

Université de Montréal

**THE DOING AND UNDOING OF GLOBAL LITERATURE: MYTH,
MICROCOSM AND ATOPIA IN TRIESTINE WRITING**

par Tzvi R. Rivlin

Département de littératures et de langues du monde

Faculté des arts et des sciences

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RÉSUMÉ

La présente étude conduit les traditions fragmentées de la culture littéraire de Trieste vers les préoccupations contemporaines de la littérature mondiale à l'époque actuelle où la mondialisation est largement perçue comme le paradigme historique prédominant de la modernité. Ce que j'appelle la « littérature globalisée » renvoie à la refonte de la *Weltliteratur* – envisagée par Goethe et traduite comme « *world literature* » ou la « littérature universelle » – par des discours sur la culture mondiale et le post-nationalisme. Cependant, lorsque les études littéraires posent les questions de la « littérature globalisée », elles sont confrontées à un problème : le passage de l'idée universelle inhérente au paradigme de Goethe entre le Scylla d'un internationalisme relativiste et occidental, et le Charybde d'un mondialisme atopique et déshumanisé. Les spécialistes de la littérature mondiale qui tendent vers la première position acquièrent un fondement institutionnel en travaillant avec l'hypothèse implicite selon laquelle les nations sont fondées sur les langues nationales, ce qui souscrit à la relation entre la littérature mondiale et les littératures nationales. L'universalité de cette hypothèse implicite est réfutée par l'écriture triestine.

Dans cette étude, je soutiens que l'écriture triestine du début du XXe siècle agit comme un précurseur de la réflexion sur la culture littéraire globalisée du XXIe siècle. Elle dispose de sa propre économie de sens, de sorte qu'elle n'entre pas dans les nationalismes littéraires, mais elle ne tombe pas non plus dans le mondialisme atopique. Elle n'est pas catégoriquement opposée à la littérature nationale; mais elle ne permet pas aux traditions nationales de prendre racine. Les écrivains de Trieste exprimaient le désir d'un sentiment d'unité et d'appartenance, ainsi que celui d'une conscience critique qui dissout ce désir. Ils résistaient à l'idéalisation de ces particularismes et n'ont jamais réussi à réaliser la coalescence de ses

écrits dans une tradition littéraire unifiée. Par conséquent, Trieste a souvent été considérée comme un non-lieu et sa littérature comme une anti-littérature.

En contournant les impératifs territoriaux de la tradition nationale italienne – comme il est illustré par le cas de Italo Svevo – l’écriture triestine a été ultérieurement incluse dans les paramètres littéraires et culturels de la *Mitteleuropa*, où son expression a été imaginée comme un microcosme de la pluralité supranationale de l’ancien Empire des Habsbourg. Toutefois, le macrocosme projeté de Trieste n’est pas une image unifiée, comme le serait un globe; mais il est plutôt une nébuleuse planétaire – selon l’image de Svevo – où aucune idéalisation universalisante ne peut se réaliser. Cette étude interroge l’image de la ville comme un microcosme et comme un non-lieu, comme cela se rapporte au macrocosme des atopies de la mondialisation, afin de démontrer que l’écriture de Trieste est la littérature globalisée *avant la lettre*. La dialectique non résolue entre faire et défaire la langue littéraire et l’identité à travers l’écriture anime la culture littéraire de Trieste, et son dynamisme contribue aux débats sur la mondialisation et les questions de la culture en découlant. Cette étude de l’écriture triestine offre des perspectives critiques sur l’état des littératures canoniques dans un monde où les frontières disparaissent et les non-lieux se multiplient. L’image de la nébuleuse planétaire devient possiblement celle d’un archétype pour le monde globalisé d’aujourd’hui.

Mots-clés : Mondialisation, littérature universelle, langues nationales, antilittérature, Italo Svevo, Scipio Slataper, géographie imaginaire, atopia, cosmopolitique, territorialisation

ABSTRACT

The present study brings the fragmented traditions of Triestine literary culture to bear on contemporary preoccupations with world literature at a time when globalization is widely perceived as the predominant historical paradigm that informs modernity. What I am calling “global literature” refers to the refashioning of *Weltliteratur* – envisioned by Goethe and translated as “world literature” or “littérature universelle” – by discourses on global culture and post-nationalism. However, when literary studies take on questions of global literature they are faced with a problem, navigating the universal idea of Goethe’s paradigm between the Scylla of a relativist, occidental internationalism and the Charybdis of a dehumanized, atopian globalism. Proponents of world literature who lean towards the former position gain an institutional foothold by working with the implicit hypothesis that nations are based in language, which underwrites the relationship between world literature and national literatures. The universality of this implicit hypothesis is what Triestine writing disproves.

In this study, I argue that Triestine writing in the first decades of the twentieth century acts as a precursor to thinking about global literary culture for the twenty-first century. It has its own economy of sense, whereby it doesn’t fit into literary nationalisms, but it doesn’t fall into atopian globalism either. It is not emphatically opposed to national literature; rather it does not admit national traditions to take root. Triestine writers expressed a desire for a sense of unity and belonging, as well as a critical conscience that undoes that desire. It resists the idealization of its particularities, and never successfully coalesces into a unified literary tradition. Consequently, Trieste has often been thought of as a non-place and its literature as antiliterature.

In bypassing the territorial imperatives of the Italian national tradition – as the case of

Italo Svevo illustrates – Triestine writing was later caught up in the literary-cultural parameters of Mitteleuropa, where its literary expression was imagined as a microcosm of the former Habsburg Empire’s supranational plurality. However, the projected macrocosm of Trieste is not a unified image, like a globe; but instead it is a nebula – as Svevo had imagined it – where no universal idealizations could gain a foothold. This study interrogates the image of the city as a microcosm and as a nowhere and how that relates to the macrocosm of the atopias of globalization, in order to demonstrate that Triestine writing is global literature *ante litteram*. The unresolved dialectics of doing and undoing literary language and identity through the act of writing that animates Triestine literary culture plays out in globalization debates and the questions of culture that arise from it. Triestine writing offers critical perspectives on the status of canonic literatures in a world of disappearing borders and placeless places, where the nebula is a master image for today’s world.

Keywords

Globalization, Trieste, world literature, national language, antiliterature, Italo Svevo, Scipio Slataper, imaginary geography, atopia, cosmopolitics, territorialization

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The medium through which works of art continue to influence later ages is always different from the one in which they affect their own age. Moreover, in those later times its impact on older works constantly changes, too. Nevertheless, this medium is always relatively fainter than what influenced contemporaries at the time it was created. Kandinsky expresses this by saying that the permanent value of works of art appears more vividly to later generations, since they are less receptive toward their contemporary value. Yet the relation of “permanent value” is perhaps not the best expression of the relation. We ought instead to investigate which aspect of the work (quite apart from the question of value) really seems more evident to later generations than to contemporaries.

For the creative person, the medium surrounding his work is so dense that he may find himself unable to penetrate it directly in terms of the response that he requires from its public; he may be able to penetrate it only in an indirect manner. The composer might perhaps see his music, the painter hear his picture, or the poet feel the outline of his poem when he seeks to come as close to it as possible.

– Walter Benjamin¹

¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Medium through Which Works of Art Continue to Influence Later Ages,” *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, trans. Rodney Livingstone, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Harvard P. 1996) 235.

PREFACE

GLOBAL LITERATURE AND THE CASE OF TRIESTE

Trieste per noi Triestini che si sono “conquistati” è qualche cosa di reale-simbolico che l'uomo deve vedere nella sua vita. Fa quasi ridere. E quando poi qualcuno viene, noi non sappiamo fare altro che condurlo per queste grigie vie e meravigliarci che egli non capisca. Non siamo capaci di dire neanche una parola d'introduzione.

Scipio Slataper, Letter to Sibilla Aleramo, 16 September 1912.¹

Where is Trieste? If you look for it on a current map you will find a small port city on the fringe of northeastern Italy, wedged between the Adriatic Sea and the Karst plateau, seemingly isolated from the mainland. However, if you compare maps made throughout the twentieth century, you would find the city enclosed in different national spaces. Although the city never moves, its relation to a shifting border is an essential part of its geo-political particularity. In the last hundred years, Trieste, which had been ruled by the Habsburg Empire for nearly five-hundred years, with the exception of a brief period under Napoleonic rule, was annexed into Italy after the First World War, occupied by Germany during the Second, fell under the protection of American and British allies afterwards, and might have even become an independent city-state, but instead passed into Yugoslav hands for forty violent days before becoming part of Italy again. The border established after that period of geopolitical turmoil marked the southernmost reach of the Iron Curtain, and its location did not change for fifty years. Border crossing was often difficult, though it was common enough to do so for those who lived in the region; that is, until the problem of the border was dissolved altogether when

¹ Scipio Slataper, *Epistolario*, ed. Giani Stuparich (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1950) 312. [Trieste for we Triestines who have been “conquered” is something real-symbolic that a man must see in his life. It almost makes one laugh. And when someone comes here, we do not know what to do except to lead him by these gray streets and marvel to ourselves that he does not understand. We cannot say even one word of introduction.] (All translations from Italian are mine unless otherwise noted.)

Slovenia joined the European Union. Known as *Tergeste* to the ancient Romans, *Triest* to Germans, or *Trst* to Slavic peoples, the name of the city keeps most of its consonants in place as it does its topographical features, dropping and replacing its vowels over time much as the fabled ship of the Argonauts did its timbers.

Trieste has invariably been described as a cosmopolitan and multicultural city, largely because of its past as the primary shipping outlet of the Habsburg Empire. Before its annexation to Italy in 1918, Habsburg Trieste exemplified imperial models of modernity with a distinctly cosmopolitan character and a vast maritime horizon. While the predominant cultures of Trieste were Italian, Slavic and German, significant populations of Greeks, Illyrians, Hungarians and Eastern European Jews had also put down roots there during the city's prosperous years as a free port. Trieste was often described as a crossroads; a place of peaceful and prosperous coexistence between nations, comprising people of different religious, social, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. There was an understanding of citizenship that involved sharing in the economic development of the city while at the same time preserving a multiplicity of languages and cultures. This multicultural milieu was in the interest of the Empire, which enacted policies of ethnic and religious tolerance that not only attracted enterprising merchants from abroad, but also sought to dilute the ethnic and national fabric of the city so that no single national community would challenge the absolute rule of the Empire. The confluence of cultures in the Imperial port produced a unique dialect and literature that is internationally famous for fostering a number of native writers, such as Italo Svevo, Umberto Saba, and Scipio Slataper. It is equally renowned for its influence on those who sojourned there, such as Charles Nodier, Rainier Maria Rilke, Stendhal, and, most famously, James Joyce. After the city joined a peninsula nation, and thus lost its economic

advantage as a port, nostalgia for its pre-Italian past engendered a number of local myths, and its writers became emblematic of those myths. The city landscape is now dotted with monuments to its great writers, and sites that attest to its supranational Habsburg era heritage.

Owing to that heritage, Trieste has become emblematic of a nebulous political-cultural concept known as “Mitteleuropa,” which is a “geographical expression” in the sense that Prince Metternich intended when he dismissed Italy’s aspirations toward geo-political unity and statehood at the Congress of Vienna. The territorial unity of Italy under the Roman Empire was the “geographical expression” that Metternich had in mind when he spoke those words, and more than half a century later the Italian poet Giosué Carducci ostensibly corrected him by asserting, “Italy really was not a geographical expression but a literary expression.”² The unity of Italy was not only undesirable to Metternich, but also inconceivable, since he was thinking of the fragmentation of the Italian Peninsula into monarchies and Papal States and their political enmities with each other. Carducci, however, having lived through the Italian Risorgimento, understood that the conceptual and cultural basis of Italian unity resided in its literary traditions, which evoked Roman Italy as a perennial theme.³ For Italian intellectuals in the Risorgimento era it was Dante Alighieri who embodied the modern collective spirit, described the ideal territorial borders of the nation, and established the Italian language as a criterion for cultural unification. Literature acted as a lynchpin to hold together nationalist ideas of language, territory and collectivism, and the Italian tradition served as a foundation for national, cultural and political unity. Triestine literature functions in a similar way: it is a

² Joseph Rossi, “National Consciousness in Italian Literature,” *The Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association*, 27.3 (Sept., 1973) 159-166. 159.

³ Ibid.

“literary expression” of the Austro-Hungarian Empire’s supranational complexity, its ambiguous identity and its cultural contradictions.

According to Claudio Magris, the renowned Triestine writer who is often credited with reconceptualising Mitteleuropa as a literary-cultural field of comparison, Trieste functions as a microcosm of the Empire. He identifies Trieste as one of the places that Joseph Roth, a Galician Jew from the border city of Brody, had in mind when he wrote in his novel *Der Kapuzinergruft* (1938), “Austria’s essence is not to be central, but peripheral. [...] The body politic of Austria is nourished and constantly replenished from the Crown Lands.”⁴ Magris elaborates upon this hypothesis in his panoramic collection of narrative essays *Danubio* (1986) by exploring numerous sites of *Mitteleuropäische* culture along the transnational banks of the Danube River. In his later work *Microcosmi* (1997), he portrays Trieste and surrounding environs as a microcosm of that macrocosmic work. Many of the protagonists of Magris’s narrative essays are authors, like Roth, who contributed to what he termed “the Habsburg Myth;” an image of unity that held the supranational Empire together until its dissolution.⁵ It also highlights one of the ironies of European history, which is that a “geographical expression” now applies to the Austrian political interests that Metternich served, since its ideal borders correspond with those of a defunct Empire. The myth of that lost totality is still discernible in the various cultures of the former Crown Lands as a palpably felt nostalgia and

⁴ Joseph Roth, *The Emperor’s Tomb*, trans. John Hoare (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984) 17.

⁵ Claudio Magris, *Il mito absburgico nella letteratura austriaca moderna* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1963) 15: “Il mito absburgico non è cioè un semplice processo di trasfigurazione del reale, proprio di ogni attività poetica, ma è la completa sostituzione di una realtà storico-sociale con un’altra fittizia ed illusoria, è la sublimazione di una concreta società in un pittoresco, sicuro e ordinato mondo favola [The Habsburg myth is not merely a figurative transformation of real historical circumstances, but the complete substitution of a historico/social reality with a fictitious and illusory one; the sublimation of a concrete society into a picturesque, secure and ordered storybook world].”

as a “literary expression.”⁶ The ideal territory of Mitteleuropa corresponds to an imaginary geography, and Magris coined the term “città di carta” (city of paper) to describe how Trieste became emblematic of it:

Crescere a Trieste significava – e significa ancora – accorgersi di vivere in una città di carta, coperta dalla letteratura come l'impero, in una parabola di Borges, è coperto dalla sua mappa disegnata dai cartografi. Anche il triestino è il risultato di una sottrazione, come l'austriaco di cui parla Musil, che era un austro-ungherese meno l'ungherese.⁷

[Growing up in Trieste used to mean – and still means – realizing that you live in a city of paper, covered by literature like the Empire, in a parable from Borges, that is covered entirely by a map of it drawn by cartographers. Also the Triestine is the result of a subtraction, like the Austrian of whom Musil spoke, who was an Austro-Hungarian minus the Hungarian.]

In the comparative field of Mitteleuropean cultural production, Austrian writers like Musil and Roth are well positioned to express ideas that pertain to the relationship between the city of Trieste and its literary culture. However, the reference to Borges suggests that the scope of Trieste’s literary model has wider conceptual implications for thinking about literature and place. Jean Baudrillard uses the metaphor of Borges map in the opening chapter of his book *Simulacra and Simulation*: it is an “allegory of simulation” that serves as a starting point for his discussion of the inverted relationship between models and reality. Similarly, the “città di carta” that Magris describes is a non-place where “the map precedes the territory — *precession of simulacra* — that engenders the territory.”⁸ Borges fantastic parable of a paper map made to scale with the Empire itself expresses the conceptual tendency of taking the

⁶ For more on Habsburg nostalgia in Trieste, see Pamela Ballinger, “Imperial Nostalgia: Mythologizing Habsburg Trieste,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 8.1 (2003) 84-101; Maura Hametz, “Presnitz in the Piazza: Habsburg Nostalgia in Trieste,” *Journal of Austrian Studies*, 47.2 (Summer 2014) 131-154.

⁷ Claudio Magris. *Itaca e oltre* (Milano: Garzanti, 1999) 281-82.

⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994) 1.

geographical contours of the city's literary model for its real geographical space. It also serves as an eloquent allegory for the Habsburg Myth and Trieste's exemplarity of it as a microcosm. According to Magris, the Empire's imagined totality, as well its dissolution whereby "il vento dell'esistenza strappa qua e là la mappa cartacea che copre la città, e fra gli squarci e le pieghe di quella carta sgualcita appaiono incantevoli frammenti del mondo [the wind of existence tears up the cartographic map that covers the city, blowing it here and there, and among the shreds and folds of this crumpled map enchanting fragments of the world appear]," is realized in the "mosaico sconnesso e eterogeneo [disconnected and heterogeneous mosaic]" of "ill non-tempo triestino [Triestine non-time]."⁹

The idea of atemporality or timelessness emphasizes the interchangeability of the map with its material support (the word 'carta' means both 'map' and 'paper' depending on context), which endures over time. On the one hand (*carta* = map; geography), Borges imagines what might happen if the abstract lines that mark and territorialize space on maps might really correspond to the territory. On the other hand (*carta* = paper; literature), it is implied that the *places* in these spaces are drawn in by the histories of those living in them. Only in parable can we think of a paper map with its hand-drawn contours and details on an equal scale to the real space of a vast domain. The making of such a map would involve cartographers situated among every detail that the map contains over time and space, and as Bertrand Westphal avers, those cartographers would not be neutral witnesses but artisans, or authors as the case may be with maps made out of language.¹⁰ One always writes from where one is, but it is the uncoupling of externalized thought from the immediacy of thinking or speech (i.e. from the materiality of the voice, which lasts only as long as the speaker speaks, to

⁹ Magris 1999, 283.

¹⁰ Bertrand Westphal, *Le monde plausible: Espace, lieu, carte* (Paris : Les Éditions de Minuit, 2007) 242.

that of a system of written symbols and an enduring material support) that gives literature its atemporal dimension. The “Imperial cartographers” of Trieste are the writers who lived there in the early twentieth century and engendered the place-ness of Trieste in their literary works to such an extent that Magris, along with co-author Angelo Ara, declares,

Trieste, forse più di altre città, è letteratura, è la sua letteratura; Svevo, Saba e Slataper non sono tanto scrittori che nascono in essa e da essa, quanto scrittori che la generano e la creano, che le danno un volto, il quale altrimenti, in sé, come tale non esisterebbe.¹¹

[Trieste, perhaps more than other cities, is literature, is its literature; Svevo, Saba and Slataper are not so much the writers who are born into it and from it, as they are writers that generate it and create it, that give it a face, which otherwise, in itself, may not exist as such.]

According to this perspective, Trieste would be a “literary expression” in the sense that Carducci gave to Dante’s Italy. “Literature,” writes Joseph Rossi, “created the image of a unified Italy and preserved it for centuries like a dormant seed. Then, when conditions were favourable, that seed sprouted quickly and vigorously attained its full growth” (166). The fitting metaphor of a “dormant seed” brings to mind the atemporality of literature, and the *precession of simulacra* whereby the model engenders the territory. The borders of Roman Italy were dissolved in the fifth century, but Dante imaginatively reconstituted them in the thirteenth century by peering back upon them through written histories and projecting them into the non-place of his poetic language. The “favourable conditions” for the abstract “seed” of Italian unity to become a political and territorial reality were also historical, corresponding to the rise of modern statehood in the eighteenth century, in which linguistic communities were united with national territories. The literature of Trieste is also such a seed, but the

¹¹ Angelo Ara, Claudio Magris, *Trieste: Un'identità di frontiera* (Torino: Einaudi, 1982) 15.

image that it projects is not one of national unity, and as I shall argue, its expression has not has not found the most favourable conditions for sprouting until today.

The literary culture of Trieste has often been considered exempt from many of the ways in which we have traditionally understood the relationship between writing, literature and place. Projected beyond the ideal limits of a local culture, the idea of Trieste occupies a larger domain in the sphere of literary practices and functions as an economy of sense distinct from that of national literature. As the Imperial port city sought for, realized and suffered its Irredentist goal of joining Italy in first three decades of the twentieth century, it engendered a literary space that was not limited by language, nation, territory or genre in the conventional sense. Writers who identify with the city, from Scipio Slataper and Italo Svevo, to sojourners and self-imposed exiles, like James Joyce and Roberto Bazlen, uncouple the unifying function of nationalism from the collective sense of belonging and validate an economy of sense independent of literary nationalism. This is why literary history has often drawn Triestine authors into the interpretive vortexes of *antiliterature*, *atopia* and *minor literature*. The implicit negativity of these categories, as I shall argue, serves as an index for the anachronism of their writings, which should not be seen as an indication of its backwardness, but rather, the historical paradigm that was needed to interpret them had not yet entered into debates about literature until the last few decades. In other words, the authors that I will be discussing did not belong to historical understandings and cultural discourses that were proper to the times in which they lived and wrote, but to discourses about globalization and culture that have emerged in our present time.

This study makes a leap of sorts: as it seems that recent scholarship has a tendency to halt before the threshold of presenting Trieste as a precursor to the conditions and

circumstances that inform contemporary discourses on globalization. The conversation has largely focused on Trieste and its place in Europe, hence the persistence of the Mitteleuropa model. For example, the contributors to a special issue on Trieste for the UK periodical *Social and Cultural Geography* write of “the distinct Triestino ‘way of being’, of its distinct non-national, non-territorial way of conceiving urban politics,”¹³ or describe the city as a “a unique European laboratory” exemplifying “an altogether different, non-exclusivist and non-territorial, idea of the nation.”¹⁴ These insightful studies focus largely on the theme of Triestine cosmopolitanism and what that means for today, but nowhere does one find the word “globalization” except in the titles of works cited for their contributions. Martin Purvis refers to Trieste as a “world city,” but refrains from speculating upon the implications of Trieste’s exemplarity beyond the scope of “Mediterranean cosmopolitan cities.”¹⁵ The contributors to this periodical nevertheless argue convincingly for the pertinence of Trieste as a model for contemplating modernity, in which the relationship between literature and place plays a critical role, or as Paul Waley writes in the introductory essay to this special issue:

Trieste possesses certain attributes that make it a powerful vehicle for geographical reflection. It forces us to think geographically, to think about the meanings of place and of affection for place and the expression of this affection in poetry and prose, as in the works of writers such as Italo Svevo and Umberto Saba. It is a city whose inhabitants animate multiple worlds, to use a metaphor that grows out of the work of Scipio Slataper, a central figure in Triestine literature: worlds that are urban, national, cosmopolitan, and again Italian, Slav,

¹³ Luiza Bialasiewicz, “Europa as/at the Border: Trieste and the Meaning of Europe,” *Social & Cultural Geography*, 10.3, May 2009, 319-336: 333.

¹⁴ Claudio Minca, “‘Trieste Nazione’ and its Geographies of Absence,” *Social & Cultural Geography*, 10.3, May 2009, 257-277: 259.

¹⁵ Martin Purvis, “Between Late-Lasting Empire and Late-Developing Nation-State: A Triestine Perspective on City-State Relations,” *Social & Cultural Geography*, 10.3, May 2009, 299-317: 313.

and Germanic. It ends up forcing one out of easy conclusions and compelling one into a sense of the multiplicity of human territorial identities.¹⁶

The metaphor that Waley borrows from Slataper and effectively paraphrases is the Triestine author's assertion that his identity is "*multianime*," which translates as "multi-souled," as it pertains to the writer's Slavic family roots, his German language education and the Italian language he speaks in everyday life. Waley teases out another potential for this neologism by translating it differently. The multiple worlds that Trieste animates (urban, national, cosmopolitan), as well as his ethnic and linguistic identities it embodied (Italian, Slav, Germanic) generated in Slataper an "anima in tormento;" a profound inner conflict and unease. Slataper saw Trieste as a space of contestation between a national identity and a supranational vocation, with the latter extending the city's economic horizons beyond the Austro-Hungarian hinterland and into the global sea. Estranged from any immediate access to an organizing identity or a received tradition, Trieste's *coscienza*-forming authors bore witness to the malaise of being subject to the Italian tradition; a condition that resulted in only partial forms of identification and ambiguous relationships with the place where they lived.

In this study, I argue that Slataper's problematic awareness of place resonates with a distinct sense, felt in many Western societies, that the various phenomena of globalization – multicultural society, imported goods, media flows, electronic commerce, outsourced services, and so on – have changed our sense of territorial identity. As a result, many individuals in these societies feel that they live in a delocalized and postnational age. The distinct sense of ambivalent or negated territorial identity, generated by the simultaneity of global space and

¹⁶ Paul Waley, "Introducing Trieste: A Cosmopolitan City?" *Social & Cultural Geography*, 10.3, May 2009, 243-256: 246.

multiple territorial identities, engenders an anomie of placelessness that the sociologist Helmut Willke refers to as the *atopia of globalism*:

Today the end of the world is not marked by the Pillars of Hercules on both sides of a strait. Place, space and distance increasingly are becoming negligible quantities for economic transactions. The term for placelessness, atopia, describes this moment of the market utopia that, in the idea of the utopian, heightens the nowhere to a somewhere. Utopia describes a place that does not exist. Atopia describes the irrelevance of the place, global placelessness. Global infrastructure systems of telecommunication and of traffic telematics, globally operating mass media and transaction networks make irrelevant the place which one communicates from, make irrelevant locality that is. In an atopian society with a global radius the market utopia finds the conditions for its self-fulfilment. Even if market economists habitually tend to ignore this, their idealised markets so far suffer from the territorial, localised and locally binding guardianship of the state.¹⁷

Although Willke describes a postmodern condition – in Jameson’s sense of the word – Trieste offers a model of the atopian globalism he describes, but from the globalization processes and phenomena of the nineteenth century. Trieste was a “market utopia” of sorts; a “città emporio” tied to its role as an Imperial port extending trade networks over the globe by maritime trade.¹⁸ It was thought of as the Philadelphia of Europe, the Hamburg of the Adriatic

¹⁷ “Atopia, the Plus Ultra of the Nation-state’s Self-encirclement*,” Helmut Willke, *Biophily*, n.d. Web. 13 Feb. 2015 <http://www.myzel.net/biophily/moderne/willke_pu_en.html>; cf. Helmut Willke, *Atopia. Studien zur atopischen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp. 2001).

¹⁸ Roberto Finzi comments on “L’acutezza e l’originalità dello scenario e sta nel tentativo, azzardato, di comporre l’“utopia” oceanica e la realtà mediterranea, che Vienna peraltro aveva ben presente fin dai tempi di Carlo VI. Prospettiva indispensabile, sembra al triestino, in quanto a Vienna se non si può non prendere atto di quanto a Trieste è avvenuto e sta avvenendo non si rinuncia al sogno oceanico: solo così infatti l’impero potrebbe divenire vera grande potenza e non, come di fatto l’Austria sempre fu, potenza “regionale” sebbene piantata nel cuore dell’area più forte del pianeta e ai suoi equilibri indispensabile. [The acuity and the originality of the scenario is in the attempt, at great risk, to compose the oceanic “utopia” and the Mediterranean reality that Vienna, moreover, was well aware of since the days of Charles VI. It was an indispensable perspective, so it seemed, to the Triestine, insofar as you cannot really take note of what goes on in Trieste from Vienna, so you don’t have to give up on the oceanic dream. In this way the Empire could in fact become a truly great power and not, as Austria had always been, a “regional” power though planted in the heart of the strongest area of the planet and vital for its balance].” Roberto Finzi, “Trieste, perché”, *Storia economica e sociale di Trieste*, eds. Roberto Finzi and Giovanni Panjek, vol. 1 (Trieste: Lint, 2001) 13-66: 47.

or an antechamber to Venice, because Trieste, as Karl Marx once wrote, had no past.¹⁹ The case of Trieste allows us to interrogate the roots of globalization that would influence the economic structure of the planet and many domains of human activity as well as its affective dimensions. The sense of placelessness, the irrelevance of place, and the apotheosis of the market utopia that transforms a nowhere into a somewhere can be discerned in nineteenth century in writings attributed to writers from Trieste and visitors to the city, which is the focus of the second chapter in this dissertation. The Triestine market exemplified nineteenth century models of globalization, related to the industrial revolution, international commerce and trade, massive immigration and a mercantile culture that invested little in matters of the kind of high culture that would territorialize it locally and nationally. The irrelevance of place was a boon to Habsburg Trieste, since it attracted enterprising economic actors from all over Europe, cultivated their peaceful cohabitation and forestalled the national fragmentation of the city that Irredentism and the fall of the supranational Empire would eventually bring about.

Triestine writers wrote out of this atopia and tried to place their city within the purview of the Italian culture-nation; however, when they critically confronted the historical antinomy between the commercial vocation of their city and the linguistic nationalism of the Italian literary tradition, they could find no ideal territory in which they could invest their doubly peripheral, “multianime” identities. They expressed their awareness of cultural fragmentation introspectively, portrayed the borders that cut across states as divisions of the self, and interpreted Trieste as a city wherein one finds no geo-political integrity other than that of the

¹⁹ The expression “Philadelphia of Europe” associated with Comte Charles Albert de Moré, quoted in Dominique Kirchner Reill, *Nationalists Who Feared the Nation: Adriatic Multi-Nationalism in Habsburg Dalmatia, Trieste and Venice* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012) 81; Reill attributes the expression “Hamburg of the Adriatic” to one of the founding editors of the Triestine literary journal *La Favilla*, Pacifico Valussi, who coined the phrase in 1842 (111); Charles Asselineau, *L'Italie et Constantinople* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1869) 132; Karl Marx, “The Maritime Commerce of Austria” *The New York Daily Tribune*, 9 January 1857, p. 3. These expressions will be discussed in further detail in the second chapter.

planet in its limited entirety. This overarching integrity, in which the atopia of globalism finds its ideational limit, is where what I am calling “global literature” is located.

Globalism is, put simply, the ideology of globalization; the view that globalization is the predominant historical paradigm that informs contemporary understandings of modernity.²⁰ What kind of “geographical expression” belongs to it? Beginning with the idea of the world as a globe, “we might also note that the perception of the earth as a sphere and its representation in the form of a globe are historical phenomena of the late fifteenth and early to mid sixteenth centuries, a period when the terms ‘globe’ and ‘global’ came into use.”²¹

Conceptions of the world as a globe require representations, which are not limited to the visual renditions that preceded photographs taken from satellites, but include abstract conceptual frameworks that account for the exchange of goods and capital, the migrations of peoples, or forms of knowledge irradiating outward from one place to a more extended space. Although the sense of belonging to a bounded, spherical globe with interconnected commercial and cultural exchange has been contemplated for centuries, we tend to feel that our lives have never been more “global” than they are now. The global and the national are both ideas that rely on representations to communicate them, and these representations often have narrative and mythical aspects to them. We know from Carducci what kind of “literary expression” belongs to the national idea. What kind belongs to the global idea?

When Goethe wrote of *Weltliteratur*, it was understood that the precondition for a work of literature to be considered universal or representative for all humanity, would be that

²⁰ This definition of globalism as an ideology is based on the work of Manfred B. Steger and Paul James. See “Introduction: Ideologies of Globalism” *Globalization and Culture: Volume IV: Ideologies of Globalism*, eds. Paul James and Manfred B. Steger (Los Angeles; London: Sage Publications, 2010) ix-xxxi.

²¹ Anthony D. King, *Spaces of Global Cultures: Architecture Urbanism Identity* (London: Routledge, 2004) 27.

it function as an exemplary work of national literature. Literature is often thought of in terms of national tradition and patrimony, primarily because it is a language-based form of cultural production, and the institution of literary canons is almost invariably organized according to linguistic and territorial criteria. In other words, when literary works that transcend their local context become universalized as *Weltliteratur*, they do so through the mediation of a national literature. This is largely because the universalizing process whereby “writing” was transformed into “literature” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had been co-opted by institutions beholden to the cultural hegemony of the nation-state and by the commercial printing press, which largely catered to a unilingual reading public. Goethe declared that the age of *Weltliteratur* would bring an end to the age of national literatures; however, it is clear that nationalism continues as the historical paradigm that dominates contemporary understandings of literature, and the conceptual framework called “world literature” employs international and transnational models that rely on the universality of literary nationalism. The concept of *Weltliteratur* – “world literature” or “*littérature universelle*,” as this famous expression has been translated into English and French – is really this national idea writ large.

The advent of globalization as a dominant historical paradigm has stimulated a reassessment and a re-visioning of Goethe’s idea, with the universal navigating a narrow course between the Scylla of a relativist, occidental internationalism and the Charybdis of a dehumanized, atopian globalism. It is in this context that I speak of “global literature,” which refers to the refashioning of paradigms for world literature, occasioned by discourses on globalization and post-nationalism, as a site for the universal. In this study I will be bringing the discussion back from the universal to the particular; from literature to writing, and again, even more particularly, to Triestine writing, in order to show how certain categories and

ideologies that underscore present iterations of global literature run some of the programs for the renewal of *Weltliteratur* aground. A panorama of Triestine writing from the beginning of twentieth century manifests the promise and the impossibility of this global literature. The worldview discernible in the Triestine authors at the heart of this study tease out the irony of universal histories and totalizing systems, uprooting the habits of categorical thought that anchor the spirit – be it mind, thought or consciousness – in history. The specificity of Triestine writing, which is that it can never realize its desire for universality, is played out in the dynamics of global literature.

