta. *The Works of Claudio Magris: Temporary Homes, Mobile Identities, European Borders* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 112.

engage in a rethinking of grand narratives and of particularistic representations of the Self-Other dichotomy through the experiences of the periphery, or better yet, those interstitial ethers that refuse homogenization and transcend traditional nation-state ideals.

Such texts call for an interdisciplinary methodological framework that combines philosophical considerations on the Self-Other dichotomy and sociological and political theories concerning multiculturalism and cultural hybridity in the post-colonial and post-imperial contexts. Drawing on ideas put forth by Bhabha, Taylor, and more recently the political theorist, Bhiku Parekh, the study will examine Magris's thematizations of 'otherness' through a trifold analytical model that cogitates philosophical, cultural, and sociopolitical perspectives. This method will eliminate the potential risk of reducing the subject to a mere philosophical entity – a problem that Paul Smith identifies in most current conceptions of the subject, since they “produce(s) a purely *theoretical* 'subject,' removed almost entirely from the political and ethical realities in which human agents actually live.”¹³

Because *triestinità*, or Triestine 'otherness,' is a byproduct of Trieste's liminal geopolitical position, or better yet its interstitial location at the borders of Slovenia and the Adriatic, the issue requires a careful and varied contemplation of the sociohistorical and geopolitical elements that play a part in the understanding of 'Self' in relation to 'Other.' Another aim of this study is to place Magris in dialogue with other contemporary Triestine and European authors to offer a comparative and dialogical look into the diverse perspectives on questions of identity and alterity that inform Triestine literature. Growing global interest in questions of belonging, particularly in the last two decades, has yielded a breadth of scholarship on the topic, launching a collective

¹³ Smith, Paul. *Discerning the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), xxix.

rethinking of the mechanisms that form our understanding of identity, and how the latter informs the relations between Self and Other.

Before delving into our textual and theoretical analysis of Magris, it bodes well for us to recall the author's wide-ranging intellectual formation and vigorous career, for these are vital in understanding his incontrovertibly Mitteleuropean temperament, as well as his philosophical and political inclinations. A prominent contemporary Italian author, scholar, and journalist, Magris is one of Europe's leading contemporary intellectuals. A longstanding columnist of the Italian newspaper, *Corriere della sera*, the Nobel prize nominee has also garnered experience as a political figure, serving as senator of Friuli Venezia Giulia from 1994 until 1996. He received his intellectual formation as a Germanist at the Università di Torino where he subsequently taught for a few years. He then returned to his native Trieste and taught German literature at the Università di Trieste from 1978 until his retirement in 2006. He first garnered significant critical attention with *Il mito asburgico nella letteratura austriaca moderna* (1963; *The Hapsburg Myth in Modern Austrian Literature*), an elaboration of his doctoral dissertation and one of the first studies to consider the strand of Jewish literature in the Mitteleuropean context. He also completed Italian translations of several works written by major German writers, such as Ibsen, Büchman, and Schnitzler. For the first twenty years of his extensive career, Magris engaged in a predominantly essayistic exploration of themes concerning modernity within the Mitteleuropean context, generating a wealth of collections of journalistic writings, including *Lontano da dove* (1971; *Far from Where*), *Dietro le parole* (1978; *Behind Words*), *Itaca e oltre* (1982; *Ithaca and Beyond*), and *L'anello di Clarisse* (1984; *The Ring of Clarissa*).¹⁴ With the publication of his magnum opus,

¹⁴ Parmegiani, Sandra. "A colloquio con Claudio Magris. Tra approdi e naufragi dell'Io: considerazioni su vent'anni di narrativa." *Italian Culture*, 22:1, 138.

Danubio (1986; *Danube*), Magris began to develop his narrative production, which includes *Un altro mare* (1991; *A Different Sea*), *Microcosmi* (1997; *Microcosms*), *Alla cieca* (2006; *Blindly*), and more recently, *Non luogo a procedere* (2016; *Blameless*) and *Tempo Curvo a Krems* (2019; *Curved Time in Krems*). This transition from essayism into narrative does not present a point of fracture in the author's oeuvre, as Simone Rebora notes, but rather becomes "il nodo portante di una ricerca letteraria sviluppata attraverso (e oltre) i comuni confini di genere" (the fundamental knot in literary research developed across [and beyond] common genre boundaries).¹⁵ Magris's robust body of essayistic and narrative works is complemented by the theatrical productions *Stadelmann* (1988), *Le voci* (2007; *Voices*), *La mostra* (1998; *The Exhibit*) and *Lei dunque capirà* (2011; *You Will Therefore Understand*). His wide-reaching success is corroborated by his numerous international awards and prizes, which include the French Best Foreign Book Prize in 1990, the Strega Prize in 1997, the Austrian State Prize for European Literature in 2006, and the Prize in Romance Languages by the Guadalajara International Book fair in 2014.

Magris holds an eminent position in Triestine literature and Triestine studies both by virtue of his narrative works and his pioneering studies on Triestine culture. In the curated collection of essays on Trieste's sociocultural history, *Trieste. Un'identità di frontiera* (1982), Magris and Angelo Ara trace, among other components, the literary representations of the city considering its shifting geopolitical identity. The significance of borders in Magris's works is hardly possible to overlook, for they constitute the narrative framework of his literary and philosophical journeys through the interstices of the Mitteleuropean landscape. Equally ubiquitous is the link between the author's native city of Trieste and his nuanced sensibility to questions of borders and identity. As Sandra Parmegiani observes "le origini triestine di Claudio Magris [...] giocano un ruolo

¹⁵ Rebora, Simone. *Claudio Magris*. (Fiesole: Cadmo, 2015), 9.

fondamentale nella saggistica e nella narrativa dello scrittore” (Claudio Magris’s Triestine origins [...] play a fundamental role in his essayism and narrative), since “Trieste ha rappresentato tra l’altro per Magris, l’esperienza diretta dell’instabilità di ogni identità storica, nazionale, e individuale, premessa di ogni lettura della realtà mitteleuropea” (Trieste has represented for Magris, among other things, the direct experience of instability of every historical, national and individual identity, premise of every reading of the Mitteleuropean reality).¹⁶ He acknowledges an inner contradiction in his own intellectual formation, as Nicoletta Pireddu recalls in *The Works of Claudio Magris*. His historical-philosophical perspective originates from German thought, his prose is “rigorously Italian,” while his “literary and biographical venues [...] are, as he himself claims, anomalous and ‘other’ with respect to Italian experiences.”¹⁷ Magris’s cross-cultural sensibility and interdisciplinary background have generated a hybrid style of writing that trespasses on genre lines and challenges contemporary conceptions of cultural and national borders, as well as our understanding of their function in the construction of identities. His narrative works, which Thomas Harrison describes as “essayistic narratives [that] in one shape or other, combin[e] historical representation with imaginative fiction and philosophical reflection,” explore the ‘in-between’ spaces described by Bhabha to offer authentic contemplations on the precarious condition of the modern subject, or the “-ex” particularly in the realm of the ‘post’ – post-war, post-colonial, post-imperial, and post-modern.¹⁸

¹⁶ Parmegiani, 138.

¹⁷ Pireddu, 142.

¹⁸ Predrag Matvejevic’s seminal book, *Mondo «ex» e tempo del dopo. Identità, ideologie, nazioni nell’una e nell’altra Europa* (2006), investigates the implications of this prefix as a mark or stigma insofar as it signals an ambiguous relation or complete rupture with a past affiliation, nation, ideology and so on. I will return to this idea in the subsequent sections of the chapter. See: Matvejević, Predrag. *Mondo “ex” e tempo del dopo. Identità, ideologie, nazioni nell’una e nell’altra Europa*. (Milan: Garzanti, 2006).

Journeying, or ‘viaggiare,’ the practice of moving beyond and across physical and abstract confines in search of authenticity, is a distinctively Magrisian trope. Borders have served an integral function in Magris’s geocultural consciousness since his childhood, shaping his early perception of Trieste’s position within Europe, and conversely, his understanding of its cultural identity in relation to its borderlands. In the preface to *L’infinito viaggiare* (2005; *Journeying*), the author recounts his daunting encounters with the Iron Curtain during his wanderings through the Karst plateau as a child.¹⁹ While the Curtain ‘divided the world in two,’ what lay beyond it represented for Magris both ‘il noto,’ the familiar, and ‘l’ignoto,’ the unfamiliar:

L’ignoto perché là cominciava l’inaccessibile, sconosciuto, minaccioso impero di Stalin, il mondo dell’Est, così spesso ignorato, temuto e disprezzato. Il noto, perché quelle terre, annesse dalla Jugoslavia alla fine della Guerra, avevano fatto parte dell’Italia; ci ero stato più volte, erano un elemento della mia esistenza. Una stessa realtà era insieme misteriosa e familiare; quando ci sono tornato per la prima volta, è stato contemporaneamente un viaggio nel noto e nell’ignoto.²⁰

(The unknown because there began the inaccessible, unknown, threatening empire of Stalin, the world of the East, so often ignored, feared, and scorned. The known because those lands, annexed by Yugoslavia at the end of the War, had been part of Italy; I had been there many times, they were a constituent of my existence. A single reality was at once both mysterious and familiar; when I returned there for the first time, it was contemporaneously a journey into the known and into the unknown.)

This autobiographical contemplation of the border in one of Magris’s early encounters with the ‘other’ postulates the philosophical framework of his narrative negotiations of alterity in the Mitteleuropean and, more specifically, Triestine context. Magris’s protagonist journeys across borders, lifting the veil of false certainty that underlies totalizing monistic conceptions of identity,

¹⁹ Magris revisits this experience in his 2019 interview with Simone Casalini, in which he underscores its significance by describing it as “una lezione fondamentale” (fundamental lesson). For the interview, see: Casalini, Simone. *Lo spazio ibrido. Culture, frontiere, società in transizione* (Milan: Meltemi, 2019).

²⁰ Magris, Claudio. *L’infinito viaggiare* (Milan: Mondadori Libri, 2017), ix-x.

as well as those truths that we deem absolute and irrefutable, to reveal the impermanence and volatility of borders.

Magris's protagonist Enrico Mreule, based on the historical figure of the young intellectual from Gorizia whose circle of friends included Carlo Michelstaedter and Nino Paternolli, partakes in this form of border-crossing in the short novel, *Un altro mare* (1991), which the author defines as “un libro di tante frontiere, fisiche e metafisiche, della terra e dell'acqua, della vita e della morte, del significato e del nulla” (a book of many borders, physical and metaphysical, of land and of water, of life and death, of meaning and of nothing).²¹ In November of 1909, inspired by Michelstaedter's evolving philosophy of authenticity, Enrico sails from Trieste towards Patagonia in pursuit of an authentic life.²² His journey represents simultaneously a rupture with the totality that seeks to suppress his sense of Self, or his individuality, as well as a quest for persuasion, the core concept of Michelstaedter's doctoral dissertation and seminal work, *Persuasione e rettorica* (1910), which Magris describes, using Gianni Vattimo's words, as “il possesso presente della propria vita, la capacità di vivere l'attimo, ogni attimo e non solo quelli privilegiati ed eccezionali, senza sacrificarlo al futuro, senza annientarlo nei progetti e nei programmi” (the present possession of one's life, the capacity to experience the moment, every moment and not just the privileged and

²¹ Governatori, Licia. *Claudio Magris. L'opera saggistica e narrativa* (Trieste: Lint, 1999), 78. Carlo Michelstaedter (1887 – 1910) was a Jewish philosopher, poet, artist and intellectual from Gorizia, capital of the formerly Austro-Hungarian County of Gorizia and Gradisca. Michelstaedter completed his doctoral dissertation, a philosophical contemplation of persuasion and rhetoric, in 1910 at the Istituto di Studi Superiori and committed suicide on the day of its completion at the age of twenty-three. Michelstaedter's work, particularly his *Persuasione e rettorica* (1910) is recognized as a vital contribution to twentieth-century European philosophy. Michelstaedter's friend, Nino (Giovanni) Paternolli (1856 – 1915) was a patron, librarian, and politician of a prominent Gorizian family. An intellectual in his own right, Paternolli predominantly focused his efforts on the direction of the family's library (from 1891 onwards), and on the patronage of a cénacle of intellectuals and educators in post-war Gorizia.

²² The Triestine poet and Magris's close friend, Biagio Marin, was the one who inspired Magris to write *Un altro mare*, during one of Magris's visits to the poet's home in Grado, as Licia Governatori notes in her book, *Claudio Magris: L'opera saggistica e narrativa*. (Trieste: Lint, 1991). Marin was a strong influence on Magris, as revealed in their epistolary exchanges, published as *Ti devo tanto di ciò che sono. Carteggio con Biagio Marin (1958-1985)*. Edited by Renzo Sanson. (Milan: Garzanti, 2014).

exceptional ones, without sacrificing it to the future, without annihilating it with projects and plans).²³ As the distance between Enrico and Trieste increases, the (understanding of) Self begins to transcend those parameters of his identity determined by society, echoing Magris's characterization of the journey as a form of escape or rejection of ideological interpolation in *L'infinito viaggiare*:

Ma presto qualcosa, nel rapporto fra il singolo e la totalità che lo avvolge, s'incrina; nella macchina della società moderna il viaggiare diventa anche un fuggire, un violento rompere limiti e legami. Il viaggio scopre non solo la precarietà del mondo, ma anche quella del viaggiatore, la lability dell'Io individuale, che comincia – come intuisce con spietata chiarezza Nietzsche – a disgregare la propria identità e la propria unità, a diventare un altro uomo, 'oltre l'uomo,' secondo il significato più autentico del termine *Übermensch*, che non indica un superuomo, un individuo tradizionale più dotato degli altri, ma un nuovo stadio antropologico, oltre l'individualità classica.²⁴

(But soon something in the relationship between the individual and the totality that envelops it becomes strained; in the machine of modern society journeying also becomes escaping, a violent rupturing of limits and ties. The journey discovers not only the precariousness of the world, but also that of the traveler, the lability of the individual 'I,' which begins – as Nietzsche intuits with unscrupulous clarity – to break apart its own identity and its own unity, to become another man, 'beyond-man,' according to the most authentic meaning of the term *Übermensch*, which does not denote a superman, a traditional individual more gifted than the others, but rather a new anthropological arena, beyond classical individuality.)

Thus, it follows that Magris's conception of authentic identity opposes the classical vision of being as compact and unitary and endorses instead a subjectivity that is always open to question and characterized by a transcendence that aligns with the Nietzschean notion of *Übermensch*. In the case of Enrico, this is viable only through Michelstaedter's conception of *persuasion*, which presupposes a rupture with *rhetoric* for which Gianni Vattimo's definition does not account.

²³ Magris, *L'infinito viaggiare*, viii. Magris cites Vattimo directly.

²⁴ Magris, xi.

Persuasione e rettorica becomes a pivotal point of reference for Magris despite, and perhaps precisely by virtue of its inability to succeed in the task of overcoming the Western fracture between the opposing forces of being and becoming, of permanence and change, and that of soulful repose and anxious desire, as Thomas Harrison notes in his book *1910: The Emancipation of Dissonance* (1996). In his attempt to reconcile the two, Harrison observes, Michelstaedter only tightens the bind between them, for he defends the first set of terms, those related to *persuasion* (being, permanence, peace, passionate commitment, and single-minded intention) against those associated with *rhetoric* (turbulent becoming, change, anxiety, desire, the mediation of language and signs, the coercions of external necessity). This only leads Michelstaedter to discover that “persuasion is all but impossible to achieve in the world as we know it [...] for rhetoric pervades every aspect of historical behavior, whether theoretical or practical, human or animal.”²⁵ Today these antithetical forces afflict contemporary European attempts to construct identities that hinge on a universal or shared sense of belonging, which signifies, however, something different for different groups and even individual members of society. More specifically, the European Union’s integration of member states, which entails fostering a pan-national, social identity for its disparate citizens, is an attempt at identity construction that presupposes, however, the existence of a shared sense of ‘being European.’²⁶

In *Un altro mare*, this tension is conveyed through the opposition between sea and land, which come to serve as symbolic incarnations of *persuasion* and *rhetoric*, respectively. Aboard the ship, Enrico feels a strong affinity with the unfamiliar ocean, which is no longer “il mare

²⁵ Harrison, Thomas. *1910: The Emancipation of Dissonance* (London: University of California Press, 1996), 70.

²⁶ Wagstaff, Mark. “Critiquing the Stranger, Inventing Europe: Integration and the Fascist Legacy.” *Dynamics of Memory and Identity in Contemporary Europe*. Eric Langenbacher, Bill Niven, and Ruth Wittlinger, eds. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 102.

Adriatico di Pirano e Salvore, dove pochi mesi prima era successo di tutto, nemmeno il Mediterraneo soggetto all'autorità degli aoristi e della consecutio temporum" ("the Adriatic of Pirano and Salvore, where a few months before everything had happened; not even the Mediterranean, subject to the ancient authority of the aorist and the sequence of tenses").²⁷ Rather, it is "l'oceano, monotono e indefinito" ("the ocean, monotonous and undefined") that captivates the protagonist. At first glance, this careful distinction between the Adriatic Sea and the ocean, and the privileging of the second over the first, can suggest an inclination to anarchism, but despite its vastness, the sea cannot escape the grip of hegemony, insofar as it is "soggetto [alla loro] autorità" ("subject [to their] authority"), while the ocean represents an uncompromised authentic transcendence because it is unconstrained and thus resists definition. This affinity with the ocean signals a rejection of ideology, which is reiterated more explicitly in Enrico's contention that "Diminuire, ridursi, la civiltà, come il giardinaggio, è arte di potare. Enrico veramente non ama la civiltà, non è andato militare anche perché li rasano la testa, gli piace andare in giro come capita [...] È meglio tornare alla nave, al suo rullio uniforme, che aiuta a pensare" ("To reduce, to compact; civilization, like gardening, is the art of pruning. Enrico, however, is disenchanted with civilization. He refused military service not least because he would have had to shave his head. He wants to do his own thing. [...] It will be easier back on board, where the ship's steady rolling aids thought").²⁸ This tension between land and sea, as symbols of rhetoric and persuasion, is expounded further in Magris's reflection on the symbolism of the sea, in which the author intimates that:

²⁷ Magris, *Un altro mare* (Milan: Garzanti, 2007), 10. English: Magris, Claudio. *A Different Sea*. Trans. M.S. Spurr (London: The Harvill Press, 1993), 11.

²⁸ Magris, 29-30; 25.

Thomas Mann diceva che l'amore per il mare è anche amore per la morte, ossia per ciò che trascende l'individualità. Il mare è anche – e così lo sento molto spesso – una promessa di vita vera, di ciò che la vita potrebbe e dovrebbe essere. Una promessa che diventa insostenibile, perché fa sentire ancor più crudelmente tutto ciò che manca alla vita, tutto ciò che ci manca e che ci spinge dunque a fuggire da essa [...] Dallo specchio del mare [...] riemerge e ci viene incontro il nostro viso più vero, una promessa di felicità sempre smentita e mai rinnegata, custodita nel profondo e divenuta la verità più profonda di ciascuno.²⁹

(Thomas Mann would say that love of the sea is also love of death, that is, for that which transcends individuality. The sea is also – and so I perceive it very often – a promise of authentic life, of that which life could and should be. A promise that becomes untenable because it makes known most cruelly all that which life lacks, all that which we miss and which pushes us to escape from it [...] From the mirror of the sea [...] reemerges and comes towards us our most real face, a promise of happiness, always denied and never disavowed, guarded within, and become the deepest truth of every-one.)

In a Barthesian vein, Magris describes 'l'amore per il mare' ('love of the sea') as 'l'amore per la morte' ('love of death') a longing for that which transcends individuality. In the famous essay, *Death of the Author* (1967), Barthes advocates for textual engagement free of biographical contextualization and unconcerned with the presumed intentions of its author, for "to give a text an author, is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing."³⁰ Similarly, Magris's notion of transcendence seeks to free the subject of limiting and obstructive conceptions of the Self. Nevertheless, Enrico's quest for authenticity produces an internal sense of laceration for he is unable to reconcile his ability to embody his essential nature and renounce superfluity, and his lack of a religious sense of the unity of life.³¹

As in *Un altro mare*, bodies of water, and more specifically, the sea, become a concrete protagonist in most of Magris's literary works. Licia Governatori describes the sea as "la grande

²⁹ Magris, Claudio. "Parlare del mare." *I mari di Trieste*. Federica Manzon, ed. (Milan: Bompiani, 2015), 55

³⁰ Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism. Second Edition*. Edited by Vincent B. Leitch. (New York: Norton & Company, Inc., 2010), 1325.

³¹ Governatori, Licia. *Claudio Magris: L'opera saggistica e narrativa* (Trieste: Lint, 1991), 78.

persuasione magrisiana [...] il vero sfondo su cui inizia e si conclude la vicenda di Enrico e sul quale si sbizzarrisce la creatività poetica dell'autore. Il mare è il dominatore assoluto, è presente ovunque, è onniavvolgente” (the great Magrisian persuasion [...] the true backdrop on which Enrico’s journey begins and ends, and on which the poetic creativity of the author lets loose. The sea is the absolute denominator, it is ever-present, it is omni-embracing).³² While it serves as a metonymy for Magris’s core philosophical concepts and beliefs, it is also a symbol of the author’s *triestinità*, a condition rooted in transcendence. In Federica Manzon’s *I mari di Trieste* (2015), a curated selection of essays by prominent Triestine authors, including Gillo Dorfles, Claudio Grisancich, Boris Pahor, Pietro Spirito, and Magris, the authors reflect on the significance of the sea in their personal and intellectual journeys. In his essay, Magris offers one of his most nuanced articulations of the symbolism of the sea, beginning with its role as an emblem of openness, or transcendence, and hybridity:

Credo sia stata fondamentale per me l’esperienza di quella grande apertura del golfo di Trieste, un mare in sé modesto ma che dà il senso dell’aperto, l’orizzonte sconfinato che sembra preludere ad altri, più grandi mari e oceani. Quell’apertura, come avrei imparato e capito più tardi, non è soltanto fisica ma anche culturale, umana: il golfo di Trieste si protende dall’Italia verso la Slovenia e la Croazia e anche se quelle coste ora slovene e croate facevano un tempo parte dell’Italia ed erano popolate da molti italiani, quel mare suggerisce l’incontro e la mescolanza di civiltà e culture, è l’Adriatico italiano (soprattutto Veneto) e slavo.³³

(I believe the experience of that big opening of the gulf of Trieste was fundamental for me; a sea in and of itself modest, but that gives the sense of the open, of a limitless horizon that seems to prelude to others more great seas and oceans. That opening, as I would go on to learn and understand, is not merely physical, but also cultural, human: the gulf of Trieste extends towards Italy, Slovenia, and Croatia; and even if those shores, now Slovenian, now Croat, were once part of Italy and were populated by many Italians, that sea suggests that the encounter and the mixing of civilizations and cultures, is the Italian [especially Venetian] and Slavic Adriatic.)

³² Governatori, *Claudio Magris: L’opera saggistica e narrativa*, 78.

³³ Magris, “Parlare del mare,” 50.

The opening of the Gulf of Trieste thus metaphorically comes to represent Magris's notion of *triestinità* as an identity that resists fixed or unitary distinctions, and consistently discovers its transcendence through its engagement with the 'Other,' whilst concurrently acknowledging its own 'otherness.' Extending from Italy towards Croatia and Slovenia, the Adriatic thus promotes exchanges among the various cultures; this porosity reinforces Bhabha's belief that "the 'locality' of national culture is neither unified nor unitary ... the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new 'people' [...] generating other sites of meaning" since "the 'other' is never outside or beyond us; [but] it emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse, when we think we can speak most intimately and indigenously 'between us.'"³⁴ In this sense, the sea acts as an agent of expansion and enrichment for it challenges the notion of Self both through the Self's engagement with the 'Other,' and by revealing the Self's alterity to itself.

In a broader context, the sea also appears as a symbol of the unity of life, for it is, as Magris contends, "il nostro avo originario [...] una specie di nonno che ci ha tenuto sulle ginocchia" (our originary ancestor [...] a kind of grandfather that has always held us on his lap) from which we originate as individuals and as a species.³⁵ While this essentialist claim appears to support Magris's 'transcendent' understanding of identity, insofar as it provides a unifying element that binds the cultures together in a naturalist sense, it paradoxically raises an important point of contention between culturalist and naturalist mitigations of difference, which Bhikhu Parekh examines in *Rethinking Multiculturalism* (2006).³⁶

³⁴ Bhabha, Homi. 'Introduction.' *Nation and Narration* (London, New York: Routledge, 1990), 4.

³⁵ Magris, 55.

³⁶ When using the term 'transcendent,' I am invoking its meaning in the sense that Magris ascribes to it, or as an identity that resists particularistic entrapment and is constantly evolving in its encounters with the Other. In the subsequent pages of, the notion of 'transcendence' will be elaborated further and substituted by the concept of 'pluralist universalism.'

Parekh observes that neither of these approaches presents a viable theory because both are “one-sided extremes [that] feed off each other’s exaggerations,” for extreme naturalism insists that human beings are essentially the same in all societies and that their differences are shallow and morally inconsequential, thus provoking a reasonable reaction in the form of culturalism, whose similar exaggerations lend credibility to naturalism.³⁷ The underlying cause of these antagonistic tensions is the intrinsically complex ontological question surrounding human nature, which these perspectives often take for granted. In other words, while we can acknowledge that human beings have a shared nature, we ought to question “its conceptualization, interpretation, the explanatory and normative weight put upon it, and the ways in which it is related to culture in much of [...] philosophy.”³⁸ Different cultures organize human beings in different ways, for cultures are not superstructures founded on identical and unchanging foundations, or expressions of a common human essence, but distinctive human constructs that assign different meaning to those properties that all human beings share, add new properties of their own, and thus give rise to different kinds of human beings.³⁹ Human nature is thus, as Parekh maintains:

[...] only a part of, and does not exhaust, the totality of all that human beings share in common. It is largely a product of human self-creation, and although it has a certain degree of permanence, it can be altered over a long period of time. As beings who constantly push against their inherited limits and sometimes succeed in stretching them, their nature is not static and finished but subject to further development. Human nature is also culturally reconstituted and diversified and is additionally subject to such changes as self-reflective individuals succeed in introducing [...] Human beings share a common nature, common conditions of existence, life experiences, a predicament, and so on [...] Their identity is a product of a dialectical interplay between the *universal* and the *particular*, between what they all share and what is culturally specific.⁴⁰

³⁷ Parekh, Bhikhu. *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, (London: Red Globe Press, 2006), 114.

³⁸ Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, 122.

³⁹ Parekh, 123.

⁴⁰ Parekh, 123.

This notion of human nature as a cross-cultural phenomenon that is relative and impermanent, is echoed in an article published in *Corriere della sera* in 2001 and subsequently in *La storia non è finita: etica, politica, laicità* (2006), in which Magris considers the relativism of moral values across cultures and the importance of civil dialogue in the face of difference. Recounting his 1988 sojourn in Hague, the western city in the Netherlands, the author remembers a certain Fair of Universal Tolerance, which took place in the city's town square. Individuals and communities in the city, ranging from political parties, churches, associations, clubs and movements, promoted their beliefs and interests in a seemingly harmonious atmosphere, generating a vision of "l'antica, tradizionale, quasi stereotipa immagine dell'Olanda paese di libertà, di diritti civili, di dialogo" (the ancient, traditional, almost stereotypical picture of Holland as the country of freedom, of civil rights, of dialogue) where "a ognuno, individuo o movimento, era data la facoltà di parola; che non c'erano dèi dominanti e gelosi, pronti a far tacere ogni altra voce" (everyone, individual or movement, was afforded the capacity to speak; where there were no dominant or jealous gods, ready to silence every other voice).⁴¹ This convergence of disparate representations of values presents a contrast to the cosmopolitan imperial capitals and great merchant cities where members of different ethnic and religious groups could coexist in harmony because they were not, as Craig Calhoun explains, "called upon to join in very many collective projects [...] democratic self-government, most crucially, or to share their universities, or their neighborhoods."⁴² The emergence of the nation forced citizens out of their enclaves, calling for a collective discourse on matters of public concern, and "grievances against the state became often grievances against each

⁴¹ Magris, Claudio. "Le frontiere del dialogo." *La storia non è finita: etica, politica, laicità* (Milan: Garzanti, 2006), 17-18.

⁴² Calhoun, Craig. *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 2.

other.”⁴³ Trieste, with the extensive string of conflicts that followed the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of World War I is a prime example of this phenomenon, and it is the lack of established values amongst cultures that led to carnage.

After a few laps around the fair, Magris experiences a sense of unease and apprehension since the fair’s seemingly unrestrained display of expressive freedom presents a reality where “accanto allo stand degli antirazzisti, [potrebbe] spuntare quello dei naziskin o addirittura quello in cui un clonatore dottor Megele avrebbe potuto propugnare la benemerita utilità dei suoi esperimenti ad Auschwitz” (next to the stand of the antiracists could emerge that of the skinheads or even that in which the cloner doctor Megele could have advocated for the worthy cause of his Auschwitz experiments).⁴⁴ Magris’s emphatic supposition captures the discursive anxieties surrounding expressions of difference and identity in modern society, which scholars and critics continue to contemplate in an ever-growing body of scholarship that boasts of cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary reconceptualizations of identity. It points to what Allan Bloom identifies in his book *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), as a certain facile relativism, whereby individuals possess their own set of values, which are conceived of as epistemological and moral, and as such, are not open to contention. In *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1991), Charles Taylor typifies this relativism as an offshoot of individualism, which “involves a centering on the self and a concomitant shutting out, or even unawareness, of the greater issues or concerns that transcend the self, be they religious, political, historical.”⁴⁵

⁴³ Calhoun, *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, 2.

⁴⁴ Magris, “Le frontiere del dialogo,” 17-18.

⁴⁵ Taylor, Charles. *The Ethics of Authenticity* (London: Harvard University Press, 1991), 14.

It appears that the ‘facile relativism’ that Bloom discovers in the context of the American school system, has become, in a way, a global phenomenon, leading some scholars to seek productive solutions to establish a common ground amongst monistic and pluralistic conceptions of identity. Magris too observes that the urgency for constructive *tolerance* and *dialogue*, between which he establishes an inextricable link, presents a universal issue, one that permeates our collective consciousness and our legislative systems with an urgency like never before.⁴⁶ It is precisely the facile relativism of Bloom that Magris identifies as a slippery slide towards extreme particularism, whereby universal values are eradicated and appropriated diversely across cultural and geographical contexts. Magris ponders the sociopolitical effects of globalization, of its increasing porosity and hybridity, noting:

la nostra cultura appare forse impreparata alle sconvolgenti trasformazioni del mondo che investono la nostra vita, la nostra società, i nostri valori. In questi enormi cambiamenti non ci sono più, come in passato, culture compatte, chiuse in sé stesse e nell’edificio dei propri valori, quasi ignare dell’esistenza di altri diversi sistemi di valori di altre culture.⁴⁷

(our culture appears, perhaps, unprepared for the perturbing transformations of the world that assault our lives, our society, our values. In these enormous changes there are no longer, as there were in the past, compact cultures, enclosed in and of themselves and in the edifice of their own values, almost unaware of the existence of different value systems of other cultures.)

In invoking this remote ethnogeographical reality of peaceful, though detached coexistence among diverse cultures and societies such as that of the great Habsburg Empire, Magris identifies a way of relating with the ‘Other,’ and thus also of understanding the Self, which is no longer useful and possible today. While the rising porosity of borders opens the possibility for a newfound openness

⁴⁶ Magris, 17-18.

⁴⁷ Magris, 18.

and exposure to diverse contexts, cultures, and values, it paradoxically nurtures an insistence on borders:

Oggi le civiltà si spostano e si mescolano, popoli e stirpi lontane s'incontrano e le loro visioni del mondo – religiose, politiche, sociali – vivono di fianco a fianco, come quelle baracche all'Aia, in un politeismo di valori, significati, tradizioni, costume e istituzioni che nessuno può ignorare. È un processo che arricchisce le nostre culture e insieme desta paure e ossessioni di difesa. Nella globalizzazione di oggi ogni identità si sente minacciata, teme di dissolversi e sparire, e allora esaspera la propria particolarità, ne fa una diversità assoluta e selvaggia, un idolo – che, come tutti gli idoli, spinge facilmente alla violenza e al sacrificio di sangue.⁴⁸

(Today, civilizations move and mix, people and distant races meet and their visions of the world – religious, political, social – coexist side by side, like those barracks in the Hague, in a polytheism of values, meanings, traditions, costumes and institutions that no one can ignore. It is a process that enriches our cultures and simultaneously feeds fears and obsessions of defense. In the globalization of today, every identity feels threatened, it fears dissolving and disappearing, and so it exasperates its own particularity; it makes of it an absolute and fierce difference, an idol – that, as all idols, easily leads to violence and to sacrifices of blood.)

It now proves useful to refer once again to Parekh, whose *Rethinking Multiculturalism* addresses the concerns associated with identity construction in multicultural contexts and offers nuanced considerations on the varied approaches that inform identity creation today. Parekh prescribes a dialectical and pluralist form of minimum universalism as the most coherent response to moral and cultural diversity. There is a creative interplay between universal moral values and the complex moral structures of different societies; the latter “domesticat[e] and pluraliz[e] the former and [are] in turn reinterpreted and revised in their light, thus leading to what [Parekh] might call pluralist universalism.”⁴⁹ This approach aptly describes Magris’s narrative and essayistic engagement with alterity and ethnocultural difference, for his universalism stems from the conception that cross-cultural dialogue is, as Parekh also suggests, the most fruitful method for the

⁴⁸ Magris, 17-18.

⁴⁹ Parekh, 127.

discovery of universal values. Magris's firm stance against particularism originates from the belief that human beings are "culturally embedded and prone to universalizing [their] own values," and as such "need [...] dialogue to counter this tendency and help [them] rise to this level of intellectual abstraction."⁵⁰ The leitmotif of journeying, or 'viaggiare,' which is crucial to Magris's oeuvre, can be understood as an expression of this form of cross-cultural dialogue, for it engages with diverse cultures and hybrid contexts to capture their differences and their individuality. Magris's narrative emerges as a model of the cross-cultural dialogue for which Parekh advocates, and finds in the latter's description a proper articulation since it "brings together different historical experiences and cultural sensibilities [to] ensur[e] that we appreciate human beings in [...] their richness and that the values [at which we arrive] are as [...] universal as is humanly possible," while also subjecting "our own reasons for holding them to a cross-cultural test [that] requires us to ensure that they are accessible and acceptable to members of different cultures."⁵¹

Magris's extraordinary sensibility to cultural border dynamics is entrenched in his spatiotemporal roots, for "to be born in Trieste after 1918" is, as Thomas Harrison observes, "to be supra-sensitive to how central power relates to the margins; to the vagaries of administration and the delicacy of social interaction; to embedments of language and mores in traditions both multiple and finely rooted."⁵² The elaborate historical fabric of Magris's narrative works permits him to explore the caprices of postmodernity through a perspective that extends to the periphery, thus disrupting center-focused grand narratives by accounting for the condition of the "post-" through a sensible and wide-ranging approach to cultural, political, and historical narratives. His

⁵⁰ Parekh, 127.

⁵¹ Parekh, 127.

⁵² Harrison, Thomas. "In the Wake of Musil and Conrad: The Story of History in Claudio Magris' *Alla cieca*." (*Compar(a)ison: An International Journal of Comparative Literature*, 2015), 172.

critical gaze, as Licia Governatori notes, is totalizing in its effort to epically represent the world and to define a particular spiritual and cultural reality that leads him to locate the allure of totality in the internal exigency – an explosive necessity for growth and expansion.⁵³ Magris’s literary journeys uphold Édouard Glissant’s contention that “the root is not important, movement is.”⁵⁴

For Magris, writing signifies exploring the postmodern condition in a simultaneously *utopic* and *disenchanted* regard; literature serves an essential cognitive function, which was rediscovered, according to Magris, in the literary works produced during the first three decades of the twentieth century. It is in the intrepid pages of canonical modern European writers – Musil, Joyce, Proust, Kafka, Svevo, Mann, Broch, and Faulkner – who sought to recompose the fragmented sense of the world caused by the development of the sciences, that literature reveals its power. Only a novel that confronted those scientific problems by showing how people lived and how they experienced those transformations, could and can, argues Magris, grasp the sense of reality and of its dissolution, mimed but also fully understood and dominated in the same experimental forms of narrating, in the disintegration and recreation of narrative structures.⁵⁵ Magris carries the torch, delving into the depths of difficult questions raised by modernity, revisiting over two hundred years of European history whilst diverting his gaze to the margins, to those subjects whose ‘history’ – the account of those experiences often collocated under the umbrella of ‘minor’ – is often excluded in the name of History, the grand narrative that is, as Walter Benjamin contends, ‘made up of fragments and absences’ where ‘What is left out is as significant as what is included.’

⁵³ Governatori, Licia. *Claudio Magris. L’opera saggistica e narrativa* (Trieste: Lint, 1999), 17.

⁵⁴ Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation* (Michigan: Michigan Press, 2000), 11.

⁵⁵ Magris, Claudio. “Fuori i poeti dalla repubblica?” *Utopia e disincanto* (Milan: Garzanti, 2001), 25.

Magris ascribes to literature the responsibility of recuperating the narratives lost in History: literature defends the individual and preserves the particular. Exemplary of his commitment to capturing the marginal is his short book, *Polene. Occhi di mare* (2019), in which he traces a detailed genealogy of the *polene*, the figureheads that have historically adorned the bows of ships, offering a rich compilation of historical anecdotes that explore the relationship between sea, women, literature, and history. Without the *polena*, notes Magris, his novel *Alla cieca* (*Blindly*) would likely never have come to fruition; it was a visit to the Museum aan de Stroom, or *Museum by the River* in Antwerp, and the sight of the “volti tragici protesi nel nulla, quegli occhi veggenti e atterriti ma anche impavidi che scorgono chissà quali catastrofi in arrivo invisibili per gli altri e quei seni che si offrono come un tagliamare ai colpi dei flutti e alla furia del vento” (tragic faces extending out into nothing, those prophetic eyes filled with terror, but also dauntless, which catch sight of incoming catastrophes invisible to others, and those breasts that offer themselves like a sea cutter to the waves and the fury of the wind) that inspired the ‘right rhythm’ for the narrative of the novel.⁵⁶ Especially relevant to this study is Magris’s tangential critique of the title of Pablo Neruda’s biography, *Confesso che ho vissuto*, or in English, *I Confess that I Have Lived* (1974; *Confieso que he vivido*). The title, which Magris finds “alquanto pomposo” (rather pompous) presupposes existence as tangible, thus reducing it to a reckonable entity. Authors who have lived and experienced life more profoundly, writes Magris, are those who understand, without sugarcoating “la tremenda minaccia che la insidia alle radici, le sottrae linfa e calore, la prosciuga e inaridisce, rendendo così problematica – e dunque falsa, se celebrata come facilmente accessibile – quella pienezza di passioni, di peccati, di energia” (the tremendous threat that undermines it to the roots, strips its nourishment and heat, drains it and dries it up, thus making problematic – and

⁵⁶ Magris, Claudio. *Polene. Occhi del mare* (Milan: La nave di Teseo, 2019), 181.

false, if celebrated as easily accessible – that fullness of passions, sins, and energy).⁵⁷ Authentic being, or *Dasein*, tries to escape the grip of rhetoric, rather than seeking to be defined by it. *Polene. Occhi del mare* gives life to some of the most liminal historical artefacts by transforming them into chief protagonists of a collective historical fabric. This attention to the interplay of the individual and the collective is emblematic of Magris’s *triestinità*, his status as an author *from* the periphery, as well as an author *of* the periphery. His attention to the ‘particular’ is grounded in his extensive familiarity with the Mitteleuropean context – its history, geography, and culture – and with his native Trieste and its borderlands. Scholars, critics, and readers have identified *Microcosmi* (2009) as one of the richest displays of Magris’s encyclopedic knowledge of the Northeastern Italian landscape and of its Slovenian and Croatian borderlands. Reconnoitering the interstices and liminal cultures of these lands, Magris engages in an exploration of the particularities that shape these ethnocultural identities and in so doing, acknowledges their differences, but nonetheless seeks to unearth similarities within them.

The narrative of *Microcosmi* is characterized by an “impulso non mediato, vissuto in prima persona dall’autore e ancora non del tutto compreso e razionalizzato” (unmediated impulse, experienced in the first person of the author and not yet entirely mediated and rationalized), a method that generates a narrative style that “ruota attorno all’illimitabile problema dell’Io, traendo alimento proprio dalla sua inesauribilità” (orbits around the limitless problem of the ‘I,’ nourishing itself from its very inexorability).⁵⁸ Rebora describes *Microcosmi* as “un libro che, nel descrivere i luoghi e le persone incontrate nel corso di una vita, traccia anche un autoritratto di chi in quel momento, anonimo e invisibile, li sta osservando” (a book that, in describing the places and the

⁵⁷ Magris, *Polene. Occhi del mare*, 181.

⁵⁸ Rebora, Simone. *Claudio Magris*. (Fiesole: Cadmo, 2015), 14.

people encountered in the journey of life, also traces a self-portrait of who, in that moment, anonymous and invisible, is observing them), echoing the famous line by Jorge Luis Borges that Magris selects as his epigraph and uses to describe *Microcosmi* as an itinerary through the places that comprise his identity.⁵⁹ Amongst the most colorful accounts from *Microcosmi* is the one devoted to Caffè San Marco, a historic café and local gathering place for all kinds of Triestines, a “periferia della Storia contrassegnata dalla fedeltà conservatrice e dal pluralismo liberale dei suoi frequentatori” (“the outskirts of History stamped with the conservative loyalty and the liberal pluralism of its patrons”).⁶⁰ The Caffè San Marco, where, as Magris writes “trionfa, vitale e sanguigna, la varietà” (“variety triumphs, vital and sanguine”) is a true embodiment of Triestine ‘otherness,’ a place that, like Trieste and Triestines, resists homogenization, and finds its identity in the contrasting elements that comprise it⁶¹:

Seduti al caffè, si è in viaggio; come in treno, in albergo o per strada, si hanno con sé pochissime cose, non si può apporre a nulla una vanitosa impronta personale, non si è nessuno. In quel familiare anonimato ci si può dissimulare, sbarazzarsi dell’io come di una buccia. Il mondo è una cavità incerta, nella quale la scrittura si addentra perplessa e ostinata. [...] Ogni vita, come le sue pagine, si ripete tante volte, nelle proprie passioni, nei propri gesti e nelle proprie ubie. La sua autobiografia ha la coerenza della frammentarietà, non finge una conclusione e s’interrompe in ossequio alla realtà, che rimane incompiuta e inconclusiva, anche per la penna che vorrebbe raccontarla tutta e viene spezzata mentre attende a questo compito eroicomico. Qualunque cosa accada, resta, incrollabile, il rispetto per gli altri, anche per le cose.⁶²

⁵⁹ Rebera, *Claudio Magris*, 14.; The quote in question reads: “Un uomo si propone il compito di disegnare il mondo. Trascorrendo gli anni, popola uno spazio con immagini di province, di regni, di montagne, di baie, di navi, d’isole, di pesci, di dimore, di strumenti, di astri, di cavalli e di persone. Poco prima di morire, scopre che quel paziente labirinto di linee traccia l’immagine del suo volto” (“A man sets out to draw the world. As the years go by, he populates a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and individuals. A short time before he dies, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the lineaments of his own face”).

⁶⁰ Magris, Claudio. “Caffè San Marco.” *Microcosmi*. (Milan: Garzanti, 2009), 15; English: Magris, Claudio. *Microcosms*. Trans. Iain Halliday (London: Penguin Random House, 1999), 7.

⁶¹ Magris, 15; 7.

⁶² Magris, 17, 33; 12, 26.

(Sitting in the café, you're on a journey as in a train, a hotel, on the road, you've got very little with you and you cannot in your vanity grace that nothing with your personal mark, you are nobody. In that familiar anonymity you can dissimulate, rid yourself of your ego as if it were a shell. The world is a cavity of uncertainty into which writing penetrates in obstinate bewilderment [...] Every life, like Fano's pages repeats itself many times, in its passions, in its acts and in its whims. His autobiography has the coherence of its fragmentary nature, there is no pretense at a conclusion, and it interrupts itself in homage to reality, which remains unfinished and inconclusive. So be it even for the pen that means to recount it all and snaps in two while it attends to this heroic-comic task. Whatever happens, respect for others, even for things, remains paramount.)

The passage includes several references to Michelstaedter's theory of authenticity, and the tension between persuasion and rhetoric which we examined earlier. The 'autobiography' or story of each being is marked by an incoherence, a contradiction between its innate and undefined essence (persuasion) and its form (rhetoric). Massimo Cacciari addresses this irresolvable query through the notion of transience, asking: "How can transience be stated and saved at the same time from the pure line of words? What power do words possess, and therefore, what are their limitations with respect to transience? But transience is also the past. Its problem is also the problem of saving the past. The limitations of language in 'comprehending' transience are its limitations in preserving and reliving the past."⁶³ Thus, the pen that wishes to entrap the being in a fixed portrait engages in an impossible and 'heroic-comic' task, as Magris writes, for the being of this ever-shifting portrait, the transient subject, transcends the boundaries of the (written) word, remaining inconclusive and defiant of the limits of rhetoric.

This problem of the articulation of transience, particularly with relation to time, arises forcefully in Magris's novel *Alla cieca* (2005), which we will revisit in more depth later in the

⁶³ Cacciari, Massimo. *The Unpolitical: On the Radical Critique of Political Reason* (New York City: Fordham University Press, 2009), 45.

chapter. Nevertheless, it is fruitful now to consider one particular passage from the novel in which Magris's chameleonic protagonist Cippico contemplates the rapid transfigurations of the "word" (rhetoric), through time and across contexts:

Ho capito che i profeti ascoltano la parola di Dio, che arriva a loro tremenda, un tuono nelle loro orecchie, e per dirla agli altri si girano dall'altra parte, si rivolgono a quelli rimasti ai piedi del monte, guardando in giù come il reverendo Blunt dal pulpito quando predica nella chiesa della prigione, e la ripetono, ma quella, passando attraverso la loro bocca, arriva giù smorzata, deformata, non è più la parola di Dio, ma di qualcun altro. E così mi succede quando mi vengono incontro le parole con cui cerco di raccontare le mie vicende; mi pare di non riconoscerle più, né le parole, né le vicende.⁶⁴

(I realized that prophets hear the word of God, that it comes to them as tremendous, a thunderclap in their ears, and that to tell it to others they turn around, addressing those left at the foot of the mountain looking down like Reverend Blunt from the pulpit when he preaches in the prison chapel, and they repeat it, but that word, spoken through their mouths, comes out muffled, distorted, it is no longer the word of God but of someone else. That's what happens to me when I encounter the words, I use to try to recount my experiences; I don't seem to recognize them anymore, neither the words nor the events).

Inauthenticity once again rears its head as the Achille's heel of Magris's relentless journeyer. Cippico identifies an unmitigated and unmitigable discrepancy between the authentic essence of the originary substance and its subsequent expression: its renegotiation over time and its constant subjection to the thralls of subjectivity, or subjective interpretation, or in the words, of Kafka, "All language is but a poor translation." Cippico's inability to mitigate the abyss that separates the events from the words used to recount them by virtue of an apparent skepticism towards the veracity or 'authenticity' of both, underscores the precarious limitations of rhetoric, while simultaneously underscoring its necessity. Magris's protagonist, like reality itself, is thus "incompiut[o] e inconclusiv[o]" ("unfinished and inconclusive"), fugacious, infinitely layered, and limitless.

⁶⁴ Magris, Claudio. *Alla cieca* (Milan: Garzanti, 2005), 212; English: Magris, Claudio. *Blindly*. Trans. Anne Milano Appel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 232.

Magris adopts the narrative ‘layering’ of *Alla cieca* in *Non luogo a procedere* (2015), to which we will devote greater attention in the following pages. Both novels draw remarkable parallels with the narrative style of Magris’s contemporary and ‘neighbor,’ the Yugoslav Ivo Andrić, and most notably with his novel *Prokleta Avlija* (1954; *The Damned Yard*). *Prokleta Avlija* oscillates back and forth in time, journeying to the past to uncover new layers of truth within the present. Furthermore, like Cippico, Andrić’s protagonist ponders the capriciousness of language when recalling the events of the overarching tale that moves the plot, which stretches across distinct yet interchanging narrative voices. The figure of Fra Petar (Brother Peter), a monk in pre-modern Bosnia, reflects on the condition of his friend Ćamil, a sensible young scholar whose obsession with the tale of Džem-sultan, or Sultan Cem, lands him in prison.⁶⁵ Ćamil becomes so enthralled by the tale of Cem that he is no longer able to separate his own tale from the Sultan’s, eventually confessing to the interrogators that he ‘is’ Džem-sultan. Offering a glimpse into the psychic dimension of Fra Petar, the narrative voice notes that “Fra Petar se nije pravo ni sećao had je u stvari počela ta priča bez reda i kraja. Isto tako nije odmah ni pravo primetio trenutak, teški i odlučeni trenutak, u kom je Ćamil jasno i prvi put sa posrednog pričanja tuđe sudbine prešao na ton licne ispovesti i stao da govori u prvom licu” (“Fra Petar could not quite remember when this tale without order or end had actually begun. Nor could he recall the exact moment, the grave and crucial moment, when Kamil first moved from the indirect narration of another’s destiny to a tone of personal confession and began to speak in the first person”).⁶⁶ A shared infirmity appears to afflict Magris’s Cippico and Andrić’s Fra Petar, one that Magris addresses in his chef-d’oeuvre,

⁶⁵ This historically accurate tale concerns Sultan Cem, a claimant to the Ottoman throne in the 15th century, who became a hostage and subsequent pawn of Mediterranean and Near Eastern politics.

⁶⁶ Andrić, Ivo. *Sabrana djela*, Vol. 4 (Zagreb: Dey St, 1967), 91-92. English: Andrić, Ivo. *Conversation with Goya, Bridges, Signs*. Trans. Celia Hawkesworth and Andrew Harvey (London, 1992), 199.

Danubio (1986), through Ernst Bloch's notion of *Ungleichzeitigkeit*, the non-simultaneity or nonsynchronism, or better yet, the 'non-simultaneity of the simultaneous.' Magris defines the latter, which separates the sentiments and habits of people and social classes, as integral to the mechanism of history and politics:

Esiste un futuro del passato, un suo divenire che lo trasforma. Come la realtà, anche l'io che la vive e la guarda si scopre plurale. Attraversando i luoghi segnati in quelle epiche cronache di trent'anni fa, si ha l'impressione di squarciare sottili pareti invisibili, strati di realtà diverse, ancora presenti anche se non afferrabili a occhio nudo, raggi infrarossi o ultravioletti della storia, immagini e attimi che non possono ora impressionare una pellicola ma che ci sono, che esistono al pari degli elettroni inattingibili per l'esperienza sensibile.⁶⁷

(The past has a future, something it becomes, and that transforms it. Like the facts themselves, the person, the 'I,' who experiences it and looks back on it discovers that it is not singular, but plural. Traveling through those places marked down in those epic chronicles of thirty years ago, one gets the impression of slicing through paper-thin, invisible barriers, different levels of reality, still present and with us even though not discernible to the naked eye, infrared or ultraviolet rays of history, images and instants that at this point cannot print an image on the celluloid, but which nonetheless are, and exist in the same way for tangible experience as electrons which elude our grasp.)

On his journey down the Danube, the author observes the non-synchronous plurality of places, which reveal the future as contained within or embedded in the past. The multidimensional identity of these places and the travelers who journey past them reveal their plurality as expanding with the passing of time. Similarly, the sea in Enrico Mreule's case, as well as the Caffè San Marco become both loci and agents of plurality. One cannot "apporre a nulla una vanitosa impronta personale" ("grace that nothing with your personal mark") because the cafe's familiar anonymity urges the writer to renounce his 'I,' as though he were shedding his skin. Ethical and philosophical persuasion thus rests on one's surrender to a plurality that transcends fixed conceptions of identity

⁶⁷ Magris, Claudio. *Danubio* (Milan: Garzanti, 1986), 265; English: Magris, Claudio. *Danube*. Trans. Patrick Creagh (London: The Harvill Press, 2001), 252.

and challenges restrictive particularity-centered rhetoric. The diverse elements that converge within the eclectic environment of the Caffè San Marco, which are formed by and reflected in the diversity of its clientele, constitute a metonymy of Trieste's 'otherness' on a *microcosmic* scale. The world is an uncertain 'cavity,' writes Magris, and when attempting to confront it, the pen only risks falling into the abyss, for authenticity transcends rhetoric.

In another 'microcosm,' "Il Nevoso," Magris recalls the virulent ethnic conflicts in former Yugoslavia to advance this anti-particularist position. Recounting the unusual story of Leon Sauta, the Czech administrator who prevented the Castle of Nevoso in the Slovenian city of Kozarišče from being destroyed in World War II, Magris revisits the ethnic tensions that led to violence. Sauta, who watched over the castle for its owner, Schönburg-Waldenburg, would tell the 'winners of the moment,' or 'i vincitori del momento,' that they were its new 'owners' to deter them from destroying it. Leon Sauta successfully appeased the different parties by feeding their desire to *possess*, and as such, writes Magris, "avrebbe da insegnare molte cose a molti e, oggi, soprattutto a quegli ex-jugoslavi che si distruggono a vicenda, furenti ed ebbri di radere al suolo le loro città e di tagliarsi reciprocamente la gola" ("would have many things to teach many people today eve, especially those former Yugoslavs who take it in turns to destroy one another, intent on razing their cities to the ground and cutting one another's throats in a crazy bloodlust").⁶⁸ Here Magris thematizes the divide between essentialist and non-essentialist conceptions of identity through the compulsive desire for national differentiation between the groups of former Yugoslavia, noting that at their most extreme, when they are idealized, borders become a prelude for war, while their absence produces a reality without identity, form, and existence. "Le cronache parlano, con

⁶⁸ Magris, Claudio. "Il Nevoso." *Microcosmi*. (Milan: Garzanti, 2009), 107; English trans.: Magris, Claudio. *Microcosms*. Trans. Iain Halliday (London: Penguin Random House, 1999), 106.

ossessiva insistenza, di frontiere e confini” (“The chronicles speak of borders and frontiers with obsessive insistence”) maintains the narrative voice, comparing them to the undefined space of the woods⁶⁹:

Guerre fra imperi e fra bracconieri, beghe di famiglia, sassate di quartiere, svolte della Storia e minimalismo quotidiano di baite nel bosco; quei lugheri di cui le cronache lamentano le incursioni – in Slovenia o rispettivamente in Croazia – sono il simbolo del secolare tributo di violenza che spesso esige un confine, idolo che chiede sacrifici di sangue. Necessità, febbre, maledizione del confine. Senza di esso non c’è identità né forma, non c’è esistenza; esso la crea e la munisce di inevitabili artigli, come il falco che per esistere e amare il suo nido deve piombare sul merlo. Il bosco è insieme esaltazione e cancellazione di confini. Una pluralità di mondi differenti e contrapposti, pur nella grande unità che li abbraccia e dissolve. Anche la luce, nella foresta, ha tagli netti, che creano paesaggi diversi e, nello stesso istante, tempi diversi. C’è la luce nera nel folto più profondo e quella verde subacquea sotto una volta di rami che s’intreccia sopra il sentiero; mentre nelle radure d’oro è ancora giorno alto, trasparenza leggera, pochi metri più in là, nella selva, è già sera, un’ombra greve.⁷⁰

(Wars between empires and family poachers, family rows, street fights, turning points in history and the daily simplicity of the chalets in the wood; those woodsmen whose incursions are often complained about in the news – in Slovenia or in Croatia – are the symbol of the centuries-old toll paid in violence that a border often demands, an idol that requires blood sacrifices. Borders: a need a fever a curse. Without them there is neither identity nor form, there is no existence; they create existence and arm it with its all-pervading talons, like the hawk that in order to exist and to love its nest must make its dive for the blackbird. The woods are at once the glorification and the nullification of borders: a plurality of differing, opposing worlds, though still within the great unity that embraces and dissolves them. Even the light, in the forest, makes clean cuts that create different landscapes, and, in the same instant, different times. There is the black light in the deepest darkness and that deep underwater green beneath a vault of branches that twines above the path; and while in the golden clearings there is still the light clarity of bright daytime, just a few metres away, in the wood, it is already evening, a grave shadow.)

And as humans draw lines and spew blood to assert their dominion, the bear mockingly observes, blissfully content in his dispassionate ignorance, “L’orso, a terra, è pasciuto e non sembra morto,

⁶⁹ Magris, 108; 106.

⁷⁰ Magris, 108; 106.

ma beatamente addormentato, ci si immagina di sentirlo russare; è l'unico che se la gode, fra tanti colpi di scena. Un occhio sembra semiaperto e sbirciare beffardo i leader della caccia e della politica; lo sguardo giusto sulla Storia, di sbieco e sornione" ("The bear lies on the ground, looking well-nourished and blissfully asleep rather than dead, and one can almost hear him snoring. He's the only one enjoying himself amidst all these *coups de théâtre*: one eye looks half open and peeks mockingly at the leading politicians-cum-hunters; the right way to look at History, a sly, sideways glance").⁷¹

Magris also illustrates how the authenticity, the 'persuasion' of the woods, is foregone with the narratives ascribed to it, such as the recurrent theme of the man who injures himself in the fight with a she-bear. This motif, he writes, can be traced to a supposed origin, an event that occurred "presso la Mater Dei e provocato da un conte magiaro in vacanza ad Abbazia, che desiderava un cucciolo d'orso e aveva mandato qualcuno a catturarlo" ("near the Mater Dei and was set in motion by a Magyar count on holiday in Abbazia, who wanted a bear cub and sent someone out to capture one").⁷² But like most ordinary accounts, as History continually demonstrates, this one is problematic:

Ma viene il sospetto che, prima di ogni accadimento reale o inventato, ci sia stato il suo racconto, la fantasia che lo immagina pensando all'orso, la parola che fonda e crea la realtà. In principio era il verbo, i cieli e la terra vengono dopo, e anche le foreste e le orse. La foresta non ha parola, è indistinzione originaria che riattira nel suo grembo tutte le cose e le forme, è Artemide che non si può guardare e non si può dire, Vita che dissolve le vite e non conosce il linguaggio che articola l'incessante metamorfosi. Il racconto afferra una forma, la distingue, la strappa al fluire e all'oblio, la fissa; quelle leggende e fantasie sull'orso impongono un significato e un ordine alla scura bestia che si muove nel folto, sono una rivincita della civiltà sull'ombra della selva. Dove comincia la foresta? Le porte sono invisibili, eppure si avverte chiaramente quando si aprono e si richiudono, quando

⁷¹ Magris, 108; 106.

⁷² Magris, 100; 99.

si è dentro e fuori dal bosco, a prescindere dal fatto d'essere circondati o meno dagli alberi.⁷³

(But the suspicion is that each event, real or invented, is preceded by its story, the fantasy that conjures up the bear by thinking of it, the word that founds and forges reality. In the beginning was the word; the heavens and the earth come after, and even the forests and the bears. The forest has no word, it is the primordial inchoate, that pulls back into its womb all things and all forms, it is Artemis who must not be looked at and whose name must not be spoken; it is Life that dissolves lives and knows not the language wherein the never-ending metamorphosis is articulated. Story lays hold of a form, renders it distinct, retrieves it from the ebb and flow, from oblivion, fixes it: those legends and those fantasies about the bear impose a meaning and an order on the dark beast that moves through the thick of the forest, for civilization they are a squaring of accounts with the darkness of the wood. Where does the forest begin? The entrances are invisible, and yet one clearly feels them as they open and as they close, and when one is inside or outside, quite apart from the fact of being or not being surrounded.)

As the edgings of the forest, palpable even when not discernible to the eye, human identity, too, is marked by distinct parameters. The nature of the forest, like the nature of human essence calls for such permeable, flexible boundaries for both the former and the latter expand and change, thus continuously shifting and redetermining their parameters in relation to the *outside*. Magris elaborates this precarious nature and duplicitous function of borders in an essay entitled, “Dall'altra parte: considerazioni di frontiera,” the peril of the human and historical “ossessione di situare qualcuno o qualcosa dall'altra parte” (the obsession with situating something or someone on the other side).⁷⁴ John Agnew echoes the problematic implications underlying this strand of border thinking in his study, “Borders on the Mind: Re-framing Border Thinking.” Agnew observes that:

borders are artefacts of dominant discursive processes that have led to the fencing off of chunks of territory and people from one another. Such processes can change and as they do, borders live on as residual phenomena that may still capture our imagination but no longer serve any essential purpose. Borders, therefore, are not

⁷³ Magris, 100; 99.

⁷⁴ Magris, Claudio. “Dall'altra parte: considerazioni di frontiera.” *Utopia e disincanto* (Milan: Garzanti, 2005), 52.

simply practical phenomena that can be taken as given. They are complex human creations that are perpetually open to question. At an extreme, perhaps, existing borders are the result of processes in the past that are either no longer operative or are increasingly eclipsed by transnational or global pressures.⁷⁵

These considerations prove remarkably relevant to the context of twentieth-century Trieste, where vertiginous geopolitical shifting generated a string of ethnic conflicts and sociocultural anxieties, which compelled Triestine subjects to rethink their identities in relation to the fluctuating identity of the city.⁷⁶ It is thus only natural that the Triestine Magris – who describes Trieste as a border city that *contains* borders and is *comprised by* them – discovers in his native city a most fruitful terrain for the investigation of regional, ethnocultural, and national (de)constructions of identity in the age of post-imperialism. For the author writing represents, as he himself writes, “un viaggio alla ricerca di sfatare questo mito dell’altra parte, per comprendere che ognuno si trova ora di qua e ora di là – che ognuno, come in un mistero medievale, è l’Altro” (a journey in search of undoing this myth of the other side to understand that every one finds oneself now here and now there – that everyone, as in a medieval mystery, is the Other).⁷⁷ In “Il Nevoso” he accomplishes this through the symbolism of the woods, which represent “insieme esaltazione e cancellazione di confini [...] una pluralità di mondi differenti e contrapposti, pur nella grande unità che li abbraccia e dissolve” (“at once an exaltation and erasure of borders [...] a plurality of different and counterposed worlds, even in the great unity that embraces and dissolves them”).⁷⁸ The spaces and

⁷⁵ Agnew, John. “Borders on the Mind: Re-framing Border Thinking.” *Ethics and Global Politics*, 1 (4):175-191 (2008), 2.

⁷⁶ For more on Trieste’s literary history, see: Pellegrini, Ernestina. *La Trieste di carta. Aspetti della letteratura triestina del Novecento* (Bergamo: Lubrina-LEB, 1987); Pizzi, Katia. *A City in Search of an Author* (Sheffield: Sheffield, Academic Press, 2002).

⁷⁷ Magris, “Dall’altra parte: considerazioni di frontiera,” 52.

⁷⁸ Magris, 108; 106.

places that comprise his *Microcosmi* are explored relationally; since Trieste is “everything and its opposite,” and his encounters with the city’s contradictory elements underscore both the productive and the destabilizing effects of Trieste’s spatio-temporal discontinuity and marginality, as Pireddu has noted.