Unlike most studies of world or global literature today, which try to make their corpus as internationally broad as possible by casting a wide net across different languages, nation-states and continents, this study looks at world literature through the lens of a specific case – that of Triestine writing, which never coalesces into a fixed literary tradition or inserts itself into an existing one – to criticize some of the fundamental presuppositions of such projects, and to offer a new perspective on the status of canonical literatures in a world of disappearing borders and placeless places. The chapters that follow are simultaneously historical, critical and conceptual in their reflections. In them we construct and narrate a historical context that has remained without strict delimitation; we interpret the primary texts of several Triestine authors, as well as the critical discourse that emerged in their wake; and we bring Triestine writing to bear on questions that are vital to literary studies in a global, postnational, or even a planetary age. For a general idea of my methodology I'd like to paraphrase Xudong Zhang, a professor of Comparative Literature and East Asian Studies, who articulates the parameters of a “theoretical narrative” that would be conducive to such a study as this one.

I seek to formulate a theoretical narrative by revisiting some structural and historical contradictions that tend to be concealed by the universalizing rhetoric of global capitalism as not only an economic system, but a system of production of culture and value as well. These contradictions define the political nature of today's conflict: they lay bare the ideological nature of various discourses of the universal and, paradoxically, keep the historical horizon open beyond the confines of the self-recognition, self-understanding, self-assertion, and political-discursive institutions of the bourgeois as a world-historical class.²²

Zhang's essay is another example of postmodern thought, in a Jamesonian key, that takes up questions about globalization, however the case of Trieste, as I will go on to argue, illustrates that late capitalism is not the only historical context in which one can use such a critical framework. If I were to switch out the words "global capitalism" for "world literature" then I might have my methodology, but I would lose something as well. The idea of Triestine literature refers to a dialectic tension between the universalizing myths of the market utopia and those of the nation that never resolve themselves into either of them. In literary works that were not reducible to the teleological narrative of nation building, authors like Svevo and Slataper reveal "the structural and historical contradictions that tend to be concealed by the universalizing rhetoric" of national literature and, by extension, world literature. The idea of what qualifies as "literary" is underwritten by categories that are hegemonic and ideological, but appear to us as universal and paradigmatic.

Svevo, for example, was not easily assimilated into the Italian tradition, largely because its guardians would not qualify his writing as "literature" – they applied a neologism to his work: *antiletterarietà* (antiliterariness). In Italy, from the Risorgimento to Fascism, the universalizing process that transformed "writing" into "literature" had been drawn into the

²² Xudong Zhang, "Multiplicity or Homogeneity? The Cultural-Political Paradox of the Age of Globalization" *Cultural Critique*, 58, Fall 2004, 30-55: 30-31

centripetal power of a national ideology. The reception of Svevo in France rendered the hegemony emanating from urban centres of culture like Florence, Rome and Milan opaque and problematic. The theoretical narrative of the third chapter in this study, which investigates the discourse that came to be known in Italian and European letters as “Il caso Svevo” is one of several discursive examples that “lay bare the ideological nature of various discourses on the universal.” Triestine writers, in their attempts to constitute a cultural and political identity through writing, and through their failures to do so, antecede this “world-historical” class that Zhang writes of, which is why I think that their works remain relevant to current debates on global culture. As the discussion about global culture is active in the humanities today, I hope to demonstrate the importance of these writers to contemporary literary understanding by pursuing an “essentially narrative attempt to establish some basic parameters of a critical cognitive mapping” (Zhang, 32) of Trieste’s place-ness and its much vaunted placelessness.

My impulse to bring Triestine writers into the orbit of the discourse on globalization arose because of resonances that I could discern between our modernity and theirs. However, as clearly as the timbres of these discourses sounded upon each other in my ears, scholarly manifestations of them have rarely materialized. Although this may seem like a very specialized field, numerous studies have established Trieste as the node of a rich literary culture, and a site of identitary paradoxes that make us “think geographically” as Paul Waley put it, about the relationship between literature, language and place. Many eminent scholars have also looked at Triestine literature as a nuanced mode of writing in contrast and comparison with the mode of cultural production that we have generally come to identify with literature. My study hopes to add to this already rich field of discourse by taking Triestine writing out of the European and Mitteleuropean conversation that has been its predominant

field of discourse and presenting it as a thought-provoking case for understanding emerging world literatures in the non-places of global modernity.

Even as we explore the vicissitudes of globalization, theorizing upon the impact that it has on economies and societies, literature still functions as a key signifier of national identity and heritage. The first chapter in this theoretical narrative will explore and interrogate the conceptual underpinnings of the discourse on language, territory and collectivity that have been used to conceptualize world literature and national literature a century ago and now. What are the categorical presuppositions of literary history that have come to be seen as universal? Where do we generally situate the limits of language, nation and canon in the making of what we call literature? How do they continue to have an effect on the contemporary discourse on globalization and global culture? The particularity of the Triestine imaginary comes into focus when compared with such questions of a general, literary nature. In exploring the “Groundwork of the Triestine Literary Imaginary,” I will examine the early concept of national language in Dante’s treatise on vernacular poetry and the idea of universal literary value in Goethe’s idea of *Weltliteratur*. I then proceed to give a brief sketch of how Risorgimento intellectuals develop these ideas into an Italian literary history that underwrites the hegemony of a literary tradition at one with the national language, a territorial imperative that unites language with bounded territorial space, and an internationalist worldview that presupposes the universality of nation-state ideology. As a way of exposing and destabilizing these ideological anchors, I introduce the critical art of Svevo’s novel *La coscienza di Zeno*, which can be read as a satire of the literary tradition. The narrative expresses a worldview informed by the writer’s palpable sense of exile from self-determination as a Triestine writer, projected onto the non-place of an idiosyncratic literary language that repels territorializations.

This is followed by an analysis, by no means exhaustive, of two contemporary attempts to bringing Goethe's *Weltliteratur* into the twenty-first century, where the hegemonic universality of the national idea metastasizes in structural-linguistic biases that ground the perspective of the critic. The chapter concludes with a brief summary of the chapters that follow, giving a preview of how the idea of Trieste as an *atopia* will unfold as a corrective to this universalizing impulse.

This is followed by survey of the historical conditions that served as a backdrop to the concept of Trieste as a non-place, as well as the essentially narrative attempts made by economists, historians, and fiction writers to constitute this non-place as a place. The second chapter, which is entitled "The Antechamber of Triestine Literature," deals primarily with the emergence of ideas and myths associated with Trieste in writings dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I bring this writing into comparison with secondary sources that exemplify the interpretative traditions of local literary history that emerged in the nineteen-sixties, which recuperates these earlier ideas and myths in order to ground them in a hermeneutic of local difference often referred to as *triestinità*. After a number of Triestine writers, such as Svevo, Slataper, Saba and Stuparich, became representatives of this local particularity, literary historians took up the writings of earlier residents and visitors to the free port in order to better understand the historical context in which they wrote. These studies contributed to the Habsburg nostalgia for Italian Trieste's lost polyvalence as an imperial and cosmopolitan city, and they also validated the image of Trieste as a paradigmatic city for visions of Mitteleuropeanism on a political, cultural and economic scale. However, when freed from the hermeneutics of *triestinità* by unorthodox readings and by poetry, these writings also reveal an atopian idea that was already circulating in Trieste because of its

dominant commercial culture – the sense of “anywhereness” that foreshadows the aftermath to its mythical, modernist “nowhereness.” In other words, when turning toward works written in and about Trieste between the establishment of the Free Port in 1719 and the polemical *prise de conscience* of Scipio Slataper in 1909, local literary history portrays these writings as prophetic or emblematic of Trieste’s mythical *antiliterature*. I use the architectural metaphor of an *antechamber* in order to resituate these writings as *anteliterature*, and as the metaphor suggests, it is a limiting, liminal and Janus-faced paradigm for historical understanding. On one side, it regards Triestine modernity as a definitive break from the historical understanding of cosmopolitanism actually in place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. On the other, it foretells the ideological exhaustion of Trieste’s hermeneutic particularity in the current historical context of European Union expansion and its dispersal in the conceptual horizons of twenty-first century globalization.

The next four chapters will focus primarily on Triestine writing taking place between 1909 and 1928, and its early reception in local, national and European contexts. However, as this study cannot hope to explore the entirety of the Triestine literary landscape, these chapters will isolate several points of interest on it as “signposts” (see chapter 4) on an imaginary terrain and focus on two writers as guides to it: namely, Scipio Slataper and Italo Svevo. In their writings one finds the idea of a problematic Triestine self-consciousness (*coscienza*), which is manifested in an awareness of literary work not reducible to national paradigms of language, territory or collectivity. Both authors recognized that the articulation of a stable national identity excluded important elements of their everyday interactions and experiences. They also created literary languages out of the ambivalent space that emerged for them between an idealized language, Italian – which was accompanied by a grammatical imperative

as well as a territorial one – and a devalued local dialect, Triestino. The dialect represented an affective homeland, a cultural *koine* and vitalistic expressive powers for them, but it was also a language of lost origins and “an endlessly shifting interplay between ‘hereness’ (confirmed by their genuine Triestinità) and ‘elsewhereness’ (embodied by their distant, and in this sense ‘absent’ nation)” (Minca, 269). The perceived antinomy between the supranational commercial vocation of the city and its territorial, nationalist longings are at the heart of the identitary fracture, ambivalence and conscience making activity that animates their writings. These chapters will discuss how Slataper and Svevo create a Triestine *coscienza* in their novels, alongside how controversies generated by their works in Italian and European literary debates became mythologized, and thereby difficult to separate from interpretations of them.

The overarching theme that binds chapters three and four is a term that was often used to criticize their works (especially those of Svevo) in the nineteen-twenties: *antiliterature*. The third chapter, “The Place of Antiliterature in Triestine Writing” recounts the emergence of Triestine literature through the lens of the Italian literary tradition that described them as “antiliterary.” When a Triestine literary tradition began to emerge it was peripheral and isolated from the ideal and geographical centers of Italian literary value: Florence, Rome and Milan. The initial appreciation of a Triestine author, Italo Svevo, by a strong external literary culture – that of France – had highly symbolic importance because it unmasked the ideological alibis that Italians often used to valorize their literature. It also represented a schism between writers who respected the traditional hierarchy of literary consecration, which was national, and the cosmopolitan, *déraciné* tendencies of European literary modernism. At the time when Svevo was writing his novels, *Una vita* (1892), *Senilità* (1898) and *La coscienza di Zeno* (1922), the trajectory through which literature passed from local cultural production to

European and global cultural capital respected a clear hierarchy in scalar and spatial terms, from the local to the national and then to the global.²³ Italians claimed that Svevo ignored the Italian tradition, that he was an unpatriotic, barbaric, bourgeois dilettante who had no place among Italy's literary elites. They viewed the celebration of his works abroad with suspicion, and argued that what foreigners failed to see was that he wrote badly. The eccentric trajectory whereby his novels bypassed the centralized intermediaries of the nation and its institutions in becoming world literature generated some of the diacritical features of Triestine literature. Consequently, Trieste and its writers occupied a marginal, negative position in dialogue with the broadly held socio-political ideology that mediated universality of the national in their time. When Svevo's writing and the polemics they generated were identified with a local literary tradition shortly after his death in 1928 his unusual trajectory to European fame became more readily identifiable with other writers from Trieste, as well as his *antiletterarietà*. The words "*antiletteratura*" and "*scriver male*," which occurred repeatedly in reviews of Svevo, eventually took on the aspect of myth and fed into the mythology of a Triestine literary tradition.

The fourth chapter, "Signposts on the Landscape of Nowhere," inquires into how these authors might have understood their own writing practices as antiliterary by looking at their novels through the veil of allegory. Slataper and Svevo place a number of signs or *signposts*

²³ Wladimir Kryszinski writes of a "dialectique de la reconnaissance" within the field of world literature, which enacts a structural hierarchy of values whereby "le *marginal* et le *local* tiennent beaucoup à leur reconnaissance nationale, et que cette reconnaissance passe par le verdict et la bénédiction de l'*institutionnel* avant de passer dans l'*universel*" (144). Kryszinski goes on to describe a model of literary value that bypasses the national and resonates with the case of Triestine literature via Svevo, but his point of departure is Miroslav Krežla, who exemplified Croatian literature in this manner: "La voie de la littérature serait moins le réinvestissement identitaire du local et marginal, que le dépassement du nationalisme. L'oeuvre littéraire idéale saurait tirer profit de cette imbrication d'éléments historiques e géopolitiques déterminés, qu'elle transformerait en un idiome universelle" (146). Wladimir Kryszinski, "Récit des valeurs: Les nouveaux actants de la *Weltliteratur*," *Weltliteratur heute: Konzepte und Perspektiven*, ed. Manfred Schmeling (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1995) 141-152.

before us that indicate an antiliterary attitude and navigate a poetic terrain that exceeds the prosaic mode in which they are presented. What are these “signposts” of the antiliterary that direct our feet off of paved roads to explore the wilderness? They can be discerned in a number of themes, figures and recurrent motifs that signal what lies outside of the hermeneutic circle of the literary. Their value to us is that they can point us to the peripheral, to the latent and to the not-yet-literary dimensions of writing, as a historical act that gets lost in literary traditions. Among these signposts we find the figure of the barbarian, which is used to signify the peripheral, the foreign and the unintelligible status of the writer who is situated outside the hegemonic centres of literary value. One also finds the figures of the dilettante writer in Svevo and the vitalistic *poeta* in Slataper, which are drawn into contrast with that of the *letterato*, or the Italian man of letters who acts as arbiter of national literary value. One also finds the idea of lying as a critical comment upon the ways in which literary establishments in Italy censure the dialectal and the ungrammatical.

The fifth chapter will be an allegorical reading of Svevo’s psychoanalytic novel *La Coscienza di Zeno* as a parody of Dante Alighieri’s *Divina Commedia*. Svevo’s satire problematizes national and cultural identifications, as well as other categorical fictions that stabilize the subject in the territory of the nation-state. The epistemological fissures of the novel originate in the instability generated between the Triestino dialect that the protagonist, Zeno Cosini, speaks, and the “cultured” national language of Italian, which he refers to by its local appellation as “*toscana*.” As his narrative moves back and forth through time, Svevo also dramatizes the historical impermanence of national space, such as the border between Austria and Italy. The apocalyptic image at the end of the novel ultimately projects the dissolution of national ideas, incompatible with the essential plurality of lived experience onto

a global scale. With the image of the Earth “returning” to a nebula state, Svevo completes a narrative cycle that articulates how attempts to achieve greater individual and collective wholeness can lead to greater fragmentation. The nebula represents the failure of the Dantean project, which aims towards totality, redemption and universality, and it also portends the undoing of the national model that was being foisted back upon Dante’s *Commedia*. The nebula allows no foothold for universality, refuses idealization, and in this sense it is emblematic of what I have been calling global literature.

In my concluding remarks I will present an overview of the study and return to the literary map of the Triestine imaginary in order to tie the threads of these chapters together. This will permit me to bring our theoretical narrative up to our time, and to demonstrate the relevance of Triestine writing for contemporary concerns with global culture. I will also take the occasion to relate to you, dear reader, my personal reasons for following such a line of inquiry. The South African artist William Kentridge remarked of Svevo in an interview, “How could this person writing in Trieste in the 1920s know how it felt to be in Johannesburg in the 1970s? Not feeling at the centre, at the edges of the real world, Svevo has his finger on doubts and indecisions that felt so familiar to me.”²⁴ Kentridge’s words resonate profoundly with a sentiment that I have held for many years with regards to writers from Trieste – and not only Svevo and Slataper as this study might suggest. Roberto Bazlen, Carlo Michelstaedter, Claudio Magris and James Joyce, who began writing *Ulysses* while living there, are also in my thoughts as I try to make sense of the sentiment that Kentridge so eloquently expresses in words and art through a communicable form of my own.

²⁴ Daniel Belasco, “Split Infinitives” *The Jewish Week*, 11 Sept. 2001, Web. 15 Jan. 2015
<http://www.thejewishweek.com/arts/arts_guide/split_infinitives> : Telephone interview with William Kentridge.

CHAPTER 1

GROUNDWORK OF THE TRIESTINE LITERARY IMAGINARY

Beginning with the depths of the space and the regions of remotest nebulae, we will gradually descend through the starry zone to which our solar system belongs, to our own terrestrial spheroid, circled by air and ocean, there to direct our attention to its form, temperature, and magnetic tension, and to consider the fullness of organic life unfolding itself upon its surface beneath the vivifying influence of light.

Alexander von Humboldt, *Cosmos*¹

The present study brings the fragmented traditions of Triestine literary culture to bear on contemporary preoccupations with world literature in the age of globalization, but it begins with a very simple premise: One always writes from where one is. In other words, every act of writing is grounded or anchored in some place. When the result of this act is posited as a paradigm or projected as a universal value to anchor institutions we encounter a number of conceptual problems. To begin with, it is difficult to talk about writing without making reference to some category as a foundational basis — genre, language, structure, authorship, intentionality, movement, and canon, among other terms, identify writing by the criteria of belonging to some category or another. Underlying these categories are a number of presuppositions about literature that have come to be seen as paradigmatic or universal. The vision of a totality, or the sense of unity that these categories project onto writing, determines the ideological basis that informs their institutionalization and their canonization as literature. The habits of categorical thought that anchor writing and writers in time and place sanction the historical and territorial hegemony of literary nationalism. The conceptual unity implied by

¹ Alexander von Humboldt. *Cosmos: A Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe*. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1863) 79-80.

such concepts of world literature, *littérature universelle*, or *Weltliteratur* are projections of these categories on a global scale.

Triestine writing is motivated by a desire for this universality, but the critical conscience that undoes that desire calls into question the hegemony of literary nationalism, which evolves in the nineteenth century in terms of language, territory and collectivism. In narratives of self-awareness that confront the universalizing principles of nationalism, Scipio Slataper and Italo Svevo generate a particular *coscienza* – which could then be understood collectively as a conflicted awareness of self and a problematic sense of place. The literature that resulted from Triestine writing took place in a transformative, critical, dialectical relation with the cultural aspirations of post-Risorgimento Italy, on the one hand, and, on the other, with the economic ambitions of the city within the Austrian State. Sensitive to the influence of a literary tradition that mobilized the hyperbole of nationalist rhetoric, Slataper and Svevo draw attention to the dialectics of the particular and the universal that inform the modernist discourse on writing and cultural politics. They reflect upon the way that they are seen from outside, particularly by Italians, and in doing so they confront the question of how one thinks about oneself with the eyes of the other.

In order to better reflect upon these writers and why critics labelled them “antiliterary,” this chapter will explore the mechanisms of the conceptual unity that we call “world literature,” such as the idea of a rational and orderly totality implied in the idea of universality (*cosmos*), images and narratives (*mythos*) that serve as vehicles for that totality, the figure of the author as a microcosm of that totality, and the “place of writing” as an idealized *topos*. These lemmas — *mythos*, *topos* and *cosmos* — pertain to narratives, spaces and worldviews inherent in the idea of Trieste, and they are intentionally polysemic since, for example, Trieste

has been variously described as an antiliterary *topos*, as an *atopia*, as a *chronotope*, and as a *heterotopia*.

In the first section we examine the idealization of Dante's language by Risorgimento intellectuals in comparison with the creative and critical potential that his linguistic treatise "*De vulgari eloquentia*" held for Triestine writers. In Italy, Dante was taken up as the prophet of the Italian nation because he expressed its unity, and the language in which he did so was taken as emblematic of a unified Italian national consciousness. His vernacular poetry served as a foundation for the modern standardization of the Italian language. For Giuseppe Mazzini and other ideologues of Italian national unity, the language that unites the nation originates with Dante, and he attributes a messianic role to the poet that sidesteps the relativism and ambiguity with which he actually treated the language question. They attributed a social role to literature that divested Dante's *patria* of its local and particular dimensions, and in doing so they attribute to his literary production a universalism that did not historically correspond to his own sense of the universal. Dante wrote that the world reveals itself in a localized horizon of experience, and Triestine writers salvage this local and global perspective from beyond the cult of Dante in writing that reflected their own historical present. By recalling Dante's own ambivalence towards Latin grammar they accentuate the contingent and changeable nature of human language, and by writing badly ("scrivere male") Svevo calls into question the hegemony of grammatical correctness in the Italian literary tradition. Triestine writers also undercut ideas of historical origin that place Dante in a remote past and posit the present as the basis of a more immediate and friendly relation with the revered poet.

In the second section we look at Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* and the idea of universality that this neologism communicated in the context of nineteenth century European

nationalism. *Weltliteratur* was fundamentally a modern concept and offered a perspective upon the future. If by the term “literature” we mean the product of writing (or the material inscription of human thought or *Geist*, with both of its meanings as ‘spirit’ or ‘mind’) onto a medium that endures through time, then the spatial and temporal extension of thought underwrites what we mean when we speak of its universality. The extension of this spirit, as Goethe realized, depended upon forces of modernity, or more precisely the technologies that made it possible for written matter to be reproduced in identical copies and distributed among any number of individuals in a linguistic group, and potentially, to all parts of the globe. However, in parallel with this universalizing and largely Eurocentric model of literary understanding, barely fleshed out in Goethe’s conversations and letters, German Romanticism drew connections between literature, language and collective culture. Goethe had declared that the age of *Weltliteratur* would render national literatures redundant, but that is clearly not what happened. Modern nationalisms extended the ideals of romantic nationalism into state culture, animating a hierarchy of literary value whereby the idea of the poet served as a manifestation of the national spirit. Coupled with this model of literary value, and mediated by institutions of learning, Goethe’s idea of universality served the national idea.

In the third section, we look at the providential underpinnings of Italian literary history in the writings of Giuseppe Mazzini and Francesco De Sanctis. Mazzini, who was one of the most influential ideologues of the Risorgimento, was a key thinker of European internationalism and the intellectual father of Italian unification. Giuseppe Mazzini regarded Dante as a prophet of Italian nationalism and looked to Goethe as the genius who foretold the universal significance of nationalism with the concept of *Weltliteratur*. By exalting Dante as the original “father” and paradigmatic “prophet” of the Italian literary tradition, he

appropriates Biblical hermeneutics for the secular religion of nationalism. De Sanctis held that Hegel's philosophy of history was anticipated by the Italian literary tradition in such thinkers as Vico, Machiavelli and Bruno. He also regarded the capture of Rome from the papacy in 1870, which realized the goals of Italian national unity, as a manifestation of the Hegelian *Weltgeist*. Triestine writing frustrates the dialectical structure of totalizing theories like this one by animating the "ante-historical period which must be excluded"² from universal history.

Svevo and Slataper behold and feel beholden to the Italian literary tradition, which anchors its hegemony in several literary paradigms that have been attributed to the historical personalities of Dante and Goethe. Triestine writers recuperate their thinking in ways that differ from those who regard them as prophets of nationalism and universality. Slataper read Dante as someone who was modern in his own time, and accordingly, his study of Italian philology served to enrich his expression of the present.³ The Italian tradition divests these authors of the contextual and relational origins of their conceptual models transforming these models into the scalar and spatial totalities of grammatical language and territorial integrity. Svevo and Slataper assert that Dante and Goethe were universal thinkers because they were alert to their own times, and their critique of the *letterato* – a professional literary critic, scholar or writer whose work is sanctioned by Italian literary nationalism – stems from this

² Georg Wilhem Fredrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. John Sibree (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1956) 63.

³ Slataper writes to his friend Guido Devescovi in Trieste about his university studies in philology: "E poi a volte domandi cose assurde. Come si han (*sic!*) fatto lo stile? Studiando o solo pensando? Ma tu sei ancora all'ideologia deamicisiana! Certo che anche *si studia*: ma non per formarsi lo stile, o almeno non si dovrebbe perché se si studia così chi si sopraffà. Senti: io imparo una bella frase, una parola netta da un autore. L'imparo per due motivi e perché nel mio spirito c'era già, confesso, il piccolo mondo che quella parola esprime: e allora essa mi dà un'improvvisa luce, e assume il colore del mio mondo, s'impregna della mia particolare visione, si trasforma. In questo caso è assurdo *studiare*: cioè prefiggersi di imparare da un libro di cui per scienza si sa che è buono per la lingua. Si legge quello che si deve: cioè quello che risponde al particolare nostro stato d'animo. Certo: *s'impara*: ma è un imparare come quello da tutte le cose che ci circondano: è un vivere, un aumentarsi di quello che è già in noi, latente." Scipio Slataper, *Epistolario* (Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1950) 134-135.

argument. They emphasise, for example, the observation that Dante invented a language that nobody spoke out of the linguistic materials that he had on hand, and that Goethe – a renowned polymath and a “universal genius” – was interested in world literature out of an impulse that was being dismissed by the literary elites of Italy as dilettantism.

Triestine writing is motivated by a desire for universality, but the critical conscience that undoes that desire calls into question the hegemony of literary nationalism in Italy, as it evolves in the nineteenth century in terms of language, territory and collectivism through the providential historical narrative of Italian unification. Some of the “ante-historical” content that made Trieste difficult to assimilate into the historical understanding that viewed Italy as a whole will be explored in the fourth section, which introduces us to Svevo’s novel *La coscienza di Zeno* (1923). The memoirs of the titular character, a hypochondriac obsessed with quitting smoking and failing to do so, are allegories of incompleteness and deferred historical consciousness, drawn from the experience of living in a city where cultural identity can’t resolve the dialectical tension between the Italian nation and the supranational Austro-Hungarian State. Themes of sickness and ineptitude, together with that of old age and death, are constant narrative motifs in Svevo’s novels and short stories, and they serve to indicate a critical perspective located outside of the hegemonic literary culture.

The fifth section brings us up to date, by exploring the concept of *Weltliteratur* and contemporary attempts to rehabilitate it as a critical context for further reflections on Trieste and global literature. I hope to shed light upon the relationship between the way in which the discourse on globalization has been used to understand world literary history and the hierarchy through which literature becomes universal through national channels. Triestine literature calls this hierarchical understanding into question because one of the defining characteristics

of its world projection is that it bypasses the intermediaries of literary nationalism and national institutions that lay claim to the universal. For Goethe, and for many of his contemporaries, literature manifests the spiritual essence of the nation and the uniqueness of “genius” is a precondition for the truth of the national spirit. The link established between language and nation by such influential thinkers as Gottfried Herder and Friedrich Schlegel in the last decades of the eighteenth century is still an active force today. Every nation has its national poets, novelists and literary critics since the territorialization of the national spirit remains a precondition for the universality of world literature. Every author is territorialized by his or her nativity and the language in which he or she writes – even those authors who wrote in languages other than their mother tongues, or in places far from where they were born, such as Conrad, Beckett and Nabokov, to name a few. This sets up a certain way of thinking about universality, which Triestine writers call into question, and which extend into the problem of global literature, or world literature in the age of globalization. In order to shed some light on how Triestine writing operates in a different literary economy from that of national literatures in the field of the global, I examine two contemporary attempts at world literary history that metastasize the perspective of the national worldview: David Damrosch’s influential study *What is World Literature?* (2003), and Pascale Casanova’s widely read *La république mondiale des lettres* (1999). While this is by no means an exhaustive survey of the ways in which contemporary scholars have conceptualized world literature, I cite these ones to emphasize the structural-national biases that are potentially at work in grounding any scholar’s perspective when taking on questions of universal literary value.

All of what has been introduced up until this point in the chapter has been drawn into attempts to portray Trieste and its literature. It is against this conceptual groundwork that the

idea of Triestine *atopia* and *antiliterature* takes place, and this will be the focus of the concluding section. Trieste's particularity as a non-place is often framed as the fruit of mutable geographical, historical and social conditions, but polyglot cultures, cosmopolitanism, centre-periphery dynamics and shifting borders are not exclusive to Trieste alone. How, then, did the idea of a particular literary tradition confronting or engaging with the conditions of European modernity arise in Trieste? How did this writing become emblematic of non-national structures of feeling? How does it constitute an ambivalent and non-totalizing cultural sphere in producing local and supranational imaginary geographies? How does Triestine writing illustrate atopian globalism with a world projection that operates outside of its provisional territorializations? This study begins with Triestine writing as a simple premise — one always writes from where one is — and traces how this writing meanders outward through space and time to project an atopian image of fragmented universality that might serve as a “literary expression” of globalization.

The language of Dante

Naturalmente a questo mondo non si può mai pensare niente senza arrivare al padre di ogni letteratura, l'Alighieri.
— Italo Svevo, “Profilo autobiografico”⁴

Triestine literature is generally identified as an Italian language literary tradition, even though there were several linguistic communities that lived in Trieste and produced literatures in other languages, most notably in Slovene. Writers associated with Triestine literature in the early twentieth century were multilingual and schooled in German, but they chose to write in Italian and wanted to inscribe themselves in the Italian tradition. Svevo was often criticized

⁴ Italo Svevo, *Racconti, Saggi, Pagine sparse* (Milano: Dall'Oglio, 1968) 808. [Naturally, in this world you can never think of anything without going to the father of all literature, Alighieri.]

for writing badly in this language, and other Triestine writers express an uneasy, tortured relationship to it. In setting down the groundwork for Triestine writing, one invariably comes back to the language of Dante Alighieri, who, according to Svevo was not only the father of Italian literature, but of all literatures. The significance of this remark will unfold in the comparison between Dante's language as a nationally sanctioned one, and his theory of language, which injects relativism and ambivalence into the linguistic paradigm that he exemplifies. Dante created an idiomatic vernacular language out of his local Tuscan dialect; however, he could never have foreseen how his writing would come to shape the language in the centuries following his death.

At the beginning of the fourteenth century, when Dante was writing his treatise on poetry in the vernacular, *De vulgari eloquentia*, there was no nation of Italy in the modern sense, and Italian was not a language.⁵ He was thinking of the scattered Kingdoms and congeries of linguistic groups in which one could discern traces of a common, supra-regional *vulgare illustre* [illustrious vernacular] upon which one might base an Italian language, but it was not exemplified in any of them. Dante's treatise poses the question of how to dignify thinking outside the language of the Church. For this Florentine exile, the Catholic worldview mediated the universal (the Greek word "*katholikismos*" from which the name of this Christian religion is derived, after all, means "universal"), as nationalism does in modernity. The scriptural languages of Catholicism were Greek and Latin, which Dante considers to be "secondary" languages because they required formal instruction, or what the Romans called *gramatica* [grammar], which he describes as "nothing less than a certain immutable identity of

⁵ For my analysis of Dante I am indebted to conversations with my dissertation supervisor Terry Cochran for indicating the pertinence of Dante's thoughts on language to Italian literary nationalism and to my project; cf. *Twilight of the Literary : Figures of Thought in the Age of Print* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 2001).

language in different times and places.” Grammar lends itself to the spatial and temporal extension of the Catholic worldview, since it averts the natural and inevitable changeability of spoken language, which he describes using the term *loquela*:

Since, therefore, all our language [*loquela*] (except that created by God along with the first man) has been assembled, in haphazard fashion, in the aftermath of the great confusion that brought nothing else than oblivion to whatever language had existed before, and since human beings are highly unstable and variable animals, our language can be neither durable nor consistent with itself; but, like everything else that belongs to us (such as manners and customs), it must vary according to distances of space and time.⁶

Loquela, in this context, means human language, since it is like the “unstable and variable” species that possesses it, and whatever regularity it acquires is dispersed in the dimensions of space and time. Oral traditions are subject to the organic mutability of human nature, but they change so slowly that many people do not perceive that change for very spatio-temporal reasons: their lives are too short and those lives mostly take place within a limited domain. The historical and territorial extension of an inscribed *gramatica* is scalar and spatial so as to appear universal, whereas the vernacular on which it is based originates in a relational and contextual *loquela*. Latin and Greek mediate the universality of Dante’s Catholicism, and extend the spatial and temporal extension of its ecumene, not so much as divine languages but as grammatical ones. Grammar halts the linguistic drift that would make scripture unintelligible, and conquers dimensions of space and time, however its point of departure is rooted in “people’s preferences and geographical proximity,” as opposed to “nature or association.” The vernacular, then, is the “primary” and universal language of

⁶ Dante Alighieri, “*De vulgari eloquentia*,” trans. Steven Botterill, *Dante Alighieri-Opera Omnia*. <http://alighieri.letteraturaoperaomnia.org/translate_english/alighieri_dante_de_vulgari_eloquentia.html> I.IX. Citations from the original Latin version refer to <http://alighieri.letteraturaoperaomnia.org/alighieri_dante_de_vulgari_eloquentia.html>. This site reproduces the text contained in “Il trattato De Vulgari Eloquentia”, per cura di Pio Rajna, *Opere minori di Dante Alighieri - Edizione Critica*, Società Dantesca Italiana, Firenze, Successori Le Monnier, 1896.

humankind, in spite of its multiplicity in geographical space and its alterations through time, because one's vernacular tongue is acquired from life. Dante's emotional investment in Florence might have lead him to erroneously assert the superiority of his native vernacular over all others, but he avoids the illusion of its universality by contemplating it from a distance that is both literal and figurative.

For whoever is so misguided as to think that the place of his birth [*locum sue nationis*] is the most delightful spot under the sun may also believe that his own language [*proprium vulgare licetur*] – his mother tongue [*maternam locutionem*], that is – is pre-eminent among all others; and, as a result, he may believe that his language was also Adam's. To me, however, the whole world is a homeland [*Nos autem, cui mundus est patria*], like the sea to fish – though I drank from the Arno before cutting my teeth, and love Florence so much that, because I loved her, I suffer exile unjustly – and I will weight the balance of my judgment more with reason than with sentiment.⁷

Dante wrote his treatise in exile from Florence, but this does not sever his sentimental attachment to the *patria*, which throws up before him the illusion of its universality in the language that is spoken there. The mistake of assuming one's language to be universal is akin to the heliocentric fallacy, whereby perspective equals truth. Dante realizes that his *patria* is a mode of life and a culture, and moreover, it is a *particular* mode of life and a *particular* culture that he carries with him, even into exile. At the same time this *patria* transcends the local dimension because the whole world reveals itself to him through his immersion in Florence. He arrives at this understanding of universality through a conceptual expression of exile from the city that he loves. His critical attention to the particular foundations of the vernacular language on which he was raised indicates that it is “reason” which exiles him from the affective universality of his mother tongue. It is Dante's literacy, and his exposure to foreign vernacular writing, which engenders a mode of conceptual detachment from local

⁷ Ibid.

contexts and relations. The contingency of his own vernacular appears to him from a conceptual position of exile that affords him a rational perspective as opposed to a sentimental one.