In more recent narrative works, particularly in the last two novels, *Alla cieca* (2005) and *Non luogo a procedere* (2015) Magris contemplates alterity through the themes of authorship, war, and memory. These novels, perhaps more than his other narrative works, present an arduous attempt to contemplate the postmodern condition through the perspective of the periphery. A strong invocation against particularism is conveyed metaphorically, albeit differently in each work. In *Alla cieca*, Magris’s disjointed narrator Salvatore Cippico transposes his already muddled identity onto several other selves, thus contesting our expectation of a stable narrating ‘I’, as Thomas Harrison notes, “producing an abstract mosaic, haunted, on the formal front, by the great ghosts of modernist narrative who recognized how dependent the ‘truth’ of a matter is on the processing of it, and how susceptible is a life to forces outside its ken.”⁷⁹ Yet, Cippico’s refusal to provide a coherent account of his identity is a form of rebellion against the ‘viscerali particolarismi’ (visceral particularisms) that promote an insistence on the Self and a disengagement with the ‘Other,’ but it is also a disguised critique of the facile relativism that plagues postmodern and post-imperial society. In the first few pages of his ‘autobiographical’ account, if we dare call it so, Cippico describes the necessity to falsify his biographical information in order to resist falling victim to the rhetorical constraints that promote the societal “mania di incasellarti una volta per tutte, di ficcarti già adesso in un bel loculo, nome cognome e indirizzo

⁷⁹ Harrison, Thomas. “In the Wake of Musil and Conrad: The Story of History in Claudio Magris’ *Alla cieca*” (*Compar(a)ison: An International Journal of Comparative Literature*, 2015), 172.

scolpiti dalle pompe funebri una volta per sempre” (“mania for labelling you once and for all, for sticking you in a neat loculus even now, name surname and address engraved by the undertakers for all time”).⁸⁰ In allowing himself to be reduced to a ‘casella,’ Cippico would be forced to confine his identity within a set rhetorical parameters that fail to provide an adequate articulation, as “più si viene interrogati meno si sa rispondere – si cade in contraddizione, dicono, e ti mettono ancor più alle strette” (“the more you’re questioned the less able you are to respond – you start contradicting yourself, they say, then they drive you even further into a corner, by hook or by crook, depending on their skill”).⁸¹ Cippico embodies the existential precariousness and the temporal and historical liminality that characterizes the Triestine condition; his ‘otherness’ challenges fixed conceptions of identity within the nation state. In projecting Cippico’s identity onto several others, Magris reinforces the belief that “il modo migliore per liberarsi dall’ossessione dell’identità è accettarla nella sua sempre precaria approssimazione e viverla spontaneamente” (the best way to free oneself of the obsession with identity is to accept it in its ever-precarious approximation and to live it spontaneously).⁸²

Magris’s *Non luogo a procedere* (2015) is a similar metanarrative that intertwines western and postcolonial history with Holocaust memory. One of its protagonists, an unnamed museum collector, is inspired by the historical figure of Diego De Henriquez, a Triestine who died in a fire that struck the warehouse which contained World War II memorabilia that he accumulated over time with the intention of displaying it in his imagined Museum of War. The narrative combines the voice of the collector and that of Luisa Brooks, a woman tasked with the responsibility of

⁸⁰ Magris, Claudio. *Alla cieca* (Garzanti: Milan, 2005), 64; Magris, Claudio. *Blindly*. Trans. Anne Milano Appel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), Kindle e-book, 6.

⁸¹ Magris, *Alla cieca*, 82; Magris, *Blindly*, 4.

⁸² Magris, Claudio. “Dall’altra parte: Considerazioni di frontiera,” *Utopia e disincanto* (Milan: Garzanti, 2014), 61.

curating the museum after the collector's death. Luisa's story unfolds through a separate narrative that occupies eight dispersed chapters, entitled "Storia di Luisa" (Luisa's Story). In these chapters we learn that Luisa is the product of two exiles, for she is the daughter of Sara, a Triestine Jewish woman whose mother died in Italy's only death camp, the Risiera di San Sabba, and of Sergeant Brooks, an African American soldier whose involvement in the Allied military government brought him to Trieste. Luisa discovers her family's history of exile in a fragmented narrative that intersects with the story of the museum collector. The novel's oscillating narrators and alternating temporal shifts merge together different (hi)stories that must be mediated. The space is one where time has collapsed, where the present meets the past as "non c'è né prima né dopo [...] il tempo è come lo spazio" ("there was no before or after [...] time is like space").⁸³ Voices blend to highlight the history of war as a simultaneously subjective and collective experience, one that is unique to the individual, but shared by the collective. Sandra Parmegiani identifies in Magris's post-millennial narrative a heightened inquiry into individual and collective memory, its fragmentary nature and relation to history, and an incessant interrogation of the very possibility of cultural transmission.⁸⁴

Magris's *Non luogo a procedere* reinforces Bhabha's assertion that "the wider significance of the postmodern condition lies in the awareness that the epistemological 'limits' of [...] ethnocentric ideas are also the enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices – women, the colonized, minority groups, the bearers of policed sexualities."⁸⁵

⁸³ Magris, Claudio. *Non luogo a procedere* (Milan: Garzanti, 2015), 15; Magris, Claudio. *Blameless*. Trans. Anne Milano Appel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 12.

⁸⁴ Parmegiani, Sandra. "Remembering War: Memory and History in Claudio Magris's *Blameless*." *Transmissions of Memory, Echoes, Traumas, and Nostalgia in Post-World War II Italian Culture*. Editor, Patrizia Sambuco. (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2018), 93

⁸⁵ Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 6.

Luisa's history leads to an unsettling discovery that makes her question her sense of identity in relation to her ancestors; she eventually learns that when her grandmother Deborah was taken to the Risiera, she was likely to have disclosed the names of other Jews who hid with her in the home of a Fascist sympathizer, and also that her grandmother's cousins died in the Risiera. Luisa's story is but one example of what Magris often calls *utopic* literary engagement with history, which seeks to recuperate lost narratives:

Utopia significa non dimenticare quelle anonime vittime, i milioni periti nei secoli in violenze indicibili e comparsi nell'oblio, non registrati negli Annali della Storia Universale. Il fiume della Storia trascina con e sommerge le piccole storie individuali, l'onda dell'oblio le cancella dalla memoria del mondo; scrivere significa anche camminare lungo il fiume, risalire la corrente, ripescare esistenze naufragate, ritrovare relitti impigliati sulle rive e imbarcarli su una precaria Arca di Noè di carta.⁸⁶

(Utopia means not forgetting those anonymous victims, the millions who perished over the centuries in unspeakable violence and appeared in oblivion, not recorded in the Annals of Universal History. The river of history carries with and submerges small individual stories, the wave of oblivion erases them from the memory of the world; writing also means walking along the river, going upstream, picking up shipwrecked existences, finding wrecks entangled on the banks and embarking them on a precarious paper Noah's Ark.)

In an interview with Anne Milano Appel, the translator of *Non luogo a procedere*, Magris confessed that “the figure of the protagonist in particular – with his manic constructing of a universal War Museum, and his horrible death – revolved in my head for many years.”⁸⁷ The maniacal and obsessive quality of the museum collector in *Non luogo a procedere* is reminiscent of Cippico, the “pazzo lucido” (lucid lunatic) *Alla cieca* (2005), who is driven by his passions on a grand scale from the beginning by “ideals that are perhaps utopian, even dangerous, but noble –

⁸⁶ Magris, Claudio. “Utopia e disincanto,” *Utopia e disincanto* (Milan: Garzanti, 2014), 11

⁸⁷ Appel, Anne Milano. “Writing as Witness: A Conversation with Claudio Magris,” 1.

ideals of justice, of the struggle against oppression.”⁸⁸ The two protagonists exhibit a similar resistance to identity, for while Cippico transposes his onto a number of other selves, the museum collector remains nameless, despite a clear reference to the historical figure of Diego de Henriquez. In his instructions to Luisa, he implores her to use the pronoun ‘I’ or ‘he’ as she pleases, even when transcribing his words, for “la mano che scrive è il vero autore” (“the hand that writes is the real author”).⁸⁹ This notion of authorship undermines the false unbiases of History, while simultaneously giving the descendant of two victims of exile a chance to offer an alternative historical account for, as Benjamin contends, “There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”⁹⁰ Any document of civilization, and by extension history, thus proves fallacious and barbarous when perceived as exhaustive and unfailing in its presumed exactitude:

La Storia è un Libro Tavolare, come vengono chiamati a Trieste i registri immobiliari col Vecchio termine in vigore nell’Austria absburgica. Proprietà e proprietari si ricostruiscono con chiarezza; se manca qualche dato ci sono pur sempre gli archivi e così si sa a chi appartengono e sono appartenute sin dall’inizio le cose, chi è l’Adamo, il primo padrone del giardino. Non conta che sia arrivato di prepotenza in quel giardino, cercando di estinguere perfino il ricordo, le tracce di chi c’era prima, perché il modo più sicuro di negare un diritto è negare l’esistenza dell’avente o degli aventi diritto. Il conquistatore sfilava su carro di trionfo trascinandosi dietro i nemici vinti in catene e fatti schiavi; il suo nome è inciso nel bronzo e il loro è svanito come il grido di un uccello colpito nella foresta.⁹¹

(History is a *libro tavolare*, as land registers are called in Trieste, referring to the old term in use in Habsburgian Austria. Property and property owners are reconstructed clearly; if a piece of data is missing, there are always the archives, so we know to whom things, and their substance, belong and have belonged since the beginning, back to Adam, the first owner of the garden. Those who come to the garden by force, trying to extinguish even the memory, the traces of those who

⁸⁸ Appel, 1.

⁸⁹ Magris, *Non luogo a procedere*, 345; *Blameless*, xii.

⁹⁰ Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 256.

⁹¹ Magris, *Non luogo a procedere*, 163; *Blameless*, 152.

came before, don't count, because the surest way to deny a right is to deny the existence of the entitled party or parties. The conqueror parades past on his triumphant chariot dragging his vanquished enemies behind, now in chains and enslaved; his name is engraved in bronze and their have vanished like the cry of a bird shot in the forest.)

History as a commodity that has “escaped from the hand of the producer and divested of its real particularly [...] ceases to be a product and to be ruled over by human beings. It has acquired a ‘ghostly subjectivity’ and leads a life of its own [...] The commodity that has been transformed into an idol, that, although the product of human hands, disposes over the human.”⁹² These reifying representations of civilization, as Benjamin contends, are manifest as phantasmagorias that begin in “the field of iron construction; thus appear the world exhibitions,” creating a marketplace of “phantasmagorias of the interior, which are constituted by man’s imperious need to leave the imprint of this private individual existence on the room he inhabits.”⁹³ War, writes the museum collector, is a serious matter that should have “il minimo possibile a che fare con l’Io, con questo presuntuoso renitente alla leva e disertore sul campo di battaglia” (“as little as possibile to do with ‘I,’ with that presumptuous draft dodger and deserter on the battlefield”), once again reiterating the ego-driven perils of an excessive attachment to difference, which produce a dangerous attachment to identity.⁹⁴

I maestri della guerra non dicono mai “Io,” a cominciare dal primo e più grande Sun Tzu, che forse è Sun Wu o altri ossia nessuno, un imprecisato grande Maestro voce di tanti Maestri, che infatti inizia sempre il suo discorso con le parole “Il Maestro Sun disse...”. Diamoci dunque sempre del Lui anche quando parliamo con noi stessi, per favore. In fondo, è quasi come darsi del Lei, come fanno tutti... Il tu ci sarà quando si accorgeranno che è stata abolita l’Amor-Te.

⁹² Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Rolf Tiedemann (ed.). Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 182.

⁹³ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 182.

⁹⁴ Magris, *Non luogo a procedere*, 24; *Blameless*, 18.

(The masters of the art of war never say “I,” beginning with the earliest and greatest, Sun Tzu, who is perhaps Sun Wu or some others, namely no one, an unspecified grand Master voice of many Masters, who in fact always begins his chapters with ‘Master Sun said...’. So let’s always use ‘He’ even when talking among ourselves, please. After all, it’s almost like using the formal ‘You,’ as everyone does...The informal ‘you’ will come when people realize that death has been abolished, la morte transformed into love, Amor-t-e”).⁹⁵

This malady of civilization usually trickles down to an underdetermined ‘we’ and an overdetermined ‘they,’ even in the matrix of contemporary theoretical debates on the relationship between security, emergency, and freedom, as well as on the limits of the law and the state, and issues of political violence, war, and peace. Rhetoric transforms us into ‘others’ foreign to our own, authentic self (persuasion). The formal ‘Lei’ and the informal ‘tu’ thus reiterate the distance between the ‘marker’ and the being it claims to represent, the dissonance within the self, and simultaneously, the dissonance between self and an other self. Michelstaedter poetically conveys this dissonance-distance in “A Senia”:

Ti son vicino e tu mi sei lontana,
mi guardi e non mi vedi, o s’io ti parlo,
pur amando ascolti, non però m’intendi;
ti sono questo corpo e questi suoni,
ti sono un nome, ti son un dei tanti,
come un altro sarebbe
che per nome e per vista conoscessi.
Io non sono per te ‘io,’ la mia vita.⁹⁶

(To you I am near and from me you are far,
you look upon me and never see me, or if to you I speak,
lovingly you listen, but understand me you do not;
to you I am this body and these sounds,
to you I am a name, to you I am one of many,
as another would be
whom by name and sight you recognize.
For you I am not ‘I,’ life of mine.)

⁹⁵ Magris, 24; 18.

⁹⁶ Michelstaedter, Carlo. “A Senia.” *Carlo Michelstaedter Poesie* (Milan: KKIEN, 2014).

The 'I' does not possess itself. As such, it cannot fully possess (an)other. Under the sovereignty of rhetoric, life is merely the absence of life and the promise of death, the threshold of the infinite and the release of the pretense of certainty. In *Non luogo a procedere*, Diego echoes this, when reflecting on Goethe's poem "Selige Sehnsucht," ("The Holy Longing") about a butterfly that rushes into a fire:

L'unica cosa che non mi va, in questa lirica mirabile [...] è quel tu dato prima alla farfalla e poi, alla fine, addirittura al lettore. Come si permette, chi crede di essere? Per quel che mi riguarda, non ho abbastanza confidenza neanche con me per darmi del tu. Figuriamoci poi se potrei dire "Io." Mi ha sentito dire questa parola? Davvero indecente. Con una signora poi...Lui, invece va bene.⁹⁷

(The only thing I don't like in this admirable lyric [...] is that 'you' given to the butterfly and at the end, even the reader. How dare he, who does he think he is? As far as I'm concerned, I'm not even on close enough terms with myself to use the familiar 'you.' Much less say 'I.' Have you heard me say that word? Truly disgraceful. With a lady, besides...He, on the other hand, is fine.)

Master Sun's use of the third person signals a conscious engagement with the self as other: the war rhetorician is not the individual behind the oratory façade. Interethnic and sociocultural conflict, on the other hand, is historically the product not only of the *inability* or *reluctance* to grasp this irremediable existential dissonance, but also the consequence of attempting to *exalt* it. As Freud alleges, in *Civilization and its Discontents*, that "The liberty of the individual is no gift of civilization. It was greatest before there was any civilization, though then, it is true, it had for the most part no value, since the individual was scarcely in a position to defend it."⁹⁸ The overwhelmingly meticulous and detailed accounts of the narrator's collected objects ironically undermine the particularist obsession with and insistence on monistic conceptions of identity,

⁹⁷ Magris, *Non luogo a procedere*, 23; *Blameless*, 17.

⁹⁸ Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and its Discontents*. Trans. Christopher Hitchens (New York: Norton and Company, 2010), 72.

while the imagined museum aims to challenge the “mythic reality of war” through a reenactment of the “sensory reality of wartime,” a distinction that Lawrence LeShan makes in *The Psychology of War* (1992), and which Chris Hedges adopts in his book, *War Is a Force that Gives us Meaning* (2003). The “mythic reality of war” is constructed through xenophobic rhetoric that gives rise to nationalistic sentiments and demonizes and transforms the enemy into a non-human. Hedges illustrates this concept through the example of former Yugoslavia and the nuanced rhetoric used in propaganda that contributed to ethnic conflicts amongst Serbs, Bosnians, and Muslims. On the other hand, the “sensory reality of wartime” exposes the brute physical violence of the battlefield, which raises the question posed by Hedges in his book, “and when the rhetoric of war is long forgot, what happens to the heroic dead, the bereaved mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, and children of those killed and lost?”⁹⁹ The envisioned purpose of the museum of Magris’s collector is to endorse peace by playing on these two dimensions of war, to reveal that war, like identity, is often a game of rhetoric.

Magris’s literary corpus explores the perspectives of liminal ‘others’ in order to rethink the postmodern condition through ‘in-between’ spaces like his native Trieste where identity is consistently (re)negotiated because of its spatial and temporal marginality. His underlying convictions about identity are influenced by a notion of transcendence that is tied to Carlo Michelstaedter’s *Persuasione e rettorica*, and more specifically, to the notion of authenticity, or the irreconcilable tension between these two forces. A fervent opponent of “visceral particularism,” Magris is a proponent of that authenticity of being that can only discover its intrinsic individuality when “persons are not homogenized by institutions like states or nations, but rather remain singular and ‘necessarily’ essential,” for the possibility of a true engagement

⁹⁹ Hedges, Chris. *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* (Tustin: Anchor, 2013), 30.

with differences exists where “humans emit statements or songs that can find resonance outside of them.”¹⁰⁰ Nietzsche said it in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “where the state ceaseth – there only commenceth the man who is not superfluous: there commenceth the song of the necessary ones, the single and irreplaceable melody.”¹⁰¹ Magris is a proponent of what Bhikhu Parekh identifies as pluralist universalism, which supports a cultural openness to and dialogical engagement with the ‘Other’ because it presupposes that identity is always constructed relationally. Magris’s thematizations of alterity contribute to ongoing universalist and particularist discussions of identity by using the historical context of Trieste to explore the consequences of each strand of thought. The author’s *triestinità* thus resists fixed conceptions of identity, revealing itself as a cultural condition that binds Triestine subjects through a shared transcendence of any formal articulation. Magris’s discoveries along his literary journeys through Middle Europe’s interstitial spaces reinforce Bhabha’s contention that “the most creative forms of cultural identity are produced on the boundaries in-between forms of difference, in the intersections and overlaps across the spheres of class, gender, race, nation, generation, location.” Here, in these obscure and perplexing interstices, literature authentically captures the particular, celebrating its value whilst transcending it.

¹⁰⁰ Harrison, Thomas. *Of Bridges* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2021), 173.

¹⁰¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich. “The New Idol.” *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Trans. Thomas Common (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1997), 47.

Chapter 2: Boris Pahor's Minor(ity) Triestine Other

A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a citation *à l'ordre du jour*—and that day is Judgment Day.

— Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*

Kaj je bogastvo?	<i>What is wealth?</i>
Kaj je razkošje?	<i>What is opulence?</i>
Zame je eno: majhen plašč imam in ta plašč ni nobenemu podoben.	<i>For me it is this: a little coat I own a coat that no other resembles.</i>

— Srečko Kosovel

In one of the earliest critical portraits of Boris Pahor written in Italian, Walter Chiareghin draws on Pietro Pancrazi's famous 1930 essay "Giani Stuparich triestino" to unearth Boris Pahor's so-called *triestinità*. Generally regarded as the first concrete attempt to situate Triestine literature within the Italian national literary landscape, Pancrazi's essay avows to identify five of its distinctive traits: antiletterarietà or 'antiliterariness,' introspection, the cosmopolitan dimension, and the concern with the ethical.¹ Despite the clear presence of all five elements in Pahor's work, affirming his place as 'a Triestine writer' is, as Chiareghin observes, a delicate and risky feat: "Partire da quell'assunto, di per sé in qualche misura precario, per descrivere l'opera letteraria di Boris Pahor può sembrare un azzardo, ma è pure incontestabile che la sua scrittura ricalchi punto per punto le cinque posizioni che [...] sono state richiamate" (Starting with that assumption, in itself to some extent precarious, to describe the literary work of Boris Pahor may seem like a gamble,

¹ The article bears the first mention of the term 'letteratura triestina' ('Triestine literature'). See: Pancrazi, Piero. "Giani Stuparich triestino." *Scrittori d'oggi*, Serie II. (Bari: Laterza, 1946), 104.

but it is also indisputable that his writing satisfies, one by one, each of the five requirements [...] identified earlier).² Born a Slovene in Trieste in 1913, at the dawn of World War I and the imminent collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, Pahor occupies the unique vantage point of a writer *on* the border, and the precarious condition of a writer *of* the border. The author personifies that marginality that bell hooks describes as “much more than a site of deprivation” but rather a “site of radical possibility, a space of resistance;” not “a marginality one wishes to lose, to give up, or surrender as part of moving into the center, but rather as a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist. It offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds.”³ In Triestine circles Pahor notably reserves the reputation of a passionate voice of an ethnolinguistic minority and a polemical proponent of particularism, seldom unwilling to discuss the complicated historical past of Trieste and its surrounding borderlands and, most importantly, ever prepared to contend with the prevalent universalist principles of his contemporaries, which include Claudio Magris and Predrag Matvejević.

Upon Italy’s annexation of Trieste, the Slovenian community in the region, which resided in the city as a recognized autonomous entity under the empire, was rashly subjected to a forced fascist Italianization that consisted in the prohibition of any public use of the Slovenian language, the suppression and obliteration of Slovenian cultural and educational institutions, as well as a widespread toponymic Italianization of over 250,000 Slavic last names. Public fascist displays of anti-Slavism and harassment (verbal and physical) in schools persisted for more than two decades.

² Chiareghin, Walter. “Uno scrittore triestino,” *Cronache dal cielo stretto*, (Udine: Forum, 2013), 163. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

³ hooks, bell. “Marginality as a Site of Resistance.” *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 341.

Pahor vividly recreates these events throughout his oeuvre, but the linguistic question finds special relevance in his collection of short stories, *Grmada v pristanu* (Slovenian, 1959; Italian: *Il rogo nel porto*, 2008) and the 1964 novel *Parnik trobi nji* (Italian: *Qui è proibito parlare*, 2009).⁴ Yet, the most severe public expression of Antislavism, and one that left an indelible mark on the then seven-year-old Pahor, took place on July 13, 1920, when the fascist Blackshirts set fire to the Narodni Dom (Italian: Casa del Popolo; English: Trieste National Hall) before a bewildered crowd in the Center of Trieste.⁵ In his autobiography, *Figlio di nessuno* (2012), co-written in Italian with Cristina Battocletti, Pahor compares the moment to a ‘baptism of fire,’ confessing, “A sette anni ebbi il battesimo del fuoco con il fascismo e un assaggio di ciò che ci sarebbe aspettato negli anni a venire. Il 13 luglio del 1920 gli squadristi incendiarono il Narodni dom, sede della Casa di Cultura slovena, un bellissimo edificio multinazionale, disegnato dall’architetto Max Fabiani” (At the age of seven, I had my baptism of fire with fascism and a taste of what was to come in the years that followed. On July 13, 1920, the squadristi burned the Narodni dom, home of the Trieste National Hall, a beautiful multinational building designed by the architect Max Fabiani).⁶ In his book *The Age of Extremes* (1994), Eric Hobsbawm describes this kind of ‘destruction of the past,’ or eradication of the social mechanisms that link one’s contemporary experience to that of earlier

⁴ I will provide (my own) approximate, literal translations of the titles and excerpts of Pahor’s works which have not yet been translated into English since translated titles in some cases lose the nuance of the original. This is the case in the Italian title *Qui è proibito parlare* (English equivalent: *Here It is Forbidden to Speak*), which does not capture the imagery and metaphorical significance of the original Slovenian *Parnik trobi nji*: literally, *The Steamboat Blows to Her*.

⁵ In *Figlio di nessuno*, Pahor describes the Narodni Dom as: “La struttura ospitava un teatro, sale conferenza, hotel e caffè ed era situato nel pieno centro della città: un affronto per gli italiani corrosi da sentimenti antisloveni, che non potevano tollerare che la nostra gente fosse capace di costruire in città un palazzo così prestigioso” (The structure housed a theater, conference rooms, a hotel and a café and was located in the heart of the city: an affront to Italians corroded by anti-Slovenian sentiments who could not tolerate that our people were able to build such a prestigious building in the city). Pahor, Boris and Cristina Battocletti. *Figlio di nessuno* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2012). Apple Books, 24.

⁶ Pahor and Battocletti, *Figlio di nessuno*, 24. All English translations of Pahor’s texts are mine unless stated otherwise.

generations as “one of the most characteristic and eerie phenomena of the later twentieth century. Most young men and women at the century’s end grow up in a sort of permanent present lacking any organic relation to the public past of the times they live in.”⁷

The event came on the heels of interethnic turbulences in nearby Pula on May 1st of the same year. Counting on the adhesion of thousands of Italian and Croatian workers, the Local Chamber of Labor organized a procession and rally, which were devised in accordance with the local carabinieri. At the end of the rally, however, roughly seven thousand demonstrators deviated from the approved route with the intention of reaching the Town Hall to grab hold of the red flag, rousing the intervention of the local police (50 bersaglieri and 15 carabinieri) who fired at the crowd, leaving four civilians dead and fifty wounded. This set the stage for what Francesco Piazza describes as ‘un assurdo evento’ (an absurd event): on July 11, 1920, some Slavic gendarmes shot and killed two Italian sailors in the city of Split, which in turn provided the fascists in Trieste with “la giustificazione per vendicare le due vittime italiane e ‘punire’ gli sloveni di Trieste, cui fu attribuita una sorta di responsabilità oggettiva per quanto commesso da quei gendarme croati” (the justification to avenge the two Italian victims and ‘punish’ the Slovenians of Trieste who were attributed a sort of objective responsibility for what was committed by those Croatian gendarmes).⁸ Mussolini’s ensuing public Anti-Slavic sentiments only stoked the fire, fueling the mounting nationalistic rhetoric, which was particularly saturated among the Italian middle class.⁹ The Duce

⁷ Hobsbawm, Eric. *The Age of Extremes* (London: Abacus, 1995), 3.

⁸ Piazza, Francesco. *L'altra sponda adriatica. Trieste, Istria, Fiume, Dalmazia 1918-1998: storia di una tragedia annunciata* (Verona: Cierre, 2001), 28.

⁹ See: De Castro, Diego. *La questione di Trieste* (Trieste: Lint, 1981); Gombač, Boris. *Trst / Trsieste: Dve imeni, ena identiteta* (Trieste: Tržaška Založba, 1993); Piazza, Francesco. *L'altra sponda adriatica. Trieste, Istria, Fiume, Dalmazia 1918-1998: storia di una tragedia annunciata* (Verona: Cierre, 2001); Pirjevec, Jože. *Serbi croati sloveni. Storia di tre nazioni* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995); Pizzi, Katia. *A City in Search of an Author: The Literary Identity of Trieste* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); Purini, Pietro. *Metamorfosi etniche. I cambiamenti di popolazione a Trieste, Gorizia, Fiume e in Istria. 1914-1975*. Udine: Kappa Vu, 2013); Sestan, Ernesto. *Venezia*

gave a speech before a numerous crowd in Pula on September 21, 1920, during which he proclaimed “Di fronte a una razza come la slava, inferiore e barbara, non si deve seguire la politica che dà lo zuccherino, ma quella del bastone” (When dealing with such a race as the Slavic, inferior and barbaric, we must not pursue the carrot, but the stick policy).¹⁰

Pahor’s expansive oeuvre predominantly centers on the experiences of the Slovenian minority under fascist rule in Trieste and the surrounding Friuli Venezia Giulia region. As the foremost twentieth century intellectual figure and literary exponent of the Slovenian minority in Trieste, Pahor exhumes the power dynamics that pervade even, and perhaps especially, such liminal, interstitial and ethnoculturally hybrid contexts as that of his native city – dynamics of which he is a firsthand witness since, as his alter ego and protagonist of *V labirintu* (Italian: *Dentro il labirinto*; English: *In the Labyrinth*), Radko Suban notes, “Il suo destino personale era [...] legato a quello della sua città” (His personal destiny was tied to that of his city).¹¹ Saturated in historically authentic, lived accounts, Pahor’s narrative uncovers a side of history that History discounts or deforms, insofar as “La storia che ci raccontano non è sempre la Storia come è veramente accaduta, e a scuola i ragazzi imparano delle balle che pretendono di essere vere” (The history they tell us is not always History as it truly unraveled, and in school, the kids learn fabrications that claim to be real).¹² His narrative demonstrates that, as Benjamin contends,

Giulia. Lineamenti di una storia etnica e culturale e il contesto storico-politico in cui si colloca l'opera (Bari: Centro Librario, 1965); Sluga, Glenda. *The Problem of Trieste and the Italo-Yugoslav Border: Difference, Identity, and Sovereignty in Twentieth Century Europe* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001); Verginella, Marta. *Il confine degli altri. La questione Giuliana e la memoria slovena* (Rome: Donzelli, 2008).

¹⁰ Mussolini, Benito. “Discorso di Pola, 21 settembre 1920.” *Biblioteca Fascista*. DOI: <http://bibliotecafascista.blogspot.com/2012/03/discorso-di-pola-21-settembre-1920.html>.

¹¹ Pahor, Boris. *Dentro il labirinto*. Trans. Martina Clerici (Rome: Fazi, 2011), 35.

¹² Pahor, Boris. *Quello che ho da dirvi. Dialogo tra generazioni lontane un secolo* (Portogruaro: Nuova dimensione, 2015), 21.

“History is made up of fragments and absences. What is left out is as significant as what is included.”¹³

Comprised of roughly thirty texts that range between works of narrative, collections of essays, and autobiographies, Pahor’s oeuvre revisits the virulent tensions of twentieth-century Europe, casting a light on the struggles of a small nation that, like many others, has continually found itself under threat. After the suppression of Slovenian educational institutions and his mandatory registration and enrollment in the Italian school of Trieste when he had just barely completed the fourth grade, Pahor continued to study his native Slovenian language clandestinely in the nearby mountains and in the presence of other Slovenian Triestines. The difficult decision to advance his ‘Slovenian-ness’ in the face of fascism marks the beginning of Pahor’s reputation and onerous career as a free thinker and outspoken intellectual committed to his ethical beliefs and pursuits for, as Gramsci maintains, “The history of education shows that every class which has sought to take power has prepared itself for power by an autonomous education. The first step in emancipating oneself from political and social slavery is that of freeing the mind.”¹⁴ Pahor, who hails from devout Catholic parents, also participated in a religious seminar in Capodistria, which was conducted exclusively in Slovenian. His theological studies nevertheless came to a halt in 1938, when he shifted his attention to politics. Under the wing of the Slovenian Catholic thinker and leader of the Christian Socialists, Edvard Kocbek (1904-1981), Pahor became acquainted with the Ljubljana-based political journal *Dejanje* (Italian: *Azione*; English: *Action*). In 1940, he enlisted in the military, serving on the Libyan Front, and was subsequently called to serve as a translator for Yugoslavian officials in the concentration camp on Lake Garda. After his arrest by

¹³ Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 252.

¹⁴ Gramsci, Antonio. *Towards an Intellectual Biography* (London: Merlin Press, 1977), 77.

the Slovenian collaborationists in 1944 and his subsequent interment in the concentration camps of Natzweiler-Struhof, Dachau, and Bergen-Belsen, he was liberated and transported to a sanatorium in Paris where he received treatment for tuberculosis. Pahor's return to Trieste in 1946 coincided with growing ethnopolitical tensions under the authority of the Allied Military Government. Still, it is in this time of conflict that Pahor began to pursue his literary career more seriously; the author completed his doctoral degree in literature at the University of Padova and taught Italian literature in the Slovenian schools of his native city.

Yet, despite Pahor's intellectual contributions, his political involvement in Trieste, and his irrefutable literary *triestinità* (as defined by Pancrazi), most would arguably struggle and hesitate to find a comfortable place for the Slovenian author within the Triestine literary tradition, and for a number of reasons. The first of these concerns the perilous implications of Pancrazi's problematic endeavor. Focusing his attention on writers who headed the literary production between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Saba, Slataper, Svevo, and the Stuparich brothers, Pancrazi sought to amass their overlapping rhetorical tendencies to perpetuate an idea of a localized Italian identity or *italianità* of Triestine writers, or simply put, their *triestinità*.¹⁵ In her seminal book, *A City in Search of an Author* (2002), Katia Pizzi observes that this phenomenon of *italianità* coincided with the nationalistic rhetoric of the Fascist regime and was propagated by Italian irredentism, which promoted a "quasi-religious type of nationalism [taking] the form of an almost mystical attachment to Italy in opposition to the Austrian-Hungarian rule."¹⁶ In her analysis of Triestine literature as *ortgebunden*, Pizzi observes that "the local cultural specificity or

¹⁵ Central is also Trieste's link with Florence and, more specifically, with the Triestine intellectuals who wrote for *La Voce*. The 'vociani triestini,' among whom Slataper was a pioneer, played an essential role in the development of a supposed Triestine literary tradition.

¹⁶ Pizzi, Katia. *A City in Search of an Author*, (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 101.

triestinità, emerges as an ‘invented tradition’ perpetuated by a nostalgic attention to its own past and identity,” whereby “Triestine literature appears to be consistently engaged in a re-creation of its tradition, of its history.”¹⁷ But if we remove the national question, we open our understanding of ‘Triestine literature’ to a supra-Italian body of works produced by writers *from* and *of* Trieste, thus comfortably accommodating some of its most authentically ‘Triestine’ voices, such as Boris Pahor and even Giorgio Pressburger, the Hungarian writer and naturalized Italian citizen who resided in Trieste for more than thirty years. In this way, we can accredit the supposed ‘re-creation of its tradition [and] its history’ to the ongoing (re)discovery of its evolving *tre anime* (‘three souls’), which are constantly revived and redefined by the emergence of voices, histories, and memories once buried or marginalized by History.

While Pahor’s winding path to recognition is proof of Trieste’s richly sedimented literary history, the author has enjoyed significant attention in Europe in recent years. In 2019, the BBC released a documentary entitled *The Man Who Saw Too Much*, featuring the then 106-year-old Pahor as he recounts his experience as the oldest known survivor of the Natzweiler Struhof Nazi concentration camp. Multiple screenings of the film were held in the author’s native city at the behest of a keen and expansive audience. On July 13, 2020, exactly one hundred years after the public destruction of the Narodni Dom by the squadristi and Pahor’s unfortunate ‘baptism of fire with fascism,’ the author witnessed the restitution of the Narodni Dom to the Slovenian minority. The same day, the Slovenian President Borut Pahor presented the author with the Order of Merit, while his Italian counterpart, Sergio Mattarella, conferred to Pahor the Knight of the Grand Cross, the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic. The following year, in 2021, the Associazione Culturale il Ponte rosso and the Slovenian publishing house Mladika joined forces to produce a critical

¹⁷ Pizzi, *A City in Search of an Author*, 32.

volume entitled *Boris Pahor: Scrittore senza frontiere. Studi, interviste e testimonianze*, edited by Fulvio Senardi and Chiereghin himself.¹⁸ As the first edited volume in Italian, boasting a diverse array of critical contributions by Slovenian and Italian intellectuals alike, this publication marks an important feat for ethnocultural relations amongst Slovenes and Italians in Trieste, but also for the distinct yet related Italian and Slovenian literary traditions or ‘scritture parallele’ (‘parallel writings’), in the words of Miran Košuta, which have always co-existed but seldom dialogued. In their introduction to the volume, Senardi and Chiereghin recognize both the value and the limitations of this critical effort, intimating that:

Ora, difficile dire se il fatto che la proposta di una miscellanea di studi, testimonianze e riflessioni dedicate a Boris Pahor, il maggior narratore triestino, sia stata accolta con entusiasmo nella “città del golfo” da intellettuali sloveni (ovvio) e italiani (meno scontato) e che un’associazione culturale nata attorno alla rivista web di lingua italiana “Il Ponte Rosso” e una casa editrice slovena, Mladika, collaborino per la pubblicazione, preannunci un nuovo inizio; la cosa in sé non è straordinaria, ma farà intrecciare esperienze di vita, passioni, competenze e lingue. E, in quanto tale, rappresenta un bel passo verso la Trieste che vogliamo.¹⁹

(Now, it is difficult to say whether the presentation of an amalgam of studies, testimonies, and reflections dedicated to Boris Pahor, Trieste’s greatest narrator, was enthusiastically welcomed in the “gulf city” by Slovenian [obvious] and Italian [less granted] intellectuals, and whether the first ever collaboration between the

¹⁸ See Chiereghin, Walter and Fulvio Senardi (eds.). *Boris Pahor: Scrittore senza frontiere. Studi, interviste e testimonianze* (Trieste: Mladika, 2021). The volume is intended to serve as: “un omaggio allo scrittore Boris Pahor in occasione del suo 108 compleanno. È l’espressione delle due anime della sua città, l’italiana e la slovena, e presenta significativi studi e riflessioni sull’opera del testimone di un periodo importante e travagliato della storia di Trieste e dell’umanità. La casa editrice Mladika ha accolto con piacere ed entusiasmo la proposta dell’Associazione culturale il Ponte rosso, accettando di collaborare a questa coedizione in cui autori italiani e sloveni partecipano ad un progetto comune che vuole rappresentare un augurio corale ad un grande uomo, scrittore e intellettuale: un libro in cui confluiscono le voci di chi legge, ammira, studia le opere di Boris Pahor e gli è amico; un ritratto vario per prospettive e angolazioni, e, in quanto tale, ricco, preciso ed esaustivo” (a tribute to writer Boris Pahor on the occasion of his 108th birthday. It is the expression of the two souls of his city, the Italian, and the Slovenian, and presents significant studies and reflections on the oeuvre of a witness of an important and troubled period in the history of Trieste and humanity. The publishing house Mladika welcomed with pleasure and enthusiasm the proposal of the cultural association il Ponte rosso, agreeing to collaborate on this co-edition, which brings together Italian and Slovenian authors to represent a choral celebration of a great man, writer and intellectual: a book in which the voices of those who read, admire, study the works of Boris Pahor, as well as nurture his friendship, converge; a portrait varied in perspectives and angles, and as such, rich, precise and exhaustive).

¹⁹ Chiereghin, Walter and Fulvio Senardi (eds.). *Boris Pahor: Scrittore senza frontiere. Studi, interviste e testimonianze* (Trieste: Mladika, 2021), 14.

cultural association founded by the Italian web magazine “Il Ponte Rosso” and the Slovenian publishing house, Mladika, heralds a new beginning; the feat itself is not extraordinary in and of itself, but it will interweave lived experiences, passions, competencies, and languages. And, as such, it marks a good step towards the Trieste that we want.)

In its breadth and plurivocality, the volume is indeed mounting evidence of a considerable shift in Trieste’s interethnic dynamics, both in literature and beyond. Despite Pahor’s prolific literary production and the international success of *Nekropola* (1967; Italian: *Necropoli*; English: *Necropolis*) between the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, he struggled to garner significant recognition in Italy until the second publication of the Italian translation of *Nekropola* in 2008 (the first came in 1997).²⁰ Generally regarded as Pahor’s magnum opus, the novel is an autobiographical account of the author’s return to the Natzweiler-Struhof concentration camp twenty years after his internment in 1944. While the novel quickly garnered attention in Europe, notably in France, it did not elicit comparable enthusiasm among Italian publishers.

In an article entitled “Il caso Pahor” (“The Pahor Case”) published in *La Repubblica* the same year, the Italian writer and journalist Paolo Rumiz wrote, “Quarant’anni ci son voluti perché un autore simile fosse conosciuto appieno nel suo Paese. Ci sono voluti decine di libri stampati all'estero, una Legion d' Onore, premi negli Stati Uniti, traduzioni in inglese, tedesco, francese, persino esperanto e finlandese” (It took forty years for an author of his stature to be fully known in his country. It took dozens of books printed abroad, a Legion of Honor, awards in the United

²⁰ In a 2010 interview with Walter Chiereghin, Pahor expressed his disillusionment for the delayed recognition of *Nekropola* in Italy, admitting, “Questo mi compensava della refrattarietà degli editori nazionali e del fatto quindi di essere completamente ignorato in questo Paese. La traduzione italiana di *Necropoli* era disponibile fin da quando il libro uscì nell’edizione slovena, ma nessun editore italiano volle pubblicarlo per quasi quarant’anni.” Chiereghin, Walter. “Uno scrittore triestino” (This compensated me for the refractoriness of national publishers and the fact that I was therefore completely ignored in this country. The Italian translation of *Necropolis* was available ever since the book came out in the Slovenian edition, but no Italian publisher wanted to publish it for almost forty years). See: Chiereghin, Walter. “A writer from Trieste.” *Cronache dal cielo stretto* (Udine: Forum, 2013), 170.

States, translations into English, German, French, even Esperanto and Finnish).²¹ The Triestine Rumiz ventures a step further, questioning the potential – and according to Rumiz himself, likely – role of fascist nationalistic debris in the fate of the Slovenian author: “Per troppo tempo ha fatto comodo non si sapesse che nella città italianissima c’era un grande capace di scrivere in un’altra lingua – la stessa che il fascismo aveva negato a suon di manganello, sputi e olio di ricino – e mettere con i suoi capolavori il dito sulla piaga” (For too long it was convenient not to know that in this very Italian city there was a great capable of writing in another language – the same one that fascism had denied with the sound of batons, spit and castor oil – and rubbing salt into the wound with his masterpieces).²²

Recollecting the ethnopolitical tensions that surfaced with the collapse of the Hapsburg Empire in 1918 and that persisted until the second half of the century, Rumiz’ article underscores the tight clasp of Trieste’s historical shackles on its evolving ethnocultural dynamics. Rumiz also broaches four elements of Pahor’s work that shape his understanding of *alterity* and contour the thematic focus of the present study: language and linguistic identity, historical memory, the binary of individual and collective, and the ethical function and national value of literature. Our analysis will uncover the valuable and unique perspective of an important ‘minority’ voice on the sociopolitical questions that afflict the historical past of the Slovenian community in Friuli Venezia Giulia. Pahor’s narrative reveals the precarious ethnocultural and linguistic specificity of small nations or minorities that, according to him, warrants recognition at the national level. Placing the author in dialogue with his European contemporaries will help us to uncover constructive and illuminating insights on broader, universal questions of belonging, difference, and ongoing

²¹ Rumiz, Paolo. “Il caso Pahor.” *La Repubblica*, January 30th, 2008.

²² Rumiz, “Il caso Pahor,” *La Repubblica*.

conversations about the status of the subaltern, who looks to transcendence with an eye of suspicion and skepticism.

In the mid-1970s, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari expounded their critical definition of minor literature as a theoretical mode of engagement that compels an ‘immigrant’ or a subject on the margins of society to act as an agent of transformative experimentation by engaging in the deterritorialization of a major language.²³ The latter is subjected to a series of displacements whereby the minor subject develops a creative, innovative “minor” language on the margins of the “major language.” Yet, as numerous reflections on and interpretations of the term “minor” among European intellectuals demonstrate, the concept of minor literature has continued to accumulate varying interpretations and adaptations. For instance, Pahor himself has repeatedly weighed the implications of the terms “minoritarie” (minoritarian) and “piccole” (small) when describing groups that belong to a quantitatively smaller ethnonational community within a larger society.²⁴

²³ See Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari’s *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* and *A Thousand Plateaus*. Trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Continuum, 1988).

²⁴ In an essay entitled “Il pregio delle culture minoritarie” (“The Merit of Minoritarian Cultures”) in the volume *Venuti a galla*, Pahor examines the implications of these terms: “E intanto bisogna innanzitutto chiarire il fatto che, parlando delle culture ‘minoritarie,’ questo termine non si riferisce, come dovrebbe essere chiaro, al loro valore intrinseco, ma alla loro posizione specifica. O sono cioè culture di vere comunità etniche o nazionali finora non confermate in Stati a sé stanti, o sono culture di comunità viventi in Stati in cui non sono definite ‘minoranze,’ anche se in molti casi dette ‘minoranze,’ si calcolano a milioni o addirittura a decine di milioni, come i Curdi, per esempio [...] Ma più che il ritrovamento di questi ‘piccoli’ continenti tanto a lungo mascherati, sarà importante il *contenuto* delle loro identità. E parlando di contenuti, si apre tutta una serie di pregi che le ‘piccole’ culture possono offrire al patrimonio culturale dell’umanità. (Qui ci sia concesso di aprire una parentesi che forse apparirà superflua, ma è giusto che ci sia. Mettendo l’aggettivo ‘piccole’ tra virgolette non solo, come è evidente, non si vuole sottolineare l’improprietà di esso, ma si vuole sottolineare proprio il contrario. Si sta infatti trattando di culture ‘minoritarie’ nei casi in cui, ponendo il problema in termini differenti, si parlerebbe di quelle entità che Sergio Salvi nel suo testo del 1973 definì le ‘nazioni proibite’...)” (And in the meantime, we must first clarify the fact that, speaking of ‘minority’ cultures, this term does not refer, as should be clear, to their intrinsic value, but to their specific position. That is, they are cultures of true ethnic or national communities hitherto not confirmed in states in their own right, or they are cultures of communities living in states where they are not defined as ‘minorities,’ although in many cases called ‘minorities,’ are calculated in the millions or even tens of millions, such as the Kurds, for example [...]) But more than the discovery of these ‘small’ continents so long masked, the content of their identities will be important. And speaking of content, it opens up a whole series of qualities that ‘small’ cultures can offer to the cultural heritage of humanity. [Let us open a parenthesis here that perhaps will appear superfluous, but it is just that it be included. Putting the adjective ‘small’ in quotation marks not only, as is evident, you do not want to emphasize the impropriety of it, but you want to emphasize just the opposite. We are in fact dealing with ‘minority’ cultures in cases where, posing the problem in different terms,

When asked about how he conceives of and defines his own literary identity, Pahor affirmed, “Io mi sento sloveno e su questo non si discute; sono di nazionalità slovena ma sono anche italiano. Sono un cittadino sloveno e un cittadino italiano, anche se non si può certo dire che io sia uno scrittore italiano. Possiamo dire che sono uno sloveno che scrive in sloveno in Italia, ecco, questa è una formula più corretta” (I feel Slovenian and that is indisputable; I am of Slovenian nationality, but I am also Italian. I am a Slovenian citizen and an Italian citizen, though it cannot be said that I am an Italian writer. We can say that I am a Slovene who writes in Slovenian in Italy; there, that is a more accurate articulation).²⁵ The nexus of ‘sentire’ (to feel), ‘nazionalità’ (nationality) and ‘scrivere’ (to write) encapsulates the thorny and ongoing debates concerning the geolinguistic specificity of writers often described as ‘minor.’

In his essay *The Curtain* (2005), Milan Kundera engages in a related and pertinent reflection whilst pondering the existential conditions of small nations in relation to large ones. Kundera observes that the principal element that distinguishes the former from the latter is “not the quantitative criterion of the number of their inhabitants” but rather “something deeper: for them their existence is not a self-evident certainty but always a question, a wager, a risk: they are on the defensive against History, that force that is bigger than they, that does not take them into consideration, that does not even notice them.”²⁶ Kundera then contemplates the implications of this disparity in the realm of literature, making recourse to a well-known archetype for discussions

we would speak of those entities that Sergio Salvi in his 1973 text defined as the ‘forbidden nations’ ...). Pahor, Boris. *Venuti a galla* (Parma: Diabasis, 2014), 36.

²⁵ Pahor, Boris. *Quello che ho da dirvi: Dialogo tra generazioni lontane un secolo* (Portogruaro: Nuova dimensione, 2015), 13.

²⁶ Kundera, Milan. *The Curtain* (Harper Perennial: New York, 2006), 33.

on the topic: Kafka.²⁷ The author dismisses the common tendency of the French to characterize Kafka as a Czech writer as ‘nonsense,’ observing that he wrote solely in German and considered himself a German writer. This apparent mischaracterization, a consequence of the shifting borders of twentieth-century Europe, is also a pertinent example of its implications for the minority communities who too often bore the brunt of it. An authoritative voice on the matter (he, too, is an eminent example of this twentieth century phenomenon), Kundera underscores the role of language and the consequences of linguistic identity in the artistic reach of writers from small nations.²⁸ To illustrate this point, he poses a provocative rhetorical question, “But suppose for a moment he had written his books in Czech. Today who would know them? [...] nobody would know Kafka today – nobody – if he had been Czech.”²⁹ Kundera highlights the wagers and the obstacles that concern those writers from small nations who write in languages to which we often refer as ‘minor’ on account of the number of their speakers or the interstitial contexts in which they are spoken. Let us indulge another example of a European writer, and another ‘neighbor’ of Pahor who presents a different perspective on the matter. The acclaimed novelist Dubravka Ugrešić who was born in Croatia (former Yugoslavia) also challenges the ontological foundation of identitarian labels and our habitual thinking of literature as entrenched in ethnic and national

²⁷ I am here referring, of course, to Deleuze and Guattari’s model of ‘minor literature,’ which they develop on the model of Kafka and his own reflections and referenced to a literature that reflected his writing. I am also, however, referring to other and future theoretical conceptualizations and critical studies of this genre of writing. See: Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

²⁸ Kundera, himself a product of the geopolitical shifting that animated twentieth-century Europe, was exiled from his native Czechoslovakia in 1950 for anti-communist activities. He subsequently settled in France where he continued his career as a French author, writing exclusively in French and halting the translation of his texts into Czech. His citizenship was ultimately restored in 2019 after an exile spanning more than four decades. In 2020 he accepted the Franz Kafka prize and has lifted the restrictions of the translation of his works into Czech, even donating his personal archive and library to his native city of Brno.

²⁹ Kundera, *The Curtain*, “Irreparable Inequality,” 34.

categories. Ugrešić asserts that holding a Dutch passport does not make her a Dutch writer, just as writing in Croatian does not make her a Croatian writer. Thus, while Kundera argues for an understanding of literary identity as self-determined by an author and by the language in which he writes, Ugrešić “signals her transnational position, unhinging citizenship from nationality or ethnicity, and language from territoriality.”³⁰ This framework encapsulates the crucial epistemological questions surrounding the geospecificity of authors and individuals from small countries and the varying – and often conflicting – approaches to the understanding of (literary) identity and belonging in general. The thread that binds these varying conceptualizations is the question of subjectivity that lies at the heart of the problem surrounding ontological conceptions of *nation* and thus also of nationality and ethnicity.

Kundera, who was born in Brno but *writes* in French and *considers* himself a French writer, notes that Kafka is a German author because he *wrote* in German and *considered* himself as such. Ugrešić, on the other hand, rejects all forms of geographically, linguistically, and ethnically binding conceptualizations of identity. Yet again, Pahor appears to argue for a less abstract, less affective, and non-transcendent understanding of literary identity: his view is entrenched in the national, which he deems inextricable from the *ethnocultural*, which also includes the *linguistic* community into which one is born. Pahor’s critique of Svevo in an article entitled “Svevo: non è tra i miei autori” (“Svevo: Not One of My Authors”) reiterates this idea. Written in 2011 and published in the critical volume *Venuti a galla* (2014), curated by Elvio Guagnini, the essay critiques the author’s choice of a distinctly Italian pseudonym and his (presumably) conscious decision to write in Italian on the grounds of the presupposition that these choices were motivated by a desire to be “ben accettato dalla maggioranza ovvero dal potere” (well accepted by the

³⁰ Karpinski, Eva C. “Postcards from Europe: Dubravka Ugrešić as a Transnational Public Intellectual, or Life Writing in Fragments,” *The European Journal of Life Writing*, Vol 2, DOI: <https://ejlw.eu/article/view/31396/28670>.

majority, or better yet, by the power).³¹ Thus, Pahor appears to support a considerably more primordial, or prescribed conceptualization of identity with respect to the constructivist understanding of Kundera, and the transcendent one of Ugrešić. But what role *does* the affective element play in how we conceive of belonging? Is how one identifies or what (or who) one considers oneself to be, what one *is*? Is our identity determined by the spatial, historical, and political margins that claim to delineate our being in relation to the world? Or are these boundary lines internal and subconsciously absorbed or defined?

For the Slovenian author these questions are deeply influenced and shaped by the traumatic experience of assimilation, which represents the hegemony of large nations and the threat they pose for small ones – questions that resound in the previously cited words of Kundera. Linguistic and cultural preservation are central to the evolution and sustenance of a community and, according to Pahor, they are embedded in its national consciousness. The forced assimilation to which he was subjected at the young age of seven marked a decisive point in the author’s personal life and as would later become evident, his career. The external and internal pressures of this form of sociocultural conditioning transformed him “da bravo ragazzo e bravo scolaro [...] in un sonnambulo” (from a good boy and good schoolboy [...] into a sleepwalker).³² However, Pahor explains, “Il problema non era tanto la lingua italiana. Era una questione psicologica più profonda:

³¹ Pahor, Boris. “Svevo: non è tra i miei autori.” *Venuti a galla*. Ed. Elvio Guagnini (Parma: Diabasis, 2014), 157. Pahor also critiques Svevo for having hidden (as he discovered in an interview between Svevo’s daughter Letizia Svevo and Jean Clause) his support for socialism because the movement was considered pro-Slav or Pro-Austrian: “Ma si iscrive invece da patriota al Partito nazionale liberale, come afferma Letizia nella stessa pagina. Una posizione ambigua, come la stessa Letizia constata nella pagina seguente. Il punto che mi tocca è quel distanziarsi dal socialismo perché difende i diritti della popolazione slovena, diritti conculcati ostinatamente dal Comune. Mi spiace per Svevo e per il suo ideale socialista che prende in considerazione il mondo ma tralascia le ingiustizie nostrane” (But he joins instead the National Liberal Party as a patriot, as Letizia states on the same page. An ambiguous position, as Letizia herself notes on the following page. The point that touches me is that of distancing oneself from socialism because it defends the rights of the Slovenian population, rights stubbornly violated by the Municipality. I am sorry for Svevo and for his socialist ideal, which takes into consideration the world but neglects our local injustices), 158.

³² Pahor, Boris and Cristina Battocletti. *Figlio di nessuno* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2012). Apple Books, 17.

con tutto me stesso mi ribellavo alla costrizione di diventare un altro. Avevo cominciato a conoscere il mondo da sloveno e ora non riuscivo a sottostare all'obbligo di trasformarmi in un italiano" (The problem wasn't so much the Italian language. It was a deeper psychological question: with all my heart I rebelled against the compulsion to become someone else. I had begun to know the world as a Slovene and now I could not submit to the obligation to transform myself into an Italian).³³ In *Quello che ho da dirvi*, Pahor further clarifies that "Non è che non comprendessi, che fossi incapace di imparare...non capivo semplicemente cosa stava succedendo. Non comprendevo perché dovevo praticamente diventare italiano. Mi avevano cambiato infatti non solo la lingua, ma tutta la società, non avevo più realtà nelle quali riconoscermi. Era lo stesso anche in chiesa, all'inizio il prete poteva predicare in sloveno ma dopo il fascismo le cose erano cambiate"³⁴ (It was not that I did not understand, that I couldn't learn...I simply didn't understand what was happening. I didn't understand why I had to practically become Italian. They had changed not only my language, but my entire society – I had no realities with which to identify. It was the same in church; initially the priest could preach in Slovenian, but things changed after fascism).³⁵ Language thus serves a central ontological function in the fulfillment of an individual's identity; severing one's tongue results in the fragmentation of his whole being.

In 2018 the author critiqued the lack of patriotic sentiment in the Slovenian national anthem, arguing that it does not convey a sense of national consciousness or bear any mention of the Slovenian people. He defended his position against backlash by citing other anthems which, in his view, adequately accomplish this feat. "It is not about nationalism" contended Pahor, but rather

³³ Pahor and Battocletti, *Figlio di nessuno*, 17.

³⁴ Pahor, Boris. *Quello che ho da dirvi. Dialogo tra generazioni lontane un secolo* (Portogruaro: Nuova dimensione, 2015), 25.

³⁵ Pahor, *Quello che ho da dirvi*, 25.

about “a natural and positive sense of belonging to a nation.”³⁶ The author has reiterated this notion in a number of interviews and speaking engagements, adding “We do not admit, in our own national anthem that we are Slovenes. Just look at the French: *Allons enfants de la Patrie!* The homeland is mentioned immediately, in the first verse” (“Mi še v svoji himni ne priznamo, da smo Slovenci. Poglejte samo Francoze: *Allons enfants de la Patrie!* Domovina je omenjena takoj, že v prvem verzu”).³⁷ Twice, the author has appealed to the Association of Slovenian Writers to propose alterations to the anthem to the parliament, but his plea was met with concern about how such textual modifications would affect the melody and ‘musicality’ of the song. Pahor also spoke of the matter in front of the community of Štanjel in the Municipality of Komen near the Karst plateau, stating that he would address the National Assembly himself, firsthand, but nevertheless stressed the importance of human consciousness, which “razlikuje narodni princip od nacionalizma” (differentiates between a national principle and nationalism).³⁸ In this sociocultural endeavor and others, he has frequently faced points of contention, which have nonetheless contributed to important and necessary conversations about thorny identitarian issues in Trieste and Slovenia, and which regard Europe on a broader scale. One such point of contention emerges

³⁶“Ne gre za nacionalizem, ampak za narodno zavest ali naraven in pozitiven občutek pripadnosti nekemu narodu,” pojasnjuje pisatelj. Zadnjič je to misel omenil na študijskih dnevih Draga 2010 na Opčinah pri Trstu: ‘V naši himni Slovencev ni. Prešeren je rekel ‘Bog živi nam deželo, Bog živi ves slovenski svet!’ A Kardelj je to vrgel ven. Prva demokratična vlada pa je to ponovila. Če bi se sosedje obrnili na nas, bi se nam zahvalili, da jih omenjamo v himni, a nas hkrati vprašali, kdo pravzaprav smo?’” (‘It is not about nationalism, it’s about national consciousness or a natural and positive sense of belonging to a nation,’ the writer explains. He last mentioned this idea at the Draga 2010 study days in the Municipalities of Trieste: ‘There are no Slovenians in our anthem. Prešeren said ‘God lives our country; God lives the whole Slovenian world!’ But Kardelj threw this out. The first democratic government, however, repeated it. If our neighbors would turn to us, they would thank us for mentioning them in the anthem, but at the same time ask us, who are we, really?’) See: Marušič, Tino. “Boris Pahor poziva k spremembi himne.” *Primorske Novice*. DOI: <http://www.primorske.si/priloge/sobota/boris-pahor-poziva-k-spremembi-himne.aspx>.

³⁷ Marušič, “Boris Pahor poziva k spremembi himne.”

³⁸ Marušič.

in Magris's introduction to the second Italian translation, *Necropoli* (Slovenian: *Nekropola*; English: *Necropolis*), in which he calls attention to a rhetorical discrepancy that underscores an important aspect of their respective, and divergent, conceptions of identity.

The Danubian author first acknowledges the sad irony that led Pahor and other Slovenes from Trieste, the Karst, and the littoral to be registered as Italians (on the grounds of their enforced citizenship) in the Lager, while their very internment – along with that of many Italians – was the result of fascist Italy's alliance with Nazi Germany. Subsequently, he cites the following passage from *Necropoli* before objecting to Pahor's use of the term 'nazione' or 'nation': "Noi sloveni del litorale affermavamo ostinatamente di essere jugoslavi. Il cuore e la mente si ribellavano al pensiero di essere eliminati come appartenenti a una nazione che, dalla fine della Prima guerra mondiale, aveva sempre tentato di assimilare gli sloveni e i croati" (We, Slovenes of the littoral, declared obstinately that we were Yugoslav. Our hearts and minds rebelled at the thought of being eliminated as members of a nation that had always tried to assimilate Slovenes and Croats since World War I).³⁹ This historical event and others, notes Magris, have contributed to the 'separatezza' ('division') that has divided the Slovenian and Italian cohabitants of the city and the region, which Pahor devotedly addresses in his oeuvre and from which he is not exempt. Indeed, in *Necropoli*, Magris detects a "sottile diffidenza che Pahor prova nei confronti dei compagni di sventura italiani" (a subtle mistrust that Pahor harbors towards his Italian partners in misfortune),

³⁹ Pahor, Boris. *Necropoli*. Trans. Ezio Martin (Rome: Fazi, 2008), 80. Slovenian: "In čeprav ima v rdečem trikotniku na prsih veliko začetnico I, ker je bil pač ujet kot italijanski državljan, slovenski človek vztrajno trdi, da je Jugoslovan, in tako na najlažji način prepriča okolje, da prisluhne njegovim ugovorom. Seveda se človeku srce in pamet upirata, da bi ga v deželi pogina ugonobili kot Italijana, potem ko je od konca prve svetovne vojske italijanska država uničevala njegovo identiteto na domačih tleh." Pahor, Boris. *Nekropola* (Ljubljana: Mladinska Knjiga, 2011), 50. ("Capital I in the middle of his red triangle – he was captured as an Italian citizen – but insisted, as any Slovene would, that he was a Yugoslav. No Slovene wanted to be exterminated in this place as an Italian, for since the end of the in this place as an Italian, for since the end of the First World War the Italian government had been trying to eradicate him on his native soil"). Pahor, Boris. *A Pilgrim in the Shadows*. Trans. Michael Biggins (Orlando: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1995), 48.

one that he also recognizes as reciprocal in the Triestine context, where “il frequente disconoscimento agli sloveni di elementari diritti e di identità triestina a pieno titolo e col conseguente muro di ignoranza che ha separato a lungo gli italiani dalla minoranza slovena, privando entrambe comunità di un essenziale arricchimento reciproco” (the frequent denial of basic rights and full rights to a Triestine identity to Slovenes, and with the subsequent wall of ignorance that has long separated the Italians from the Slovenian minority, depriving both communities of essential reciprocal enrichment).⁴⁰ This reticence extends, Magris observes, even to Gabriele, whom Pahor later discovers to be – as he professes in a protracted note at the end of the book – Gabriele Foschiatti: a bold antifascist republican who consequently perished at Dachau. Recognizing the equally devastating atrocities committed by the various ethnic and political groups of Trieste and its surrounding borderlands, Magris identifies what he considers to be a notable ‘inaccuracy’ in Pahor’s use of the term ‘nazione’ or ‘nation’:

In questo senso, la frase di *Necropoli* citata in precedenza contiene un’espressione inesatta, perché non è stata ‘la nazione’ italiana a opprimere gli sloveni, così come non è ‘la nazione’ slovena o croata o serba responsabile delle violente e indiscriminate ritorsioni compiute alla fine della guerra contro gli italiani né ad esempio dell’eccidio dei domobranzi, i collaborazionisti sloveni, e di ustascia e cetnici compiuto dai titoisti nel 1945 e denunciato – oltre che dal grande scrittore sloveno Drago Jančar – in un libro-intervista con Edvard Kocbek dello stesso Pahor (punito per questo col divieto di entrare in Jugoslavia per un anno) che pure era stato consegnato alla Gestapo proprio dai domobranzi.⁴¹

(In this sense, the previously-cited passage from *Necropoli* contains an inexact expression as it was not the Italian ‘nation’ that oppressed Slovenes, just as it would be unjust to lay responsibility on the Slovenian, Croatian, or Serbian ‘nations’ for the violent and indiscriminate acts of reprisal committed against the Italians at the end of the war nor, for instance, for the massacre of the Slovenian Home Guard, the Slovenian collaborationists, the Ustasha and the Chetniks, committed by the Titoists in 1945 and denounced – besides by the great Slovenian writer Drago

⁴⁰ Magris, Claudio. “Un uomo vivo nella città dei morti.” Introduction to *Necropoli* by Boris Pahor. Trans. Ezio Martin (Rome: Fazi, 2008), 13.

⁴¹ Magris, “Un uomo vivo nella città dei morti,” 13-14.