And although for my own enjoyment (or rather for the satisfaction of my own desire), there is no more agreeable place on earth than Florence, yet when I turn the pages of the volumes of poets and other writers [*revolventes et poetarum et aliorum scriptorum volumina*], by whom the world is described as a whole and in its constituent parts [*mundus universaliter et membratim*], and when I reflect inwardly [*ratiocinantesque in nobis*] on the various locations of places in the world, and their relations to the two poles and the circle at the equator, I am convinced, and firmly maintain, that there are many regions and cities more noble and more delightful than Tuscany and Florence, where I was born and of which I am a citizen [*unde sumus oriundus et civis*], and many nations and peoples [*plerasque nationes et gentes*] who speak a more elegant and practical language [*sermone*] than do the Italians.⁸

Dante's introspective reasoning (*ratiocinantesque in nobis*) is another trope of exile, since this turning inward, which is exemplified by the act of reading, is simultaneously a turning away from Florence. Modernity, in Dante's time, meant that books and writing increase historical and territorial distances as effectively as horses and wagons do. This media involves the economy of the *scriptorium*; the very limited circulation of books copied out by hand, which effectively telescope the local and the global and brings poetry written in faraway places to literate Florentines. Dante's exposure to foreign writers corroborates his view that the vernacular is the true mother tongue of humanity, in the sense that it is traditionally acquired from wherever you happen to be born.⁹ By the same literary economy through which the words of poets from other *patria natio* reach him, his vernacular poetry also gains in territorial extension, just as the river Arno that runs through his *patria* empties into the global

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ This relates to the etymology of the Latin words *nationes* and *gentes*, that is, generation and begetting, and other poets and writers are born elsewhere, just as Dante originates (*oriundus*) in Tuscany and Florence.

sea. In other words, the affective universality of the vernacular one speaks is relative, and the material existence of other written vernaculars rationally demonstrates that this relativism is universal. The relativism and ambivalence of Dante's introspective rationalism undermines the hegemony of grammatical language, however, it is not the purpose of Dante's treatise on eloquence in the vernacular – only one of its premises.

The language spoken by Adam is the biblical archetype for a universal language, or a redeemed language. Since this prelapsarian language is irretrievable, the task that Dante sets before himself in this treatise is to identify the most illustrious vernacular (*vulgare illustre*) and the best manner of speaking (*optima loquela*) in the Italian peninsula by a comparative critique of vernacular poetry from the scattered Kingdoms. How, then, does one elevate a particular vernacular to transcend this universal relativism, to ennoble and dignify thinking in a particular vernacular, to assert the superiority of one over others in an expanded territory, and to acquire an image of unity or universality? Dante expresses the idea of this absent language through the allegory of the hunt. His intended prey, the panther, remains elusive, though it leaves its scent wherever it goes. The panther, of course, is a metaphor for the universal, as the word derived from Greek means “all” (pan-) “beasts” (-ther). However, since it cannot be trapped, it refers to an obscure and tenuous quality that is latent in some instances of vernacular poetry from people who inhabit territories that were once part of Roman Italy. The ephemeral and immaterial trace of the panther, a mere scent in the place of its physical presence, serves as a figure of thought for Dante to speak of an Italian language that did not exist or could not be attested to in any written form. The allegory of the hunt expresses the desire for a unified Italian language, as well as the critical awareness that makes such an original or universal principle to unify it impalpable. As the proverbial hunter explores the

different vernaculars of the Italian Peninsula to find this panther, he can only take temporary comfort as he pauses upon the relative universality that the Panther's scent bestows upon them. The panther, too, is always moving on.

The Italian literary tradition dignified the language of Dante, not as the realization of the *vulgare illustre*, but as an *optima loquela*, elevating the Tuscan vernacular of his poetry to the sanctity that was formerly occupied by Latin, and modernizing it for the unification of the Italian Kingdom. The idea of a poetic language that Dante refers to as the *optima loquela* in the second book of *De vulgari eloquentia*, radically modifies and extends the sense of the word *loquela*, since it refers to an abstraction that can be realized in literary language. Dante could only sense that his written *loquela* resonates with the mute ephemerality of the *vulgare illustre* when he was writing, but he could not confirm its correctness by comparison to paradigmatic or grammatical models. This *optima loquela* expresses the latent presence of this *vulgare illustre* poetically, that is, when the poet writes he produces an imperfect image of the universal, but it is not the universal language itself. He projects an image of universality, but the conceptual problem occurs when the image is taken for the thing itself. The latent force of Dante's figures, his Latin treatise on eloquence in the vernacular and his poetry in an idiosyncratic Tuscan attest to the potential of for any vernacular language to gain a similar kind of universality to that of Latin. However, this universality could only gain a foothold for its territorial and temporal extension by negating the original function of the vernacular, which is rooted in the antinomy of its universal relativism.

Triestine writing mediates the universal differently from the way that nationalism does, and Slataper and Svevo recuperate this non-totalizing model of universality in their approaches to their idiosyncratic literary languages. They also employ Dante's concept of

patria as having local and global dimensions, and in doing so they circumvent the hierarchy of the national model. Slataper conceives of the *patria* as relational and contextual rather than scalar or spatial when he writes “Trieste è la mia patria. Io scopro in me ogni giorno di più Trieste [Trieste is my homeland. I discover more of Trieste in myself every day].”¹⁰ He also rejects the conceptual annexation of the term “*patria*” to the modern nation, and expresses an understanding of the term very similar to what Dante may have intended: “Il concetto *patria* non s’allarga affatto nel concetto umanità, perché appunto la patria è la forma in cui il sentimento d’umanità si rivela [The concept of the patria does not merely expand into the concept of humanity, because the *patria* is actually the form in which the sentiment of humanity reveals itself].”¹¹ The task that Slataper attributes to the poet in this continuum is to mediate the relation between the local (*patria*) and the universal (humanity), which is revealed in the historical horizon of experience that serves as the basis of his lyrical novel *Il mio Carso*. This task differs from that of the *letterato* – a writer who may be a scholar, a critic or even a poet – who takes the Italian tradition as his point of departure and return.

Dante is also the prototype of the modern artist who reflects upon this *patria* from a position of exile – one thinks of Joyce who carried Dublin within him while living in Trieste, Paris and Zurich – and Slataper was no exception. He wrote much of *Il mio Carso*, a lyrical, autobiographical novel set in Trieste, from a position of exile, quite ironically, while living in Florence. Svevo did not have to leave Trieste to feel like an exile from his *patria*, he merely had to open a book; the hegemony of the Italian tradition condemned him as an outcast. By highlighting how Dante wrote in and for his own time, they claim the same original immediacy for their own.

¹⁰ Scipio Slataper, *Alle tre amiche*, ed. Giani Stuparich (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1958) 425.

¹¹ Idem. *Appunti e note di diario*, ed. Giani Stuparich (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1953) 94.

Svevo recuperates Dante's linguistic model in several ways that will be explored in the following chapters. For the time being, I'll offer a few examples concerning resonances with Dante's linguistic treatise. Svevo often relativizes the Italian language by calling it "Tuscan" in his novels, indicating its historical origin as a local idiom. He criticizes the colonization of Triestine culture by the national language of Italy by satirizing it, portraying Tuscan-Italian as a book language, and putting it into the mouths of his characters as an affected manner of speaking. Svevo's resistance to the cultural colonization of literary language can also be understood in Dantean terms: In a retrospective essay on his life and writing, Svevo claims that he wrote in a Triestine *loquela*. This archaism carries with the same connotations of an ungrammatical and sentimental language that resists codification, and that of a living language drawn from his contextual and relational *patria*. Furthermore, Svevo's confrontation with the Italian language resembles Dante's effort to ennoble the Tuscan idiom over and against the ecumenical hegemony of Latin, while at the same time mining its expressive resources, as Dante had done with the language of Virgil.

Slataper and Svevo wrest Dante from the possessiveness of the Italian tradition by asserting that his universality was not the result of a paradigmatic, national *italianità*, irradiating outward into the world, but rather it was a property of his acute awareness of the present and his restrained humanity. If I have been using the term universal in a vague way when referring to the way in which these writers read Dante, let me clarify what the term signifies here: The universal in Dante is not mediated by the national, but is the mediation itself. The universal is any extension or telescoping moving outward from the particular. The idea of a microcosm or a macrocosm are inherently biased by this very idea of the small context or the big picture as having some kind of logical or poetic consistency in relation to its

opposite scope. The term “the universal” in fact makes no sense at all, since it is merely an abstraction, an Idea. But we can use the verb “to universalize” in describing the process by which particular facts enter into abstract relationships with general ones. The etymology of the word “universe” bears this out – *uni-versas*: toward the one, or turning around the one. The divine vision with which Dante ends *La Divina Commedia* is a metaphor of universality, whereby the light from an indivisible point irradiates outwards, illuminating the concentric spheres of paradise and the hierarchies of angels upon them.

***Weltliteratur*: a universal Idea and “an expanded homeland”**

The universal was an Idea during the Enlightenment. According to Jean Baudrillard, when this Idea “became realized in the global, it disappeared as an Idea, it committed suicide, and it vanished as an end in itself.”¹² Immanuel Kant’s writings on the cosmopolitical are among the most representative works expressing this Idea. So are Goethe’s writings on *Weltliteratur*, sketched out conceptually in his letters and conversations. Goethe witnessed a number of technical developments that augmented the spatial and temporal characteristics of print media and saw this as the sign of a new universal culture. The question of media, and specifically the rise of print culture, is important in Kant’s famous essay on the Enlightenment, and the distinction between private uses of reason and public reason would have no basis without the availability, however restrained, of books. The impact of technological forces on economic, social and cultural exchange – such as the passage from oral to written traditions, from clay tablet to parchment scroll to codex, from manuscript to print (and so on into the

¹² Jean Baudrillard, “The Violence of the Global,” *CTHEORY*, Trans. François Debrix. Public Knowledge Project, 20 May 2003, Web. 16 June 2013, <<http://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14558/5403>>.

digital age) – accompany and allow the distribution of ideas to a public, which is constituted as such by forms of literacy and access to texts. When Goethe said to Eckermann that he had become “more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men,”¹³ he also maintained that translators had an essential task in mediating the universal values to which all national poets were drawn, so that they could be “reborn” into other languages. This would potentially expand the spatial-horizontal scope of a work across languages as well as its vertical-atemporal extension as the bearer of the unifying principle that was communicated through literature.

Kant’s writings on the cosmopolitical sphere emphasized the materiality of literary production as a precondition for this irradiation of culture, but he also asserted the importance of literary modes of thought in conveying unifying principles. In his essay “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View” (1784) he writes of an Idea that would convey the rational ordering of world history.

It is strange and apparently silly to wish to write a history in accordance with an Idea of how the course of the world must be if it is to lead to certain rational ends. It seems that with such an Idea only a romance could be written. Nevertheless, if one may assume that Nature, even in the play of human freedom, works not without plan or purpose, this Idea could still be of use. Even if we are too blind to see the secret mechanism of its workings, this Idea may still serve as a guiding thread for presenting as a system, at least in broad outlines, what would otherwise be a planless conglomeration of human actions.¹⁴

¹³ Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe*, 1835; quoted in David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) 1.

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, “Kant: Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” *Kant: Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*, trans. Lewis White Beck, Marxists Internet Archive, n.d. Web, 12 Sept. 2012, <<https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/kant/universal-history.htm>>; From Immanuel Kant, “On History,” The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1963.

The idea of which Kant writes serves as an organizing principle that allows one to understand the course of nature in general terms — a manner of digesting history — an assertion that reason reigns in human history, and this will itself encourage reason. Its self-fulfilling logic tells us something about the relationship of ideas to civilization and the recourse to fiction that social and historical order entails. It is perfectly admissible to misrepresent the state of affairs when doing so is conducive to historical understanding. Many such an Idea become prominent as worldviews and modes of interpretation that in various times have characterized cultural systems as well as the historical understandings that underpin them. Ideology, which is essentially the belief that perspective is truth, has the power to stand in for the inscrutable course of nature and makes connections between human actions that would otherwise remain isolated in their contingency and randomness. Whether this Idea is manifested in belief systems, ideologies, concepts, theories, projections or myths, it is eminently a construction of the mind as opposed to a creation from nature; historical insofar as history too is a human idea. For Kant the idea of reason that organizes universal history is a useful fiction, but we lose sight of its *romanesque* quality. The modern vision of world literature is comparable to the idea that is the object of Kant's critique, as equally useful and fictitious master tropes have taken into account the irradiation of culture over time and among a number of media.

But if such a world literature develops in the near future — as appears inevitable with the ever increasing ease of communication — we must expect no more and no less than what it can and in fact will accomplish. The world at large, no matter how vast it may be, is only an expanded homeland [*erweitertes Vaterland*] and will actually yield in interest no more than our native land.¹⁵

¹⁵ Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe*, 1835; quoted in David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) 1.

The “*Welt*” of *Weltliteratur* also bears some similarity to the *mundus-patria* of Dante (“*Nos autem, cui mundus est patria*”) expanded by the economy of the scriptorium, and telescoping the local with the global. However, Goethe witnesses this world-homeland from the other side of the Gutenberg revolution, and the circumnavigations of the globe by explorers in changed the way he would have conceived of the world. Goethe describes a smaller, more centripetal place, as knowledge of the globe’s finitude makes *Weltliteratur* into an expanded homeland with more definite limits. Goethe projects *Weltliteratur* as the inevitable result of increasingly accessible communications, and though the speed of printing and dissemination in the nineteenth century can hardly be compared with the instantaneous digital telecommunications and media advances of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it offers a presentiment of some of the major factors that characterize globalization. As societies increasingly rely on global networks in commerce and culture, we witness the hypermobilization of forces of modernity. The concept of an “expanded homeland” could be compared with, for example, Marshall McLuhan’s concept of a “global village” since both are distinguished by opposite spatio-temporal media extensions that telescope the local and the global. However, they are grasped from different ends of that telescoping. The conceptual space of *Weltliteratur* is an expansion of local cultural horizons, whereas the “global village” is the result of imploding distances and virtual spaces. The former seeks to transcend borders whereas the latter seeks to render these borders insignificant. *Weltliteratur* is generally characterized by a timeless literary and intellectual (“high”) culture, while the vehicle of globalization is often associated with passing and ephemeral (“low”) culture.

What appeals to the multitude will spread endlessly and, as we can already see now, will be well received in all parts of the world, while what is serious and truly substantial will be less successful. However, those who have devoted

themselves to higher and more fruitful endeavours will become more easily and more intimately acquainted. Everywhere in the world there are men who are concerned with what has already been achieved and, using that as a basis, with working toward the true progress of mankind. But the course they take and the pace they maintain is not to everyone's liking. The more forceful members of society want to move faster and therefore reject and prevent the furtherance of the very things which could aid their own advancement. The serious minded must therefore form a silent, almost secret congregation, since it would be futile to oppose the powerful currents of the day. But they must maintain their position tenaciously until the storm has subsided. Such men will find their main consolation, even their ultimate encouragement in the fact that what is true is at the same time useful. Once they themselves have discovered this connection and can demonstrate it convincingly, they will not fail to have a strong impact, and what is more, for years to come.¹⁶

As a prescient thinker of modernity and mass culture, Goethe tasks the “serious minded” with safeguarding the universal against its dispersal in the common hordes of humanity. In distinguishing the multitude from the serious minded he opposes the idea of historical progress from that of ahistorical universalism. The role of “serious minded” individuals — identified as poets or philosophers; philologists or humanists; intellectuals or literary scholars — set limits to the universal from within by discerning its exemplars from the proliferation of printed documents and ephemera that cater to the fleeting tastes of the general public, who limit it from outside by their lack of interest. The “silent, almost secret congregation” of serious minds evokes a situation particular to institutions in Goethe's Jena and Berlin that would be anachronistic if we were to apply it to the “serious minded” intellectuals of the present. There was more of a spiritual investment in German Romanticism than there is in the contemporary university, and it would be difficult to characterize the literary scholar of today as the philologist of Goethe's time.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Goethe's idea of the universal was significant not only for the historical consciousness that it expressed, but for the historical context in which it emerged. It was an important period in the development of European nationalisms, though it also emerged during a lull between the patriotic-military passions of the French Revolution and those of 1848. German Romantic nationalism was in a youthful and dynamic stage, intimately tied to literature after Gottfried Herder equated specific languages with the spirit of a collectivity in the late eighteenth century. This historical consciousness extended to other modern nations in Europe, whose intellectuals began drawing connections between literature, language, collective culture and the state. Friedrich Schlegel wrote of "poetic genius" as a manifestation of the national spirit and Goethe was revered in his time as the poetic genius of the German people, while in much of the literate world he was regarded as the nineteenth century embodiment of *homo universalis*. The view of nationality that Goethe expresses is cosmopolitical, or as he writes in a letter to Count Stolberg, Goethe writes: "Poetry is cosmopolitan, and the more interesting the more it shows its nationality."¹⁷ Goethe saw a special role for the German people in this age of *Weltliteratur*, which was to facilitate world literary exchange as translators. However, the legacy of Herder and Schlegel would also find a foothold there. Goethe contributed to a model of world literature in which the national was established as a prerequisite of the universal: a work of literature is universal insofar as it emanates from the national spirit. The national spirit is expressed in language that straddles the threshold between the exemplary and the ordinary; there must be formal excellence on the one hand and accessibility on the other. A work that is both of these within its own language deserves translation and becomes the property of all mankind.

¹⁷ J. W. von Goethe, "Essays on Art and Literature," ed. John Gearey, *Goethe's Collected Works*, Vol. 3. New York: Suhrkamp, 1986. 227.

It is obvious that for a considerable time the efforts of the best writers and authors of aesthetic worth in all nations have been directed to what is common to all mankind. In every field, whether the historical, the mythological, the fabulous, or the consciously imagined, one can see, behind what is national and personal, this universal quality becoming more and more apparent. [...] One must learn to note the special characteristics of every nation and take them for granted, in order to meet each nation on its own ground. For the characteristics of a nation are like its language or its coinage. The sure way to achieve universal tolerance is to leave untouched what is peculiar to each man or group, remembering that all that is best in the world is the property of all mankind.¹⁸

Goethe expressed a sense of the literary world that, in its overarching totality and its inner unity, would transcend the dialectics between the particular and the universal, the individual and mankind, but the European horizons, the subnational foundations and the localized dimensions of *Weltliteratur* invited literary nationalisms to lay claim to this universal Idea. On the market of universal literary value, which he likened to that of monetary exchange, those that exemplified their language had national literary value first. In this monadic conception world literature the whole shines through the part as the universal manifests itself through what is national and personal, but the universal cannot dispense with either of these. *Weltliteratur* is a literary economy that operates on a global scale, but the universal idea that distinguishes it from other forms of literary production has its internal limits. In determining what these limits meant during the rise of nationalisms in the nineteenth century, the spiritual overtones of Goethe's essay, along with its idea of actors who mediate the universal as a kind of sacred "congregation," were more often than not transplanted into the secular religion of nationalism and its institutions.

Giuseppe Mazzini, who regarded Dante as the prophet of Italian nationalism, identified Goethe as the prophet of internationalism and quoted the German polymath as a starting point

¹⁸ Quoted in Fritz Strich, *Goethe and World Literature* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1949) 13-14.

for his own expression of literary and political internationalism: “Io intravvedo l’aurora d’una letteratura europea: nessuno fra i popoli potrà dirla propria; tutti avranno contribuito a fondarla [I see the dawn of a European literature: none among the peoples may call it their own; all will have contributed to founding it].”¹⁹ Mazzini’s quotation is curious for several reasons: First, he uses it in 1826, before the publication of Eckermann’s *Conversations with Goethe*; second, he does not speak of a “world” or “universal” literature, but of a “European” literature; and finally, Mazzini holds cosmopolitan and patriotic values at the same time. The universality that the Italian literary tradition mediates is that of nationalism, which Risorgimento historians often regarded as a civic religion with a secular worldview. Outside of the nation it is internationalism, and the idea that for every territorial identity there is a language and a territory, which underscore the universal idea of nationalism. For these intellectuals, Goethe expressed the spiritual and political universality of the nation-state by asserting that every nation had its own particular literary expression, and that it was also common to mankind. Dante exemplified this model and the “serious minded” arbiters of literary value diffused his language, preserved it, and refined it treated his universality as a spiritual fact, when it was also a material and an institutional one. Echoes of this secular religion were present in the controversy that surrounded the reception of Svevo’s novels, first in France and then in Italy, as Antonio Gramsci discerned when writing upon it: “In realtà questa gente si infischia della letteratura e della poesia, della cultura e dell’arte: esercita la professione di sacrestano

¹⁹ Two articles written by Mazzini in 1826 deserve special attention concerning the providential understanding that undergirds Italian unification. “D’una letteratura europea” which was inspired by Goethe’s writings on *Weltliteratur* was published in 1826 by the journal *L’Antologia Vieusseux*, whereas “Dell’amor patrio di Dante” was refused on account of inaccuracies in Mazzini’s reading of the Tuscan poet. The latter article indicates Dante as a prophet of nationhood and the former claims Goethe as a prophet of internationalism. Mazzini begins his essay “D’una letteratura europea” with an epigraph from Goethe, as the starting point for his own literary and political internationalism: “Io intravvedo l’aurora d’una letteratura europea: nessuno fra i popoli potrà dirla propria; tutti avranno contribuito a fondarla.”

letterario e nulla più [In reality, these people couldn't care less about literature and poetry, culture and art: they practice the profession of literary sacristan and nothing more]."²⁰ With this wry comment, Gramsci gives us a picture of the knowledge economy that undergirded Italian nationalism, and initiates us into how the "serious minded" guardians of Italy's monadic *Weltliteratur* integrated Goethe's vision into their providential and totalizing historical understandings of literary history.

Resurgence and redemption: providential literary history

Nazionalità è infatti la parola vitale dell'Epoca che sta per sorgere.
– Giuseppe Mazzini²¹

In Risorgimento Italy, through the First World War and well beyond, national literature was understood in both retrospective and prophetic terms, and was a vital frame of reference for the historical continuity of mind that coupled modern Italian unity with an illustrious past. In the preface to a collection of poems entitled *The Prophecy of Dante*, the English Romantic poet Lord Byron remarks, "the Italians, with a pardonable nationality, are particularly jealous of all that is left of them as a nation — their literature."²² This was the "literary expression" that Carducci spoke of, and Mazzini built upon this as one of the most influential intellectuals of the Risorgimento. Mazzini celebrated Dante as a prophet and a precursor to the Risorgimento, "ch'io dal 1821 al 1827 aveva imparato a venerare, non solamente come poeta, ma come Padre della Nazione [that I, from 1821 to 1827, learned to venerate, not only as a

²⁰ Antonio Gramsci, *Letteratura e vita nazionale* (Milano: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1950) 96.

²¹ Giuseppe Mazzini, "Politica internazionale," *La questione d'Oriente, seconda edizione* (Roma: Per cura della commissione per la pubblicazione delle opere di Giuseppe Mazzini, 1877) 28. [Nationality is actually the vital word of the epoch that is now arising.]

²² Lord Byron, *The Prophecy of Dante: A Poem* (Philadelphia: M. Carey and Sons, 1821) 9.

poet, but as the Father of the Nation].”²³ Dante embodied the modern collective spirit for Mazzini and he established the Italian language as a criterion for unification. Dante was also an important touchstone for literary historians after Italian unification, such as Francesco De Sanctis, whose highly influential *Storia della letteratura italiana* is animated by a Hegelian spirit. Risorgimento literary history established the continuity of a tradition from writers such as Petrarch, Boccaccio, Dante and Machiavelli through to the writers of their times, such as Manzoni, Carducci, Verga, Pascoli and D’Annunzio. What unified these ideologues, writers and literary critics was a sense of historical destiny and an artistic intent associated with the idea of realizing an Italian collective spirit.

In 1926, Mazzini wrote an article entitled “Dell’amor patrio di Dante,” which served as a statement upon the social significance of literature, asserting that in Dante’s time (and specifically in Dante’s case) literature played a vital social role.

[L]e lettere formavano, come debbono, parte delle istituzioni che reggevano i popoli, e non si consideravano ancora come conforto, bensì com’utile ministero, fu detto il poeta non essere un accozzatore di sillabe metriche, ma un uomo libero, spirato dai Numi a mostrare agli uomini la verità sotto il velo dell’allegoria.²⁴

[L]etters informed, as they must, the institutions that reigned over the peoples, one did not consider them yet as comforting, but rather as a useful ministry, as the poet had said, not as someone who got muddled up in metric syllables, but a free man, inspired by the Gods to show people the truth under the veil of allegory.]

²³ Giuseppe Mazzini, “Del amor patrio di Dante” *Scritti editi ed inediti*, Vol. 2. (Milano: G. Daelli, Editore, 1863) 19.

²⁴ Ibid.

According to Roland Sarti, such a view of the writer's role anticipated Mazzini's later concept of the nature of political leadership.²⁵ Dante, according to Mazzini, was a great writer because he voiced and acted on his vision of a just society and he embodied the prototypical modern artist whose mission to it was to incite people into action.²⁶ Sarti explains that this was the Germanic concept of literature as a form of social expression, which Mazzini interpreted dynamically: the function of literature was to change society, and the great writer was a social reformer in disguise. In politics as in literature innovators fulfill their mission by anticipating, interpreting and shaping the collective will. What that collective will might be Mazzini did not say in his essay on Dante, but he argued that it was to the credit of his generation that it believed in the social mission of literary criticism (Sarti, 33-34). In this respect, Mazzini seemed revolutionary, as he tried to recuperate social relevance of Dante, which was buried under the influence of the erudite and pedantic classicism that characterized the *Accademia degli Arcadi*.

In his memoirs, he places his mission to join literature to his understanding of history within the context of his studies, sets up a diametric opposition between the romantic and classical conceptions of literary thought that were prevalent at the time, and criticizes both of them. He faults the academic institutions for the philological and analytical distance that reduces literature to "imitations" of past models that are "cold, hard, without intent, soul or

²⁵ Roland Sarti, *Mazzini: A Life for the Religion of Politics* (Westport CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1997) 33-34.

²⁶ "Il Genio, l'individuo singolarmente potente, può compendiare il passato, o collocarsi profeta dell'avvenire; ma la Letteratura collettiva, l'Arte d'un Popolo o di più Popoli, non può che informarsi al *fine* sociale immediato dell'Epoca. Missione speciale dell'Arte è spronare gli uomini a tradurre il *pensiero* in *azione*. [The genius, the singularly powerful individual, can epitomize the past, or be the Prophet of the future; but collective Literature, the art of a People or of more Peoples, can only inquire to into the immediate social *goals* of the Epoch. The special mission of art is to incite men to translate thought into action]." Giuseppe Mazzini, "Ai lettori" *Scritti editi e inediti*, vol. 2 (Milano: G. Daelli, Editore, 1863) 13.

life.”²⁷ Mazzini rejects Classicism for being pedantic, whereas the Romantics to him are charlatans who indulge in flights of individual fancy with literary forms that are unstructured and insincere. Romanticism is intolerant to Classicism to such a point that it throws out the proverbial baby with the bathwater, since it disregards “the sanctity of the laws that govern art.” Mazzini describes the extremes of both positions insofar as they are inimical to the role of art as a force for social change — both conducive of static and conservative forces as opposed to dynamic and revolutionary ones. Mazzini does not reject either position outright in “giving a base to the new Literature,” but cannot reconcile romantic notions of individualism, inspiration and artistic genius to the social function of Risorgimento aesthetics, which Mazzini defines for literature:

L’ispirazione individuale doveva sorgere con indole propria dalle aspirazioni della vita collettiva italiana, come belli di tinte varie e d’infiorescenza propria sorgono, da un suolo comune a tutti, i fiori, poesia della terra. Ma la vita collettiva d’Italia era incerta, indefinita, senza centro, senza unità d’ideale, senza manifestazione regolare, ordinata. L’arte poteva dunque prorompere a gesti isolati, vulcanici: non rivelarsi progressiva, continua, come la vita vegetale del Nuovo Mondo, dove gli alberi intrecciando ramo a ramo formano

²⁷ “Nel 1827 fremevano accanite le liti fra classicisti e romantici, tra i vecchi fautori d’un dispotismo letterario la cui sorgente risaliva per essi a duemila e più anni addietro e gli uomini che, in nome della propria ispirazione, volevano emanciparsene. Eravamo, noi giovani, romantici tutti. [...] I primi, Arcadi di Roma, Accademici della Crusca, professori e pedanti, andavano ostinatamente scrivendo imitazioni fredde, stentate, senza intento, senz’anima, senza vita: i secondi, non dando base alla nuova Letteratura fuorchè la fantasia individuale, si sbizzarrivano in leggende dei tempi di mezzo, inni menzogneri alla Vergine, disperazioni metriche non sentite, e in ogni concetto d’un’ora che s’affacciasse alla loro mente intollerante d’ogni tirannide, ma ignara della santità della Legge che governa, come ogni altra cosa, anche l’Arte. [In 1827 fierce disputes simmered between classicists and romantics, between the old advocates of a literary despotism who looked back to sources two thousand and more years old, and the men who, in the name of his inspiration, wanted to free themselves from these it. We were, we young people, all romantics. [...] The first group, the Arcadi of Rome, the Accademia della Crusca, were professors and pedants, stubbornly writing cold imitations, stunted, without intent, without a soul, without life: the latter, not giving a basis to the new Literature except the individual imaginations, they whimsically idled in legends of the times in between, in dishonest hymns to the Virgin, despairingly deaf to metrics, and in every concept of that they faced within their minds, intolerant of any tyranny, but unaware of the sanctity of the law that governs, like everything else, even Art].” Giuseppe Mazzini, “Note Autobiografiche,” *Scritti di Giuseppe Mazzini, Politica ed Economia*, vol. I. (1861)

l'unità gigantesca della foresta. Senza Patria e Libertà noi potevamo avere forse profeti d'Arte, non Arte.²⁸

[Individual inspiration must arise with its own distinctive character from the collective aspirations of Italian life, as beautiful as the varied colors and flowerings, they rise from a ground that is common to all, the flowers, the poetry of the earth. But the collective life of Italy was uncertain, indefinite, without a center, without a unity of ideals, without regular or orderly manifestation. Art could therefore break out in isolated, volcanic acts: not by revealing itself gradually and progressively, like plant life in the New World, where the trees intertwining from branch to branch formed the gigantic unity of the forest. Without a Fatherland, and without Freedom, we could have prophets of Art, perhaps, but not Art.]

The key term in Mazzini's retrospective aesthetic theory (aside from the "sorgere" of Risorgimento) is collectivism, and such notions as individual genius and inspiration are subordinate to the aspiration of art towards collective consciousness. Art, according to this view, is essentially teleological; it has the collective life of the nation as its end. Literature is actual insofar as it transforms words into action, and art without this transformation as its end is, at best, only potential. As literature is charged with a "special mission," only the Risorgimento gives a sense to Dante's art, since it could not become actual in its own time, but as a prophecy for the unification of the Italian nation. According to this view, the "sacred laws" of art are socially constructive and they reveal the model of literary thought that would become identified with Risorgimento ideology. The anti-romantic sentiment expressed in Mazzini's writings endorses collective agency at the expense of individualism, whereas the tendencies towards *Sturm und Drang* romanticism in Slataper and individual confession in Svevo place the budding of a distinctly Triestine literature at odds with the collective model established during the Risorgimento. Yet Mazzini's description of Dante's poetry as a

²⁸ Ibid.

prophetic art that “breaks out in isolated, volcanic acts” describes exactly how Triestine writing emerged in the early twentieth century. Triestine writers were situated at the periphery of the Italian literary tradition and they did not have one of their own. They wrote mostly in isolation from each other, approached writing with different premises, using idiosyncratic, dialectically inflected prose or poetry from the linguistic materials available to them, and they were not bound to the totalizing principles of a *patria* or a collective will. Mazzini describes the collective life of Italy in the early nineteenth century as indefinite, uncentered, irregular and lacking in a central idea before the emergence of a national organizing principle. Similarly, it was not until the 1930s that literary critics would try to make collective sense out of Trieste’s isolated writers, as Pietro Pancrazi did when he advanced the timid hypothesis that a constellation of them might comprise such a conceptual unity as “Triestine literature.”²⁹

Mazzini’s model for literature as a means toward collective identification with the nation was manifest in the making of Italian literary history, and this was attested to in the proliferation of weighty tomes on the subject.³⁰ The Risorgimento began as a revolutionary movement after the Congress of Vienna and was concluded in 1871 when the Italian Kingdom made Rome into the capital of the unified State. This date was significant to Francesco de Sanctis, one of the most respected literary historians in post-Risorgimento Italy, who published his two-volume *Storia della letteratura italiana* (1870 and 1871) after the Third

²⁹ Pietro Pancrazi. “Giani Stuparich triestino” *Ragguagli di Parnasso: Dal Carducci agli scrittori d’oggi*. Ed. Cesare Galimberti (Milano: Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, 1967) 303-304. Although this edition dates Pancrazi’s article in 1929, most critics regard the publication of a slightly edited version of this essay, bearing the title “Scrittori triestini” in *Il Corriere della Sera* on 16 June 1930 as the moment when Pancrazi’s definition of Triestine literature began to influence the literary culture of the city. Pancrazi’s definition of Triestine literature will be treated in more detail in the third chapter of this study.

³⁰ Scholars produced numerous monographs on literary history during the Risorgimento. These include Girolamo Tiraboschi, *Storia della letteratura italiana* (1825); Francesco Salfi, *Manuale della storia della letteratura Italiana* (1834); Giuseppe Maffei, *Storia della letteratura italiana dall’origine della lingua sino a nostri giorni* (1852-1853), Pietro Sanfilippo, *Storia della letteratura italiana* (1859), Paolo Emiliani-Giudici, *Storia della letteratura italiana* (1863), Cesare Cantù, *Storia della letteratura italiana* (1865), and Luigi Settembrini, *Lezioni di letteratura italiana* (1866).