Jančar – in a book-interview with Edvard Kocbek by Pahor himself [who was banned from entering Yugoslavia for a year as a form of punishment] who was also turned into the Gestapo by the Slovenian Home Guard itself.)

It is not an entire ‘nation,’ argues Magris, that drives those extreme ethnopolitical mechanisms that lead to violence and conflict, but rather a specific group of constituents within it, which is not representative of the *national collective*. Magris seems to echo Thomas Scheff’s definition of ethnic conflict as “violence between groups with different *cultures*, including differences based on language, religion, race and class.”⁴² In several essays, Pahor openly engages with and critiques the theory of identitarian ‘transcendence’ for which Magris and his contemporary Predrag Matvejević advocate, while Magris contends with particularist conceptions of being on the grounds of their potential to generate and enflame nationalisms and fascisms. To extinguish the mortal mechanisms of such destructive forces, suggests Magris, it is necessary to “sfatare ogni febbre identitaria, ogni idolatrica identità nazionale, autentica quando viene vissuta con semplicità ma falsa e distruttiva quando viene innalzata a idolo e a valore assoluto e si vaneggia superiore alle altre” (debunk every identity fever, every idolatrous national identity, authentic when it is lived with simplicity but false and destructive when it is raised to the state of idolatry and given an absolute value, and when it boasts arrogantly over others).⁴³

Particularity, argues Magris, is not yet a value in and of itself, but rather “solo la premessa di un possibile valore che la trascende; quando viene oppressa, va difesa anche duramente ma senza permettere mai [...] che essa diventi il valore supremo. La nazionalità è un valore proprio in quanto non è un dato di natura, bensì ciò che si sente e talora si sceglie di essere” (only the premise

⁴² Scheff, Thomas. “Emotions and Identity: A Theory of Ethnic Nationalism.” *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*. Ed. Craig Calhoun (Padstow: Blackwell, 1994), 277.

⁴³ Scheff, “Emotions and Identity: A Theory of Ethnic Nationalism,” 277.

of a possible value that transcends it; when it is oppressed, it must also be defended harshly but without ever allowing [...] it to become the supreme value. Nationality is a value precisely because it is not a datum of nature, but what one feels and sometimes chooses to be).⁴⁴ Fascisms and Nazism arise from nationalistic sentiments, but not only; they also derive from particular (ethnic, social, economic, political, cultural, and even religious) reactions to the “radicale sconvolgimento che, con la Prima guerra mondiale e successivamente, ha distrutto il vecchio ordine europeo” (radical upheaval that, with the First World War and thereafter, has destroyed the old European order).⁴⁵ Pahor contends with this perspective, stressing the potential of universalist transcendence to produce those very same mechanisms. According to the Slovenian author, this outlook fails to consider the precarious circumstances of small nations: universalism’s implied deficiency of diversification produces hegemonic imbalances. Pahor directly addresses this issue and his Italian contemporary in a 1992 essay entitled “Il disinteresse degli intellettuali verso le identità misconosciute” (“The Disinterest of Intellectuals towards Unknown Identities”), in which he claims that Magris advocates for the same kind of transcendence that led to the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire because Vienna refused to recognize the national Slavic identities:

E per gli Sloveni, oltretutto, allora sarebbe stata la soluzione migliore il restare, come entità riconosciuta, nel complesso austro-ungarico, dal momento che—dopo il conflitto—una gran parte del territorio passò dall’Italia e all’Austria. Non si è trattato quindi allora (e né si tratta ora) di un attaccamento viscerale alla propria identità, almeno se non dichiariamo nella medesima accezione viscerali Slataper e Stuparich, per esempio, che sono degli indubitabili rappresentanti di *particolarismo* nel volersi staccare da Vienna. Certo, nella ex Jugoslavia, gli sloveni e i croati avevano le loro repubbliche, ma come si sentivano riguardo alla propria identità nelle dipendenze da Belgrado, solo loro possono definirlo e, con l’avvento della democrazia, democraticamente decidere riguardo al loro futuro.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Scheff, 277.

⁴⁵ Scheff, 277.

⁴⁶ Pahor, *Venuti a galla*, 20-21.

(For the Slovenes, moreover, it would have been best to remain, a recognized entity under the Austro-Hungarian complex, since after the conflict a large part of the territory passed to Italy and to Austria. It therefore had nothing to do with a visceral attachment to one's own identity then [nor does it now], unless we declare visceral in the same sense Slataper and Stuparich, for example, who are undoubtedly representatives of particularism in wanting to detach themselves from Vienna. Of course, in former Yugoslavia, the Slovenes and Croats had their own republics, but only they can define how they felt about their own identity in the dependencies on Belgrade and, with the advent of democracy, democratically decide about their future.)

Pahor thus suggests that even the notion of 'visceral particularisms' is inherently unstable and skewed for it assumes different meanings according to one's vantage point, or the side of the border(s) on which one is standing. It also differs on the basis of the theoretical or contemplative lens with which it is being examined. For instance, while Magris and Pressburger both advocate for a universalistic conception of identity, the Hungarian's is grounded in a less political and more abstract, philosophical sense of the Absurd. Nonetheless, Pahor's political beliefs and involvement have furrowed brows on both sides of the border. Slovenes have perceived the Triestine as a dangerous dissident because of his (outspoken) ideas concerning the national question in Slovenia, while accusations of nationalism swirled on either side of the border.⁴⁷ Pertinent to this aspect of Pahor's political persona is Igor Omerza's 2017 book entitled *V žrelu Udbe* (English: *In the Jaws of the Udbe*), which presents official documentation from the Archives of the Republic of Slovenia concerning the former State Security Service's secret monitoring of Pahor over four decades (1952 – 1989).⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Brecelj, Martin. "Ulisse e le sirene." *Boris Pahor: Scrittore senza frontiere* (Trieste: Mladika, 2021), 31.

⁴⁸ See: Omerza, Igor. *V žrelu Udbe* (Ljubljana: Mohorjeva, 2017). Previously named OZNA (Oddelek za Zaščito Naroda), UDBA (Uprava Državne Bezbednosti) was a major constituent of the Yugoslav secret intelligence services from 1946 until 1991.

The national question lies at the heart of Pahor's 1969 essayistic volume *Odisej ob jamboru* (Italian: *Ulisse e le sirene*; English: *Ulysses and the Sirens*), with which the author helped to inaugurate the journal *Zaliv* and the Biblioteca Kosovel (Kosovel Library). Pahor had first lost the support of a group of Communist ideologists in 1952 when he sided with the writer Edvard Kocbek whom the regime was trying to remove from the public stage at the time. In 1969, the publication of *Odisej ob jamboru* sparked more controversy; the volume, containing essays which had previously been published in a number of Slovenian journals, centered on the national character of Slovenes, but it also critiqued the leading communists and their clericalism, particularly the leading Slovenian communist ideologue Edvard Kardelj, who was, according to Pahor, not sufficiently cognizant of his own Slovenian identity.⁴⁹ The book was immediately banned in Slovenia, although no official statement called for the ban. The Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia and Kardelj were unhappy with the publication and in turn seized it, but they were quickly met with a letter of protest signed by the Slovenian writer Alojz Rebula and thirty-seven members of the Slovenian community. Two years later, Pahor published an extended version of the volume, which included the letter and some additional articles published in *Zaliv* and other journals. In the preface to *Odisej ob jamboru* Pahor expounds his idea of nation, stating that "Zakaj kljub vsem vzponom človeškega razuma, kljub pridobitvam človeškega duha, s katerimi se vzdigujemo nad etnične mehe, je narodno občestvo še zmeraj najbolj žlahtna domovina človeškega srca, in prepričan sem, da bo v prihodnosti plemenita vrednost njenega bistva, četudi nekoliko spremenjena, v glavnem ostala ista" (Despite all of the progresses of the human mind and the achievements of the human spirit with which we rise above ethnic lines, the national

⁴⁹ Gabrič, Aleš. "How the culture of the Slovenian emigrants was received in Slovenia." *Dve domovini. Two Homelands* 19 (2004): 191.

community is still the noblest *homeland* of the human heart, and I am certain that the noble value of its essence will persist over time).⁵⁰ Pahor conceives of the nation *primordially*, as a community into which human beings are born and to which they belong upon birth, and which is the carrier of the tradition that enables them to develop their individual and collective identity.⁵¹

Drawing on Leo Weiseberger, he contends that in the national linguistic community, human beings develop their spiritual ‘life,’ suggesting that all such communities have their own way of life, as well as their own artistic and philosophical character through which they create and nurture their distinct spiritual element.⁵² Martin Brecejl has noted that Pahor “rigett[a] il globalismo unilaterale evocando la necessità di bilanciarlo con la valorizzazione del locale, al quale egli sembra anzi attribuire un certo primato. Più che di globalismo, nella sua prospettiva dovremmo quindi parlare di ‘glocalismo’” (rejects unilateral globalism, evoking the need to balance it with the enhancement of the local, to which he seems to attribute a certain primacy. In his perspective we should therefore speak of ‘glocalism’ rather than globalism).⁵³

While Pahor advocates for a more prescribed understanding of ‘nation,’ as the community of which one becomes part upon birth, he does not necessarily negate the element of *constructedness* that also underlies it. Benedict Anderson proposes an anthropological definition of the nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in their minds of each lives the

⁵⁰ Pahor, Boris. *Odisej ob jamboru* (Koper: Založba Lipa, 1993), 11.

⁵¹ Pahor, *Odisej ob jamboru*, 11.

⁵² Brecejl, Martin. “Ulisse e le sirene.” *Boris Pahor: Scrittore senza frontiere* (Trieste: Mladika, 2021), 31.

⁵³ Brecejl, “Ulisse e le sirene,” 34.

image of their communion.”⁵⁴ Drawing on Anderson, Scheff argues that a nation is based on an idea, an act of imagination because even the use of a common language “doesn’t necessarily lead to the formation of a cultural identity,” since for “such differentiation to occur, the group itself, or its host group has to undergo a collective act of imagination. This act is to imagine the specific group as an actual entity.”⁵⁵ Pahor himself expresses this idea repeatedly throughout his work, stressing the power of literature to support and promote the development of a national sense of belonging. In the novel *V labirintu*, during a conversation with a fellow Triestine Slovene in the year 1946, when the city was buzzing with contrasting opinions concerning the prospect of the Free Territory of Trieste, Pahor’s protagonist and alter ego Radko Suban refutes accusations of nationalism and underscores the difference between the latter and the love of one’s nation, affirming that he may be considered a nationalist in the sense that:

Nazionalista nella misura in cui rivendico l’identità particolare del mio popolo, rifiutando ogni sorta di sottomissione. Per il resto sono un cittadino del mondo. Ma avendo vissuto accanto agli italiani fin dalla nascita, per molti aspetti mi sento più vicino a un italiano di Trieste che non a uno sloveno di Lubiana.⁵⁶

(Nationalist to the extent that I claim the particular identity of my people, rejecting any kind of submission. For the rest, I am a citizen of the world. But having lived alongside Italians since birth, in many ways I feel closer to an Italian from Trieste than to a Slovene from Ljubljana.)

Pahor’s idea of ‘nation’ contributes to a robust body of literature and multivocal discussions of the concept. The author’s own identity lies at the center of these precarious notions as he himself observes: “La differenza tra cittadinanza e nazionalità ha segnato il mio caso fin dalle origini. Sono

⁵⁴ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagines Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

⁵⁵ Scheff, Thomas. “Emotions and Identity: A Theory of Ethnic Nationalism.” *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*. Ed. Craig Calhoun (Padstow: Blackwell, 1994), 278.

⁵⁶ Pahor, Boris. *Dentro il labirinto*, 220.

nato infatti nel 1913 sotto il governo austro-ungarico, dunque di cittadinanza austriaca ma di nazionalità slovena” (The difference between citizenship and nationality has marked my case since the beginning. I was born, in fact, in 1913 under the Austro-Hungarian government, as an Austrian citizen, but of Slovenian nationality).⁵⁷ In his essayistic volumes and narrative works, he examines and underscores the different epistemological expressions of these concepts in disparate contexts. He observes that some states such as France, where the minority linguistic communities are simply considered to be French, do not differentiate between citizenship and nationality. Furthermore, he notes that after the second world conflict, Italian identification cards began to indicate citizenship, not nationality. In one of his studies, Isnenghi similarly observes the strange position that the very term ‘paese’ (country) occupies in Italian national consciousness:

Più complesso e specifico della esperienza della memoria italiana sembra essere il termine ‘particolare,’ quello per cui ‘al mio paese nevicca/il campanile della chiesa è bianco,’ o paese si oppone a città, dando vita all’opposizione ‘paese/città.’ Ho l’impressione che il termine *paese* che sta per Italia, non abbia lasciato in quanto tale una traccia profonda nella memoria degli italiani, che sia stato un sinonimo utile, una base di espressioni topiche (‘gli interessi del Paese’), senza mai avere la forza affettiva o politica di termini come *patria*, o *nazione*, o più semplicemente *Italia*.⁵⁸

(More complex and specific to the Italian experience of memory is the term ‘particular,’ that for which ‘in my country it is snowing / the church tower is white,’ or by which country opposes city generating the opposition of ‘country/city.’ I am under the impression that the term *paese* [country] which stands for Italy, as such has not left a deep trace in the memory of Italians, but rather acts as a useful synonym and basis for topical expressions [‘the interests of the country’], without ever having the affective or political force of terms such as homeland, or nation, or more simply, Italy.)

⁵⁷ Pahor, Boris. *Quello che ho da dirvi. Dialogo tra generazioni lontane un secolo* (Portogruaro: Nuova dimensione, 2015), 25.

⁵⁸ Isnenghi, Mario. *I luoghi della memoria: Strutture ed eventi dell’Italia unita* (Rome: Laterza, 1996), IX.

Isnenghi's reflection reinforces the essential role of language in the construction and understanding of these terms and stresses the divergent distributions of value historically attributed to them in different contexts. This plurality of conceptualizations illustrates the difficulty of transcendence, for as Vattimo observes, “molteplici popoli e culture hanno preso la parola sulla scena del mondo, ed è divenuto impossibile credere che la storia sia un processo unitario, con una linea continua verso un *telos*” (multiple peoples and cultures have spoken on the world stage, and it has become impossible to believe that history is a unitary process, with a continuous line towards a *telos*) and “Caduta l'idea di una razionalità centrale della storia, il mondo della comunicazione generalizzata esplose come una molteplicità di razionalità ‘locali’ – minoranze etniche, sessuali, religiose, culturali o estetiche prendono la parola...” (With the fall of the idea of a central rationality in history, the world of generalized communication explodes as a multiplicity of ‘local’ rationalities – ethnic, sexual, religious, cultural or aesthetic minorities take the floor...).⁵⁹ Pahor's faithful engagement with this complex nexus of notions originates from the belief that the future of the collective rests on the individual. His insistence on nationality is ultimately a *defense* of diversity as the author himself asserts:

Io, Boris Pahor, dal '45 porto avanti la tesi che bisogna prima di tutto avere la coscienza della propria identità, che sia slovena, friulana, italiana, tedesca [...] Se uno dice: sono friulano ma non mi interessa avere un'identità friulana, è affar suo. Ma se pensa al domani e desidera che la sua comunità non vada persa, non diventi pian piano italiana e dopo sparisca, l'unica possibilità è essere consapevole della propria provenienza, del *valore* dell'essere friulano; insegnare i ragazzi a scuola che sono friulani e che hanno una loro lingua, quella friulana, e una cultura, una storia. Insomma, al di là di tutte le etichette, per me la cosa più importante è avere coscienza di ciò che si è.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Vattimo, Gianni. *La società trasparente* (Milan: Garzanti, 1989), 57.

⁶⁰ Spirito, Pietro. “Il rogo nel porto: Dove tutto è cominciato.” *Boris Pahor. Scrittore senza frontiere*. Walter Chiareghin and Fulvio Senardi, eds. (Trieste: Mladika, 2021), 107.

(Since '45, I, Boris Pahor, have been promoting the idea that one must first of all be aware of one's identity, whether Slovenian, Friulian, Italian, German [...] If someone says: I am Friulian but I am not interested in having a Friulian identity, it is his business. But if he thinks about tomorrow and wishes for his community not to be lost, not to gradually become Italian and then disappear, his only possibility is to recognize his origin, to recognize the *value* of being Friulian; to teach children in school that they are Friulian, that they have their own language, the Friulian one, and a culture, a history. In short, beyond all labels, for me the most important thing is to be aware of what one is.)

This evocation of the school setting, of language and of children figures prominently in Pahor's oeuvre, partly because of the author's traumatic scholastic experiences under fascism, to which he devotes a considerable section of one of his first narrative works, the collection of short stories, *Grmada v pristanu* (1959; Italian: *Il rogo nel porto*, 2008; English: *The Port in the Pyre*).

As in the case of his Triestine contemporary Giuliana Morandini, children constitute a vital, albeit sometimes overlooked aspect of Pahor's narrative for they form the focus and unique vantage point of the narrative voice as it captures the complex ethnopolitical dimension of Trieste's interethnic conflicts from the puerile, and one could say, unprejudiced yet discerning perspective of a child. Pahor's ability to operate and oscillate between these two modalities – the polemical and political voice of a convinced adult on the one hand, and the apolitical and affective perspective of a child on the other – enables him to address prickly humanistic concerns and convey their ethical complexity by engaging the reader intellectually and affectively at once. In his autobiographies, short stories, and novels, Pahor turns his attention to these blameless victims, *reverting* his gaze back in time and *recalibrating* his memories of those experiences he witnessed firsthand as a child and adolescent to capture them in striking detail and intensity. This is most evident in the short stories that comprise *The Port in the Pyre* (*Grmada v pristanu*), which as Pietro Spirito observes “contengono i motivi portanti della narrativa di Boris Pahor, rappresentano una sorta di preludio all'intero percorso letterario dello scrittore, percorso volto a definire ‘il processo

triestino, sloveno ed europeo di tutto il suo secolo” (contain the main motifs of Boris Pahor’s narrative; they represent a sort of prelude to the writer’s entire literary journey, a path aimed at defining ‘the Triestine, Slovenian and European process of his entire century’).⁶¹ While the short stories illustrate “Le vicissitudini della comunità slovena durante il fascismo, la difesa dell’identità culturale e della lingua, gli orrori del Novecento” (the vicissitudes of the Slovenian community under fascism, the defense of cultural identity and language, and the horrors of the twentieth century), they also convey “l’amore, la bellezza, il senso di una propria libertà interiore come antidoto e indirizzo per la realizzazione di sé” (love, beauty, a sense of internal, individual freedom as the antidote and direction for the realization of the self).⁶² As Spirito suggests, the tales in this volume present a sort of prelude to “[lo] smarrimento, la rabbia, la consapevolezza di stare entrando un tunnel oscuro, l’avvio di una fase storica in cui [...] per un intero popolo verrà soffocata l’identità, comunitaria e personale” (bewilderment, anger, the awareness of entering a dark tunnel, the start of a historical phase that will suffocate the personal and collective identity of an entire nation).⁶³

The historical references in *The Port in the Pyre* delimit the parameters of a crumbling world, while also serving as proof of a thought “che cerca nella realtà storica dei fatti il senso di una ‘esperienza costitutiva’ in grado di superare gli ostacoli di un pessimismo capace di portare al silenzio. Quel silenzio degli oppressori” (that seeks in the historical reality of facts the sense of a ‘constitutive experience’ able to overcome the obstacles of a pessimism capable of leading to silence. The silence of the oppressors).⁶⁴ The volume is divided into four parts that span four

⁶¹ Spirito, Pietro. “Il rogo nel porto: Dove tutto è cominciato,” 115.

⁶² Spirito, 118.

⁶³ Spirito, 112.

⁶⁴ Spirito, 112.

decades of Pahor's life. As Spirito maintains, all of Pahor's narrative is a representation and reflection of his biographical experience, and "Nei racconti de *Il rogo nel porto* l'arco esperienziale copre un tempo che va dall'infanzia alla liberazione del lager. In questo senso lo scrittore come testimone del secolo scrive forse il suo capitolo più importante: è il tempo della formazione, il tempo in cui si definiscono le direttive di uno sviluppo che ancora seguirà il corso della Storia" (The experiential arc of the stories of *Il rogo nel porto* covers a period ranging from childhood to the liberation from the concentration camp. In this sense, as a witness of the century, the writer pens perhaps the most important of his chapters: the formative period, the time in which the directives of a development that will follow the course of history are defined).⁶⁵

The story with arguably the strongest autobiographical undertones "Il naufragio" ("The Shipwreck") of the volume *Grmada v pristanu* recounts the struggles of a Slovenian elementary school student named Branko (Pahor) with his Italian language acquisition under fascism. Branko's learning process is paved with difficulties and exacerbated by a hostile school setting that becomes a painful source of intimidation and repression. The narrative voice describes Branko's internal turmoil as he becomes the target of ridicule after making grammatical mistakes, or, as Paolo Rumiz would call them, 'capriole verbali' ('verbal somersaults') while reading his written assignment before his class. The unusual syntactical pairings such as "le difficoltà cigolano" (the difficulties creak) and "il piroscafo s'annegò" (the steamboat drowned) generate painful, rising laughter and harassment from his peers and his teacher. After learning about the class incident, Branko's father Štefan, who was eager to help his son despite his own struggles with Italian and the family's socioeconomic hardships, impassionedly exclaims "Annegato?"

⁶⁵ Spirito, 115.

Affondato? Ci avessero lasciato la nostra scuola slovena, non sarebbe naufragato nessuno!” (Drowned, sank? Had they left us our Slovenian school, no one would have shipwrecked!).⁶⁶ In another story, “La farfalla sull’attaccapanni” (“The Butterfly on the Coatrack”) a fascist teacher hangs a young girl named Julka, whom he (the teacher) addresses by the Italian Giulia, onto a coatrack by her pigtails after she utters some words in her native Slovenian to her fellow conational classmate. As a result of the incident, the hostile teacher requires her classmates to write “Devo parlare solo italiano” (I must only speak Italian) a hundred times as Julka hangs from the coatrack before their eyes.⁶⁷ These stories offer the perspective of the children – the innocent – whilst underscoring the dissolution of the ‘self’ and the sense of disorientation generated by the suppression of basic human rights – culture, language, education. Children are a symbol of hope for a better and more just future, as well as a return to a world free of ideology. In *V labirintu* Pahor juxtaposes, in stunning, sentimental prose, the enviable innocence of children and the crude reality of the senseless world that encircles them:

i bambini che scalpitano gioiosi sui gradini di legno come cavallini imbizzarriti. Ho l’impressione di essere uno di loro, di essere ritornato bambino per incanto. Sebbene tutto sia come sempre, mi sembra che i giochi pirotecnici di stasera abbiano un valore particolare [...] in me alberga un sentimento simile a una grande speranza, quasi una convinzione. Mi sembra che i bambini e i loro razzi multicolori neutralizzeranno il fungo atomico. So che è da ingenui posare un cavallino di legno accanto all’atomica per disinnescare miracolosamente la potenza distruttrice. Ma nel mio profondo non posso impedirmi di credere che quei piedi di bambini, che ora battono sul pavimento di legno plaudendo ai colori che danzano nell’aria, calpesteranno tutti i progetti contro l’umanità. Con il loro innocente zelo, i bimbi scacceranno l’indifferenza dei filistei di ogni risma, ripudieranno la miopia degli alchimisti che hanno imprigionato l’entusiasmo nei catechismi, smaschereranno l’ardore dei leccapiedi, dei profittatori e dei voltabandiera. La piena dei bambini di oggi e di domani cancellerà le cicatrici delle viltà di ieri e ne impedirà la formazione di nuove. Con il tocco delle loro dita innocenti, questi fanciulli vivaci fermeranno

⁶⁶ Pahor, Boris. “Il naufragio.” *Il rogo nel porto* (Milan: Fazi, 2006), 84.

⁶⁷ Pahor, Boris. “La farfalla sull’attaccapanni.” *Il rogo nel porto* (Milan: Fazi, 2006), 91.

le mani degli inquisitori, fonderanno l'acciaio delle manette e il ferro delle serrature delle prigioni.⁶⁸

(the children who paw joyfully on the wooden steps like runaway horses. I have the impression that I am one of them, a child anew by enchantment. Although everything is as always, it seems to me that tonight's pyrotechnics have a different value [...] I harbor a feeling similar to a great hope, a conviction, almost. It appears to me that the children, with their multicolored rockets, will neutralize the atomic mushroom. I know that it is naive to place a wooden horse next to the atomic bomb and expect it to miraculously defuse its destructive power. But deep down I cannot help but believe that those children's feet, which now strike the wooden floor and applaud the colors that dance in the air, will trample all schemes against humanity. With their innocent zeal, the children will chase away the indifference of Philistines of all sorts; they will repudiate the myopia of the alchemists who have constrained the enthusiasm in catechisms; they will unmask the ardor of the bootlickers, the profiteers, and the flag-bearers. The flood of the children of today and of tomorrow will erase the scars of yesterday's cowardice and prevent new ones from forming. With the touch of their innocent fingers, these lively children will stop the hands of the inquisitors, melt the steel of the handcuffs and the iron of the prison locks.)

It is this *transcendence* of the children, these creatures who have not yet been interpolated into the machine of ideology, that Pahor is prepared to (and already does) openly endorse. The ability to embody and the freedom to claim one's individuality and true essence in pacific coexistence, like the children who rejoice in unison at the sight of fireworks, is but one example of the Pahorian call for empathy, understanding and acceptance of difference.

The author's narrative works reiterate this call to action and others by thematizing the threat of assimilation and the importance of a sense of national belonging in a community's sociocultural preservation. Pahor's frequent recourse to the popular Slovenian folk song, "Lepa Vida" (Italian: "Bella Vida"; English: "Fair Vida") illuminates both the threat and the allure that large nations present for small ones. The song tells the story of Vida, young mother to a newborn son and wife to an older man. While washing rags in the water one day, a young man approaches her on a boat and takes her to the court of the king of Spain. After reaching the promise land, Vida longs for her

⁶⁸ Pahor, Boris. *Dentro il labirinto*. Trans. Martina Clerici (Rome: Fazi, 2011), 348.

homeland and her ‘roots.’ The ancient folk song has garnered significant attention since its inception, especially after the great Slovenian poet France Prešeren transcribed it into a ballad, the most well-known version of “Lepa Vida” to date. Another distinguished Slovenian poet, writer and playwright, Ivan Cankar, also curated a theatrical adaptation of the play, slightly altering, however, the core message of the song and transforming Vida into the archetype of the ‘ideal woman.’ With a few notable exceptions, most iterations of the song give no indication of Vida’s presumed efforts to return to her homeland, but the common and most significant thread that binds all versions of “Lepa Vida” is the woman’s sad fate, for she presumably spends the rest of her days longing for her homeland. The most substantial difference among the iterations of the motif concerns the function and the intentions of the man who reaches Vida on the boat. While some re-elaborations suggest that Vida is abducted against her will, others imply that she voluntarily allows the man to transport her to Spain. Nevertheless, the primary motif and underlying message of “Lepa Vida” remains, for Pahor specifically, the threat that large nations pose for small ones. In an essay from 1995, the author reflects on its insinuations concerning the inherent sense of inferiority that tends to afflict members of small, unrecognized communities, and in doing so, often leads them to seek a sense of belonging in assimilation:

non è necessario che il canto popolare s’inventi l’arrivo del battelliere straniero che porterà Vida alla corte spagnola, giacché basta il prestigio di una grande nazione che con la sua storia, la sua economia, la sua cultura è una tentazione ben maggiore per la figlia o il figlio di una piccola comunità. E così il motivo della *Bella Vida* cessa di essere poetico e diventa invece un elemento del complesso d’inferiorità, complesso che è tanto più forte quando una parte di un piccolo popolo vive nell’ambito di un altro Stato. In questo caso, infatti, ogni singolo membro della comunità ha l’occasione prossima di oltrepassare la frontiera interna, cioè di abbandonare la propria collettività etnica – i due anziani del canto popolare – e di unirsi alla comunità maggioritaria, la quale potrà anche a parlare spagnolo, in ogni caso, però una lingua che non sarà quella d’origine dell’emigrato linguistico.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Pahor, Boris. “Riflessioni sulla letteratura di un piccolo popolo o di una parte di essa separata dalla frontiera,” *Venuti a galla* (Parma: Diabasis, 2014), 8.

(it is not necessary for the popular song to fabricate the arrival of the foreign boater who will bring Vida to the Spanish court since the prestige of a great nation, with its history, its economy, and its culture is a much greater temptation for the daughter or son of a small community. And so, the motif of *Fair Vida* ceases to be poetic and instead becomes an element of the inferiority complex, a complex that is all the stronger when a part of a small people lives within another State. In this case, in fact, every single member of the community has the opportunity to cross the internal border, that is, to abandon his own ethnic collectivity – the two elders of popular song – and to join the majority community, which will also be able to speak Spanish, in any case, but a language that will not be the one of origin of the linguistic emigrant.)

Pahor's "Lepa Vida" is thus imbued with significant political admonitions that underscore the delicate existential conditions of small nations and subaltern cultures. The inferiority complex that Pahor identifies in Vida's willful departure towards the promise land reaches new depths in contexts where geographical boundaries between one nation and another are removed, as in the case of the Slovenian community in Trieste. Under these circumstances, suggests Pahor, only one's national consciousness, the so-called 'frontiera interiore' (internal border), can diminish the sense of inferiority and reduce the temptation to assimilate. Jože Pogačnik has observed that with its numerous mutations and adaptations, "the motif of Fair Vida, as it passed through history, [has had] a unique rebirthing function for the Slovenian nation."⁷⁰ Pahor employs this motif in his novel *Mesto v zalivu* (Italian: *La città nel golfo*; English: *The City in the Gulf*), through a character who becomes the very personification or 'double' of the woman in the ancient folk song and even bears the same name.

Pahor's oeuvre is populated with female figures who serve vital functions in the narrative and often present diverse embodiments of femininity, which inspire introspection in their male counterpart and help him to identify and question his desires, values, and principles. Pahor places

⁷⁰ Pogačnik, Jože. *Slovenska Lepa Vida ali hoja za rožo cudotvorno* ['The Slovenian Fair Vida' or 'Following the Magic Flower']. (Ljubljana, 1988), 31

women at the forefront of his narrative – another aspect that speaks to an important chapter of Trieste’s sociohistorical past. The city contributed to the genesis of the Slovenian feminist movement since the first Slovenian feminist newspaper *Slovenka* was published in Trieste between 1897 and until 1902. Its first editor, Marica Nadlišek was a central figure in social and intellectual circles between the Slovenian, Habsburg, and Slavonic worlds.⁷¹ Pahor’s women *are* or *are encouraged to become* independent agents of change not only *capable* of contributing to society in a myriad of ways but *urged* to do so.

In *Mesto v Zalivu*, Pahor juxtaposes two female figures who are, in many ways, direct opposites.⁷² Their differences push the male protagonist to contemplate his own value system, in this case through their respective attitudes to the political questions sweeping the region of Friuli Venezia Giulia and, more specifically, the community of Slovenes residing within it. In 1943 Nazi-occupied Italy, Rudi Leban, a Slovenian law student abandons his Italian uniform and embarks on a journey to his native Trieste. On the train, Rudi notices a young dark-haired woman who immediately draws him in with her beauty and demure demeanor, “la ragazza del nastro viola divenuta in quell’istante, ai suoi occhi, la ragazza più stupenda del mondo” (the girl with the purple ribbon who became, in that moment, to his eyes, the most wonderful girl in the world).⁷³ During the train ride, the passengers learn of a new order by the German commander of Trieste, which

⁷¹ For more on the feminist movement in Trieste see Camboni, Marina. *Networking Women: Subjects, Places, Links Europe-America* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2004); Luthar, Oto. *The Land Between: A History of Slovenia* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2008); Ramet, Sabrina P. *Gender Politics in the Western Balkans* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999); Smith, Bonnie G. and Joanna Regulska, *Women and Gender in Postwar Europe: From Cold War to European Union* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012).

⁷² The novel was met with great enthusiasm and praise by Slovenian writers and intellectuals. In the introduction to the first edition of *Necropoli*, Marija Pirjevec notes that in a 1956 letter to Pahor, the Slovenian writer and Pahor’s friend Edvard Kocbek remarked, prophetically: “con questo libro sei diventato scrittore” (with this book you became a writer). See: Prijevec, Marija. “Lo scrittore Triestino Boris Pahor.” *Necropoli* (Rome: Fazi, 2008), 185.

⁷³ Pahor, Boris. *La città nel golfo*. Trans. Marija Kacin (Milan: Bompiani, 2014), 10.

requires all registered officials and soldiers to report, in uniform, at Roiano, warning that failure to comply would result in their interment and removal from Trieste, as well as severe punishment. The young woman confidently assures him that the Germans would not be present at the Trieste train station and that he would arrive at his native city safely. Rudi trusts her assurance, only to soon regret it, but manages to escape the Germans by a stroke of luck. Subsequently, he seeks refuge in the countryside, where he is greeted by the charming and vibrant, but also “presuntuosa e mordace” (presumptuous and biting), and “amabilmente indifferente” (lovingly indifferent) Vida who is said to show enthusiasm at the sight of an out-of-town, foreign visitor.⁷⁴ The rapport between the two, who had first met two years earlier, is founded on difference since they appear to exhibit contrasting perspectives on virtually everything and, most importantly, divergent attitudes towards their respective identities which emerge in their many conversations:

È comunque interessante che fin dal primo giorno in cui si erano conosciuti avessero, senza preliminari, scelto quel tono, sempre un po' sopra le righe. In tal modo era loro consentito di essere sinceri senza aggredirsi a vicenda, di accusarsi senza reciproca offesa; si danno rispettivamente del lei, il che consente loro di mantenere le distanze, eppure è come se si dessero del tu. Tutto è consentito, in quel loro colloquiare, rispettoso e provocatorio.⁷⁵

(It is, however, interesting that from the first day they met they had chosen that tone, always a little over the top, without any hesitation. In this way they were allowed to be sincere without attacking each other, free to accuse each other without mutual offense; they address themselves formally, which allows them to keep their distance, yet it is as if they called themselves ‘you.’ Everything is allowed, in their respectful and provocative conversations.)

Dialogue, the verbal exchange of perspectives, is an integral trait of Pahor’s narrative. Conversations about sensitive and contentious ethno-political issues abound and serve an ethical and instructive function: engagement with difference is a collective ethical responsibility of all

⁷⁴ Pahor, *La città nel golfo*, 62-63.

⁷⁵ Pahor, *La città nel golfo*, 65.

individuals. While frustrations and quarrels arise in the divergent political beliefs between Pahor's interlocutors, the narrative voice always underscores their intrinsic educational value. This also proves true for the banter between Rudi and Vida, even when their rousing interactions assume a tone that borders on hostility. One such example is their conversation about Vida's travel aspirations (she yearns to visit Rome, Florence, and Palermo) and her desire to leave home, which Rudi challenges by observing that she had previously *voluntarily* returned to her native city from Florence:

È stata lei stessa a raccontare della sua fuga da Firenze, verso casa. Non è vero? Perché non ce la fa a stare a lungo lontana da qui. Questo è il punto. Ora lei si sente diversa dalle ragazze del paese, sente di non far parte di loro. Se invece sta in giro per il mondo, deve ritornare. Non riesce a concepire la sua vita lontana da questi pastini e da queste deliziose doline che ora le riescono così tediose.⁷⁶

(It was you, who spoke of your escape from Florence, towards home. Is it not true? Because you cannot stay away from here for long. This is the point. Now you feel different from the girls in the country, you feel like you are not part of them. If you travel around the world, you have to return. You cannot conceive of your life away from these pastries and from these delicious sinkholes that you now perceive as so dreary.)

Vida defends her position, stating that her return was motivated by familial pressures and the sense of being perceived as a "peccatrice" (sinner). She also accuses him of preaching against desires that he was privileged to fulfill, for he had traveled the world "in lungo e in largo" (far and wide).⁷⁷ Rudi explains that this seeming privilege was instead a requisite of his employment, affirming "Per noi è diverso, perché abbiamo girato il mondo quando vi ci hanno mandati, da studenti, da soldati, da internati, ma siamo sempre stati fieri di noi stessi. Noi, in terra straniera, la nostra terra natale l'abbiamo sempre apprezzata *ancor di più*" (It is different for us because we have traveled the

⁷⁶ Pahor, 115.

⁷⁷ Pahor, 115.

world when we were sent to do so as students, as soldiers, as prisoners, but we were always proud of ourselves. On foreign land, we always appreciated our native land *even more*).⁷⁸

The narrative voice encapsulates the complex geopolitical circumstances of the Slovenian Littoral that underlie Rudi's inner thoughts, intimating that "questo lembo di terra slovena la cui capitale dal 1918 è Roma, sta qui, sul litorale adriatico, come un pesce fuor d'acqua. Si sta inaridendo e sfaldando. Se ti opponi alla violenza sei un bandito. Se vuoi vivere puoi farlo, naturalmente, ma devi divenire *uno di loro*" (this strip of Slovenian land, the capital of which has been Rome since 1918, is here, on the Adriatic coast, like a fish out of water. It is drying up and flaking off. If you resist violence, you are an outlaw. If you want to live you can, of course, but you have to become *one of them*).⁷⁹ While the ethnopolitical implications of the rhetorical 'uno di loro' (one of them) can be interpreted as divisive and representative of the problematic interethnic relations of the time, they veraciously portray the historical reality of the region following the first world conflict. Emphasized through italics by the author himself, this precarious choice of words nonetheless stresses the disadvantaged conditions of the Slovenian minority under and after fascism, for the very premise of forced assimilation is, indeed the adoption of language, identity, norms, customs, ideology, and religious beliefs of *(an)other*, generally larger, and dominant culture. The allure of the larger (Italian) cities by which Vida is enticed lies in their more 'evolved' culture, Rudi suggests: "A lei invece pare che siano il massimo, perché possono vantare Michelangelo, Raffaello, e la basilica di San Pietro" (You, on the other hand, perceive them as magnanimous because they can boast Michelangelo, Raffaello and the basilica of Saint Peter).⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Pahor, 114.

⁷⁹ Pahor, 114.

⁸⁰ Pahor, 114.

Vida retorts, in her signature devil's advocate panache, asking "E noi, li abbiamo?" (And we, do we have them?), to which the impassioned and frustrated Rudi replies:

No, non li abbiamo. Però abbiamo dei grandi uomini. Soltanto che i nostri grandi uomini sono irrilevanti se viviamo in uno Stato straniero che si accanisce a sostenere come la nostra sia una lingua di mandrieri* e che tutti noi siamo dei contadinotti con addosso il fetore di letame. Questo è il veleno il cui effetto si protrae per tutta la vita, è un veleno tenace. Ce lo hanno iniettato a scuola. Ce lo hanno dunque ben iniettato nel cuore, già da bambini. E così oggi ci vergogniamo delle nostre madri [...] Per quale motivo il suo ragazzo o fidanzato o quel che sia non è uno Sloveno**? Anche i nostri giovani studiano medicina, ingegneria e via dicendo. Sono dunque persone colte anch'essi. Lei, perché non si sceglie uno di loro? Oh, lo so, a Venezia, a Roma, a Milano sarebbe da meschini rinfacciare a una ragazza di essersi innamorata di uno straniero. Sarebbe da imbecilli. Ma per noi è diverso. Noi ci vergogniamo di essere figli di schiavi che vanno fucilati oppure depurati con l'olio di ricino. È dunque naturale che lei si infiammi per chi non viene insultato da nessuno, per chi le farà provare l'ebbrezza della vita umana.⁸¹

(No, we don't. But we have great men. Only that our great men are irrelevant if we live in a foreign state that doggedly argues that ours is a language of mandrieri* and that we are all peasants with the stench of manure on us. This is the poison whose effect lasts a lifetime, an assiduous poison. They injected it into us at school. Thus, they have injected it deeply into our hearts as children. And so today we are ashamed of our mothers. [...] For what reason is your boyfriend or fiancé, or whatever he is, not a Slovene **? Our young men also study medicine, engineering and so on. They are therefore cultured people, too. Why don't you choose one of them? Oh, I know, in Venice, in Rome, in Milan it would be petty to accuse a girl of having fallen in love with a foreigner. It would be foolish. But for us it is different. We are ashamed of being the children of slaves who are shot or purified with castor oil. It is therefore natural that you blush over those who are not insulted by anyone, for those who will make you feel the thrills of human life.)

Rudi's provocative remarks at once decry the same sense of inferiority that brings Lepa Vida to abandon her homeland and venture towards new horizons, and underscore the importance of dignity, a core tenet of Pahor's understanding of identity. At first glance, Rudi's incendiary remarks *can* appear to echo the 'moglie e buoi dei paesi tuoi' (Italian proverb: your wife and your livestock should come from your own town) kind of nationalistic favoritism, however, the

⁸¹ Pahor, 114-115. *Mandrieri: "coltivatori di verdure e primizie a ridosso di Trieste;" ("growers of vegetables and fresh fruit near Trieste"). **The capitalization is true to the text.

underlying appeal of the author is entrenched in the indispensable role of the individual in the collective efforts of a community. More specifically, for Rudi, the political question cannot be transcended before a collective and imminent struggle for *survival*. Unreservedly invested in this cause, Rudi struggles to accept Vida's seeming impartiality and detachment before the grave existential conditions of the fraught Slovenian minority.

Yet, while Rudi does not yield to nor internalize the inferiority that he condemns, he does instead earnestly stress the humiliating nature of the mechanisms employed to achieve it in the consciousness of the subaltern: "Sono geloso come lo siamo stati per ogni ragazza che lo straniero si è portato via, lo straniero che ci stava annientando. Ripeto: che ci stava annientando. Geloso per tutte quelle migliaia di ragazze. Siamo stati tutti gelosi perché i fascisti si gloriavano, a mo' di macellai-padroni, di poter scegliersi le carni migliori" (I am as jealous as we have been for every girl the stranger took away, the stranger who was annihilating us. I repeat: *who was annihilating us*. Jealous of all those thousands of girls. We were all jealous because the fascists prided themselves, like butcher-masters, on being able to choose the best meats).⁸² Rudi's language, which Vida describes as 'vulgar' emphatically conveys the condescending, primal, and inhumane treatment of the 'other.' In a subsequent encounter, Rudi shares the story of Lepa Vida with Vida herself, who initially dismisses it as a 'favola' (fable), likely fabricated by Rudi himself, especially given the name of the woman in the song. Vida justifies the departure of the woman in the song, observing that "Non era di certo felice, a casa, altrimenti non se ne sarebbe andata" (She certainly was not happy at home, otherwise she would not have left), while Rudi asserts in response "Ma in terra straniera, felice lo fu ancor meno" (But on foreign land, she was even less happy).⁸³ Rudi

⁸² Pahor, 116.

⁸³ Pahor, 122.

also intimates that Vida was not familiar with the folk song because of her cultural conditioning: “Sopresse le scuole slovene fu costretta, si sa, a frequentare quelle italiane. È per questo motivo che non sa nulla del canto popolare sulla Bella Vida” (Upon the suppression of Slovenian schools, she was forced, as we know, to attend the Italian ones. It is for this reason that she did not know anything about the folk song about Lepa Vida).⁸⁴ This creative intertextuality enables the author to bring Lepa Vida to life, whilst simultaneously challenging the motives that might lead her to embark on the boat *before* she does. Similarly, in his unyielding patriotism, Rudi and by extension Pahor, promises “Noi, ora siamo soldati per riportare a casa tutte le nostre Elene e tutte le nostre Vide” (We are now soldiers to bring home all of our Elenas and Vidas) and “Noi dobbiamo essere liberi e liberi saremo. Avremo libri e scuole e manderemo i nostri giovani e le nostre ragazze all’università slovena e all’accademia delle arti perché possano conoscere i nostri poeti e scrittori e i nostri artisti. E venga, allora qualcuno a insultarci” (We have to be free and free we will be. We will have books and schools and we will send our young men and women to Slovenian universities and academy of art so they can learn about our poets and writers and artists).⁸⁵ Nevertheless, Rudi contemplates the disparate evolutionary ‘journeys’ of large and small nations through the mechanism of a toy that belongs to Vera’s sister Dorica. Studying the equidistant hands of the clock-like gadget, he compares them to the separate, albeit connected journeys of the Slovenian community and the Italian state, which move differently, but always on the same ‘axis’:

Il fatto che entrambe le lancette si muovano in contemporanea, perfettamente sincronizzate, sempre egualmente distanti. Ecco: egualmente distanti. Il meccanismo della nostra psiche sta qui. Non di tutti noi. No. Di molti però sì. Di molto lo è di certo. Sì. Sta di fatto che ti hanno educata inculcandoti un senso di inferiorità. Sta qui il primo trauma. Poi ti hanno ammaliata con lo splendore della magnificenza straniera. Due fatti essenziali. Un duplice trauma, diciamo. E è così

⁸⁴ Pahor, 125-126.

⁸⁵ Pahor, 123, 118.

che tutto il tuo anelare rifugge da quel senso di piccolezza e di vergogna. Il che significa che è rivolto all'esterno. All'infuori. Fuori, via, vuol dire allontanarsi. È per questo motivo che il flusso della psiche della nostra gente si scinde ai pari delle lancette di quel giocattolo. [...] Anche sull'orologio vero ci sono ovviamente due lancette. C'è quella grande. Quella si mette in cammino e nel frattempo la lancetta piccola si muove assai più lenta e cauta. L'una intraprende un percorso più lungo, l'altra uno più breve. Però, stanno in attesa l'una dell'altra. Si incontrano per decidere la distanza tra loro. Il significato di due percorsi diversi. Certamente. Due percorsi, anche se l'asse è uno solo. È così. Anche l'essere umano ne ha uno solo. La coscienza. E la consapevolezza della coscienza. È, questa, la coscienza di sé. Poi la coscienza del mondo esterno. La consapevolezza della coscienza si fa sempre più radicata.⁸⁶

(The fact that both hands move simultaneously, perfectly synchronized, always equally distant. Here: equally distant. The mechanism of our psyche lies here. Not in all of us. No. Of many, however, yes. It certainly does. Yes. The point is that they educated you by instilling a sense of inferiority in you. Here lies the first trauma. Then they bewitched you with the splendor of foreign magnificence. Two essential facts. A double trauma let's say. And that is how all your yearning shuns that sense of littleness and shame. Which means that it faces outwards. Outwards. Out, away, moving away. It is for this reason that the flow of our people's psyche splits like the hands of that toy. [...] There are obviously two hands on the real watch too. There is the big one. It sets off, and in the meantime, the small hand moves much slower and more cautious. One takes a longer path, the other a shorter one. However, they are waiting for each other. They meet to decide the distance between them. The meaning of two different paths. Certainly. Two paths, even if the axis is only one. It is so. Even the human being has only one. Conscience. And the awareness of consciousness. This is self-awareness. Then the consciousness of the outside world. Awareness of consciousness becomes more and more rooted.)

The conscience of an assimilated subject who internalizes an externally imposed sense of inferiority is thus analogous to the splitting of the singular hand of Dorica's toy. When the national consciousness or sense of belonging is weakened or strained, the gaze looks outwards, thus widening the distance between the *true* self and the *conditioned* self. According to Pahor, human conscience, however, develops with one's sense of self-awareness, which requires a discerning and determined engagement with external forces and a faithful internal contemplation of one's morals and principles. It is this integrity and loyalty to his own moral compass that ultimately leads

⁸⁶ Pahor, 130, 131.

Rudi to be more drawn to the patriotic activism and political involvement of Majda, the partisan dispatch rider whom he meets at the beginning of the story.

Pahor also adopts this concept in the novel *Spopad s pomladjo* (Italian: *Una primavera difficile*; English: *A Difficult Spring*), shifting the focus more intently, however, to the principle of dignity and independence in a supra-national sense. The novel traces the journey of Pahor's protagonist and alter ego, Radko Suban as he is transported from the Natzweiler Struhof concentration camp to a sanatorium in Paris in May of 1945. The narrative structure of the novel alternates between the past and the present, containing fragments of memory with which the protagonist attempts to reconstruct his identity, while the characters do not appear in their concrete form, but are rather presented as “frammenti di puzzle che l'autore incastra in modo progressivo per lasciarli infine costruire l'intera opera e, per dirla come Proust, 'L'immenso edificio del ricordo'” (fragments of puzzles that the author wedges in in a progressive way to ultimately allow them to construct an entire work and, in the words of Proust 'The immense edifice of memory').⁸⁷ The physical strains caused by tuberculosis are intensified by Radko's unceasing self-reproach, those “internalized barriers, constantly restored and consolidated by the feeling of eternal guilt for being still here, still being alive, while so many of the convicted were transformed into smoke, rising above their last dwelling-place,” thus transforming the sanatorium into “its own Kafkian penal colony.”⁸⁸ As Mary B. Tulusso notes, Radko's spring is difficult for it “segna un prima e un dopo. Prima e dopo lo sterminio, prima e dopo le modalità più feroci messe in atto dagli esecutori al servizio dei dittatori, prima e dopo la perdita della libertà. Ma appunto, Radko stesso è un

⁸⁷ Tulusso, Mary B. “Il dolore ritrovato di una primavera difficile.” *Boris Pahor: Scrittore senza frontiere* (Trieste: Mladika, 2021), 132.

⁸⁸ Bavčar, Evgen. “To Love or Not to Love: That Is the Question.” Prologue to *A Difficult Spring* by Boris Pahor. *Litterae Slovenicae* (2016). DOI: <https://litteraeslovenicae.si/wpcontent/uploads/boris-pahor-spremka.pdf>, 275.

paradosso perché il suo sottrarsi alla memoria del dolore è istintivo. Pensare a sé stesso come a un altro uomo – ora – pare l'unica possibilità per affrontare presente e futuro” (marks a before and an after. Before and after the concentration camp, before and after the cruelest modalities implemented by the executors in service of the dictators, before and after the loss of freedom. But Radko himself is a paradox because his withdrawing to the memory of pain is instinctive. To think of himself as another man – now – is the only possibility to face the past and the future).⁸⁹ As Evgen Bavčar maintains, it is in nature and the feminine that “Radko resorts and [...] looks for a unique asylum on the way to freedom, to new beginnings. Nature and woman give him, in their infinity, the opportunity to forget.”⁹⁰

In the sanatorium Radko meets Arlette, the French nurse who brings him back to health, but also ‘back to life’ as the author intimates in *Figlio di nessuno*, “Arrivai al sanatorio come un derelitto, nell’anima e nel corpo, e Arlette fu una zattera a cui appigliarmi, un virgulto di vita, una ragione che mi fece risvegliare il desiderio di andare avanti” (As a derelict, in soul and body, I arrived at the sanatorium and Arlette was a raft to hold onto, a side shoot of life, a reason that restored my desire to move forward).⁹¹ In Arlette, Toluoso identifies the most Proustian of all the characters in the novel, for she is “una specie di adolescente vitale, indipendente, soprattutto ‘irresponsabile’ [...] una sintesi ossimorica tra pudicizia e provocazione” (a kind of dynamic adolescent, independent, above all, ‘irresponsible’ [...] an oxymoronic synthesis of demureness and provocation).⁹² It is this nexus of contradictory qualities that intrigues Radko, giving way to a

⁸⁹ Toluoso, 130.

⁹⁰ Bavčar, 277.

⁹¹ Pahor and Battocletti, *Figlio di nessuno*, 80.

⁹² Toluoso, 134.

physical attraction that transforms, over time, into an intellectual relationship between two seemingly contrasting natures.⁹³ Yet, this convoluted romance comes to a halt in the sequel, *Il labirinto*, when Arlette must decide whether to join Radko in Trieste or to remain in Paris. This predicament presents Arlette with a decision that evokes the myth of Lepa Vida, albeit the situation in Trieste at the time (1946) is certainly far from desirable. Still, while Radko hopes that the woman will join him in his native city, he encourages her to reach a decision independently. After learning that she has made strides in her professional life, he pens a letter in which he commends her for fulfilling her personal objectives: “E mi pare davvero che tu abbia finalmente trovato la tua strada [...] vuol dire che hai preso in mano le redini del tuo destino. È l’essenziale e si spera che tu non ti tiri indietro come l’anno scorso quando hai rinunciato a procurarti il passaporto. Ti sei lasciata

⁹³ Pahor describes this intersection of the intellectual and physical in *Figlio di nessuno*: “Arlette amava Gide, Colette, Gary e caldeggiava le opere di Ernst Wiechert, ma io non riuscivo ad affrontare nulla che riguardasse la lingua, la cultura o solamente la provenienza tedesca. Lo lessi solo molti mesi dopo. A forza di immergermi in libri e quotidiani sinistrorsi, anch’io rimasi soggiogato dal pensiero della Gauche e mi avvicinai alle sue posizioni, non potendo ancora prevedere gli esiti fallimentari del socialismo reale nell’ex Jugoslavia e in Unione Sovietica. Fu il periodo in cui rimasi affascinato da *Il silenzio del mare* di Vercors, romanzo di contenuto antinazista. Mi sentivo affine anche a questo autore, perché avevamo un percorso intellettuale molto simile: anche lui aveva combattuto nella lotta di liberazione dal nazismo senza essere comunista, mantenendo sempre le sue posizioni liberali. Era una figura molto vicina a Edvard Kocbek, cui mi sentivo in sintonia di pensiero e di azione. Anche Vercors conobbi personalmente e gli regalai una copia di *Necropoli*, nelle cui pagine l’avevo citato. In tutto questo bailamme culturale si intromise Arlette, con cui mi ammorbidii pian piano. Sentii lentamente risvegliarsi dentro di me un interesse, di cui avvertivo in qualche modo la reciprocità, quando quotidianamente faceva ingresso nella mia stanza per affiancare la dottoressa o per la distribuzione dei termometri. Quando si avvicinava io rimanevo rapito dalla sua fronte alta, leggermente inarcata, e dalle ciocche bionde ribelli che uscivano dal fazzoletto stretto sotto la nuca. Spesso accadeva che si liberasse per un attimo da quella pettinatura forzata sotto il mio sguardo e scuotesse la testa per sciogliere la chioma. Poi si riaggiustava il tutto davanti allo specchio in una mossa civettuola.” (Arlette loved Gide, Colette, Gary and supported the works of Ernst Wiechert, but I couldn't deal with anything that concerned the language, the culture or the mere German provenance. I read it only several months later. By dint of immersing myself in leftist books and newspapers, I too was subjugated by the thought of the Gauche and grew closer to its positions, not yet able to foresee the bankruptcy outcomes of real socialism in the former Yugoslavia and in the Soviet Union. It was a period in which I was fascinated by *The Silence of the Sea* by Vercors, a novel of anti-Nazi sentiment. I also felt akin to this author because we had a very similar intellectual journey: he too had fought in the struggle for liberation from Nazism without being a communist, always maintaining his liberal positions. He was a figure very close to Edvard Kocbek, with whom I felt in harmony in thought and action. I also met Vercors personally and gave him a copy of *Necropolis*, in which I cited him. Arlette, with whom I slowly softened, intervened in this cultural turmoil. I slowly felt an interest awaken within me, whose reciprocity I felt in some way, when she entered my room every day to assist the doctor or to distribute the thermometers. When she approached me, I was enthralled by her high, slightly arched forehead and the rebellious blonde locks that emerged from the tight handkerchief under her neck. She often freed herself for a moment from that enforced hairstyle under my gaze, shaking her head to loosen her hair. Then she would readjust everything in front of the mirror in a coquettish way). Pahor and Battocletti, *Figlio di nessuno*, 96-97.

influenzare da tua madre e hai avuto paura di andare a vivere all'estero" (And it truly seems to me that you have finally found your way [...] it means that you have taken the reins of your destiny in hand. It is essential and hopefully you will not back down like last year when you gave up on obtaining a passport. You allowed yourself to be influenced by your mother and you were afraid of going to live abroad).⁹⁴ But he also encourages Arlette to reach a decision in complete autonomy, for it is in the freedom of choice that *dignity* lies: "Dovresti convincerti – e adesso pare che tu lo sia davvero – che l'unica decisione valida sarà quella che prenderai in completa autonomia. Naturalmente vale anche nel caso che tu decida di lasciar perdere l'idea del nostro incontro sulla costa di Trieste" (You should convince yourself – and now it seems that you really are – that the only valid decision will be the one you will make in complete autonomy. Of course, this also applies if you decide to give up on the idea of our meeting on the Triestine coast).⁹⁵ Thus, while Arlette brings Radko back to health, he helps her to pursue a more autonomous existence, even if the latter does not include him.

After his internment in the concentration camps of Europe, Radko practices his own independence by prioritizing his contact with nature to cope with his consuming grip of guilt and alienation. To ameliorate this sense of displacement, he seeks refuge in the "oscurità del bosco e della notte per ritrovare il suo passato. Non era infatti possibile essere al tempo stesso estraneo al mondo della morte e al mondo degli uomini" (darkness of the forest and of the night to rediscover its past. Indeed, it was not possible to be at the same time a stranger to the world of death and to the world of men).⁹⁶ The space of the woods becomes a locus of projection onto which the former

⁹⁴ Pahor, Boris. *Dentro il labirinto*. Trans. Martina Clerici (Rome: Fazi, 2011), 282.

⁹⁵ Pahor, *Dentro il labirinto*, 182.

⁹⁶ Pahor, Boris. *Una primavera difficile* (Milan: La nave di Teseo, 2016), 100.

political prisoner of the camp mentally transposes and in which he recreates his memory of the concentration camp, for “il bosco diventava a poco a poco impersonale. Si rendeva conto che ciò somigliava molto a una fuga, ma il suo passato continuava a esigerlo. Perché nel bosco, dove non c'erano parole umane, valeva ancora la verità dello sconfinato sterminio, e il reduce manteneva intatte le proprie immagini” (little by little, the woods would become impersonal. He recognized that this resembled an escape, but his past continued to demand it. Because in the woods, where there were no human words, the truth of the boundless extermination camp was still valid, and the veteran kept his images intact).⁹⁷ Like Vida, although in a different configuration, Radko is afflicted by contrasting emotions generated by the external conditioning of the concentration camp, which now cause him to feel like a man who resides somewhere *between* the land of the *dead* and the land of the *living*. The author also articulates this in *Nekropola*, where the protagonist's contact with the visitors of the Natzweiler-Struhof concentration camp, twenty years after his internment, leaves him with the perception that they can see the uniform he once wore as an internee:

Sarò strambo ma mi pare che i visitatori, mentre tornano alle loro automobili, mi osservino come se di colpo fosse riapparsa sulle mie spalle la giubba a strisce e io stesso camminando sulla ghiaia con gli zoccoli. Si tratta certo di un'idea bislacca: però è vero che a volte, in momenti particolari, si è capaci di emettere fluido invisibile ma potente, che gli altri percepiscono come la vicinanza di un'atmosfera insolita, eccezionale, e ne vengono colpiti come un'imbarcazione da un'onda anomala. E chissà, forse sulla mia persona è rimasto davvero un qualcosa di com'ero in quel tempo. Perciò tento di camminare tutto raccolto in me stesso, e quasi mi disturbano i sandali leggeri che ho ai piedi, che mi consentono un passo molto più elastico di quello che potrei permettermi se le mie calzature fossero ancora di tela e le soles di legno spesso.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Pahor, *Una primavera difficile*, 49. Slovenian: “ko je gozd polagoma postajal zmeraj bolj brezoseben. In zavedal se je, da je bilo to podobno begu, a kaj, ko je tako še zmeraj zahtevala njegova preteklost. Ker v gozdu, kjer ni bilo človeških besed, je ostajala še v veljavi resnica brezmejnega pogina, in povrnjenec je ohranjal nedotaknjene svoje podobe.” Pahor, Boris. *Spodaj s pomladjo* (Ljubljana: Mladinska Knjiga, 2012), 46.

⁹⁸ Pahor, Boris. *Necropoli* (Rome: Fazi, 2008), 29. Slovenian: “Bedasto je, a zdi se mi, da me turisti, ki se vračajo k svojim vozilom, opazujejo, kakor da se je naenkrat poveznil na moje rame zbrasti jopič in da moje lesene cokle tarejo kamenčke na poti. Sak, nenadzorovan utrinek, ki v človeku pomeša preteklost s sedanost; vendar je tudi res, da se v nekaterih trenutkih v človeku spočenja neviden, a močen fluid, ki ga drugi občutijo kot bližino njim nevsakdanjega, izrednega ozračja, in se zdrznejo kakor čoln ob nevadnem valu. Zato je na meni morebiti zares nekaj mene iz davnih

(I may sound strange, but it seems to me that as they return to their cars, the visitors observe me as if the striped jacket had suddenly reappeared on my shoulders and I myself walking on the gravel with the clogs. This is certainly a strange idea: however, it is true that sometimes, in particular moments, one is able to emit invisible but powerful fluid, which others perceive as the proximity of an unusual, exceptional atmosphere, and are struck by it as a boat by a tidal wave. And who knows, maybe something has really remained of the person I was at that time. So, I try to walk all collected in myself, and the light sandals on my feet almost disturb me, for they allow me a much more flexible step than the shoes made of canvas and soles of thick wood.)

Like the hands of Dorica's toy and Vida's sense of shame and 'smallness' which emanates from inside, the author-protagonist-narrator projects his identity as a violated and tortured 'other' externally, perhaps by that 'invisible fluid' that is produced by and within us. The lasting effects of the conditioning enacted by the concentration camp are conveyed through the imagery of the footwear: the lightness and flexibility of the new sandals inversely cause discomfort because they contradict the weight of the wooden clogs to which he had become accustomed, and which had become an extension of his former self. Nevertheless, this internal mediation not only with the external world, but also with the past, ultimately illustrates the triumph of self-awareness and individual consciousness without disremembering the depth of the lasting imprint of the inhumane mechanisms which threaten them.

In *Spopad s pomladjo* (Italian: *Una primavera difficile*; English: *A Difficult Spring*),

Radko's destabilized sense of dignity and of self is especially apparent in his initial encounters

dni; in pri tej misli skušam hoditi zbrano sam zase, čeprav me moti, da so moje sandale tako lahke in je zato moj korak dosti bolj prožen, kakor bi bil, ko bi bilo, moje obuvalo spet platneno in bi še imelo podplate iz debelega lesa." Pahor, Boris. *Nekropola* (Ljubljana: Mladika, 2013), 11. English: ("It's absurd, but I almost feel that the tourists walking back to their cars can see the striped jacket wrapped around my shoulders and hear my wooden clogs crunch on the gravel of the path. This is a sudden flash, the kind that confuses past and present. There are moments when an invisible but powerful force stirs within us; others can sense it – as the presence of something unusual in the air – and they shudder like a boat in an unexpected wave. I may well be showing something of my former self. At this thought I try to focus on my stride. It bothers me that my sandals are so light and my step so elastic, more than if I were wearing canvas shoes with thick wooden soles. As I did then"). Pahor, Boris. *A Pilgrim in the Shadows*. Trans. Michael Biggins (Orlando: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1995), 5.

with the medical staff of the opposite sex and in his perception of his own physical body. While waiting for the doctor to conduct a physical exam, “Avvertiva però un senso di inattesa umiliazione all’idea che l’intera sua storia nel campo del concentramento si sarebbe ridotta a questo povero corpo, e per di più dinanzi a una donna” (He felt a sense of unexpected humiliation at the idea that his entire history in the concentration camp would be reduced to this poor body, and moreover in front of a woman).⁹⁹ After this encounter, Radko experiences a sensation similar to that of the protagonist of *Nekropola*, inasmuch as “Quando infine lui uscì dal portone, si fermò indeciso perché gli parve di essere diventato troppo presto un uomo come gli altri nelle strade di Parigi. Rimase sul marciapiede e capì che a renderlo strano erano i suoi abiti, sui quali si soffermavano sguardi dei passanti” (When he had finally walked through the large door, he stopped, undecided because it seems to him that he had too soon become a man like the others on the street of Paris. He stood on the sidewalk and realized that what was making him strange were his clothes, which attracted lingering passing glances).¹⁰⁰ Thus, Radko’s internal consciousness – constantly confronted with memories of a difficult, humiliating past – repeatedly produces a scission between present and past, internal and external. But Radko’s sense of alienation and estrangement is also attributable to his conflicting moral drives, which are generated by the mounting political tension in Trieste during his sojourn in Paris. In a letter to Arlette, Radko expresses his waning sense of belonging and the contradicting nature of his personal desires and his *individual* responsibility to the *collective* political efforts of his community:

⁹⁹ Pahor, Boris. *Una primavera difficile* (Milan: La nave di Teseo, 2016), 12. First digital edition; Slovenian: “Imel pa je občutek nepričakovanega ponižanja ob zavesti, da se bo vsa taboriščna zgodovina skrčila na to revno telo, in to še pred ženskim bitjem.” Pahor, Boris. *Spopad s pomladjo* (Ljubljana: Mladinska Knjiga, 2012), 10.