Italian war of Independence. Like Mazzini, De Sanctis played vital roles in politics as well as the literary sphere alternating between his professorship at the University of Naples and posts in the Italian Parliament, including minister of education. De Sanctis exhorted Italians to cultivate a greater sense of their common literary and cultural heritage, which in turn, helped to solidify identifications with the new nation. His history of the culture and civilization of the Italian-speaking peoples from medieval times to the nineteenth century had a profound influence on educated Italians, including renowned intellectuals like Benedetto Croce, Antonio Gramsci and Giovanni Gentile. The Triestine *Vociani* in Florence (Slataper as well as the brothers Giani and Carlo Stuparich) had also read it and Svevo devoured the book while working as a bank clerk in Trieste.

The historical understanding that operates in *Storia della letteratura italiana* did not contradict the providential narrative of Risorgimento Italian nationalism, since collective consciousness is one of the principal directives of De Sanctis's literary history.³¹ “La letteratura non poteva risorgere che con la risurrezione della coscienza nazionale [Literature cannot arise without the resurrection of a national conscience],”³² De Sanctis writes in the final chapter of his work. De Sanctis interprets the tradition as a whole and seeks to establish a conceptual and historical connection between Italian literary history and the present day accomplishment of Italian political unity. Conceptually, he validates the idea of literature as the basis of a collective national conscience, and draws from the rational spirit of Machiavelli his secular and scientific orientation towards politics. However, his recourse to the Florentine Renaissance intellectual belongs to a different historical understanding from that of Mazzini. As Giuseppe Petronio observes, “La storia allora non è *dietro* il libro di De Sanctis, vi è

³¹ Ezio Raimondi, *Letteratura e identità nazionale* (Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 1998) 14.

³² Francesco De Sanctis, *Storia della letteratura italiana* (Firenze: Salani, 1965) 680.

dentro.”³³ Mazzini sees Dante as a great poet because he was a prophet, who foresaw and announced the Risorgimento as a sacred historical destiny. According to De Sanctis, Dante and Machiavelli are great because they lived in their own times and their worldviews were animated with a consciousness of the present, which they rendered concrete in writing. For De Sanctis the universal spirit in Dante and Machiavelli is always present and there is a telling passage from his book that illustrates this historical understanding:

Questo è il vero machiavellismo, vivo, anzi giovane ancora. È il programma del mondo moderno, sviluppato, corretto, ampliato, più o meno realizzato. E sono grandi le nazioni che più vi si avvicinano. Siamo dunque alteri del nostro Machiavelli. Gloria a lui, quando crolla alcuna parte dell’antico edificio. E gloria a lui, quando si fabbrica alcuna parte del nuovo. In questo momento che scrivo, le campane suonano a distesa, e annunziano l’entrata degl’Italiani a Roma. Il potere temporale crolla. E si grida il “viva” all’unità d’Italia. Sia gloria al Machiavelli. (561)

[This is the real Machiavellianism, alive, still young. It is the program of the modern world, developed, corrected, expanded, more or less realized. And great are the nations that resemble us. We therefore alter our Machiavelli. Glory to him, when any part of the ancient edifice collapses. And glory to him when any part of it is built anew. Right now I write, the bells ringing loudly, and they announce the entry of the Italians in Rome. The temporal power collapses. And he shouts “live” to the unification of Italy. Glory be to Machiavelli.]

³³ Giuseppe Petronio. *Teorie e realtà della storiografia letteraria : guida storica e critica* (Roma-Bari : Editori Laterza, 1981) xl: “La storia allora non è *dietro* il libro di De Sanctis, vi è *dentro*; è tutt’uno col suo gusto; spiega i giudizi che egli dà, anche i più letterari; costituisce il filo rosso lungo il quale la vicende si snodano. Dante è “grande” e “attuale”, non perché, come antistoricamente aveva favoleggiato Mazzini, avesse preannunziato il Risorgimento italiano, ma perché è una “poeta”, l’esempio massimo di una “poesia” nata da un’adesione così intima al proprio tempo e vissuta così seriamente da impegnare tutti gli affetti e tutte le forze dell’autore. [History is not *behind* the book by De Sanctis, it is *inside* of it. It is all one with his taste. It explains the judgments that he gives, even the most literary ones. It is the red guiding thread along which the events unfold. Dante is “great” and “current,” not because, as Mazzini had antihistorically fabled him to be, the one prophesized the Italian Risorgimento, but because he is a “poet”, and the highest example of “poetry” is born out of such an intimate adhesion to their own time and lived so seriously as to engage all the affections and all the forces of the author.”]

For De Sanctis, the ringing of the bells that announce the capture of Rome, wrested from the papacy by the Italian army on September 20, 1870 does not announce the victory of forces commanded by General Raffaele Cadorna, but by Machiavelli. The fall of the temporal power is that of the Papacy, and the new edifice is the secular church of the State. The bells are an expression of the national spirit, and he hears them like the “a shout in the street” that Stephen Dedalus heard as the “manifestation of God” in a novel penned by James Joyce fifty years later.³⁴ If the bells of Italian unification ring with Hegelian manifestations of “historical Spirit,” consciousness, totality and universality in this passage, it is because indications of it are spread throughout the *Storia*. De Sanctis regards the writings of Machiavelli, Bruno, Campanella and especially Vico as proof that the Italian literary tradition anticipates Hegel, and that his idealism reflects an internal logic belonging to the tradition.³⁵ Conceptually, his history seeks to render the unity of the Italian tradition, “avviluppata come di una sfera brillante, la sfera della libertà e della nazionalità [enveloped as if by a brilliant sphere, the sphere of liberty and of nationality]” (905), comprehensible in Hegelian terms as a “self comprehending totality”(Hegel, 78). The originality of De Sanctis, according to Ezio Raimondi, is that he constructs analogous concepts with regards to the “spirit” of language,

³⁴ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, annotated student edition, (London: Penguin Books, 1992) 43. In the “Nestor” episode, Stephen Dedalus responds to a statement by the schoolmaster, Mr. Deasy “All history moves toward one great *goal*, the manifestation of God.” (my italics) Having heard the schoolchildren outside shouting victoriously because one of them scored a *goal* in a game of hockey, Stephen responds. “That is God. [...] A shout in the street.” This exchange is widely held to be a critical comment on Hegelian theories of history. This theme is treated more extensively by Robert Spoo in *James Joyce and the Language of History: Dedalus’s Nightmare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 69-73.

³⁵ De Sanctis, 882. “Religione, arte, filosofia, dritto, sono manifestazioni dello spirito, momenti della sua esplicazione. Niente si ripete, niente muore: tutto si trasforma in un progresso assiduo, che è lo spirituarsì dell’idea, una coscienza sempre più chiara di sè, un maggiore realtà. In queste idee codificate da Hegel ricordi Machiavelli, Bruno, Campanella, soprattutto Vico. Ma è un Vico *a priori*. Quelle leggi, che egli traeva da’ fatti sociali, ora si cercano *a priori* nella natura stessa dello spirito [Religion, art, philosophy, law, are manifestations of the spirit, moments of it explication. Nothing is repeated, nothing dies: everything turns into constant progress, which is the spiritualization of the idea, a consciousness increasingly clear to itself, a greater reality. In these ideas codified by Hegel one recalls Machiavelli, Bruno, Campanella, above all Vico. But it is Vico *a priori*. Those laws, which he derived from social facts, now they are found *a priori* in the very nature of the spirit].”

community and geography (1). For De Sanctis modern literature has its mission in the production of an image that projects the conscious universality of the nation in the individual and leaves a testament to it, since literature is born out of this inner consciousness of historical spirit, whereby the individual author is but a monad of the national spirit.³⁶ The lack of such a universal idea is a gateway to entropy and fragmentation:

Come gli individui hanno la loro missione in terra; così anche le nazioni.
Gl'individui senza patria, senza virtù, senza gloria sono atomi perduti,
“*numerus fruges consumere nati.*” E parimenti ci sono nazioni oziose e vuote,
che non lasciano alcun vestigio di sé nel mondo.³⁷

[As individuals have their mission on earth; so also do the nations. Individuals without a homeland, without virtue, without glory, are lost atoms, “[*the numerous are born to consume the fruits of the earth*].” And proportionately there are also nations that are idle and empty, leaving no trace of itself in the world.]

Hence, one returns to Romantic ideas in Europe that establish the metonymy of the nation with fatherland, glory and virtue, and as every state was expected to identify as a nation, the idea of the nation provided a way of organizing history. For De Sanctis, the individual investment in the nation is understood as an active participation in national history. The guiding mission of the individual speaks to the producers of modern literature, and recalls Mazzini’s social role for art, which is to give form to the collective spirit. Without the guiding principle of the nation to animate this historical understanding, the individual is lost in “un

³⁶ De Sanctis, 699. “Adunque, se gl’individui sono innumerabili, ogni cosa è uno, e il conoscere questa unità è lo scopo e termine di tutte le filosofie e contemplazioni naturali, montando non al sommo principio, escluso dalla speculazione, ma alla somma monade o atomo o unità, anima del mondo, atto di tutto, potenza di tutto, tutta in tutto [Therefore, if the individuals are innumerable, everything is one, and to know this unity is the aim and end of all philosophies and contemplations of nature, not by mounting an overarching principle, excluded by speculation, but at the sum of monad or atom or unity, the soul of the world, the act of all, all power of all, the all in all].”

³⁷ Ibid. 603. De Sanctis paraphrases from a famous passage from Horace: “Nos numerus sumus et fruges consumere nati.” (Lib. I, epist. I.) “We are a mere number (but ciphers), and born to consume the fruits of the earth.”

mondo sciolto in atomi, senza vita e coesione interna [a world dissolved into atoms, without life and internal cohesion].” (De Sanctis, 656). Paraphrasing Horace, De Sanctis condemns liberal individualism without a national purpose as a parasitic ideology upon the collective life, and his atomism is prescient of the “anarchy of atoms” that Nietzsche, paraphrasing Paul Bourget, would come to associate with literary decadence, wherein “life no longer resides in the whole.”³⁸ According to the redeemed Italian history of De Sanctis, the individual who is not guided by the internal, organizing principle of the nation is a “*lost atom*,” not enveloped by the spherical, self-comprehending totality of the national-historical spirit, but dialectically excluded from it, astray in a haphazard mass of meaningless human actions, and thus “leaves no vestige of itself in the world.”

The eponymous narrator of Italo Svevo’s novel, *La coscienza di Zeno*, lives up to his Greek namesake when he confronts the totality of Hegelian historical *Weltgeist* with the paradoxes of the Eleatic philosopher. In Hegelian terms, if you have a paradox that can be resolved then it will be resolved, but Svevo’s novel is characterized by a dialectic that has no resolution. If Hegel’s “universal Spirit [...] elevates and completes itself to a self-comprehending totality” through the dialectical principles of universal history, the totality of Zeno’s historical consciousness (“*coscienza storico*”) is ineluctably and irremediably deferred. The modern version of the ancient Greek Zeno is an aging hypochondriac who resolves to quit smoking, and punctuates every significant milestone in his life with an “*ultima sigaretta*” that will never be the last one, until death resolves the issue of his totality. The utopian promise of

³⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Case of Wagner. Nietzsche contra Wagner. The Twilight of the Idols. The Antichrist*. Trans. Thomas Common (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1899) 25. Nietzsche draws from Paul Bourget’s essay on Baudelaire, first published in 1883, for his comments on literary decadence and the “anarchy of atoms”; cf. Paul Bourget. “Charles Baudelaire” *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre 1883; 1891) 25.

the nationalist that is projected in the providential histories of Mazzini and De Sanctis is the recovery of a lost, mythical unity, and Zeno calls this mythical unity is called “health,” but it is the “sick” *coscienza* that foreshadows the fate of such utopian projections. At the end of the novel, Zeno narrates an apocalyptic scenario that seems to mock the universalizing historical understanding of nationalism. In this vision man degenerates into a ‘sicker’ being as he becomes more dependent upon the materials, concepts and technologies that he uses as extensions, and his difference from others becomes amplified until the entire globe is a field of individual, antagonistic micronationalisms. In this scenario “bespectacled man” manages to free the world “of parasites and sickness” only by blowing it up, “returning” it to an original nebulous state. The spherical image of planetary totality is undone by the formlessness of the nebula, wandering through space.

Zeno’s cosmopolitics: antiliterature and entropy

Italo Svevo’s third novel, *La coscienza di Zeno*, is presented as a memoir written by an aging Triestine businessman with bourgeois values and insatiable desires, a hypochondriac riddled with imaginary illnesses, impelled to turn to psychoanalysis by an obsessive desire to regain his health. The psychoanalyst, Dr. S., claims in his prefatory note to these memoirs that he has published them as an act of revenge after his patient discontinues his visits. The memoirs are the fruit of a therapy that Dr. S. prescribes to the narrator-protagonist of the novel, Zeno Cosini, who seeks to overcome his tobacco addiction. Zeno recalls the doctor’s recommendation thus: “Scriva! Scriva! Vedrà come arriverà a vedersi intero [“Write it down!

And you'll see yourself whole! Try it!"]³⁹ Try as he may, Zeno is never able to follow through with the therapies recommended to him by this doctor and several others, and much of the novel's comical irony comes from the mental stratagems that Zeno invents in his subjective, historical auto-analysis of his smoking habit. In recounting his failures to achieve health, Zeno's ineptitude extends into almost every other aspect of his life, such as his professional life, his marriage, his sense of well-being, and ultimately becomes the fabric of the narrative itself. In writing out his psychoanalytic confessions Zeno is motivated by the promise of personal integrity and a unified sense of historical being, but the writing cure fails and this leaves him with an existential insight, wherein his quest for unity only leads him to more fragmentation.

In many respects the ideal state of health that Zeno sets out to achieve can be related to political and national ideologies that were pervasive in Trieste at the time during which the narrative takes place, and when Svevo was writing. Zeno Cosini, with a name that implies "stranger" and "little thing," is a microcosm of Triestine identity that cannot be universalized on the macro level. He embodies the plurality and relativism of Triestine life and he has a sick conscience because he cannot feel whole. Zeno's therapeutic writing reflects a deeper impulse to avoid categorical commitments, and the writing cure decisively comes to an end when he accidentally walks into a war zone during a stroll in the countryside. In the final chapter of the novel Zeno recalls his encounter with a group of Austrian soldiers, who establish a border that prevents him from returning to his family in a nearby village where he had been vacationing. By constraining him to one side of a territorial conflict they interrupt his customary

³⁹ Italo Svevo, "La coscienza di Zeno" in *Romanzi e "Continuazioni"* Ed. Nunzia Palmieri and Fabio Vittorini. (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 2004) 623-1085: 628; Italo Svevo. *Zeno's Conscience*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Vintage Books, 2001) 7.

ambivalence toward the various components of his identity. The event forces a resolution in which the quest for a unified sense of self, symbolized by his ideal state of health, the sense of wholeness aspired to in the act of writing, only results in more fragmentation and sickness.

“L’ho finita con la psico-analisi [“I’m through with psychoanalysis”]” (1048 [402]). Zeno declares, signalling a rupture with the narrative mode of the preceding chapters. The abstruseness of Zeno’s “cure” is reflected in the published memoirs, in which he tries to present his life as an organic and intelligible whole but complains that he is prevented from doing so by the resentful psychoanalyst who will not return his writings so that he can revise them. After spending almost a lifetime trying to quit smoking on his own, he finally declares himself cured – not by ending his dependence upon tobacco, but by accepting his ambiguous “sickness” as the way things are. Zeno’s “*coscienza*” which can be translated from the Italian as “consciousness,” “awareness” or “conscience” has psychological and moral significance within the economy of the novel, whereas it accumulates cultural and political significance as a work of literature. Expressed through his sense of linguistic inferiority, his cunning self-deceptions, his desires and his sincere inquiry into self-understanding, Zeno’s *coscienza* is a way of life that resists paradigmatic models of identity that are based on universal categories, but in the act of writing it becomes a kind of cultural *koine*. *La coscienza di Zeno* depicts the construction and the constitution of the modern psyche as the fictional narrator recounts the events of his life as a series of episodes in which he seeks out an ideal state of health. Yet in Zeno’s failings to attain the ideals that he sets out to achieve, he discovers who he is and the nature of his constitution. Franco Basaglia eloquently describes the transmutation of Zeno’s private *coscienza* into a public one:

[Svevo] ha descritto il triestino tipico: Zeno che è il triestino che non sa scegliere e che vive di intuizioni ‘cosmiche’ da un lato, e dall’altro di questa ambivalenza nelle sue scelte di vita. Questo tipo di persona è difficile da prendere per chi viene da fuori appunto perché sfugge costantemente e perché ha difficoltà di decidere quale è la sua identità.⁴⁰

[Svevo] described the typical Triestine: Zeno is the Triestine who doesn’t know how to choose and lives out his ‘cosmic’ intuitions on the one hand, and on the other, he lives out this ambivalence in his life choices. This type of person is hard to mistake for those coming from abroad, precisely because he constantly escapes and because he has difficulty in deciding what his identity is.]

The author of these comments was not a literary critic by vocation, but then, neither was Ettore Schmitz, the Triestine businessman who wrote novels and short stories under the pseudonym of Italo Svevo while working as a correspondence clerk at a large bank and later selling waterproof marine paint for the family business. Basaglia was the experimental psychologist who reformed the mental health system in Trieste in the 1970s. As one of the most successful proponents of the “antipsychiatry” movement in Italy, he initiated reforms that began with the controversial decision to end forced confinement in psychiatric hospitals in Trieste, opening its doors and integrating patients into the general public. Basaglia also advocated a phenomenological approach to psychiatry against the traditional positivist approach in an attempt to eliminate from the treatment of mental illness the subject/object divide and redefine what is meant by the concept of sanity. Basaglia’s opposition to the orthodoxy of the psychiatric establishment resonates with the antiliterary quality of Svevo’s writing, which also sought to redefine what was meant by the concept of literature.

The psychiatrist’s insight into the ideal and physical barriers of institutions that prevent the “mentally ill” from mingling with the “mentally healthy” population is not unlike the

⁴⁰ Quoted in Ferruccio Fölkel and Carolus Cergoly, *Trieste Provincia Imperiale: splendore e tramonto del porto degli Asburgo* (Milano: Bompani, 1983) 107-108.

border that Zeno encounters during his stroll in the country and the absurd farce that bars him from returning to his wife, his jacket and his coffee. From his remarks on the Triestine type associated with Zeno, we could conjecture that Basaglia would have found Zeno's views on life, sickness and therapy to resonate with some of his own:

La vita somiglia un poco alla malattia come procede per crisi e lisi ed ha giornalieri miglioramenti e peggioramenti. A differenza delle altre malattie la vita è sempre mortale. Non sopporta cure. Sarebbe come voler turare i buchi che abbiamo nel corpo credendoli delle ferite. Morremmo strangolati non appena curati. (1081-82)

[“Life does resemble sickness a bit, as it proceeds by crises and lyses, and has daily improvements and setbacks. Unlike other sicknesses, life is always fatal. It doesn't tolerate therapies. It would be like stopping the holes that we have in our bodies, believing them wounds. We would die of strangulation the moment we were treated.” (435)]

In Zeno's polysemic comparison that joins life to sickness, the porousness of body, which is necessary for all living things to survive, is also necessary for culture, language and nations to thrive. The limits of the State, so suddenly inscribed in space, and the threat of violence posed by the soldiers who are tasked with maintaining the solidity of the border make Zeno think about the limits of the organism and the image of a body that would suffocate if one blocked all of its orifices. Figuratively, the border also cuts across the body, amputates part of it (jacket, coffee and milk, wife). In their respective domains of psychiatry and commerce Basaglia and Svevo offer metaphors for the fixing of borders that are brought to bear on the domain of the literary. Both criticize gestures of territorialization at odds with the ambivalence of life and the relativity of modernity. Zeno's *triestinità*, described by Basaglia as a kind of identitary ambivalence, is understood as a kind of mental illness by the protagonist who writes, “La malattia è una convinzione ed io nacqui con quella convinzione

[“Disease is a conviction, and I was born with that conviction”] (635 [14]).” Zeno is convinced of his own illness, in spite of reassurances about his relative health from many of the doctors with whom he consults. He smokes incessantly and is convinced that his habit poses a risk to his health. Although his physician has only told him to cut back, Zeno firmly believes that quitting outright is the only way to regain his health. All that Zeno has to do is make a compromise in his smoking habit, but the comedy of the novel is how Zeno strives toward absolutes he can’t live by.

For the writer, Italo Svevo, the hegemony of the Italian tradition is characterized by impulses toward universality, categorical absolutes and providential notions of historical redemption – analogous to the state of “health” against which Zeno Cosini compares himself negatively. The writing cure that would confer “health” upon the Zeno serves as a metaphor for the idea of universal history that would allow someone situated in time and space to see its meaning. The Italian word for health, “salute,” can also mean “salvation,” which pertains to the worldview implied by the idea of a universal history, manifested in narratives that would redeem history from chaos, violence and the atomistic disorder of being in the world. Zeno’s narrative suggests that all greater unities, especially those that are presupposed by the literary tradition, are impostures and myths, and that human beings use their myths to justify violence under the guise of order.

Much as Zeno’s writing strives to encapsulate his life, the idea of universal history is manifested in the writer’s aspiration or pretence to enclose human history in a narrative container as well as a linguistic one. Zeno’s writing is never permitted to be national in a political or cultural sense, so in order to see himself as whole, redeemed and universal, he must find a way to bypass his perceived inadequacy in the terms of the linguistic container in

which he writes. As a Triestine, Zeno writes in the language he speaks in daily life, and he is stigmatized by his inability to master the conventional and formal structures of Italian — a stigma that Italo Svevo knew very well. As a hypochondriac, Zeno’s perceived “sickness,” his ineptitude and his inadequacy are illusions produced by looking at himself through the mirror of an imaginary integrity. In the allegorical scheme of Svevo’s novel this mirror is the Italian literary tradition that bases its hegemony upon the accepted integrity of its written language. The language ennobled by Dante, perfected and then preserved in a grammar by Manzoni, was held at a reverential distance by the *letterati* who overlook the historical basis of Dante’s originality, which was that he wrote in the living language of *his* present. Svevo wrote in what he called a “living language,” possessing resonances with the dialect spoken in Trieste, business jargon and syntactical borrowings from the German language that he also spoke fluently (the *loquela* that I spoke of earlier). His self-published novels were exiled to the margins of the Italian literary tradition where he was first ignored and then, after he was “discovered” by Joyce and celebrated in Paris, Italians condemned him for writing badly. Yet Svevo treats the hegemonic cultural superiority of the literary tradition into which he tries to insert his writing with relativizing irony, and correspondingly, Zeno acquires a more nuanced understanding of health that overturns his earlier “conviction” of sickness. For Svevo, the author of two failed novels, attempting his third, Zeno’s “avventura psichica [“psychic adventure”] (1062 [416])” pertains to the field of the literary. Zeno claims his own health when he becomes conscious of his ambivalence and indecisiveness, and his “cosmic intuitions” resonate much more closely with a life in constant flux than they do with literature. Life takes a meandering path towards death, as living vernaculars do through inscription and codification; health and sickness are only temporary stages, and there are many plateaus that

one can inhabit between the poles of instinct and reason, desire and indifference, moral correctness and error.

One can imagine that Zeno might have fared better with Basaglia as a therapist than he did with Dr. S., or for that matter, with the doctor who gave Zeno a clean bill of mental health, which he shows to his father who replies, “Ah, you really are crazy.” Taking such a certificate as an absolute proof of health is as senseless as deeming a passport as proof of one’s nationality. (In a world defined by nationalities, what else is there to use?) A passport only proves citizenship and enforces state power over territorial borders, much as the clean bill of mental health merely testifies to the authority of the knowledge institution to which Zeno submits himself for examination. As a proponent of the antipsychiatry movement to which Michel Foucault also subscribed,⁴¹ Basaglia contends that mental health is defined by what is normatively categorized as mentally ill, with relations of power establishing these categories.

La malattia mentale non è ragione e origine, ma conseguenza necessaria e naturale dei processi di esclusione legati alla dinamica del potere, potenzialmente e concretamente attivi in tutte le istituzioni sociali. Non basta liberare i malati per ridare una vita, una storia, a persone che sono state private della loro vita, della loro storia.⁴²

[Mental illness is not the reason and origin, but the necessary and natural consequence of exclusion processes related to power dynamics, potentially and

⁴¹ I mention Foucault here because of the consonance between the views expressed in his important study *L’histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* and Basaglia’s practices. Although Foucault generally attributes Basaglia’s findings to independent research, Basaglia was very familiar with Foucault’s work. Foucault was one of the preeminent critics of institutional structures associated with the antipsychiatry movement and he often made a point of holding Basaglia’s practices up as an example of the validity of his views. In an interview during which he discusses at length the antipsychiatry movement in practice, he quotes a report on the psychiatric hospital in Gorizia by Basaglia, “La caractéristique de ces institutions (école, usine, hôpital) est une séparation tranchée entre ceux qui détiennent le pouvoir et ceux qui ne le détiennent pas.” Quoted in Michel Foucault, “La pouvoir psychiatrique” *Dits et écrits*. Vol. 1. (Paris, Gallimard, 2001) 1549; cf. Franco Basaglia (Ed.), *L’Istituzione negata. Rapporto da un ospedale psichiatrico*, Turin, Nuovo politecnico, vol. 19, 1968 (*Les institutions de la violence*, in Basaglia F., éd., *L’Institution en négation. Rapport sur l’hôpital psychiatrique de Gorizia*, trad. L. Bonalumi, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, coll. “Combats”, 1970, p. 105).

⁴² Franco Basaglia (ed.), *L’Istituzione negata. Rapporto da un ospedale psichiatrico*, Turin, Nuovo politecnico, vol. 19, 1968.

concretely active in all social institutions. Liberating the ill is not enough to restore a life, a history to persons who have been deprived of their life, their history.]

Svevo's writing was also caught up in the exclusionary politics of power relations that took place in the knowledge economy of the literary, first as an author who would have been forgotten by the Italian literary tradition and second as a subversive, non-normative challenge to it. Structurally, thematically, linguistically and allegorically, *La coscienza di Zeno* plays out the power dynamics of literary hegemony in a number of domains in which the Triestine writer is relegated to a peripheral, inferior or excluded place; specifically, with regards to linguistic legitimacy, the economy of literary capital, institutional knowledge structures, political modalities of belonging (national identity), historical self-awareness and the act of writing itself as a means toward distinction in these domains. At the same time, with Svevo as with many Triestines, there is a bit of that attitude which Groucho Marx expresses in a telegram that he sent to a Hollywood club he had joined: "Please accept my resignation. I don't want to belong to any club that will accept me as a member." When the city was ruled by the Habsburg Empire Triestines asserted their *italianità*, and after it was "redeemed" by Italy, they would remind those who identified them plainly as Italians that they still identified as citizens of the Austrian Empire, much like Zeno wandering in the borderlands on the eve of war, since his *patria* is not to be found in either of the divided nation-states but in the freedom to transit between the two.

Zeno's Trieste and the borderlands of Lucinico where he meets the soldiers are microcosms of national literary space, and the dynamic relations of force within these spaces are allegorized in Zeno's interpersonal relationships. The allegorical and allusive significance of the novel will be explored in the fifth chapter, which reads *La coscienza di Zeno* as a

bourgeois satire of courtly romance, as a satirical pilgrimage towards salvation, and as a parody of Dante's *Commedia*: the most paradigmatic and universal work in the Italian language tradition. The object of Svevo's critique is not Dante, but rather the cult of Dante. The bourgeois worldview of Svevo's novel is a parasitic critical reflection upon the nexus between literature and national identity, and the ironic narrative of Zeno's "sick" conscience undermines their foundations without offering an alternative; it interrupts the coherence and continuity of feasible narratives and it casts doubt on authoritative voices. Zeno's recollections and repressions, his ingenuous lapses and disingenuous deferrals, his chronic indecision and his far-reaching cosmic intuitions do not produce a unified sense of self, and yet for all of Zeno's failures he ends up with a highly ambiguous kind of success. In spite of his ineptitude, he is reunited with his loving wife and child, and by exploiting an opportunity created by the war he gets rich. He realizes that life is a sickness after all, and thus declares himself cured.

Zeno's *conscience* is the awareness of the failure to resolve the paradox of his own unity in some ideal state of "health," but it evolves into a way of life, and while it would be hard to say whether the characteristic ambivalence of the Triestine type described by Basaglia preceded Svevo or followed from those who read him, what we know is that he gave them a durable form in his writing. Thus, if we were to imagine Svevo's image of the health acquired through "therapy" – or therapy as the term seems to suggest – as one of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the transubstantiation of a writing subject into a monument takes place materially in the economy of literary history that produced the life-sized statue of Svevo in Piazza Attilio Hortis. Svevo was eventually taken up by his native city, and by Italy, as a literary angel of sorts for the prevailing image of Trieste as a *città di carta*. Immortalized with a book under

his arm and a foot stepped forward, Svevo's likeness is fixed in one place but it seems to walk among us should we get caught in a photograph beside it. Of course, the body of Italo Svevo is not encased in bronze there, as the nightmarish image of a body with sealed orifices might suggest, but the substance of his work, his writing and his life, is encased in a thick layer of myth.

There was another myth of Svevo that was encased in bronze: a bust of Svevo was erected in the Giardino Pubblico in 1931 and it was stolen by fascist thugs in 1939 who had scrawled on the pedestal the words "Giudeo, il bronzo sia dato alla patria [Jew, this bronze will be given back to the fatherland]." ⁴³ The subtraction of Svevo from the *spazio vitale* of fascist Italy was a symbolic gesture to exclude Svevo once more from Italian culture when anti-Semitism and patriotism were synonymous with the "redeemed" Italian nationalism of Trieste. The message also implies that the bronze would be put to better use by immortalizing the image of an author deemed worthy by the State. However, up until the bust was replaced, many who saw the empty pedestal thought it was a clever artistic rendition of the author, since *La coscienza di Zeno* left an impression that was powerful enough on the minds of readers to engender a myth of elusive selfhood. Other myths of "*scriver male*" and "*triestinità*" engendered by Svevo's writing are not falsehoods, nor are they fictions in the sense that they stand in for the loss of a historical reality, but rather they function as grand narratives that the community uses to explain and order the world the world they live in. As such, these local narrative myths offer a critical alternative to the grand narratives of resurgence and redemption that underwrite the hegemony of the Italian tradition, and by extension, Zeno's

⁴³ Alberto Cavaglioni, *Italo Svevo* (Milano : Bruno Mondadori, 2000) 26.

cosmic intuitions critique the idea of world literature as an international, self-sustaining network of national literatures.

The rehabilitation of world literature: windows on the world

Occasioned by the proliferation of discourse about globalization, there has been much discussion among intellectuals over the last few decades on how to rehabilitate the idea of *Weltliteratur*. Reflections on the economy and material basis of literature account for a number of reprisals of the idea of *Weltliteratur* today that attempt to bring the concept up to date with the changing historical, social, economic and technological conditions of their times, while historicizing Goethe's understanding of the universal and rooting it in classical models. By the same token, it is also possible to historicize such attempts at articulating a new universality by making the cognitive and ideological underpinnings of these changing conditions intelligible. However, where globalization is generally thought of as a historical rupture with the hegemony of world order determined by fixed borders and nation-states, such rehabilitations of *Weltliteratur* elide or downplay the decline of literature's dominance as a mode of cultural production. As new media comes to dominate the production and diffusion of knowledge, writing and reading changes such that the endeavour of this rehabilitation is largely a conservative one. Such attempts often begin with a critique of Goethe's view, some praising his expression and then criticizing its Eurocentrism or its anachronistic (romantic) universalism, before continuing on to a view that ostensibly corrects its flaws using the disciplinary tools of the human sciences.

The rehabilitation of *Weltliteratur* is exemplified in such influential monographs as David Damrosch's *What is World Literature?* (2003), which sets out to define Goethe's

project in a twenty-first-century context, and Pascale Casanova's *La république mondiale des lettres* (1999).⁴⁴ Damrosch describes world literature as “all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language [...] actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture” (4), which indirectly makes the inverse claim that literatures which remain within the borders of their respective cultures are not effective as world literatures. Damrosch claims that “world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading” (5), recuperating Goethe's idea of an economy of literary value. As “a refraction of national literatures” (281) world literature affirms the solidity of the nation state and its culture; as “writing that gains in translation” (ibid) it acts as a transnational “locus of negotiation between two different cultures” (283). Damrosch dispenses with the notion of canonicity, but retains the practice of reading that resembles a window looking outward, positing the territorial stability of a national subjectivity or spirit ‘at home.’ From this anchored perspective, Damrosch's describes world literature “as an established body of classics, as an evolving canon of masterpieces, or as multiple windows on the world” (15). The structural metaphor of a window on the world is highly suggestive, characterizing the mediation of a detached, transcendent perspective and claiming that world literature “is not a canon of texts but a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time” (ibid). Damrosch posits the territorial stability of a disconnected subjectivity at a comfortable or a longing distance from the image that it contemplates, enclosed in a mobile interior as “someone who perceives

⁴⁴ David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Pascale Casanova, *La république mondiale del lettres* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999, et 2008). Other notable studies of world literature that are worth mentioning in this context, such as Franco Moretti's *Maps, Graphs, Trees* (2005) and his influential essay “*Conjectures on World Literature*”, Emily Apter *The Translation Zone*, Manfred Schmeling, *Weltliteratur Heute* (1995), Christopher Prendergast, *Debating World Literature* (2004), John Pizer, *The Idea of World Literature* (2006), Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, *Mapping World Literature* (2008).

the other through a window of theory while themselves eluding counter-observation.”⁴⁵ The idea of an interior, where one finds shelter and comfort, as opposed to an exterior where one intermingles with a world of people and things, strangeness and terror, brings the antinomy of life and literature into view.

Pascale Casanova's *La république mondiale des lettres* takes theories of cultural production and capital developed by Pierre Bourdieu to expand upon the idea of world literature as an international marketplace. Casanova situates Paris as the spatiotemporal centre of this marketplace – a “Greenwich Meridian” of literary time – through which all writing has to pass in order to participate in the exchange of literary capital, and where texts are transmuted into literature by processes of consecration or “littérisation.” Literature that accedes to the universal becomes “dénationalisée,” and translations play an important role in this transversal process: “C’est la traduction dans une grande langue littéraire qui va faire entrer leur texte dans l’univers littéraire : la traduction n’est pas une simple “naturalisation” (au sens de changement de nationalité), ou le passage d’une langue dans une autre mais plus spécifiquement, une “littérisation” (201-201). She underlines this point by with an interesting observation: “C’est notamment le cas de Joyce, qui trouva en Valéry Larbaud à la fois un introducteur, un traducteur et un consacrant unique” (214). Casanova’s appraisal of Larbaud’s role in the translation of *Ulysses* into French and her argument for “le rôle central et actif de Larbaud dans cette consécration et ennoblissement du texte” (215) before becoming one of the foundational texts of literary modernity seems like an exaggeration, but this overstep (as well as my perception of it), as Casanova later realized, was indicative of a limit to her literary understanding.

⁴⁵ Peter Sloterdijk. *In the World Interior of Capital: For a Philosophical Theory of Globalization*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013) 120-121.

Casanova's book enjoyed a wide readership and translation into English, and it was also criticized for its structural-national biases (xv) – in other words, its Francocentrism. Damrosch was among her most disparaging critics, taking issue with the “implicit triumphalism” of Casanova's work and suggesting that it “might be better titled *La République parisienne des lettres*.”⁴⁶ When a new French edition was published in 2008, it appeared with an apologetic preface. Paraphrasing Erwin Panofsky, Casanova writes of “habitudes mentales,” and remarks that her work expressed “les « habitudes littéraires » de l'espace auquel j'appartiens.” This admission acknowledges that any overview of world literature is necessarily grounded in some place and that place becomes the foundation for a global projection, positing a model that begins at a single point and projecting a world outward. She identifies this space with a specific language and a specific national identity: “une identité que je n'avais jamais cessé d'occulter ou de dénier en ce que je la considérais comme dénuée d'importance, de validité ou de pertinence : mon identité nationale” (xiv). Yet Casanova's response to the critics, “ma République ne pouvait qu'être française,” is not at all in conflict with the idea of *Weltliteratur*, but reiterates it as the limit of literary understanding.

Casanova's avowed perspective, located in a city, a nation and a linguistic community, seems to indicate a kind of national-linguistic geocentric fallacy that underwrites all literary claims to universality. It seems too difficult to prove the heliocentric universe from a grounded perspective where the sun really does seem to orbit the earth. Similarly, it is hard to see the world from outside of one's language and culture – the subjective centres from where

⁴⁶ Damrosch, 27 “An unsatisfactory account of world literature in general, Casanova's book is actually a good account of the operation of world literature within the modern French context.” Frances Ferguson describes the critical commonplace of Francocentrism, from such scholars of world literature as Christopher Prendergast, Franco Moretti and David Damrosch. “Planetary Literary History: The Place of the Text” *New Literary History*, 39.3, Summer 2008. 657-684.

world projections emanate. Casanova's admission points to the ideological and cognitive elision that underwrites totalizing theories of world literature, and whether they are modelled on Goethe's understanding or they attempt to bring it up to date by accounting for the vicissitudes of globalization, they involve a literary economy that projects the local into the global, but this projection is mediated by national language and cultural consecration.

Although Damrosch and Casanova seem to suggest that what was prophetic in Goethe's time is anachronistic in ours, perhaps it would be better to recognize the anachronism embedded in the institutionalization of literary thought that was proper to German Romanticism. As Lois Parkinson Zamora observes, the dependence upon national languages and literatures acts as a hindrance to comparative literature in the context of the globalization debate:

National literatures and languages have long been the analytical units of our discipline, but the processes of globalization tend to detach cultural formations from national territories in ways that undermine the territorial coincidence of language, culture, and nation. This development involves the (re)conceptualization of space to which I have referred. Terms like "post-geographical" and "post-national," sprinkle discussions of globalization and there is virtual unanimity on this point: the ratios of local and global are no longer clearly fixed, and familiar distinctions between "here" and "there" are unstable, if not gone (if the recent coinage "glocal," combining local and global, seems unlikely to catch on, we can always recur the venerable term "cosmopolitan," combining "cosmos" and "polis," which John Stuart Mill coined in 1848 in his second volume of *Political Economy* to suggest the changing relations of local and global in his own time). In short, cultural spaces are increasingly mobile, volatile, virtual, fungible, and may now be close to becoming something like the opposite of the fixed spatial category of nation upon which comparatists continue to depend.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Lois Parkinson Zamora, "Comparative Literature in an Age of "Globalization"" *CLCWeb* 4.3 (September 2002) <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss3/1>>. Note on the text: The author attributes the coinage of the term "cosmopolitan" to Mill, whereas Jean Jacques Rousseau was already using the term by 1762 in seminal works such as *Émile* and *Du contrat social*.

Globalization, however, has not turned world literature into an outmoded term, since the dissemination of literary works translated into other languages and distributed, electronically or by means of the (soon to be antiquated) technology of the printed book, shows that modern means of distribution do indeed augment the scope of Goethe's vision. Insofar as understandings of world literature presuppose national space as a centre of gravity, or posit a stable point of reference for the territorialisation of literary work, they do not account for the entropy of global flows, or for the complex identitary negotiations of the individual psyche in a postnational world. In this respect, where attempts to understand Trieste's particular anachronism have labelled it as an microcosm, we can now view it as a fractal for a worldview that had not yet come.

The no-place of Triestine writing

How does Triestine writing offer a critical perspective that allows us to think about the literary economy of global literature in terms of globalization, postnationalism and late modernity? The following chapters will attempt to answer questions raised by the groundwork of this one. First, the idea of Trieste that comes across in its cultural production belongs to a different literary economy than that of world literature, whereby its world projection effectively bypasses the mediation of the nation state and national language, and exemplifies a trajectory that diverges from that of national literatures. The divergent trajectory of Svevo, which is treated in the third chapter of this study, extends into our traditional understandings of *Weltliteratur*, insofar as its world projection implies the exchange of literatures territorialized in the nation as a precondition of its universality. Writing, in the scheme of world literature, presents the image of a microcosm extending into a cultural sphere

or constituting one, but the hubs of literary value are now dispersed and polycentric. The universality of Svevo lies in the attempt to constitute such a center, but the macrocosm of Svevo's writing is not a cosmic sphere but a nebula. Triestine writing is a fractal, not a microcosm. Globalization is not an age of cosmic totalities but of fractals.

Second, Triestine writing frustrates canonicity with a non-nationalizing critical impulse, and anticipates the decline of modern nation-state hegemony in the classification of literature, as its reception presents a paradoxical counter-myth to that of nationalism. What "antiliterature" meant for Slataper and Svevo extended into the conceptual paradigms that defined their historical modernity, and this will be explored in the fourth chapter of this study. The temporal aspect of the term "modernity," referring to the present, has never been successfully purged from literary history, nor from any other branch of historical thinking that uses it. Yet this is what these writers try to do by demonstrating a critical awareness of the present and projecting a worldview rooted in a contemplation of their own immediate circumstances. Reflecting upon his status as a Triestine artist Slataper wrote: "prima di tutto sono *uomo*. Poi sono *poeta* (e non letterato). Poi sono *triestino* (cioè senza una tradizione letteraria, ma devo fare tutto da me, e sopra un materiale storico ed etnico molto più intenso che per lo più) [above all I am a *man*. Then I am a *poet* (and not a man of letters). Then I am a Triestine (that is, without a literary tradition, but I must make all of it out of myself, and above a historical and ethnic material that is all the more intense for it)]."⁴⁸ In this hierarchical stocktaking of the self, Slataper expresses a critical attitude that underwrites much of his work. Literary criticism and scholarship, which makes judgments deciding what writing qualifies as literature (*logos*) rely on the material and conceptual accumulations of history, or what Svevo

⁴⁸ Scipio Slataper, *Alle tre amiche*, ed. Giani Stuparich (Verona: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1958) 419.

would call a “malattia della materia,” in defense of his “dilettante” writing.⁴⁹ The material bases upon which the hegemony of literary nationalism anchors itself preclude the three bases of what Slataper sees as universal, his humanity (*cosmos*), his poetic expression (*mythos*) and his sense of place (*topos*). One always writes from where one is. That is the center of Slataper’s classicism (that is, the way in which he relates to writers from the past, or as a friend of mine put it, “dare del *tu*” to Dante, Goethe and Shakespeare) and the basis of his Triestine art. The historical distance that any institutional use of literature places between the human and their awareness of the present, or the poet and their sense of its expressive potential, is the material basis of a hegemony whose domain has only metamorphosed and expanded as the result of globalization.

Third, Triestine literature expresses disenchantment with (or a sense of impossibility regarding) the integrity of any nation-state coterminous with culture, whether real or imagined. It consists of an awareness of cultural fragmentation on par with the fragmentation of the self, in which one finds that there is no geo-political integrity other than that of the planet in its limited entirety. This overarching integrity, in which the entropy of globalization finds its ideational limit, however provisional, is where global literature is located. This hypothesis will be treated in greater depth in the fifth chapter of this study, which examines Svevo’s novel *La coscienza di Zeno* as a parody of Dante and a satire of literary value. In response to the inner conflict generated by the political and economical forces of modernity that converge in Trieste, it could be said that Slataperian tragedy and Svevian comedy are two sides of the same coin, as both address the impossibility of an integral and authentic self. Slataper’s

⁴⁹ “La vita è una malattia della materia [Life is a disease of matter].” Italo Svevo, *Racconti, Saggi, Pagine sparse* (Milano Dall’Oglio, 1968) 842. The context and irony of this aphorism, as well as the nuances of sickness as a Svevian motif in relation to his writings on dilettantism, are treated on pages 234-235 of this text.

“multianime” Triestine identity elides traditionally established categories of national identity, whereas Svevo contemplates what might happen if these identities were allowed a foothold. The scenario in which the self-determined micronationalisms of individual identity coexist peacefully is the dream of Mitteleuropa, but in *La coscienza di Zeno*, where his protagonist witnesses the antagonism of nations toward each other, the satirical, social Darwinist outcome foretells the nightmare of Balkanization on a global scale.

Fourth, Trieste has historically been regarded as a *non-place*, a nowhere on shifting borderlands that Richard Robinson describes as a “Central European atopia, where national teleologies disappear into blank space.”⁵⁰ Sources of this idea in its earliest cultural expression will be explored in the second chapter of this study. Many who came to Trieste in the nineteenth century perceived the general preoccupation with commerce to be the city’s defining cultural trait, and that it excluded from its sphere literary or historical preoccupations. In an article on Adriatic maritime trade, Karl Marx observed that Trieste “had the advantage of not having any past,” reiterating the prevalent “Philadelphia myth” of Charles Albert de Moré who compared Trieste to the past-less cities of the new world in the early nineteenth century. Habsburg Trieste would have been a *heterotopia* according to the German sociologist Helmut Willke, whose use of the term refers to a “generalized social condition” of global modernity, “that cultivates indifference toward cultural difference, together with a diminution in the social drive toward unity and order.”⁵¹ Descriptions of the city from this period also resonate with Willke’s use of the term *atopia*, which “describes the irrelevance of the place,

⁵⁰ Richard Robinson, *Narratives of the European Border: A History of Nowhere* (Houndmills; New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007) 43.

⁵¹ Summary of Willke’s concept of heterotopia in Ronald Nietzen, *A World Beyond Difference* (Malden; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) 179; cf. Helmut Willke, *Heterotopia: Studien Zur Krisis Der Ordnung Moderner Gesellschaften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003).

global placelessness.”⁵² The atopian geographical expression of Trieste anticipates the atopian dimensions of globalization, and was generated out of historical circumstances that made Trieste into a proto-global city when it was an Imperial free port under the supranational Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Having no sense of history and no literary traditions, Trieste was seen as non-national and atomistic in the sense that Mazzini and De Sanctis would have intended, until Italian national sentiments in many of the city’s residents galvanized the political movement of Irredentism, upsetting the general peaceful coexistence of multiethnic economic actors, and finally realizing their “redemption” after the great war. Before that time, owing to a perceived antinomy between its commercial vocation, which was tied to the interests of the Habsburg State, and cultural-historical-artistic traditions, which looked toward the recently established Kingdom of Italy, it did not have a strong sense of local identity. When the Viennese playwright and critic Hermann Bahr visited Trieste in 1909, he summed up this situation in a much-cited passage from his travel memoirs.

Merkwürdig ist Triest. Die schönste Landschaft. Schöner als Neapel. Aber gar keine Stadt. Man hat das Gefühl, hier überhaupt nirgends zu sein. Es kommt einem vor, als bewege man sich im Wesenlosen. Hier hat sich nämlich der Staat das Problem gestellt, einer Stadt ihren Charakter vorzuenthalten. Natürlich geht das nicht, es ist doch eine italienische Stadt. Aber sie darf nicht. Daher der Unwille, den man überall an ihr spürt. Es ist eine Stadt, die eine unwillige Existenz führt. Was sie ist, soll sie nicht sein, und gegen den Schein, zu dem man sie zwingt, wehrt sie sich.⁵³

[“Trieste is strange. The most beautiful landscape. Even more beautiful than Naples. But not a city at all. One has the feeling of being nowhere here. It seems as if one moves in the unreal. Here the state has posed itself the problem

⁵² Helmut Willke. “Atopia, the *Plus ultra* of the nation-state’s self-encirclement” <http://www.myzel.net/biophily/moderne/willke_pu_en.html>; cf. Willke, Helmut. *Atopia. Studien zur atopischen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp. 2001).

⁵³ Hermann Bahr, *Dalmatinische Reise* (Berlin: S. Fischer, 1909) 8.

of withholding from the city its character. Of course, this cannot work, it is an Italian city. But it is not allowed to be so. Hence, the unwillingness one perceives everywhere. It is a city, which leads an unwilling existence. What it is, it shall not be, and it defends itself against the illusion it is forced into.”⁵⁴

In the same year that Bahr made that voyage Slataper declared, “Trieste has no cultural traditions,” in the Florentine periodical *La Voce*. The Irredentist historian Ruggero Timeus remarked, “Trieste non ha storia,” in a history of the city that disavows the historical import of five hundred years of Habsburg rule. The pervasive idea of negativity, expressed by Bahr and elaborated upon in numerous examples since, has become as symbolic of Trieste as any of its landmarks. A century after Bahr, Slataper and Timeus wrote those words, we can now say that Trieste has perhaps too much history and that its literary culture has been well established. Scholars have and continue to generate new knowledge about the city and a list of novelists and poets too numerous to mention here expand upon and continued the city’s most acknowledged cultural tradition.

When the idea of a cultural Mitteleuropa gained cultural currency in the nineteen sixties, Trieste was annexed into the phantasmic image projected by the defunct “geographical expression” of the Habsburg myth, and in many respects defined it. As discussed earlier, Magris paraphrases Musil in articulating the idea of Trieste as a space where self-identity is only arrived at through subtraction, or whether a stable national identity can only be achieved through the repudiation of some part of one self (as Slataper and Svevo realized). Claudio Magris and Angelo Ara write of the *anti-letterarietà* of Triestine literature (15) and Enzo Bettiza, the Dalmatian author of *Fantasma di Trieste*, claims that Triestines are *apolidi*

⁵⁴ Above quotation translated by Anna Campanille “The Torn Soul of a City: Trieste as a Centre of Polyphonic Culture and Literature” *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. Vol. 2 (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2006) 145-161: 147.

(Robinson 4) – people without a city-state or citizenship. Fabio Cusin refers to his history of Trieste as an anti-history.⁵⁵ The city acquired its unique identity, becoming someplace, by being a non-place, and many authors and intellectuals from beyond Trieste and Italy have since also nourished this *atopian* idea.

The Welsh travel writer Jan Morris describes her recollection of the city as a “half-real, half-imagined seaport” (8), paraphrasing an expression from Slataper in a book that is appropriately titled *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere* (2001). Joseph Cary’s memoir about the city, *A Ghost in Trieste* (1993), details the quest for long dead authors (Joyce, Svevo and Saba) among the traces of the city’s literary past. This attribution of ambivalence and lack that is inscribed upon biographical narratives of these authors, metamorphoses into an existential sense of *triestinità*, or gets drawn into a rhetorical tradition that mystifies the city’s peculiar literary history. In literary-historical discourse “Trieste” is not a city, but an idea, a feeling, a kind of radioactivity (Enzo Bettiza, *Il fantasma di Trieste*) or even an elusive spirit (Stelio Mattioni, *Il richiamo di Alma*) that leaves its trace in the written activity that attests to its being (Umberto Saba, *Trieste e una donna*), or having-been there (Anita Pittoni, *L’Anima di Trieste*), exceeding its living or lived historical reality (Mauro Covachich, *Trieste sottosopra*), a conscious non-rapport or an intuition about being out of place or out of time. The proliferation of such a literary-historical discourse and its effect on studies of Triestine literature has many examples, and it is evident in, for example, Carla Galinetto’s study of the Triestine author Alberto Spaini:

⁵⁵ The Triestine historian Fabio Cusin wrote books of Triestine history and highly polemical anti-nationalist historiography, notably his *Antistoria d’Italia* (Torino, Einaudi, 1948); cf. Glenda Sluga, “Inventing Trieste: History, Anti-History, and the Nation,” *The European Legacy*, 1.1, 1996, 25-30.

Nascere a Trieste significava già allora proiettare la propria esistenza nella sospensione della storia; esistere nel luogo della mancanza delle vitali cognizioni di tempo e spazio. Troppi tempi e troppi spazi si confondevano l'uno con l'altro, si scontravano, si respingevano, a volte compenetrandosi. Ne derivava una sensazione di marginalità esistenziale, di ambiguità e di elusione della vita stessa; in ultimo la sensazione di vivere nell'indeterminatezza e nell'immaterialità delle cose, che a Trieste, sembravano trovarsi tutte una accanto all'altra, contemporaneamente.⁵⁶

[Being born in Trieste already meant at that time to project one's existence into the suspension of history, to exist in a place lacking vital cognitions of time and space. Too much time and too many spaces mingled with one another, clashed, repudiated and sometimes interpenetrated each other. This resulted in a feeling of existential marginality, ambiguity and the avoidance of life itself. Finally, the feeling of living in the uncertainty and the immateriality of things, that in Trieste, all seemed to lie next to each other, and happened at the same time.]

In such descriptions one also hears the distant melody of the global, atopian non-place. Trieste's singularity is found in its ambivalence toward its singularity, which is also the source of its historical tensions and identitary ironies. Its centre of gravity is also a centrifuge, and its aperture towards the sea suggests its connection to shores far away. In many respects, this openness draws thinking about Trieste away from its rootedness in one place. Many of the city's inhabitants, or their ancestors, had come there by sea, and while they could communicate with each other in the *koine* language of the port, and as Claudio Minca writes in his article on Trieste's 'geography of absence', "while speaking Triestino with each other, the city's various communities remained culturally distinct according to their nation of origin, in an endlessly shifting interplay between 'hereness' (confirmed by their genuine Triestinità) and 'elsewhereness' (embodied by their distant, and in this sense 'absent', nation)."⁵⁷ In

⁵⁶ Carla Galinetto, *Alberto Spaini germanista* (Gorizia, Trieste: Istituto Giuliano di Storia, Cultura, Documentazione, 1995) 13-14.

⁵⁷ Claudio Minca, "'Trieste Nazione' and its Geographies of Absence," *Social & Cultural Geography*, 10.3, May 2009, 257-277: 269.

conceiving of such a constitutive dynamic, we return to the French writers in the early nineteenth century who did not imagine Trieste as a sphere or a circle, but as an amphitheater, implying that the half it opened out towards was the global sea. Yet the problem of understanding Trieste's enigma has often fallen to literary criticism that attempts to disentangle historical myths and images from historical realities and facts, and there is so much written on this subject that to sift through it one feels like Kafka's messenger, trying to get beyond the walls of the Imperial palace, and the walls seem to expand faster than I can run.

One always writes from where one is. What kind of place is Trieste, then?

CHAPTER 2

THE ANTECHAMBER OF TRIESTINE LITERATURE

The writings that will be examined in this chapter pertain to a number of atopian myths about Trieste, which are related to the concept of the city's commercial vocation under Habsburg rule. They *antecede* the emergence of *triestinità*, whether it is the expression of a particular "*coscienza*" associated with a place, a principle of negativity, or an unresolved dialectic. Before the illustrious generation of Triestine authors who sought to define the particularity of Trieste in terms of its literary culture, the city was invariably thought of as a commercial hub for world exchange and foreign markets, and consistent with this, its literary culture was largely made up of borrowings from imported models.¹ Trieste was called the *città emporio* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and it has been associated with commerce and exchange since it was established as a Roman colony in the second century B.C. The ancient name of the city is telling: when it was part of the Roman Empire it was called

¹ Ernesto Sestan, *Venezia Giulia: Lineamenti di una storia etnica e culturale* (Bari: Edizioni del «Centro Librario», 1965) 24-25: "La coscienza di appartenere, geograficamente, alla regione che si chiama Italia, e giuridicamente, all'organismo statale che fu prima l'Impero romano e poi, nel risorto impero carolingio, il regno longobardo-italico, non si era mai spenta; ad essa ora si aggiunge una più alta coscienza, quella di appartenere a una comunità linguistica, culturale, letteraria che è quella italiana. Quell'ignoto friulano o istriano che nel Dugento o nel Trecento lesse per primo e gustò i poeti siciliani o toscani, i versi di Dante o del Petrarca o le novelle del Boccaccio o magari le pagine devote di un mistico umbro o senese, e le sentì come voci della sua gente e si provò ad imitarle e le comunicò agli amici e trovò in essi concordia di apprezzamenti, quegli fu uno dei primi italiani della Venezia Giulia. [The awareness of belonging, geographically, to the region that called itself Italy, and legally, to the state apparatus that was initially the Roman Empire and then, after the reborn Carolingian Empire, the Lombard-Italic Kingdom, never extinguished itself. To that one added a more acute awareness; that of belonging to a linguistic, cultural, literary community, which is that of Italy. That unknown Friul or Istrian first read and savoured the Sicilian and Tuscan poets, the verses of Dante or of Petrarch, or the novellas of Boccaccio or perhaps, pages of worship by an Umbrian or Siense mystic, then he felt it as though it was the voice of his people, and then he tried to imitate them and communicate them to his friends and found in them a mutual appreciation; he would have been one of the first Italians in Venezia-Giulia]."

Tergeste, which combines two words from the extinct Venetic language: the root *terg*, which means ‘market’, ‘place’ and the suffix *-este* indicating ‘space’, ‘town.’²

Trieste did not develop into the fourth largest city of the Austrian Empire as the result of an advantageous geographical location, proximity to natural resources, or a particularly enterprising population. Austrian conflict with Venice necessitated an Adriatic port within the protectorate of the Empire, and other viable options in the Istrian peninsula were Fiume (now called Rijeka), Capodistria (Koper) and Pola (Pula). Modern Trieste was born out of Imperial decree when the Emperor Charles IV declared it a Free Port in 1719. His immediate successor Empress Maria Theresa aided its growth with subsidies, the development of port facilities and the construction of the grid-like *quartiere teresiano* on land reclaimed from the sea, where the *città emporio* flourished at the foot of the old city. While the *fiat* that gave birth to the modern city of Trieste was a calculated decision, it has nonetheless been regarded as a providential moment, and a powerful economic myth. Images of the city in the writings of those who lived in Trieste in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, *émigrés* who had come to make a living and stayed, sojourners and travellers who stayed for various periods of time, and others who may never have been to the city at all suggest a constellation of historical, economic and cultural characteristics that have endured.

If Triestine modernity is the main space of our inquiry, the image of an antechamber can be a useful metaphor to describe the written artefacts that were produced before the Triestine “*prise de conscience*” took place. The prefix “ante-” in architectural terms identifies a spatial orientation and signifies an area that must be passed through in order to arrive at a larger space like a theater or a concert hall. As an antechamber is a small room leading to a

² Alessandro Cisilin, “L’imposition d’une frontière. Société et idéologie à Trieste, entre municipalité, nationalité et empire 1717-1914,” *Social Anthropology* (2000), 8.3 219-340. 322, n. 8.

main one, it always has a secondary or preparatory function. It might function as a waiting room for visitors or a reception area, a place of transit or a site of transactions extrinsic to the function of the main space. In a sense, it is a *non-lieu – atopos* – but one that differs from the atopic *antiliterature* that has come to be traditionally associated with the idea of Triestine literary space. What I have termed “*anteliterature*” to describe the literary *topos* of eighteenth and nineteenth century Trieste combines the spatial and temporal distinctions of the prefix to indicate the placelessness of Trieste, and to conceptually distance this earlier writing from *antiliterature*, which refers to the idea of a Triestine counter-tradition beginning with Svevo. Like *antiliterature*, the term *anteliterature* should be understood in terms of a specific literary history informed by a hermeneutics of *triestinità*; that is, a sense of local particularity, but also a way of making sense of history, which we will explore in the last section of this chapter.

Mercury and Minerva: patron deities of Trieste

The Triestine aristocrat Antonio de’ Giuliani consecrated much ink to the promise of his natal city as an emerging economic power on the world stage as well as its grand role in European nation building. De’ Giuliani was a loyal subject to the Austrian Empire and had sojourned in France and England in diplomatic service to the Emperor. His reflections on the commercial and civic cultures of Trieste begin in the intersection between Enlightenment economics and the dawning of a new national consciousness. Predating the romantic nationalisms of the French Revolution and the linguistic-literary national spirit where national conscience developed out of collective identifications with artistic genius or military heroism, Antonio de’ Giuliani identifies Trieste as a hub city where the centripetal and centrifugal forces of commerce, the traffic of goods and a mobile workforce engenders a sense of place

and of national destiny. De' Giuliani's vision of Trieste is informed by the economic populationist doctrines of Joseph von Sonnenfels under whom he studied law in Vienna,³ but his writings also feature an allegorical aspect. In his *Riflessioni Politiche sopra il prospetto attuale della Città di Trieste* (1785) De' Giuliani describes the "Genio del Commercio" as a historical-spiritual force in the development of nations from within and from without, and a "mediating spirit" that sojourns in Trieste while acting as a vehicle for a "new order" of imperial-national cities:

Altre volte il mondo era tutto dei conquistatori, che si disputavano la gloria di distruggere. In oggi tempi più felici presentano un quadro assai diverso per l'Umanità [...] In questo sistema di cose non si calcola più nei fasti di un monarca il numero delle città demolite, ma quello della Città edificate [...] Si osservino gli spiriti mediante una felice rivoluzione già inclinati a un nuovo ordine di idee, cessar d'occuparsi delle chimere, che prima assorbivano tutte le nostre facoltà fisiche, e morali [...]. Il commercio, le scienze e le arti dopo aver soggiornato in un luogo, amano di passar sott'altro cielo a migliorare il destino delle nazioni [...]. A Trieste venga l'uomo di riflessione a mediare sopra il modo con cui nascono e si formano le città.⁴

[In older times the world was all one of conquerors who fought over the glory of destruction. These happier times present a very different framework for Humanity [...] In this system of things the glories of the monarch are no longer calculated in the number of cities demolished, but that of the Cities they build [...] One observes the spirits by means of a happy revolution already inclined to a new order of ideas, ceasing to deal with chimeras that had initially absorbed all our physical and moral faculties [...]. Commerce, science and the arts after soujourned in one place, love to pass under another sky to improve the fate of

³ Cesare Pagnini "Prefazione" Antonio de' Giuliani, *Scritti inediti*, ed. Cesare Pagnini (Milano: All'Insegna del Pesce d'Oro, 1968) 12. Robert A. Kann recounts that Sonnenfels' doctrine of economic populationism stipulates that the wealth of the state rested in a skilled work force, which was a value in itself as bullion was thought to be according to the current mercantilist doctrines. Sonnenfels was also an advisor to the Empress Maria Theresa, who was convinced of the validity of his doctrines, as was her co-regent and successor Joseph II. "The regime under the direction of the empire-wide Commerce Directory, established as early as 1741, pursued a mercantilist commercial and industrial policy, revised and somewhat refined by the doctrines of populationism." Robert A. Kann. *A History of the Habsburg Empire: 1526-1918* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974) 181-182.

⁴ Antonio de' Giuliani, *Riflessioni sul porto di Trieste*, Vienna 1785; ctd. in Apich, *Trieste* 13-14.

nations [...] The man of reflection comes to Trieste to mediate over the way in which cities are born and formed.]

De Giuliani portrays Trieste as the embodiment of a renewed function of Empire, occupied by the benevolent “spirits” of the modernity: commerce, science and the arts. These *Riflessioni* are dedicated to Joseph II, regent to Maria Teresa, who carries out this peaceful new Imperial function in the development of Trieste, which in turn, partakes in building successful trade hubs abroad in a global economy while extending these “spirits” of the marketplace to other nations. According to De’ Giuliani, the new order involves the development of urban hubs that facilitate global logistics and exchange, and the Empire gains through the economic growth of other nations. De’ Giuliani sees the city as a monad of the renewed historical spirit, a locally bound civil society with a global scope.

Ma l’esperienza di tutti i secoli e l’osservazione di quanto si vede ai nostri giorni, devono convincere che la storia del commercio altro non è se non la storia dello sviluppo delle nazioni. Questo sviluppo è determinato dal concorso delle circostanze, dai rapporti, e dalle relazioni esterne. Queste circostanze, questi rapporti, e queste relazioni non restano mai le stesse, quindi li continui cambiamenti di scena sul teatro del mondo.⁵

[But the experience of the ages and the observation of what you see today must convince you that the history of commerce is nothing if not the history of the development of nations. This development is determined by the competition of circumstances, of reports, and of external relations. These circumstances, and these relationships are never the same, so there constant changes of scene on the world stage.]

De’ Giuliani’s vision of national history is manifest in terms of commercial development, and in accord with the Austrian economic policy of his time he does not advocate the bullion-based mercantilist doctrine that regulates foreign trade by hoarding

⁵ Idem. “Riflessioni politiche sulla stagnazione dell’industria nella monarchia austriaca” *Scritti inediti*, 159.

domestic gain. In this manner, he has often been compared with the Scottish economist and philosopher Adam Smith, who published his magnum opus *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* in 1776. Like Smith, he was also a critic of mercantilism and thought that government interference in the economic process by imposing trade tariffs was detrimental to the development of a commonwealth. De' Giuliani could also be thought of as an early proponent of global systems of exchange and the internationalization of the political economy. He regards Trieste as an exemplary global city, from an understanding that is predicated on the idea that the healthy nation state is formed by international commerce and trade relations. Commerce, which is personified as one of the spirits of the modern age, resides in Trieste but cannot be tied to any nation or state.

Dacchè si è considerato il commercio come le sorgente della ricchezza degli Stati, tutt'i Governi vollero avervi parte. Ognuno cercò d'incatenarlo, ma invano. Egli spezza tutte le catene, e non intende farsi schiavo di alcuna Nazione. Egli favorisce i Popoli, perchè ama di visitare altri climi e fare il giro del Globo. [...] Se le idee sparse in questa picciola produzione feriranno forse per la loro novità, questo sarà perchè dedotte non già dalla mania dei sistemi, ma da un lungo esame sopra li bisogni e le passioni degli uomini, vi si rimarcherà il carattere di riflessioni fatte sempre a cielo scoperto sugli oggetti veduti d'appresso, e non già nel ritiro di un Gabinetto sopra le vaghe ipotesi di un mondo di fantasia, che sembra esser quello di tutti gli odierni scrittori politici.⁶

[Since commerce is thought of as the fountain of the State's wealth, all governments want to have him take their side. Everyone has tried to chain him, but in vain. He breaks all chains, it is not his intention to act as a slave to any nation. He favors diverse Peoples, because he loves to visit other climates and to travel around the globe. [...] If the ideas that are scattered in this small production prove to offend you, perhaps because of their novelty, this is because they are not deduced from the mania of systems, but through a long examination on the needs and passions of men, you will remark the character of reflections always done in the open air on objects seen from up close, and not

⁶ Idem. "Panorama politico della Città di Trieste" *Scritti inediti*, 200.

in the withdrawal of a salon set above the vague idea of a fantasy world, which seems to apply to all of today's political writers.]

De' Giuliani's barb against other political writers is a denunciation of mercantilism as a constructed political narrative based on abstract systems of thought from afar, but his assertion of authority in speaking of the city is to defend it from a rather infamous reputation that had grown alongside its development. Trieste had become considerably more famous since the Imperial decree that made it a Free Port, and not only was it known for its commercial prospects and inclusive merchant class, it had also gained notoriety as a city of thieves.⁷ Trieste was well known for an infamous crime at the time: the classicist and aesthete Johann Winckelmann was assassinated by a common thief in 1768. One might think that "*triestin mezo ladro e mezo asasin* [Triestine, half thief and half assassin]," a proverb in the local dialect, could have arisen from the infamy of this crime, but it began in revulsion toward newcomers with criminal pasts in other countries who had obtained permits of stay and abused duty exemptions in the Free Port.⁸ De' Giuliani holds that commerce is not properly

⁷ "Era ancora e sempre vero quanto aveva scritto Antonio Giuliani, che, cioè, la immigrata popolazione si componeva di diverse nazioni ed in parte di brava gente che giovava il prosperamento commerciale, ma purtroppo anche di fuggitivi, di banditi, di micidari, di bisognosi stranieri, che trovavano nell'esercizio della loro industria la felicità [It was already true when Antonio Giuliani wrote, that is, the immigrant population was composed of different nations and partly of good people who enjoyed commercial prosperity, but also of fugitives, bandits, killers and needy people, who found satisfaction in the exercise of their trade]." Giulio Caprin, *I nostri nonni* (Trieste : G. Caprin, editore, 1888) 29.