¹⁰⁰ Pahor, *Una primavera difficile*, 13. Slovenian: “Ko je potem odšel skozi veliki vhod, se je neodločen ustavil, ker ga je obšel občutek, da je prehitro postal človek kakor drugi ljudje na pariških ulicah. Stal je na pločniku in čutil, da je čudaški samo zaradi obleke, na kateri so se ustavljali pogledi mimoidočih.” Pahor, Boris. *Spopad s pomladjo* (Ljubljana: Mladinska Knjiga, 2012), 11.

Sono seduto a un caffè sugli Champs-Élysées e ho appena letto sul giornale l'articolo sulla città, "di cui parla il mondo intero," come direbbe Lei. Le notizie sulle dimostrazioni e proteste per le strade di Trieste a volte mi inquietano, e vorrei essere là a parteciparvi; ma devo riconoscere che tutto questo scalpore, riguardo a ciò che si aggroviglia e si annoda intorno alla mia città, in sostanza mi stanca. Il posto in cui siamo stati per alcuni decenni oggetto di paura e disprezzo è diventato l'epicentro sismico d'Europa; io invece ho voglia di pace e silenzio. È vero, sento di essere un senzatetto, e la patria è per me ovunque e in nessun luogo. Non so perché Le racconto tutto ciò. Forse perché mi spieghi se sia lecito a un uomo che è ritornato dalla terra dello sterminio innamorarsi di una bocca che mordicchia un baccello verde di fagioli. E se lo stesso uomo può opporsi quando la sua giovane accompagnatrice desidera andare a ballare.¹⁰¹

(I am sitting at a café on the Champs-Élysées and I have just read the article about the city in the newspaper, which "the whole world is talking about," as you would say. The news about the demonstrations and protests on the streets of Trieste sometimes disturb me, and I would like to be there to participate in them; but I must admit that all of this fuss about the tangles and knots around my city essentially tires me. The place where we have been for some decades the object of fear and contempt has become the seismic epicenter of Europe; I, on the other hand, want peace and silence. It is true, I feel homeless, and the homeland is everywhere and nowhere for me. I don't know why I am telling you all this. Perhaps so that you can explain to me whether it is permissible for a man who has returned from the land of extermination to fall in love with a mouth that nibbles a green pod of beans. And if the same man can object when his young date wants to go dancing.)

Arlette's presence thus ameliorates Radko's internalized perception of homelessness and unbelonging, nevertheless spurring emotions that instill a sense of restless self-scrutinization in the protagonist who tirelessly contemplates the consequences and moral soundness of his individual actions in the greater context. Yet, Radko's apparent detachment, or suggested desire for distance from the volatile terrain of his homeland, is uncharacteristic of Pahor's traditionally

¹⁰¹ Pahor 155. Slovenian: "Pred kavarno na Champs-Élysées sedim in pravkar sem odložil časnik s člankom o mestu, o katerem govori ves svet, kot bi rekli Vi. Vesti o demonstracijah in protestih po tržaških ulicah me kdaj vznemirijo, da bi se jim rad pridružil; a priznati moram, da me ta hrup ob vozlu, ki se je spredel okoli mojega mesta, v bistvu utruja. Kraj, kjer smo bili nekaj desetletij deležni strahu in zaničevanja, je postal epicenter "evropskega potresnega področja; meni pa se hoče tišine in miru. Res, tako čutim, kakor da sem brezdomec in mi je domovina povsod in nikjer. Pa saj ne vem, zakaj Vam to pravim. Saj, morebiti zato, da bi mi razložili, ali se sme človek, ki se je vrnil z zemlje pogina, zagledati v ustnice, ki grizljajo zelen fižolov strok. In ali se sme taisti človek upreti, ko si njegova mlada spremljevalka želi plesnega ritma?" Pahor, Boris. *Spopad s pomladjo* (Ljubljana: Mladinska Knjiga, 2012), 149.

enterprising, relentless, and convicted protagonists. This complacency, in fact, soon shifts to agency and a call to action roused internally. If Arlette acts as a refuge, a source of understanding and light, his sister Vidka stands as a symbol of ethical and social responsibility.

Whereas the Vida of *Mesto v zalivu* (Italian: *La città nel golfo*; English: *The City in the Gulf*) becomes a personification of the “Lepa Vida,” Vidka represents the subversion of the ancient myth. Ironically, it is she who, even from a distance, challenges Radko’s decision to extend his stay in France instead of participating in the hardship of his native city and homeland. Vidka (diminutive for Vida, meaning “little Vida”) thus breaks the ancient archetype and stands as both a symbol of a firm consciousness grounded in solidarity, and the commitment to the preservation of one’s ‘true self.’ The narrative voice intimates this after Radko writes her a letter, since “Si rese conto che pensava davvero più spesso al ritorno, anche se l’aveva scoperto solo mentre scriveva a Vidka; il problema era capire se Arlette l’avrebbe frenato o accelerato” (He realized that he really was thinking of his return more often, it only became apparent while writing to Vidka; the problem was whether Arlette would have slowed or accelerated it).¹⁰² In the letter, Radko acknowledges his increasing distance from the city and forestalls Vidka’s criticism, teasingly expressing his hopes for her ‘absolution’:

Vidka, cerco di immaginarmi le vie della nostra città, ma non mi riesce; come se tutto fosse svanito, si fosse spostato chissà dove, forse in capo al mondo. I giornali scrivono infatti di Trieste come se si trattasse di Shangai o di New Orleans; ma che vuoi, è già dal 1940 che giro l’Italia, l’Africa e ora l’Europa, per cui non c’è da meravigliarsi se sono di casa ovunque e in nessun luogo. Questo però non significa che non senta sempre accanto a me la mia sorellina, che con il suo cuore di oro mi accompagna dappertutto. Merito il tuo rimprovero, lo so, perché impiego così tanto

¹⁰² Pahor, 298; 155. Slovenian: “Vidka, je pisal, skušam si predstavljati ulice našega mesta, pa se mi ne posreči; tako je, kakor da se je vse pomaknilo nekam na konec sveta. No, saj o Trstu tudi pišejo, kot da gre za kak Šangaj ali New Orleans; a kaj, jaz že od 1940. leta krožim po Italiji, Afriki in zdaj po Evropi, da se pravzaprav ni čuditi, če sem doma povsod in nikjer. Vendar to ne pomeni, da ne čutim zmeraj ob sebi male sestrice, ki me spremlja povsod s “svojim zlatim srcem. O vem, prav gotovo zaslužim, da me ošteješ, ko pa se tako dolgo odpravljam od tod; a prišel bom in se bova pomenila, in prepričan sem, da mi boš tedaj dala odvezo.” Pahor, Boris. *Spopad s pomladjo* (Ljubljana: Mladinska Knjiga, 2012), 367.

tempo a congedarmi da qui; ma verrò e ne parleremo, e sono convinto che mi concederai l'assoluzione.¹⁰³

(Vidka, I try to imagine the streets of our city, but I cannot; it is as if everything had vanished and moved who knows where, perhaps to the end of the world. In fact, the newspapers write about Trieste as if it were Shanghai or New Orleans; but can I say, I have been touring Italy, Africa and now Europe since 1940, so it is no wonder that I am at home everywhere and nowhere. However, this does not mean that I do not always feel my little sister beside me, who accompanies me everywhere with her heart of gold. I deserve your reproach, I know, because it takes so long to take my leave from here; but I will come and we will discuss it, and I am convinced that you will grant me absolution.)

Radko's nomadic history presupposes a series of encounters with the 'other.' Still, as previously mentioned, this seeming complacency is rare among Pahor's protagonists, who tend to move with urgency and intention, setting a call for action not only for other characters, but for themselves and for the reader. Yet, in these moments Pahor's seemingly inexorable and unshakingly determined protagonists reveal their *humanity*, penetrating beneath the morally ostentatious guise which some have identified. Radko ruminates on this interplay of contemplation and action, observing that "il pensiero, come sta scritto nell'Amleto, ci fa diventare tutti paurosi, e bisognerebbe trovare la giusta percentuale di azione per mantenere l'equilibrio" (thought, as is written in Hamlet, makes us become fearful, and we should find the right amount of action to maintain a balance).¹⁰⁴ Whereas we can say that in *Spopad s pomladjo* the act of writing presents Radko with an escape and a possibility to 'reemerge from the ashes,' it is in the 600-page sequel *V labirintu*, originally

¹⁰³ Pahor, 363. Slovenian: "Vidka, je pisal, skušam si predstavljati ulice našega mesta, pa se mi ne posreči; tako je, kakor da se je vse pomaknilo nekam na konec sveta. No, saj o Trstu tudi pišejo, kot da gre za kak Šangaj ali New Orleans; a kaj, jaz že od 1940. leta krožim po Italiji, Afriki in zdaj po Evropi, da se pravzaprav ni čuditi, če sem doma povsod in nikjer. Vendar to ne pomeni, da ne čutim zmeraj ob sebi male sestrice, ki me spremlja povsod s svojim zlatim srcem. O vem, prav gotovo zaslužim, da me ošteješ, ko pa se tako dolgo odpravljam od tod; a prišel bom in se bova pomenila, in prepričan sem, da mi boš tedaj dala odvezo." Pahor, Boris. *Spopad s pomladjo* (Ljubljana: Mladinska Knjiga, 2012), 366-367.

¹⁰⁴ Pahor, 225. Slovenian: "Zato, ker nas misel, kakor je zapisano v Hamletu, dela vse plašljive, in bi morali najti pravi odstotek dejanja, da bi držal ravnotežje." Pahor, Boris. *Spopad s pomladjo* (Ljubljana: Mladinska Knjiga, 2012), 276.

published in Slovenian in 1984, that writing assumes a more conscious, political tone and ethical function.

Radko receives news of the May 1st Yugoslav occupation of Trieste while recovering in the French sanatorium, but towards the end of 1946, after his return to Trieste in *V labirintu*, he becomes a direct witness to the events occurring in the city, actively partaking in constant discussions concerning both its political state and its fate amongst Slovenes and Triestines. At this time, the possibility of the establishment of the Free Territory of Trieste was fueling debates among the various ethnic groups in the city and Radko was not opposed to the idea, for this option would have granted equal rights and recognition to both the Italian and the Slovenian side, respectively. Between fragments of romantic struggles, familial discussions, and life in the city, the novel traces the unraveling of this complex historical itinerary, which appears to reach a destination with the Treaty of Paris signed on February 10, 1947. But it is precisely from here on, as Cristina Benussi notes, that Radko's reflections intensify, "scisso come è tra due possibili scenari, da cui però, nei fatti, prende comunque le distanze: dalla democrazia che in Italia ha permesso al capitale di sottomettere il mondo; dal socialismo, che in Jugoslavia, attraverso la polizia segreta ha imposto un sistema totalitario" (torn as he is between two possible scenarios, from both of which however, he distances himself: from the democracy in Italy, which had allowed capital to subdue the world; from socialism, which imposed a totalitarian system in Yugoslavia through the secret police).¹⁰⁵ Benussi also aptly points out that the novel, published in 1983, is written from the perspective of a Pahor who was clearly aware of the cessation of the Free Territory of Trieste in 1954 and of the eventual resolution of the eastern border at Osimo in 1975, as well as of the death of Tito, and of the ongoing unresolved interethnic tensions between Italians and Slovenes which were hindering

¹⁰⁵ Benussi, Cristina. "Donne dentro il labirinto." *Boris Pahor: Scrittore senza frontiere* (Trieste: Mladika, 2021), 140.

a peaceful and collaborative interethnic and intercultural coexistence.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, Pahor's emphasis on Radko's exposure to and engagement with a variety of political and cultural perspectives attests to the divergent reactions and aspirations of the city's subgroups. These dialogical exchanges and the divergences they present are arguably some of the most authentic examples of Trieste's changing identity in the inter and postwar periods, while the maturing intellectual pursuits of Radko are proof of the changing manifestations of literary *triestinità*. Furthermore, the novel also problematizes and underscores the responsibility of literature and sets the ethical parameters of the author's objectives; Radko's writing is characterized by a sense of urgency and haste, as the narrative voice writes:

invece di vedersi accordare il tempo necessario a una giusta concentrazione, si era sentito ordinare: Raccogli tutto, non c'è tempo! Così, come un lavoratore d'assalto. Sicché provava una certa insofferenza mentre ripartiva i fogli, ne stabiliva l'ordine e lo scombinava di nuovo. [...] Temeva infatti di non essere in grado di trasmetter[e la cruda realtà] nella sua complessità. A un certo punto, oltre che dall'impressione di non riuscire ad approfondire alcuni temi o di farlo solo in modo approssimativo, fu tormentato dalla certezza che gli scritti altro non fossero che prove di feuilleton. Allora ammonticchiò il fascio di fogli e ritagli di giornale, ci mise sopra il primo libro che gli capitò a tiro e se ne andò sul molo.¹⁰⁷

(instead of allowing himself the time necessary to find proper focus, he felt compelled to: Gather everything, there is no time! Like an assault worker. Therefore, he felt a certain impatience while he divided the sheets, put them in order and mixed them up again. [...] In fact, he feared not being able to transmit it [the crude reality] its complexity. At a certain point, in addition to the impression of not being able to deepen some themes or to do it only in an approximate way, he was tormented by the certainty that his writings were nothing more than feuilleton proofs. So, he piled up the bundle of papers and newspaper clippings, put the first book he could find on top of it, and went off to the dock.)

In *Venuti a galla*, Pahor writes that the literature of small nations is more of a general matter of the collective, rather than of its individual 'literary historians,' insofar as the primary aim and

¹⁰⁶ Benussi, "Donne dentro il labirinto," 140-141.

¹⁰⁷ Pahor, *Dentro il labirinto*, 360-361.

purpose of this body of literature is “che la comunità *senta* che la letteratura la *rappresenta*, che nella letteratura essa è *realizzata*” (that the community *feel* that the literature *represents* it, that it feels *realized* in the literature).¹⁰⁸ This applies to small nations, contends Pahor, but it is even more true of those communities who are separated from their matrix by a border. There is no doubt, according to Pahor, that where such communities preserved their identity without reducing themselves to ‘folk phenomena,’ literature was one of the principal engines of ethical and national conscience.¹⁰⁹

V labirintu is filled with the protagonist’s reflections on his own writing; Radko’s immersion in city life is also a means to collect material for his book. The objective of this enterprise crystallizes one day when its purpose suddenly reveals itself to him: “Inaspettatamente la sua opera, racchiudendo le esperienze di un’intera comunità, gli si rivelava una testimonianza irrefutabile del suo radicamento storico sul territorio. Non voleva essere un’opera fondata sull’ideologia, ma semplicemente un libro, colmo di angoscia, pervaso dalla fede nel valore della propria esistenza, teso al miraggio della libertà” (Unexpectedly, enclosing the experiences of an entire community, his work proved to him to be an irrefutable testimony to its historical roots in the area. It was not to be a work based on ideology, but simply a book, full of anguish, pervaded by faith in the value of one’s own existence, aimed at the mirage of freedom).¹¹⁰ Comparing the book to historical landmarks and monuments, Radko contemplates, “Un’opera letteraria al posto di palazzi prestigiosi, di templi e rappresentanze importanti? Pareva fosse proprio così. Ne sarebbe nato un libro al di sopra delle diatribe politiche, estraneo alle mire dell’imperialismo occidentale e

¹⁰⁸ Pahor, *Venuti a galla*, 6.

¹⁰⁹ Pahor, 6.

¹¹⁰ Pahor, *Dentro il labirinto*, 362.

ai fini rivoluzionari dei materialistici storici: un documento irrefutabile dell'esistenza di una comunità antica" (A literary work instead of prestigious buildings, temples and important representations? It seemed to be so. The result would be a book above political diatribes, foreign to the aims of Western imperialism and the revolutionary aims of historical materialists: an irrefutable document of the existence of an ancient community).¹¹¹ The novel is thus not merely a literary account of a community's ethno-political history, but rather a historical ethno-political literary account of the lived experiences of an *individual* and his *community*. Despite the disheartening encounters and conversations with fellow Triestine Slovenes, which leave him dejected and isolated in his convictions, the prospect of creating an artifact capable of commemorating the presence and story of his nation reawakens Radko's faith.

Radko's devotion to his work is reawakened with the ringing of the bell of the Greek-Orthodox church, one of the many symbols of the city's diversity, which imbues him with hope and faith that his book "poteva diventare un atto ufficiale di autenticazione di tutto ciò che la comunità affermava sul proprio conto e che, proprio per questo, era destinato a essere una prova storica altrettanto valida, se non di più, di un palazzo istituzionale o di un movimento" (could become an official act of authentication of everything that the community affirmed about itself and which, precisely for this reason, was destined to be an equally valid form of historical proof, if not more so, than an institutional building or a movement).¹¹² But this convergence of narrative as an account of individual and collective experience underscores the complicated link between memory and history, which is often even perceived as antagonistic. In his prodigious book, *Les lieux de mémoire (Realms of Memory)*, the French historian Pierre Nora observes that "Memory is

¹¹¹ Pahor, 362-363.

¹¹² Pahor, *Dentro il labirinto*, 363.

always suspect in the eyes of history, whose true mission is to demolish it, to repress it. History divests the lived past of its legitimacy.”¹¹³ If history is an account of the collective, memory can be thought of as the history of individuals. As Lawrence D. Kritzman suggests in the foreword to Nora’s book, “memory is to be understood in its ‘sacred context’ as the variety of forms through which cultural communities imagine themselves in diverse representational modes. In this sense ‘memory’ distinguishes itself from history, which is regarded as an intellectual practice more deeply rooted in the evidence derived from the empirical reality.”¹¹⁴ Kritzman also maintains that one understanding of the quest for memory in the contemporary world considers the latter to be “nothing more than an attempt to master the perceived loss of one’s history” and “an attempt to read the signs of culture in places, objects, and images that are marked by vestiges of the past, and remembered in the vicissitudes of contemporary consciousness.”¹¹⁵ Similarly, in his *I luoghi della memoria*, Isnenghi contends that “Naturalmente, chi voglia ricostruire ciò che ha avuto e ha rilievo nella memoria di un popolo non può ragionare solo in termini di storia politica. Anzi, la memoria è il segno della storia sociale” (Naturally, whoever wants to reconstruct that which has had and has importance in the memory of a people cannot think only in terms of political history. Quite the contrary, the memory is the symbol of the social history).¹¹⁶ And without memory, as Elie Wiesel once affirmed, there is no culture, no civilization, no society, and no future.

¹¹³ Nora, Pierre. *Realms of Memory: Conflicts and Divisions*. Trans. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Columbia, 1996), 3.

¹¹⁴ Kritzman, Lawrence D. “Preface.” *Realms of Memory: Conflicts and Divisions* by Pierre Nora. Trans. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), ix.

¹¹⁵ Kritzman, “Preface,” xiii.

¹¹⁶ Isnenghi, Mario. Mario Isnenghi *I luoghi della memoria: Strutture ed eventi dell’Italia unita* (Rome: Laterza, 1996), IX.

Radko's book – and Pahor's metanarrative – thus aims to present a historical account filtered through the empirical reality of the memory of a man and his community to contribute to the establishment of a firm national consciousness and a veracious account of a nation's vicissitudes. But as Jeffrey K. Olick ponders in his study *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (2007), which engages with a diverse body of thinkers including Bakhtin, Hobsbawm, and Nora, "If narrative is constitutive of identity, an instrument of politics (i.e., rhetoric) and an expression of culture (i.e., representation), what happens when an organization – small or large, family, social movement, or nation-state – cannot tell such stories in an unproblematic fashion?"¹¹⁷ The destruction of Slovenian cultural and educational institutions, and the prohibition of the Slovenian language under fascism certainly did not permit the community to tell its story – and thus establish, better yet, preserve its identity – in an 'unproblematic fashion'; one could also contend, as we previously observed, that Pahor's strenuous path to recognition in Italy was not without obstacles. Perhaps we should take Olick's question a step further and ask: if narrative is constitutive of identity, what happens when a group is not permitted to write its (hi)story in its originary tongue? Pahor addresses this theme in *Parnik trobi nji* (Italian: *Qui é proibito parlare*; English: *The Steamboat Blows to Her*), in which Ema, the protagonist of the novel, considers the consequences of the fascist prohibition of the Slovenian language and its effects on the community's sociocultural development and future.

Ema, a young woman from the Karst plateau, struggles to find a sense of belonging and peace in Trieste during the years of fascist Italianization in the 1930s. With the support of Danilo, a young man whom she meets on the pier, she begins to feel more grounded in Trieste, joining the

¹¹⁷ Olick, Jeffrey K. *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 5.

resistance movement and contributing to the fight for the rights of the Slovenian minority. In one of her articles, Maja Smotlak explores Ema's relationship with the city through the archetype of the *flâneuse*, arguing that this aspect of the central female figure endows her with a distinct aura of modernity and presents an unusual representation of Trieste in the Slovenian literary landscape.¹¹⁸ *Parnik trobi nji* can also be considered a bildungsroman, for it traces the journey of the protagonist from adolescence to adulthood against the backdrop of a volatile ethno-political climate. As most Pahorian protagonists, Ema proves to feel at home in the urban setting of Trieste; she moves around freely and confidently, despite occasional unpleasant encounters with strangers on the street. Like Radko in the first part of *Spopad s pomladjo*, Ema initially safeguards her solitude, predominantly keeping to herself with little interest in pursuing relationships or connections with others. In the second half of the novel, she crosses paths with individuals from all walks of life, a diversity of characters that reproduces the city's multicultural identity. Yet, as Smotlak notes, Ema no longer perceives Trieste as the multicultural city it once was and her interactions with the Italians of Trieste are severely limited; they remain mere passersby or strangers.

For Ema as for Radko, the cultural advancement of the Slovenian community becomes a central concern, and she is moved by a strong sense of urgency to contribute to the resistance. *Parnik trobi nji* conserves the characteristic romantic relationship between man and woman, but simultaneously shifts the focus onto the female figure as protagonist. Often treated as *marginal voices in a marginalized community*, the women of Pahor's works instead occupy a privileged position as active, central agents of change in all sectors of society and human existence. Typically

¹¹⁸ See: Smotlak, Maja. "Modernost osrednjega ženskega lika v romanu *Parnik trobi nji* skozi vlogo pohajkovalke – flâneuse" *Annales, Ser. Hist. Sociol.* (2011): DOI: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/52488096.pdf>, 369-378.

presented as psychologically evolved and independent individuals, they play a vital role in the moral development of the traditionally male protagonists. Ema, like Radko in *Spopad s pomladjo* and *V labirintu*, questions the nexus of politics and culture, and holds strong convictions about the conditions of the city, which she voices openly and earnestly. One day, she picks up an Italian translation of the book *Mrtvi se vračajo* (1935; English: *The Dead Return*) by the celebrated Slovenian writer France Bevk, and experiences a ‘senso di ripulsa’ (sense of disgust) at the thought of not having the basic right to read texts written in her native tongue by Slovenian writers in their original form:

Prese il libro che aveva avuto per le mani l’ultima volta. Francesco Bevk, *I morti ritornano*. Uno strano senso di ripulsa la coglie ogni qualvolta tiene in mano volumi del genere. Se fosse uno scrittore non sopporterebbe che la propria opera assuma un simile aspetto. Non è la stessa cosa. Poiché un bambino non porta il nome impresso in fronte: mentre va per strada è Danilo ed è Danilo mentre dorme. Il titolo italiano su un libro sloveno invece, è come il marchio sulla pelle di uno schiavo, sulla sua carne viva.¹¹⁹

(She took the book she had had on her hands the last time. Francesco Bevk, *I morti ritornano*. A strange sense of disgust seizes her every time she holds such volumes in her hands. If she were a writer, she would not tolerate her work taking on such an aspect. It is not the same. A child does not have his name stamped on his forehead: while he goes on the street it is Danilo and it is Danilo while he sleeps. The Italian title on a Slovenian book, on the other hand, is like the mark on the skin of a slave, on his living flesh.)

Ema’s repugnance is a visceral reaction to unwanted subordination: a rejection of fascism and of the ‘other’ as which she is forced to identify against her will, and not of the ‘other’ (the Italian) itself. The poetic simile which likens the book to the living flesh of a human being positions

¹¹⁹ Pahor, Boris. *Qui è proibito parlare*. Trans. Martina Clerici (Rome: Fazi, 2010), 55-56. Digital version. Slovenian: “Vzela je knjigo, ki jo je že zadnjič imela v rokah. Francesco Bevk, *I morti ritornano*. Nenavadno zoprn občutek jo prešine vsakokrat, ko se dotakne takšne knjige. Če bi bila pisatelj, bi ne mogla prenesti, da ima njeno delo takšno lice. Saj to ni isto, kakor da ne smeš svojega otroka imenovati Danilo, ampak mora po zakonu biti Giordano. Ni isto. Zato, ker otrok ne nosi imena napisanega na čelu, ampak hodi po cesti kot Danilo, in kadar spi, je Danilo. Ta italijanski naslov na slovenski knjigi pa je kakor žig na sužnjevi koži, v njegovem živem mesu.” Pahor, Boris. *Parnik trobi nji* (Ljubljana: Mladinska Knjiga, 2012), 64.

language as an integral constituent of being. Moreover, Ema's reproach critiques the very idea that the true essence of a thing, its authentic being, can be transformed and manipulated into (an)other. Her disgust quickly transmutes into an impassioned call for action, as she beseeches, "Perché mai accettare un libro con un titolo italiano? Non lo vogliamo!" (Why would we ever accept a book with an Italian title? We don't want it!).¹²⁰ Eva takes her plea further, intimating that she would be prepared to risk her life to be relieved of the humiliation of having to endure the psychological and cultural violence of assimilation:

Che senso hanno venti o trenta compiti corretti se non ci sono scuole slovene, se non è permesso né parlare né cantare nella propria lingua! Non vogliamo nemmeno l'insegnamento. *Rinunciamo alla scuola e chiuso il discorso.* Che ci sbattano tutti in prigione. Tutti. Ma prima scendiamo tutti in piazza. Tutti gli sloveni in piazza. Tutti gli abitanti dei villaggi per le strade, con il bestiame, con gli attrezzi di lavoro. Bloccare il traffico. Gridare. Cantare. Innalzare barricate. Morire tutti, se è necessario, piuttosto che accettare, nel ventesimo secolo, l'umiliazione di dover riunire due dozzine di liceali per insegnare loro la lingua madre di nascosto.¹²¹

(What is the point of completing twenty or thirty correct homework assignments if there are no Slovenian schools, if one is not allowed to speak or sing in one's own language! We don't even want teaching. *Let's give up school, end of story.* Put us all in jail. Everyone. But first let's all take to the streets. All the Slovenians in the square. All the villagers on the streets, with livestock, with workers' tools. Block traffic. Scream. Sing. Raise barricades. To die, all of us, if necessary, rather than to accept, in the twentieth century, the humiliation of having to bring together two dozen high school students to teach them their mother tongue in secret.)

¹²⁰ Pahor, 55-56. Slovenian: "Zakaj sprejeti knjigo z italijanskim naslovom? Nočemo je! Pahor, Boris. *Parnik trobi nji* (Ljubljana: Mladinska Knjiga, 2012), 67.

¹²¹ Pahor, 58-60. Slovenian: "'Zakaj sprejeti knjigo z italijanskim naslovom,' je trdo rekla. 'Nočemo je! Kaj mi naj pomeni dvajset ali trideset popravljenih nalog, ko pa ni slovenskih šol, ko pa ne smeš ne govoriti ne peti po svoje! Nič učenja, ne maramo. Ne bomo sploh hodili v šolo. Naj nas vse zaprejo. Vse. Prej pa vsi na ulico. Vsi Slovenci na ulico. Vsi vaščani na cesto, z živino, z orodjem. Ustaviti promet. Kričati. Peti. Postaviti barikade. Umreti vsi, če je treba, a ne sprejeti v dvajsetem stoletju takšnega ponižanja, da zbereš dva ducata dijakov in jih naskrivaj učiš materinščine! Naskrivaj? Če bi bilo vsaj res naskrivaj, a policija dobro ve za tisto sobo, kakor prav dobro ve za to sobo, in mogoče ve že tudi, da sva zdajle midva tukaj za to mizo.'" Pahor, Boris. *Parnik trobi nji* (Ljubljana: Mladinska Knjiga, 2012), 67-68.

Her plea is thus a cry for the right to dignity. In Pahor's oeuvre, language emerges as a form of resistance, an instrument of cultural evolution, but also, and most importantly, as an authentic and vital expression of one's being.

In his book *Language and Minority Rights* (2013) Stephen May examines the contentious intersection and interconnectedness of ethnicity, language, and nationalism across a range of interdisciplinary approaches. May argues that while language may not be a determining factor of one's identity, it would be a grave mistake to assume that it has little significance as "the relation between language and identity is [...] *contingent* on both subjective factors and particular political circumstances" and "the language we speak is crucial to our identity *to the degree to which we define ourselves by it*," which "will obviously vary widely, both among individuals and within and between groups."¹²² Language decline and language death, observes May, "always occur in bilingual and multilingual contexts, in which a majority language – that is, a language with greater political power, privilege and social prestige – comes to replace the range and functions of a minority language."¹²³ Furthermore, while languages have "risen and fallen, become obsolete, died or adapted to changing circumstances in order to survive, throughout the course of human history [...] what is qualitatively and quantitatively different in the twenty-first century is the unprecedented scale of this process of decline and loss – some commentators have even described it as a form of 'linguistic genocide.'"¹²⁴ Edward Sapir, on the other hand, claims that "the network

¹²² May, Stephen. *Language and Minority Rights: Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Politics of Language* (London: Routledge, 2008), 136.

¹²³ May, *Language and Minority Rights: Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Politics of Language*, 18.

¹²⁴ May, 2. For more on linguistic minorities and language loss in Italy, See: Salvi, Sergio. *Le lingue tagliate: Storia delle minoranze linguistiche in Italia* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1975). Salvi investigates the unfulfilled assurances, the "costituzione inapplicata" of the Italian republic, which was decreed on December 27th, 1947. Erected in conscious opposition to the fascist regime, the constitution passed an article (Article 3) that stated that all citizens would have "pari dignità sociale" ("equal social status of dignity") and be "uguali davanti alla legge, senza distinzione di sesso, di razza, di lingua, di religione, di opinioni politiche, di condizioni personali e sociali" ("equal before the law, without

of cultural patterns of a civilization is indexed in the language which expresses that civilization” and that it would be “an illusion to think that we can understand the significant outlines of a culture through sheer observation and without the guide of the linguistic symbolism which makes these outlines significant and intelligible to society.”¹²⁵ Furthermore, Sapir contends that language is a guide to ‘social reality’ insofar as:

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, not alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for that society. [...] The fact of the matter is that the ‘real world’ is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the groups. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.¹²⁶

Pertinent to our discussion of Eva’s response to the reality of having to engage with a text originally written in her native Slovenian is Sapir’s example of a poem; the anthropologist notes that the understanding of a single poem does not merely consist in the grasp of the single words in their average significance, but rather in “a full comprehension of the whole life of the community as it is mirrored in the words, or as it is suggested by their overtones.”¹²⁷ Assimilation thus does

distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions”).¹²⁴ Yet, Salvi affirms that while the constitution of the Italian Republic gives the impression that “l’Italia sia un paese dove vige un ‘buon’ regime di democrazia linguistica: una democrazia che molti popoli, anche europei, sono ancora ben lontani dal possedere” (Italy is a country where a ‘good’ regime of linguistic democracy presides: a democracy that many countries, even European ones, are still far from achieving) it has rarely enacted its *constitution* in entirety.¹²⁴ Yet, one of Salvi’s most interesting findings suggests that in those cases where the protection of a minority exists, it usually does not derive from the application of the constitutional dictation of Italy, but by “clausole di trattati internazionali che provengono dalla sconfitta militare dello stato fascista appaiono perciò imposte da una volontà esterna al popolo italiano) e che risalgono quasi tutte a un periodo precedente la costituzione” (clauses of international treaties that derive from the military defeat of the fascist state and therefore appear to be imposed by a will external to the Italian people) and that almost all date back to a period prior to the constitution), 12.

¹²⁵ Sapir, Edward. *Culture Language and Personality* (London: University of California Press, 1985), 162.

¹²⁶ Sapir, *Culture Language and Personality*, 162.

¹²⁷ Sapir, 162.

not merely presuppose the adoption of a new identity, but gestures a death or psychological, spiritual and cultural rupture with a constructed, internalized world. Similarly, Pahor does not claim that language is the sole, determinant feature of one's ethnic identity: it is 'genetic' or primordial only "in nome dell'amore, non in nome del sangue" (in the name of love, not in the name of blood).¹²⁸

But one's attachment to the mother tongue does not and *should not* preclude the possibility of learning other languages. Indeed, the author considers it "un'apertura per conoscere il prossimo, puoi entrare in relazione con un'altra comunità grazie alla lingua" (an opening to get to know someone; you can create a relationship with another community thanks to language), while reading "è conoscere il mondo. Aiuta a vedere le diverse identità, perché leggere nella lingua originale di un paese significa vedere il mondo in maniera differente. Basti dire che per i tedeschi il sole è femminile: cambia tutto se hai il sole al femminile" (is to know the world. It helps to see the different identities, because to read in the original tongue of a country means to see the world differently. It suffices to say that for the Germans the sun is feminine: everything changes if the sun is feminine).¹²⁹ In *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (2012), Yasemin Yildiz suggests that the Austro-Hungarian empire serves as an important reference point in the ongoing revalorization of multilingualism because it warns that "what looks like a multilingual context can indeed be governed by a monolingual paradigm."¹³⁰ While the Habsburg empire acknowledged its broad multilingual makeup in its political structure, unlike the German *Kaiserreich* (a monolingual nation state), it "increasingly shifted from being constituted by

¹²⁸ Pahor, Boris. *Quello che ho da dirvi. Dialogo tra generazioni lontane un secolo* (Portogruaro: Nuova dimensione, 2015), 21.

¹²⁹ Pahor, *Quello che ho da dirvi*, 28.

¹³⁰ Yildiz, Yasemin. *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition*. (New York City: Fordham University Press, 2012), 12.

subjects with diverse multilingual competences to a multilingualism constituted by the side-by-side-existence of a series of monolingual communities.”¹³¹ Through its hegemonic power structures, such as educational and cultural policies and the establishment of separate schools, “the multilingual empire increasingly produced monolingual subjects and participated in what Hanna Burger calls the ‘expulsion of multilingualism’ (‘Vetreibung der Mehrsprachigkeit’).”¹³² Yildiz recontextualizes the ‘multilingualism’ of a city like twentieth-century Prague which was, at the start of the twentieth century, characterized by a language war between the Czech-speaking majority with national aspirations and the smaller, German-speaking middle and upper class whose power was dwindling. These nationalist movements were invested in claiming that the subjects they represented spoke only one language because “nationalist movements – be they Czech or German – treated a person’s native language as a solid indicator of his or her nationality.”¹³³ The ‘mother tongue’ was thus “the medium through which one was tied organically to one’s nation as well as the only basis of access to proper subjectivity and legitimacy.”¹³⁴ This problem absorbs new layers of complexity in the hybrid linguistic context of Trieste, with the advent of fascism. When examining the author’s understanding of the function of language in the construction or understanding of cultural, ethnic, and national identity it is thus integral to consider the biographical element; the author’s personal stake in the subject matter provides us with precious insight into the psychological and spiritual effects of these epistemological negotiations of identity

¹³¹ Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition*, 12.

¹³² Yildiz, 12.

¹³³ Yildiz, 12.

¹³⁴ Yildiz, 12.

on the human spirit and consciousness. They also highlight the challenges that afflict smaller nations and communities, whose existence is, as Kundera claims, a constant wager.

Pahor's oeuvre encapsulates greater sociological discussions and debates concerning questions of identity and provides authentic perspectives on contemporary reevaluations of precarious concepts such as ethnicity, nationality, and culture. Grounded in his lived personal experiences as a member of a minority in a liminal geoethnic context with shifting borders, Pahor writes to *remember*, but also to *change*. In his defense of 'particular' identities, the Triestine author aims to promote the preservation of diversity rather than perpetuate their superiority over others.¹³⁵ The safeguarding of differences is, in Pahor's view, the most ethical means to celebrate them, whilst drawing, however, an impenetrable boundary before the threshold of extremisms that transform them into instruments to gain or assert dominance over (an)other. His essayistic and narrative works uphold the universal values of dignity, tolerance, and equality, and demonstrate that universal welfare is contingent on the fulfillment of the singular self, for the collective begins with, exists because of, and ends in the individual.

¹³⁵ "La globalizzazione va bene fino a che si parla di cose che sono utili per tutti gli uomini, però, di fronte alla globalizzazione che uniforma, ci sono delle specificità che devono restare, resistere. Ecco, quindi che la differenza si basa sulla cultura della propria identità [...] Perciò la cultura come base della propria identità è la visione più giusta, se vogliamo anche più di quella di Dante, che per alcuni è nazionalismo: parlare del proprio sangue e della propria terra è nazionalismo, è fascismo, è nazismo. Se lo intendiamo come Mussolini e Hitler, sì, è nazionalismo; ma la gente comune invece dice: sono nata a Trieste tra gente triestina che parlava sloveno, mia mamma è slovena, onestamente senza voler essere nazionalista? Oggi è meglio non parlare di identità, ma di identità, ma di coscienza culturale, è meglio parlare della propria letteratura, così ci si libera dal sospetto di essere nazionalisti." (Globalization is fine as long as we talk about things that are useful for all men, however, in the face of the globalization that unifies, there are specificities that must remain, resist. Here, therefore, that the difference is based on the culture of one's own identity [...] Therefore culture as the basis of one's identity is the most correct vision, if we want even more than Dante's, which for some is nationalism: to speak of one's blood and of one's own land is nationalism, it is fascism, it is Nazism. If we understand it as Mussolini and Hitler, yes, it is nationalism; but ordinary people instead say: I was born in Trieste among people from Trieste who spoke Slovenian, my mother is Slovenian, honestly without wanting to be a nationalist? Today it is better not to talk about identity, but about identity, but about cultural conscience, it is better to talk about one's own literature, thus freeing oneself from the suspicion of being nationalist). Pahor, Boris. *Quello che ho da dirvi* (Portogruaro: Nuovadimensione, 2015), 30.

Chapter 3: Giuliana Morandini's Fragmented Triestine Other

Les temps et les lieux se heurtent, se juxtaposent ou s'inversent, comme les sédiments disloqués par les tremblements d'une écorce vieillie.

(Times and places collide, juxtapose or reverse, like sediment dislocated by the tremors of aged bark.)

— Marc Augé

Enfermé dans l'être, il faudra toujours en sortir. A peine sorti de l'être il faudra toujours y rentrer. Ainsi, dans l'être, tout est circuit, tout est détour, retour, discours, toute est chapelet de séjours, tout est refrain de couplets sans fin.

(Entrapped in being, we shall always have to come out of it. And when we are hardly outside of being, we always have to go back into it. Thus, in being, everything is circuitous, roundabout, recurrent, so much talk; a chaplet of sojournings, a refrain with endless verses.)

— Gaston Bachelard

If vestiges are, as Hans-Georg Gadamer writes in *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics* (1964), “fragments of a past world that have survived and assist us in the intellectual reconstruction of the world of which they are a remnant,” it follows that the reconstruction of this past (world) is also fragmented.¹ The heir of any world or reality – post-imperial, post-colonial, post-war and so on – instinctively looks to the past to make sense of the present. In his book *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1985), David Lowenthal similarly argues that “Vestiges of the past, whole, dismembered, or discernible only in traces, lie everywhere around us, yet until recently these remnants were seldom prized,” and “Saving the tangible, and lately the intangible, past is today a global

¹ Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *The Gadamer Reading. A Bouquet of the Later Writings*. Ed. by Richard E. Palmer (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 127.

enterprise. Nations like individuals [now] salvage things in greater quantity and variety than ever before, albeit often too vicariously.”² However, this search often only intensifies the sense of dissonance between the present self and the self of the past. In his book *Le Monde Ex* (1996), Predrag Matvejević expounds this idea through his theoretical conceptualization of the prefix ‘ex.’ As a product of an ethnogeographical entity which experienced its own disintegration in the twentieth century, the Bosnian Croat writer and ex-citizen of ex-Yugoslavia notes that this innocuous little prefix holds tremendous power: it signals an ambiguous link or a complete rupture with a past affiliation, nation, culture, and ideology.

The period after the Cold War (1947 – 1991) saw a part of the world “vivere un’esistenza in qualche modo postuma: un ex-impero, numerosi ex-stati ed ex-patti di alleanza tra stati, tante ex-società ed ex-ideologie, ex-cittadinanze ed ex-appartenenze, e anche ex-dissidenze” (live a somewhat posthumous existence: an ex-empire, numerous ex-states and ex-alliance pacts between states, many ex-societies and ex-ideologies, ex-citizenships and ex-affiliations, and even ex-dissidents).³ It is thus legitimate, Matvejević suggests, to ask what it actually means to be an ‘ex’ or to identify as an ‘ex;’ to have been “cittadino di un’ex Europa finalmente affrancata, di una ex Unione Sovietica disgregata, di una ex Jugoslavia distrutta? Essere diventato ex socialista o ex comunista, ex tedesco dell’Est, ex cecoslovacco, membro di un ex partito o partigiano di un ex movimento, o chissà cos’altro? Non essere più – o non voler più essere – ciò che si è stati o ciò che si presumeva essere?” (Citizen of a finally liberated ex-Europe, of a disintegrated ex-Soviet Union, of a destroyed ex-Yugoslavia? Being an ex-socialist or an ex-communist, an ex-East

² Lowenthal, David. *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge U1985), 26-27.

³ Matvejević, Predrag. *Mondo “ex” e tempo del dopo. Identità, ideologie, nazioni nell’una e nell’altra Europa*. (Milano: Garzanti, 2006), 11. The book was originally published in French, see: Matvejevic, Predrag. *Le Monde ex: Confessions* (Paris: Fayard, 1996). All translations are mine from the Italian unless otherwise noted.

German, an ex-Czechoslovakian, a member of an ex-party or partisan of an ex-movement, or who knows what else? No longer being – or no longer wanting to be – what one was or what one presumed to be?).⁴ To bear or to embody this prefix is thus to possess an ill-determined status and a sense of incompleteness, both on an individual and collective level, caused by a dislocation or perishing of parts that once presumably constituted a whole. This status affirms one’s identity and modality of existence as a kind of *ex istanza*, retroactive and simultaneously overlapping.⁵ The ‘ex’ is geopolitical, social, spatial, and psychological at once; it poses “più di una questione morale e mette in causa una morale precedente” (more than one moral question and calls into question a previous one).⁶ It subsists in a state of disorienting suspension insofar as its identity hinges on a link with a world (political, national, cultural affiliation) that no longer exists, but nevertheless remains a subject’s principal mode of association. In other words, the ‘ex’ is defined by the past, or by the memory of what no longer is. It produces a tension that “accomuna...non affievolisce perché ogni forma non è risolta” (unites...it does not weaken because each shape is not resolved) and Giuliana Morandini’s novels explore this tension, not by offering resolve, but by describing “lo sforzo, la continua incompletezza” (“the effort, its permanent unfinished state”).⁷

This ‘incompletezza’ is thus paradoxically marked by both a rupture and a continuation: the ‘ex’ embodies a rupture with the past, but it also relies on this link to make sense of its present. This concern of Morandini (1938 – 2019) can also be fruitfully explored through the Deleuzian notion of the fold, particularly in the sense of the “contradiction between *continuity* of infinite

⁴ Matvejević, *Mondo “ex” e tempo del dopo. Identità, ideologie, nazioni nell’una e nell’altra Europa*, 11.

⁵ Matvejević, 11.

⁶ Matvejević, 11.

⁷ Morandini, Giuliana. *Caffè Specchi* (Milan: Marietti, 2003), 48; Morandini, Giuliana. *Cafè of Mirrors* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), 41.

variation and the *discontinuity* of the viewpoint,” that irremediable discrepancy between the mutability of essence and the inevitable constraints of perception.⁸ The latter is often conveyed vis-à-vis the limits of language, the instability of discernment, and the transience of time: “non porto mai fotografie, riflettono immagini sempre diverse rispetto a quando sono state scattate, quell’attimo è sfumato come il chiaroscuro” (“I never carry photographs, they always reflect different images from those when they were taken; that second is lost like light and shadow”) and “Si trovava a pensare e a parlare frammenti di linguaggi, e nell’attraversarne i nodi diveniva estranea [...] ‘Le parole [...] devo trovare le parole...non mi capiranno’” (“She found herself thinking and speaking in fragments of languages; in their tangles she felt an outsider. [...] ‘Words, [...] I must find the words...they will not understand me’”).⁹ Morandini’s writing endeavors to capture the *fold* or being through the *fragment*, or the condition of the *ex*; it reveals the irreconcilability of *experience* or *essence*, or in Deleuzian terms, “not something permanent, but time in its pure state, pliability,” and the *representation* of that impermanent experience, “nothing more unsettling than the continual movement of something that seems fixed. In Leibniz’s words: a dance of particles folding back on themselves.”¹⁰ Morandini contrives “a world of infinity, or of variable curvature that has lost notion of a center,” one that sets the view “in the place of the missing center” and which is “a virtuality that currently exists only in the folds of the soul which convey it, the soul implementing inner pleats through which it endows itself with a representation of the enclosed world.”¹¹ Morandini’s destabilized narrative voice internally negotiates this de-centered or *centerless* reality.

⁸ Deleuze, Gilles. *The Fold*. Trans. by Tom Conley (New York: Continuum, 1993), 20-21.

⁹ Morandini, *Caffè Specchi*, 30; Morandini, *Cafè of Mirrors*, 26.

¹⁰ Deleuze, Gilles. *Negotiations, 1972-1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 157.

¹¹ Deleuze, *The Fold*, 24.

In the guise of novelist, literary critic, and journalist, Morandini has endeavored to collect, recontextualize and examine the authority of the vestiges of the past. Her oeuvre offers sensible reflections on the condition of ‘ex’ as expounded by Matvejević. The dissonance between the internal and the external is explored through the leitmotifs of fragmentation, transposition, and rupture, and her protagonists observe the world through a simultaneously introspective and retrospective lens. Their solitary, melancholic and unappeased gaze discovers movement within the immovable, and unexplored depths within the seemingly one-dimensional. Her novels are characterized, as Luisa Quartermaine observes, by “little plot, minimal characterization, and scant action or moral aspect. Their decisive feature is a fundamental shift of perspective from an interest in the world of objects to an examination of the regarding mind; density and opacity is characteristic of her novels, reflection its result.”¹² The author’s language gives form to “composite constructions, drawn from diverse recollections which no longer give a clear indication of their origins. Within this framework develops the atmosphere of suspended pessimism characteristic of Morandini’s work.”¹³ This lenient nihilism is expressed through a sense of abstract fragmentation: dispersed images of a world in shards that cannot be faithfully reconstructed echoing Maurice Blanchot’s characterization of the fragment as a statement, but never an affirmation, nor a negation. Morandini’s suspended pessimism, conveyed through the leitmotif of the fragment effectively captures and explores the *fragmented* and *suspended* state of the ‘ex,’ the ‘continuo sforzo’ to discover continuity and order in a ruptured and disconnected reality.

¹² Quartermaine, Lisa. “Introduction.” *Café of Mirrors*. Trans. Lisa Quartermaine. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997, vii.

¹³ Quartermaine, “Introduction,” vii.

In his seminal study on the relationship between memory and identity, *Les Lieux de mémoire* (1986) Pierre Nora describes modern memory as archival insofar as “it relies entirely on the specificity of the trace, the materiality of the vestige, the concreteness of the recording, the visibility of the image.”¹⁴ According to the French historian, memory is tied to a sense of insecurity, or “fear that everything is on the verge of disappearing, coupled with anxiety about the precise significance of the present and uncertainty about the future,” and to mitigate this uncertainty “we have felt called upon to accumulate fragments, reports, documents, images, and speeches – any tangible sign of what was – as if this expanding dossier might some day be subpoenaed as evidence before who knows what tribunal of history.”¹⁵ Memories unsettle Morandini’s protagonists because, as Nora underscores, memory “tears at us, yet it is no longer entirely ours: what was once sacred rapidly ceased to be” and we harbor “a visceral attachment to that which made us what we are, yet at the same time we feel historically estranged from this legacy.”¹⁶ This paradox acquires new complexities in the transition from memory to history, for it requires every social group to redefine its identity by dredging up the past, a phenomenon of which Morandini is a faithful student.

This historical fragmentariness is central to the author’s engagement with the past of Middle Europe. Born in Udine in 1938, Morandini belongs to that generation of writers who inherited the residues of the early twentieth century, which called for a rethinking of the notion of Central Europe. In the words of the author herself, “L’idea che ne ha avuto la nostra generazione, fino ai recenti avvenimenti, è stata indiretta, mediata da una tradizione non vissuta ma assorbita

¹⁴ Nora, Pierre. *Realms of Memory: Conflicts and Divisions*. Trans. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 7.

¹⁵ Nora, *Realms of Memory: Conflicts and Divisions*, 8-9.

¹⁶ Morandini, *Notte a Samarcanda*, 7.

attraverso la memoria dei padri. La vera Mitteleuropa è rimasta sospesa allo scoppio della Prima guerra mondiale, ed è poi rimasta sospesa sino ad oltre la seconda guerra” (Our generation’s idea of it, until recent events, was indirect, mediated by a tradition that was not experienced, but absorbed through the memory of parents. The real Mitteleuropa remained suspended at the end of the first world war, and then suspended until even after the Second war).¹⁷ Since then, Central Europe has been “sfuggente, diversa a seconda dei momenti storici; a volte coincide con una geografia, a volte si concreta come un’aspirazione federale, a volte maschera complesse volontà politiche” (elusive, different according to historical moments; sometimes it coincides with a geography, sometimes it materializes as a federal aspiration, sometimes it masquerades complex political motivations); it reemerges periodically “quando la situazione politica è vicina a un cambiamento radicale, e riporta in scena la complessità dei confini, delle lingue, dei costumi, dei desideri [...] della molteplicità, delle complessità [...] può confrontarsi con internazionalismi in crisi, oppure con nazionalismi riduttivi” (when the political question is close to radical change, and brings to the stage the complexity of borders, languages, customs, and desires [...] of multiplicity, of complexity [...] it can be confronted with internationalisms in crisis or reductive nationalisms).¹⁸

Scholars have predominantly focused their attention on Morandini’s first three novels, which form her Mitteleuropean trilogy: *I cristalli di Vienna* (1978, Premio Prato), *Caffè Specchi* (1983; Premio Viareggio), and *Angelo a Berlino* (1987; Premio Campiello). Critical interest in these female-centered novels may be motivated by the limited engagement with women’s

¹⁷ Morandini, Giuliana. “Il confine delle parole.” *Neohelicon*, Volume 23, Issue 2, (1986), 56. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02435496>.

¹⁸ Morandini, “Il confine delle parole,” 56.

perspectives on these historical issues, which contribute to the diversity of perspectives in the Triestine literary context. These three works trace the journeys of the protagonists through the decaying Mitteleuropean cities that cannot escape the residues of the past. As Rita Wilson observes, Morandini's protagonists search "for an identity and for the recuperation of memory [...] in the climate of disorientation and separation of central European civilization in three symbolic cities" that are significant "for the exploration of the fictional female psyche as each 'si presenta scissa, divisa, e va integrata'" ('presents itself as split, as divided, and is integrated').¹⁹ The author presents a Berlin whose 'case disabitate mostravano vetri rotti' (uninhabited homes exposed broken glass), a Trieste as a 'sismografo deirimpero' (imperial seismograph), and a Vienna imbued with 'un silenzio gonfio di emozioni, anche sorpreso' (silence swollen with emotion, even surprised). These Mitteleuropean cities represent "una 'cultura della crisi' che ha avuto il culmine nell'orizzonte del 1910. La complessità delle idee corrisponde a una complessità degli spazi aperta dalla crisi dei nazionalismi dell'800" (a 'culture of a crisis' that reached its apex on the horizon of 1910. The complexity of these ideas corresponds to a complexity of spaces opened by the nationalism of the 1800s).²⁰ The essential element of this period is "l'aver dimostrato, nella sua fioritura artistica e scientifica, che la crisi è il centro di un nuovo sapere, di un sapere che con ironia abbandona le certezze illusorie dei Sistemi" (having shown, in its artistic and scientific flowering, that culture is the center of new reason, of reason that abandons, through irony, certain illusory truths of Systems).²¹

¹⁹ Wilson, Rita. *Speculative Identities: Contemporary Italian Women's Narrative* (New York: Routledge, 2000), Kindle, loc. 341.

²⁰ Morandini, Giuliana. "Il confine delle parole." *Neohelicon*, Volume 23, Issue 2, (1986), 56. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02435496>. For more on the crisis of 1910, see Harrison, Thomas. *1910: The Emancipation of Dissonance*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996.

²¹ Morandini, "Il confine delle parole," 56.

Morandini's successive novels, *Sogno a Herrenberg* (1991, Premio Flaiano; *A Dream in Herrenberg*) and *Giocando a dama con la luna* (1996; *Playing Checkers with the Moon*) deviate from the trilogy on account of their clearly demarcated temporal framing, their segmented narrative structure, and the male historical figures whom Morandini positions as protagonists. Set in sixteenth century Germany, *Sogno a Herrenberg* (1991) tells the story of the martyrdom of the Swedish Renaissance painter Jörg Ratgeb. Ratgeb's bold participation in the German peasant revolution of 1525 ultimately led to charges of high treason and his subsequent execution. In a similar narrative style, *Giocando a dama con la luna* (1996) traces the imaginings and ambitions of the German engineer and archaeologist, Karl Humann (1839 – 1936), who discovers the Pergamon Altar. In her last novel, *Notte a Samarcanda* (2006; *Night in Samarkand*), Morandini returns to her archetypal protagonist, a young woman from Friuli Venezia Giulia who journeys to Samarkand in Uzbekistan with her emotionally detached partner, where she is confronted with a new reality and circumstances that push her to rethink the boundaries of her own existence through dialogical, cultural, and physical interactions with the other.

One may wonder whether the overwhelming critical focus on the question of identity in Morandini's Mitteleuropean trilogy has produced a constrained and perhaps skewed understanding of the author's identity as a writer. In an effort to help mitigate this lacuna, the present study will turn its attention to works that have received limited critical engagement, while stretching its gaze across the entire literary corpus. The study will approach the question of identity through a careful investigation of Morandini's employment of the fragment, the symbolic representations of decay and the concern with historical (re)construction to unearth a mediation of difference that hinges on the accumulation of traces, vestiges, and fragments to constitute a sense of being that is consistently destabilized, challenged by the instability of memory, and perpetually redefined by

the dissonance of a transient world. Morandini's *form* is most revelatory in her engagement with difference: it is the persistent symbol of an incomplete being endeavoring to discover or recuperate a sense of completion.

The author principally situates her novels in a disordered, decaying post-imperial and post-colonial Central Europe. Her postmodern subject lives in a perpetual state of estrangement, a mutable reality that destabilizes the comfortable premise underlying binary dialectics. This Morandinian form of estrangement resounds in what Bachelard describes as a reality in which "Man's being is confronted with the world's being, as though primitivity could be easily arrived at. The dialectics of here and there has been promoted to the rank of an absolutism according to which these unfortunate adverbs of place are endowed with unsupervised powers of ontological determination."²² Morandini's narrative unearths the subconscious human inkling that absolutisms are essentially deceptive and implausible through a blurring of the boundary between the abstract and the tangible. Despite the palpable presence of the abstract however, the author approaches her novels with the intentions of a realist, as she has affirmed firsthand.

This apparent dissonance lies in the stratified or layered nature of her *verità* (*truth*), which consists in "tutte quelle sensazioni, tutti quegli strati della cultura che si depositano sulle cose. A poco a poco scrivendo mi sono resa conto che gli oggetti, i fatti, i luoghi che descrivevo erano interiorizzazioni che si erano sedimentate nella mia coscienza in forma di catene di associazione" (all those sensations, all of those layers of culture that settle on things. Little by little I realized that the objects, the facts, the places I described were internalizations that had settled in my consciousness in the form of chains of association).²³ Disfigured images of the 'ex' emerge like

²² Bachelard, Gaston. *The Dialectics of Space*. Trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2014), 228.

²³ Antonella Gargano cites this remark made by Morandini at a conference in 1984 in the preface to *Caffè Specchi*. See Gargano, Antonella. "Prefazione." *Caffè Specchi* by Giuliana Morandini (Genova: Marietti, 2003), XI.

phantasms through the dispersed remnants of the past that now lie under a familiar, but foreign sky.

Morandini's literary consciousness is marked by a break, a type of narrative fragmentation that denotes, in Philip Beitchman's conception, "a separation from traditional thought – the major defect of which was its tendency to be frozen into systems that give us the illusion of understanding and dominating existence."²⁴ The author's 'fragment' possesses what Beitchman characterizes as the particular "ability to express certain profound incompatibilities in the nature of things – first of all between man and his power to communicate (his inability to express himself), and also between the universe that we live in and the world where writing [...] calls us."²⁵ In a Proustian sense, Morandini's narrative is at once the experience of the limit and a perpetual search of it: the limit never announces its presence but is rather internally arbitrated. The protagonists often reside on the threshold of the limit of perception, of truth and of language.

One could identify this as the predominant literary problem of Morandini's novels. Her engagement with the limit effectuates a steady crumbling of certainties to expose the chimeras on which they are constructed, thus producing a disenchanting reality comprised of scattered pieces of empirical truth and a surfeit of forebodings: "I frammenti di quella storia le danzavano davanti come marionette deformi" ("The fragments of that story danced before her like deformed puppets").²⁶ As Morandini's protagonist Katharina explains in *Caffè Specchi*, using a musical metaphor, authentic being is always marked by dissonance:

È questo che prende, l'avvicinare qualcosa che si perde. L'orchestra ogni volta è un esperimento. Si ripetono le aperture. Si cerca il segreto di un movimento, gli

²⁴ Beitchman, Philip. "The Fragmentary Word." *SubStance*, vol. 12, no. 2, University of Wisconsin Press, 1983, 61. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3684490>.

²⁵ Beitchman, "The Fragmentary Word," 61.

²⁶ Morandini, *Caffè Specchi*, 82; Morandini, *Cafè of Mirrors*, 70.

attacchi si dispiegano sempre impercettibilmente diversi. L'unica storia di cui posso segnare un tempo. Gli orchestrali sono delle intenzioni che si cercano. Gli errori sono importanti, l'esecuzione perfetta non sarebbe sopportabile.²⁷

(That is what is attractive, the bringing together of something which is dispersing. Each time the orchestra plays is an experiment. Overtures are repeated...one looks for the secret of a movement, openings are always imperceptibly different. It's the only history of which I can indicate the period. The players are intentions which are looking for each other. Mistakes are important, a perfect performance should be unbearable.)

In fact, Katharina, like all of Morandini's protagonists, is not deceived by the semblance of perfection or the allure of the absolute: "La certezza del quadrato la obbligava a spostarsi. Andava sino al cancello, se ne allontanava, girava intorno" ("The certainty of the square forced her to move away. She would go as far as the gate, walk away from it, walk round").²⁸ Her narrative dithers between two descriptive modes, the distortive and the distrustful. The unstable and inharmonious reality she captures reveals the protagonist's own discord:

Accumulava una serie di fatti che le risultavano estranei. Situazioni e scelte sbiadivano dietro una patina di distacco. Capire significava afferrare le parole che dimostravano di esistere quando la mente sembrava confondersi. Queste parole doveva stringerle forte, e ascoltare, riflettere, ma si scopriva distratta, temeva ogni pausa come un tranello. Il filo della vita era necessario corresse teso, senza indecisioni. Ma le incertezze crescevano, la soffocavano. Il corpo stesso la teneva chiusa, l'avvolgeva come un involucro secco e morto. Solo quando entrava nel rettangolo della scena, si illudeva che i segni s'accendessero di verità.²⁹

(She accumulated a series of facts that were extraneous to her. Situations and choices faded behind a patina of detachment. Understanding meant grasping the words that showed themselves to exist while the mind seemed confused. These words, she had to hold tight, and listen, reflect, but she found herself distracted, she feared every pause as a trap. It was necessary for the thread of life to run taut, without hesitation. But the uncertainties grew, suffocating her. Her own body closed on her, enveloped her like a dry and dead shroud. Only when she entered the rectangle of the scene, she deluded herself that her signs were lit up with truth.)

²⁷ Morandini, 48-49; Morandini, 42.

²⁸ Morandini, 82; Morandini, 71.

²⁹ Morandini, Giuliana. *I cristalli di Vienna* (Milan: Bompiani, 1978), 6. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

To objects, bodies, and even shapes such as a mere ‘quadrato,’ the narrative voice attributes extraordinary depth and density.

In the spatial realm, too, fragmentation serves the function of reconstructing a sometimes apocalyptic and other times somewhat post-apocalyptic reality, one that produces a state of disorientation within the protagonist who is confronted with the eccentricities of a world whose epistemological foundations have been radically called into question. Most of Morandini’s novels, particularly those featuring female protagonists (all except *Sogno a Herrenberg* and *Giocando a dama con la luna*) engage in a subversion of temporal linearity, which symbolically underscores the status of ‘ex,’ an attempt to reconcile or understand the convergence of multiple ‘identities.’ Morandini’s use of the fragment also reflects and exposes dissonance within a *marginal* existence which does not feel itself represented by and within the whole. The marginalized subject of her novels is often the young woman or the child who finds herself interacting with this dismantled world as a passive, isolated observer.

Morandini appears to adopt a two-fold employment of the themes of linearity and fragmentation with potentially interesting implications. Structurally, her novels can be divided into two overarching narrative modes. The female-centered novels situated in the post-war period, such as *I cristalli di Vienna* (1978), *Caffè Specchi* (1983; *The Cafè of Mirrors*, 1997), *Angelo a Berlino* (1987; *Angel in Berlin*) and *Notte a Samarcanda* (2006; *Night in Samarkand*), are characterized by a temporal opacity caused by a sense of psychological suspension and cyclicity. The psycho-affective state of these young women from Central Europe is transposed onto the spatiotemporal reality of their surroundings, generating a kind of undulation through leaps in memory and space. On the other hand, we have *Sogno a Herrenberg* (1991) and *Giocando a dama con la luna* (1996), which narrate the experiences of two historical Mitteleuropean figures, Jörg Ratgeb (c. 1480 –

1526) and Karl Humann (1839 – 1896). Respectively, they are marked by distinctively linear spatiotemporal narrative progressions. These disparate modes – the female-centered novels and those centered on historical events which feature prominent male intellectual figures – thus reveal diverse gendered and historical perspectives.

Notwithstanding these differences, Morandini’s narrative always delineates a restless ‘history,’ which finds resonance in Elena Fornari’s understanding of contemporary conceptions of History as “una catacresi, una metafora senza referente letterale, una *forma vuota* al cui interno si scontrano e articolano ‘ritmi’ temporali talora dissonanti” (as catachresis, a metaphor with no literal representative, an *empty form* inside which tendentially dissonant temporal rhythms clash and formulate).³⁰ It presents a “nuova configurazione del ‘mondo,’ fattosi materialmente *uno* e tuttavia attraversato oggi più che mai da crepe, turbolenze e linee di frattura” (a new configuration of the ‘world,’ materially constructed as *one* and plagued, more than ever, by cracks, turbulence and fracture lines).³¹ Much like her protagonists, Morandini is both a product and a representative of the margin, intended as the peripheral context from which she hails, within which women reside on another margin.

In her last novel, *Notte a Samarcanda* (2006), the protagonist Sophie describes her relationship with memory as deep-seated in a sense of urgency and devotion, which are also characteristic of Morandini’s writing: “Cerco disperatamente di fare esercizi di memoria, per non perdere le immagini del ricordo, esatte. Ripeto tutte le nozioni e immagini che mi sono apparse nella mia avventura, metto in codice le immagini, so che esse solo mi terranno in contatto con tutto questo strano mondo. Ho paura che la memoria vacilli” (I try desperately to do memory exercises,

³⁰ Fornari, Emanuela. *Linee di confine* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2011), 49.

³¹ Fornari, *Linee di confine*, 49.

so as not to lose the exact images of the memory. I repeat all of the notions and images that have appeared to me in my adventure; I code the images, for I know that only they will keep me in touch with this whole strange world. I'm afraid my memory will falter).³² This *intent* to preserve and recompose memory conveys the awareness underlying Proust's contention that 'Remembrance of things past is not necessarily the remembrance of things as they were.' It is this inherent epistemological insecurity, or the irreconcilable tension between Truth and truth, which lies at the base of human existence, that Morandini's novels endeavor to pierce. As Quartermaine observes, her narrative "images the mind's language, exploiting its capacity for association and sequent observation as well as its ability to manipulate images while constantly admitting new material."³³ Memory, like human nature, is subject to shifts and ruptures; it is privy to conscious or subconscious manipulation by both the rational mind and irrational desires, as well as by the variability of time and space. This ephemeral and tendentially non-linear quality of Morandini's works echoes Cixous's assertion that 'we should write as we dream.'

Like the elusive and enigmatic spaces of her novels, Morandini herself is a writer who, as Elvio Guagnini observes, "cannot readily be categorized as belonging to any particular literary movement, even though her thematic and artistic interests clearly reflect contemporary concerns and problems."³⁴ Guagnini attributes this categorical transcendence to Morandini's focused and faithful commitment to "a precise set of related ideological preoccupations rather than pursuing formal innovation or succumbing to the dictates of literary fashion."³⁵ Her thematic interests and

³² Morandini Giuliana. *Notte a Samarcanda* (Genoa: Marietti, 2006), 50.

³³ Quartermaine, Lisa. "Introduction." *Café of Mirrors*. Trans. Lisa Quartermaine. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997, xi.

³⁴ Guagnini, Elvio. "Giuliana Morandini: Inner and Outer Frontiers." *The New Italian Novel*. Ed. by Zygmund G. Barański and Lino Pertile (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 139.

³⁵ Guagnini, "Giuliana Morandini: Inner and Outer Frontiers," 139.

humanistic concerns converge with those of her contemporaries, but her vantage point differs. As we have examined in our previous discussion of Pancrazi's famous essay and exposition of *triestinità*, the Triestine literary tradition has primarily concerned itself with establishing a 'localized canon' of works produced by male Italian writers since the turn of the twentieth century. While Morandini's Mitteleuropean voice has not been submerged by History, as has often been the case with women's writing (especially in liminal cultural contexts), her works merit more attention than they have received thus far, for they offer the opportunity for engagement with a valuable (minority) perspective capable of contributing to ongoing discussions of shifting dynamics of center (History) and periphery (histories). Perhaps it is for this reason that Morandini has frequently reflected upon her own novels as a literary critic. This convergence of self-reflexivity and essayism unites Morandini and her contemporaries of Trieste, especially those who form the focus of this quadripartite study.

In addition to her narrative works, the author has made significant contributions to the advancement of study of Italian and European women writers. In 1989 she also published the collection of writings on Trieste entitled, *Da te lontano: cultura triestina tra '700 e '900 (Far from You: Triestine Culture Between 1700 and 1900)*.³⁶ In her critical volume *La voce che è in lei (1980; The Voice That Is In Her)* she examines the works of nineteenth and twentieth century women writers such as Neera, Anne Vivanti, but also Marchesa Colombi and Liana Millu. In *Sospiri e Palpiti (2001; Sighs and Heartbeats)*, on the other hand, she turns her critical gaze to seventeenth and eighteenth-century women writers. Both volumes are a testament to Morandini's extensive

³⁶ See Morandini, Giuliana. *Da te Lontano: cultura triestina tra '700 e '900* (Trieste: Dedolibri, 1989); Morandini, Giuliana... *E allora mi hanno rinchiusa* (Milan: Tascabili Bompiani, 1985); Morandini, Giuliana. *La voce che è in lei: antologia della narrativa femminile italiana tra '800 e '900* (Milan: Bompiani, 1967); Morandini, Giuliana. *Sospiri e palpiti: Scrittrici italiane del Seicento* (Genoa: Marietti, 2002).

interest in the works of women who “came before [her],” women “with great tenacity [who] journeyed through these spaces of expression available to them, going beyond the limits imposed on them with the intensity of emotions and poetry.”³⁷ The author also studied and forged relationships with Paola Masino, Anna Banti, Elsa Morante, and the women of her generation: “women whom I have spoken with, woven relationships with and whom I have been able to encompass over the course of a personal journey.”³⁸ These intellectual explorations and interpersonal ties, along with the author’s clinical experience with female patients in a psychiatric hospital, form a crucial moment in her life and career. Morandini identifies *...E allora mi hanno rinchiusa* (1977; *...And so they Locked Me Up*) as her first authentic exploration of “the boundary” of identity, one she considers “literature to all effects.”³⁹ This account of Morandini’s experience and conversations with the women in the psychiatric hospital was “a confrontation with social suffering, with the mechanisms of exclusion and marginalization. But it was also a confrontation with [her] own suffering, a search into the alienated parts of [her]self and hence into those parts struggling to give shape to and to take form in the narration.”⁴⁰ During this time, the author had also undertaken psychoanalytic care. Treatment required her to confront, as she affirms, her own “multiplicity of internal levels and conflicts,” while simultaneously bearing witness to the stories of women in a psychiatric hospital. To “these two confrontations, with the unwell women and the

³⁷ Morandini, Giuliana. “Boundaries, the Work of Writing and the Female Soul.” *Italian Women Writers, 1800-2000. Boundaries, Borders, and Transgression*, ed. by Patrizia Sambuco (Maryland: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015), 60.

³⁸ Morandini, “Boundaries, the Work of Writing and the Female Soul,” 59.

³⁹ Morandini, 60.

⁴⁰ Morandini, 61. Morandini entered the psychiatric hospital when it was still a ‘closed space.’ The Italian Mental Health Act of 1978, known as the Basaglia Law or Law 180, was proposed by Franco Basaglia and Franco Ongaro Basaglia, and contained directives for the shutting down of all psychiatric hospitals in Italy. The 180 law was approved in May of 1978 and led to the gradual replacement of psychiatric institutions with a new range of acute in-patient community-based services. Law 180 is the basis of Italian mental health legislation.

unwell part of myself’ she attributes the idea for her first novel, *I cristalli di Vienna* (1978), which explores the complex intersection of historical and familial trauma over a temporal trajectory that alternates between infancy, adolescence, and adulthood to expose time as cyclical, but also irremediably fragmented.

The preoccupation with time underlies the intellectual foundation of Morandini and her contemporaries. This generation, which witnessed World War II in childhood, engages in diverse negotiations of historical memory to cope with the inherited crisis of bourgeois culture which ironically had set goals of progress and cultural continuity for itself, especially in cities such as Trieste, Vienna, Prague, and Budapest which nevertheless came to represent a culture of crisis which reached its apex on the horizon of 1910:

Il binomio *Kultur und Besitz*, il sogno di una rinata età classica, il mito di una scienza che ci afferma e risolve le domande sociali, l’ipotesi di un commercio crescente, internazionale sono le grandi illusioni di una borghesia in sviluppo. Ma ad un tratto questa borghesia si vede invece confrontata con spettri di dissoluzione, con deliri di onnipotenza distruttiva. La consapevolezza che si è scavata attorno all’orizzonte del 1910 con lo sgretolarsi di certezze, di sistemi, di equilibri, è alla base della idea di modernità e ancora ci appartiene.⁴¹

(The binomial *Kultur und Besitz*, the dream of a reborn classical age, the myth of a science that affirms and solves social questions, the hypothesis of a growing, international trade are the great illusions of a developing bourgeoisie. But all of a sudden, this bourgeoisie instead finds itself confronted with ghosts of dissolution, with delusions of a destructive omnipotence. The awareness that was dug around the horizon of 1910 with the crumbling of certainties, systems, balances, is the basis of the idea of modernity and still belongs to us.)

These figures sought to recuperate the breadth of the cosmopolitanism that suffered a brusque obstruction, attempting to recuperate and restitch the heterogeneity that was at once its most authentic trait and the cause of its demise. The author explores this crisis in her ‘Mitteleuropean trilogy’ through the wanderings of the female protagonists *towards* and *within* the Central

⁴¹ Morandini, Giuliana. “Il confine delle parole.” *Neohelicon* 23 (1996): 59. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF0243549>.

European landscape, particularly the capitals Trieste, Vienna, and Berlin. The external surroundings of Morandini's young women invoke images of memories of a time that feels within reach just before it fades away.

The beginning of each novel is marked by the transit or arrival of the women to their respective destinations. Elsa, the protagonist of *I cristalli di Vienna*, journeys to the Austrian capital, reminiscing of her childhood memories as the train passes through her native Friuli. In *Caffè Specchi*, Katharina Pollaczek, a young woman of Slavic descent returns to Trieste to settle important legal matters concerning the custody of her son, and although the name of the city is never mentioned in the novel, its identity is revealed through the detailed descriptions of its unmistakable physiognomy. The title is also a reference to the historic Café degli specchi in Trieste, which overlooks the Piazza Unità d'Italia. In *Angelo a Berlino*, Erika of Polish origin arrives to Berlin, intent on exploring the complex fabric of the divided city and the secrets contained in its monuments. Their respective immersion into new spatiotemporal dimensions coincides with that of the reader, whose impressions of the cities are filtered through the interiorities that the protagonists project onto them.

The identities of these cosmopolitan spaces are entrenched in the stories, memories, and pasts of the young women who explore them, producing an increasingly layered narrative in the process. Emma Bond has identified the common element in these three works as “their representation of the way in which their female protagonists interact with their surrounding environment, often against a background of emotional trauma provoked in part by historical events or cultural issues which have lacerated both place and psyche.”⁴² As the train passes through her native land on its way to Vienna, Elsa's perception fluctuates between steadiness and haziness:

⁴² Bond, Emma. *Disrupted Narratives: Illness, Silence, and Identity in Svevo, Pressburger and Morandini*. (Great Britain: Legenda, 2012), 126.

Alcune immagini prendevano corpo. Solo i luoghi le riusciva difficile vederli nella misura giusta. Erano rimpiccioliti, a volte invece dilatati. Allora voleva visitare la casa e le sue stanze, il cortile, il giardino. Ma era un rischio, le persone non c'erano più e se qualcuno restava neanche l'avrebbe riconosciuta. Queste emozioni che si affermavano le aveva sfiorate per lunghi anni. Come figure del sogno vagavano separate e avevano dolore di questo, le copriva una polvere leggera di malessere. Qualche giorno prima, trovando una vecchia scatola con dei bottoni di osso ingialliti, e un feltro che s'era impregnato di chiuso, aveva provato la medesima sensazione di qualcosa di perduto che non cessava di farla soffrire. Anche quando la vita l'aveva colpita, le era sempre parso di sapere che le inquietudini e le tristezze avevano altro volto e neppure s'intravedeva dove si nascondessero, forse stavano anch'esse nella cassetta dei bottoni. Quando cercava di riannodarle, l'agitavano. Accaduti e figure si sfocavano.⁴³

(Certain images took shape. It was only difficult for her to see the places in the right measure. They were shrunken, sometimes dilated. She wanted to visit the house and its rooms, the courtyard, the garden. But it was a risk, the people were no longer there and if someone stayed, they wouldn't have even recognized her. These emotions that were now arising, she had touched for many years. Like figures in dreams, they wandered alone and in pain, dusted by a light malaise. A few days earlier, finding an old box with yellowed bone buttons, and a soaked up felt, she had experienced the same sensation of something lost that never ceased to make her suffer. Even when her life had struck her, she always seemed to know that the anxieties and sadness had another face, and she could not see where they hid, perhaps in the same box of buttons. When she tried to tie them back together, they unsettled her. Events and figures grew blurred.)

Elsa's sense of displacement, and her recollection of her childhood memories transform the novel into a reverse bildungsroman, or *bildungsroman a rovescio*. Whereas the traditional novel of formation traces the moral and psychological growth of a main character, *I cristalli di Vienna* uncovers the sense of laceration caused by the spaces and memories of Elsa's childhood, which is marked by difficult familial dynamics, the disintegration of the family's bourgeois culture, and the trauma of war.

Through her introspective wanderings around the realm of memory, Elsa ultimately deconstructs her own sense of self against the backdrop of her changing, even decaying environment. Her journey through space is also a journey through and *against* time. In *L'infinito*

⁴³ Morandini, Giuliana. *I cristalli di Vienna* (Milan: Garzanti, 1978), 6-7.

viaggiare Magris recalls Marisa Madieri's assertion that, "Noi siamo tempo rappreso" (We are time congealed), and ventures the hypothesis that places, like individuals, are also "tempo rappreso, tempo plurimo" (congealed time, multiplicitous time).⁴⁴ Elsa's journey is one where the present and the past collide, signaling the rupture of a particular type of coherent, modern 'I' and a realization that the "linearità del progresso e dello sviluppo è stata un'illusione" (the linearity of progress and of development was an illusion) from which "[è nata] la nostra modernità" (our modernity was born).⁴⁵ Magris's conception of the bildungsroman as a kind of 'viaggio' or 'journey' is relevant to *I cristalli di Vienna*, insofar as the author suggests that:

Il Bildungsroman, il romanzo di formazione che si pone un problema centrale della modernità, ossia si chiede se e come l'individuo possa realizzare o no la propria personalità inserendosi nell'ingranaggio sempre più complesso e "prosaico" della società, è quasi sempre [...] pure un romanzo di peregrinazione, di viaggio. Ma presto qualcosa, nel rapporto fra il singolo e la totalità che lo avvolge, s'incrina; nella macchina della società moderna il viaggiare diventa anche un fuggire, un violento rompere limiti e legami. Il viaggio scopre non solo la precarietà del mondo, ma anche quella del viaggiatore, la labilità dell'Io individuale, che comincia – come intuisce con spietata chiarezza Nietzsche – a disgregare la propria identità e la propria unità, a diventare un altro uomo, 'oltre l'uomo,' secondo il significato più autentico del termine *Übermensch*.⁴⁶

(The Bildungsroman, the novel of formation that tackles a central problem of modernity, that is, whether and how the individual can realize his own personality or not by inserting himself into the increasingly complex and "prosaic" mechanism of society, is almost always [...] also a novel of pilgrimage, of travel. But soon something, in the relationship between the individual and the totality that surrounds him, cracks; in the machine of modern society, traveling also becomes an escape, a violent breaking of limits and bonds. The journey discovers not only the precariousness of the world, but also that of the traveler, the lability of the individual ego, which begins – as Nietzsche senses with ruthless clarity – to dissolve its own identity and unity, to become another man, 'beyond man,' according to the truest meaning of the term *Übermensch*.)

⁴⁴ Magris, Claudio. *L'infinito viaggiare* (Milan: Mondadori Libri, 2017), x.

⁴⁵ Morandini, "Il confine delle parole," 58.

⁴⁶ Magris, *L'infinito viaggiare*, x.

Elsa's journey causes a point of internal rupture, a dissolution of the 'I' in the face of a subverted social order – which is a journey *towards* the awareness of one's *ex*-istence, a conscious realization of existential suspension, or more simply, a sense also of irreversible unbelonging. In “Il confine delle parole” (“The Boundary of Words”), Morandini reiterates this notion, affirming that “*I cristalli di Vienna* hanno quale primo atto la discesa all'interno della storia interiore, non come cronaca di un ricordo, ma come analisi e attualizzazione di emozioni, di vissuti” (*I cristalli di Vienna* is a descent into an inner history, not as a chronicle of a memory, but as analysis and actualization of emotions, of experiences).⁴⁷ Indeed, Elsa “Interrogava la propria identità nei lineamenti del padre, con lo scrupolo con cui si visitavano vecchi ritratti. Il riflesso fisico di quel volto le sembrava consumato, strappato” (Questioned her own identity in her father's features, with the scruple with which one examines old portraits. The physical reflection of that face seemed worn out, torn).⁴⁸ Simultaneously, the spaces of her memory gawk at her, becoming off-putting in their extraneousness:

I luoghi che avvicinava non le riusciva di crederli della stessa sostanza della sua carne, del suo respiro. Eppure doveva afferrare le sue strane sensazioni dove avevano cominciato a svilupparsi e ad aggrovigliarsi. Temeva altrimenti di perdere ogni peso del concreto. La speranza di spiegarsi ciò che le accadeva, di ordinare il senso, la trascinava a una barriera muta della quale a malapena sfiorava la superficie. La famiglia, definitivamente lontana, restava riferimento per ogni suo gesto e ne accresceva la perplessità. [...] Questa diffidenza l'ossessionava e la fitta s'inaspriva a ogni occasione.⁴⁹

(She could not believe that the places she was approaching were of the same substance as her flesh, her breath. Yet, she had to grasp its strange feelings where they had begun to develop and tangle. Otherwise, she feared she would lose the weight of the concrete. The hope of explaining what was happening to her, of giving order to her senses, dragged her to a silent barrier of which she barely touched the surface. The family, definitively distant, remained a point of reference for her every

⁴⁷ Morandini, “Il confine delle parole,” 58.

⁴⁸ Morandini, *I cristalli di Vienna*, 8.

⁴⁹ Morandini, 9.

gesture and increased her perplexity. [...] This distrust consumed her, and the pang worsened at every opportunity.)

Elsa is unable to establish a sense of contented familiarity with her former home and familial entity (which still serves as a point of reference despite its physical absence) by virtue of the impermanence of human existence and the vacillation of memory: the past is transfigured by the present self which struggles to grapple with the unfamiliarity of a world that no longer exists as it once did. Elsa copes both with her own internalized sense of otherness as well as with the foreignness of the spaces and foundations that shaped her: “Elsa constatava l’abbandono, l’incapacità di ristabilire un rapporto. I suoi sforzi le parevano canestri a vendemmia finita con pochi violacei spiccati. Questa tensione aveva finito per scuotere gli organi del corpo, per ficcarne la resistenza” (Elsa ascertained the abandon, the inability to re-establish a relationship. She compared her efforts to empty baskets at the harvest’s end with but a few signs of violet. This tension ended up shaking the organs of her body, forcing their resistance).⁵⁰

Evasion becomes her primary coping mechanism as “Evitava incontri, conversazioni, le relazioni più semplici. Ogni movimento della vita quotidiana la minacciava. Solo il vuoto era divenuto un esercito metodico e necessario per alleviare l’affanno” (She avoided meetings, conversations, the simplest of relationships. Every movement of daily life threatened her. Only the void had become a methodical and necessary army to alleviate the trouble).⁵¹ Like Pahor’s Radko Suban in *Spopad s pomladjo* (Italian: *Una primavera difficile*; English: *A Difficult Spring*), who finds in nature an *empty canvas* or *neutral terrain* wherein he commands the *mise-en-scène* of the ‘ex’ space of the concentration camp, Elsa is able to confront the past by detaching from its concrete, physical vestiges (‘il vuoto’). Like the Triestine author, Morandini presents alternative

⁵⁰ Morandini, 9-10.

⁵¹ Morandini, 10.

engagements with the other, particularly through the perspective of a child, or that of an adult recounting her former point of view. The narrative voice reconstructs Elsa's psychological and emotional state during the war period through her childhood perceptions of and interaction with the army of soldiers who appear in the city:

Non era la prima volta che vedeva dei soldati tedeschi. Erano già passati, in piccoli gruppi. Ne aveva ascoltato le grida di comando; aveva osservato con attenzione quei loro movimenti rigidi, di marionette; aveva vissuto le reazioni diverse che procuravano nella gente e si era forzata di farle sue; aveva rimestato dentro tutto il parlottare di paura che si faceva nei crocchi del paese e anche in famiglia. Quei volti venuti da lontano le richiamavano immagini da tempo sopite. Ne era intimidita ma si accorse che se riuscivano a sconvolgere avevano però anche poteri positivi: la sua famiglia, che di solito non riusciva a scambiarsi nulla, trovava nella preoccupazione motivo di sentirsi più unita e papà e mamma parlavano tra loro come da molto non succedeva.⁵²

(It was not the first time she had seen the German soldiers; they had already passed by in small groups. She had listened to their authoritative shouts; she had carefully observed their rigid, puppet-like movements; she had experienced the different reactions they caused in people, and she forced herself to adopt them; she had absorbed internally all the talk of fear among the village crowds and in the family. Those faces that had come from afar reminded her of long-dormant images. She was intimidated by them, but realized that if they managed to upset, they also had positive influences: her family, who usually had no interaction, found in their shared concern reason to feel more united, and dad and mom talked to each other as they had not in a long time.)

This naïveté and neutrality reveal insight into the complex portrait of Elsa's family, while earnestly underscoring the humanity of the soldier, the 'other.' Elsa curtails the distance between herself and the soldiers both physically and verbally when she approaches one of them and asks his name in German. Surprised, the soldier with "denti radi e bianchi come i sassolini lucidati dall'acqua del torrente" (teeth sparse and white like pebbles polished by the water of the stream) kindly responds in Italian: "'Wilhelm...,' rispose l'uomo e subito corresse: 'Willy,' suggerendo il diminutivo quasi a rompere l'imbarazzo; e subito, facendosi di un rosa anche più lucido, aggiunse raccogliendo

⁵² Morandini, 36.

qualche parola italiana: ‘Perché parli tedesco? Sei una bambina tedesca?’” (‘Wilhelm...’ the man replied and immediately corrected himself: ‘Willy,’ using the diminutive as if to conceal his embarrassment; and immediately, turning even more shiny pink, added, picking up a few Italian words: ‘Why do you speak German? Are you a German little girl?’).⁵³ Ironically, while this interaction with ‘the other’ helps Elsa to navigate this context with some familiarity, it stirs bewilderment in her family, especially when their home is selected to serve as the site of an important ceremony featuring the soldiers:

Elsa, superata la timidezza, si muoveva tra i soldati dimostrando disinvoltura, li precedeva nel loro tragitto sino al luogo dove le casse andavano deposte. [...] I suoi di famiglia, perplessi nell’affrontare quella situazione, la guardavano un po’ stupiti, con curiosità e anche con una certa apprensione, mescolarsi con i soldati tedeschi ma in fondo non se ne meravigliavano. La conoscevano e sapevano bene che era una bambina strana, con delle reazioni che non sempre si prevedevano. La malattia l’aveva resa così. Faceva sempre qualche cosa di diverso rispetto agli altri, forse per essere presa in considerazione, o per avere affetto. E poi parlava la loro lingua.⁵⁴

(Having overcome her shyness, Elsa moved among the soldiers with ease, preceding them on their way to the where the boxes were to be deposited. [...] Her family, perplexed before that situation, looked at her a little amazed, with curiosity and also with a certain apprehension, as she mingled with the German soldiers, but they were not surprised. They knew her and they knew very well that she was a strange child of unpredictable reactions. Her illness had made her like this. She always did something different than the others, perhaps to be taken into consideration, or to get affection. And she also spoke their language.)

Elsa’s presumed illness is not mentioned elsewhere in the novel. Thus, we can postulate that her mere being, the temperament that contrasts that of the other members of the family is perceived as a kind of disorder that contributes to her ‘otherness.’ Furthermore, since Elsa’s family does not associate or identify with the soldiers – which is implied by the rhetorical choices of the narrative voice – Elsa occupies that grey zone between the former (the family) and the latter (the soldiers).

⁵³ Morandini, 40.

⁵⁴ Morandini 41.

Her linguistic affinity with the soldier enables her to render the boundaries between them more malleable, while simultaneously fortifying the differences or points of disintegration with her family.

Recounting the war experience from this point of view enables the narrative voice, as well as Elsa and the reader, to question how sociopolitical integration affects one's engagement with difference. But young Elsa's innocence is marked by an awareness that makes war *all too real*. Her candid interaction with the soldier is reminiscent of the naivety that drives Pin in Calvino's neorealist classic *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1947; *The Path to the Spiders' Nest*) to unsuspectingly mingle with the enemy, but little Elsa is much too deliberate in her actions and aware in her contemplations.⁵⁵ Her sensible young spirit "continuava ad avvertire fisicamente l'imminenza di quanto doveva succedere" (continued to physically perceive the imminence of what was to happen), silently aware that things would never be the same.⁵⁶ This sensibility is a byproduct of the existential exigencies posed by the war itself, which imbues, in Elsa's mind, the *space* of the home with peril and discord.

In her study of the narrative strategies employed by Morandini in the construction of the female voice in *Caffè Specchi*, Bond observes that "many of the main issues in Morandini's works of fiction [concern the] rift between identity and place, as provoked by the postmodern urban experience, where probability and uncertainty replace determinate knowledge as the world itself becomes both discontinuous and indeterminate."⁵⁷ Similarly, Antonella Gargano writes that the substantial incorporeity and "invadenza dei vuoti che caratterizza il romanzo stride fortemente

⁵⁵ Calvino, Italo. *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (Turin: Einaudi, 1947).

⁵⁶ Morandini, 64.

⁵⁷ Bond, Emma. *Disrupted Narratives: Illness, Silence and Identity in Svevo, Pressburger and Morandini* (New York: Legenda, 2012), 128.

l'apparire a tratti di una fisicità vistosa. Il corpo della città la esprime perdendo i suoi tratti allucinati e immobili quando si sdoppia in un organismo separato e completamente diverso” (the intrusiveness of the voids that characterizes the novel clashes strongly, at times, with the occasional appearance of a showy physicality. The city expresses it by losing its disoriented and immovable features when splitting into a separate and completely different organism).⁵⁸ This interplay of the abstract and the concrete is introduced in the first line of *Caffè Specchi* which juxtaposes the “pallore della città” (pallor of the city) with the “statue ritagliate nel cielo” (statues like cardboard cutouts against the sky).⁵⁹ Katharina Pollaczek, a young woman of Slavic descent returns to Trieste for an appointment with her lawyer, concerning the custody of her son. Morandini’s selection of Trieste as the setting of *Caffè Specchi* is deliberate; the atmosphere of the city that Katharina discovers upon her return to Trieste is that of “a once great, but now decayed, trading center, [that] accentuates insecurity.”⁶⁰ The city stirs unsettling emotions in the protagonist, who alludes to its difficult historical past in a conversation with a man she encounters on her journey:

“Avviene così,” disse, “se il vento comprime la forza in una strada stretta...Qualcosa d’improvviso di dilata, spezza le linee dei diagrammi...Anche il marmo si gonfia e ammala...”

“Alcune generazioni hanno creduto che nella città l’armonia avrebbe prevalso...”

“Anzi, l’immaginavano solida perché la vedevano crescere con fatica da origini e linguaggi diversi...”⁶¹

⁵⁸ Gargano, Antonella. “Prefazione: Dietro gli specchi di Giuliana Morandini.” *Caffè Specchi* (Milan: Marietti, 2003), XI.

⁵⁹ Morandini, Giuliana. *Caffè Specchi* (Milan: Marietti, 2003), 11; Morandini, Giuliana. *The Cafè of Mirrors* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), 3.

⁶⁰ Quartermaine, Lisa. “Introduction.” *Caffè Specchi*. (Milan: Fabbri Bompiani, 1997), x.

⁶¹ Morandini, Giuliana. *Caffè Specchi* (Milan: Marietti, 2003), 149; Morandini, Giuliana. *The Cafè of Mirrors* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), 127.

(“It happens like this,” she said. “If the wind’s strength is funneled into a narrow street...Something suddenly expands, breaks the lines of the diagrams...The marble, too, inflates and deteriorates...”

“Some generations thought that harmony would prevail in the city...”

“In fact, they thought it was solid since they saw it grow laboriously from different roots and languages...”)

Trieste’s imperial glory could not be recovered in the face of the nationalisms that erupted at the brink of the twentieth century. Katharina’s internal unsettledness mirrors Trieste’s post-imperial, decaying condition, while her interaction with the space suggests that she is usurped by its frontiers, both geographical and metaphysical. As Quartermaine affirms, “frontier life entails separation, dislocation of family structures, alienation,” and “existence itself assumes the status of an ‘outsider.’”⁶² Morandini presents an alternative negotiation of border-crossing in *Angelo a Berlino* by comparing, once again, a child’s and an adult’s memory of the same experience.

Upon her arrival to a divided Berlin, Erika contemplates how the historical laceration of the city has transformed her personal understanding of one’s movement across the border: “Era sempre una strana emozione passare la frontiera. Da bambina provava un certo eccitamento quando la sballottavano da un paese all’altro. Attraversava il confine a piedi, attenta alla differenza vaga tra un terreno e l’altro” (It was always a strange thrill to cross the border. As a child she felt a certain excitement when they tossed her from one country to another. She crossed the border on foot, attentive to the vague difference between one terrain and another).⁶³ Interestingly, the protagonist identifies the promise of choice, the freedom and ability to move across the border, as the most *attractive* aspect of the experience, prior to the erection of the wall and the policing of a formerly natural, uninhibited border-crossing experience: “All’ultimo momento poteva anche

⁶² Quartermaine, “Introduction,” 97.

⁶³ Morandini, Giuliana. *Angelo a Berlino* (Milan: Bompiani, 1987), 5.

tornare indietro, o proseguire: una scelta aperta, questo l'attraeva. Ora, passare il confine significava provare quanto la città stesse vivendo la divisione, una ferita che non rimarginava" (At the last moment she could turn around and go back or continue: an open choice, this enticed her. Now, crossing the border meant experiencing how much the city was subject to division, a wound that had not healed).⁶⁴

Written in 1987, the novel predates the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Erika's contemplation of the border prefigures the central nexus of space, art, and memory, which reveals itself as a driving factor of her journey to Berlin, insofar as "Aveva un motivo irreprensibile. Doveva studiare i progetti delle nuove costruzioni e documentarsi sulla storia del tessuto della città; materie e argomenti precisi che temeva di non conoscere profondamente" (She had an irreproachable motive. She had to study the plans for the new buildings and read up on the history of the fabric of the city; specific subjects and topics that she feared she might not know well).⁶⁵ But before divulging Erika's interest in the architectural identity of the divided city, the narrative voice ruminates on the question of sovereignty – in the political and philosophical sense – in the understanding of identity, spatial and otherwise. The narrator echoes John Agnew's contention that "There is, then, nothing at all 'natural' – physically or socially – to borders. They are literally impositions on the world," which does not imply, however, "that borders are somehow simply metaphorical or textual, without materiality; lines on a map rather than a set of objects and practices in space," but rather that they "are never transcendental objects that systematically secure spaces in which identities and interests can go unquestioned."⁶⁶ Indeed, the sole notion of a

⁶⁴ Morandini, *Angelo a Berlino*, 5.

⁶⁵ Morandini, 9.

⁶⁶ Agnew, John. "Borders on the Mind: Re-framing Border Thinking." *Ethics and Global Politics. Ethics & Global Politics*. Vol. 1, No. 4. Coaction, 2008.

borderless space, as the narrative voices observes, has potential to present either a threat or to induce disinterest insofar as it represents the unknown:

Qualcuno non riesce a seguire i segni nello spazio neutro, e osa fermarsi; proprio come fa ora Erika, vorrebbe cogliere quel fiore arrampicato per caso su di una scatola di latta vuota dalla quale debordano rifiuti e garze militari. È un fiore splendido, ma non lo sarà mai abbastanza, perché non avrà un nome; non appartiene ad alcuna categoria, non è inserito nel corpo della botanica, la scienza lo disconosce. Quando mai si ammira e ama qualcuno che non sappiamo da dove viene e nasce? Proviamo un sottile disagio; e lo strappiamo e gettiamo, dopo esserci soffermati a dire “toh, guarda, che strano fiore mai è questo, sarebbe bello se...” Tra le nostre mani avvizzisce, lo depositiamo, distrattamente, su qualcuno o su qualcosa. Il fiore si reclina, sa di disturbare e che lo si vuole tenere lontano per guardare altri fiori, meno misteriosi ma conosciuti, ai quali diamo un nome, e che leghiamo al profumo dell’infanzia, a carezze materne amate. Lo straniero desiderato potrebbe rapire il ricordo, riportarci nel buio di un passato senza storia.⁶⁷

(Someone fails to follow the signs in a neutral space and dares to stop; just like Erika is doing now; she would like to pick that flower that has accidentally clambered into an empty tin box from which military garbage and gauze spill over. It is a wonderful flower, but it will never be enough, because it will not have a name; it does not belong to any category, it is not mentioned in the body of botany, science does not recognize it. When do we ever admire and love someone if we don't know where they come from and where they were born? We feel a subtle discomfort; and we tear it up and throw it, after pausing to say “oh, look, what a strange flower this is, it would be nice if...” In our hands it withers, we deposit it, casually, onto someone or something. The flower reclines, it knows it disturbs and that we want to keep it far away to look at other less mysterious, but well-known flowers, to which we give a name, and which we associate with the scent of childhood, to beloved maternal caresses. The desired stranger could steal the memory, bring us back into the darkness of a past without history.)

Discourses of territory and borders invoke the notion of sovereignty and control almost without exception. But if we conceive of these as forms of *possession* in a broader, metaphysical sense, then the neutral space, the unknown flower, and the ‘undefined’ foreigner to which Erika alludes represent entities with invisible or malleable borders. These indeterminate units thus either produce disinterest and fear by way of their foreignness, or they awaken our desire to possess them and

⁶⁷ Morandini, 6-7.

demarcate their boundaries ourselves. The ‘straniero desiderato’ (‘desired stranger’) symbolizes unbelonging and ‘a past without history,’ or simply ‘nothing.’ Echoes of Magris and Pressburger – and by extension, Michelstaedter – ricochet in this negotiation of transcendence. Simultaneously, the question of sovereignty and possession of the ‘undefined’ echoes Pahor’s convictions concerning the threat that large nations pose for small, or ‘unknown’ (‘misconosciute’) ones.

Erika’s interest in Berlin is not entrenched in the intrinsic visual and aesthetic value of its architecture, but rather in the link between space, historical memory, and human identity. Architecturally, she conceives of the city as “un cantiere continuo. Una assurda corsa edilizia per stabilire chi fa prima e chi fa più alto e chi fa più bello” (a continuous construction site. An absurd building race for stability who makes first and who makes taller and who makes more beautiful), but divided Berlin also becomes a metaphor of her divided family (history); its separation is paralleled to the disjointed maternal and paternal sides that coexist within her.⁶⁸ Distant memories of the mother Sophie and her sister Ulrike, and the short time spent with her father, produce an awareness of her own internal laceration:

Ma la bambina divenne presto ragazza e rimase tale senza conoscere l’amore, senza sapere quanto l’amore fosse importante per vivere e per respirare. Non aveva potuto amare, e allora tutto quello che pensava, tutto quello che le avevano detto si smarrì. Forse se il padre non l’avesse lasciata così...Lo ricordava, o piuttosto l’aveva presente per avere osservato a lungo la fotografia [...] Allora lei come poteva capire che c’era un’altra parte? Era poi una parte dove le stelle e anche la luna brillavano allo stesso modo, dove le betulle avevano il dorso egualmente macchiato di latte, e dove gli uccelli cantavano un’identica melodia e d’estate facevano a gara con il frinire delle cicale e davano loro il cambio.⁶⁹

(But the child soon became a young girl and she remained such without knowing how to love, without knowing how important love was to live and to breathe. She had not been able to love, and then everything she thought, everything they had told her about it got lost. Maybe if her father had not left her like this ... She remembered

⁶⁸ Morandini, 74.

⁶⁹ Morandini, 85.

him, or rather had an idea of him, having observed his photograph at length [...] But how could she understand that there was another side? It was also a part where the stars and even the moon shone in the same way, where the birches had their backs equally stained with milk, and where the birds sang an identical melody and, in the summer, competed with the chirping of cicadas, giving them the change.)

The notion of ‘un’altra parte’ (another side) continues the thread of transcendence established in the negotiation of the border earlier in the novel. Erika’s journey through the history, architecture and body of Berlin is also a metaphysical and spiritual Magrisian journey through its interstices. Her intellectual mediation of the city is inherently personal; she continually challenges the limitations of form – such as that of the border – in capturing the truth and essence, and in so doing, questions the vacuum of identity. Simple verbal utterances such as “Mi chiamo Erika” (My name is Erika) are internally problematized by the un verbalized information that lies beneath the veil of rhetoric or the *story* beyond the façade of a building. This is most striking in her remembrance of the death of her sister Ulrike:

“Mia sorella Ulrike.” Oppure sarebbe stato meglio dire: “Mia sorella è morta il 7 luglio 1959, alle ore 5 e 30.” Sì, un giorno d’estate, un’alba d’estate. Qui da noi, a Berlino c’è ancora la brina che gela le erbe nei prati, il sole non ha a quell’ora la forza per scaldare. La finestra finita, da dove le hanno sparato... a Ulrike... è rimasta tale. Quel buco vuoto, in quella casa svuotata come fosse un ascesso di pestilenza e non avesse avuto i suoi abitanti con gioie e dolori. L’hanno smembrata, anche i muri sono stati strappati come pelle macchiata, alla quale si fa uno speciale trattamento per ridarle un nuovo aspetto...⁷⁰

(“My sister Ulrike.” Or perhaps it would have been better to say: “My sister died on July 7, 1959, at 5:30 am.” Yes, a summer day, a summer dawn. Here, in Berlin, there is still frost that freezes the grasses in the meadows, the sun does not have the strength to warm up at that time. The finished window, from where they shot at her... at Ulrike... remained that way. That empty hole, in that empty house as if it were an abscess of pestilence and had not had its inhabitants with joys and sorrows. They have dismembered it, even the walls have been torn off like stained skin, which is given a special treatment to give it a new look...)

⁷⁰ Morandini, 86-7.

Erika's rhetorical variations in recounting the past illustrate the precariousness, and simultaneous concreteness of form. The building which witnessed its destruction alongside the death of Ulrike becomes the locus of pain and suffering: its dismembered anatomy remains, for Erika, an extension of her sister's mutilated body.

In his book *The Ghosts of Berlin* (2018), Brian Ladd stresses the epistemological value of architecture and space, maintaining that "Buildings matter. So do statues, ruins, and even stretches of vacant land. Buildings provide shelter for human activities, but it is the activities, not the shelter, that make structures and spaces important to human beings trying to define their place on this earth."⁷¹ These tangible structures, maintains Ladd, "are also the visible remnants of the past: they often outlast the human beings who created them" and "How these structures are seen, treated, and remembered sheds light on a collective identity that is more felt than articulated. Civilizations have always erected buildings and monuments to stake their claims on the land and in the cosmos. But more striking in recent years have been the battles over existing buildings and even over vanished ones."⁷² Berlin is not a random or coincidental choice of setting; Ladd observes, "The concentration of troubling memories, physical destruction, and renewal has made Berliners, however reluctantly, international leaders in exploring the links between urban form, historical preservation, and national identity."⁷³

Similarly, in her book *Architecture, Politics, and Identity in Divided Berlin* (2014), Emily Pugh notes that this nexus intensified during the Cold War when "ideas about and images of home, belonging, and national identity were often presented by the regimes of east and west via

⁷¹ Ladd, Brian. *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 2.

⁷² Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape*, 2.

⁷³ Ladd, 4.

architecture, urban planning, and design,” and since “victory in the Cold War was tied closely to public perception, contemporary popular discourses about housing and architectural design are critical to gaining an understanding of how these concepts influenced political and national identity formation in both spheres of the Cold War.”⁷⁴ Walter L. Hixson observes that its formation is linked to the element of constructedness, since “Although deeply embedded in national consciousness, the Cold War is nonetheless a cultural construction devoid of ontological status. Simply put, the Cold War always was and still is a narrative discourse, not a reality” and although the gravity of the war, “the Berlin Wall, nuclear weapons, and the deaths of millions of people were all too real, [...] the way in which these phenomena are framed and interpreted can only be determined by representation.”⁷⁵ Dylan Trigg picks up this thread, observing that representation, particularly architectural, assumes newfound significance with the decline of theological values in the West:

With the decline of any firmly held theological, indeed theological belief in the West, and with secularism becoming synonymous with a progressive form of liberal democracy, the need for objects to convey a complex relationship between temporal events becomes requisite. Heritage takes the place of previous modes of spiritual engagement. Now, the ‘effable’ emerges as the thread of temporal continuity. If our values are weakened, then our reliance on objects is intensified. Monuments provide a convenient measure of time passing, a practical method to maintain our bond with the past. [...] Residue, even if false, is preferable to a nomadic atemporal placelessness.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Pugh, Emily. *Architecture, Policy, and Identity in Divided Berlin* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014), 9. “For example, with the construction of new housing during the Cold War, authorities sought to prove they could provide for the citizens in their sphere. Using ‘representational’ architecture, such as model homes or cityscapes shown in propaganda films, authorities offered images of the prosperous present they had created and of the progressive future promised to those who lived under their leadership. Residents in West Berlin, West Germany, and East Germany often measured the success or failure of their government by the extent to which they lived up to the standards established by the representational media and official rhetoric around architecture and building. Governments, in turn, measured their own success in part by the numbers of ‘hearts and minds’ won over to their way of life.”

⁷⁵ Hixson, Walter L. *The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor: Yale University Press, 2008), 166.

⁷⁶ Trigg, Dylan. *The Aesthetics of Decay: Nothingness, Nostalgia, and the Absence of Reason* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 228.

Morandini contends with the last notion of Trigg insofar as her nomadic protagonists do, in fact, search for traces to mitigate the void of placelessness, but they never quite succeed in overcoming their distrust of them. The author's narrative negotiation of these questions is most overt in Erika's conversations with Leonard, the man who guides her studies and helps her to delineate the parameters of her academic and architectural research objectives.

Erika and the man engage in ongoing examinations of the city's somatic identity. When the protagonist states that she seeks to trace "le generazioni di architetti che nel tempo hanno lavorato per Berlino. E capirò come negli anni il volto della città è stato costruito, distrutto... e ora rifatto" (the generations of architects worked for Berlin over time. And I will understand how, throughout time, the face of the city has been constructed, destroyed... and now redone), the man observes that "È difficile, per quanto ne so, trovare una città il cui disegno costruttivo non sia stato interrotto" (It is difficult, in my experience, to find a city whose constructive design has not been interrupted).⁷⁷ In this active dialogical exchange between Erika and the man, Berlin is described as an exemplary case of a city that was born divided because, as Leopold explains, Friedrich Wilhelm, the elector, "aveva il problema di riunire genti diverse, con religioni, abitudini, lingue diverse. Ma questo non lo preoccupò. Il suo motto era la tolleranza, il lasciar fare" (he had the problem of reuniting different peoples, with different religions, habits, and languages. But this was no cause of concern for him. His motto was tolerance).⁷⁸ The latter becomes a point of contention as Erika questions whether Friedrich Wilhelm's focus on tolerance was a means to uphold equality or a concealed imperial strategy to erase difference.

⁷⁷ Morandini, 32.

⁷⁸ Morandini, 32-3.

In the uniform facades of the churches – as well as homes – beyond which all were permitted to freely profess and practice their own religions, Erika detects the underlying issue of (in)distinction that Pahor also often addresses in his writing. While the protagonist questions the potential – voluntary or involuntary – of this uniformity to expunge difference, Leopold assures her that “le differenze non sono state cancellate. Anche oggi, anche ora. Vivono insieme. D'altronde l'impero tedesco è stato così, fatto di piccoli stati. E il filosofo per eccellenza, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, ha predicato questa convivenza di tensioni” (the differences were not expunged. Even today, even now. They coexist. After all, the German Empire was like this, made of small nations. And the great philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel advised this coexistence of tensions).⁷⁹ Their divergent considerations on uniformity encapsulate the opposing conceptions of difference held by Magris and Pahor in their rumination on the expression of difference. Ultimately, Erika and Leopold appear to find common ground in the nexus of art and politics, particularly with reference to the architect Carl Schinkel (1781 – 1841). Erika suggests that Prussian general and politician Friedrich Wilhelm provided Schinkel with the thematic framework – of tolerance and inclusivity – along with the creative license to engage with a diverse range of artistic influences:

La tolleranza dell'elettore diveniva per l'architetto un mezzo per ottenere quello che amava. Egli trasferiva la ragion di stato nella ricerca degli stili. L'elettore aveva mescolato con disinvoltura genti e lingue; ed egli guardava ai Greci e ai Romani, agli Egiziani e ai Bizantini, al Gotico e al Rinascimento. Un progetto strano lo disegnava in più stili e da ognuno capiva un segreto [...] e così, libero di vagare sulle tracce del tempo, si ritrovava poi a pensare qualcosa in tutto originale e suo.⁸⁰

(The tolerance of the voter became a means for the architect to obtain what he loved. He transferred the *raison d'état* to the research of styles. The voter had casually

⁷⁹ Morandini, Giuliana. *Angelo a Berlino* (Milan: Bompiani, 1987), 34-5.

⁸⁰ Morandini, 80.

integrated people and languages; and he looked to the Greeks and Romans, the Egyptians and the Byzantines, the Gothic, and the Renaissance. He devised a strange project in several styles, and derived a secret from each [...] and thus, free to wander in the footsteps of time, he found himself thinking about something completely original and his own.)

Erika collocates the essential value of architecture in authentic *storytelling*, or more specifically, in the meaningful expression, not representation, of the past with a forward-thinking gaze: “Vedi, io penso che per fare l’architetto – e per Schinkel la cosa conta più che mai – sia importante essere attenti alla storia... Un artista ha dentro il passato che ricorda solo creando per il futuro, in questo modo cancella il vuoto del passato” (You see, I believe that to be an architect – and for Schinkel this mattered more than ever – it is important to be attentive to history...An artist carries the past inside him, which he remembers only by creating for the future; in this way he erases the emptiness of the past).⁸¹ This kind of unfamiliar continuation of past fragments, observes Trigg, “will become, for us, the means by which a hermeneutic relationship with lived place reveals the temporal property able to convey the Nothing” and “As subjective consciousness recognizes itself in the remnant, which have managed to persist into the spatial present, sensitivity toward obscurity cultivates an understanding of time and place.”⁸²

Morandini further explores this intersection of art and politics in *Sogno a Herrenberg* (1991) and *Giocando a dama con la luna* (1996). Set in the early years of the sixteenth century, the *Sogno a Herrenberg* recounts the martyrdom of the German painter, Jörg Ratgeb. While Ratgeb’s influences include Dürer, Grünewald, and Bosch, he was most notably well-versed in the Venetian leanings of the late fifteenth century. The artist was stripped of his rights as a citizen of Heilbronn after marrying a serf of the Duke of Württemberg and was not permitted to convert his

⁸¹ Morandini, 80.

⁸² Trigg, *The Aesthetics of Decay: Nothingness, Nostalgia, and the Absence of Reason*, 18.

wife Orsola and their children. Although he was elected to participate in the negotiations of those involved in the peasants' revolt, he changed his stance and joined the rebellion instead. Elected to serve as the councilor and chancellor of the peasants, he was ultimately charged with high treason and publicly executed – torn apart by the force of four horses – in Pforzheim in 1526. The novel recounts the story of Ratgeb against the backdrop of vigorous sixteenth-century Germany, journeying through the socioreligious tensions between the Lutheran opposition to the church of Rome, the utopic theology of Müntzer, and the peasant insurrection.

Morandini explores the political dominion over the arts through the fate of Ratgeb's polyptych or *Herrenberg Altarpiece* (1518 – 1519) in relation to the painter's life, observing that "Parallela alle vicende dell'altare, si è mossa la fortuna, o meglio la sfortuna critica del pittore. La disperata avventura rivoluzionaria, l'accusa infamante, l'orrenda esecuzione, sortiscono l'effetto immediato di relegare nell'oblio un'opera di bellezza aspra e di passione provocatoria" (Parallel to the events of the altar was the fate, or rather the critical misfortune of the painter. His desperate revolutionary adventure, the slanderous accusation, the horrendous execution, had the immediate effect of relegating a work of harsh beauty and provocative passion to oblivion).⁸³ Written after the fall of the wall of Berlin, *Sogno a Herrenberg* and *Giocando a dama con la luna* originate from "the spirit of bringing together the 'knots' of history," since after the fall of the wall, Morandini "began several explorations into the past [going] back to the roots and the essential points of change in the European conscience. This is perhaps one way, among the many possible ways, of taking us back to the turning points of an era that on a subconscious level still influence us."⁸⁴

⁸³ Morandini, Giuliana. *Sogno a Herrenberg* (Milan: Fabbri, 1991), 178.

⁸⁴ Morandini, Giuliana. "Boundaries, the Work of Writing and the Female Soul." *Italian Women Writers, 1800-2000. Boundaries, Borders, and Transgression*, ed. by Patrizia Sambuco (Maryland: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015), 64.

In *Giocando a dama con la luna (Playing Checkers with the Moon)* Morandini similarly explores the vibrant cultural climate of late nineteenth-century Europe through the journeys of the Prussian-trained engineer and archaeologist Carl Humann who excavated the ancient Pergamon Altar in Asia Minor under the auspices of the Berlin Museum between 1878 and 1886. Humann brought to light some of the most treasured examples of Hellenistic sculptures and made significant contributions to the study of Hellenistic city planning. Born in 1839 in Steele, Germany (formerly Prussia), he steered the construction railway lines from the Ottoman government. During this time, driven by a visionary potency of oneiric journeys and the rigor of a scientific undertaking, Humann also traveled to the Ionian Islands and Asia Minor, as well as to Constantinople and Smyrna. Through encounters and interactions between Humann and other prominent intellectual figures of the nineteenth century, Morandini addresses the convergence of the arts, the sciences, and politics amid a budding tradition and commercialization of philhellenism. The author offers interesting points of reflection for sociocultural debates surrounding the culture of ‘German Graecophilia,’ which sought to resurrect and recreate the beauties of the ancient Hellas. This movement was an example of one of the many ways in which the German state tried to increase its involvement in cultural affairs as patron, organizer and publicizer.⁸⁵

The novel features a structure similar to *Sogno a Herrenberg*, and as previously mentioned, both works differ significantly from Morandini’s other novels. Divided into twenty-six chapters reminiscent of travel logs or diary entries prefaced by the location and date of Humann’s whereabouts, the novel spans almost a century of European history. The first chapter reads “*Berlino 1861 / Costantinopoli, 1862,*” while the last and only unnumbered chapter bears the

⁸⁵ Marchand, Suzanne. *Down from Olympus (Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970)*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2020), 228.

inscription “Cinquant’anni dopo – *Berlino*, 1945.” Five decades separate the penultimate chapter from the final: Morandini thrusts the reader into the grim reality of the Battle of Berlin after leaving the narrative suspended in “*Mileto*, 1895” with a Humann whose health is rapidly declining and who would come to perish in April of the following year (although the novel does not mention this). Through Humann, Morandini explores the vibrant Mitteleuropean landscape and artistic spirit, and illustrates the thriving diversity and intermingling of cultures, to ultimately underscore the calamity of its collapse at the turn of the twentieth century.

Morandini imbues Humann with the exuberance and romanticism that many have claimed to be distinctive of the man: “Perché non credere che le dèe dell’antichità lo proteggessero, lui uomo venuto dal nord, giovane ingegnere che per inseguire i desideri qui era approdato. Sì, avrebbe costruito la ferrovia e terre lontane si sarebbero incontrate e unite in un matrimonio capace di far fiorire e generare frutti tanto diversi tra loro” (Why not believe that the goddesses of antiquity were protecting him, a man from the north, a young engineer who had landed here to pursue his desires. Yes, he would have built the railway and distant lands would have met and united in a marriage capable of generating fruit so different among each other).⁸⁶ His ardent interest in the reclamation of past civilizations blossomed serendipitously, as if driven by instinct. In the novel, this romantic longing is expressed in Humann’s dreams: “aveva sognato, un’ossessione, sempre lo stesso sogno: uomini si trovavano al limite del deserto e tracciavano linee, uno di loro segnava con il dito dei punti precisi e subito vi sgorgava del liquido, poi altri uomini discutevano animatamente, cose preziose giacevano nell’oscurità” (he had dreamt, an obsession, always the same dream: men were on the edge of the desert and drew lines, one of them marked precise points with his finger and immediately gushed liquid, then other men conversed amongst themselves

⁸⁶ Morandini, Giuliana. *Giocando a dama con la luna* (Milan: Bompiani, 1996), 17.

animatedly, precious things lay in the dark).⁸⁷ Morandini's evocative and nuanced language brings to life a figure who made extraordinary contributions to the advancement of the multiculturalism and artistic discoveries of his time:

Respirava la vera anima dell'Asia, inseguita dall'infanzia, e con certezza dell'uomo proveniente da scienze esatte, si inoltrò nel labirinto delle vie. Osservò come fosse la prima volta le case bianche, con palmette e arabeschi celesti, come porcellane; tra le finestre punti scuri, erbe mischiate per i nidi delle rondini. Porte socchiuse, quasi viandante, se avesse voluto, poteva sospingere l'uscio ed entrare nei cortili lastricati di pietre colorate, abbandonarsi al gocciolio delle fontane nell'ombra dei giardini, e farsi prendere dal cinguettio delle donne in vestiti bianche e colorate. In un cortile così un giorno lontano un vecchio poeta aveva dato voce e suono a storie avvenuto lungo la costa, cantava le armi e il ritorno di vincitori. Immaginare un mondo che prima di questo tempo, ancora prima, aveva vissuto quell'aria profumata e sognare, come faceva da bambino con il fratello, guardando la pioggia cadere sul vetro spesso della casa di Essen, inventare avventure importanti, scoprire civiltà che avrebbero segnato la storia e lasciato il suo nome inciso su pietre battute da secoli.⁸⁸

(He breathed in the true soul of Asia, which he had pursued since childhood, and with the certainty of a scientist, entered the labyrinth of its streets. He observed the white houses adorned with palmettes and celestial, porcelain-like arabesques, like as if he were seeing them for the first time, dark spots between the windows, assorted grass for the nests of the swallows. Doors left ajar, like a wayfarer, he could have push them open and entered the courtyards paved with colored stones, indulging in the trickle of the fountains in the shade of the gardens, and be enveloped in the nattering of women in white and colored dresses. In such a distant courtyard one day an old poet had given voice and sound to stories which had taken place along the coast, singing about weapons and the return of victors. To imagine a world that, before this time, even earlier, possessed that fragrant air, and dreaming, as he did as a child with his brother, as he would watch the rain fall on the thick glass of the house in Essen, to devise important adventures, to discover civilizations that would have marked history and left his name engraved on stones beaten for centuries.)

Humann's fascination with the past, his yearning to uncover new layers of different eras and other realities, is one of the distinctive traits of Morandini's literary identity and one with which she

⁸⁷ Morandini, *Giocando a dama con la luna* (Milan: Bompiani, 1996), 17.

⁸⁸ Morandini, 21.

imbues all of her protagonists, particularly Erika in *Angelo a Berlino*. While Humann dreams of the Greeks, the women of Morandini's other novels long to recuperate or grasp the Middle Europe of *his* time, the one that precedes the dark chapter of cataclysmic and irreparable rupture, which marked a clear *before* and *after* in the European book of history. Morandini's Humann is a symbol of flourishing nineteenth century Mitteleuropean openness, an emblem of the organic convergence of differences and the seductive appeal of the past, which crumbled with the rise of various nationalisms at the onset of the twentieth century and continued for decades, and whose aftermath marks the conclusion of the novel.

Morandini's descriptive passages of Humann's engagement with his spatial surroundings are rhetorically striking and visually captivating. Constantinople, for instance, is "vissuta, contaminata, sfruttata in tutti i segreti, maneggiata come una prostituta alla quale non è sfuggito nessun trucco, il piacere è stato toccato fino a sentire il limite" (lived, contaminated, exploited in all secrets, handled like a prostitute who never missed a trick, the pleasure reached its limit), while in Ephesus "Il lungo selciato raccontava ancora storie d'amore e di odio; e i mosaici luccicavano al crepuscolo come lacrime gelate, gocce di specchi induriti dal sale del mare che ritirandosi si era vendicato" (The long pavement still told stories of love and hate; and the mosaics glistened in the twilight like frozen tears, drops of mirrors hardened by the salt of the sea, which retreating, had avenged itself).⁸⁹ And yet again in Smyrna, "Nei piccoli locali attorno al mercato si sorseggiava caffè e tè profumati. Andava lenta la processione di un mondo al quale il passato aveva lasciato molte cose, ma era come se non avesse il presente. Turchi, Persiani, Arabi di Siria e d'Africa, Armeni, Curdi, Tatars, Ebrei, Indiani, nei loro costumi, tanti occhi d'Oriente, uomini e cammelli" (In the little bars around the market, fragrant coffee and tea were consumed. The slow procession

⁸⁹ Morandini, 32, 41.

of a world to which the past had left many things but appeared as if it did not have a present time. Turks, Persians, Arabs of Syria and Africa, Armenians, Kurds, Tatars, Jews, Indians, in their costumes, many eyes of the East, men and camels).⁹⁰ Such expressive accounts pervade the novel, affirming the author's own Mitteleuropean sensibility and her notable knowledge of architectural history within and well beyond the borders of Central Europe.

After leaving northern Europe to preserve his health, Humann accepted a post in the service of the Grand Vizier Fuad Pasha, whom he advised on the railway and road routes in the 1870s.⁹¹ While Humann was representative of "a generation of rough and ready pioneers in the East," unlike his contemporaries Siemens and Moltke, he "did not return to Germany to amass a fortune or become a hero" but rather "stayed in Asia Minor and became an archaeologist."⁹² Suzanne Marchand describes Humann as "an archaeologist cut of an entirely different cloth" whose "connections in the Ottoman Empire extended from the Turkish court down to the local officials and workmen, reaching a depth and sensitivity far beyond that of the neohumanist ambassadors."⁹³ His patriotic devotion to "enriching the Fatherland was widely acclaimed" and the archaeologist-engineer was determined to bring the glories of the Pergamon back home to the Reich, in part because, as Marchand maintains, "the desires of Berlin were partly projected onto the expatriate in Asia."⁹⁴ In her novel, Morandini explores the relationship between divergent approaches to the junction of art and science through Humann's discussions with Ernst Haeckel. The two first met

⁹⁰ Morandini, 35.

⁹¹ Marchand, Suzanne. *Down from Olympus (Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970)*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2020), 93.

⁹² Marchand, *Down from Olympus (Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970)*, 93.

⁹³ Marchand, 93.

⁹⁴ Marchand, 93.

at university, but reunited years later when Haeckel was gaining recognition for his revolutionary scientific contributions. In a conversation about the biology of marine life, Haeckel expounds his Biogenetic Law (1866) and the two explore a point of contention that perturbs Humann, but later proves central in his approach to art.

The Biogenetic Law posits that the developmental stage of embryos represents an adult form of an evolutionary ancestor and thus, according to the law, monitoring the stages of embryological development is analogous to studying the diversification of life on Earth. Through Haeckel's law, the two engage in an interesting exchange about the relationship between substance and form, with Humann challenging Haeckel's theory of "*sostanze e poi cellule, ecco vita*" (substance and *then* cells, that's life) as unconvincing.⁹⁵ He expresses skepticism towards Haeckel's unempirical conception, whilst Haeckel contends that "*Molti pensano che la natura risponda a un disegno, ma è un'idea a mio parere debole*" (Many believe that nature acts according to a design, but I believe this to be a weak idea).⁹⁶ Yet, Humann's own empiricism acquires a new form with the excavation of the Pergamon, for the sculptor "*Sente le passioni, il segreto della vita e della morte che le figure trattengono, qualcuno ha donato loro la ricetta misteriosa per tramandarla a chi le scopre, la vitalità che comunicano è il segno della loro umana vendetta*" (He feels the passions, the secret of life and death that the figures draw, someone has given them the mysterious recipe to pass it on to those who discover them, the vitality they communicate is the sign of their human revenge).⁹⁷ Those bodies of marble, fruit of the golden age, echo the voice of conflict, which was fast approaching back in Berlin: "*Il desiderio dell'età dell'oro era solo un*

⁹⁵ My italics.

⁹⁶ Morandini, 39.

⁹⁷ Morandini, 58.

sogno. Da quei corpi di marmo, ai quali la passione dell'uomo aveva trasmesso vigore, saliva un rumore di guerra, di catastrofi, di rivolgimenti sociali. La democrazia si fondava sulla schiavitù, sulla violenza, e nulla era stato più violento della tranquilla democrazia di Atene” (The desire for the golden age was just a dream. From those marble bodies to which man's passion had transmitted vigor, rose the word of war, catastrophes, social upheavals. Democracy was founded on slavery, on violence, and nothing had been more violent than the quiet democracy of Athens).⁹⁸ Morandini interweaves history, science, and art to demonstrate how these are ultimately bound together and often subjected to the authority of politics.

Humann's conversation with Alexander Conze, who later became director of the Museum of Berlin, reveals how Haeckel's law subtly – or perhaps not so subtly – operates in the realm of culture and civilization. In her book *Down from Olympus*, Marchand observes that “Humann found in Conze (and the Reich) a doctor to cure his ‘chronic longing,’ and by the same token, the Reich found in the adventure-seeking Humann a solution to its yearning for original and monumental Greek sculpture”).⁹⁹ Indeed, Humann had previously tried to persuade the Prussians to invest in the dig at Pergamon in 1871, but they were too absorbed with their plans for Olympia to show serious interest. The engineer and archaeologist thus carried on with his digging, relying on his private funds until he attracted the attention of Conze in 1878. In the following exchange, Morandini appears to confirm Marchand's characterization of the rapport between the two:

“Come pensavi scrivendomi,” rispose Conze con un sorriso paziente cercando di soddisfare l'amico, “il Kronprinz e il Cancelliere approvano, la Germania vuole una nuova storia, proprio per non dimenticare l'antica.”