⁸ Elio Apih, *La società triestina nel secolo XVIII* 86-87; cf. P. Kandler, *Emporio e Portofranco di Trieste* 227. Apih continues from the above to criticize this perspective, "In realtà questo modo di vedere non era che un aspetto de malanimo col quale la città vecchia si sottomise; anche a questo proposito bisogna sottolineare che la lunga tradizione storiografica che ha accolto senza molto impegno critico questo giudizio, o per ingenuo acquiescenza alla tradizione umanistica, o per interessata propaganda di un pseudo idealismo irrazionale, ha presentato e diffuso il quadro di una città dominata da incolti affaristi di ogni nazione, non ha capito che ciò non era decadenza o peggio ma era formazione travagliata e poco organica di una società nuova, era diffusione disordinata di nuovi valori pratici in larghe masse di popolazione, era espansione di uno spirito attivo, intraprendente, mirante al concreto [In fact this perspective was only an aspect of the ill will with which the old town was subjected. Also in this regard, it should be underlined that the long historical tradition has accepted this judgment with little critical effort, or by naive acquiescence to the humanistic tradition, or by the biased propaganda of an irrational pseudo idealism, it presented and published the picture of a city dominated by uncultivated businessmen from every nation, did not understand that this was not decadence or worse, but was the turbulent and rather inorganic formation of a new society; it was a disorderly spread of new practical values

understood unless it takes into account the purposes, the interactions, the transactions and market processes that are guided by human need and desire. These processes may take place under the aegis of good faith and honest exchange; however, as gain is not always achieved by these means, De' Giuliani relates the realism that comprehends the human propensity to deception and violence to a figure in Greek mythology that embodies both and that smiles upon moral and amoral commercial practices: the pagan god Mercury.

Il commercio che in origine riposava sulla buona fede, divenne poco a poco il seminario di tutte le astuzie, di tutti gl'inganni, di tutte le frodi, e di ogni sorte di pirateria. Non senza ragione la mitologia degli antichi, ch'era tutta allegorica, mise il commercio sotto il patrocinio di Mercurio, il Dio delle furberie, e il fautore dei ladrocinj. Tuttavia resta sempre vero che il commercio è l'anima degli Stati, perché senza moto tutto languisce nella natura, e fra li Negozianti vi sono degli individui stimabili che non conoscono altre soddisfazioni che quelle d'influire al movimento promotore di tutte le industrie. Mercurio il Dio di tutte le furberie, di tutti gli artificj, il fautore dei latrocinj. Non senza ragione sino a tanto che nell'antica Roma era rispettata la virtù, si fece dei mercadanti una classe separate dal resto de' Cittadini, ed esclusa di quelle prerogative ch'erano loro proprie. Ma lo splendor dell'oro che tutto annobilita, annobilità in tempi posteriori il commercio. Egli è divenuto il Dio delle nazioni. (162)

[Commerce, which originally rested on good faith, gradually became the seminary of all tricks, of all deceits, of all fraud, and of every kind of piracy. It is not without reason that in the mythology of the ancients, which were allegorical, commerce was placed under the patronage of Mercury, the God of cunning, and the champion of thieves. However it still remains true that commerce is the soul of the State, because without its impulse everything in nature languishes, and between traders there are reputable individuals who do not know any other satisfactions than these to influence the promoting movement of all industries. Mercury, the God of all tricks and of all artifices; the proponent of theft. It is not without reason until such time as ancient Rome had respected the virtue of the merchants became a separate class from the rest of citizens, and excluded of those prerogatives that were their own. But the

in broad masses of the population; it was the expansion of an active, enterprising spirit, aimed at what was concrete].”

splendour of gold that ennobles all, ennobled commerce in latter times. He has become the God of the nations.]

Mercury as the patron divinity of Trieste has commonly been used as an allegory for the city's commercial vocation. Giambattista Vico indicates that the words "commerce," "merchant" and "mercedes" (payment) are derived from the name of the aforementioned deity.⁹ De' Giuliani's reference to the division in Roman society between merchant and citizens alludes to the writings of Caius Julius Caesar, who described the divinity as "the inventor of all arts" having "very great influence over the acquisition of gain and mercantile transactions."¹⁰ Caesar, who was unfamiliar with the gods that comprised the Gaul pantheon, mistook Mercury as their chief divinity. De' Giuliani associates Mercury with the division in Roman classes of citizenship (*Cives Romani*) into those who enjoyed full protection, suffrage and the right to hold office (*optimo jure*), and those who held only the rights of property and marriage (*non optimo jure*), likening the commercial class to the Gauls, who were also regarded as a barbarian people. The gradual ennobling of commerce had a real corollary in

⁹ Giambattista Vico, *La scienza nuova*. (1744) Vol. 2. Ed. Fausto Nicolini (Bari: Gius. Laterza & Figli, 1913). "Dal qual Mercurio, che fu altresì creduto dio delle mercatanzie, gl'Italiani (la qual uniformità di pensare e spiegarsi, fin a' nostri di conservata, dee recar meraviglia) dicono « mercare » il contrassegnare con lettere o con imprese i bestiami o altre robe da mercantare, per distinguere ed accertarne i padroni." (328) "Qui incominciarono i primi commerzi nel mondo, ond'ebbe il nome esso Mercurio, e poi fanne tenuto dio delle mercatanzie; come da questa prima imbasciata fu lo stesso creduto dio degli ambasciatori, e, con verità di sensi, fu detto dagli dèi (che noi sopra truovammo essersi appellati gli eroi delle prime città) esser mandato agli uomini (qual' Ottomano avverte con meraviglia essersi detti dalla ricorso barbarie i vassalli); e le ali, che qui abbiam veduto significare origini eroiche, furone poi credute usarsi da Mercurio per volare da cielo in terra, quinci rivolare da terra in cielo. Ma, per ritornar a' commerzi, eglino incominciarono d'intorno a questa spezie di beni stabili; e la prima mercede fu, come dovet'essere, la più semplice e naturale, qual è de' frutti che si raccolgono dalla terra; la qual mercede, sia di fatiche di robe, si costuma tuttavia ne' commerzi de' contadini." (536)

¹⁰ Caius Julius Caesar, *"De Bello Gallico" and Other Commentaries*. Trans. W.A. Macdevitt. Everyman's Library, 1915. <<http://archive.org/details/quotdebellogalli10657gut>> The Project Gutenberg. In an example of the comparative discourse of *interpretatio romana*, whereby the Imperial Romans reinterpreted the religious traditions of Gauls and other peoples according to Roman models, Caeus Julius Caesar writes "XVII.--They worship as their divinity, Mercury in particular, and have many images of him, and regard him as the inventor of all arts, they consider him, the guide of their journeys and marches, and believe him to have very great influence over the acquisition of gain and mercantile transactions. Next to him they worship Apollo, and Mars, and Jupiter, and Minerva; respecting these deities they have for the most part the same belief as other nations: that Apollo averts diseases, that Minerva imparts the invention of manufactures, that Jupiter possesses the sovereignty of the heavenly powers; that Mars presides over wars."

Trieste, as a merchant could acquire an aristocratic title if he had enough capital at his disposal or influence in commerce, as Baron Pasquale Revoltella would do in the latter half of the nineteenth century, but the commercial culture of Trieste would continue to be regarded with the ambivalence attributed to the wily patron deity of the city.

De' Giuliani's adoption of Mercury as the patron deity of Trieste gives a mythological character to the economy of Trieste and its actors. It also serves as an allegory that embraces several of the most pervasive myths that characterized the Free Port in the nineteenth century. As the messenger god, Mercury cannot be tied to one place but is present in traffic with other places. Mercury is the patron god of financial gain, but also the god of *furberia*, which is not properly translated as "cleverness" but as the virtue of being able to turn situations to your advantage by honest or dishonest means. Channelled into representations of the city's commercial vocation, and the figure of Mercury persisted in the myth of Trieste, well into the time in which the generation of Triestine writers beginning with Svevo and Slataper began to set narratives in their city.

With its recourse to allegory, and as a written and published text that attempts to define the civic character of in its uniqueness, De' Giuliani's *Riflessioni* is a document of Triestine anteliterature. The symbol of Mercury as the chief divinity of Trieste is ubiquitous in the literary history of Trieste, though more and more often in dialectical opposition with Apollo or with Minerva, who came to symbolize forms of cultural nationalism that were antithetical to the nations symbolized by Mercury in De' Giuliani's writings, and more consonant with the modern political European nationalisms that were on the rise.¹¹ After the Congress of Vienna

¹¹ For example, two indispensable literary histories of Trieste derive titles from the pairing of Mercury with another god. The fourth chapter of Ara and Magris's *Trieste : Un'identità di frontiera* is entitled "Apollo e Mercurio," and Elvio Guagnini's magisterial two volume study of Triestine literary history bears the title of

and the Revolutions of 1848, cultural discourses showed a distinctly dialectical character, opposing enlightenment humanism to romanticism, imperialism to nationalism. This dialectical understanding was frequently expressed in the early twentieth century by such thinkers as the Triestine economist and socialist Angelo Vivante, who regarded the “antitesi tra il fattore economico e quello nazionale”¹² as central to understanding Triestine history, and Scipio Slataper who identifies the “doppia anima” of Trieste with the “travaglio delle due nature che cozzano ad annullarsi a vicenda: la commerciale e l’italiana.”¹³ This dialectical view, however, did not have to wait until the revolutions of 1848 and the Italian Risorgimento, after which Irredentist passions flared. Triestines sought to root their *italianità* in a much more Apollonian sense of culture in the early nineteenth century as well, and this was the imperative of Domenico Rossetti, who was a major cultural figure in the city during the early nineteenth century.

Domenico Rossetti di Scander (1774-1842) was a historian, philologist and patriot who emphasized the *italianità* of Trieste under the aegis of Minerva. He founded two influential institutions that are still in operation, *La società del gabinetto di Minerva di Trieste*, which was founded in 1810 and *L’Archeografo triestino*, a historical and cultural journal to which the noted historian Pietro Kandler (1804-1872) made regular contributions. *La società di Minerva* was a collective of liberal intelligentsia who promoted and participated in cultural and artistic activities and played an important role in giving Trieste a sense of having an Italian identity. The choice of Minerva symbolized the neoclassical orientation of the society’s activities, the cult of memory, philological and archaeological research, the

Minerva nel regno di Mercurio. The latter makes reference to the *Società di Minerva*, a provincial literary circle to which many influential cultural figures in the city were drawn.

¹² Angelo Vivante, *Irredentismo adriatico* (1912) (Trieste: Edizioni “Italo Svevo”, 1984) 221.

¹³ Scipio Slataper, “La vita dello spirito”, *La Voce*, 25 March 1909.

conservation and valorization of Trieste's Roman cultural patrimony and the celebration of the Italian language.¹⁴ However, when Triestine Irredentists chanted the slogan "Ne la patria de Rossetti non si parla che italiàn," the homage to this important cultural figure commits the anachronism of aligning the "patria" of Rossetti with the greater unity of Italian Risorgimento nationalism. In the early nineteenth century, as the historian Giorgio Negrelli asserts, Rossetti fostered notions of the city's civic particularism and did not extend into the national question.

[I]n realtà, la "patria" del Rossetti è la sua *città*, nulla di più: è questa la sua idea, questo il suo concetto politico fondamentale; la *nazionalità* ne è un elemento, che serve per impedire l'assorbimento della piccola *patria* nello Stato; la "nazione" nel significato sempre più preciso che tale assumerà nel corso del secolo XIX, non esiste ancora.¹⁵

[In reality, the "patria" of Rossetti is his *city*, nothing more: this is his idea, this is his fundamental political concept; *nationality* is no more than an element that is useful for impeding the absorption of the smaller *patria* into the State; the "nation" in the more precise sense that it would assume in the course of the nineteenth century did not exist yet.]

The particularity of Trieste, which Rossetti conceived of as a Roman heritage, was not antithetical to Habsburg domination since he saw the Austrian Empire as a continuation of the Holy Roman Empire.¹⁶ It is also worth noting that Domenico Rossetti and his family bore an aristocratic title, which had been conferred upon his father Antonio by Empress Maria Teresa for his vital role in developing the city's shipping industry. Rossetti's pro-Austrian *italianità* indicated that the concept of the nation was decided by every criterion except the political: it had historical, linguistic, ethnic, religious, cultural criteria, which manifested in the literary

¹⁴ Elvio Guagnini, *Minerva nel regno di Mercurio*, vol. 1 (Gorizia-Trieste, Istituto Giuliano di Storia, Cultura e Documentazione, 2001) 10-11.

¹⁵ Giorgio Negrelli, "Il municipalismo di Domenico Rossetti," *Rassegna Storica del Risorgimento* (1967) II, 183-184.

¹⁶ Fabio Cossutta, *Ideologia e scelte culturali di Domenico Rossetti: Il suo petrarchismo* (Udine: Del Bianco, 1989) 72-79.

“spirit” of a people. Rossetti firmly believed in the Italian nationhood of Trieste, but at the time the political order in Europe did not demand that the nation and the state combine in a sacred union, and it was not a contradiction in terms to have an Italian nation in an Austrian State. Moreover, when Napoleon’s forces dominated the region from 1809 until 1816 Rossetti asserted the right of Austria over Trieste, and took a view of the French presence in the city as the invasion of a foreign power.¹⁷ Rossetti brought the patron goddess Minerva into the Triestine pantheon, but she would only come into conflict with De’ Giuliani’s deity Mercury after Risorgimento nationalism corralled to itself the arts of philology, language and the study of literature in the imaginary community of a unified Italy. The idea of nationalism changed from one that didn’t see a contradiction in being an Italian Austrian to another that insisted upon being Italian only.

De’ Giuliani and Rossetti were both wealthy, aristocratic intellectuals who identified Trieste as their *patria* in the early years of the Free Port, and their respective choices of patron deity reflect how they conceived of the city. Mercury smiles upon “furberia” (cleverness) in commercial transactions whereas Minerva graces philology, archaeology and the salon. Put into the terms of Roman models of citizenship, the people of Mercury are the foreign barbarian Gauls and *Cives Romani* “*non optimo jure*”, and those of Minerva are the “*optimo jure*” aristocracy. Mercury follows the unrooted cosmopolitan between here and elsewhere,

¹⁷ Cossutta, 76-77: “La dedizione all’Austria si configura quindi come sottomissione a quell’unica autorità universale che storicamente continuava l’eredità di quell’autorità romana di cui Trieste era figlia, e che non poteva quindi essere sentita come un autorità straniera. [...] L’Austriaco Domino non era sentito come autorità tedesca, ma come autorità romana, e quindi non solo nulla ostava a che una città italiana fosse suddita della monarchia romana, ma anzi, proprio nella sudditanza a quella monarchia, le caratteristiche nazionali italiane di quella città trovavano le più ampie e le più alte garanzie [The dedication to Austria is thus configured as submission to that single universal authority that historically continued the legacy of that Roman of which Trieste was its offspring, and that could not therefore be perceived as a foreign authority. [...] The Austrian Dominion was not perceived as a German authority, but as a Roman authority, which therefore did not preclude it being an Italian city as it was subject to a Roman monarchy; rather, in its allegiance to the monarchy, the Italian national characteristics of that city they were the fullest and the highest guarantees].”

while Minerva stays at home in municipal patriotism and provincial particularism. The patron deities of Trieste are figures of centrifugal and centripetal forces, civic virtues and vices, material transactions and intellectual exchanges, financial and literary economies. They serve as mythical allegories for cultural perceptions that would only become antagonistic for Irredentists and Socialists between the Risorgimento and World War I, though their relationship between the two deities was unequal as the nineteenth century was characterized by the reign of Mercury over Minerva.

One more distinction: Minerva's language was Italian, maintained in insular linguistic traditions and in literature. Mercury's language was the Triestine dialect, which was based on Veneto, incorporating elements from the mixed populations used in commercial life. The Triestine dialect was an inclusive linguistic container for many immigrants who continued speaking the languages of their birthplaces with their families. The immigrant populations of Trieste, and those who visited for shorter periods, were also important sources of the city's myths, especially abroad. The French *émigré* community, which came to Trieste as exiled aristocrats after the Revolution, or as bureaucrats during Napoleon's brief reign, was particularly instrumental in contributing to the mythology of the Free Port.

Between atopia and anywhere: the Philadelphia myth

After decisive a military victory over Austria in 1809, when territories from the Tyrol to Dalmatia were ceded to the French as part of the Treaty of Schönbrunn, the Napoleonic Empire established the Illyrian provinces and held them until 1816. Napoleon's name for these territories, "*Les Provinces Illyriennes*," refers to the people who had occupied these regions in antiquity. The French Emperor established the administrative centre of the

provinces in Laybach (now Ljubljana) and set up consuls in Trieste, Venice, Ragusa (Dubrovnik) and other cities. Several writers who would become well known later in their careers had sojourned there, particularly Chateaubriand and Stendhal, who were stationed in Trieste, and Charles Nodier, who remained in Laybach for several years and set several of his novels in the Adriatic port city. Having been posted in the Illyrian Provinces as ambassadors and in other official capacities, these men of letters described their surroundings in reports, memoirs and personal correspondences, as well as in their more consciously literary activities, such as their novels. Descriptions of Trieste and its culture before its period of Napoleonic occupation are also found in the memoirs of General Louis Charles Antoine Desaix (1768-1800) and Comte Charles Albert de Moré, who described the city as the “Philadelphia of Europe.” After the Illyrian Provinces had been returned to the Austrian Empire, depictions of Trieste in the novels of George Sand and Jules Verne were informed by the Memoirs of Desaix and de Moré as well as Nodier’s novels, attesting to the myth of Trieste in the first half of the eighteenth century.

Carnival and amphitheater: the spectacle of cultural difference

General Louis Charles Antoine Desaix (1768-1800) visited Trieste in 1797 and wrote of his impressions of the city in great detail, taking notes on its infrastructure, the quality and dimensions of the streets, lighting, the layout of the port, and the semi-circular form of the city: “La ville de Trieste est peu grande, quoiqu’il y ait plus de 30,000 âmes. Elle est prodigieusement peuplée. C’est une ville presque toute neuve. Dans dix ans, elle a augmenté d’un tiers. Elle doit son existence à Joseph II qui, en faisant d’elle un port franc, y attira un

commerce énorme” (230).¹⁸ Desaix saw promise in the fledgling city’s rapid growth in the bustle of construction taking place,¹⁹ and observed the variety of cultures that circulated there to be one of its most distinct characteristics: “Il y a à Trieste une chose bien intéressante. C’est tous les costumes différents qui s’y trouvent par les gens de toute nation et de toute espèce en route [...] Leur variété m’a bien amusé” (234-35). General Desaix writes of Trieste as a tourist, remarking that the culture of the city is not to be found in the theater or the museum, but in the streets and in a way of life as a spectacle. For the narrator of Charles Nodier’s novel, *Mademoiselle de Marsan* (1832), public celebrations like Carnivale, combining elements of masquerade, exoticism and utopian equality would resemble aspects of the city that émigrés encountered regularly:

Je me doutais à peine de ce spectacle, [...] mais il devait avoir un aspect particulier à Trieste, où il faisait foisonner sous les colonnades et à travers les illuminations cette partie casanière de la population qui est aussi un spectacle : les Grecs, les Albanais, les Turcs, dans leurs vêtements si variés et si pittoresques; les jolies filles juives qui percent d’oeillades si ardentes et si acérées les anneaux coquets de leur noire chevelure [...] (85)

The variety of national costumes provides a spectacle for General Desaix, offering a pageant of cultures from far and wide. Even its form suggests a stage, as the city not only has a Roman amphitheater among its most prominent landmarks, but also resembles one topographically.

The surgeon Dominique-Jean Larrey who accompanied Desaix in Trieste describes the city in his memoirs as “une ville neuve, favorablement située sur le revers d’une colline qui s’étend en demi-cercle sur les bords du golfe où le port est construit. La ville s’élève par

¹⁸ Louis Charles Antoine Desaix, *Journal de voyage de General Desaix, Suisse et Italie* (1797), 2nd edition (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1907) 230.

¹⁹ “Trieste s’augmente tous les jours. Dans peu, elle deviendra très considérable. Par toutes les extrémités, on voit s’élever de nouveaux bâtiments, très grands et très beaux” (234).

degrés au-dessus en sorte qu'elle forme [...] un amphithéâtre pittoresque.”²⁰ Charles Nodier also describes the city in *Jean Sbogor* using similar terms: “Ses bâtiments, qui s’étendent en amphithéâtre depuis le port jusqu’au tiers de l’élévation de la montagne” (41). Similar descriptions are found in the memoirs of Comte de Moré, who writes to this effect: Trieste [...] s’élève en amphithéâtre sur le croupe d’une Montaigne dont le pied est mouillé par la mer” (196). The port and the emporium are at the foot of this structure where the stage is erased and where participants and spectators are not separated from each other.

Carnivale takes on a different meaning in Trieste to the narrator in Charles Nodier’s novel since the spectacle of masquerade, colourful costumes and Oriental exoticism is part of quotidian life, but it is not the inference that such events are exceptional elsewhere that make them uncanny to the author, but rather the realization that such experiences can go unnoticed. With its rapidly expanding population, Trieste was a city where being an *émigré* was the rule rather than the exception, and the ease with which the foreigner could integrate into the economic activity of the city, and added to its novelty. For the French, this added to the carnivalesque aspect of the city and in the memoirs and novels that describe it the Bakhtinian sense of the word applies. Some found amusement in the spectacle of nations, ethnicities and languages that were part of their everyday experience of the city, and for others the saturnalian upsetting of traditional class hierarchies that this entailed often required novel renegotiations of identity. This was especially the case with Comte Albert-François de Pontgibaud, who dropped his title to take on the pseudonym Joseph La Brosse and become a merchant in Trieste.

²⁰ D. J. Larrey, *Mémoires de chirurgie militaire et campagne*, vol. 1 (Paris: J. Smith, 1812) 174.

Joseph La Brosse and the Philadelphia of Europe

Comte Albert-François de Moré de Pontgibaud left France shortly before the Revolution in 1792 with his family, first settling in Lausanne, then in Constance and Prague before arriving in Trieste in 1799, where he spent the remainder of his days until 1824.²¹ He began by setting up a shop where he sold paintings, tools and his wife's embroidery, and he held a private bank for French émigrés, both of which were very successful. He attained a predominant position among the merchant community of Trieste and was one of the founders of the *Tergesteo*, the port city's stock market. He was an exception to the general French aristocratic émigré culture, but nonetheless his story serves as a point of reference, because he came from noble origins and cast aside his title to join the modern city and its culture of commerce. From aristocrat to merchant, he conducted business in Trieste under the name of Joseph La Brosse and exemplified a type of successful Triestine immigrant who became interwoven into the economic fabric of the city. La Brosse was a well-known figure at the time and an archetype of the successful French émigré, representing the composite, nomad identity of the exile and the cosmopolitan ethos of the Triestine marketplace.²² La Brosse belongs to a post-Revolutionary historical narrative in which the émigré integrates into the new community, and whose success in a new world is predicated upon the ability to let go of an illustrious past. The identity renewal that he exemplifies is placed in sharp opposition to the identity politics of those who kept a destiny inherited from the past close to heart.

Joseph La Brosse kept a correspondence with his brother, Charles Albert de Moré de Pontgibaud, who took a different journey when he left France and accompanied Lafayette in

²¹ René Dollot, *Trieste et La France (1702-1968): Histoire d'un Consulat* (Paris: Éditions A Pedone, 1961).

²² Charles Dédéyan « Les romantiques français à Trieste avant et après Stendhal » *Atti del Congresso del Quindicennale « Trieste e la Francia »* (Trieste : Edizioni Italo Svevo, 1986) 83.

the American War of Independence. Charles Albert de Moré, who visited Philadelphia when he participated in the American Revolution, visited Trieste, where his brother resided, upon his return to Europe. He had the chance to compare the French expatriate communities in these cities and wrote to his brother, “The city you have chosen for your new enterprise is the most suitable and certain for success; it is the Philadelphia of Europe, the typical pioneer city of our old continent, the port in which castaways find shelter and a new, promising life.”²³ The image of the city as an outpost of the new world in the heart of the old makes reference to ideas about the assimilating mercantile culture of Trieste and the promise of a new life that it holds. The comparison to Philadelphia, “a typical pioneer city,” implies that these promising circumstances could be reproduced in any number of world cities, given the specific economic conditions of the Free Port, and the epithet suggests Trieste’s conceptual placelessness. Philadelphia is not the Trieste of America because Trieste is an *atypical* European city. The influx of *émigrés* who came to the city for a fresh start imagined Trieste as a new world located in the old, the rise of communities where the shattered old world of decadent, aristocratic Europe could find refuge. The myth of Trieste portrayed the city as a European bastion of the new world that was unencumbered by the aristocratic hierarchies of the old world by a commercial mercantile one. To De Moré, The city of Trieste was a vantage point for reflection upon Europe and the new economic-political order. Its myth also drew many more castaways to its shores.

As Comte de Moré notes in his memoirs: “Trieste devint l’hospice où tous les blessés politiques, de quelque rang qu’ils fussent, depuis les têtes découronnées jusqu’à leurs

²³ Quoted in Dominique Kirchner Reill, *Nationalists Who Feared the Nation: Adriatic Multi-Nationalism in Habsburg Dalmatia, Trieste and Venice* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012) 81; cf. Oscar de Incontrera, *Trieste e l’America (1782-1830 e oltre)* (Trieste: Edizioni dello Zibaldone, 1960) 99-101.

ministres, venaient chercher un asile, et où ils le trouvaient : mon frère les a tous reçus sous son toit hospitalier” (301). For Comte de Moré, the personality of his brother becomes inseparable from his understanding of Trieste: his “toit hospitalier” is a synecdoche of Trieste as a “hospice.” Another noteworthy motif in his description is that of the “castaway” seeking stable ground, hospice, shelter or any kind of enclosure that would preserve the exile from the dissolution of identity. The hereditary title belonging to La Brosse would have signified his adhesion to the past and carried with it the stigma of exile or impeded his integration into the host society. La Brosse and his family chose to invest personally and economically in their host country, whereas the French community he observed in Philadelphia suggests that aristocrats exiled by the Revolution generally turned inward and surrounded themselves with a network of other aristocrats in order to preserve their identity, with a view to the restoration of the monarchy and a return to privilege in France.

Comte de Moré met with members of the French émigré community in Philadelphia, which was mostly comprised of the outcast nobility who had taken refuge there after the French Revolution, and he describes their predicament in his memoirs:

Hélas ! mon Dieu ! je ne rencontrerai dans les rues de Philadelphie que des grands devenus petits, des ambitieux trompés, des niais punis et des hommes d’hier qui n’étaient plus rien aujourd’hui ; que des parvenus étonnés de ce que la roue de fortune ne fût pas restée stationnaire pour eux, quand leur étoile était montée jusqu’à son zénith.

Mon ami Duportail me nomma, pour mon instruction particulière, les réfugiés français marquants que Philadelphie renfermait, comme l’arche de Noé. Le vaisseau de la monarchie française ayant sauté par suite de leurs faux systèmes et de leurs folies, l’explosion avait jeté un bon nombre d’entre eux jusqu’aux Etats-Unis. Aucun d’eux n’était corrigé, désabusé, n’était revenu à des idées plus saines ; ainsi, constituants, conventionnels, thermidoriens, fructidoriseurs, tous ne voyaient dans leur défaite politique qu’une opération à laquelle il n’avait manqué presque rien pour réussir. Ils jetaient toujours les yeux sur la

France, comme sur une terre d'expériences, qu'ils regagneraient tôt ou tard, pour y recommencer ce que chacun d'eux appelait le *grand œuvre* : car il existait autant de plans et de systèmes politiques qu'il y avait parmi eux de fugitifs notables. Aux Etats-Unis, on pouvait se croire aux Champs-Élysées décrits au sixième livre de l'Énéide, ou chaque défunt se nourrissait dans l'autre monde l'idée qu'il avait caressée de son vivant.

Mais comme avant tout il fallait vivre, chaque Français déchu de sa grandeur exerçait une industrie : c'était là le curieux de spectacle. (147-148)

Comte de Moré takes note of a sharp difference in the attitudes of the aristocratic exiles toward their roots in France and the cities where they had settled. If the spectacle of cultural diversity in Trieste is a carnival, the spectacle of *émigré* life is a saturnalia where men of title and privilege are forced to take up professions and rely on their wits and labour. The Revolution had levelled the ground and the former aristocrats had to engage in activities that they once thought beneath them in order to survive. Invariably, those who hold out hope for the recuperation of privileges that comes with title encounter disappointment and failure in the new world, where they are often astonished at finding themselves in service to another as, for example, when taking on the role of a shopkeeper. The saturnalia of Philadelphia extends into Europe through Trieste, only it is more favourable for Joseph La Brosse who did not have repatriation in view when he founded his businesses in Trieste, and did not return to France after the Bourbon Restoration. The willingness to shift one's own political plans and national allegiances in order to prosper in the economic sphere of world commerce attested to a form of cosmopolitanism that made Trieste an attractive city for merchants.

Undoubtedly, another important factor in the success of La Brosse was that he was surrounded by a network of the most influential figures in the city, and he often acted as an intermediary between small merchants in the port and the city's Austrian, Italian or French

elites.²⁴ La Brosse rendered a number of mutually profitable services to the French military during their occupation of Trieste and the Illyrian Provinces, and he remained in good stead with the Austrian authorities after Napoleon had lost his hold on Trieste in 1813. To avert the crisis of the French forces who still occupied the city confronting the Austrian army that surrounded it, La Brosse was called upon to act as a mediator, going between the French and the Austrian camp “comme un parlementaire chargé de la confiance des deux nations; sa maison de campagne, ses propriétés furent respectées constamment et regardées comme un territoire neutre” (De Moré 206). When a war tax of six million francs was imposed upon the city by Napoleon’s forces in the November of 1805, La Brosse was offered an exemption but refused it in solidarity with the merchant community of Trieste. This gesture did not estrange him from the French occupiers, quite the contrary. They needed supplies for French Imperial troops in Istria and Dalmatia, and purchased them from *la maison Joseph Labrosse* three days after the tax was imposed.²⁵ The General in command of those forces told La Brosse, “Notre maître veut qu’on tonde ses brebis, et non pas qu’on les écorche” (205, cf. Appendix V).

²⁴ In one famous exchange he negotiated with Prince Metternich on behalf of Trieste’s merchant community. He was also called upon a number of times by Napoleon’s consuls to mediate between communities.

²⁵ Charles Albert de Moré de Pontgibaud, *Mémoires du Comte de Moré: 1758-1837* (Paris: Alphonse Picard et Fils, 1898): “Le général taxa la ville et par conséquent toute la classe des commerçants. Ils s’exécutèrent, et Joseph Labrosse se porta lui-même en tête pour une forte somme; mais l’existence de cet émigré français, le rétablissement de sa fortune, le noble usage qu’il en faisait, sa réputation, étaient connus d’avance des vainqueurs; aussi le général, voulant protéger et servir un compatriote qui avait si courageusement triomphé de l’adversité, déclara à Joseph Labrosse qu’il serait exempté de la taxe, et ne paierait rien. Mon frère ayant demandé si cette somme serait défalquée de la somme exigée, il lui répondit qu’il serait exempté personnellement, mais que la taxe resterait intégrale, et que sa part serait répartie sur les autres commerçants de Trieste. Mon frère eut la noblesse et le désintéressement de répondre qu’ayant reçu l’hospitalité à Trieste, tous les commerçants étaient ses confrères et ses amis, et qu’après avoir couru avec eux les chances de la bonne fortune, il devait faire cause commune dans un malheur commun.

« Mais, dit-il au général Ser. ... , puisque vous avez tant de bonne volonté, voulez-vous faire quelque chose pour moi ? diminuez un peu le nombre des soldats qui sont logés dans nos magasins; j’ai remarqué que les ballots de marchandises paraissent se déplaire à la vue des sabres et des moustaches. » Le général se mit à rire, et lui ôta un bon nombre de soldats logés chez lui.

Mon frère se récupéra facilement de cette contribution dans l’occupation de Trieste par la division de l’armée française : il proposa en effet, au général, qui l’accepta, de se charger utilement, pour les deux parties contractantes, de la fourniture générale de.... Il offrit de montrer les factures, sur lesquelles il ne se réservait qu’un

The General's reference to the French émigré community as a flock of sheep alludes to the biblical parable of the sheep and the rams (*Matt. 25:31-45*), also known as "The Judgment of the Nations."²⁶ The parable resonates with the eschatological mood of the French nobility in exile after the French Revolution, and it was a fitting allegory for the ethics of living in exile. In a secular context this parable relates to the political and social order in post-revolutionary France as well as historical and ethical values for those living in exile and remaining subject to the will of Napoleon. The "sheep" as peaceful exiles, would have redemption in their new lives as immigrants abroad and as Imperial subjects of Napoleon, whereas royalists and counter-revolutionary "goats" are regarded with suspicion and depicted as decadent, avaricious and ethically corrupt. Redemption comes to the forward-looking exiles who seek opportunities and who integrate into the new world, who renounce the titles that have been wrested from them, whereas the situation of the backward-looking aristocrat who seeks to reclaim their former privileges in France is one of rebellion and the way of decline. By shrugging the mantle of aristocracy, La Brosse was an exception to the general French aristocratic émigré culture that his brother observed in Philadelphia and his story serves as a point of reference for a new type of European.

The story of La Brosse was well known in Trieste and France, such that his name appears in novels by several French authors. He is referred to in Nodier's novels *Jean Sbogar* and *Mademoiselle de Marsan*, and in Balzac's *Le Lys dans la Vallée*. La Brosse also serves as

droit de commission convenu, mais qu'on s'engagerait à payer exactement; ce traité fut exécuté de part et d'autre, à leur satisfaction réciproque" (197-198).