“È strano,” riprese Carl, “grande è la differenza tra fare politica e scavare le cose sepolte, ma forse una stessa passione ci prende,” aggiunse spronando il cavallo, “è

⁹⁸ Morandini, 58.

⁹⁹ Marchand, 93.

come se volessimo controllare i fatti, il loro corso, così come regoliamo il passo dei nostri cavalli.”

[...] “Bismarck ha visitato le tue statue, e si è fermato a lungo; uscendo ha detto ‘faccia tutto il possibile, queste statue devono essere berlinesi.’”

Carl, rassicurato dall’amico, diveniva più loquace, a stento tratteneva l’eccitazione e con l’entusiasmo di un ragazzo riprese: “La politica è una passione, e come tale a volte crudele e fisica, cerca corpi, fatti che diano il senso della storia, il pensiero ha bisogno di cose visibili, se questo mondo poi suscita interesse per il suo mistero tanto meglio, si vogliono scoprire altre civiltà e altri popoli per avere conferme.”¹⁰⁰

(“As you intuited when writing to me,” Conze replied with a patient smile trying to satisfy his friend, “the Kronprinz and the Chancellor approve, Germany wants a new history, just so as not to forget the old one.”

“It is strange,” continued Carl, “the difference between doing politics and digging up buried things is big, but maybe the same passion takes us,” he added, spurring the horse, “it’s as if we wanted to verify the facts, their course, just as we regulate the pace of our horses.”

[...] “Bismarck has visited your statues, and he stayed for a while; on leaving he said, ‘do everything possible, these statues must be Berliners’”

Carl, reassured by his friend, became more talkative, barely held back his excitement and with the enthusiasm of a boy resumed: “Politics is a passion, and as such, sometimes cruel and physical, it looks for bodies, facts that give sense to history, thought needs visible things, if this world then arouses interest in its mystery so much the better, you want to discover other civilizations and other peoples to have confirmation.”)

Both Carl and Conze thus identify, whether in art, politics, or existence itself, a necessity for the substantiation of belonging – the sense of being a part, albeit small of the past and of the future. The inherent basis of this urgency underlies Haeckel’s notion of genealogy of which Humann was initially doubtful. Humann, as all of Morandini’s protagonists, is interested in the fragments, vestiges, voices, and contours of interconnectedness.

The protagonist confirms this in his agreement with Conze’s conviction that “l’Europa forse non lo sa, ma porta dentro di sé qualcosa che queste città hanno concepito” (perhaps Europe is unaware that it carries inside something that these cities conceived), because for Europe as for the Hellenes, “combattere [...] era divenuta una necessità, così non solo si salvavano, ma erano

¹⁰⁰ Morandini, 70-71.

certe di esistere” (to fight [...] had become a necessity, so that not only were they saving themselves, they were also certain that they existed).¹⁰¹ In an intimate reflection, the two discuss the two-edged implication of borders:

“Ma avevano sentito bisogno di confini.”

“Ecco il punto,” disse Conze, e non voleva mostrare all’amico entusiasta il disagio che lo prendeva al giungere del caldo. I cavalli si facevano sentire e Carl era immerso nei pensieri in cui credeva. Allora disse d’un fiato: “tracciare i confini allontanava la paura.”

“O l’avvicinava,” rispose Carl, “comunque ricordiamolo, è un sentimento che ci appartiene. Serse, il gran Re, aveva proposto alle città greche uno spazio comune, in sogno aveva visto due cavalli di diverso colore sotto uno stesso giogo.”

“Ma il giogo poi si spezzava.”¹⁰²

(“But they felt they needed boundaries.”)

“Here’s the point,” Conze said, and he didn’t want to show his enthusiastic friend the discomfort he felt when it got hot. The horses made themselves heard and Carl was immersed in his thoughts. Then he said in one breath: “drawing the boundaries removed fear.”

“Or heightened it,” replied Carl, “however let’s remember, it’s a feeling that belongs to us. Xerxes, the great King, had proposed a common space to the Greek cities, in a dream he had seen two horses of different colors under the same yoke.”

“But the yoke then broke.”)

This Magrisian exchange between the archaeologist and the director encapsulates the impasse of borders, insofar as, like two faces of the same coin, *being* and *nothing* border on each other as Heidegger postulated. Roots cannot be traced without borders, but borders have the capacity to erase traces, and to thus cast doubt on the roots. The narrative voice reiterates this through an allegory of a young princess and a white bull.

In a time “lontano nella memoria del mondo” (distant in the memory of the world), intimates the narrative voice, the young princess had gone to the beach with her handmaids, where they delighted together in the sand and created necklaces out of flowers, as “sul corpo di Europa i

¹⁰¹ Morandini, 73.

¹⁰² Morandini, 74.

petali rosa disegnavano il grembo intatto” (on the body of Europe, the pink petals denoted an intact womb).¹⁰³ A white bull stood still where the waves met the shore as the young princess approached it, and standing close enough to feel its breath on her skin, tied him to herself with the necklace made of flowers. Yet, when the bull plunged into the water, a wave of fear enveloped the maids, who began to scream while the young princess felt afraid “solo quando la spiaggia era una linea lontana, e lei la lasciava per una terra che non conosceva, che forse neppure esisteva. Non sapeva che da quella paura nasceva la necessità di avere certezze e il desiderio di conoscere e di descrivere il mondo per non smarrirsi” (only when the beach became a distant line and she left it for a land she did not know, which perhaps did not even exist. She did not know that this fear generated the need for certainties and the desire to know and describe the world in order not to get lost).¹⁰⁴ The allegory captures the power of *invisible* borders, the internalized and absorbed demarcations that demand to be made tangible.

Even the zeal of the Germans to claim possession of the statues of Pergamon, as evidenced in the words of Conze, “queste statue devono essere berlinesi” (these statues have to be Berliners), is, in a sense, a desire for ‘borders.’ The quest for traces, connections, and evidence is, as Michelstaedter would argue, paradoxically both the search for possession (of the self) and a simultaneous renunciation of it in the process. Indeed, Marchand maintains that the “two decades that preceded the outbreak of the Great War present a puzzling blend of vastly expanded international cultural contact and enormously increased national chauvinism.”¹⁰⁵ The historian observes that this period saw the acceleration of commerce among European and American

¹⁰³ Morandini, 74.

¹⁰⁴ Morandini, 74.

¹⁰⁵ Marchand, 228.

scholars as scholarly organizations grew in number, but this expansion simultaneously caused a demand for equal access to information and equivalent ownership of objects. Paradoxically, however, “as scholarly advancement became more and more dependent upon international contact, it also came increasingly to be regarded as a national bragging point” and “on the eve of the First World War, then, *Kultur* and *Wissenschaft* were both more international in scope and more nationalist in sentiment than never.”¹⁰⁶ This phenomenon, however, was also a response to allegations by Allies that “the land of Goethe and Beethoven had become the land of Bismarck and Attila,” and that “beneath a thin layer of scholarly prowess and Romantic poetry, the Germans themselves remained barbarians, uncivilized descendants of the murderous Vandals and Huns.”¹⁰⁷

The German professoriate could not bear, as Marchand explains, that the German soul be tarnished on charges of pure militarism, “even in the midst of the nation’s ‘struggle for existence,’” for “Germany was ‘about’ *Kultur*, not militarism; or at least about the symbiosis of the ascetic soul and the strong body.”¹⁰⁸ The notion of *Kultur* played a central role in the development of the

¹⁰⁶ Marchand, 228. While *Wissenschaft* has equivalents in many languages, there appears to be, according to linguists and historians, no appropriate equivalent in English to capture the nuances of the term. Thomas H. Brobjer provides a detailed etymological overview: “The German word *Wissenschaft* dates from the fourteenth century, a conventional term coined in a theological and mystical context as a translation of the same *sciens*, *scientia* from which the English word *science* is derived. But the English ‘science’ (rooted in the Latin *scire* (to know) and related *scindere* (to cut, divide) does not render the more complex set of associations implied by *Wissenschaft*. *Wissenschaft* is a German word-form which maintains a powerful array of etymological connections via *wissen* linking it to the Old High German *wizzan* and Old Saxon *wita*, but also the English *wit* and *wot*, as well as to the Sanskrit *veda* and the ancient Greek *oidá*, as well as the Latin *videre*. [...] *Wissenschaft* defined in terms of an ordered, systematic, and coherent disciplinary arena of knowledge corresponds only to the last sub-entry in the OED: ‘The kind of organized knowledge or intellectual activity of which the various branches of learning are examples.’ As the noun corresponding to *wissen*, *Wissenschaft* carries the connotations of the ‘ways’ or conduits of knowing – as heard in English with the archaic *wis* (to show the way, to instruct) or *wist* (to know)” See: Brobjer, Thomas H.. “Nietzsche’s Reading and Knowledge of Natural Science: An Overview.” Eds. Thomas H. Brobjer and Gregory Moore. *Nietzsche and Science*. N.p., Taylor & Francis, 2017.

¹⁰⁷ Marchand, 232.

¹⁰⁸ Marchand, 228.

interrelationship between the state and the diffusion of the arts and of academic advancements, as well as, and most importantly, of the maneuvering of the nation's identity:

The principle that *Kultur* should serve the state and, correspondingly, that the state should promote *Kultur*, had become the shared conviction of academia and the Reich bureaucracy. Noting the changing parameters of patronage, however, does not explain why late Wilhelmine Germans took such avid interest in the modernization and promotion of *Kultur*. New forms of organization for the pursuit of knowledge were not only spawned by internal, institutional demands for modernization and expansion but can also be linked to the rise of new, broader, and more subtle forms of imperialist activity. As the product of national institutes and public-private joint ventures, cultural enrichment and the progress of scholarship provided endless opportunities for nonbelligerent self-congratulation, a particular delight to a German nation that had long called itself one of the 'poets and thinkers.' It also offered an excuse for Germans to patronize or even colonize other nations by means of gradual influence.¹⁰⁹

Yet, what drew Germans to the ancient Greeks, and what drove the phenomenon of Graecophilia was an obsession with "chiliastic aestheticism, that brought Schiller to remark, on contemplating a piece of Greek sculpture: 'Man brought something here into being, that is more than he himself is, that hints at something greater than his own species [*Gattung*] – does this perhaps prove, that [man] is now less than he will be?'"¹¹⁰ Schiller's contemplation echoes, more romantically, Haeckel's theory of Biogenetic Law which, in opposition to Darwin's law of natural selection, proposed an understanding of evolution as progressive.

But the true paradox lies in the ultimate fate of German Graecophilia, which lies in the "triumph of historicized classical scholarship over poetry and antiquarian reverie [that] gradually eroded the very norms and ideals that underwrote philhellenism's cultural significance."¹¹¹ Morandini conveys this in yet another conversation between Humann and Conze upon the arrival

¹⁰⁹ Marchand, 229.

¹¹⁰ Marchand, xvii.

¹¹¹ Marchand, xviii.

of the archaeologist to Berlin in March of 1880, in which Humann notes “Oltre alle statue, vive anche l’idea che la guerra muova economia e politica” (In addition to the statues, there is also the idea that war moves politics and the economy), to which Conze responds “È l’idea che sta per diventare nostra, ed è l’eredità che l’Imperatore e il Cancelliere sentono di ricevere dagli Atalidi” (It is the idea that we will soon claim, and the inheritance that the Emperor and the Chancellor feel they are receiving from the Attalides).¹¹² Furthermore, in the penultimate chapter, entitled “*Mileto*, 1895,” Humann tries to convince Conze to focus his attention on Mileto rather than Didyma, which was attracting the interest of the German government at the time. Because, according to both men, “l’industria è il motore di ogni pensiero ed espressione del mondo” (economy is the engine of every thought and expression of the world), Mileto would have been significant because it symbolized the idea of commerce for the ancients. Meaningful are also the words of Friedrich Krupp, the German steel manufacturer and founder of the Krupp family commercial empire, to Humann: “Noi [...] abbiamo il potere del denaro, ma senza di voi il denaro non lascia traccia [...] A volte ci costa caro ascoltare gli artisti, ed è anche pericoloso. Qualcuno potrebbe seguirvi e non trovare più la strada dell’economia. Voi ci lasciate in un terreno dove lo spazio è davvero senza tempo e anche chi guarda il profitto come meta potrebbe imparare a sognare” (We [...] have the power of money, but without you, the artists, the money leaves no trace [...] Sometimes the cost is heavy to listen to artists, and it is also dangerous. Someone could follow you and never find the path to the economy again. You bring us to a terrain where space is really without time and where even those whose goal is profit can learn to dream).¹¹³ Carl agrees with Krupp’s contention, “è vero quello che dice, tutto è economia, forse anche desiderare di ritrovare una civiltà perduta nel

¹¹² Morandini, Giuliana. *Giocando a dama con la luna* (Milano: Bompiani, 1996), 147.

¹¹³ Morandini, 185.

tempo fa parte dell'economia, scambiare i propri desideri e i bisogni e avere una sorta di potere su questa terra paludosa sotto la quale io sento qualcosa che è vita della nostra vita" (what you say is true, everything is economy, maybe even the desire to unearth a civilization lost in time is part of the economy, as well as to exchange one's desires and needs and to have some kind of power over this swampy land under which I feel the presence of something that is life of our life).¹¹⁴

The supposed premise of philhellenism, however, is the promise of borders, the idea of a dream that can precipitate into the terrain of obsession over individualization. This veneration of the ancient Greeks, civilizations of centuries past, preceded and coincided with the Great War – the ultimate example of this treacherous obsession. The idea that drove the German Graecophilic fixation with redefining and *proving* the grandiosity of Germany through the Hellenes, is the same that led Berlin to become 'a nameless city,' as Morandini's narrative voice intuits in the final chapter of the novel, marked 1945:

Berlino non aveva più nome, rimaneva una cosa che continuava a morire. Il buio del cielo non distingueva il giorno dalla notte se non per i lampi di fuoco, che nell'oscurità fiammeggiavano più alti. Il cielo della notte non ricordava più di avere avuto stelle. I palazzi rimanevano crepe annerite, rovine come spettri. Le cattedrali, i teatri bruciavano. L'isola con i musei era all'incrocio delle traiettorie di tiro.¹¹⁵

(Berlin no longer had a name. It remained a thing that continued to die. The dark sky no longer distinguished between night and day, if not for the flashes of fire which flamed even higher in the darkness. The sky of the night no longer remembered that it once had stars. The buildings remained blackened cracks, ghostlike ruins. Cathedrals, theaters burned. The island with the museums was at the intersection of the shooting trajectories.)

Against the backdrop of this violent Berlin, Marie Humann, the wife of Carl's son Friedrich who had died three days earlier, takes a final walk through her home, recalling the memories of times past and recuperating the photos of family members, including 'papà Carl.' The novel concludes

¹¹⁴ Morandini, 185-186.

¹¹⁵ Morandini, 188.

as she walks through the door and utters “forse [...] resterò come una statua di papà Carl” (maybe [...] I will remain as a statue of papà Carl), while the narrative voice intimates “questo non accadde e gli occhi erano asciutti ma sentì il corpo piegarsi, come se il colpo della porta alle spalle fosse inferto al suo corpo” (this did not happen and her eyes were dry, but she felt her body fold, as if the blow to the door behind her struck her body).¹¹⁶ Thus, like the Hellenes, what would remain of the Berliners would have to be dug up from the ground, but immortalized nonetheless in the traces of faded photographs recovered by generations to come.

On the other hand, Morandini’s last novel *Notte a Samarcanda* (2006) ventures beyond the geocultural boundary lines of Central Europe and follows the journey of the protagonist Sophie into the double-landlocked former territory of the Soviet Union in East Asia. The protagonist originates from Friuli and is enveloped in an air of nostalgia, contemplation, and fragmentariness. Like Katharina in *Caffè Specchi*, Elsa in *I cristalli di Vienna* and Erika in *Angelo a Berlino*, Sophie moves within the bounds of a spatiotemporal reality that is continuously contested by images of decay and fragmented memories of a distant and evasive, but insistent past. While her native city is never explicitly mentioned, much like the locus of Katharina’s wanderings in *Caffè Specchi*, we learn (12 pages into the novel) that she hails from that conflict-ridden region near Slovenia and Austria. The sight of the numerous indistinct figures in the distant landscape of the desert conjure up images of her native plain: “Non era sicura, ma le sembravano pastori; e tante pecore, tante così in gruppo, non le aveva viste mai nella pianura nativa a due passi dalla Slovenia e dall’Austria” (She was not sure, but they seemed pastors; and many sheep, she had never seen this many of them, in groups, in her native plain, two steps from Slovenia and two from Austria).¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Morandini, 191.

¹¹⁷ Morandini, Giuliana. *Notte a Samarcanda* (Genoa: Marietti, 2006), 35.

Morandini's deliberate use of punctuation permits the double narrative voice to slide in and out of Sophie's psyche, blurring the lines between the narrative voice and that of the protagonist, thus leading the reader to ponder if the two are not, in fact, one and the same. The scarcity of commas underscores the *scorrevolezza* and *susseguirsi* of the protagonist's thoughts and reflections, while the manipulation of quotations, obfuscates *or* enforces the distance between self and other. Descriptive and poetic spatial accounts transform space into an allegorical embodiment and silent witness of humanity's haunted history and its unresolved questions. The dormant presence of the forlorn past is palpable beneath the asphalt of the desert, for "sotto l'asfalto il deserto è umido di pioggia, il deserto vuole il proprio dominio, nessun esercito coprirà la sua voce. Questa striscia di terra vuota e spazzata dal vento, al confine con un altro confine" (under the asphalt, the desert, humid with rain, wants its own dominion. No army will cover its voice. This strip of empty and windswept land, at the border of another border).¹¹⁸

Sitting at the crossroads of multiple cultures and religions, this interstitial piece of land and one of the most significant sites on the Silk Road has been home to ethnocultural conflicts, much like the volatile homeland of the protagonist. Nevertheless, despite the parallels in the historical and geographical configurations of these two contexts, Sophie's sense of familiarity with the desert dissipates almost instantly. The young woman submits to a re-contemplation of those figures that initially reminded her of sheep, imagining them instead as the souls of the tortured coming towards her to recriminate the injustices of the West:

forse sogno, forse non sono pastori; e le pecore sono le anime dei torturati e vengono verso di me e mi chiedono insistenti: "Che cosa avete fatto con le vostre idee, cosa hanno pensato i filosofi, stanchi delle religioni. Ogni vostro sforzo a nulla è servito, per salvarvi e per salvarci. Il tuo cristianesimo, del quale vai fiera, non è stato forse crudele come l'Islam, e forse più? Per quale ragione allora vi considerate giusti? Avete intrapreso crociate, avete ucciso e torturato chi non la pensava come

¹¹⁸ Morandini, *Notte a Samarcanda*, 13.

voi. Volete forse dominare il mondo con l'inafferrabile? Ma voi che venite dall'Europa credete di avere sempre ragione, in ogni cosa. Invece nulla ormai si trascura per allontanarvi, e vi torcerà contro anche l'intelligenza che usate per renderci schiavi..."

(maybe I am dreaming, maybe they are not shepherds; and the sheep are the souls of the tortured who approach me and ask, insistent: "What have you done with your ideas, what were the philosophers thinking, tired of religion. Each of your efforts was worth nothing to save you and to save us. Was your Christianity, of which you are proud, not cruel like Islam, or maybe even more? Why then do you consider yourselves righteous? You have embarked on crusades, you have killed and tortured those who did not think like you. Do you want to dominate the world with the elusive? But you who come from Europe believe you are always right, in everything. Instead, nowhere is neglected to get away, and even the intelligence you use to enslave us will come back to bite you...")

Sophie's reflections reveal a trifold engagement with the 'other.' First, she demonstrates a proclivity and natural ability to engage with the (historical) reality of the 'other,' for she herself envisages the 'souls of the tortured' and their implorations. In doing so, Sophie also engages with her own self as 'other,' or as a representative of the menacing imperial West in the eyes of the Arab, or Eastern 'other.' This in turn enables her to consider her own position and identity – her system of values and beliefs – in relation to the culture to which she theoretically belongs (the West). Through this subconscious, internal(ized) mechanism Sophie is able to acknowledge ethnocultural differences without neutralizing them, but instead using them to uncover points of convergence.

Sophie possesses what Edward W. Said describes as "the ability to leave one's cultural home" and the stronger this ability, maintains Said, "the more easily is one able to judge it [one's own cultural home], and the world as well, with the spiritual detachment and generosity necessary for true vision. The more easily, too, does one assess oneself and alien cultures with the same combination of intimacy and distance."¹¹⁹ Sophie's incensed and disheartened attitude towards the

¹¹⁹ Said, Edward W. *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1979), 259.

hostile history of the territory, and her natural identification with its inhabitants are conveyed repeatedly. The desert becomes an open canvas onto which she transposes multiple (imagined) realities, alternating between the pre-imperial, the imperial, and the post-imperial:

La via della seta: immagini sbiadite come vecchie fotografie! Mi guardo intorno e non rimane nulla, le carovane non appaiono più nella luce del tramonto, i pozzi dell'acqua sono vuoti, non si accendono fuochi nelle sere limpide, sotto il manto di stelle. La distruzione sembra avere vinto, e la violenza nel suo cieco ripetersi spegne ogni cosa. Non c'è più spazio per l'uomo in queste terre fredde e contaminate. Non m'inganna qualche filo d'erba, ingiallito e portato dal vento d'autunno. Né mi seduce la vista di ali sfavillanti nel cielo sereno. Tutto, lo so bene, da un'ora all'altra diventa immobile e mortale. Laggiù, vicino, a un soffio da me, c'è il deserto.¹²⁰

(The Silk Road: faded images like old photographs! I look around and there is nothing left, the caravans no longer appear in the light of the sunset, the water wells are empty, no fires are lit on clear evenings, under the mantle of stars. The destruction seems to have won, and the violence in its blind repetition extinguishes everything. There is no more space for humans in these cold and contaminated lands. I'm not fooled by a few blades of grass, yellowed, and carried by the autumn wind. Nor does the sight of sparkling wings in the clear sky seduce me. Everything, I know well, from one hour to the next becomes immobile and deadly. Over there, close by, a breath away from me, is the desert.)

Sophie internalizes and incarnates the dissonance of her surroundings, simultaneously interacting with the present and the past, and underscoring the command of the latter over the former. The narrative voice also proves unstable, oscillating between the perspective of an omniscient narrator through the use of the third person singular, and that of the first-person singular point of view of Sophie, which temporarily positions the protagonist as the primary narrative source. This strategy enacts an ongoing process of scission and consolidation within the protagonist, reinforcing the multifaceted engagement with otherness unearthed earlier. Sophie's sensibility, displayed in her subconscious ability to superimpose multiple spatial dimensions, historico-cultural realities and temporal realms leads her to question, in a strikingly Magrisian tone, the nature of borders in and their validity: "Quale linea può dividere questi due mondi? Cambiano forse il colore della terra, il

¹²⁰ Morandini, 34.

vento infuocato, la sagoma delle montagne lontane? Le pianure sono meno infinite e gli orizzonti più rassicuranti? Qui le frontiere sono state spesso modificate, e lo sono ancora, è la paura a segnare le linee inutili” (Which line can divide these two worlds? Does the color of the earth, the fiery wind, the silhouette of the distant mountains change? Are the plains less infinite and the horizons more reassuring? Here the borders have often been changed, and still are. It is fear that marks the useless lines).¹²¹ Sophie’s Magrisian transcendentalism stands in stark contrast with the fear and reservation of her romantic and travel partner Sebastian to whom she refers as “l’uomo importante” (the important man).¹²²

Palpable from the onset of the novel, the tension between Sophie and Sebastian is also evidence of the protagonist’s negotiation of difference. Natalie Dupré has explored the novel’s subtle, but systematic deconstruction of the supposed binary opposition between “Occidente” (West) and “Oriente” (East), through the ‘tripartite male constellation,’ or three particular male figures in the novel: Sophie’s partner, Sebastian, the “uomo importante” (the important man), “l’arabo gentile” (the gentle Arab), whom she meets during an ecstatic dance, and “l’uomo di Heidelberg” (the man from Heidelberg) who appears and disappears in the room of the hospital where she is recovered after a fall.¹²³ Dupré observes that the Orient assumes “una vera e propria alterità” (a real otherness), even though the clear border between the East and the West becomes labile when a series of experiences, rites and symbols bring them to impenetrate.¹²⁴ Our close analysis of the text will uncover these tensions through the linguistic choices and the imagery

¹²¹ Morandini, 14.

¹²² Morandini, 16.

¹²³ Dupré, Natalie. “Frontiere e orientalismo in *Notte a Samarcanda* di Giuliana Morandini.” Casa Moretti: quaderni semestrali (Cesenatico: Casa Moretti, 2004), 135. DOI: [10.1400/97810](https://doi.org/10.1400/97810).

¹²⁴ Dupré, “Frontiere e orientalismo in *Notte a Samarcanda* di Giuliana Morandini,” 135.

employed by the author, whilst also contemplating the locus of the female body as a space of identity negotiation of its own.

Indeed, although Sophie and Sebastian hail from the same geographical context (Europe), Sophie nurtures a subtle, apathetic aversion to the man's presumed self-ascribed superiority and hesitant interaction with the other. Sophie subtly conveys the man's implied ignorance when she alleges that this experience may help him to truly understand for the first time "cosa è stata l'Unione Sovietica" (what the Soviet Union really was).¹²⁵ Sophie's confliction is especially telling when the man invitations her into a tender moment, pressing his lips to hers and vowing to make love to her in the desert. When Sophie utters a simple 'yes,' the narrative voice intimates that "È stanca. L'assale uno strano malessere, per la prima volta avverte il bisogno di udire la sua lingua e allora prova ad ascoltare la sua voce, si sussurra lontane parole dell'infanzia. Si sente madida di sudore in una macchina comoda e lucida; e Rustam le è vicino come la sua *tata* di un tempo" (She is tired. A strange malaise seizes her, for the first time she feels the need to hear her language and then tries to listen to her voice, distant childhood words are whispered. She feels herself damp with sweat in a sleek, comfortable car; and Rustam is close to her like her old *nanny*).¹²⁶ The mere proximity of the "uomo importante" generates a sense of disorientation within Sophie, and we learn that their relationship bears the indelible mark of a painful trauma: the memory of her unfulfilled pregnancy.

Her ambivalence towards the man is well-defined when she imagines herself riding atop one of the "asinelli bianchi o scuri" (little white or gray donkeys) and asking them "riportatemi a casa, correte via dall'uomo venuto dall'Europa, andate dove un tempo c'era solo pace, e voi non

¹²⁵ Morandini, 16.

¹²⁶ Morandini, 22.

sapevate che talvolta lo straniero vi caricava al posto della canna da zucchero fucili, fucili pesanti, con i quali dovevate correre in tutt'altra direzione” (take me home, run away from the man who came from Europe, go where once there was only peace, and you did not know that sometimes the stranger loaded you with guns, heavy guns instead of sugar cane, with which you had to run in a completely different direction).¹²⁷ Sophie’s characterization of Sebastian as the “uomo venuto dall’Europa” (man who came from Europe) signals a disassociation and ‘othering’ of her partner; despite their shared ‘Europeanness,’ Sophie appears to draw a silent but detectible association between the man and the ‘evils’ of the West. She, on the other hand, appears more beholden to Rustam, the man who serves them, who reminds her of her *tata*, and who communicates with “parole non sue nella lingua, ma sue perché esprimono il sentimento dell’anima” (almost understanding the words, not his in the language, but his because they express the sentiment of the soul).¹²⁸

While gazing at the desert, Sophie asks herself what she really wants from “quella massa assoluta, dove qualcuno prima di lei aveva cercato e forse trovato la sua verità?” (that absolute mass where someone before her had searched and perhaps found his truth?).¹²⁹ Morandini has drawn a parallel between Sophie’s interaction with the desert and that of Katharina in *Caffè Specchi*, affirming that “*Notte a Samarcanda* is almost the continuation of the same wandering...Sophie in the place of Katharina.”¹³⁰ In this open, seemingly boundless space, Sophie

¹²⁷ Morandini, 33.

¹²⁸ Morandini, 17.

¹²⁹ Morandini, 17.

¹³⁰ Morandini, Giuliana. “Boundaries, the Work of Writing and the Female Soul.” In *Italian Women Writers, 1800-2000: Boundaries, Borders, and Transgression*. Ed. by Patrizia Sambuco (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press), 65.

looks for answers, or perhaps even for the freedom to ask questions that do not yet have a well-defined form:

Cosa cerchi, cosa credi di trovare nel deserto? Non lo vedi, nulla cambia, ovunque è deserto. Cosa guardi oltre questo paesaggio irripetibile sul quale non c'è nulla da dire...la purezza è davanti agli occhi. È naturalmente in fuga da tutto, da sempre, ogni giorno braccata verso il deserto, sempre più all'interno. Cosa volevi, entrare in intimità con chi non parlerà mai la tua lingua, né accetterà mai la tua cultura, i tuoi pensieri. O pensavi forse di accostare i figli del vento?¹³¹

(What do you look for, what do you think you'll find in the desert? You don't see it, nothing changes, everywhere is desert. What do you look at beyond this unrepeatable landscape of which there is nothing to say...purity is before our eyes, it is naturally on the run from everything, forever, every day chased toward the desert, always further into the center. What did you want, to be on intimate terms with people who will never speak your language, nor ever accept your culture, your thoughts. Or maybe you thought of getting closer to the children of the wind?)

The echo of the imposing question in Sophie's mind presupposes that she is on a quest, one that she is, however, unable to define. This is in line with Morandini's archetypal female protagonists who always seek answers and deeper truths to penetrate. Sophie's internal voice derides her supposed naïveté for attempting to create intimacy with the 'other,' thus reinforcing an implied uncrossable boundary between self and other.

Before the immensity of the desert Sophie enters a region that Bachelard defines, in a chapter entitled "Intimate Immensity" in *Poetics of Space*, as the purest form of phenomenology" or "a state that does not need to wait for "the phenomena of the imagination to take form and become stabilized in completed images."¹³² Since the immense is not an object, "the phenomenology of immense refers us directly to our imagining consciousness, for "immensity is within ourselves" and it is "attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution

¹³¹ Morandini, Giuliana. *Notte a Samarcanda* (Genoa: Marietti, 2006), 31.

¹³² Bachelard, Gaston. *The Dialectics of Space*. Trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2014), 202.

arrests, but which starts again when we are alone. As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense.”¹³³ Sophie’s depth of perception resounds in Bachelard’s notion of ‘inner immensity,’ for the ‘immensity’ of the desert is also a reflection of her own, which “originates in a body of impressions which, in reality, have little connection with geographical information.”¹³⁴

Sophie’s ruminations and her engagement with the immense are reminiscent of Enrico Mreule in Magris’s *Un altro mare*. Yet, while both contemplate the immensity of their surroundings, they also transpose the *borderedness* of society onto them. Thus, the *borderedness* they weigh against the seemingly *boundless* and *unbordered* landscapes of the desert and the sea, respectively, reveal the contentious space in between. Morandini’s protagonist struggles to articulate the purpose of her search, perhaps because her true quest is authentic being, and authenticity resists articulation. This is conveyed in the persistence of the question and Sophie’s reflection on pain:

Dolore, che strana parola, posseduta dal corpo. Perché un giorno ho abbandonato la dolce protezione dei giardini per inoltrarmi lungo le dure piste battute dalle carovane con i loro asini e cammelli? Cosa cercavo? Cosa cercavano loro? Io sono andata nel deserto per sfuggire al mio dolore. E ancora cosa cerchi nel deserto, sempre questa voce nella testa, questo deserto dove non c’è più nulla da udire. Perché sono qui? È per la solitudine, forse nel Mar Rosso troverei la verità!... Ma ci sono gli squali...ma il mio grembo...Perché nessuna voce risponde? ...eh, già il deserto rispetta il silenzio.¹³⁵

(Pain, what a strange word, possessed by the body. Why did I abandon the sweet protection of the gardens one day to go along the hard tracks beaten by the caravans with their donkeys and camels? What was I looking for? What were they looking for? I went to the desert to escape my pain. And what are you looking for in the desert, always this voice in your head, this desert where there is nothing more to

¹³³ Bachelard, *The Dialectics of Space*, 202.

¹³⁴ Bachelard, 202.

¹³⁵ Bachelard, 202.

hear. Why am I here? It is because of loneliness, perhaps in the Red Sea I would find the truth! ... But there are sharks ... but my womb ... Why does no voice answer? ... ah, right, the desert respects silence.)

Sophie's Michelstaedterian characterization of the word 'pain' as strange, possessed by the body invokes the tension between rhetoric (strangeness) and possession. Similarly, the reference to the Mar Rosso and the disconcerting presence of sharks denotes *fear* and *projection* in time which mark, in Michelstaedter's conception of authenticity, the impasse of *persuasion* and *rhetoric*.

Of interest is also the reference to the garden, for Magris's protagonist employs similar language when he considers being in relation to space. Gazing onto the sea, he thinks to himself "Diminuire, ridursi, la civiltà, come il giardinaggio, è arte di potare. Enrico veramente non ama la civiltà, non è andato militare anche perché li rasano la testa, gli piace andare in giro come capita [...] È meglio tornare alla nave, al suo rullio uniforme, che aiuta a pensare" ("To reduce, to compact; civilization, like gardening, is art of pruning. Enrico, however, is disenchanted with civilization. He refused military service not least because he would have had to shave his head. He wants to do his own thing. [...] It will be easier back on board, where the ship's steady rolling aids thought").¹³⁶ In both instances, the garden symbolizes a space of ideology for it is a presumably natural space deployed by human borders. Bachelard also conveys this idea, in strikingly similar imagery, when he contraposes the 'forest' and the 'fields' / 'meadows:

In the vast world of the non-I, the non-I of fields is not the same as the non-I of forests. The forest is a before-me, before-us, whereas for fields and meadows, my dreams and recollections accompany all the different phases of tilling and harvesting. When the dialectics of the I and the non-I grow more flexible, I feel that fields and meadows are with me, in the with-me, with-us.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Magris, *Un altro mare* (Milan: Garzanti, 2007), 29-30. English: Magris, Claudio. *A Different Sea*. Trans. M.S. Spurr (London: The Harvill Press, 1993), 25.

¹³⁷ Bachelard, 202.

The immensity and the silence, or better yet, the immense silence of the desert thus invite Sophie to mollify the dialectics between her I and her non-I, which can also be said of the steady rolling of the ship against the expansive sea in the circumstances of Enrico. As Natalie Dupré notes, “il deserto si oppone alla definitezza, al carattere circoscritto del continente europeo, tratti che sono sempre stati motivi centrali della geografia immaginaria europea” (the desert is opposed to the definite nature, to the circumscribed character of the European continent, traits that have always been central motifs of the imaginary European geography).¹³⁸

The curt reference to the womb is subsequently developed, when the narrative voice affirms that unlike the fortunate hypothetical stranger who may just have found answers before the desert, “Lei invece continuava a sentirsi abbandonata, anche da chi aveva pregato in ginocchio e scongiurato perché la salvasse dal dolore, dalla colpa, dalla voglia di perdersi nel nulla. Ma nessuno le aveva salvato quello che cresceva nel suo grembo di bambina” (She, on the other hand, continued to feel abandoned, even by those who had prayed on her knees and begged to save her from pain, from guilt, from the desire to get lost in nothingness. But no one had saved what grew in her womb as a child).¹³⁹ Sophie’s sense of alienation heightens before the immensity of the desert:

Era stordita davanti al deserto; avrebbe voluto vedere un’effigie, una macchia, anche un’ombra, solo così avrebbe creduto che qualcuno potesse salvarla. Forse cercava Dio, ma Dio l’aveva abbandonata molti anni prima. Non l’aveva forse abbandonata proprio quando inginocchiata pregava per quel grumo di sangue che aveva concepito, chiedeva che non glielo strappasse dal ventre, desiderava che si ricomponesse, non era così? Allora, Dio avrebbe dovuto esserci. Aveva pregato, supplicato. Ma nessuno aveva risposto. Dio era morto ovunque ed ora moriva anche in lei, insieme a quel mucchietto di carne che le strappavano contro la sua volontà. Anche lui, l’uomo importante, non c’era. Loro non ci sono mai quando ti macellano il ventre. C’era una volta una principessa sepolta in una tomba tappezzata d’oro e

¹³⁸ Dupré, 135.

¹³⁹ Dupré, 135.

di perle preziose e, fra tante suppellettili e giocattoli che luccicavano da millenni, là in fondo, accanto ad un'anfora, un vetro trasparente più prezioso dell'oro, più brillante dei diamanti, più vicino a quel Dio che non rispondeva, là c'era un mucchietto di carne e per lei viveva nell'eternità.¹⁴⁰

(She was astounded before the desert; she would have liked to see an effigy, a stain, even a shadow, so that perhaps she could have believed that someone could save her. Maybe she was looking for God, but God had abandoned her many years before. Hadn't he abandoned her when she was kneeling, praying for that clot of blood that she had conceived not to be torn from her belly, to be recomposed? Didn't he? That is when God should have been there. She had prayed, pleaded. But no one answered. God had died everywhere and now he was dying in her too, along with that heap of flesh that they tore from her against her will. He too, the important man, was not there. They are never there when they slaughter your womb. Once upon a time there was a princess buried in a tomb covered with gold and precious pearls and, among so many furnishings and toys that shone for millennia, there in the background, next to an amphora, the transparent glass more precious than gold and brighter than diamonds, closer to that God who did not answer, there was a heap of flesh and for her it lived in eternity.)

Her sense of abandonment and alienation derive from both internal and external forces: she feels marginalized within a system that is not there “quando ti macellano il ventre” (when they slaughter your womb) and by a God that does not answer her prayers. But Sophie's trauma also derives from an internal scission caused by the unfulfillment, the premature cessation of the gestational process, a concept that Kristeva expounds in “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini,” in which she claims that:

if we presume that someone exists throughout the process of cells, molecules, and atoms accumulating, dividing, and multiplying without any identity (biological or sociosymbolical) having been formed so far, are we not positing an animism that reflects the inherent psychosis of the speaking Being? So, if we suppose that a mother is the subject of gestation, in other words the *master* of a process that science, despite its effective devices, acknowledges it cannot now and perhaps never will be able to take away from her; if we suppose her to be master of a process that is prior to the social-symbolic-linguistic contract of the group, then we acknowledge the risk of losing identity at the same time as we ward it off.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Morandini, 34.

¹⁴¹ Kristeva, Julia. *The Portable Kristeva*. Trans. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 308.

Being stripped of the opportunity to *maintain* mastery over this *internal* process by way of an external *invasion* of her body thus produces a sense of identity loss in an *external* reality wherein she already resides on the margin.

Indirect parallels emerge between the violence historically endured by the geographical landscape of Samarkand and Sophie's violated gravid body. Sebastian, the "uomo importante" thus also represents the oppressive patriarchal order of which Sophie deems herself a victim. Still, her ambivalence towards Sebastian is perhaps most strongly conveyed through the juxtaposition of her partner and the figure of the "arabo gentile" (gentle Arab) whom the protagonist meets while witnessing an ecstatic dance, and with whom she eventually engages in physical intimacy. While Sophie is viscerally unsettled by the idea of engaging in lovemaking with Sebastian, her surrender to carnal desire with the "arabo gentile" is instantaneous, bordering on ecstasy and producing a sense of internal liberation within the young woman:

Allora egli la strinse a sé forte, e con tenera energia la stese a terra. Una terra calda, soffice. Poco più in là continuavano le danze. "Ecco," egli dice, "ora il tuo corpo può muoversi libero come quello dei danzatori, e le mie vocali, gutturali come tu le chiami, saranno la nostra musica." E mentre il suo corpo le è sopra, lo sente sussurrare: "Rimani qui, con me." Tolsse la camicia di seta e la fece scivolare sul centre di lei. Il suo corpo si muoveva dentro di lei come un'influenza magica, egli soffriva godendo, fino allo spasimo, la bocca premeva contro i seni divenuti turgidi nel primo vento della sera. Cominciavano ad apparire, una ad una, lente, le stelle, prima lontane, piccole come punti neri nel vuoto, poi più grandi. Dalla posizione in cui giaceva, le sembrava che le corressero incontro, sempre più vicine. E, dietro alle stelle, nel manto blu della notte, comparve una luna sorniona e allegra. Fu un attimo, l'atto in cui l'uomo le bagna il ventre, ma in quell'attimo lei comprese: "ah, davvero sono libera."¹⁴²

(Then he embraced her tightly, and with tender energy laid her to the warm, soft ground. A little further away the dance continued. "Here," he says, "now your body can move freely like that of the dancers, and my vowels, guttural as you call them, will be our music." And with his body on top of her, she hears him whisper, "Stay here, with me." He took off his silk shirt and slipped it onto her center. His body moved inside her with a magical power; he writhed whilst enjoying her, to the point

¹⁴² Morandini, 43 – 44.

of spasm. His mouth pressed against her breasts, which became turgid in the first wind of the evening. The stars began to appear, one by one, slowly, at first distant, as small as black points in a vacuum, then larger. From the position in which she lay, they seemed to be running towards her, closer and closer. And, behind the stars, in the blue mantle of the night, a sly and cheerful moon appeared. It was merely a moment, when the man wet her womb, but in that moment, she understood: “ah, I am really free.”)

During the sexual act with the “arabo gentile” Sophie’s contact with the environment assumes a more positive tone, as conveyed through the slow appearance of the stars. Particularly symbolic is also the man’s release inside of the woman, which instantly imbues her with a sense of freedom. This act can be interpreted as the completion of a two-fold process: it signals, at once, Sophie’s disassociation with the ‘West,’ and the simultaneous merging of the self with the other, symbolically subverting the historical order. Ironically, immediately after Sophie reaches her newfound sense of freedom or liberation, the “arabo gentile” claims possession of her affirming “tu sei straniera, ma hai fatto l’amore con me e mi appartieni” (you are foreign, but you made love to me, and you belong to me).¹⁴³

The distance from Sebastian and the closeness of the “arabo gentile” generate in Sophie a sense of conviction: “sì, era un luogo per essere o diventare più umani” (yes, it was a place where one is or becomes more human).¹⁴⁴ Still, she continues to perceive “qualcosa [di] strano, di ambiguo,” (something strange, ambiguous), the sense that she was entering “un tempo altro, più che in un altro luogo” (another time, more than another space); words made their return, “fluide come i pensieri” (fluid like the thoughts) and “la timidezza e quella sorta di sorpresa svanivano come schiuma al vapore, le parve che l’impressione di lontananza e anche di mistero si sciogliesse, si sentiva più vicina alla realtà” (the shyness and that sort of surprise vanished like steamed foam,

¹⁴³ Morandini, 44.

¹⁴⁴ Morandini, 45.

giving her the impression of distance and that even of mystery was melting; she felt closer to reality).¹⁴⁵ Yet this shift is quickly marked by yet another vacillation as Sophie is seized by anger and “pensieri cattivi e spregevoli, come schegge appuntite di sospetto, gelosia, odio e rancore, con il martellante desiderio di vendetta. Quanto la circondava le dava ora disagio e disgusto” (cruel and despicable thoughts, like sharp splinters of suspicion, jealousy, hatred, and resentment, with a pounding desire for revenge. What surrounded her now gave her discomfort and disgust).¹⁴⁶ While it is clear that contradictory feelings afflict Sophie, the narrative voice does not reveal the true source of her confusion in well-defined terms:

Io non sono nulla, e lui è qualcosa di spregevole [...] Sii forte, altera, non permettere che facciano di te il loro giocattolo [...]” Quando entrò nella città, riflessioni e pensieri seguivano un'altra strada; e si disse ancora cose, contrarie a quelle che poco prima sembravano sostenerla. “Non essere forte, sarai sola, altrimenti. Non essere altera, non capirai nessuno e nessuno capirà te. Se sarai fragile, umile e tenera, allora ti avvolgeranno, e la loro superbia si scioglierà come neve al sole. Non avere paura, la tua fragilità darà loro forza, forse, ti aiuteranno e scoprirai che si può vivere meglio.”¹⁴⁷

(I am nothing, and he is something despicable [...] Be strong, haughty, do not let them make you their toy [...]” When she entered the city, her reflections and thoughts followed a different path; she told herself more things, which contradicted what earlier seemed to provide her support. “Don't be strong, you will be alone, otherwise. Don't be haughty, you won't understand anyone, and no one will understand you. If you are fragile, humble, and tender, then they will envelop you, and their pride will melt like snow in the sun. Do not be afraid, your fragility will give them strength, perhaps, they will help you and you will discover that you can live better.)

If we suppose that the pronoun “loro” (their), which Sophie uses when imploring herself not to allow *them* to make her *their* toy refers to Sebastian and the “arabo gentile,” then Sophie assumes the symbolic position of a contested “territory,” or “toy” like the land on which she now treads.

¹⁴⁵ Morandini, 45.

¹⁴⁶ Morandini, 45.

¹⁴⁷ Morandini, 46.

The contrasting sentiments that emerge in this short monologue encapsulate the existential human need to reconcile the exigencies of the self with those of the external world, or in short, the ongoing human negotiation of difference. Sophie's conversation with the man under the tent exemplifies this necessity.

When the man asks her to speak of her "popolo" ([the] people), Sophie remarks, "Noi usiamo poco la parola popolo [...] diciamo persone o gente" (We use the word '[the] people' very seldom [...] instead we say people or folks).¹⁴⁸ This linguistic elucidation expresses a disunity among subjects on the same geographical plane, particularly in the historically volatile terrain of Friuli Venezia Giulia. While Sophie critiques the hypocrisy of her 'people,' observing that "Da noi la gente finge, finge sempre, la menzogna è quasi un obbligo per continuare a vivere, e le persone deludono. C'è qualche eccezione, ma queste rare perle finiscono schiacciate dall'egoismo degli altri" (Where I come from people pretend, they always pretend, lying is almost an requirement to continue living, and people disappoint. There are some exceptions, but these rare pearls end up crushed by the selfishness of others), the man condemns the violence of both. He observes "anche qui sono crudeli, diciamo che mostrano una violenza più esposta, forse fa parte del nostro modo di essere e pensare, che dici?" (they are cruel here, too; let's say that they exhibit a more direct violence, maybe it is part and parcel of our way of being and thinking, don't you think?).¹⁴⁹ In return, Sophie affirms, "anche noi abbiamo storie di sacrificio [...] Sangue e martirio hanno sempre riempito le nostre menti, anche da noi donne vengono rinchiuso, soffocate e assassinate per amore. Spesso erano i padri a non tollerare che amassero. Come vedi, l'amore, la

¹⁴⁸ Translation here bears clarification for the Italian 'popolo' is generally applied in the political sense of community, as a collective of a nation or an ethnic group. The closest English translation is 'the people.'

¹⁴⁹ Morandini, 54.

gelosia, e tutte le passioni, affratellano il mondo” (we too have stories of sacrifice [...] Blood and martyrdom have always filled our minds, even we women are locked up, suffocated and murdered for love. Often it was the fathers who could not tolerate their love. As you can see, love, jealousy, and all passions bring together the world).¹⁵⁰ This free-flowing negotiation of difference reached its apex when the man tells Sophie “Sei un’europa [...] Vieni dalle parti del mondo dove dite che la cultura sia necessaria come il pane quotidiano. Insegnate al mondo, e volete soprattutto insegnare a noi, come si vive, perché si vive, come si mangia, come ci si veste. Ma non sapete rispondere quando vi si chiede cosa sia un’anima” (You are European [...] You come from those parts of the world where you say that culture is as necessary as daily bread. You teach the world, and you are especially eager to teach us how one should live, why one lives, how one eats, and how one gets dressed. But you don’t know how to answer when you are asked what a soul is).¹⁵¹

Yet, it is only when she is recovered in the hospital after falling from a horse that Sophie delves into the *nuances* of these differences with Sergej, her unexpected new interlocutor to whom the narrative voice also refers as the “l’uomo di Heidelberg” (the man from Heidelberg). The severe injury to the head relegates Sophie to the space of the hospital for an extended period of time, rousing memories of her family and questions of belonging. It is through her dialogical relation with Sergej that Sophie, as Giulio Piacentini observes, “si convince del dramma che l’Occidente, senza rendersene conto, sta vivendo: il venire meno dei valori, della fede, della speranza; tutte cose che invece, nel mondo islamico, sono ben presenti: forse anche troppo, tanto che non è semplice trovare un punto d’incontro. Eppure, nonostante le discutibili differenze, anche l’Islam è capace di slanci appassionati verso Dio” (grew certain of the calamity that the West,

¹⁵⁰ Morandini, 60.

¹⁵¹ Morandini, 60.

without realizing it, is experiencing: the loss of values, faith, hope; all things that instead, in the Islamic world, are very present: perhaps too much, so much so that it is not easy to find a meeting point. Yet, despite the questionable differences, Islam, too, is capable of passionate outbursts towards God).¹⁵² Only a new system of codes could theoretically dismantle the pervasive and deeply ingrained Foucauldian foundations that underlie, drive and define human history: “Bisogna trovare un linguaggio che apra il mondo a nuove parole” (We need to find a language that opens the world to new words).¹⁵³ Freedom is conceivable only in ‘rethinking to recreate the world,’ because “Le idee sono come gli dèi, vagano attorno a un’utopia, come un’onda che saliva e si dilatava dentro. Ci dovremmo prendere il permesso di cancellare le regole, naturalmente, la morale anzitutto, e poi togliere ogni fede, per annullare i motivi di tutti, di tutte le critiche e le avversità. Rinunciare ad ogni tradizione, agli strumenti del potere. È l’unica via per reprimere l’ingiustizia [...] Perché affannarsi intorno ai miglioramenti, non è così che si annulla l’infamia del passato” (Ideas are like the gods, they circle around a utopia, like a wave that rose and swelled inside. We should permit ourselves to cancel the rules, of course, morality first, and then remove all faith, to cancel everyone’s motives, all criticism and adversity. Renounce all tradition, the tools of power. It is the only way to suppress injustice [...] Because concern with improvement does not erase the infamy of the past).¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Piacentini, Giulio. “Recensione a Giuliana Morandini, *Notte a Samarcanda*.” *Tillandsia, Foglio del Gruppo Meic* dell’Università Cattolica di Milano, Vol. I, n. 1 (2006): 172. In an untitled postscript to the novel the Algerian and naturalized Italian sociologist Khaled Fouad Allam observes that Morandini’s Islam “non è l’islam ‘ufficiale,’ ortodosso, quello che riconosce come fonti solo il Corano e la tradizione profetica (Sunna): non è l’Islam della *shari’a*, ma non è nemmeno l’islam che si oppone alla dottrina dei giureconsulti” (“is not the ‘official,’ orthodox Islam that recognizes only the Koran and the prophetic tradition (Sunna) as its source: it is not the Islam of the *shari’a*, but neither is it an Islam that opposes the doctrine of jurisconsults,” rather it is “il risultato di una lenta elaborazione e dei diversi processi di contaminazione fra rivelazione islamica e culture locali, che hanno filtrato e interpretato quell’islam delle origini” (“the result of a slow elaboration of the different processes of contamination between Islamic revelation and local cultures, which have filtered and interpreted that Islam of the origins”).

¹⁵³ Morandini, 156.

¹⁵⁴ Morandini, 156.

Human beings, like their pasts and histories, are made of absences, excesses, fragments, memories, and unanswered questions. They are embodiments, as Pessoa writes, of “a vague nostalgia neither for the past nor for the future,” but “a nostalgia for the anonymity, prolix, unfathomable present.”¹⁵⁵ Morandini’s narrative concerns itself with the past – individual and collective; historical and personal; Western and Eastern; artistic and scientific; recent and distant – because the present is always also the *present* of days past, as well as those that await. Time reminds us of our transience, while flaunting its power to persist and dissipate as it pleases. The remnants of former worlds remind us that their memory exerts dominion over our own. “Tutto il mondo è vedovo” (The whole world is a widower) writes Rosselli, and Morandini concurs.

¹⁵⁵ Pessoa, Fernando. *The Book of Disquiet*. Trans. Margaret Jull Costa (Surrey: CPI Bookmarque, 2010), 177.

Chapter 4: Giorgio Pressburger's Multiplicitous Triestine Other

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.

— Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*

To will to be an individual human being (which one unquestionably is) with the help of and by virtue of one's difference is flabbiness; but to will to be an individual existing human being (which one unquestionably is) in the same sense as everyone else is capable of being – that is the ethical victory over life and over every mirage...

— Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

In his rich interdisciplinary study *On Bridges* (2021) Thomas Harrison writes that “Bridges take shape within a topology of separation. They presuppose geological or geocultural borders, some overarching divisions between nations. [...] Bridges counteract, resist, or overcome the divisive element [...] They bind territories that remain disparate, albeit joined.”¹ A bridge, Harrison contends, “allows only limited interaction. It does not neutralize the differences between the shores and peoples that it links. It creates no synthesis, but rather a locked couple: a vital experience of being together. Establishing rapport, a bridge itself transcends the differences it joins; it is a third space or term between them, a passageway by which we move between bordered things. It calls attention to that junction of visibly disjointed places.”² Migrants, nomads, and ethnoculturally ‘hybrid’ subjects are often the bridge personified: their existence is a demand for mediation of difference across spatial, cultural, linguistic, and spiritual lines. In their conscious, unconscious,

¹ Harrison, Thomas. *Of Bridges* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), 8-9.

² Harrison, *Of Bridges*, 8-9.

or instinctive process of forming connections, they contemplate potentially ‘divisive element[s]’ without ‘neutraliz[ing] differences,’ but rather exploring unique vantage points by which they can transcend them. Writers who explore these distinctions in their work represent ‘that junction of disjointed places,’ those third spaces, as Harrison calls them, that lie in-between. They are also bridges in the sense that Gloria Anzaldúa attributes to them: “thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness [...] passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives. Bridges span liminal spaces between worlds, spaces [she] call[s] *nepantla*, a Nahuatl word meaning *tierra entre medio*.”³ Human existence is predicated on and defined by connections and ‘bridging’ is thus a basic human instinct and necessity. Writers who occupy liminal, unstable, or marginal positions in society do not merely inhabit those interstices between cultures and languages, they can also *(re)create* them. The Jewish Budapest native and Italian naturalized citizen Giorgio Pressburger (1937 – 2017) is an authentic example of such an intellectual. Pressburger’s protagonists set out to form bridges between cultures, languages, and realities only to discover that they are but a thread in an ever-expanding network of intersecting, overlapping and untraceable links.

Throughout his life and career, Pressburger nurtured several artistic talents, spoke various languages, and traversed many borders. Prolific author of novels and short stories, theater and film director, television producer, as well as playwright, journalist, and essayist, he was also an avid activist and educator. Some have described him as “l’anima ebraica della Mitteleuropa” (the Jewish soul of Middle Europe), others have deemed him “l’ultimo mitteleuropeo” (the last Mitteleuropean). With his all-embracing versatility and multiculturalism Pressburger is, indeed, a prime representative of the rich diversity of Central Europe. A direct descendant of Karl Marx,

³ Anzaldúa, Gloria E. *This Bridge We Call Home. Radical Visions for Transformation* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 1.

Heinrich Heine, Felix Mendelssohn, Emeric Pressburger, and Edmund Husserl, he was born in Budapest in 1937 to Jewish parents of Slovakian origin, from Bratislava, the former Pressburg (in German). He escaped Nazi concentration camps by hiding in the basement of a synagogue with his brother and sister, a rabbi and some fifty other Jewish children until their release. After the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, Pressburger fled to Vienna and subsequently settled in Italy, first in Rome and then in Trieste where he would reside for the next thirty years of his life. The cultural and artistic sensibility of Pressburger and of his European contemporaries – not only those who comprise this study, but also Ingrid Bachmann, Milan Kundera, and Dubravka Ugrešić to name a few – is, in large part, a byproduct of the volatile sociopolitical temperament of the twentieth century, and of the events (and conflicts) that steered their personal trajectories.⁴ These victims of the modern European malady became its most devoted disciples, and such was unquestionably the case for Pressburger.

The author's early domestic uprooting, spurred by his even earlier encounter with *il Male* (Evil) – the condition that encompasses the inconsistency, absurdity, and the senselessness of existence, which is nonetheless essential to the natural order of things – in the form of religious and political persecution, among others, imprint on his oeuvre, generating an existential tug-of-war that rouses his protagonists and moves the storylines of his narratives. The themes of belonging and identity occupy a central position in Pressburger's literary production, but they are also

⁴ I am here referring to those European writers whose personal journeys were impacted by the geopolitical events of the twentieth century and who derived from these events much of the subject matter that comprises their works. While this includes the autobiographical element, it is not necessarily limited to it. Rather, it points to the sociopolitical involvement or ethnocultural entanglements of these figures in their respective contexts which, in one shape or another, play a vital function in their intellectual formation and cultural sensibility. This also includes residing in places other than the *first* 'home,' and thus discovering that 'home' can be elsewhere; or writing in other languages as opposed to solely in one's mother tongue. In the Triestine literary context, the autobiographical element is commonly regarded as a distinctive feature of *triestinità* as initially suggested by Pietro Pancrazi in his problematic early attempt to delineate the parameters of this literary tradition. Nonetheless, this presupposition is commonly accepted among scholars as a common thread in the literature of Triestine writers.

distinctive leitmotifs of his all-embracing multimediatric artistic repertoire. Fraught with the Sisyphean task of unearthing a logic in their seemingly futile human existence, Pressburger's restless eternal vagabonds embark on a quest whose objective is, at the very least, elusive: to reach the Heimat, the (imagined and symbolic) homeland that holds the keys to their existential woes – a journey bound to find resolution only in the acceptance of and submission to the unknown, or in Pressburgian terms, *l'oscuro*. This search for meaning is often characterized by a fleeting sense of logic and order, one that finds a sensible articulation in the Austrian Musil, who describes it as “a flash of understanding that amounts to the insight of genius, and yet it slowly withers, even in our hands – like a flower. The form remains, but the colors and the fragrance are gone.”⁵ In Pressburger's narrative, fantasy and reality converge, becoming nearly indissoluble. Languages intermingle and peculiarities abound to produce an intricate portrait of humanity wherein “tutte le vite, piccole o grandi, se si può fare questa distinzione, sono intrecciate l'una con l'altra” (all lives, big or small, if one can make this distinction, are intertwined with one another).⁶

It is in this ostensibly infinite web of human, and thus also cultural, temporal, and historical, interrelations that Pressburger's protagonists seek to discover a sense of belonging, a Heimat if we dare, that follows from what Peter Bickle denotes as “an individualization that is based on a disindividualization.”⁷ We can characterize this process described by Bickle as intrinsically European: the existential anguishes of Pressburger's postmodern subject intersect with, or even better, surface as extensions and micro-expressions of the greater ontological questions

⁵ Musil, Robert. *Young Törless*. Trans. Eithne Wilkins (London: Panther, 1971), 183.

⁶ Pressburger utters this phrase in the film adaptation of his collection of short stories, *L'orologio di Monaco*, first published in 2003 by Einaudi. Directed by the Triestine filmmaker Mauro Caputo and featuring Pressburger himself, the film was released in 2014 by Istituto Luce-Cinecittà. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

⁷ Bickle, Peter. *Heimat: A Critical Theory of the German Idea of Homeland*. (Rochester: Camden House, 2002), 6.

surrounding the identity of Europe itself. The ‘*Stara Nova, vecchia Europa*’ is, indeed, the author’s real protagonist and Pressburger’s individual works, as well as his cumulative corpus, may well be interpreted as allegorical representations of its search for an articulable and sensical identity.⁸ The figures and characters that populate Pressburger’s pages reproduce Europe’s complexity: those fluctuating ethnocultural dynamics and sociopolitical mechanisms that find an appropriate description in Massimo Cacciari’s *Europe and Empire* (2016):

No generalization is able to encompass the ‘terrifying’ freedom of responses, forms, and languages, the uncertainty of relations between parts and the whole, between states and nations, which characterizes European history. Europe has never defined its borders to the outside because inside its figure is a perennial metamorphosis that does not tolerate a stable determination (*determinazione*). It is irreversible rootednessless. It is *experimentum*: process, way (*via*), danger. It only possesses itself as a destination to reach something that is absent in the present. Pure “already” and “not yet” (*iam et nondum*).⁹

Cacciari’s observations resound in historians and theoreticians such as Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, and Peter Stahlins, whose scholarship in the last two decades of the twentieth century, greatly contributed to the consolidation of a constructivist vocabulary for historical analyses of nations and the formation of national identities.¹⁰ As Glenda Sluga observes, these “historians shifted their attention to the discursive representations of difference that underwrite the ‘invented’

⁸ Pressburger uses this phrase in *L’orologio di Monaco* (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2017). More specifically, it is the narrator’s aunt who utters this oxymoron, formed by the Slavic words *stara* or ‘old,’ and *nova* or ‘new,’ while focusing on the generational differences between her generation and that of her nephews.

⁹ Cacciari, Massimo. *Europe and Empire: On the Political Forms of Globalization*. Trans. Massimo Verdicchio (United States: Fordham University Press, 2016). Fordham Scholarship Online. DOI: 10.5422/fordham/9780823267163.001.0001.

¹⁰ For more of this topic, see: Gellner, Ernst. *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Kristeva, Julia. *Nations Without Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Todorov, Tzvetan. *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism and Exoticism in French Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Todorov, Tzvetan. “*The Coexistence of Cultures*.” OLR 19 (1998); Esbenschade, Richard. “Remembering to Forget: Memory, History, National Identity in Postwar East-Central Europe.” *Representations*, 49 (1995); Abou, Selim. “L’Universel et la relativité des cultures.” *L’Idée d’humanité* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1996), 41-70.

and ‘imagined’ constitution of nations and national identities.”¹¹ The concerns surrounding Europe and Europeanism trickle down to the regional and localized dimension, as is apparent in the case of Trieste and *triestinità*, which Jan Morris describes as “an allegory of limbo, in the secular sense of an indefinable hiatus.”¹² Trieste’s delineation as a resident of a boundary region, “an area of transition often marked by ambiguity,” offers, in the words of Sluga, “a promising vantage point for the study of both the oppositional discourses that shape national identities, and the fragile points of attachment and separation of ‘perceived patterns of similarities and differences.’”¹³

Multiplicity is synonymous with Pressburger’s name. It is also the focus of the present study of the author’s multidimensional negotiation of alterity. By employing an interdisciplinary methodology akin to the very narrative that constitutes the framework of this examination, and engaging with a diverse body of thinkers – Calvino, Kundera, Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Michelstaedter – our critical gaze will ponder the philosophical and ethical identitarian implications underlying the leitmotif of the network, the running thread of humor, the multilayered thematization of the *absurd*, and multilingualism as a form of existential boundary-crossing, cultural hybridity and multiplicity. This interdisciplinary engagement with these four critical aspects of Pressburger’s narrative will reveal the author’s inherent privileging of an understanding of the self as a fundamentally multiplicitous, diverse, and uncertain entity that spurns the rhetorical and conceptual limitations of a fixed ‘I.’ Uncovering substantial points of convergence between the Pressburgian and Magrisian conceptions of the self-other dichotomy, our analysis will nonetheless argue that the authors present different typologies of transcendence: while Magris’s

¹¹ Sluga, Glenda. *The Problem of Trieste and the Italo-Yugoslav Border: Difference, Identity, and Sovereignty in Twentieth Century Europe* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 5.

¹² Morris, Jan. *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002), 20.

¹³ Sluga, 5.

'I' is transcendent, fluid and dialogically-negotiated as self-other, the Hungarian's is uncertain, untrusting and skeptical by virtue of its quest and inability to tame the convergence of an inherently contradictory and unreliable system of values, differences and beliefs.

Like Trieste and Europe, Pressburger's protagonists are unfit to tame, or at least 'systematize,' the convergence of elements and contradictions that reign unrestricted within him, producing a 'perennial [internal] metamorphosis' that resists stable determination. In other words, he is unable to discover, and much less accept, a stable classification (or form) of his *being*, one that does not ultimately contradict itself. The Pressburgian protagonist, like the European space, is, what Cacciari describes as "a variable geometry: not a universe but a multiverse" wherein "All [...] frontiers exist so as to be crossed [...] only in that variable distance, impossible to capture, which separates and unites those in dialogue and those who fight."¹⁴ Furthermore, it operates *as* and *within* a system, since "Europe's parts have always been within a 'network;' they have always looked at themselves in the light of conflict-harmony (*polemos-harmonia*). Each part lives because it absorbs energy from the others and transforms it."¹⁵ In Pressburger's oeuvre, this network stretches across individuals, continents, temporalities, and cultures (including language), but also past the boundary between the tangible or concrete, and the imagined or invented. The concept of network is central to Pressburger's critique of identity, but also to his writing, which is fruit of an interdisciplinary exploration of and wide-reaching gaze onto the world, one that sets out to draw connections and establish links between temporal, spatial and human dimensions. Pressburger openly affirms this in one of his final interviews with Eleonora Barbieri while discussing his last

¹⁴ Cacciari, Massimo. *Europe and Empire: On the Political Forms of Globalization*, Fordham Scholarship Online. DOI: 10.5422/fordham/9780823267163.001.0001.

¹⁵ Cacciari, *Europe and Empire: On the Political Forms of Globalization*, DOI: 10.5422/fordham/9780823267163.001.0001.

novel *Don Ponzio Capodoglio* (2017), which clearly evokes, as the title suggests, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. When Barbieri comments on the remarkable breadth of the work – the novel combines music, religion, philosophy, archeological literature, paleontology, and biolinguistics – Pressburger affirms “Nella mia vita mi sono occupato di tutte queste cose, e anche di altre che non ci sono, come le scienze biologiche. È la curiosità a tenerle insieme” (In my life I studied all of these disciplines, as well as others which are not included, such as the biological sciences. It is curiosity that holds them together).¹⁶ Literature is, indeed, a point of convergence of the author's diverse artistic proclivities and wide-reaching intellectual interests, many of which he started to cultivate long before his relatively late plunge onto the literary stage in the 1980s with his collection of short stories *Storie dell'Ottavo Distretto* (1986) and the short novel *L'elefante verde* (1986), both products of a coauthorial effort with his twin brother Nicola who became gravely ill at this time and perished before the publication of the second text.¹⁷

This first fraternal narrative endeavor marks a defining moment in Pressburger's career for it carries significant implications for his (first-person) narrative, as Emma Bond has observed. *Storie dell'Ottavo Distretto* (1986) presents a vibrant portrait of the Jewish community in Budapest, where the twins grew up and dwelt before fleeing to Italy by way of Vienna. In an

¹⁶ Pressburger, Giorgio. “Kafka, Cervantes, Joyce: gli autori pesanti sono i veri umoristi.” Interview by Eleonora Barbieri. *Il giornale*. April 9, 2017, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/kafka-cervantes-joyce-autori-pesanti-sono-i-veri-umoristi-1383945.html>.

¹⁷ His first solo narrative, *La legge degli spazi bianchi* (Bologna: Marietti, 2020) a collection of five short stories, was published three years later in 1989.

¹⁷ Some of the author's other publications include: *Il sussurro della grande voce* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1990); *La coscienza sensibile* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1992); *Denti e spie* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1994); *I due gemelli* (Venice: Marsilio, 1996); *La neve e la colpa* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998); *Di vento e di fuoco* (Turin: Einaudi, 2000); *L'orologio di Monaco* (Venice: Marsilio, 2017); *Sulla fede* (2004); *Nel regno oscuro* (Milan: Bompiani, 2008); *Storia umana e inumana* (Milan: Bompiani, 2013); *Racconti triestini* (Venice: Marsilio, 2015); and *Don Ponzio Capodoglio* (2017). In addition, Pressburger has authored theatrical plays such as *La partita* (1974; Premio Pirandello), *Le tre madri* (1995; Premio Flaiano), and *Messaggio per il secolo* and (1997; Premio Riccione).

interview with Laura Lepschy, Pressburger reveals that he had already written two of the twelve stories that comprise the volume when Nicola became gravely ill. To shift the twin's attention away from his illness, Giorgio suggested they co-author the volume. They divided the work, allocating the short stories and adding a few new ones by Nicola. Each adopted a literary model: Giorgio opted for the poetic tone of the Trieste, Umberto Saba, while Nicola elected the prose style of the Austrian writer, Peter Handke. The creative process of the twins consisted in biweekly discussions which were held in Italian rather than their native Hungarian. Since the premise of collaboration is negotiation, of difference, language, and style, but also of the (narrative) identity of the co-authors, it is only natural that the presence of Nicola during this early stage of Pressburger's career played a significant role in his (individual) artistic evolution. In addition, while the collaborative nature that spurred these texts makes "explicit the fact that the writing of the self – especially when shared between two voices – is always subject to complex processes of negotiation," the decision to write in Italian enabled Pressburger "to make use of the multiple aspects of that 'double perspective' experienced by so many migrant writers."¹⁸ Thus, the uncertain 'I' of the texts co-authored by Giorgio and Nicola persists in the author's oeuvre, as Bond affirms; in works published after Nicola's death "the narrating first person now enacts and seeks to resolve the fragmentation of this partial self."¹⁹

Language, one of the ultimate instruments of mediation of difference, is for Pressburger both an expression and a correlate of belonging. In an article entitled "La lingua come confine ovvero Apprendistato per una metamorfosi" the author contemplates the role of language in the

¹⁸ Bond, Emma. "Narrating Multiple Selves: The 'Double' First Person in the Work of Giorgio Pressburger." Paper given at the conference *First Person Writing, Four Way Reading*, IMLR, London, December 1st, 2011, 1.

¹⁹ Bond, "Narrating Multiple Selves: The 'Double' First Person in the Work of Giorgio Pressburger," 1.

formation or perception of a writer's literary identity. Presenting several examples of authors who adopt and write in an idiom other than their native tongue, he describes this process as a metamorphosis and asserts that "Uno scrittore che non scrive nella lingua madre, che ne varca i confini, è davvero simile a uno strano animale che abbia subito la metamorfosi" (A writer who does not write in his native tongue, who transverses its borders, is similar to a strange animal that has undergone a metamorphosis).²⁰ This linguistic border-crossing or *journeying* – strikingly Magrisian in imagery – across the threshold of the native tongue thus signals one's encounter with the self as other, a kind of chameleonic transformation: "scrittori che, per esempio, da giapponesi o cinesi si trasformano in inglesi, oppure da inglesi si *trasformano* in francesi, da cingalesi in canadesi, da ungheresi in svizzeri, o in italiani, oppure in tedeschi, da russi in americani" (writers who, for instance, from Japanese or Chinese, *transform* into English, or from English into French, or from Sinhalese into Canadians, or Hungarians into Swiss, or into Italians, or Germans, from Russians into Americans).²¹

Pressburger describes the rupture with the mother tongue as a symbolic separation from one's earliest self since the latter is traditionally developed in the first two or three years of one's existence, the time associated with "le esperienze più terribili dell'esistenza dell'uomo" (the most terrible experiences of human existence).²² Our most traumatic encounter with reality and our earliest and most primitive emotions are experienced at the age when we learn to speak. Thus, observes Pressburger, who abandons the language acquired in this way also abandons "il proprio sé stesso più antico" (his own oldest self) and the "realizzazione di quel ponte meraviglioso che

²⁰ Pressburger, Giorgio. "La lingua come confine ovvero Apprendistato per una metamorfosi," *The Italianist*, 26:2, 2016, 315, DOI: 10.1179/026143406X151836.

²¹ Pressburger, "La lingua come confine ovvero Apprendistato per una metamorfosi," 315.

²² Pressburger, 315.

collega emozione pensiero e espressione” (realization of that marvelous bridge that connects emotion thought and expression).²³ For Pressburger this is mitigated by other ‘bridges’ (languages), which can be constructed and traversed but are nevertheless bound to be inherently different.²⁴ Multilingualism is evidence of the plurality of elements that can coexist in a singular identity, as Pressburger maintains:

Possiamo, noi soli, noi esseri umani, far convivere dentro di noi due o più ‘forme’ mentali diverse, senza tragedia, senza bisogno di chiuderci nel bozzolo, senza spargimento di sangue. Siamo progettati per essere di molte forme ed è questo che ci può assolvere dai vincoli dell’identità, che è stato uno dei miti, uno degli idoli, uno dei morbi dei secoli e millenni passati. La letteratura, l’arte, può, sotto questo aspetto insegnare molto all’altra grande attività della mente umana: la politica.²⁵

(We, human beings, can allow for two or more different mental ‘forms’ to coexist within us without tragedy, with no need to hide ourselves in a cocoon, and without bloodshed. We are intended to be of many forms, and it is this that can absolve us of the constraints of identity, which was one of the myths, one of the idols, one of the diseases of centuries and millennia. Under this aspect literature, art, has a lot to teach the other great activity of the human mind: politics.)

Pressburger challenges and problematizes monistic understandings of language, claiming that the native tongue is one into which a human being is thrust, and which one does not develop consciously, therefore acting as a predeterminate signifier of one’s being – a belief that is upheld and echoed by Pahor. The primary tongue is thus, for Pressburger, a correlate of *Die Geworfenheit*, the state of having-been-thrown into the world, thrust into a unique and prescribed social milieu. The multiplicity underlying Pressburger’s conception of identity thus also extends to languages.

²³ Pressburger, 315.

²⁴ Pressburger upholds this through various examples of acclaimed and canonical writers from different geographical contexts, which include the Polish writer Joseph Conrad, the Japanese Kazuo Ishiguro, the Irish Samuel Beckett, who famously wrote in French rather than his native English, as well as the so-called ‘German trio’ composed of Kafka, Elias Canetti, Bulgarian of Spanish origin, and the Romanian Paul Celan, among others. In doing so, Pressburger delineates nine typologies of this metamorphosis, while acknowledging that there are many others.

²⁵ Pressburger, Giorgio. “La lingua come confine ovvero Apprendistato per una metamorfosi,” *The Italianist*, 26:2, 2016, p. 325, DOI: 10.1179/026143406X151836.

Indeed, over time, the author's narrative diversified exponentially, boasting remarkable linguistic breadth and dialectical range.

This range and experimentation are also both the agents and the byproducts of Pressburger's multimediatic explorations. In the initial stages of his career, Pressburger pursued his artistic formation in theater and film directing, as well as radio and television producing. After fleeing his native Hungary in 1956 he initially settled in the eternal city, studying biology at the University of Rome and theater at the National Academy of Dramatic Arts (Accademia Nazionale d'Arte Drammatica) where he received an academic grant and obtained a degree in theater directing. During this time, he joined the Experimental Cinema Center and mingled with the Italian intellectual scene, forging relationships with leading figures such as Alberto Moravia and Dacia Maraini. The Italian writer Andrea Camilleri, who worked for Rai at the time, took Pressburger under his wing and introduced him to the world of radio – the beginning of a lifelong affair with the culture of sound.²⁶ At the Phonology Studio in Milan, Pressburger collaborated with leading music researchers such as Bruno Maderna and Luciano Berio. In the early 1960s he began

²⁶ On July 8, 2017, only three months before his death (Trieste, October 5, 2017), Pressburger published his last article for the Italian newspaper *Corriere*. In the article Pressburger pays tribute to Camilleri: “Camilleri ha aiutato nei suoi lunghi anni di insegnamento molti giovani attori e attrici, introducendoli nelle istituzioni, nelle compagnie teatrali, nella Rai, dando consigli e indicazioni. Così ha fatto anche con me e gliene sarò sempre grato. Come regista all’opposto dei suoi famosi contemporanei, non si esibiva salendo sul palcoscenico sostituendosi agli attori per far vedere quanto era più bravo loro: più intelligente, più acuto. Camilleri usava invece poche parole, sussurrava due, tre idee e poi tornava al suo posto. Come del resto faceva Eduardo De Filippo. Camilleri seguiva la famosa poesia proprio del grande maestro napoletano: la fantasia ‘fa tà-tì, tà-tì, nun fa tì-tà...’. Non occorrono invenzioni gigantesche, basta un piccolo spostamento nell’osservazione della nostra ineffabile realtà per rappresentarla in modo critico e veritiero.” (In his long years of teaching, Camilleri helped many young actors and actresses, introducing them to institutions, theater companies, Rai television, and giving them advice and guidance. This he also did with me, and I will always be grateful to him. As a director to his famous contemporaries, he did not rise on stage to demonstrate how much better he was than them: more intelligent, sharper. Instead, Camilleri would use very few words, whisper two or three ideas, and return to his seat. Just as Edoardo De Filippo would do, after all. Camilleri followed the very poetry of the great Neapolitan teacher: la fantasia ‘fa tà-tì, tà-tì, nun fa tì-tà...’. Excessive inventions are unnecessary, what suffices is a small adjustment in the observation of our ineffable reality to represent it in a critically and faithfully). My translation. See: Pressburger, Giorgio. “A lezione dal mio maestro Camilleri,” *Corriere della sera*, July 8, 2017.

producing works of prose, as well as radio and television originals.²⁷ For many years, he divided his time between Rome and Trieste, before eventually settling down in the capital of Friuli Venezia Giulia, whose sociocultural climate resembled that of his native Budapest, while its expansive aperture onto the Adriatic imbued him with the same sense of openness or ‘infinito’ as the Danube. In the last four decades of his life, Pressburger also steered many cultural committees.²⁸ The Budapest native served as artistic director for more than a decade and presented Hungary as the guest of honor at the first ever Mittelfest in 1991.²⁹ Some years later, in 2007, he served as artistic director of the Castel Teatro Festival sanctioned by Trieste, which extended to all of the theatrical establishments in the territory, embracing even those of its neighbor, Slovenia. Throughout his career, he held tenure and numerous guest lectures at several international institutions.³⁰

²⁷ Pressburger’s radio and television originals include *Il mattatoio* (1967), *Il ponte di Queensborough* (1971), *Giochi di fanciulli* (1970), *La torre di Babele* (1971), *Ages* (1972), *Missione compiuta* (1973), *Eclisse di un Vicedirettore generale* (1973), *Diario immaginario* (1975), *Gli ebrei* (1975), *Vita di Schubert* (1977), *Torquato Tasso* (1984), *Il formaggio e i vermi* (1979), *Il principio* (1988), *Terranera, un viaggetto nel proto-Lazio* (1994). His radio production includes the following titles: *Macbeth* (Shakespeare), *Don Carlos* (Friedrich Schiller), *Il malato immaginario* (Molière), *Il temporale di Strindberg* (August Strindberg), *I barbari di Gorki* (Maksim Gor’kij), *La rosa di carta* (Ramón María del Valle-Inclán, Miguel Ángel Asturias, Luigi Pirandello), *La commedia delle vanità* (Elias Canetti).

²⁸ Not long after the fall of the Berlin Wall, he secured, as part of the pentagonal initiative, an investment from then foreign minister, Gianni De Michelis, for the international and multidisciplinary festival in Cividale del Friuli, Mittelfest. Formed in Budapest in 1989, the initiative is a forum of regional cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe, consisting of 18 member states. With the addition of Czechoslovakia in 1990, it adopted the name of Pentagonal Initiative and with the subsequent addition of Poland, changed once more to Hexagonal Initiative. At the summit of Heads of Government in Vienna, the name changed to Central European Initiative (CEI). The Budapest native served as artistic director for more than a decade and presented Hungary as the guest of honor at the first ever Mittelfest in 1991.

²⁹ The official website of Mittelfest states that the festival was established in 1991 “in a time of renewed dialogue between East and West in the framework of the pentagonal initiative, which then included the government of Italy, Austria, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, and over the years has extended to 19 Central and Eastern European countries, thus giving life to the Central European initiative (CEI).” For more information about the festival, visit: www.mittelfest.org.

³⁰ His teaching repertoire extends to the following institutions: Accademia Nazionale d’Arte Drammatica (1968-1976; 2008), Università di Lecce (1971), Università di Roma (1974), Scuola di Teatro di Palmi (1993), Istituto Nazionale di Dramma Antico di Siracusa (1993-95), Università di Seghedino (2000-2002), Università di Udine (2002-2008), Università di Genova (2004), the University of Cambridge (2005), Accademia d’Arte Drammatica “Paolo Grassi” di Milano (2008).

Pressburger's intellectual and ethical pursuits thus sought to recognize and promote *multiplicity* in all of its forms.

The concept of *multiplicity* attests to the blossoming existential consciousness of Pressburger's time, a period that saw the steady corrosion of generally accepted value systems pave the way for a crisis from which the new and enervated Europe – and Central Europe in particular – would never recover. As Kundera observes, “The time was past when man had only the monster of his own soul to grapple with, the peaceful time of Joyce and Proust. In the novels of Kafka, Hasek, Musil, Broch, the monster comes from outside and is called History [...] it is impersonal, uncontrollable, incalculable, incomprehensible – and it is inescapable,” for it was right after World War I that the “great Central European novelists saw, felt, grasped the *terminal paradoxes* of the modern era.”³¹ Kundera proceeds to affirm, “The quest for the self has always ended, and always will end, in a paradoxical dissatisfaction. [...] Nonetheless, after reaching the depth involved in the detailed exploration of the self's interior life, the great novelists began, consciously or unconsciously, to seek a new orientation.”³² In *The Art of the Novel* (1988) Kundera describes this investigative deep dive into the edges of human existence as particular to the genre of the novel, which he defines as “The great prose form in which an author thoroughly explores, by means of experimental selves (characters), some themes of existence.”³³ Calvino picks up this theme in a related way in his *Lezioni Americane* (1988), outlining the parameters of this new orientation of the novel, which he identifies as a certain newfound inclusivity, a widening of

³¹ Kundera, Milan. *The Art of the Novel* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 7.

³² Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, 7.

³³ Kundera, 143.

intellectual horizons that has now shifted its focus outward, challenging the solidity of the self as an insulated, independent entity and embracing the peripheral and the marginal(ized).

In his fifth and final *lezione*, centered on the theme of multiplicity, Calvino expounds his theory of the modern novel as “enciclopedia, come metodo di conoscenza, e soprattutto come rete di connessione tra i fatti, tra le persone, tra le cose del mondo” (encyclopedia, as method of knowledge, and above all as network of connections among events, among people, among the things of the world).³⁴ Using the acclaimed works of canonical European writers as case studies, he presents different typologies of narrative multiplicity. Particularly pertinent to our consideration of this aspect of Pressburger’s works is Calvino’s conclusion, which addresses foreseeable criticisms of this conceptualization of the modern novel. More specifically, Calvino counters conceivable concerns regarding this expansion of existential horizons as a possible divergence, a means to distance, rather than to bring us closer to a concrete conception of the self:

Qualcuno potrà obiettare che più l’opera tende alla moltiplicazione dei possibili più s’allontana da quell’unicum che è il *self* di chi scrive, la sincerità interiore, la scoperta della propria verità. Al contrario, rispondo, chi siamo noi, chi è ciascuno di noi se non una combinatoria d’esperienze, d’informazioni, di letture, d’immaginazioni? Ogni vita è un’enciclopedia, una biblioteca, un inventario d’oggetti, un campionario di stili, dove tutto può essere continuamente rimescolato e riordinato in tutti i modi possibili.

Ma forse la risposta che mi sta più a cuore dare è un’altra: magari fosse possibile un’opera concepita al di fuori del *self*, un’opera che ci permettesse d’uscire dalla prospettiva limitata d’un io individuale, non solo per entrare in altri io simili al nostro, ma per far parlare ciò che non ha parola, l’uccello che si posa sulla grondaia, l’albero in primavera e l’albero in autunno, la pietra, il cemento, la plastica...

Non era forse questo il punto d’arrivo cui tendeva Ovidio nel raccontare la continuità delle forme, il punto d’arrivo cui tendeva Lucrezio nell’identificarsi con la natura comune a tutte le cose?³⁵

³⁴ Calvino, Italo. *Lezioni americane* (Milan: Mondadori, 2016), 275. English: Calvino, Italo. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. Trans. By Geoffrey Brock (Boston: Mariner Books, 2016), 129.

³⁵ Calvino, *Lezioni Americane*, 309; English: Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, 151.

(Some may contend that the more a work tends toward the multiplication of possibilities, the further it drifts from that unicum that is the writer's *self*, from sincerity, from the discovery of personal truth. I would reply: On the contrary, for who are we, who is each of us, if not combinatorics of experiences, of information, of things we have read and imagined? Every life is an encyclopedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a pattern of book styles, in which everything can be constantly remixed and rearranged in every possible fashion.

And I have another reply, one that may be closer to my heart: what if it were possible for a work to be conceived beyond the *self*, a work that allowed us to escape the limited perspective of the individual ego, not only in order to enter other similar selves but to give voice to that which cannot speak—the bird perched on the gutter, the tree in spring and the tree in autumn, stone, cement, plastic...

Wasn't this, perhaps, where Ovid was going when he described the continuity of forms, where Lucretius was going when he identified himself with the nature that all things have in common?)

These Calvinian considerations, and more specifically, the very notion of the modern novel as an *expansive*, but also *expanding* container of humanity that challenges the ego and embraces the self as an evolving other, find a home in Pressburger. Furthermore, they offer a constructive framework for a fruitful comparative consideration. Pressburger and his Triestine contemporary and good friend, Claudio Magris, present a great (Triestine) example of two diverse displays of this narrative multiplicity. Both are representatives of that far-reaching, scrutinizing, and politically involved twentieth century Mitteleuropean sensibility. Critical and shrewd in their respective representations of the postmodern Central European subject, they also align with the identitarian transcendence that Calvino expounds through the Ovidian continuity of forms. Pressburger and Magris both endorse and even personify the *soi-disant* 'transcendent self' that refutes the 'I' as a stable and insulated entity, which is often attributed to that particularist strand of thought that instead finds a home in their Slovenian contemporary, Boris Pahor. Their disparate conceptions of identity resound in this fundamental aspect of their respective works: while the Magrisian and Pressburgian narratives tend towards expansion by virtue of an identitarian transcendence whereby the Self expands to accommodate and embrace the Other, while also recognizing the self *as* other,

Pahor's narrative, much like his identitarian concerns, is more restricted in its thematic range. Grounded in the context of the author's lived past and personal experiences, Pahor's narrative is autobiographical, centering predominantly on the experiences of the Slovenian minority in Trieste.³⁶ Pressburger also sets several of his works in biographically relevant contexts, but his thematic and stylistic scope is arguably wider. As Bond, Gragnolati and Lepschy have observed:

I suoi romanzi hanno generalmente continuato ad avere un tema autobiografico – come, ad esempio, la fuga clandestina dall'Ungheria e le successive vicissitudini di integrazione nella società italiana ne *Il sussurro della grande voce* del 1990. Allo stesso tempo, i romanzi di Giorgio Pressburger si aprono sempre ad altre tematiche, che vanno di questioni relative alla fede, l'etica e il misticismo, all'eros, il linguaggio e la soggettività, sviluppando una vera e propria meditazione sul significato dell'esistenza umana.³⁷

(His novels have generally continued to revolve around an autobiographical theme – like, for instance, the clandestine escape from Hungary and the successive vicissitudes of integration in Italian society in *The Whisper of the Great Voice* in 1990. At the same time, the novels of Giorgio Pressburger always open up to other themes, which go from questions relative to faith, ethics, and mysticism, eros, language and subjectivity, developing a real personal meditation on the meaning of human existence.)

Alternatively, the narrative multiplicity of Giuliana Morandini tends to be characterized by a rupture and a dissonance both *within* the protagonist, and *between* the protagonist and her spatiotemporal reality. This mostly applies to the author's first three novels, which together comprise her Mitteleuropean trilogy, but while scholarly attention has predominantly drifted to these works, Morandini's lesser-known novels, such as *Sogno a Herrenberg* (1991) and *Giocando*

³⁶ The autobiographical element continues to find itself at the forefront of scholarship on Triestine literature since the genesis of the notion of a so-called Triestine literary tradition. It has long been considered a distinctive element of *triestinità*. While one could argue that “all writing is autobiography” as David M. Murray has famously suggested, I am here specifically referring to the scope and range of the thematic and sociopolitical grounding of Pahor's works, which is restricted to the author's lived experiences.

³⁷ Bond, Emma, Manuele Gragnolati and Laura Lepschy. “Riscrivere Dante in un'altra lingua. Conversazione con Giorgio Pressburger su *Nel regno oscuro*.” *Dante's Plurilingualism: Authority, Knowledge, Subjectivity*. Eds. Sara Fortuna, Manuele Gragnolati and Jürgen Trabant, (Leeds: Legenda, 2010), 250.

a dama con la luna (1996) are arguably more representative of the multiplicity of Pressburger and Magris.

Pressburger's narrator often disrupts the binary of center and periphery to present the world as a web of relations that mysteriously act upon us. Pressburger's later publications are excellent examples of this. In the autobiographical volume, *L'orologio di Monaco* (2003), for instance, the author-narrator-protagonist embarks on a transcontinental journey in search of his relatives, eager to learn more about his lineage after learning, by chance, that the mother of Karl Marx bore the same last name as he (Pressburger). Each short story centers on a different ancestor and journey on the genealogical quest of the narrator-protagonist; together, they form a mosaic of his complex ancestral network:

A metà della mia vita sono venuto a sapere che alcuni uomini davvero determinanti per la storia degli ultimi due secoli sono nati da una famiglia che porta il mio stesso nome. Sulle prime ho provato sgomento a causa della mia piccolezza, poi, poco a poco, un sentimento d'altro genere si è impadronito di me. Ho avvertito come un senso di protezione, un paterno abbraccio proveniente da loro. Si è diffusa in me, per qualche settimana o mese, una coscienza felice. Quegli antenati, o presunti tali, erano diventati la mia nuova patria.³⁸

(Halfway through my life I came to learn that some men who were truly significant for the last two centuries of our history were born into a family that bears the same name as I. At first, I felt dismay because of my smallness, then, little by little, a different feeling took hold of me. I felt a sense of protection, a fatherly embrace coming from them. A happy conscience grew in me for a few weeks or months. Those ancestors, or presumed as such, had become my new homeland.)

With this discovery, the author-narrator-protagonist stumbles upon new old threads in his network of connections which push him to rethink his own existence and place in the world.

The motif of the network or 'system of systems,' as Calvino puts it, is also reflected in the symbol of the clock, which appears in the title of the novel. In the twelfth short story, entitled

³⁸ Pressburger, Giorgio. *L'orologio di Monaco* (Venice: Marsilio, 2017), 7.

“L’orologio di Monaco,” (“The clock of Munich”) the author-narrator forewarns the readers not to confuse the clock in question with the famous Munich Glockenspiel (Orologio di Monaco in Italian): “Non pensate al famoso orologio del Municipio di Monaco di Baviera, quel congegno che ogni ora fa sfilare graziose figurine in un carosello molto fedele allo spirito delle linde città tedesche del Cinquecento. L’orologio di Monaco è per me un altro” (Do not think of the famous clock of the City Hall of Munich, that device that parades, every hour, pretty figurines on a carousel, so faithful to the spirit of the clean German cities of the sixteenth century. The clock of Munich is for me another).³⁹ Instead, his clock is a strange, yet common household object linked to the death of his last relative, as well as a symbol of “una storia che mi ha inquietato per tre o quattro anni, togliendomi il sonno e turbando le ore di attività e di veglia” (a story a story that has troubled me for three or four years, taking away my sleep and disturbing my hours of activity and wakefulness).⁴⁰ The narrator-protagonist reveals that the object was a gift from his aunt, who also presented four other, identical ones to his relatives and one to her neighbor’s son. The detailed description of the clock foreshadows its symbolism, which is revealed later in the novel:

Il congegno dell’orologio è nascosto da un quadrante rotondo, sul quale sono stampate in oro, dentro un elementare motivo ornamentale, le cifre che indicano le ore. Sotto a questo quadrante si muovono assicurate a un perno centrale, quattro palline dorate: con ogni probabilità nelle intenzioni del progettista non c’era alcun significato recondito, ma la tendenza della mente umana a simbolizzare tutto può attribuire a queste semplici forme una valenza di astri, di pianeti: potrebbero rappresentare i quattro temperamenti (sanguigno, abulico, iracundo stoico), i quattro elementi (aria, acqua, terra, fuoco), i quattro Cavalieri dell’Apocalisse, il Tetragramma che racchiude il nome dell’Eterno, le quattro basi che caratterizzano gli amminoacidi determinandone la sequenza. Le palline compiono un giro ogni secondo: un secondo si muovono in avanti, nel secondo successivo tornano indietro. Tutto l’orologio è racchiuso in una campana di vetro, che poggia su una piccola base rotonda, di plastica.⁴¹

³⁹ Pressburger, *L’orologio di Monaco*, 177.

⁴⁰ Pressburger, 177.

⁴¹ Pressburger, 178.

(The contraption of the watch is hidden by a round dial, on which the digits that indicate the hours are printed in gold, inside a simple ornamental motif. Under this quadrant move, secured to a central pivot, four golden balls: in all likelihood, there was no meaning in the designer's intentions, but the tendency of the human mind to symbolize everything can attribute to these simple forms a valence of stars, of planets: they could represent the four temperaments (sanguine, abulic, wrathful stoic), the four elements (air, water, earth, fire), the four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the Tetradrachm that contains the name of the Eternal, the four bases that characterize the amino acids determining their sequence. The globes make a turn every second: one second, they move forward, the next second they go back. The whole watch is enclosed in a glass bell, which rests on a small round, plastic base.)

The narrative voice that engages in ‘the tendency of the human mind to symbolize everything’ is, in true Pressburgian fashion, deliberately sardonic. Even the shrewd and discerning narrator who gently disparages the human necessity for meaning will fall victim to this human proclivity, attributing a precise symbolic significance to the clock as an emblem of his aunt after she comes to pass. The revelation that one of the recipients of the clock – the young man who emigrated to Johannesburg – had disposed of it two years earlier when it had ceased to work properly thrusts the narrator into a precipitous rush of dejection. He confesses, “All’improvviso provai una pena avvilente, straziante. Era come se quel ragazzo avesse buttato nella spazzatura mia zia. Come se il valore della vita fosse zero, la destinazione finale il nulla. Mi misi a piangere nella casa vuota, abbandonata” (Suddenly I felt a disheartening pain. It was as if that guy had thrown my aunt in the trash. As if the value of life were zero, the final destination nothing. I started crying in the empty, abandoned house).⁴² The narrator ponders and ultimately determines the symbolic value of the object when the four globes on each of the five clocks stop turning concurrently with the aunt’s last breath: “L’orologio di Monaco sul comodino aveva il bilanciere fermo. Le quattro palline non si muovevano. Anche quel congegno dunque si era bloccato, insieme a quello del corpo di mia

⁴² Pressburger, 187.

zia” (The balance wheel of the clock of Much on the bedside was still. The four globes were not moving. That device had also come to a standstill, along with that of my aunt’s body).⁴³ The presence and interplay of the numbers four and five is also worth noting for its possible and likely reference to the Torah, and more specifically, to Zechariah 2:10, which states “...for I have scattered you like the four directions of the heavens.” While the number four, the number of the globes in each clock, represents separation and dispersal in all four directions, discreet and independent of each other, five is considered to be the “unifier,” also called “agudah,” which resides in the middle and unifies the other elements.⁴⁴

To the narrator’s dismay, the clock begins to function properly only a few days after the initial signs of malfunction. Initially unaware of the ticking and subsequently puzzled by its source, the disconcerted protagonist abandons the aunt’s house in a frenzy and culls the task of assembling her belongings. Yet, while all four clocks begin to re-emit the ticking sound, their globes remain unmoving: “Il congegno era dunque perfettamente funzionante, ma i quattro globi, le quattro lettere del Tetragramma in cui è racchiuso il nome del Signore, i quattro cardinali del mondo erano fermi, non si muovevano” (The device was, in effect, fully functional, but the four globes, the four letters of the Tetradrachm in which the name of the Lord is enclosed, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse were stationary, they did not move).⁴⁵ With each reprise of the possible symbolic meanings of those four globes, initially proposed with a hint of disdain, the narrator underscores his own humanity, for he, too, falls prey to the “tendenza della mente umana a simbolizzare tutto”

⁴³ Pressburger, 184.

⁴⁴ Karlinsky, Rabbi Shaya. “Chapter 3: Mishna 7, Part 3.” *Torah.org*. DOI: <https://torah.org/learning/maharal-p3m7part3/>.

⁴⁵ Pressburger, 189.

(tendency of the human mind to symbolize everything).⁴⁶ The clock thus becomes a veiled representation of the human necessity and instinct to ascribe form to essence: “L’anima era rimasta, ma lo spettacolo, la pura scena della vita, l’apparenza del movimento, si era bloccata” (The soul had remained, but the spectacle, the pure scene of life, the appearance of movement, had stuck in everyone).⁴⁷

The religious undertone of the story, notably palpable in the conversation of the narrator and his twin brother, as well as in the former’s final reflection on the soul and faith, is significant. These particular moments echo the tension between morality and faith, which Pressburger expounds in his book *La fede* (2019; English: *Faith*).⁴⁸ The following passage from *L’orologio di Monaco*, reposed here in its entirety to illustrate the mounting narrative tension between morality and faith, shows how the latter is conveyed through the dialectic of inside/outside and internal/external. The narrator’s external, verbal privileging of physics over metaphysics is ultimately internally contested and rejected:

“Si vede che hanno un difetto di fabbrica” dissi a mio fratello che ancora oggi si trova a Pechino.

“Già. Un difetto di fabbrica. Si vede che non sono stati fabbricati per l’eternità. Ma il ricordo della zia resterà racchiuso in questi congegni, finché ci saremo noi. Dopo, nessuno lo conserverà più. Verrà buttato nella spazzatura insieme all’orologio” mi disse.

“Gli orologi si scomporranno in atomi, come tutto, riunendosi al grande carosello dell’universo. Con la morte della zia è finita un’epoca. Ne finiranno tante altre. Poi anche questo universo scomparirà e ne verrà un altro” dissi io. “E quindi, tutto sommato, il difetto di fabbrica non c’è. Il congegno funziona, e noi, le nostre parole, i nostri corpi, il nostro io, non contiamo poi tanto. Siamo come i quattro globi dell’orologio di Monaco. Pura scena.”

⁴⁶ Pressburger, 178.

⁴⁷ Pressburger, 190.

⁴⁸ Pressburger’s *La fede* (Turin: Treccani, 2019) inspired Mauro Caputo’s film *Il profumo delle favole* (Luce – Cinecittà, 2016), which features Pressburger’s text and voice.

Ho detto così a mio fratello, quel giorno. Ma non ho più potuto dimenticare l'esile traccia della vita di mia zia. Con il suo ticchettio essa è ancora percepibile nella mia casa, come in quella dei miei parenti sparsi nel mondo.

Da quel giorno m'è venuto il dubbio che l'anima esista davvero, e che aleggi sopra il mondo, invisibile, immensa schiera di coloro che hanno vissuto sulla terra. La mia fede materialista è crollata. Ho letto in questi anni centinaia di libri di filosofia, di mistica, di cognitivismo, di linguistica, ho letto Pascal, Sant'Agostino, Platone, Chomsky, Pinker, ho passato tutto il mio tempo a cercare una certezza in grado di sciogliere questa mia vaga supposizione, questo filo di fede e di scetticismo lasciati in eredità dai miei avi. Non ho mai trovato alcuna certezza. Ma non smetto di cercare.⁴⁹

("Right. A manufacturing defect. It looks like they were not manufactured for eternity. But the memory of our aunt will remain enclosed in these devices, so long as we are here. After, no one will conserve them. After, no one will conserve them anymore. It will be thrown in the trash along with the clock" he said to me.

"The clocks will disintegrate into atoms, like everything, reuniting with the large carousel of the universe. The death of our aunt marked the end of an epoch. Many others will end. Then, this universe will also disappear and another one will come" I said. "So, all in all, there is no manufacturing defect. The device works and we, our words, our bodies, our "I," we don't count that much after all. We are like the four globes of the clock of Munich. Pure show."

This is what I said to my brother that day. But I could not forgive the frail trace of my aunt's life. With its ticking, still perceptible in the house, as in that of my five relatives dispersed around the world.

From that day on I began to suspect that the soul really exists, and that it hovers above the world, the invisible, immense multitude of those who lived on earth. My materialist faith crumbled. In these years I read hundreds of books on mysticism, on cognitivism, on linguistics, I read Pascal, Saint Augustine, Plato, Chomsky, Pinker, I spent all of my time searching for a certainty capable of loosening this vague supposition of mine, this thread of faith and of skepticism left to me in inheritance by my ancestors. I never found any certainty. But I do not stop searching.)

The crumbling materialist faith of the narrator-protagonist lands him in a Kafkaian predicament, that of "a cage in search of a bird." Despite the sensible rebuttal to his convicted brother – who, unconvinced by the theory of the 'manufacturing defect,' uncompromisingly conceives of the object as a physical symbol of the aunt's being – the narrator is internally afflicted by the interplay "di fede e di scetticismo lasciati in eredità dei miei avi" (of faith and of skepticism left to me in

⁴⁹ Pressburger, 189-190.

inheritance by my ancestors).⁵⁰ As Magris observes in the preface to *La fede*, Pressburger does not conceive of faith within the constraints of religion; for him, faith resides “al di là del linguaggio e se viene espressa secondo le necessarie regole della lingua non è più fede o non è più soltanto fede, ma già filosofia o testimonianza o analisi della fede, che sono altra cosa” (beyond language and if it is expressed within the bounds of language, it is no longer faith, or better yet, it is no longer just faith, but philosophy, testimony of analysis of faith, which are something else).⁵¹ The protagonist’s fruitless search for certainty in the realm of philosophy communicates the transcendence of faith over language, but it is also in and of itself an expression of faith.

Pressburger’s conceptualization of faith resounds in his exploration of the role of language in the understanding of identity, both individual and collective. One principal distinction that Pressburger draws between religion and faith in *La fede* concerns the insulating nature he ascribes to the latter and the sense of solidarity he attributes to the conceptual basis of the former: “Perché la solidarietà tra uomini in qualche modo pare essere il fondamento più importante delle religioni. Ma non necessariamente della fede. La fede può dare anche un grande senso di solitudine. Avere compassione, sentire solidarietà, fare del bene: tutto è giusto. Ma chi ha fede è solo, completamente solo di fronte a Colui, a ciò in cui ha fede. E in questa solitudine la religione non può aiutare” (Because solidarity among beings appears to be, in some way, the most important foundation of religions. But it is not necessarily of faith. Faith can even generate a strong sense of solitude. To have compassion, experience solidarity, do good: it is all right. But who has faith is alone, completely alone before Him, that in which he has faith).⁵² The novel conveys this through the

⁵⁰ Pressburger, 190.

⁵¹ Magris, Claudio. “Prefazione.” *La fede* by Giorgio Pressburger (Turin: Treccani, 2019), 6.

⁵² Pressburger, Giorgio. *La fede* (Turin: Treccani, 2019), 37.

narrator's *external* rationalization of the 'malfunctioning' of the device and his simultaneous *introspective*, Kierkegaardian submission to faith. In *Fear and Trembling* (1843), Kierkegaard relegates faith to the realm of interiority. The Danish philosopher contends that when an individual "withholds himself on or slips down again into the qualifications of feeling, mood, etc. that belong to interiority, he trespasses, he is immersed in the spiritual trial [*Anfægtelse*]. The paradox of faith is that there is an interiority that is incommensurable with exteriority."⁵³ Kierkegaard explicates this dissonance through the Absurd, which he defines as "a category, the negative criterion, of the divine or of the relationship to the divine" which only faith has the capacity to dispel since, "When the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd – faith transforms it. The passion of faith is the only thing which masters the absurd – if not, then faith is not faith in the strictest sense, but a kind of knowledge."⁵⁴ Thus, only faith is capable of ousting the absurd for "The absurd terminates negatively before the sphere of faith, which is a sphere by itself. To a third person the believer relates himself by virtue of the absurd."⁵⁵ Pressburger's thematization of identity reverberates in this Kierkegaardian relegation of faith to the realm of interiority since the Danish theologian and thinker argued that it can only truly be authentic when it is internally negotiated, a belief that Pressburger clearly expounds in *La fede*, and which he also contemplates vis-à-vis identity through the Michelstaedterian notion of persuasion. We will explore this correlation in the next sections of the chapter.

⁵³ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling*. Transl. Edna H. Hong, Howard V. Hong (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 69.

⁵⁴ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, Vol. 3. Ed. Edna Hatlestad Hong (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1967), 7.

⁵⁵ Kierkegaard, Søren. *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 7.

Many scholars have recognized *Nel regno oscuro* (2008) as Pressburger's romanzo-mondo par excellence. Modeled after Dante's *Inferno*, the *regno oscuro* presents a complex testimony of the twentieth century with Freud as the narrator's stand-in for Virgil. As Bond, Gragnolati and Lepschy maintain, the novel is "una riscrittura dell'*Inferno* di Dante, non a caso in trentaquattro capitoli, in cui il modello dantesco della discesa agli inferi si trasforma in un viaggio che è sia un percorso psicanalitico nelle zone più intime e oscure di sé, sia un cammino attraverso le tragiche vicende del Novecento, la *Shoah* in particolare" (a rewriting of Dante's *Inferno*, not coincidentally in thirty-four chapters, in which Dante's model of the descent into underworld is transformed into a journey that is both a psychoanalytic path within the most intimate and dark areas of the self, as well as a journey through the tragic events of the nineteenth century, and in particular, the Shoah).⁵⁶ While Dante's underworld centers on the principle of justice, Pressburger's is a representation of "la condizione di sofferenza gratuita e priva di senso in cui la Storia ha posto tante persone innocenti [...] che popolano l'inferno descritto da Pressburger e modellato non solo sul paradigma dantesco, ma anche sull'esperienza del *Lager*" (the condition of gratuitous and nonsensical suffering to which History has subjected many innocent people [...] who populate the inferno described by Pressburger and modeled not only on the Dantesque paradigm, but also on the experience of the concentration camp).⁵⁷ Thus, while the *inferno dantesco* restores justice, Pressburger's *regno oscuro* recriminates its absence. His exploration of the calamities that struck

⁵⁶ Bond, Emma, Manuele Gragnolati and Laura Lepschy. "Riscrivere Dante in un'altra lingua. Conversazione con Giorgio Pressburger su *Nel regno oscuro*." *Dante's Plurilingualism: Authority, Knowledge, Subjectivity*. Eds. Sara Fortuna, Manuele Gragnolati and Jürgen Trabant, (Leeds: Legenda, 2010), 251.

⁵⁷ Bond, Gragnolati and Lepschy, "Riscrivere Dante in un'altra lingua. Conversazione con Giorgio Pressburger su *Nel regno oscuro*," 251.

the twentieth century ultimately hinges on the question of otherness, as the bipartite structure of his underworld implies.

On his journey, Pressburger's protagonist crosses paths with individuals who are divided into two categories: the *carnefici* (oppressors), including figures such as the 'Angel of Death,' Dr. Mengele and the terrorist group Baader-Meinhof; and the *vittime* (victims), the other category, which boasts a plethora of innocents who perished and those who are still alive, such as the poet Celan, the singers Tenco, Dalida and Guccini, as well as the directors Antonioni, Greenway and Pasolini. Through this displacement, Pressburger destabilizes the sociocultural, but also historical hierarchy between center and periphery. The protagonist's individual story branches out into an ever-expanding embrace, the intricate and expansive *omnium gatherum* that forms a complex portrait of the nineteenth century with pain as the connecting tissue between various contexts, individuals, and narratives.⁵⁸ Rather than turning his attention to those responsible for the violence and the bloodshed of the twentieth century, Pressburger vindicates the victims: directing his gaze towards those who endured this inhumane suffering, he shares their stories and thus *rewrites* their position in History.

As Manuele Gragnolati has observed, the "interplay between the personal and the collective, as well as its connection with the motifs of the Apocalypse and writing are [...] at the core of *Nel regno oscuro*," while the announcement of Freud as Virgil's replacement contributes to "the organization of the novel's narrative around an explicitly psychoanalytic, Freudian concept

⁵⁸ Lanslots, Inge and Annelies Van Den Bogaert. "Nel regno oscuro di Giorgio Pressburger. Voce ibrida 'dall'inferno degli innocenti' tra rivisitazione storico-autobiografica e riscrittura letteraria." *Ebrei migranti: le voci della diaspora*, Raniero Speelman, Monica Jansen and Silvia Gaiga (eds.), *Italianistica Ultraiectina* 7, (Utrecht: Igitur Publishing, 2012), 378.

of self.”⁵⁹ Inge Lanslots and Annelies Van Den Bogaert have drawn parallels between Pressburger’s *regno oscuro* and Mann’s magic mountain; the former, they maintain, offers us “una panoramica storico-culturale del Novecento con ambizioni enciclopediche [...] la montagna è una (ri)costruzione letteraria, storica, enciclopedica appunto nel senso che ricorda il monte Sinai, quello di Ararat, la montagna incantata di Thomas Mann” (a historico-cultural panorama of the nineteenth century with encyclopedic ambitions[;] the mountain is a literary, historical, and encyclopedic (re)construction precisely in the sense that it is reminiscent of Mount Sinai, that of Ararat, the magic mountain of Thomas Mann).⁶⁰ Pressburger’s mountain also undergoes several metamorphoses, as Lanslots and Van Den Bogaert note: one moment it appears (to the narrator) as Vienna, then as Trieste, next as Budapest, a concentration camp, and so forth.⁶¹ In all of its transfigurations, the mountain is thus the locus of the narrator’s ongoing process of mediation where the place and the identity of the individual are constantly renegotiated within the universal and vice versa.

Irresolute attempts to penetrate beyond the surface of life’s absurdity spur the *male di vivere* that accompanies the lonesome Pressburgian protagonist. It was the Czech writer, Václav Havel who wrote “Modern man must descend the spiral of his own absurdity to the lowest point; only then can he look beyond it. It is obviously impossible to get around it, jump over it, or simply avoid it.”⁶² Havel’s evocation of the spiral vis-à-vis the absurd befits us, for Pressburger’s

⁵⁹ Gragnolati, Manuele. “Rewriting Dante after Freud and the Shoah: Giorgio Pressburger’s *Nel regno oscuro*.” *Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*. Ed. by Manuele Gragnolati, Fabio Camilletti, and Fabian Lampart (Berlin: Verlag Turia + Kant), 240.

⁶⁰ Lanslots and Van Den Bogaert, “*Nel regno oscuro* di Giorgio Pressburger. Voce ibrida ‘dall’inferno degli innocenti’ tra rivisitazione storico-autobiografica e riscrittura letteraria,” 379.

⁶¹ Lanslots and Van Den Bogaert, 379.

⁶² Havel, Vaclav. *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvizdala*. Trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 53-54.

mountain – like the narrator’s inner ponderings – frequently elicits both the imagery and the symbolism associated with the figure, particularly in the Jungian sense which claims that “when you make a spiral you always come over the same point where you have been before, but never really the same, it is above or below, inside, outside, so it means growth.”⁶³ The spatiotemporal and psychological progression of the protagonists reinforce this insofar as both are marked by a sense of cyclicity. In *Nel regno oscuro*, the “percorso dell’io non è né ‘ascensionale né discensionale,’ ma sì voraginoso e ‘concentrico’ come nell’inferno dantesco, un percorso in uno spazio prestabilito” (the journey of the ‘I’ is neither ascending nor descending, but rather voracious and concentric like Dante’s inferno, a journey in a preestablished space).⁶⁴ The narrator explicitly compares this ‘voracious’ and ‘concentric’ *percorso* to a psychoanalysis session: “Come nella vita, nelle sedute di psicoanalisi, nei viaggi agli inferi, tutto il cammino può risultare un vano errore attorno allo stesso punto” (As in life, in a psychoanalysis session, the journey to the underworld, the entire trajectory can appear to be one useless error around the same point).⁶⁵

This Camusian sense of ontological entrapment, which arises when the human “appetite for the absolute and for the unity and the impossibility of reducing the world to a rational and reasonable principle” cannot be reconciled envelops the Pressburgian protagonists and their diverse encounters with the absurd. Camus poetically articulates this in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, painting a vivid image of those moments in which the curtain drops, repositing the familiar in a foreign light, and thus enabling us to perceive that:

the world is “dense,” sensing to what a degree a stone is foreign and irreducible to us, with what intensity nature or a landscape that negate us. At the heart of all beauty

⁶³ Jung, Carl. *Dream Analysis*, Volume I (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2021), 100.

⁶⁴ Lanslots and Van Den Bogaert, “*Nel regno oscuro* di Giorgio Pressburger. Voce ibrida ‘dall’inferno degli innocenti’ tra rivisitazione storico-autobiografica e riscrittura letteraria,” 378.

⁶⁵ Pressburger, *Nel regno oscuro*, 277.

lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these trees at this very minute lose the illusory meaning with which we had clothed them, henceforth more remote than a lost paradise. The primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia, for a second, we cease to understand it because for centuries we have understood in it solely the images and designs that we had attributed to it beforehand, because henceforth we lack the power to make use of that artifice. The world evades us because it becomes itself again. That stage scenery masked by habit becomes again what it is. [...] But the time has not yet come. Just one thing: that denseness and that strangeness of the world is absurd.⁶⁶

The ‘illusory meaning with which we [clothe]’ our world communicates an attempt to mediate the complexity of the absurd through a familiar apparatus of negotiation. Yet, when these human ‘garbs’ are removed, and the familiar is suddenly revealed to us in all of its irreducible and distant foreignness, one is also faced with the reality of his own incongruity. Camus’s contention that we are unequipped to grasp ‘the primitive hostility of the world [which] rises up to face us across millennia’ is significant, in part because the *regno oscuro* is Pressburger’s adaptation of Dante’s *Inferno*. The work is, indeed, a new depiction of *il Male* that seeks to rethink and redefine a previous conception of the underworld, in order to repropose one that is more ‘familiar’ and ‘faithful’ to us and to our understanding of the world. Pressburger’s narrative evokes the image of the spiral insofar as it highlights the cyclical nature of human existence whereby, we continue to come across former certainties to search for deeper truths within them. In *Spirals: The Whirled Image in Twentieth-Century Literature and Art* (2015), Nico Israel explores this leitmotif across a variety of artistic mediums spanning several geographical frameworks. In twentieth-century literature and art the spiral comes to represent an effort or urgency to “both register and resist ideas about the transnational and the global” because “the centrifugal and centripetal torsions of the spiral [...] demonstrate transforming conceptions of locality (including both the idea of nationhood and the locality of the body, of *embodiment*) and globality (the extranational political and

⁶⁶ Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2012), 14.

economic sphere) and the relation between them.”⁶⁷ Drawing on Benjamin, he suggests that if we conceive of them as *images* in the sense ascribed to the term by the German philosopher, spirals can “illuminate how conceptions of modernity, history, and geopolitics are mutually involved” insofar as they embody “tensions between teleology and cyclicity, repetition and difference, locality and globality,” to “not only complicate literary and art history’s familiar spatiotemporal coordinates (including those based on nation and period), but also offer a way of reconceiving the ‘distribution of the sensible across the century.’”⁶⁸ Pressburger elicits the image of the spiral by re-interrogating the seemingly familiar to uncover its inherent and irreducible extraneousness.

Nel regno oscuro conveys this in a salient moment in the text, during the protagonist’s encounter with Osip Mandel’shtam (1891 – 1938), the great Russian poet who openly opposed Bolshevik rule and challenged the strict censorship of his time with his poetry. In November 1933, Mandel’shtam published a provocative, unabashed critique of Stalin, which his contemporary Boris Pasternak described as “suicide, not poetry,” urging Mandel’shtam to keep it hidden from the public eye. Pasternak’s advice went unheeded and Mandel’shtam was arrested for the first time in May of 1934. In Pressburger’s novel, the poet delivers an impassioned plea in which he urges the author-protagonist-narrator to write about the “real hell” on earth:

Ho letto Dante, ne ho parlato in pubblico. Sai, l’inferno c’è. Sì, c’è. Dante non lo sapeva. Per lui l’inferno era fantasia. Io invece sì, ho visto l’inferno. Ti prego, parlane del vero inferno che esiste oggi. Di qua, di là, nel mondo. Parlane. Lo so che puoi morire, ben lo so, Ma il tuo dolore soccorrerà [...] L’orrore lo può testimoniare solo la poesia: la verità sta solamente in lei, è impossibile rappresentare l’orrore. Ma il poeta può farlo, e morire nella fatica di pronunciare le parole. Le parole della verità. Ti prego. Parla. Ti prega un moribondo. La favola dell’inferno cristiano è bella, edificante e potente, ma quando l’inferno scende sulla

⁶⁷ Israel, Nico. *Spirals: The Whirled Image in Twentieth-Century Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 9.

⁶⁸ Israel, 9.

terra occorre un'altra immaginazione. Irreparabile è questa notte, da voi c'è luce ancora ma qui il sole è nero.⁶⁹

(I read Dante, I discussed him in public. Hell exists, you know. Yes, it does. Dante didn't know. For him hell was a fantasy. I, on the other hand, have seen hell. I beg of you, talk about the real hell that exists today. Here, there, in the world. Talk about it. I know you can die from it, I am well aware, But your pain will help [...] Only poetry can testify to the horror: the truth lies only therein, it is impossible to represent the horror. But the poet can do it, dying as he struggles to utter the words. The words of truth. I beg you. Speak out. A dying man pleads with you. The fable of the Christian hell is beautiful, uplifting, and powerful, but when hell descends on earth, a different kind of imagination is needed. This night is irreparable; where you are, there is still light, but here the sun is black.)

For Gragnolati, this significant moment in the novel highlights the redemptive function of writing and of psychoanalysis, which in the case of Pressburger present “la possibilità non di uscire dalla Storia e dal male o dalla tragedia della Perdita, ma in qualche modo anche di esprimerla e di non cadere in questo modo nella disperazione assoluta o nel suicidio; o – per usare l’immagine del libro – la possibilità di uscire dal regno oscuro” (the possibility of not evading History and Evil or the tragedy of loss, but of expressing it in some way and not sinking, in this way, into absolute desperation or suicide; or – to use the image of the book – the possibility of stepping outside of the dark realm). But the exchange between Mandel’stam and Pressburger, the author-protagonist-narrator, also raises important questions about the role of authorship vis-à-vis history. The Russian urges the protagonist to bear testimony to ‘the vero inferno’ of the twentieth century with ‘le parole della verità,’ thus to produce a veracious account of the *infernal* historical reality that one ups Dante’s ‘fantasia.’ The emphasis on truth in Pressburger thematization of Mandel’stam is sensible; the poet’s relentless quest for truth and commitment to freedom of expression (as well as thought) landed him in repeated political trouble, eventually leading to his death.

⁶⁹ Pressburger, Giorgio. *Nel regno oscuro* (Milan: Bompiani, 2008), 189-90.

After his arrest in 1934, Mandel'shtam was exiled to Cherdyn with his wife Nadezhda. Suffering severe mental strains as a result of his time in prison, he was admitted to a hospital where he attempted suicide by leaping out of a window. As a result, he spent the next three years of his exile (until 1937) in Voronezh, before returning to Moscow for what would be his last time. The arrest and subsequent execution of Nikolai Bukharin, Mandel'shtam's last voice of support among party officials, in 1938 ultimately led to the poet's mysterious death. The secretary of the Union of Soviet Writers, Vladimir Stavsky, invited Mandel'shtam to receive treatment for his chronic health issues at a health resort in Samatikha, a gesture that the poet's wife Nadezhda interpreted as one part of a deliberate and calculated plot to isolate her husband and facilitate his arrest. Ultimately, Mandel'shtam died in a secret transit camp to which he was allegedly transported in great haste. The poet perished as a result of harsh camp conditions, which were exacerbated by the typhus epidemic that struck when his health was already rapidly deteriorating. Mandel'shtam's personal fate, like that of several artists and intellectuals of the twentieth century, calls into question the relationship between art and truth, particularly in the face of politics. It also challenges, like Pressburger's oeuvre, the role of language in the expression of being.

Pressburger's Mandel'shtam maintains that only poetry is capable of conveying the horrors of the twentieth century *truthfully* when he affirms that “L'orrore lo può testimoniare solo la poesia: la *verità* sta solamente in lei, è impossibile rappresentare l'orrore. Ma il poeta può farlo, e morire nella fatica di pronunciare le parole. Le parole della verità” (Only poetry can testify to horror: the truth lies only therein, it is impossible to represent the horror. But the poet can do it, dying as he struggles to utter the words).⁷⁰ In one of his essays, he maintains that:

in poetry the boundaries of the national are destroyed, and the elements of one language exchange greetings with those of another over the heads of space and

⁷⁰ Pressburger, Giorgio. *Nel regno oscuro* (Milan: Bompiani, 2008), 190.

time, for all languages are linked by a fraternal bond, which strengthens itself on the freedom and domesticity of each, and within this freedom they are fraternally akin, and each from its own home, they call out each other.⁷¹

Mandel'stam's view of poetry as a site of convergence and multiplicity echoes the unboundedness that underlies Pressburger's understanding of human identity. Deliberately inconsistent and unreliable, his narrative voice consistently exposes the instability (fluctuation) of being – the Self is its own ever-mutating Other – and the inability of language to keep pace. This designation of poetic language naturally invokes the Barthesian death of the Author and T. S. Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry for both writers argue for an understanding of (poetic) language as a repudiation of the limiting constraints of ideology insofar as (for Eliot) "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion; it is not an expression of personality, but an escape from personality," while (for Barthes) "it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality (not at all to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realist novels), to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs,' and not 'me.'"⁷² The author, for Barthes, is linguistically "never more than the instance of writing, just as the I is nothing other than the instance saying I: language knows a 'subject,' not a 'person,' and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together,' suffices that is to say, to exhaust it."⁷³ This theoretical lens encapsulates Pressburger's conception of identity: the *expression* of being conflicts with the *representation* of being – a contention that Pressburger articulates through his aversion to the pronoun 'I' as we will examine later in the chapter.

⁷¹ Mandelstam, Osip. *Osip Mandelstam: Selected Essays*. Trans. Sidney Monas (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), 113.

⁷² Barthes, Roland. *The Death of the Author* (London: Fontana, 1977), 143.

⁷³ Barthes, 145.

Pressburger also repeatedly, and perhaps most vigorously reiterates this conflict between being and expression in his last novel, *Don Ponzio Capodoglio* (2017). Arguably the author's most laborious (it boasts 442 pages) literary enterprise, the novel is a parodic evocation of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605), and while the text may be described as a prose epic, it is also a metatext and a metanarrative that contains elements extraneous to the traditional epic novel.⁷⁴ The novel contains forty-two chapters and is divided into two parts or 'tomi' that contain twenty-one chapters, respectively (Part 1: Chapters 1-21; Part 2: Chapters 22-42). Each of the two parts is prefaced by an "Avvertenza," or "Warning," as well as a "Contratto tra scrittore e lettore" (Contract between Writer and Reader). The work centers on the adventures of the chemical engineer Don Ponzio Capodoglio, "Capdeuil o Capdoh o Capodoglio o Chaptuill o Capduch o Capduelh," whose origins are deliberately made unclear, although we learn that he is 'sold' to western Germany by socialist Romania on the grounds of an international agreement that permitted Romanian citizens of alleged German descent to be 'acquired' by socialist Romania.⁷⁵ The text also opens with a disclaimer that introduces Don Ponzio Capodoglio's search for his identity as the overarching theme of the novel and suggests, in a Manzonian vein, that the novel is a "raccolta di scritti" (collection of writings), comprised of geographically dispersed historical documents and archival materials that ironically claim to present an 'authentic biography' of the protagonist:

In questa epoca sanguinosa e caotica, l'ossessione della propria identità, origine e appartenenza si è diffusa, come un morbo micidiale, su tutto il nostro pianeta. Questa pubblicazione si basa su una biografia autentica, e si prefigge di contribuire alla guarigione da questa grave e contagiosa malattia: la ricerca dell'identità.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ With *Don Ponzio Capodoglio* Pressburger positions himself in the long tradition of the prose epic, which includes François Rabelais's *La vie de Gargantua et de Pantagruel* (*The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel*; c. 1532 – c. 1564), Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759, vol. 1-2 - 1767, vol. 9).

⁷⁵ The law of "German Citizenship by Descent" allows individuals with German ancestry to claim citizenship, although the regulations are considered to be rather complex and defined by the geopolitical events of the twentieth century.

⁷⁶ Pressburger, *Don Ponzio Capodoglio*, 384.

(In this bloody and chaotic epoch, the obsession with the identity, origin and belonging of the self has spread like a deadly disease throughout our planet. This publication is based on an authentic biography, and it resolves to contribute to the recovery from this grave and contagious illness: the search for identity.)

Pressburger's comparison of the postmodern crisis of identity to a disease, calls to mind Gonzalo's famous invective against pronouns, 'the parasites of thought,' in Carlo Emilio Gadda's *La cognizione del dolore* (1968): 'io' or 'I': "... l'io, io! ... il più lurido di tutti i pronomi! ... I pronomi! Sono i pidocchi del pensiero. Quando il pensiero ha i pidocchi, si gratta come tutti quelli che hanno i pidocchi...e nelle unghie, allora...ci ritrova i pronomi: i pronomi di persona" (...the I, I! ... The filthiest of all pronouns! ... Pronouns! They're the lice of thought. When a thought has lice, it scratches, like everyone who has lice... and they get in the fingernails, then... you find pronouns, the personal pronouns).⁷⁷ The invective is founded on the premise that pronouns postulate the uniqueness or indivisibility of the speaker or subject, and thus breed a profound fault in speculation: "di veder ad ogni costo l'io e l'uno dove non esistono affatto, di veder limiti e barriere, dove vi sono legami e aggrovigliamenti" (to see, at any cost, the 'I' and the 'one' where they do not exist at all; to see limits and barriers where there are ties and entanglements).⁷⁸ As Emilio Mazzotti observes, the 'io' becomes a symbol of a presumed, fixed identity which repudiates Gadda's protagonist inasmuch as: "Gli *io*, i *me* conducono insomma a smarrire il senso dell'aleatorietà della persona: e la via è aperta al consolidarsi del 'carattere,' all'insorgere dell'egoismo, del narcisismo" (hence, the '*Is*', the '*mes*' lead to a sacrificing of the sense of

⁷⁷ Gadda, Carlo Emilio. *La cognizione del dolore*. ed. Rodondi, Guido Lucchini, and Emilio Manzotti, (Milan: Garzanti, 2007), 636. English translation: Gadda, Carlo Emilio. *Acquainted with Grief*, translated by Weaver (New York: Brazillier, 1985), 86.