²⁶ The parable, which tells of the last judgment, depicts the people of the world as divided into the blessed, who remain on the right hand of God and the cursed, who are cast into eternal fire alongside the devil. In the Bible this division is based on kindness and mercy toward others in need, in which Jesus identifies charitable acts toward others as showing kindness toward him. Those who show kindness are the sheep. The goats are animals with horns and they do not act kindly toward those in need, but the biblical connotation is that the goats are not only unkind and uncharitable, but rebellious toward their master. The sheep know their master and their master knows them; they accomplish the will of god and form his flock.

the inspiration for the character of Comte de Fougères in George Sand's novel *Simon*. The novel is rich in mythical images of Trieste and the depiction of La Brosse takes much artistic liberty from the historical sources, treating the question of exile with more cynicism than ambivalence. The novel is set after Fougères returns from Trieste after the Restoration to reclaim his title and estate in France. The pseudonym under which the fictional La Brosse did his past business upsets Simon's republican and idealistic values, and he sees in the Count a Triestine type who is self-interested, duplicitous, and calculating. Simon finds it shameful that the count would go by another name while Fougères considers the adhesion to an aristocratic title to be unpragmatic in the context of his exile:

Qu'est-ce qu'un nom ? je vous le demande ; est-il propriété plus chimérique ou plus inutile ? Quand *j'ai monté ma boutique* à Trieste, je commençai par quitter mon nom et mon titre, et je reconstruisis ma fortune sous celui de signor Spazzetta, ce qui veut dire M. Labrosse. Eh bien ! mon commerce a prospéré, mon nom est devenu estimable et m'a ouvert le plus grand crédit. Je voudrais bien que quelqu'un vînt me prouver que le nom de Spazzetta ne vaut pas celui de Fougères !²⁷

By translating the adopted name again into Italian, Sand's novel extends the saturnalia of Trieste's Philadelphia myth *ad absurdum*. The hereditary title belonging to a respected lineage is replaced by the word for a common and banal object, "*brosse*", and then translated again into the Italian word "*spazzetta*." The equivalence between proper names and common names, native language and foreign language, portends endless replacements of the kind, motivated by market forces indifferent to ancestral heredities. The translation also alludes to the Italian verb to which the noun corresponds: *spazzare*, which means to sweep, to mop, or to scrub, and is figuratively used in the sense of wiping out or destroying something. The willing

²⁷ George Sand, *Simon* (La Bibliothèque électronique du Québec); édition de référence: George Sand, *Simon* (Paris: Garnier frères, 1847).

detachment of identity from national origin is not merely a symbol of utilitarian modernity dispensing with antiquated decorousness: pragmatism coupled with the replaceability of one's name portends the profane, saturnalian dissolution of privileged civil identity for Simon Féline, who is not initiated into an economic and cosmopolitan European order, nor into the vicissitudes of exile.

A city without a past: Karl Marx's Trieste

Karl Marx is often cited as a keen observer of Trieste's market atopia in numerous studies of the city's culture and history for several reasons. For one, it seems that the arbiters of Trieste's literary and historical institutions assimilate any thinker of great standing who has anything to say about the city. Invariably, it is Marx's mention of Trieste in an article published under the title of "The Maritime Commerce of Austria" in the faraway *New York Daily Tribune* in 1857 that is taken as another representation of the city's negative, atopian character because he wrote of the city as having "no past at all." However, this statement does not mean the same thing as Slataper's famous words, "Trieste non ha tradizioni di cultura" which would indicate Triestine antiliterature "secondo la logica di questo mito costruito per negazione [according to the logic of this myth constructed by negation]" (Ara and Magris 8). In the nineteenth century the lack of a burdensome sense of history would be regarded as a sign of the city's modernity and as one of its advantages for prosperous economic activity. Other writings from the same period indicate a general view of the opposition between commerce and culture, and where Trieste is concerned several writers understand culture and art to be the cost of economic advantage. Marx's comparison between the Austrian port-cities

of Venice and Trieste, from which his comment is extrapolated, exemplify the dynamic opposition in this perspective:

How, then, came it to pass that Trieste, and not Venice, became the cradle of revived navigation in the Adriatic? Venice was a town of reminiscences; Trieste shared the privilege of the United States of having no past at all. Formed by a motley crew of Italian, German, English, French, Greek, Armenian and Jewish merchant-adventurers, it was not fettered by traditions like the City of the Lagoon. Thus, for instance, while the Venetian grain trade still clung during the eighteenth century to its old connections, Trieste at once attached itself to the rising fortunes of Odessa, and thus succeeded, by the commencement of the nineteenth century, in driving its rival entirely from the Mediterranean corn trade.²⁸

Marx's comparison between Venice and Trieste relies upon centripetal and centrifugal tendencies interlacing spheres of culture and commerce. The imagery in Marx's article conjures the view that cultural memory is centripetal, and as such, it is an obstacle to commercial development. Venice is "*fettered* by traditions," as its "grain trade still *clung* [...] to its *old* connections" and its civic culture is on the same plane as its commercial prosperity. The enclosed lagoon in which Venice is situated acts as a geographical metaphor for its history and traditions, whereas Trieste "formed the natural *outlet* of the *vast and inexhaustible* dominions lying at its back [...] The prosperity of Trieste, therefore has *no limits* but the development of the productive forces and means of communication of the enormous complex of countries now under Austrian rule."²⁹

Trieste's openness to foreign shores is offered as another reason why it "became the cradle of revived navigation in the Adriatic," and Marx offers the example of how the city of

²⁸ Karl Marx, "The Maritime Commerce of Austria" *The New York Daily Tribune*, 9 January 1857, p. 3. A second article with the same title was published in the same newspaper on 4 August 1857. Both were written in late November 1856.

²⁹ Ibid.

Trieste “attached itself to the rising fortunes of Odessa.”³⁰ As Marx understood Trieste’s advantage in its trade and commerce with the Orient, he remarks “Venetian capitalists naturally transferred their capital to the opposite shore of the Adriatic.” In fact, the Venetians also joined their cultural capital to Risorgimento Italy, and immediately following the Third War of Independence against Austria – ten years after Marx had written his articles on Austrian Maritime commerce – Venice would become part of Italy.³¹

Marx’s advantageous comparison of Trieste with the United States of America corroborates the *Philadelphia myth* that would have still been in circulation at that time. The influx of *émigrés* who came to the city for a fresh start imagined Trieste as a new world located in the old, whereas Venice was very much part of the old world and a decadent, aristocratic Europe. At the time of this article, both Adriatic port cities were under Austrian

³⁰ The two cities are linked not only in terms of commercial trade relations but also imagined in terms of their similarities, and the modality of attachment that Marx identifies with these cities is always open and expanding its global reach. These similarities did not pertain only to the development of their respective shipping networks, but also to their nascent cosmopolitan cultures – both were ethnically and religiously plural imperial city-ports embodying the liberal and tolerant society that became associated with the “città emporio.” As Emilio Cocco writes in an insightful article drawing similarities between Trieste and Odessa: “In a context of social stratification and ethnic plurality, which was typical of imperial powers such as the Austrian and Russian ones, these city-ports assumed both vital economic functions and highly symbolic values. In fact, by the 18th century onward, the continental empires invested materially and symbolically in the creation of littoral outposts towards the progressively global oceanic world of trade and commerce. Those cities were ‘special cases’ for the variety of people and the freedom and liberality of their customs, yet also aimed at portraying the civilizing message of the empires embodied in the urban multi-national and multi-religious local cosmopolitanism. Few cities more than Odessa and Trieste, in this perspective, impersonated the gist of the multicultural imperial idea through their cosmopolitan flavour, the economic prosperity and the practices of state-sponsored religious tolerance. Odessa and Trieste hosted large immigrant and diaspora communities, first of all the Jewish one, which extensively shaped the cultural and social landscape of the cities (Bianchini 2009; Dubin 1999). Moreover, the histories of Trieste and Odessa are exceedingly similar, from the imperial acts of foundation to the social engineering of their immigration policies. Eventually, the two cities also shared a post-imperial fate with the failure of the Russian and the Austrian empires, experiencing, though in different ways and times, tentative ethno-political redemptions and eventually the post-socialist implosion that introduced challenges” (40). Cocco, Emilio, “Performing Maritime Imperial Legacies: Tourism and Cosmopolitanism in Odessa and Trieste” *Anthropological Notebooks* 16 [1]: 37-57. Slovene Anthropological Society, 2010.

³¹ Robert A. Kann describes the Austria’s cession of the province of Venetia as “one of the strangest episodes of diplomatic history, in which the trends of modern nationalism mingled with medieval concepts of chivalry. [...] [T]he decision on both sides to fight a war over a matter of national prestige, although Austria and Italy in substance agreed on the outcome beforehand, represented a moral low in international relations. Thousands were killed for the sake of “chivalry” of two military establishments.” *A History of the Habsburg Empire: 1526-1918* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974) 272-273.

rule and they were located approximately 115 kilometers from each other (as the crow flies), yet they are metaphors for two continents separated by an ocean. Unlike Venice, Trieste resembled America, since it was not burdened by historical narratives that sought fulfillment in terms of its past. Instead, it enjoyed the sense of a prosperous future based on the efficacy of its trade and insurance industries, which were aided by favourable imperial policies. Conditions for prosperity were optimal and the Austrian Lloyd – a powerful insurance company that had become equally as potent a force in shipping and logistics – dominated maritime trade to the detriment of Venice. The Imperial decree that made Trieste into a free port had also made the city into something new: Trieste had the advantage of allowing its merchants to choose their commercial alliances and loyalties according to the laws of the market, and whether the “past” is seen in terms of history, traditions, blood alliances or cultural memory, it indicates a few general assumptions about Trieste that indicate the nineteenth century attitude that regarded literary culture as a form of life incommensurable with economic activity.

The utilitarian spirit and the anomaly of idleness

Travel literature, which was a particularly widespread genre in the nineteenth century, had the power to communicate an individual author’s impressions of a place to a multitude of people from a given linguistic community that might never venture into the cities and landscapes described. Trieste was described in terms of its economic development and the richness of ethnic and linguistic variety in the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century.³² After the middle of the nineteenth century, following the national revolutions of 1848, images

³² A number of memoirs and letters attest to this. The memoirs of General Desaix portray Trieste as an amphitheater where ethnic and linguistic varieties are on show. In the novels of Charles Nodier and Jules Verne, Trieste has a carnivalesque atmosphere.

of Trieste related the thriving economy of the city to a dearth of historical and artistic culture. Such images are found in the observations of Charles Yriarte, a French journalist and illustrator who had travelled through Trieste, and whose illustrated travelogue *Les bords de l'Adriatique et le Monténégro* had been published in French and in Italian at roughly the same time. His comments on Triestine culture are typical of this perspective:

Le cachet de la ville est utilitaire, mais la pureté du ciel, de charme italien qui transforme toute chose prêtent a cette cite de marchands, d'agioteurs et de courtiers une certaine poésie incompatible avec son esprit vrai. [...]

Il me semble qu'un homme oisif serait une monstruosité à Trieste, et l'oisiveté intelligente, le dilettantisme occupé seraient une anomalie. La vie intellectuelle, je l'ai dit, est assez nulle: il n'y a ni littérature, ni art, ni aspirations d'un ordre élevé. On a détruit naguère, sans scandaliser presque personne, cette *Loggia* charmante, reste d'autonomie, qu'on pouvait encadrer avec goût dans la construction nouvelle devenue nécessaire. Il y a naturellement des hommes distingués dans la ville, cela va sans dire, et deux noms ressortent les premiers de tous, ceux de Kandler et a plus d'importance que l'idée, et la division de la vie est telle, qu'il n'y a vraiment pas de place de Rossetti, morts depuis longtemps, et que personne n'a oubliés mais le fait pour autre chose que l'échange.³³

Yriarte's comments on the cultural and commercial life of the city in 1874 characterize the city according to its impressive economic development as a free port and a commercial hub and draw an inverse conclusion with regards to its culture. As nationalism had become more and more inextricably bound to cultural traditions and the sense of shared history was seen in national terms. For Marx, the non-tradition of Trieste's "motley crew" of international "merchant adventurers" coupled with the utilitarian sensibilities of the Lloyd set the stage for Trieste's maritime success in world markets. Yriarte regards the preoccupation with commerce as a base pursuit compared with the "higher order" of intellectual and literary life.

³³ Yriarte, Charles (1833-1898). *Les bords de l'Adriatique et le Monténégro. Venise, l'Istrie, le Quarnero, la Dalmatie, le Monténégro et la rive italienne* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1878) 80-81.

He laments the neglect of local historians and men of letters, Pietro Kandler and Domenico Rossetti, founding members of the Gabinetto di Minerva who aspired to a Triestine literary and historical culture, consonant with its ethnically Italian population. Yriarte characterizes the general Triestine character by the inversion the values of culture and commerce to exalt the latter, and to diminish the former as his comment on the incompatibility between the poetry of the city and its mercantile spirit suggests. By this reasoning, such ‘intelligent idleness’ as writing had no place in the busy life of Trieste where non-utilitarian productivity is an ‘anomaly’ in the life of the city and the man who does this with his leisure is a ‘monstrosity.’ In Yriarte’s account Trieste has no literature and is not a place for writers. Writing is conceived of as a sin against pragmatism, the commercial character of the city penetrates into the writings of Svevo and Slataper, who cultivated their works in abroad or in secret like a vice.³⁴ Yet the comparison with Venice is somewhat ironic now when one considers the complete metamorphosis of literary space whereby Trieste became, as the title of an essay by Claudio Magris indicates, a “Luogo della scrittura.” Now the idea of Trieste resembles that of Venice in the nineteenth century: a city with rich historical and cultural traditions, but in decline, abandoned by its once rich trade relations, celebrating its illustrious past, but only a shade of what it once was.

³⁴ “In una città priva di tradizioni culturali la letteratura che esula dal pantheon umanistico delle lettere patrie non conosce alcuna istituzionalizzazione, non assume la dignità di un’attività, ma viene coltivata come un vizio segreto, fra le pause e gli intervalla dell’esistenza sociale e lavorativa. [...] Non il cenacolo letterario è il luogo della letteratura, ma l’ufficio, la scrivania sveviana alla banca Union, il retrobottega della libreria di Saba, il caffè, l’osteria, come per Joyce [In a city bereft of cultural traditions, the literature that lies outside the humanistic pantheon of patriotic letters knows no institutionalization, takes on none of the dignity of an activity, but is cultivated like a secret vice, between the pauses and the intervals of social and working existence. The place for literature is not the old-fashioned, classicizing literary salon but rather the office, Svevo’s desk at the Banca Union, the back of Saba’s bookshop, or the tavern, as in the case of Joyce]” (Ara and Magris, 73)

Antechamber to Venice

In 1865 the literary critic Charles Asselineau wrote in his travel memoirs, “Passer de Venise à Trieste, c’est passer du rêve à la vie.”³⁵ In his comparisons between Trieste and Venice, he differentiates them as spaces where even that which is staged as fantasy resembles the real, and spaces where even some of the most palpable realities are transmuted into fantasy. Venice is a city of dreams as well as one of reminiscences: “Tout est souvenir à Venise: le gondolier qui m’a promené ce matin est ce vieux Beppo, autrefois serviteur de lord Byron, et qui, dit-on, garde encore la barque armoriée de son ancien maître” (116). Asselineau attributes the palpable melancholy in Venice to the interweaving of memory and fantasy in its artistic traditions. The matter of artistic creations endures beyond the glory of the city that it attests to and acts as a reminder to Venetians of an illustrious past.³⁶ For Asselineau the presence of the Orient in Venetian life and commerce is an integral part of the lagoon city. He characterizes the historical present of Venice as *contretemps*, since it is incomplete without its Oriental trade routes, and it does not live up to the artistic and historical depictions that anchor civic characteristics in tradition and produce the idea of Venice as an *a priori* category. Out of this idea he looks out at Trieste:

Venise, tournée vers l’Orient, l’annonce et l’appelle. [...] Comment résister à la tentation, et ne pas aller chercher au delà de la mer, en quelques heures, ce complément de Venise, ce reflet de sa grandeur et de sa puissance tombées? Je

³⁵ Charles Asselineau, *L’Italie et Constantinople* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1869) 129.

³⁶ “Venise subit aujourd’hui le plus terrible des *contratempis*. La misère et la conquête, ce n’est rien, si on sait où cacher sa misère [...] Mais la misère au milieu du luxe, la dépendance en face des témoins de sa liberté et sa puissance, voilà ce qui est amer et dérisoire. La misère dans une ville de palais, bâtis par les maîtres de Palladio, avec la gloire de Venise pendant au plafond et ses exploits peints sur tous les murs, c’est là ce qui rend Venise plus triste que la tombe même ; triste comme un lendemain de fête, ou comme le retour d’une mascarade” (119). This description might apply to Trieste today in its attachment to its own past grandeur, whereby one feels the past in specific sites that function as an ambulatory museum throughout the city and the spaces between them. Like Venice, another important aspect of the idea of Trieste is that of its former role as a major Mediterranean port and as a portal to the Orient. However, Asselineau could never have imagined that the literary tourist of the future might experience Trieste in the same way that he experienced Venice!

le dis très sérieusement, on n'a qu'une idée incomplète de Venise si l'on n'a pas vu l'Orient; et puisque l'Orient ne vient plus jusqu'à elle et préfère s'arrêter à cette antichambre qui est Trieste. (132)

Trieste is characterized here in several ways in its relation to Venice, as a *complement* city to a main one, as the presence of the Orient would complete it, as a reflection of past Venetian grandeur revealed in its contrasts, and hence, the antechamber is the spatial and temporal metaphor that he gives to Trieste in its relation with Venice. Venice is haunted by its ideal self-image from the past and Trieste remains a “ville neuve, port et ville de commerce” for the literary critic, eighty years after General Desaix wrote his impressions of the city in his memoirs. In a passage that seems to evoke them Asselineau writes, “C'est un Havre étincelant de la lumière de l'Orient et gai comme un carnaval, où la laideur du négoce disparaît sous l'amusante variété des costumes et sous l'animation d'une vie joyeuse” (127). The contrasts between Venice and Trieste are developed further here: one city is as despondent as the day after a celebration, and the other is exultant in the midst of its carnival season; the opulence of Venetian art and architecture cannot hide the misery of the city, whereas the baseness of trade disappears in the spectacle of national and ethnic diversity; Trieste is animated and luminous whereas Venice is cadaverous and sombre. However, according to Asselineau, Venice was singular and unrepeatable, “la relique étincelante d'un temps merveilleux où le génie humain fit explosion et se manifesta avec un éclat sans pareil dans sa triple puissance de force, de beauté, et de richesse” (121). The idea of Venice persists only because the real circumstances of its construction have been removed from the scene, whereas the monuments remain, giving to the city a fixed, synchronic countenance that serves to overwrite a real narrative of foundation and development that would expose the origins of the city and its former autonomy as a series of contingent events, such as the presence of the Orient, that are bound to specific

moments. Consequently, the displacement of the Adriatic port to the Orient from Venice to Trieste is seen as a disruption in the natural course of history, and a trifling one at that.³⁷

Figuratively, in French “*antichambre*” can be used as a metaphor for a contingent situation that precedes another more permanent or important one.³⁸

The centripetal and self-accumulating image of Venetian history provides Asselineau with a narrative that accounts for both the origins of the city and the accomplishment of future progress as a complete and complementary story. However, the Austrian cession of Venice did not restore its former autonomy. Rather the accumulation of cultural capital which is the product of contingent historical conditions would contribute to the uncertain nation building project of Risorgimento Italy the self-evident unity of its culture and history, which now claims for itself, like Rome and Florence, to have heralded the organization of the world system of state and market in the historical present.

Trieste, on the other hand was seen as interchangeable and its resemblances to other cities like Le Havre or Philadelphia, which stand for powerful ideas, emphasize precisely its own non-specificity. Trieste is like “*Toutes ces villes, bâties en amphithéâtre au bord de la mer et échelonnées sur des collines, Naples, Trieste, Salerne ont besoin de la perspective pour donner tout leur effet, et c’est en s’éloignant qu’on les apprécie*” (132). Historically it is a fitting metaphor, since it is only through temporal distance that one appreciates a city in terms of its singularity, but this is impossible in the historical present.

³⁷ In a footnote to his chapter on Venice, Asselineau writes: “Depuis que ces lignes ont été écrites (1865) les Autrichiens ont quitté Venise. On m’écrit que la misère y est grande: pourtant Venise d’agite et s’anime; elle rallume ses fourneaux et travaille, l’oeil tourné vers Suez qui peut lui rendre le commerce de l’Orient.” (122, n. 1) Reports indicate to Asselineau that the mood of Venice has not changed, but he nevertheless imagines the city returning to its former glory and taking back its dominance over trade routes with the Orient.

³⁸ “*Definitions de antichambre*” Antidote – Dictionnaires (logiciel) : “FIGURÉ - Situation provisoire qui en précède une autre plus permanente, plus importante. Les escarmouches, antichambres de la guerre déclarée.”

Although the Venice of Asselineau is not the Venice of Karl Marx, the latter makes a similar comparison regarding the city and the economic prospects of the State: “Trieste, therefore, is destined to become, in its immediate future, what Marseilles, Bordeaux, Nantes and Havre united are to France.”³⁹ For the economist, Trieste was viewed as having the potential for greater power than the sum of its analogous cities, but for traveller who visits cities out of literary interest, Trieste is only an antechamber to the palace of Venetian history and culture. Yet as Marx’s comparison between Venice and Trieste would suggest, this antechamber to the vast Imperial hinterland of Austria-Hungary carries a different connotation as it is projected into the future as an economic power. The end of the Austrian Empire and the annexation of Trieste into the peninsular state of Italy would, in effect, severely reduce maritime trade and cut the city off from its hinterland. No longer a hub in a network of port cities with no past, Trieste also lost the sense of its atopian idea in the nineteenth century – not yet as an unclassifiable, original and agonistic “nowhere,” but as a protean, spectacular and interchangeable “anywhere” of the new European and colonial world order.

The resonance of the past: toward a hermeneutics of triestinità

For as long as literary history has been a preoccupation of Trieste’s intellectuals, specific characteristics that would come to be identified with *triestinità* have been discerned in images of the city produced by its residents and sojourners. As a city with “no past,” according to Karl Marx, “no history” in the polemical writings of the Irredentist journalist Ruggiero Timeus, or “no cultural traditions” as Scipio Slataper had famously claimed in the pages of *La Voce*, it seems as though the shape of Triestine history is a search into an obscurity that is more figurative than literal, since the social, political and economic history of

³⁹ Karl Marx, “The Maritime Commerce of Austria”, *New York Daily Tribune*, 9 January 1857. 3

the city had been extensively documented for centuries. Numerous monographs and anthologies have shaped the narrative of Trieste's literary history, though fewer inquire into what that might have looked like before Trieste attained its literary self-consciousness with the generation of Slataper, Saba, Stuparich and Svevo in the early twentieth century. In this section I take cues from two books that interpret the local difference of *triestinità* through writings that preceded the twentieth century. Giuliana Morandini's *Da te lontano: cultura triestina tra '700 e '900* and Anita Pittoni's *L'anima di Trieste: Lettere al professore* are inquiries into how writers from Trieste and those who sojourned there envisioned the *imago* of the modern global city in imperial terms and suggest alternatives to the ossification of Trieste's literary culture in the repetition of commonplaces about Mitteleuropa. I'll examine the hermeneutic and *romanesque* qualities of these books, and the recurring theme of myth that re-emerges in contemporary Triestine poetry. Poets like Paolo Universo and Ugo Pierrri allude to nineteenth century myths of Trieste in order to criticize the literary culture that dominates Trieste in the twentieth century and the present.

Elvio Guagnini describes Morandini's book as "un lavoro di montaggio critico ed ermeneutico operato da una lettrice attenta della città e del suo mito, ricostruiti attraverso le carte di chi li ha visti o vissuti, dal di dentro o dal di fuori [a work of critical and hermeneutic montage, operated by a reader of the city and its myths, reconstructed through the pages of those who had seen them or lived them, from within and from without]."⁴⁰ This description pertains to the scope of literary history and the narrative project these books undertake. In cinema the technique of montage selects images and information in order to condense time and space, and make suggestive connections between the selected images to form an

⁴⁰ Elvio Guagnini, "Prefazione" in Morandini, *Da te lontano: cultura triestina tra '700 e '900*, ix.

interpretative pattern. Morandini's anthology is a literary montage, offering images in a vivid and fragmentary succession of intense moments and underwritten with a critical and hermeneutic sensibility. She interprets descriptions of Trieste makes them intelligible in terms of a historical narrative and patterns of causality, projecting the sense local particularism known as *triestinità* into a past that seems to be a fragmented, collective unconscious. Out of this distinction, the critical task of separating myth and reality became a major thematic preoccupation of those charged with creating Triestine literary history. The experience of tradition in this case is a hermeneutic one; an aesthetic interpretation based on what is repeatable. Morandini explores the myths of Trieste in two parallel ways: she interprets and reconstitutes them in her novels, such as *Caffè degli specchi* (1983), and in *Da te lontano* her selections from Triestine writers from the eighteenth century onward and introductory remarks to them give these writings an aspect of narrative cohesion that would otherwise be (or had hitherto been) lacking in them.

Another thread indicated by Guagnini's comment is the distinction between the writings of those who had *seen* the city through its myths or those who had *lived* them, which begs the question of how tradition marks the experience of the *insider* and that of the *outsider*. With regards to the understanding of literary history that operates in Trieste, interpellation by the tradition and a sense of belonging to it are proper to the insider.⁴¹ In a recent monograph on Triestine literature, Katia Pizzi wrote of an "in-feeding [...] literary endogamy"⁴² among Triestine writers after the First World War, and to some extent this applies to the city's literary history as well. While conducting my own research in Trieste in the years of 1999 and in

⁴¹ Or according to Hans Georg Gadamer, writing on hermeneutics in *Truth and Method*, in the experience of reading and writing "belonging is brought about by tradition's addressing us" (463).

⁴² Katia Pizzi, *A City in Search of an Author: The Literary Identity of Trieste* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001) 55-58.

2011, I realized that the only way to contribute to research on Triestine literature was through an analysis of how the historical and literary traditions addressed me as an outsider and to write about Triestine literary history with an awareness of my own perspectival conditionality. As a consequence, my analysis of the horizon of interpretation that occupies the already existing literary tradition of Trieste, which is circumscribed by its myths and firmly localized, reflects upon its hermeneutical dimensions and expands them.

Anita Pittoni's interpretation of primary materials from eighteenth and nineteenth century Trieste, "L'anima di Trieste" is self-described as a search for the soul of Trieste through its documents. Pittoni is a locally renowned Triestine poet, who was married to Slataper's literary executor Giani Stuparich and oversaw the editions of *Lo Zibaldone*, and she also one of the protagonists in Katia Pizzi's assessment of Trieste's "endogamous culture." Pittoni's task was specifically to make a contribution to the historical self-awareness of Trieste, and the impetus for the book began in 1964, when she wrote a series of open letters to an imagined professor who would ideally produce an authoritative history of modern Trieste, its literature and its culture.⁴³ In terms of Pizzi's endogamous vision of Triestine literature Pittoni's mode of inquiry as a cultural historian is also decidedly gendered: Pittoni is maternal and maieutic, acting as a midwife to the spiritual *coscienza* of the city and exhorting the paternal figure of the professor to safeguard it. The division of the book into two sections tells us something about this critical historical conscience. The first section, which contains the open letters, is titled "L'anima di Trieste" and the appendix of selected texts is called "La voce di Trieste." The selection of documents in the appendix is intended to show continuity and

⁴³ These open letters were first broadcast on local radio in 1964, and in 1965 they were serially published in a Genovese newspaper as well as the Triestine daily *Il Piccolo* before they were collected into a volume and published in 1968 under the title *L'anima di Trieste: Lettere al professore*, containing, in addition, an appendix of historical texts written about Trieste from the 18th century to the 20th.

contrasts between aspects of the city that have been hidden until now and the present historical understanding that had recently been cultivated.⁴⁴

Si tratta di documenti originali (riproduzioni di stampe rare) e di alcuni inediti: una scelta che va dal 1774 al 1947: *voci* di Triestini, uomini di pensiero e di azione che, pur nella diversità dei tempi e degli interessi, s'incontrano nella tensione verso precise mete; per ognuno la *città* rappresenta quel *particolare* concreto – una specola sul mondo che *si vive* – un trampolino dal quale prendere lo slancio verso gli spazi del generale per servire il proprio *luogo* inserendolo nel largo movimento più avanzato, o previsto, delle umane vicende. (10)

[These are original documents (reproductions of rare prints) and some unpublished ones: a selection ranging from 1774 to 1947: *voices* of Triestines, men of thought and action that, despite the diversity of times and interests, meet in the tensions towards precise goals; for each of them the *city* represents that concrete *particularity* – an observatory on the world which *is lived* – a springboard from which one takes its momentum into the spaces generality in order to serve their own *place* by inserting it in broader movement more advanced, or projected, of human history.]

The words that Pittoni chose to italicize in this passage emphasize a number of relevant themes with reference to these *voices*: they are written in the eighteenth and nineteenth century but reading makes them speak to the present like the subconscious of an analysand whose desire is revealed by psychoanalysis. The idea of a historical spirit that is proper to a literary culture would be discernible if we could listen to the polyphony of its 'voices.' In other words, they are written in a concrete and existing context by men of thought and action, as opposed to the analyses of historians and other scholars. The *city* represents for each of these men a concrete and existing reality and not an abstract or ideal construct; it is a *Weltanschauung* that is not theoretical, but functional and lived through. The form of subjective recognition and selection establishes the nativism of Pittoni's authority in the order of a locally produced and

⁴⁴ Alberto Spainì, Claudio Magris, Elvio Guagnini and several other prominent intellectuals made contributions to Triestine literary history in the years from 1963 to 1965.

understood literary-historical discourse. These voices are found in rare texts, threatened with oblivion, and her recovery responds to the demand of Benedetto Croce, who admonished the Istrian historian Francesco Salata in 1923 that he should seek to publish “una collana e opuscoli di quelle scrittori delle province ex austriache, perché molte di quelle stampe o penetrarono poco in Italia o sono diventate rarissime [a collection and pamphlets of those writers from the former Austrian provinces, because many are printed or they did not penetrate much into Italy or they have become rare]” (16).⁴⁵ Trieste did not have a literary history to speak of, so the scarcity of the documents of which she speaks should not be surprising, nor that the published writings of Triestine authors would have gone out of circulation.⁴⁶ Of such documents she writes:

Per comprendere più a fondo l’anima di questa nuova società, bisogna avvicinarsi al fatto individuale: la “*petite histoire*” è sempre necessaria per penetrare l’umano nella storia; generalmente è trascurata, ignorata dalla “*grande histoire*”. Lo stesso succede anche per la piccola porzione di mondo che è Trieste; da questa ignoranza, che oggi sveltisce la “*grande histoire*” volando sui binari delle idee filosofiche, che sono in realtà piuttosto ideologie di parte; che si fa sintesi di particolari immaginati piuttosto che appresi da documenti, da questa ignoranza è nata alquanto confusione nei riguardi di Trieste, che si è trovata imprigionata, cristallizzata nel conformismo di più o meno amabili formule.

La “*petite histoire*” di Trieste è illuminata da copiosi documenti, tra i quali carteggi familiari e privati che soltanto una ristretta schiera di appassionati di

⁴⁵ Salata, instead, is remembered for his highly dramatic biography of Guglielmo Oberdank, the Irredentist martyr.

⁴⁶ “Qui, l’ignoranza ha un’attenuante: per uno strano destino, che ha del favoloso, i documenti che riguardano proprio l’importante avventamento dello “scatto” di Trieste, cercati invano fin dall’Ottocento, sono stati miracolosamente trovati, e messi a disposizione degli interessati, appena 1923. Millenovecentoventitre!” (15). Pittoni spells out the year in which archives became available, since it is evident that nobody in the throes of Irredentist redemption would even consider looking at such documents, attesting to a Trieste that was European, global and anything else but firmly Italian. The literary historian might regard 1923 as significant since it was the year that Italo Svevo’s *La coscienza di Zeno* was first published, but this would have had little to no meaning in the context of the historical documents released by the state archives of which Pittoni writes.

storia locale conoscono, e che, per la maggior parte, hanno raccolto con commovente diligenza. (24-25)

[To better understand the soul of this new society we must approach the facts individually: the “*petite histoire*” is always required to insert the human into history; generally it is neglected, ignored by the “*grande histoire*.” The same goes for the small portion of the world that is Trieste. From this ignorance, which now speeds up “*grande histoire*,” flying on the tracks of philosophical ideas, which are actually rather partisan ideologies, that becomes a synthesis of particulars imagined rather than learned from documents. A considerable amount of confusion was born out of this ignorance with regards to Trieste, which found itself trapped, frozen in conformity with more or less amiable formulas.

The “*petite histoire*” of Trieste is illuminated by copious documents that include private and family correspondences that only a select group of local history buffs know, and for the most part, have collected touching diligence.]

For Pittoni, this well of ignored texts is the spiritual precursor to those of Triestine modernism; a number of letters from aristocrats and bourgeois from all parts of the globe, who have come to Trieste, which was called by de Moré “la Filadelfia dell’Europa”; Europe’s America where “Il passato è morto” (24), and where the “peccatori”, “affliti”, and “naufragi trovano ricetto e una nuova promettente vita...” (25) The distinction between “*petite histoire*” and “*grande histoire*” also reflects the sensibility of modern historicism, which has for many years rejected the grand narratives of national or universal history that are pulled in the direction of provincial or ideological impulses to gloss over the irregularity of historical contingency. The book of public letters attests to the forgotten past that predates the conscience forming authors of Triestine modernity and Pittoni cites the better-known protagonists of Triestine literature to find the resonance of the past in them. In Pittoni’s project the texts of Slataper, Svevo and Saba corroborate the “spirit” of Trieste, which has its most pure expression in personal accounts and letters written in many languages, the journals of

Lloyd Adriatico, and any number of literary activities. The proposition that the spirit, or thought, or whatever immateriality that Trieste represents, has literature as its vehicle is critical to Pittoni's project, but history takes place in the speculative act of interpretation: the idea of Trieste is precisely whatever historical reality is available to it at any time, and what it has been given by the past is no guarantee of an eternally valid truth. The characteristics of this spirit are not enumerated in a general and reductive way, but the hermeneutic experience that takes place in reading these fragments is animated by a sense of destiny, much like the music that accompanies a filmic montage.