⁷⁸ Manzotti, Emilio. "La cognizione del dolore di Carlo Emilio Gadda." *Letteratura Italiana Einaudi. Le Opere*, Vol. IV.II (Turin: Einaudi, 1996), 73-4.

randomness of the person: and the path opens to the consolidation of ‘character,’ to the rise of egoism, of narcissism).⁷⁹

A little more than a decade before Gadda, the Bosnian Ivo Andrić, who would speak of himself in the first-person plural, also challenged this epistemological ‘pest’ in his novel *Prokleta Avlija* (*The Damned Yard*, 1954). In a narrative style reminiscent of Magris’s *Alla cieca* (2005) and *Non luogo a procedere* (2015), Andrić’s novel oscillates between multiple narrative modes and back and forth in time, journeying to the past to discover new layers of truth within the present. A sensible young scholar named Ćamil becomes fixated with the tale of Džem-sultan, an obsession that eventually lands him in prison. Unable to separate his own reality from Džem’s, he eventually surprises the narrators by confessing that he is (“I am”) Džem-sultan. Cognizant of the nature of Ćamil’s obsession, the monk, Fra Petar, reflects on the allusions of the term:

Ja! – Teška reč, koja u očima onih pred kojima je kazana određuje naše mesto, kobno i nepromenjivo, često daleko ispred ili iza onog što mi o sebi znamo, izvan naše volje i iznad naših snaga. Strašna reč koja nas, jednom izgovorena, zauvek vezuje i poistovećuje sa svim onim što smo zamislili i rekli i sa čim nikad nismo ni pomišljali da se poistovetimo, a u stvari smo, u sebi, već odavno jedno.⁸⁰

(I! – Potent word, which in the eyes of those before whom it is spoken determines our place, fatefully and immutably, often far beyond or behind what we know about ourselves, beyond our will and above our strength. A terrible word which, once spoken, links us with and identifies us with all that we have imagined and said, with which we have never dreamed of identifying ourselves, but with which we have in fact, in ourselves, long been one).

Gadda and Andrić’s mistrust in this pretentious signifier in an unexpected *mise-en-scène* resounds in Magris’s critique of ‘self-definition,’ for “La verità [dell’] autodefinizione esiste sul piano del vissuto e sul piano della poesia che lo ricrea, ma sfugge a una connotazione individuale precisa”

⁷⁹ Manzotti, “*La cognizione del dolore* di Carlo Emilio Gadda,” 74.

⁸⁰ Andrić, Ivo. *Sabrana djela*, Vol. 4 (Zagreb: Dey St, 1967), pp. 91-92. English: Andrić, Ivo. *Conversation with Goya, Bridges, Signs*, trans. Celia Hawkesworth and Andrew Harvey (London, 1992), 199.

(The truth of self-definition exists on the plane of existence and of the poetry that recreates it, but it escapes a precise individual connotation).⁸¹ As we have established, it is also a strong point of contention with Boris Pahor, who argues that this transcendence or *overcoming* of identity, which he identifies as the principal reason of the collapse of Austro-Mitteleuropean universalism, fails to account for the “posizione delle comunità minacciate” (position of the threatened communities).⁸² Pressburger holds a unique position between these contrasting perspectives: his oeuvre starts with the particular, but opens itself up to the universal, suggesting that the place of the *mutating* and *multiplicitous* individual is constantly renegotiated with respect to the never-ending network of relations, cultures and stories that transcend a singular, simplistic and rhetorical articulation. The question of origins and of ancestry figures prominently in Pressburger’s oeuvre, but its ultimate aim is to reveal the absurdity behind representation, or better yet, *rhetoric* in a Michelstaedterian sense.

Pressburger also concocts an authentic diatribe against the pronoun in chapter thirty-four of *Don Ponzio Capodoglio*. As the introductory summary informs us, the chapter consists of a *mise en scène* set in place by Professor Negrescu who reads a manuscript received by Don Ponzio Capodoglio from an unknown writer encountered years earlier at the Braşov Railway Station. Entitled “Prêt-à-porter” and written by “anonymous,” it opens with a synopsis of the play which explains that:

il presente dramma in musica rappresenta una quasi ininterrotta sfilata di moda. Non prevede praticamente altro che un palcoscenico vuoto e una lunga passerella che si incunea anche nella platea. Alcuni elementi scenici saranno indicati di volta in volta, ma dovranno essere molto scarni. La messa in scena dell’opera dovrebbe essere effettuata con indossatrici e indossatori. All’apparire degli abiti di questa o

⁸¹ Ara, Angelo, and Claudio Magris. *Trieste: Un’identità di frontiera* (Turin: Einaudi, 1982), 15.

⁸² Pahor, Boris. *Venuti a galla: scritti di metodo, di polemica, di critica*. Elvio Guagnini (ed). Parma: Diabasis, 2014, 30.

quella azienda un'apposita scritta luminosa potrebbe segnalarne la collaborazione, in modo da dare ancora maggiore credito all'azione. Se questo non fosse possibile, le scritte potrebbero indicare ditte fittizie ma verosimili.⁸³

(the present musical drama represents an almost uninterrupted fashion show. It provides practically nothing more than an empty stage and a long walkway that also sections off into stalls. Some scenic elements will be indicated from time to time, but they will have to be very meager. The staging of the work should be carried out with male and female models. When the clothes of this or that company appear, a special luminous written sign could signal their collaboration, to give even greater credit to the action. If this should not be possible, the writing could indicate fictitious but plausible company names.)

The musical is an allegorical representation of the tension between substance, individuality, and form, for the real *prêt-à-porter* in which the narrative voice is interested is that of language: the relationship between the models and the ready-to-wear clothing they are to showcase is analogous to that of human beings and the limited, preset system of identifications into which they are intercalated, and within which they define the parameters of their being and their individuality. This is further reiterated in the overture through the personification of the prologue, which is represented by a little girl, who states:

Io sono il prologo,
e rappresento ciò che tutti chiamano
Anima. Sì, sì; questa grande favola
Che l'uomo ha inventato da millenni.
Mi hanno dato forma di bambina,
ma non dovrei avere alcuna forma.
Io vado e vengo dal corpo umano.
Secondo alcuni muoio con il, corpo,
per altri vivo nell'eternità.
Adesso mi vedrete in azione.
sarò compagna d'un uomo famoso
all'apice fella felicità
ma che ignora me completamente.
Un grande avvenimento lo attende.
Quale? Lo vedrete tra un istante.⁸⁴

(I am the prologue,
and I represent what everyone calls
Soul. Yes, yes; this great hogwash
That man has invented for millennia.
They gave me the form of a child.
but I shouldn't have a form.
I come and go from the human body.
According to some I die with the body,
for others I live in eternity.
Now you will see me in action.
I will be the companion of a famous man
at the height of happiness
but who ignores me completely.
A great event awaits him.
Which? You will see in a moment.)

⁸³ Pressburger, *Don Ponzio Capodoglio*, 324-325.

⁸⁴ Pressburger, 364.

The Prologue affirms that it represents the soul, which predates and transcends form and is boundless. Yet, it simultaneously relies on rhetoric ('prologue') to communicate its infinitude, thus ironically accentuating the inescapable and unyielding grip of rhetoric. This tension reemerges in the exchange between the personifications of Anima (soul), Duma, the self-declared angel of death, and Vu, 'l'autore degli abiti' ('the author of the garments'). The first scene, which follows the earlier interjection by the Prologue, signals the arrival of a group of attractive young women who represent the spring, creating an atmosphere "da quadro di Botticelli" (reminiscent of a painting by Botticelli), two of whom accompany the designer, Vu. This idyllic scene is interrupted upon the arrival of an unnamed young man, or 'giovanotto,' clad in dark garments and dark glasses, who extracts a gun and fires at Vu's chest. As he falls to the ground, Vu exclaims "Ah, è finita la vita" (Ah, life has ended).⁸⁵ This dramatic moment sets the stage for an existential symposium, which is prefigured by the appearance of Duma, the angel of death who warns Vu that his "viaggio è terminato" (journey has ended).

In response to Vu's objections, Duma vows to show him "tutta la Storia dell'uomo attraverso gli abiti, la moda, il tuo mondo. Lo faccio sempre, con ogni morente: l'artigiano rivede tutti gli arnesi, il professore tutti gli scolari, il prete vede tutti i fedeli [...] E lo stilista rivede con la mente la storia del mondo attraverso la moda" (the entire History of man through clothing, fashion, your world. I always do it, with each dying man: the artisan sees his tools again, the professor all of his students, the priest all devotees [...] And the stylist sees, with his mind, the history of the world through fashion).⁸⁶ Duma thus claims that despite the unique paradigms that

⁸⁵ Pressburger, 527.

⁸⁶ Pressburger, 540.

characterize individual lived experiences, a universal existential value of History can be derived from or attributed to each. The angel upholds his promise to recount History through the lens of fashion by virtue of Vu's professional identity: the stage transforms into a simulation of the Ethiopian River Valley, which acts as a backdrop to "Una sfilata di scimmie. Piccole, grandi, vere e rappresentate (danzatori camuffati da scimmie). Una coppia lievemente diversa si distingue nella moltitudine di scimmie che cammina avanti e indietro sulla passerella. Sono maschio e femmina. Meno pelosi, più svelti delle altre scimmie" (A sequence of apes. Small, large, real, and represented [dancers disguised as apes]. A slightly different pair stands out in the multitude of apes pacing up and down the catwalk. I am male and female. Less hairy, quicker than the other apes).⁸⁷ Followed by Vu, who is tailed by Anima, Duma rises onto the stage and identifies the re-created setting as the locus of man's "salto genetico da primate a uomo. Sì. *Homo Erectus*" (genetic jump from primate to man. Yes. *Homo Erectus*).⁸⁸ Suddenly, all apes but the 'pair' disappear, leaving behind only their skeletons. This account of the genesis leads to a straightaway contemplation of death. When Vu yields to an impassioned invective against "Morte! Schifosa, lurida morte! Dolore infinito per la coscienza! Perché, perché, perché devi esistere?" (Death! Filthy, filthy death! Infinite pain for the conscience! Why, why, why do you have to exist?), while Anima observes that "Secondo lo studioso Viktor Bálint [...] non esiste individuo perché questo si divide all'infinito..." (According to the scholar Viktor Bálint [...] there is no individual because he is divided to infinity...).⁸⁹ Deleuze and Guattari expound this notion of 'individual infinitude' in *A*

⁸⁷ Pressburger, 540.

⁸⁸ Pressburger, 541.

⁸⁹ Pressburger, 542.

Thousand Plateaus through ‘the three virtues’: imperceptibility, indiscernibility, and impersonality. These can only be achieved through the process of infinitive becoming:

Becoming-everybody/everything (*tout le monde*) is to world (*faire monde*), to make a world of worlds (*faire un monde*). [...] becoming-everybody/everything, making the world a becoming, is to world, to make a world of worlds, in other words, to find one’s proximities and zones of indiscernibility. The Cosmos as an abstract machine, and each world as an assemblage effectuating it. If one reduces oneself to one or several abstract lines that will prolong itself in and conjugate with others, producing immediately, directly *a* world in which it is *the* world that becomes, then one becomes-everybody/everything. The infinitive-becoming, and the proper name to which one is reduced. Saturate, eliminate, put everything in.⁹⁰

Deleuze and Guattari thus propose an unremitting, sporadic, and infinite process of ‘bridging’ that connotes an infinite state of *becoming* that is active and transient, as opposed to that of *being*, which implies a more static and unchanging state of existence. It is Vu’s adherence to the latter that Anima and Duma consequently decry, not before the narrative voice juxtaposes their discordant perspectives, placing them side-by-side, as replicated below:

DUMA e ANIMA:		VU:	
Tutto	(All	Tutto	(All
ciò	that	ciò	that
che	which	che	which
passa	passes	passa	passes
è solo un	is just a	mi	terrorizes
simbolo.	symbol.	terrorizza.	me.
Anche	Even	Essere	Being
l’effimero	the ephemeral	effimero	ephemeral
diventa	becomes	m’opprime e	oppresses and
eterno	eternal	tormenta.	torments me.
per chi sa	for who knows	Rifiuto la	I reject
leggere	to read	morte:	death:
il libro	the book	non voglio	I do not want to
dei tempi.	of time.)	morire!	die!) ⁹¹

⁹⁰ Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 280.

⁹¹ Pressburger, 546.

By virtue of their methodical unalignment, the indented first four lines of each respective sentiment visually accentuate the impermanence and transience they simultaneously rhetorically convey. Allied with the terrain of the signified, the semiotic, and persuasion, the angel of death (Duma) and the soul (Anima) conceive of transience as an inevitable and intrinsic foundation of human existence. Vu, on the other hand, fears the power of impermanence to negate or inadequately denote one's existence, and is thus associated with the signifier, the symbolic, and rhetoric. This deliberate adjacency illuminates the ontological Michelstaedterian crux, but it also effectively illustrates the central questions that animate cacophonous universalist and particularist conceptions of being. Vu embodies the human desire for permanence and authenticity, which stands in discord with the ephemerality of authentic existence.

As models wearing various kinds of blood-soaked animal skin populate the stage, Duma and Anima accuse Vu of submitting to the laws of nature and being “violento, un assassino, corrotto e corruttore!” (violent, an assassin, corrupt and corruptive), while Vu defends himself with the assertion that he had to complete such actions to “realizzare me stesso [...] per emergere dal branco” (to realize myself [...] to stand out from the crowd).⁹² It is here that Pressburger's invective reaches its peak:

DUMA: Allora sappi che il tuo io,
quello che ti distingue da questo branco,
tra poco non esisterà.
VU: No! No!
Non voglio crederci!
DUMA: Lo so, è così.
Con tutti, fino all'ultimo momento.
Quell'io ti succhia come una cimice.
VU (acutissimo, fortissimo): Io! Io! Io! Io ti voglio!
ANIMA: Butta via quel pronome e impara a dire tu e noi.⁹³

⁹² Pressburger, 546.

⁹³ Pressburger, 384.

(DUMA: Then know that your Self,
that which sets you apart from this pack,
will soon not exist.

VU: No! No!

I don't want to believe it!

DUMA: I know, that's it.

With everyone, until the last moment.

That me sucks you like a bedbug.

VU (very sharp, very strong): I! I! I! I! I want you!

SOUL: Throw that pronoun away and learn to say you [2nd person sing.] and us.)

While the admonitions of Duma and Anima reiterate the points we explored earlier, it is the focus on the pronoun 'io' that begs our attention insofar as both characters urge Vu to abandon the first-person moniker and instead adopt 'tu' ('you,' 2nd person singular) and 'noi' ('we'). A hint of irony underlies this 'advice,' for 'Vu' derives from the Latin root *vōs* which signifies 'you,' and 'you all.' Thus, Vu is the very embodiment of the rhetorical entrapment that thwarts authenticity and breeds dissension: the figure most viscerally attached to and preoccupied with the "io" bears the moniker "tu." In another side-by-side comparison, which concludes the fourth act of the play, Duma and Anima echo the destructive potential of excessive insistence on individuality, whereas Vu claims to discover eternity, or perpetuity, in his 'I':

DUMA e ANIMA:

Con l'io comincia la voglia sempre d'esser diversi: comincia la moda, comincia l'invidia, comincia il progresso, comincia il mondo	(With the 'I' beings the desire to always be different: begins the fashion, begins envy, begins progress, begins the world
---	---

VU:

Non credo ancora che tutto finisca Per me il mio io è l'eternità, per me il mio io è l'eternità, il mio io, è l'eternità.	(I don't believe yet that everything ends. For me my I is eternity, for me my I is eternity, my I is eternity.) ⁹⁴
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⁹⁴ Pressburger, 371-372.

in cui viviamo. in which we live.)

In this authentic employment of rhetoric, Pressburger effectively conveys the limitations of language and the vulnerability and peril that surround an ingenuous overinsistence on self-diversification. Curious, however, is the use of the word “progress,” which implies a degree of movement and change stirred by the pronoun ‘I,’ insofar as the Vu is the embodiment of the attachment to individuality articulated by Anima and Duma. Thus, the term ‘progress’ evokes its very antonym, the opposite of its implied meaning. This insistence on ‘progress’ by virtue of excessive individualization only generates more desire for ‘progress,’ thus creating a breeding ground for the perusal of endless visceral particularisms.

The irony that permeates the pages of *Don Ponzio Capodoglio*, more specifically, the derision with which the narrative voice registers the protagonist’s journey of self-discovery is also self-referential since, like Don Ponzio Capodoglio, Pressburger embarked on a personal journey to unearth a clearer portrait of his own genealogical history, which he relates in *Orologio di Monaco*. In *Don Ponzio Capodoglio*, Pressburger articulates the tension between universalist and particularist identitarian perspectives in a series of conversations between and juxtapositions of the newlyweds Don Ponzio Capodoglio and Sieglinde. One such example is the amusing exchange between the two, during which the engineer affirms that “L’uomo vale tanto quanto valgono i suoi avi” (A man is worth as much as his ancestors), while his spouse responds, “Ma tutti gli avi sono uguali: esseri umani con testa mani, gambe e piselli e, come chiamarle, nel caso delle signore: topine, patatine o come vuoi” (But all ancestors are the same: human beings with heads hands, legs and willies and, what to call them, in the case of ladies: hoo-has, pearls or whatever you prefer).⁹⁵ Don Ponzio Capodoglio’s remark essentially reduces Sieglinde’s ‘worth’ to *nothing*

⁹⁵ Pressburger, 53.

since she is an orphan whose origins are unclear. Sieglinde, on the other hand, underscores the intrinsic, universal value of all human beings. Tracing the root of the protagonist's preoccupation with belonging, the narrator problematizes the mystery of human existence through the notion of the homeland:

Che cos'è la patria? Nostro padre, che ci genera? Queste terre, questi boschi, questi fiumi sarebbero loro a generarci? Pons de Chapdueill ci pensava tutto il tempo. In un certo senso sì, rispondeva a sé stesso. Queste terre con i loro frutti nutrono quegli esseri che noi chiamiamo uomini, i quali contribuiscono alla nostra nascita con alcune gocce di sperma. Ma da lì a chiamare patria quelle terre, quei boschi, quei fiumi. Pons de Chaptueill, dal momento in cui concepì questi pensieri, lì nel mezzo della notte, subì una strana metamorfosi. Il suo cervello si incagliò all'improvviso sul quesito delle origini, dell'identità da attribuirsi, sul voler sapere da dove veniva la sua famiglia, chi erano gli antenati, i parenti, dove vivevano. La sua vita pareva dipendere dalla soluzione di questi enigmi. Il respiro del povero Ponzio divenne affannoso, si sentì soffocare, il cuore gli batteva forte. Quanto a Sieglinde, lei era senza padre né madre. Non si curava affatto delle proprie origini. Tuttavia, pianse tutto il tempo: patria o no, le dispiaceva lasciare quei posti. Era orfana, non sapeva chi fossero i suoi genitori, ma le dispiaceva ugualmente andar via da quei luoghi dove era nata. Molto si parla del perché un essere umano o animale si affeziona al posto dove vede la luce per la prima volta: un punto fermo è dato dal fatto che gli esseri godono di esistere, e non vorrebbero mai non esistere.⁹⁶

(What is the homeland? Our father, who begets us? These lands, these woods, these rivers would it be they who generate us? Pons de Chapdueill thought about it all the time. In a way, yes, he answered himself. These lands with their fruits nourish those beings we call men, who contribute to our birth with a few drops of sperm. But from there to call those lands, those woods, those rivers home. From the moment he conceived these thoughts there, in the middle of the night, Pons de Chaptueill underwent a strange metamorphosis. His brain suddenly fixated on the question of origins, on the identity to be attributed, on wanting to know where his family came from, who his ancestors were, the relatives, where they lived. His life seemed to depend on solving these enigmas. Poor Ponzio's breathing became labored, he felt himself suffocate, his heart beating fast. As for Sieglinde, she was without a father or mother. She did not care at all about her origins. However, she cried all the time: homeland or not, she was sorry to leave those places. She was an orphan, she didn't know who her parents were, but she still regretted leaving those places where she was born. Much is said about why a human or animal becomes attached to the place where it sees the light for the first time: a fixed point is given by the fact that beings enjoy existing and would never want not to exist.)

⁹⁶ Pressburger, Giorgio. *Don Ponzio Capodoglio*, 35.

While Don Ponzio Capodoglio searches for the biological and geographical ‘coordinates’ of his ‘homeland’ in the realm of his remote and unknown ancestral history, Sieglinde discovers hers in a more metaphysical sense. As the narrative voice intimates, the human proclivity to form attachments to specific geographical spaces derives from the greater existential instinct to evade death, insofar as “gli esseri godono di esistere, e non vorrebbero mai non esistere” (beings delight in existing, and they would never want to not exist).⁹⁷ Thomas Harrison astutely articulates this notion in a chapter of his seminal book *1910: The Emancipation of Dissonance*, fittingly entitled “The Deficiency of Being.” Engaging with diverse negotiations of death in the critical thought of intellectuals such as Lukács, Simmel and Michelstaedter, Harrison observes that “Only within the borders of a mortal span of existence, and by virtue of the practical limitations on each possible experience, does a life acquire some identity and shape,” and while “From the start, humans embark on a flight from the end—[it is] only this end [that] helps us see the beginning.”⁹⁸ For Pressburger, the ‘punto fermo’ that is intended to establish and even validate one’s existence instead marks its end, just as the attachment to life paradoxically obstructs its unfolding in the present, a point to which we will return in the following pages.

Pressburger introduces the concept of “punto fermo” earlier, in *Orologio di Monaco*, particularly in the appended reflections of his son Andrea Pressburger and in the author’s post-script. At the end of his “resoconto della [sua] vita” (account of [his] life) Andrea writes, “Sono frutto di tanti incroci, in me vivono tanti popoli diversi, e io sarò, ormai è chiaro, il ramo secco della famiglia. Questa è la mia conclusione. Non avrò eredi. Non è una tragedia. Non obbedisco

⁹⁷ Pressburger, 35.

⁹⁸ Harrison, Thomas. *1910: The Emancipation of Dissonance*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996, 97 and 99.

alla macchinetta biologica, tutto qui” (I am fruit of many crossings, many different peoples live in me, and, by now it is clear, I will be the dry branch of the family. This is my conclusion. I will have no heirs. It is not a tragedy. I don't obey the biological machine, that is all.).⁹⁹ Similarly, in his post-script, Pressburger acknowledges the limitations of an existence determined by biological ‘coordinates’ when he affirms, “Il romanzo della mia mania genealogica è definitivamente naufragato con la presente, estesa testimonianza della penultima generazione della mia famiglia. Più in là, finora, non ho osato andare, nel timore di vedere pian piano ridotto me stesso a un punto, cioè a un essere senza dimensioni nel tempo e nello spazio” (The novel of my genealogical mania is definitively wrecked with the present, extended testimony of the penultimate generation of my family. Beyond that, I have not dared to go, for fear of seeing myself slowly reduced to a point, that is, to a dimensionless being in time and space).¹⁰⁰ This meditation of the role of space in the demarcation of the parameters and limits of one’s place – and being – in the world directly calls into question the *Heimat*. Pressburger’s engagement with the idea of homeland through the question of genealogical belonging traces the evolution of the German concept, thus revealing its paradoxical evolution during the second half of the nineteenth century and the twentieth.

In *Heimat: A Critical Theory of the German Idea of Heimat*, Bickle explores the ontological grievances that often accompany this German conceptualization of the broader notion of homeland which, in German premodern society, primarily constituted “one’s own homestead (fields, house, livestock, extended family with hierarchical role and labor divisions) – provided, for that time at least, a low ontological level of anxiety. It provided means for survival and

⁹⁹ Pressburger, Andrea. “Nel terzo millennio (Il ramo secco),” in *L’Orologio di Monaco* by Giorgio Pressburger. Venice: Marsilio Specchi, 2017, 215.

¹⁰⁰ Pressburger, *L’Orologio di Monaco*, 216.

knowledge of one's place in a society where survival was basic."¹⁰¹ Yet, the Heimat began to acquire a different meaning in the second half of the eighteenth-century,

becoming increasingly associated with an inner emotional capacity to attach oneself with personalized memories of experiences to a place, a family, a specific landscape. What the Heimat that was one's own farmstead once provided, the more subjective, individualized idea of Heimat now provides: a low ontological level of anxiety, which is to say, identity, a sense of belonging – and all of this without the pain of having to come to terms with modernity's *Entzweiungen* [splits and fragmentations]. This is to express it positively. Expressing it negatively, one might say that wanting to have one's own Heimat is the beginning of that small, autistic, windowless world in which those who feel the need for the definitive structure of a Heimat begin to spin or imprison themselves.¹⁰²

Pressburger's protagonists, as Don Ponzio Capodoglio or the Pressburger author-protagonist narrator of *L'Orologio di Monaco*, toe the line between the two conceptions of Heimat outlined by Blickle: while they search for a sense of belonging through identification with a geographical space or genealogical history, they quickly recognize the trap of the 'windowless world' into which such an objective can potentially land them. Attempting to make sense of the *thrownness* of life, the Pressburgian protagonist stumbles into the murky waters of the Absurd before which he ultimately has no choice but to surrender. This *mêlée* derives from the ontological tension that Michelstaedter ascribed to the irresolvable dissonance between persuasion and rhetoric in 1910, which acknowledges the impasse between true, authentic possession of the self (persuasion) and the apparatus of ideology (rhetoric) that prevents it. The Gorizian writer illustrates this in one of his poems, which questions the empirical basis of the notion of homeland:

Non è la patria il comodo giaciglio per la cura, la noia e la stanchezza; ma nel suo petto, ma nel suo periglio,	(The homeland is not a comforting nest for healing and boredom, and weariness; but in one's bosom, for its peril
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¹⁰¹ Blickle, Peter. *Heimat: A Critical Theory of the German Idea of Homeland* (Rochester NY: Camden House, 2004), 78.

¹⁰² Blickle, 79.

chi ne voglia parlar
deve crearla.¹⁰³

whoever yearns to speak of it
must create it.)

Thus, the true Heimat is one that is internally negotiated, and which resists concrete articulation. If persuasion is possession of self, then it results that faith, identity, and the homeland – which can be understood as extensions of the Self – can be grasped or possessed only independently of rhetoric: a task that is, as Michelstaedter has shown, all but impossible to surmount given the subtle and pervasive ways in which rhetoric operates and interpolates the subject. In a *New York Times* interview, Milan Kundera reiterated a similar notion when asked about the notion of ‘home,’ maintaining that “‘Home’ is something very ambiguous for me. I wonder if our notion of home isn’t, in the end, an illusion, a myth. I wonder if we are not victims of that myth. I wonder if our idea of having roots is simply a fiction we cling to.”¹⁰⁴ His exile from his native country, Czechoslovakia, led him to France, an event that nudged him to rethink his understanding of the notion of ‘home’:

In French, of course, the word “home” doesn't exist. You have to say “*chez moi*” or “*dans ma patrie*” – which means that “home” is already politicized, that “home” already includes a politics, a state, a nation. Whereas the word “home” is very beautiful in its exactitude. Losing it, in French, is one of those diabolical problems of translation. You have to ask: What is home? What does it mean to be “at home”? It's a complicated question. I can honestly say that I feel much better here in Paris than I did in Prague, but then can I also say that I lost my home, leaving Prague? All I know is that before I left, I was terrified of “losing home” and that after I left, I realized – it was with a certain astonishment – that I did not feel loss, I did not feel deprived.

Kundera’s reflection is pertinent insofar as it illustrates the interrelatedness – and problematic nature – between language (rhetoric) and belonging. Is it not this very desire to articulate the

¹⁰³ Michelstaedter, Carlo. “Non è la patria” *Carlo Michelstaedter Poesie* (Milan: KKIEN Enterprise Srl., 2014), 38.

¹⁰⁴ Kundera, Milan, interview by Jane Kramer. “When there is No Word for ‘Home.’” April 29, 1984, Sunday, Late City Final Edition Section 7; Page 46, Column 1.
<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/05/17/specials/kundera-home.html>

inarticulable internalized sense of belonging that led Slataper to acknowledge the limitations of rhetoric in his iconic “vorrei dirvi”? This conception of the homeland resounds in the examples of Don Ponzio Capodoglio and the author-protagonist-narrator of *L’Orologio di Monaco* (Pressburger himself). The orphaned Sieglinde who knows nothing of her roots or of her ancestry ironically appears more unconstrained and less concerned with these matters than her spouse or the protagonist of *L’Orologio di Monaco*. The *patria* is not an apparatus of tradition, an inherited understanding of belonging, or a set of customs; rather, it is a self-determined and internally mediated sense of belonging.

The young Michelstaedter, who took his own life the day he completed his doctoral dissertation, knew this better than most for, as Harrison suggests, “In a sense, the real act of completion lies in the suicide itself, for the work he labored so intensely over the course of the year tolerates no breach between theory and practice.”¹⁰⁵ In *Persuasione e rettorica*, which later came to be recognized as one of the most unusual European works of the twentieth century, Michelstaedter expounds the irreconcilable dissonance between persuasion, which he equates with complete conviction, and rhetoric, the apparatus of words, institutions and ideological trappings that obstruct the achievability of the former. Michelstaedter’s founding claim suggests that fulfillment escapes beings because every entity is essentially oriented towards the future; man asks of time that which he is unable to give himself: the possession of his own self. Michelstaedter writes:

Ma l’uomo vuole dalle altre cose nel tempo futuro quello che in sé gli manca: *il possesso di sé stesso*: ma quanto vuole e tanto occupato dal futuro sfugge a sé stesso in ogni presente. Così si muove a differenza delle cose diverse da lui, diverso egli stesso da sé stesso: continuando nel tempo. Ciò ch’ei vuole è dato in lui, e volendo la sua vita s’allontana da sé stesso: egli *non sa ciò che vuole*. Il suo fine non è il suo fine, egli non sa ciò che fa perché lo faccia: il suo agire è un *esser passivo*: poiché

¹⁰⁵ Harrison, 3.

egli non ha sé stesso: finché vive in lui irriducibile, oscura la fame della vita. *La persuasione non vive in chi non vive solo di sé stesso*: ma il figlio e il padre, e schiavo e signore di ciò che è attorno a lui, di ciò ch'era prima, di ciò che deve venir dopo: *cosa fra le cose*.¹⁰⁶

(But man wants from other things in a future time what he lacks in himself: *the possession of his own self*, and as he wants and is busied so with the future, *he escapes himself in every present*. Thus, does he move differently from the things different from him, as he is different from his own self, continuing in time. What he wants is given within him and wanting life he distances himself from himself: *he does not know what he wants*. His end is not his end, nor does he know why he does what he does: his activity is *being passive*, for he *does not have himself* as long as an irreducible, obscure hunger for life lives within him. *Persuasion lives not in him who does not live from his own self*, who is son and father, slave, and master of what lies around him, of what came before him, of what must come after—a *thing among things*.)

Persuasion eludes human existence by virtue of the perpetually ephemeral and fluctuating nature of human desires, convictions, and inclinations. Life would be “*una, immobile, informe, se potesse consistere in un punto*” (*one, immobile, formless* if it could consist in *one* point), but the necessity of flight in time “*implica la necessità della dilatazione nello spazio: la perpetua mutazione: onde l’infinita varietà delle cose*” (implies the necessity of the dilatation of space: *perpetual mutation*, from which comes the *infinite variety of things*) and thus, “Poiché in nessun punto la volontà è soddisfatta, ogni cosa distrugge avvenendo e passando: per ciò che posa nel vario desiderare si trasmuta” (Because at no point is the will satisfied, each thing destroys itself in coming into being and in passing away: ‘everything flows,’ so that it transforms itself without respite in varied desiring).¹⁰⁷ While the prospect – or fear – of death drives life, it also impedes the possibility of authenticity, just as the “punto fermo” of which Pressburger writes, and which arises from a desire to “possess oneself,” simultaneously marks the impossibility of the fulfillment of that desire:

¹⁰⁶ Michelstaedter, Carlo. *La persuasione e la retorica* (Milan: Adelphi, 1982), 41–42; English translation: Michelstaedter, Carlo. *Persuasion and Rhetoric* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 11.

¹⁰⁷ Michelstaedter, *La persuasione e la retorica*, 14; Michelstaedter, *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, 15.

esser nati non è che voler continuare: gli uomini vivono per vivere: per non morire. La loro persuasione è *la paura della morte*, *esser nati* non è che *temere la morte*. Così che se si fa loro certa la morte in un certo futuro—*si manifestano già morti nel presente*. Tutto ciò che fanno e che dicono con ferma persuasione, per un certo fine, con evidente ragione—non è che paura della morte.¹⁰⁸

(to be *born* is nothing but to want to go on: men live, in order *not to die*. Their persuasion is *the fear of death*. Being *born* is nothing but *fearing death*, so that, if death becomes certain in a certain future, *they are already dead in the present*. All they do and say with fixed persuasion, a clear purpose, and evident reason is nothing but fear of death.)

Authentic life coincides with death: only upon coming to terms with death can one possess oneself.

As Heidegger writes, ‘If I take death into my life, acknowledge it, and face it squarely, I will free myself from the anxiety of death and the pettiness of life – and only then will I be free to become myself.’ Fear of death can only be overcome through its fulfillment insofar as “preparedness for death” is an essential tenet of Being.

The first short story in Pressburger’s volume *Racconti triestini* (2015), inspired by Trieste and Triestines, entitled “Il testamento Taussig – Via Brunner” immediately comes to mind here. Its protagonist, the engineer Taussig, reveals himself as a clear personification of the Michelstaedterian notion of persuasion. Indecision, passivity, and death immediately emerge as central themes of the story: every moment of the engineer’s existence is marked by indecision, even as it pertains to the most mundane daily tasks, which are transformed into ongoing dilemmas, such as calculating the rationality and efficiency of using the bathroom before having his morning coffee and vice versa. During a casual conversation, the engineer informs his nephew that he will inherit all of his belongingness upon his death. In turn, the nephew beseeches, “Non parliamo della tua morte. Perché ne parli sempre?” (Let’s not talk about your death. Why do you always talk

¹⁰⁸ Michelstaedter, Carlo. *La persuasione e la retorica*. Milan: Adelphi, 1982, 69. English translation: Michelstaedter, Carlo. *Persuasion and Rhetoric*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004, 38-39.

about it?), to which the engineer responds with “Per sentirmi ancora vivo” (to feel myself still alive).¹⁰⁹ Taussig forthrightly reiterates Michelstaedter’s positioning of fear of death as man’s persuasion. Moved by the belief that his life ‘had no other sense’ but to persist in the objects, money, and homes for the next two or three generations, Taussig resolves to compose his will. The following passage delineates a narrative framework wherein the influence of *La persuasione e la rettorica* is undeniable: Taussig’s indecisiveness, incessant planning, and sudden recognition of his lack of self-possession make him a personification of this Michelstaedterian notion:

“Cosa faccio? Mi preparo prima il caffè? No, prima vado nel bagno. Ma se vado nel bagno...” continuò i calcoli utili per l’economia e la razionalità della sua esistenza. Optò per il bagno e la liberazione momentanea della vescica. Poi andò in cucina.

“Devo prima tirar fuori dalla credenza la caffettiera o il barattolo del caffè? Forse conviene tirare fuori prima il cucchiaino dal cassetto.”

L’ingegner Taussig ponderò bene ogni gesto, ogni movimento. In realtà non voleva farne nessuno. Il suo sogno era di essere inerte, servito in tutto, come aveva fatto sua moglie, a suo tempo. Ma lei era morta.”

[...]

Prese un doppio foglio e cominciò a scrivere. Data, luogo, e dopo la solita frase:

“In pieno possesso delle mie facoltà mentali e della mia libera volontà...”

“Devo scrivere ‘libera volontà’? E dove sta questa libertà? È meglio scrivere ‘della mia volontà.’” Scrisse così. “La mia volontà? Dove sta questa volontà? Io non voglio nulla, mai. In pieno possesso della mia possibilità di volere, piuttosto.” Scrisse così, poi si arenò. Tutte le parole scritte gli sembravano false. “In pieno possesso? Non esiste il pieno possesso. Gli istinti, gli affetti, i desideri distolgono l’uomo dal pieno possesso della volontà e delle facoltà. E poi di chi è questo possesso? Del mio cervello? Della totalità del mio essere? Ma se io oscillo, un giorno sono così, un altro giorno cosà? Allora, questo pieno possesso di chi è? Di quello che sono in questo istante? Bah. Lasciamo stare.”¹¹⁰

(“What should I do? Should I make coffee, first? No, first I’ll go to the bathroom. But if I go to the bathroom...” he carried on with his useful calculations for the efficiency and rationality of his existence. He opted for the bathroom and the release of his bladder. Then he went to the kitchen.

¹⁰⁹ Pressburger, Giorgio. “Il testamento Taussig.” *Racconti triestini*. Venice: Marsilio, 2015, 10.

¹¹⁰ Pressburger, “Il testament Taussig,” 10-11.

Engineer Taussig carefully pondered each of his gestures, each of his movements. In reality, he didn't want to make any one of them. His dream was to be inert, waited on in everything, just as his wife had done in her time. But she was dead.

[...]

He took a double sheet and began to write. Date, place, and then the usual phrase: "In complete possession of my mental faculties and my free will..."

"I have to write 'free will'? And where is this free will? It is better to write 'of my will.'" And this he wrote. "My will? Where is this will? I don't want anything, ever. In full possession of my will, rather." He wrote this, and then ran aground. All of the words he had written seemed untrue. "In full possession? Full possession doesn't exist. The instincts, affects, the desires divert man from the full possession of his will and of his faculties. And then, whose is this possession? Of my brain? Of the totality of my being? But if I oscillate, when one day I am like this, the next day I am like that? Whose is this full possession then? Of that which I am in this instant? Bah. Let's leave it alone.")

Taussig's careful estimation of the costs and benefits of his most basic actions reveal his lack of 'self-possession' on the grounds of his inability to exist in the present. Furthermore, the narrative voice intimates that despite devoting so much time to such minute daily tasks, the engineer did not want to complete any of them for his dream was to be "inert." While writing his will, he is unsettled by a growing skepticism concerning his lack of control over his own existence. He questions the soundness of three core Michelstaedterian notions – freedom, possession, and free will – through close scrutiny of the language that underlies a standard, typical last will and testament. Upon closer analysis, however, these seemingly sound rhetorical constructs prove surprisingly feeble and pretentious.

Pressburger's narrator engages in this ongoing representational renegotiation of belonging through the discursive tension between the 'invented,' or 'imagined,' and the 'real' to exalt the ontological Catch-22 of identity. One of the ways in which the author engages in this mode of representation is through the displacement of language, as a few scholars have observed. Remo Ceserani notes that Pressburger's narrator presents "situazioni comunicative in cui la voce narrante cela la propria identità dietro una sigla o un nome fittizio o attribuisce la responsabilità e

l'autenticazione dei fatti narrati a un altro personaggio" (communicative situations in which the narrating voice conceals its identity behind the use of initials or false names or makes another character responsible for the telling and authentication of facts).¹¹¹ In her study on the question of intimacy in illness and silence in Pressburger's *La legge degli spazi bianchi*, Emma Bond reiterates this, stating that the author "Plays on received notions of the location of meaning and puts the reliability of language as a system of signification into question [...] by presenting situations where communication is rendered impossible and by linking this to medicine and the figure of the doctor, uses this failure to promote wider questions concerning identity, existence and death."¹¹² Bond also observes that "the preface also immediately calls into question the very reliability of itself, raising further negative implications for the stability of meaning, regardless of whether this is expressed in oral or in written form. Signed 'G.P.', the preface posits the stories which follow as having been collected and recounted to the author by the intermediary figure of a certain 'Professor Sch.'"¹¹³ Similarly, in the preface to *Racconti triestini* (2015), the author writes: "Le storie che ho raccolto qui provengono da racconti di conoscenti, pettegolezzi da caffè e tristi o ridanciane cronache cittadine. Come tali potrebbero essere anche vere. Di fatto che le ho ritoccate notevolmente, adattandole a ciò che io penso fosse la verità. Che ha poco o niente a che fare con le vicende reali" (The stories I have collected here derive from tales by acquaintances, coffee shop gossip and sad or pleasant city news. As such they could also be true. In fact, I have touched them up significantly, adapting them to what I believe to be the truth. Which has little or nothing to do

¹¹¹ Ceserani, Remo. "Esilio e divisione in Giorgio Pressburger." *L'esilio come certezza*. Ed by Andrea Ciccarelli and Paolo A. Giordano (West Lafayette, IN: Bordighera Press, 1998), 117.

¹¹² Bond, Emma. *Disrupted Narratives: Illness, Silence and Identity in Svevo, Pressburger and Morandini* (New York: Legenda, 2012), 18.

¹¹³ Bond, *Disrupted Narratives: Illness, Silence and Identity in Svevo, Pressburger and Morandini*, 18.

with the actual events).¹¹⁴ In his signature lackadaisical humor, Pressburger first appears to reinforce the insolent binary opposition of truth and reality, only to deftly underscore its idealistic premise: while adapting the stories to what he ‘believe[s] to be the truth,’ he simultaneously acknowledges that this may have ‘little or nothing to do with the actual events.’ In this Pirandellian vein, the author demonstrates that conscious or subliminal subjectivity tightens the bind between reality and truth: “Verità e realtà: è un binomio difficile, ma con un po’ di accortezza se ne può disinnescare la portata esplosiva, tanto che questa mia raccolta va rappresentata a tutti gli effetti un’opera di fantasia” (Truth and reality: a difficult binomial, but with a bit of shrewdness we can disarm its explosive reach, such that this collection of mine is to be understood, for all intents and purposes, as a work of fantasy).¹¹⁵

Pressburger’s premise, which resounds in the author’s oeuvre more generally, calls to mind the preface to *Sei personaggi in cerca di un autore* (1921; *Six Characters in Search of an Author*) in which Pirandello explicates the central existential impasse of the play: “l’inganno della comprensione reciproca fondato irrimediabilmente sulla vuota astrazione delle parole; la molteplice personalità d’ognuno secondo tutte le possibilità d’essere che si trovano in ciascuno di noi; e infine il tragico conflitto immanente tra la vita che di continuo si muove e cambia e la forma che la fissa, immutabile” (the deceit of mutual understanding irremediably founded on the empty abstraction of the words, the multiple personality of everyone corresponding to the possibilities of being to be found in each of us, and finally the inherent tragic conflict between life [which is always moving and changing] and form [which fixes it, immutable]).¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Pressburger, Giorgio. “Premessa dell’autore.” *Racconti triestini* (Venice: Marsilio, 2015), 7.

¹¹⁵ Pressburger, *Racconti triestini*, 7.

¹¹⁶ The preface was first published on *Commedia* in January of 1925 under the title “Come e perché ho scritto i *Sei personaggi*.”

Pressburger's distinctive use of humor calls for more scholarly attention than studies currently offer. This distinctive constituent of Pressburger's narrative style enables the author to plunge into the misty chasms of human existence and reemerge with a seductive ease and precious discernment. In one of his final interviews, entitled "Kafka, Cervantes, Joyce: gli autori pesanti sono i veri umoristi," Pressburger discussed his last novel *Don Ponzio Capodoglio* (2017) with Eleonora Barbieri, stating: "Il paradosso. L'assurdo. Il leggero: cercavo la leggerezza in modo spasmodico, anche nelle espressioni. Da giovane mi colpì una frase di Elsa Morante: Io voglio cercare soprattutto la leggerezza. Tutti gli scrittori più pesanti e tormentati credo la cerchino" (The paradoxical. The absurd. Lightness: I searched for lightness in a spasmodic way, even in my expressions. When I was young, a quote by Elsa Morante struck me: Above all, I want to seek lightness. I believe that all of the most 'heavy' and tormented writers search for it).¹¹⁷ Pressburger's search for lightness emerges in his use of humor, or better yet, in the ability of language to construct or reveal fallacies and incongruities.

In the famous essay "On Humor" (1908), Pirandello identifies this 'feeling of incongruity' as a distinctive trait of humorists, whose "special kind of reflection [...] creates the feeling of incongruity, of not knowing any more which side to take amid the perplexities and irresolutions of his conscience."¹¹⁸ Pressburger's humor, as the preface to *Racconti triestini* demonstrates, among other texts, reveals what Pirandello expounds in his essay:

The conciliation of discordant tendencies, of disagreeable feelings, of contrary opinions, seems to be more effectively carried out by a common lie than by an explicit and manifest tolerance of discord and contrast. It appears that, in effect, a lie is more advantageous than the truth, insofar as the lie can unite whereas the truth

¹¹⁷ Pressburger, Giorgio. "Kafka, Cervantes, Joyce: gli autori pesanti sono i veri umoristi." Interview by Eleonora Barbieri. *Il giornale*. April 9, 2017, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/kafka-cervantes-joyce-autori-pesanti-sono-i-veri-umoristi-1383945.html>.

¹¹⁸ Pirandello, Luigi, and Teresa Novel. "On Humor." *The Tulane Drama Review*, vol. 10, no. 3, The MIT Press, 1966, 50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1125162>.

divides. This is not obviated by the fact that the lie is secretly revealed and recognized and truth itself is then assumed as a guarantee of its effective association, through which hypocrisy comes to look like sincerity.¹¹⁹

Humor unites not despite but *because of* the collective individual incongruity of human existence that it reveals. Rhetorical manipulation reveals and demands our negotiation of the absurd, “The forms in which we try to stop and fix this continuous flow are the concepts, the ideals, within which we want to keep coherent all the fictions we create, the condition and the status in which we try to establish ourselves.”¹²⁰ Simultaneously, it foreshadows the “stormy moments, inundated by the flow,” in which “all our fictitious forms collapse ignominiously,” revealing “our soul, which is the life in us, the flow continues indistinctively, under the wire, past the limits that we set when we formed consciousness and built a personality.”¹²¹ Pressburger presents a diverse range of these moments in the short stories collocated in *Racconti triestini*. One of these, entitled “La figlia della cantante - Caffè Tommaseo” plays with this notion through the enigmatic figure of “la Cantante” (the Singer) whose very existence is questioned at one point in the story. Clad in eighteenth-century attire, the woman ‘would frequent’ the Caffè Tommaseo alone, order a cappuccino, and leave without uttering a word to anyone. Her air of mystery generated endless speculation among the townspeople, fueling their human propensity to ‘pin down’ or at least their urge to understand this ephemeral, elusive figure:

Si diceva che un piano intero del vicino Hotel Corso fosse occupato dal suo guardaroba. Si diceva in giro che avesse una figlia, anche lei sempre vestita come la madre. Questa figlia si vedeva molto di rado, mentre la Cantante era sempre visibile in città. Ma quale cantante poteva essere stata? La sua voce non l’aveva mai sentita nessuno. Pareva muta. Oppure un essere soprannaturale. Qualcuno diceva che fosse moglie di un ingegnere. Ma questo ingegnere non era mai apparso.

¹¹⁹ Pirandello, 49.

¹²⁰ Pirandello, 49.

¹²¹ Pirandello, 52.

Altri la qualificavano come moglie del direttore artistico dell'Opéra di Parigi. La Cantante in realtà sembrava un emblema di Trieste. Portava tutti i significati che gli abitanti attribuivano alla loro città e alle proprie famiglie.¹²²

(It was said that her wardrobe occupied an entire floor of the nearby Hotel Corso. It was rumored that she had a daughter who was also always dressed like her mother. This daughter was seen very rarely, while the singer was always visible in the city. But which singer could she have been? No one had ever heard her voice. She seemed mute. Or a supernatural being. Someone said she was the wife of an engineer. But this engineer had never appeared. Others of her qualified her as the wife of the artistic director of the Paris Opera. The singer actually looked like an emblem of Trieste. She carried all the meanings that the inhabitants and their families attributed to their city.)

The narrator likens the woman to Trieste: her contradictory, multifaceted, and elusive nature became the locus of the self-projections of those who sought to define her, filtering her through their personal exigencies and perceptions. Yet, the incessant chatter and the fallacies concerning her persona attest to the human necessity to attach forms to 'try to stop and fix this continuous flow are the concepts, the ideals, within which we want to keep coherent all the fictions we create,' as Pirandello maintains. When a tourist attempted to take her picture, the Cantante, also known as Poppea, "si mise a correre per evitare di essere 'immortalata.' Evidentemente l'immortalità la ripugnava. Voleva essere l'apparizione di un attimo, il simbolo di un attimo" (began to run to avoid being 'immortalized.' Evidently, immortality revolted her. She wanted to be the apparition of a moment, the symbol of a moment).¹²³ Filtered through a Michelstaedterian lens, the Cantante's aversion to immortality can be interpreted as a rejection of rhetoric: her desire to represent and symbolize a *moment* can be perceived as a testament to her possession of her Self. By virtue of her elusiveness, the Cantante *exists* in moments.

¹²² Pressburger, Giorgio. *Racconti triestini* (Venice: Marsilio, 2015), 95-96.

¹²³ Pressburger, *Racconti triestini*, 98.

After the encounter with the tourist, she disappears, “come inghiottita dalla Terra. Come se fosse stata ripresa dagli inferi, da dove veniva. O dall’aria, che forse l’aveva generata” (as if engulfed by the Earth. As if she had been taken from the underworld, where she came from. Or from the air, which perhaps she had generated) until she resurfaces a few days later at the café.¹²⁴ For the first time, the townsfolk hear the Cantante’s unexpectedly shrill voice. Stunned, their personally curated image of the Cantante, the *singer*, as a ‘figura imperiale’ disintegrates, giving way to an apathy generated by the irrefutable evidence of the fickleness of the human mind and the irreducible strangeness of the world:

Da quel giorno al nome di Poppea cominciò ad associarsi un’idea disonorevole. Il pregiudizio si desta con molta facilità nell’animo e scompare invece molto difficilmente. Accade così anche con il pregiudizio nei riguardi di noi stessi, Come nasce l’odio tanto velenoso per la propria persona? Quale gene lo genera? Ha tanti travestimenti questo moto della mente: è forse la maggiore maledizione dell’umanità.¹²⁵

(From that day on, a dishonorable idea began to be associated with the name of Poppea. Prejudice awakens very easily in the soul and instead disappears with difficulty. This also happens with prejudice towards ourselves. How does hatred so poisonous for one’s own self arise? Which gene generates it? This movement of the mind has many disguises: it is perhaps the greatest curse of humanity.)

This ‘curtain-drop’ moment is a perfect example of Pressburger’s humor, which reveals itself, as Kundera asserts, when “a reality is abruptly revealed as ambiguous,” and when “things lose their apparent meaning, the man before us is not what he thought himself to be. That is *humor* [...] Humor is not a spark that leaps up for a brief moment at the comical dénouement of some situation or story to set us laughing. Its unobtrusive light glows over the whole vast landscape of life.”¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Pressburger, 98.

¹²⁵ Pressburger, 98.

¹²⁶ Kundera, Milan. *The Curtain* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 109.

After the Cantante's permanent disappearance, observes the narrative voice, the townspeople begin to dream of her:

I vecchi della città adesso sognavano lei, si sogna sempre qualcosa che scompare. Ma forse quel sogno era rivolto in realtà alla Regina: all'essere che non aveva mai smesso di vivere cent'anni prima di se stessa, accogliendo però nel proprio corpo, con la propria carne, il traballante presente. Molti consideravano allo stesso modo tutti gli abitanti della città. Qualcuno asserisce, oggi, che quella donna non è mai realmente esistita: sarebbe stata soltanto frutto di una fantasia collettiva. Invece è esistita eccome, e comunque vale il detto di Simone Weil: si può amare anche ciò che non esiste.¹²⁷

(The city's elderly now dreamed of her, one always dreams of something that disappears. But perhaps that dream was actually aimed at the Queen: the being that never stopped living, even a hundred years before herself, but who welcomed in her body, with her own flesh, the shaky present. Many viewed all the inhabitants of the city equally. Someone asserts, today, that that woman never really existed: she would have been only the result of a collective imagination. But she did exist, and in any case Simone Weil's saying applies: one can also love that which does not exist.)

Pressburger's engagement with the individual, as this passage illustrates, opens up to the collective; the Cantante is but a symbol of a universal human phenomenon that afflicts all individuals: uncertainty. She is also the incarnation of Trieste, the city whose contradictory, variegated, indefinable, and elusive essence continues to slip through one's fingers the moment she believes she has caught it. Pressburger's humor unifies by conveying the diverse semblances of the great mystery of life and revealing the condition of "Essere gettati nell'esistenza: di fronte al destino tutti quanti siamo dilettanti" (Being thrown into existence: before destiny we are all dilettantes) as a collective, universal phenomenon.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Pressburger, 101.

¹²⁸ Pressburger, Giorgio. "Kafka, Cervantes, Joyce: gli autori pesanti sono i veri umoristi." Interview by Eleonora Barbieri. *Il giornale*. April 9, 2017, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/kafka-cervantes-joyce-autori-pesanti-sono-i-veri-umoristi-1383945.html>.

For Pressburger's protagonist the world itself is a perennial other that can never be familiar insofar as the impenetrable mystery of human existence cannot ever truly be breached. He is never able to faithfully define the parameters of his own multiplicitous and elusive existence, which has no choice but to consistently renegotiate itself in the face of the transitoriness of human existence since "we simulate and dissimulate with ourselves, splitting or even multiplying ourselves."¹²⁹ As any true humorist, the Hungarian student of life "knows well that the pretense of logic is much greater in us than real logical coherence, because if we feign logic, the logic of our actions reveals the logic of our thoughts by showing that it is fiction to believe in its absolute certainty."¹³⁰ An air of restless anticipation characterizes Pressburger's world, that of the *unknown* which, like *being* knows no clear end, only an endless of contradictory, fleeting, and seemingly sensical momentary pretenses: "L'amore per il passato, l'amore per il futuro e la rovina che tutti e due gli amori possono portare. C'è un'unica cosa: l'indefinibile esistere che ci avvolge, ci tormenta, e che ci fa sorridere, da ebeti. Vi è coinvolto tutto: l'uomo, il tempo, Dio, il passato, il futuro, la Storia e il nulla. L'amore materno e quello filiale, la volontà di uccidere e la volontà di essere uccisi" (The love for the past, love for the future and the ruin that both loves can bring. There is only one thing: the indefinable existence that surrounds us, torments us, and makes us smile, like a fool. Everything is involved: man, time, God, the past, the future, history, and nothingness. Maternal and filial love, the will to kill and the will to be killed).¹³¹

¹²⁹ Pirandello, Luigi, and Teresa Novel. "On Humor." *The Tulane Drama Review*, vol. 10, no. 3, The MIT Press, 1966, 50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1125162>.

¹³⁰ Pirandello, "On Humor," 50.

¹³¹ Pressburger, Giorgio. *Racconti triestini* (Venice: Marsilio, 2015), 94.

Conclusion

Triestinità is an example of a (localized) struggle to affirm an identity that transcends nation-state ideals and defies stable conceptions of belonging. More broadly, this phenomenon, *myth* or ‘invention of tradition’ proves that ‘belonging’ and ‘identity,’ like borders, “are not cut in rock, that they are not secured by a lifelong guarantee, that they are eminently negotiable and revocable.”¹ Identities are fruit of *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*, like Calvino’s *cavaliere inesistente* (inexistent knight). Their precariousness can be self-imposed and internalized, triggered by external forces, or provoked by the omnipotent hand of *time*. Twentieth-century Europe provides concrete evidence of this, for as Mauro Covacich maintains, “l’identità fallica dei nazionalismi ha lasciato il posto a un’identità diffusa, rizomatica, la cui non-appartenenza è forse il regalo più prezioso” (The phallic identity of nationalisms gave way to a widespread, rhizomatic identity, whose non-belonging is perhaps the most precious gift).²

This notion of non-belonging resonates with the Magrisian transcendence, which presupposes the overcoming of difference as the only authentic expression of being. But, as the Slovenian Pahor attests, this is not always the case: non-belonging can precipitate into oblivion, threatening to *erase* traces of cultures and civilizations. Alternatively, in the Morandinian sphere, non-belonging is the only conceivable *form* of belonging amid the unmitigable evanescence of time. Similarly, this post-modern rhizomatic being reflects, according to Pressburger, the absurdity of the world, which reveals our non-belonging just when we think we have reached the *Heimat* (belonging). Magris and Pressburger, and to a more limited extent Morandini, embody the

¹ Bauman, Zygmunt. *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2008). E-book.

² Covacich, Mauro. *La città interiore* (Milan: La nave del Teseo, 2017), 22.

encyclopedism that Calvino describes as a way of perceiving everything as “un ‘sistema di sistemi,’ in cui ogni sistema singolo condiziona gli altri e ne è condizionato” (a ‘system of systems’ in which every singular system conditions others and is itself conditioned by them).³ On the other hand, Pahor adopts the mechanism of the system to stress the role of the individual vis-à-vis the collective. Throughout his Mitteleuropean wanderings, Magris’s Danubian protagonist faithfully and relentlessly chronicles the interconnections of seemingly distant and foreign worlds to demonstrate that the Self is always also Other. With his sensible and perceptive gaze, Magris’s narrator stitches a multifaceted web of a humanity united in its diversity, in which it is “difficile, oltre che insensato e crudele, definire chi sia lo straniero” (“not only senseless and cruel, but also difficult to state who is a foreigner”).⁴ These writers delve into the interstices of being to expose the insecurities that drive the human quest for stability and reason, or perhaps the stability of reason.

History, especially that one that bears a capital H, has yet to divulge a universal formula proven to account for the irregularity of being and the trials and tribulations of the human condition. On June 12, 2020, Trieste held its inaugural celebration of the anniversary of its liberation from Yugoslav forces in 1945. Earlier that morning graffiti appeared on the façade of one of the most symbolic Slovenian institutions in the region, the France Prešeren theater. It read, “Neither peace nor forgiveness for Titoist terrorists and criminals” (Né pace né perdono per terroristi e criminali titini). A month later, on July 13, 2020, the President of Italy, Sergio Mattarella, and the President of bordering Slovenia, Borut Pahor, made a historic appearance,

³ Calvino, Italo. *Lezioni Americane* (Milan: Mondadori, 2016), 275.

⁴ Magris, Claudio. *Danubio* (Milan: Garzanti, 2006), 206; Magris, Claudio. *Danube*. Trans. Patrick Creagh (London: Penguin Random House, 2001), 188.

standing hand in hand before the *foiba* of Basovizza, where Yugoslav forces executed officials and civilians over the course of their forty-day occupation of Trieste. Then the two national presidents formally restored the Slovenian National Hall in Trieste to the Slovenian community, one hundred years to the day after its public destruction by the Italian Blackshirts in 1920. The decision to commemorate these two events during a global pandemic of which Italy was a principal victim underscores the lasting importance of and efforts to resolve the virulent ethnonational tensions that have both resulted from and contributed to the city's shifting borders during the twentieth century. While these efforts expose vestiges of Trieste's volatile past, they also raise important questions about its role in the evolving identity of the city and its dwellers.

Camus writes, "There is no longer a single idea explaining everything but an infinite number of essences giving meaning to an infinite number of objects. The world comes to a stop, but also lights up."⁵ The past, with its fragments, betrayals, irrationalities, embellishments, and its inherent baggage of uncertainties, bears the imprint of our own inconsistency, our inexorable humanity. Our civilization, said Musil, "is a temple of what would be called unsecured mania, but it is also asylum, and we don't know if we are suffering from an excess or a deficiency."⁶ The more we search for meaning, the more it withdraws from us, and simultaneously draws us along, as Heidegger observes:

What withdraws from us, draws us along by its very withdrawal, whether or not we become aware of it immediately, or at all. Once we are drawn into withdrawal, we are drawing toward what draws, attracts us by its withdrawal. And once we, being so attracted, are drawing toward what draws us, our essential nature already bears the stamp of "drawing toward." As we are drawing toward what withdraws, we ourselves are pointers pointing toward it. We are who we are by pointing in that

⁵ Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2012), 45.

⁶ Musil, Robert. *The Man Without Qualities*. Trans. Sophie Wilkins (New York: Vintage, 1996), 834.

direction – not like an incidental adjunct but as follows: this “drawing toward” is in itself an essential and therefore constant pointing toward what withdraws.⁷

Identity consumes because it evades. The same can be said of the past: we are drawn towards the possibility of reaching or recuperating that which escapes our grasp. Our innate yearning for persuasion, that Michelstaedterian ‘possession of self,’ is the unsurmountable obstacle that prevents it. *Being* ceases when the *desire to be* begins.

Lowenthal claims that modern humanity has come to question its stewardship of the past – an alarming thought if “life without memory has little substantive meaning” since “the individual, the family, the tribe, the nation, all claim identities derived from memory.”⁸ If, as Michelstaedter contends, we struggle to ‘possess’ the present, a firm grasp of the past seems nearly unthinkable, for memory lives at the mercy of rhetoric. But memory is also the locus of urgency and meaning, the repository of *being*:

Memory – from Latin *memor*, mindful – has in mind something that is in the mind, thought. But when it is the name of the Mother of all Muses, “Memory” does not mean just any thought of anything that can be thought. Memory is the gathering and convergence of thought upon what everywhere demands to be thought about first of all. Memory is the gathering of recollection, thinking back. It safely keeps and keeps concealed within it that to which at each given time thought must be given before all else, in everything that essentially is, everything that appeals to us as what has being and has been in being. Memory, Mother of the Muses—the thinking back to what is to be thought is the source and ground of poesy.⁹

Perception reveals meaning and attributes significance: *what* we remember matters, and so does *how* we remember it. Memory raises questions and demands answers. And sometimes answers

⁷ Heidegger, Martin. *What is called thinking?* Trans. J. Glenn Gary (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 9.

⁸ Wagstaff, Mark. “Critiquing the Stranger, Inventing Europe.” *Dynamics of Memory and Identity in Contemporary Europe*. Eric Langenbacher, Bill Niven, and Ruth Wittlinger (eds.) New York: Berghahn, 2012, 118.

⁹ Heidegger, *What is called thinking?*, 11.

pose more questions, just as the absence of borders threatens to produce an excess of borders. When then, does the spiral end?

Yet, like Sisyphus we keep pushing the rock up the hill, regardless of how many times it rolls back on us. If learning is a matter of persistence, study is a perilous form of reinvention. Teachers and pupils, contends Wagstaff, “make brash claims upon the past, ransacking others’ texts for the words that fit the case and perhaps omitting the subordinate clause that does not have quite the right tone.”¹⁰ But is the search for meaning through dialogue – despite its intrinsic limitations and potential for error – not preferable to insulated defeat? Does history come back to haunt us because we continue to misunderstand it, or is it simply untamable by virtue of our own incongruity? Perhaps the answer lies in the gray zone of variability, which paradoxically makes the *shared universal* experience of being also so inherently *particular* and *individual* at once.

The perspectives of our four Triestine writers and their Mitteleuropean counterparts expose the human desire to reduce the distance between the Self and the Other to ensure the preservation and authentic expression of each. But it is the distance between our own authentic being and the expression of the latter that obfuscates this feat. Deleuze states that world is “the infinite curve that touches at an infinity of points an infinity of curves, the curve with a unique variable, the convergent series of all series,” but “why then is there not a single and universal point of view?”¹¹ The variability of the particular is an expression *of* and *within* the universal, for “With greater reason an infinite series, even if the variable is unique, cannot be separated from an infinity of variations that make it up” and “That is why only one form – or one street – recovers its rights, but

¹⁰ Wagstaff, “Critiquing the Stranger, Inventing Europe.” *Dynamics of Memory and Identity in Contemporary Europe*, 118.

¹¹ Deleuze, Gilles. *The Fold*. Trans. by Tom Conley (New York: Continuum, 1993), 24-25.

only in respect to the entire series.”¹² *Triestinità* is an individual unit that “includes the whole series; hence it conveys the entire world but does not express it without expressing more clearly a small region of the world, a subdivision, a borough of the city, a finite sequence.”¹³ The Triestine voices examined in this study are but a sample of the multiplicity that reverberates in the singular fabric of humanity. The tensions underlying divergent conceptions of being, which reside on the spectrum between universalism and particularism, are a testament to the collective queries that dominate and drive each individual human ‘reality.’

¹² Deleuze, *The Fold*, 24-25.

¹³ Deleuze, 24-25.

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