The prophetic, proleptic and "inedito" character of that both of these anthologies attribute to writings about Trieste in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries bring to mind the Latin expression *ante litteram* – literally "before the letter" – which is used to define people, currents of thought or cultural movements that are proper to successive historical epochs. Triestine literature and history is understood in terms of a perception that the city was out of time because the conceptual categories that it would engender had not been articulated by then. Representations of Trieste in the nineteenth century contain numerous accounts describing the diffusion of the industrial revolution, global finance networks, imperial colonization, free-exchange, maritime trade and metamorphoses of urban conditions in ports of commerce. The forces of globalization of the nineteenth century, in many respects, anticipate the conditions that preoccupy scholars in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While they express ideas that have become associated with the city's character, including its cosmopolitanism and its uncanny lack of a constitutive civic identity, their treatment provides an insight into what the institutionalization of literary discourse in Trieste attempts to hold at bay in the early twenty-first century: the dissolution of the city's distinctive character.

This ante-litteram history represents a forward-looking anachronism that serves as a critical antidote to the more traditional anachronism at work in the prevalence of the Habsburg Myth in Triestine literary culture. The antimodern dimension of the Habsburg myth – that rejection of modernity in favour of a more pristine historical past – influences the interpretative horizon of *triestinità*. In this sense “antiliterature” has traditionally functioned much like the historical myth that stayed the dissolution of the Empire. The atopian “nowhere” that has become a paradoxical commonplace in the Triestine imaginary arises from a lack of ideal conceptual categories at hand in the literary/cultural sphere. The economic life of the global city is at odds with ideal notions of national spirit, and hence it does not find its expression in literature, taken categorically. The current literary mapping of the “città di carta,” its ideal transformation into a kind of literary museum where one “reads” the city by walking it, retracing the footsteps of its great generation of authors, enacts the kind of historical repetition that masks the dissolution of its particularity. The image of Trieste as an atopian “anywhere” that unfolds in these primary texts presages the global character of the city and shifts the signifier of *atopia* as a literary commonplace *back* to what it might have been before, that is, from “nowhere” back to “anywhere.”

This shift is discernible in a number of eighteenth and nineteenth century texts that Pittoni and Morandini make reference to, but in the poetry of Ugo Pierri they are explicitly projected into the Trieste of the present, and they serve as a derisory and critical reminder of mythical residues that sap the city of its poetic vitality, induce a state of limbo, and preclude an alternative literary tradition. Contemporary Triestine poetry that uses the resonance of the past to criticize the present, but also hint at the critical potential that Trieste’s mythologies

entail for the present. Ugo Pierri's *Aiku lokali* offers up a chain of myths pertaining to Trieste in the nineteenth century that could also serve as an overview of this chapter:

xe necropolis
filadelfia d'europa
covo di ladri

un reticolo
da trapoleri rigò
maria teresa

specia cupole
azure san spiridion
s'ciavo ortodosso

vivi a trieste
mercanti e putane
merce di scambio⁴⁷

The allusive density in this cluster of haikus can be unpacked through the hermeneutics of *triestinità* explored in this chapter and through our examination of nineteenth century myths about Trieste, and it presents us with a mythology of historical tensions that resonate in the Triestine writing we will explore in the following chapters. In the late eighteenth century, Antonio De' Giuliani praised Trieste as a mercantile city under the patronage of Mercury, god of commerce and of thieves. In the early nineteenth century, Comte Charles Albert de Moré coined the epithet "Philadelphia of Europe" since viewed it as an asylum for émigrés who had metaphorically capsized in their homelands. His brother, who left France at the beginning of the revolution, changed his name to Joseph La Brosse and opened a successful business it was the city of new life liberated from the old. The Philadelphia myth endured into the latter half of the century, when Karl Marx described it as a city with "no past." However, for Pierri,

⁴⁷ Ugo Pierri, *Aiku lokali* (Milano, Terziaria, 1996) 36; quoted in Luigi Nacci, *Trieste allo specchio: Indagine sulla poesia triestina del secondo Novecento* (Trieste: Battello stampatore, 2006) 94. [this necropolis | philadelphia of europe | den of thieves || a reticulum | of trappers ensnared | maria teresa || domes reflect | azure san spiridion | orthodox slavs || alive in trieste | merchants and whores | merchandise for trade].

Trieste now suffers from having too much of a past. Trieste nostalgically looks back to its former matron, Empress Maria Teresa, after whom the grid-like *quartiere teresiano* is named and the historical predispositions that evoke her are compared to a “reticulum,” which could either be the pattern of interconnected objects one inevitably encounters in the city/museum, or it could be part of the stomach that belongs to ruminant animal, chewing the same food over and over.

The poet who sees Trieste as a “necropolis” critically observes the literary culture and tourism of the city, finding statues and plaques commemorating the great authors of the past, the much-vaunted Habsburg era architecture, emerging like tombstones at the expense of any new expression of culture. Yet where one finds the opening gestures that resulted in this aspect of the cultural imaginary – a culture of literary interpretation narrating the city in parallel with representations produced in poetic and novelistic works – one also finds its endgame. Many poets and even historians in Trieste want to liberate themselves from the mollifying weight of its history, and to see it again as a city “without a past,” since they view the Triestine consecration to history, literature and cultural memory as a form of decadence and a sign of artistic stagnation. As Spirito suggests in his poem, the loss of Trieste’s particularity as a cultural, political and literary *topos* is anticipated in its old myths. This is what I am describing as *anteliterature* – a cultural-literary antecedent to the precedent setting writers of Trieste – which forms the rich, historical humus out of which the works of Trieste’s conscience-forming writers blossomed. Literary *triestinità*, in this respect, might be better understood as a one hundred year period of cultural solitude, bookended by the economic discourses that took place before it emerged and coming to the forefront again.

CHAPTER 3

THE PLACE OF ANLITERATURE IN TRIESTINE WRITING

Erst bricht man Fenster. Dann wird man selber eines.

— Heimito von Doderer¹

Antiliterature is quite useless

È il travaglio delle due nature che cozzano ad annullarsi a vicenda: la commerciale e l'italiana. E Trieste non può strozzare nessuna delle due: è la sua doppia anima: si ucciderebbe. Ogni cosa al commercio necessaria è violazione d'italianità; ciò che ne è vero aumento e danneggia quello.²

[It is the torment of the two natures – the commercial and the Italian – that collide to cancel each other out. And Trieste cannot suffocate either of the two, since it is her double soul: it would kill her. Each thing of commercial necessity is a violation of Italianness; that which is true of the former augments and damages the latter.]

Responding to the precarious, potentially paradoxical, position of Trieste as part of the Italian nation and of the Austrian state, Scipio Slataper describes the profound cultural anxiety concealed by the peaceful cosmopolitanism of Triestine life. This affliction, suffering or “spleen” indicates the starting point, from which Triestine literature begins, but there is also a curious algebra at work in Slataper’s words. Trieste, as part of “unredeemed Italy,” is a small fraction of an ideal linguistic and cultural totality, cast off from the whole and incomplete in itself, and redemption means that it is rejoined to the political and nation-state territory to which it belongs. Slataper sees the culture of Trieste as predominantly Italian, but it is cancelled out by the exigencies of the city’s anational economic vocation as the principal port

¹ Heimito von Doderer, *Meine neunzehn Lebensläufe und neun andere Geschichten* (München: Biederstein Verlag, 1966). [First you break the windows. Then you become one.]

² Scipio Slataper, *Lettere triestine: col seguito di altri scritti vociani di polemica su Trieste* (Trieste, Edizioni Dedolibri, 1988) 31-39; Scipio Slataper “La vita dello spirito” *La Voce*, 25 March 1909.

city of the Habsburg Empire and by its long-standing mercantile tradition. While the idea of nationalism is incomprehensible without the literary component that channels ideas, sentiments, aesthetic judgments and expressions into communicable, traditional forms, nationalism must also be held accountable to a broad spectrum of social practices and relationships that take place at the heart of collective life. According Slataper, nationality is based on a tradition that unites disparate elements into something whole. Cultural traditions, carried by literature in a shared language, promote a collective consciousness and assist in containing the nation within the state. Although many Triestines aspired to see their city as part of the Italian nation, Trieste owed its existence and prosperity to conditions created by the Austrian state. If national culture is a positive value for the Irredentist, then the commercial culture of the city has an equal and negative value that cancels it out.

In 1909 Slataper began a series of articles about Trieste for the Florentine literary journal *La Voce*, which began with the words “Trieste non ha tradizioni di cultura [Trieste has no cultural traditions],” which seems to refer to the outcome of the city’s two natures coming into contact with each other. Many readers of Slataper’s *Lettere triestine*, especially Triestines, took this statement as a provocation, as it was intended, but his cultural critique was a vital step towards his call for the emergence of a Triestine art. In light of artistic debates circulating in Italy at the time, which regarded the value of art and literature in terms of their ideological purpose or social function, Slataper’s statement can be read in a similar way as Oscar Wilde’s aphorism, “All art is quite useless.” Wilde speaks less to the value of art than he does about the encroachment of utilitarian values upon artistic value, and asserts the autonomy of the former from the latter. The irony of his assertion rests on the negativity of aesthetic values to the positivism of ideological ones. A similar irony is discernible in the

second of Slataper's *Lettere triestine*, "Mezzi di coltura," in which Slataper turns his attention to Trieste's cultural institutions, and first among them, the art museum that bears the name of the shipping magnate that founded it: Baron Pasquale Revoltella.

Baron Revoltella exemplified the commercial culture of the city and loyalty to the Habsburg Empire, not only in his personality but also in his legacy.³ Part of his fortune, as Slataper observes, was acquired in supplying the military of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in wars against Italian independence. Having no heir, the Baron left all that he had to the city of Trieste, which included among other things significant works of art that form the core of the museum's collection, the building that houses the museum, and ample funds to expand the collection. Slataper's argument grows out of the observation that the curators managed this inheritance badly, using the museum space poorly, stockpiling some works of art indiscriminately or placing more expensive ones out of sight from the public for whom they are ostensibly intended. The committee of the Revoltella museum exemplifies the cultural and financial values of Trieste's liberal elites, which is reflected in their treatment of the collection as well as their efforts to expand it.

Nucleo centrale sono le opere degli autori venuti a Trieste nel periodo di dormiveglia della I metà del secolo scorso: Bernardino Bison di Palmanova, Natale Schiavoni di Chioggia...; e dei triestini contemporanei. Dei quali il Veruda è l'unico che li unisca alle vere opere d'arte nazionale che il museo possiede [...] Ma è strano che non si sia pensato di comperare del Veruda

³ Revoltella was the son of a Venetian butcher who came to Trieste to seek his fortune and climbed to the highest echelons of Trieste's lucrative shipping companies. In 1860 he was arrested and imprisoned for underhanded deals while supplying the Imperial and Regal military at war against Italy. Exonerated in 1867, he had the title of Baron conferred upon him by the Emperor Franz Joseph. Among the inheritance that he left to Trieste, he provided for the Scuola Superiore di Commercio Revoltella. In an unpublished article Slataper treated the expansion of the school with suspicion, "ma in mano di Giacobbe ogni piatto di lenti rischia di costare la primogeniture." Scipio Slataper, "Per l'Università commerciale "Revoltella," *Scritti politici*, ed. Giani Stuparich (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1954) 123. Revoltella might be this Jacob to young Triestines, or he may also be like this Esau who gave up his Italian birthright for the Austrian Empire's plate of lentils.

quanto più e quanto meglio si poteva: Trieste dovrebbe far magari qualche sacrificio per avere una collezione almeno discreta del suo artista migliore.

La commissione del museo compra invece da qualche tempo all'esposizione di Venezia diverse opere né significative né belle; e con una svogliatezza tentennante e pigra, specialmente nella biennale ultima, che fa mal sperare per l'imminente.⁴

[The central core is comprised of works by artists who came to Trieste in the drowsy period of the last century's first half: Bernardino Bison of Palmanova, Natale Schiavoni of Chioggia ...; and Triestine contemporaries, out of which Veruda is the only one that unites them with the real works of national art that the Museum possesses: [...] But it is strange that they could not have thought of buying from Veruda as much of and as best as they could: perhaps Trieste ought to have made a few sacrifices to have at least a modest collection of its best artist.

For quite some time the commission of the museum has instead bought several works from the Venice exhibition that are neither significant nor beautiful; and with such hesitant and lazy indolence, especially at the last Biennale, which bodes poorly for the upcoming one.]

Slataper's complaint might appear insignificant on its own – a parochial endorsement of a local artist – but in the context of these *Lettere triestine* it points to an inconsistency that Triestines ought to think of as a problem. He takes issue with the Triestine disdain for Veruda, noting that between 1899 and 1905, Veruda's work had hung four times at the Venice Biennale. For Slataper, this alone is proof that the Triestine elite ignored the city's greatest artist. When the most important art museum in Trieste privileges artists and works of art extraneous to the Triestine cultural sphere when adding to the collection they do so at the expense of the city's Italian character. The result, according to Slataper's analysis, is a false consciousness; a special kind of centripetal provincialism in reverse that privileges an imported culture over an indigenous one. The curators of the Revoltella museum exemplify

⁴ Scipio Slataper; *Lettere triestine: col seguito di altri scritti vociani di polemica su Trieste* (Trieste, Edizioni Dedolibri, 1988) 16; "Mezzi di cultura" *La Voce*, Firenze, 25 Feb. 1909;

this mindset by purchasing works of Italian art as a means of enhancing Trieste's national character and prestige, whereas Slataper asserts that Trieste's *italianità* would be better served by cultivating homegrown expressions of it. He does not want to replace Italian art with Triestine art, but to include it among the prestigious works in the gallery's collection.

Slataper's championing of Veruda highlights the need for a change in the way Triestines thought about cultural production from their city, since the nineteenth century perception of an antithesis between economical and cultural development rendered Triestine cultural establishments inert. Italian nationalism imposes restrictive understandings of cultural tradition upon Triestine life that disavow any spontaneous expression of it to be recognized as art, and the materialistic, mercantile mindset of Trieste's bourgeoisie makes them insensitive to expressions of the spirit rooted in Triestine life. In their indifference to Veruda's art these curators serve the mercantile culture of Triestines who think that art must be good if it is expensive on the one hand, and on the other, Triestine Irredentists who think that art must be good if it is Italian. In other words, Trieste's cultural institutions do not recognize, want or even hope for a Triestine art.

Slataper wants Trieste to contribute to the Italian tradition, but finds this desire confronted with the sense that any culture outside of the one defined by a secure national tradition is not thought of as culture at all. The sense that Italy's culture is a unilateral gift, and that Triestines are not permitted to give anything back to it, engenders the resentment that characterizes much of Slataper's polemics and cultural critique. In this light, *Lettere triestine* can be read as a dialogue between a Triestine "self" and an Italian "other" located in Florence, who seems to possess and have direct, spontaneous access to national cultural traditions, whereas "Trieste non ha tradizioni di cultura." The case of Veruda exposes the false

consciousness and the critical intuition that underlies the “torment” of Trieste’s dual nature, and the same scenario plays out when Slataper takes aim at what he sees as the sorry state of literary affairs in Trieste. Building upon the thesis that “everything that is necessary for commerce is a violation of *italianità*” Slataper contends that the lofty, spiritual aspirations of literature are cancelled out by the baseness of commercial culture.

Trieste per un momento possiede – e pare per più cause possa esprimere – una propria natura differente in certi riguardi dagli altri comuni italiani. E se non con moto indipendente né con egual valore, certo Trieste sarebbe stata capace di concorrere in qualche modo alla magnifica produzione letteraria italiana. Ma aveva l’anima troppo bassa, direnata dal senso economico in modo da non scorgere più alte aspirazioni e tanto ottusa da non intuire che lo sviluppo materiale a un dato punto non procede più senza il concorso di forza intellettuale. Per ciò la storia di Trieste è ghiaccia: senza uno slancio di idealità, senza bisogno d’arte, senza affetto allo spirito.⁵

[Trieste for a moment possesses – and it seems for many reasons capable of expressing – its own nature that is different in some respects from that of other Italian municipalities. And if not by independent motion nor by equal value, then certainly Trieste would be able to contribute in some way to the magnificent literary production of Italy. But it had a soul that was too base, directed by its economic sense so as not to discern any higher aspirations, and so obtuse as to disregard that material development, at a given point, does not proceed anymore without the competition of intellectual force. For this reason the history of Trieste is frozen: without an outburst of idealism, without art, without affection towards the spirit.]

The lack of idealism and love of country that motivates one toward political action was also lacking in Trieste’s literary efforts, where local writers were valued only for leaving, and the imitation of foreign models was revered. For this reason Slataper disregards established literary societies and journals, as well as dialect poets and serial novels produced in the

⁵ Scipio Slataper *Lettere triestine : col seguito di altri scritti vociani di polemica su Trieste* (Trieste, Edizioni Dedolibri, 1988) 11-12; “Trieste non ha tradizioni di coltura,” *La Voce*, 11 Feb. 1909.

nineteenth century, as forming the basis for a Triestine literary tradition.⁶ Although he claims that Trieste is Italian, he felt that it had a unique way of being Italian that the literary production of the city did not exemplify. If the reader applies the premise of Slataper's critique, "Trieste non ha tradizioni di cultura," to the literary, this suggests that Trieste was to be understood as an empty vessel that must be filled. For much of the city's Italian speaking population, whether or not they strongly identified with this cultural and political Irredentism, Italian culture was to do that filling, but Slataper held that unquestioning acquiescence to the hegemony of Italian culture would not produce a Triestine art. At the same time, he did not agree with the socialists and economists who felt that Trieste could preserve its Italian character as part of the Austrian Empire. As Slataper observes, the economic advantages of the all-too commercial and culturally heterogeneous shipping hub would evaporate without the vision, inventiveness and critical thinking that accompanies historical and artistic traditions. Commercial and Italian – or socialist and Irredentist – "truths" are largely relative, exaggerated, historical, and above all ideological. Slataper wants to demolish both of these perspectives, in order to privilege a vital awareness of the present that would allow for a Triestine *prise de conscience*.

⁶ Domenico Rossetti, who is credited with having created the literary society of "Il Gabinetto di Minerva" and the historical society responsible for the journal "Archeografo triestino," was largely limited to the wealthy classes and did not succeed in engaging citizens in popular support for Italian culture. The literary journal "La Favilla" (The spark), showed promise under the editorship of Giuseppe Dall'Ongaro and Pacifico Valussi, having as its motto "Poco favilla gran fiamma seconda" (Little spark first, great flame second) but as Slataper points out the spark never caught fire. "Dov'è la fiamma?" Slataper asks, before pointing out that any noteworthy authors who had contributed to that journal were known only for what they produced when they left for the Italian kingdom, and those who stayed in Trieste were forgotten. There was also a mendacious tendency toward imitation of foreign literary models that characterized works like the serial novel "Misteri di Trieste" by Tito Dellaberra that rendered such efforts less significant. Silvio Benco was considered to be the city's most promising writer in the first decade of the twentieth century, but his two novels *La fiamma fredda* (1903) and *Il castello dei desideri* (1906) did not manifest that promise.

Poetry in the triestino dialect is not mentioned in Slataper's letters, as it was primarily created for comical entertainment, and never intended to channel any higher aspirations to cultural identity or tradition. See Roberto Damiani, *Poeti dialettali triestini: profilo storico-critico 1875-1980* (Trieste: Edizioni « Italo Svevo », 1981) 12.

In the fourth of the *Lettere triestine*, entitled “La vita dello spirito [The life of the spirit],”⁷ Slataper begins to reconstruct what he has worked so hard to tear down. If the polemical cultural critique of the previous letters works to raze the ground of false pretences to having cultural traditions, this one begins to build on the ground that is cleared, calling attention to what is particular of Triestine life that are plain to see if only one opens one’s eyes to it. “Trieste non si conosce ancora [Trieste does not know itself yet],”⁸ Slataper observes, calling attention to the problem of the two dominant cultures that disavow mutual recognition. He also sought to make his readers aware that the populations of Trieste were too varied and multiple in terms of ethnicity, language and geographical origin, such that any attempt to impose a monolithic culture upon them would destroy the “multianime” character of the city. By drawing his readers to consider the shortcomings of the city’s cultural traditions in categories that were consonant with affirmations of Italian identity, he tacitly exhorts his Triestine and Italian readers to examine their complacent view of culture of and to regard the particularities of the city in positive terms. Slataper regarded art in terms of cultivating self-awareness and a culture rooted in direct and spontaneous access to a literary tradition and a way of life. Slataper writes, “Trieste ha un tipo Triestino: deve volere un’arte triestina. Che ricrei con la gioia dell’espressione chiara questa convulsa e affannosa vita nostra [Trieste has a Triestine type: it must want a Triestine art. One that recreates with the joy of clear expression this feverish and frantic life of ours].”⁹ With no literary tradition to unite Trieste with Italy, or even to unite Triestines amongst themselves, Slataper took it upon himself to create the foundational work of a new tradition.

⁷ Scipio Slataper, *Lettere triestine* 31-39; “La vita dello spirito,” *La Voce*, 25 marzo 1909. The word “spirito” used here could also be translated as “intellect” or “mind,” much as the German word “Geist.”

⁸ Ibid. 37.

⁹ Ibid. 38.

Slataper realized that Triestine culture had to reimagine itself as an autonomous and original tradition if Triestine art was to have any value. The aesthetic value of a national art is determined at the center of its cultural traditions and in the case of Italian literature it was located in Florence. If that city could be compared to a central bank, determining the value and form of a currency, then Trieste was constrained to receive and to pay in that currency. If there is no sense of artistic value that is not somehow derived from Italian culture, then Triestine culture is non-essential; an appendix to Italy's already achieved cultural unity. It always faces the problem of the unilateral gift, whereby Trieste can only receive culture from Italy and not contribute to it in a significant way.¹⁰ Until Triestine literature can add to the tradition that expresses the unity of the Italian nation, Triestine writing subtracts from it, not by introducing difference *per se*, but by placing stock in an independent economy. Triestine writing has a negative literary value in the national and international economy of world letters until it is commodified as Triestine literature. However, if cultural production from Trieste is treated as a negative quantity in the literary economy of the Italian tradition, then it must be isolated from the Italian tradition, and find value in that isolation. The parameters of a Triestine literary tradition begin to emerge from Slataper's critical intuitions, but they do so in terms of negativity to existing traditions. If this negativity anticipates the concept of

¹⁰ Slataper's resentment toward Italian culture resonates with the dynamic of unequal exchange described by Jean Baudrillard as a characteristic of anti-Western sentiment in the Middle East and in colonized nations. "To understand the hatred of the rest of the world against the West, perspectives must be reversed. The hatred of non-Western people is not based on the fact that the West stole everything from them and never gave anything back. Rather, it is based on the fact that they received everything, but were never allowed to give anything back. This hatred is not caused by dispossession or exploitation, but rather by humiliation. [...] The unilateral gift is an act of power. And the Empire of the Good, the violence of the Good, is precisely to be able to give without any possible return." Jean Baudrillard, "The Violence of the Global." Trans. François Debrix. *Ctheory.net*. 5/20/2003 < www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=385 > ; Initially published as "La Violence du Mondial," in Jean Baudrillard, *Power Inferno* (Paris: Galilée, 2002) 63-83.

“antiliterature,” a term that has been used to identify many Triestine writers since, then antiliterature, to borrow again from Wilde, is quite useless.

When reconsidering Slataper’s endorsement of Veruda in the light of this critical awareness, and from this side of literary history, one finds an oversight that is as eccentric and ironic as anything produced by Trieste’s greatest writer. That writer was not Slataper, but a close friend of Veruda – a bank clerk who toiled in isolation on his first two novels in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and who disappeared from the stage of Triestine letters almost instantly when he published them. Nowadays, as Veruda continues to be celebrated to this day by the city’s cultural institutions, it is more by virtue of his friendship with the city’s most celebrated novelist than by his merit as an artist. However, this was not the case when Slataper wrote his *Lettere triestine*. Veruda knew the novelist who I am referring to by the name of Ettore Schmitz, but we know him better by his literary pseudonym, Italo Svevo. His first two novels, *Una vita* (1892) and *Senilità* (1898), were self-published and received by the reading public to an indifference so unbearable to their author that he resolved to quit writing and to focus his energies on the family business. By this account of public indifference Svevo would be to Triestine literature what Veruda is to Triestine visual art, but in Slataper’s *Lettere triestine* there is no mention of Svevo. The fact that Slataper, the champion of Triestine culture, had no awareness of Svevo’s novels indicates just how ignored he truly was. It also bears out the validity of Slataper’s cultural critique.

“Il caso Svevo”: antiliterature and literary criticism

antiletterario [an-ti-let-te-rà-rio] agg.
Che è contrario alle norme, al gusto, allo spirito della letteratura.

If the absence of Svevo from Slataper's articles strikes us as a noticeable lacuna when we read of Veruda in them, this tells us something about literary history and the traditions that consolidate it. Trieste is now famous for its writers and has established literary traditions, largely because of Svevo, who became a widely admired modernist writer in Europe and is unquestionably Trieste's most celebrated novelist. In spite of the wide critical acclaim that Svevo was to achieve, he was virtually unknown by the time that Slataper wrote his articles for *La Voce*. It is more likely that Slataper was completely unaware of Svevo's novels than choosing to omit them, and there is no documentation from either Svevo or Slataper that attests to either of them having been aware of each other's existence. Yet even if they had known each other personally, it is just as probable that Slataper would have remained oblivious to Svevo's novels. It was very likely that the journalist Silvio Benco knew Schmitz personally, yet he makes no mention of Svevo in a book about Trieste published one year after Slataper's articles for *La Voce*, though he does consider the author's friend Veruda worth discussing. Even Svevo's work colleagues were unaware of Svevo's novels, and it is reported that one of them, upon learning news of his growing fame in Europe, exclaimed, "What? That idiot Schmitz?" Svevo took the apathetic reception and disappointing reviews of his work seriously enough to abandon any further pursuit or promotion of his literary ambitions, confessing in his journal in 1899 "'Io, a quest'ora e definitivamente ho eliminato della mia vita quella ridicola e dannosa cosa che si chiama letteratura [I, at this very moment and definitively, have eliminated from my life that damned thing called literature].'"¹¹ Indeed, there is no reason why either of the two should have written about this bourgeois and well-to-

¹¹ Italo Svevo, *Racconti-Saggi Pagine sparse*, ed. Bruno Maier (Milano, Dall'Oglio, 1968) 818.

do Triestine businessman who had written a few novels in his youth under the pen name of Italo Svevo.

The designation of “antiliterature,” now an umbrella term ascribed to much of Trieste’s literary output, arose in 1925 with a controversy in European literature that was known in Italian circles as “*Il caso Svevo*.” The discovery of Svevo by French and Italian literati was made all the more clamorous in contrast with the glacial silence with which they were initially received; rescued from the brink of oblivion by a chance encounter with an certain Irishman working as an English teacher in Trieste. These circumstances beg the question of what Svevo was writing before his discovery and why he disappeared so completely from the scene of Triestine culture. One answer to this question lies in Slataper’s hypothesis, whereby there were no cultural traditions capable of categorizing his work. This could also be applied to other Triestine writers – such as Umberto Saba, Carlo Michelstaedter, Virgilio Giotti, Giani and Carlo Stuparich, to name a few – who were writing before 1925, but each of them wrote in a different way from other Triestine writers. Even Slataper’s self-consciously Triestine novel, *Il mio Carso*, was *sui generis* as a work of Triestine art.

It is also clear that Svevo’s novels suffered in comparison to Italian and European models. Early critical readings of these novels treat them in terms of the foreign influences that they reflected, and in particular the realism of Emile Zola as opposed to that of Giuseppe Verga. Domenico Oliva, who reviewed *Una vita* for the newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* in 1892, describes Svevo as a second-rate imitator of Maupassant.¹² However poorly he reviewed the novel, it is to Oliva’s credit that he was the only literary critic who would deign to read and write anything about it, as all textual evidence suggests. The question of language

¹² Domenico Oliva, “*Una vita* di Italo Svevo” *Il Corriere della Sera*, Milano, 11 dicembre 1892; reprinted in Nanni, *Leggere Svevo* 133-134.

and the lack of literary flourish in Svevo's novels became a commonplace in Svevo criticism, but before his discovery his shortcomings were instead regarded in terms of "un valore tecnico assai limitato [limited technical skill]" (Oliva), and for the German writer Paul Heyse, a lack of economy with regards to the novel's composition, among other "difetti, che si possono attribuire a un falso principio artistico del naturalismo moderno [defects that can be attributed to the false artistic principle of modern naturalism."¹³ In this vein, Heyse identifies another characteristic that might explain the indifference of Triestines to his novels.

Svevo's psychological realism, "à la Zola", was unflattering with regards to the local coloring of his protagonists, both of whom are disempowered clerks working in Triestine banks. Unlike the healthy, young hero of Slataper's *Il mio Carso*, whose ambience is the natural Karst plateau surrounding Trieste, Svevo's protagonists exemplified what Svevo called an "inetto"; an ineffectual man. "*Un inetto*" was the title that Svevo had originally proposed for *Una vita*, which details the obsessions of a bank clerk with literary aspirations who courts the daughter of his employer. Heyse wrote that it was hard to sympathize with his characters because of they were morally repulsive; Alfonso Nitti is described as "l'eroe del romanzo è di una natura così debole, insignificante, spesso ripugnante che l'occuparsi insistentemente di lui e del suo ambiente, l'analisi dei suoi sentimenti più tenui, dei suoi pensieri, della sua psiche, sembrano non valer la pena di esser fatti [a hero with a nature that is so weak, insignificant and often repugnant that to become occupied insistently with him and his environment, the analysis of his most intimate sentiments, of his thoughts and of his psyche seems not worth

¹³ Paul Heyse "Due lettere da Monaco" from Livia Veneziani Svevo, *Vita di mio marito con altri inediti di I.S.*, ed. Anna Pittoni (Trieste: Edizioni dello Zibaldone, 1958), 31-32; 47-48. Reprinted in Nanni, *Leggere Svevo* 134-135. Heyse was another one of Svevo's earliest readers. Svevo sent copies of his self-published novels to Heyse, who responded to *Una vita* in a letter dated 19 June 1897, and to *Senilità* in a letter dated 26 November 1898. His comments, written in letters to the author, were not public record until the memoirs of Svevo's wife, Livia Veneziani Svevo, were published.

doing].” Heyse made similar remarks with regards to the protagonist of *Senilità*, Emilio Brentani, an insurance clerk who feels that he is prematurely old, and carries his affair with a young and attractive working-class woman into all consuming and egocentric obsession, “la nostra compassione per quell’inetto sciagurato non prevale a lungo sulla ripugnanza per la sua malattia morale [our compassion for this wretched incompetent does not prevail very long against the repugnance of his moral sickness].”

Later critics would attribute similar characteristics to Svevo himself in explaining the disappearance, or rather the non-appearance, of the author from Italian and Triestine letters. For one, he was not thought of as a literary type, but rather as a well-established member of Trieste’s bourgeois business community. He scribbled away at his first novels at his desk at the Union Bank in his spare time, having literary aspirations that were doomed to fail, much like his protagonists. He belonged to no literary groups, and worked in relative isolation with the language he had at hand until his encounter with James Joyce in 1907. Svevo was generally indifferent to Italian nationalism, choosing to side with whatever political position offered him the most advantage. Similarly with religion, he converted from Judaism to Catholicism in order to marry the daughter of a wealthy manufacturer of paint for shipping vessels. Svevo also lacked the kind of charisma that Slataper was endowed with, but instead, according to Roberto Bazlen, “Non aveva che genio: nient’altro. Del resto era stupido, egoista, opportunista, gauche, calcolatore, senza tatto [A genius and nothing more. The rest of him was stupid, gauche, calculating, tactless].”¹⁴ Such comments, when applied to a Jew, even after conversion, as was the case with Svevo, or written by a Jew who professes to atheism, as was the case with Bazlen, bring to mind the language and imagery of anti-Semitism.

¹⁴ Roberto Bazlen, *Scritti* (Milano, Adelphi: 1984) 380.

Details about the life of Svevo, or Schmitz, which became the material for *ad hominem* attacks on the author are absent in Oliva, or in Heyse who wrote that he was compelled to write to the author precisely because he discerned talent in the work, lamenting that “l’opera seria e profonda passava inosservata in Italia [the serious and profound work was ignored in Italy].” In spite of their generally negative appraisals of *Una vita*, Oliva remarks that there is a distinct “coscienza artistica ed un osservatore dall’occhio limpido [artistic conscience and an observer with a clear eye],” whereas Heyse forgives the novel for many of shortcomings because he intuits “una seria ricerca della verità interiore e una decisa attitudine a trattare problemi psicologici [a serious search for interior truth and a decisive inclination toward the artistic treatment of psychological problems.]” This kind of praise seems consistent with Svevo’s own conscious approach to writing, which he describes in his novel *Senilità*, indirectly, as the aesthetic principles that he attributes to the sculptor Balli.

[Balli] aveva continuato a correre la sua via dietro a un certo ideale di spontaneità, a una ruvidezza volute, o come egli diceva, perspicuità d’idea da cui credeva dovesse risultare il suo “io” artistico depurato da tutto ciò ch’era idea o forma altrui. [...] la riconquista della semplicità o ingenuità che i cosiddetti classici ci avevano rubate.¹⁵

[Balli] continued to pursue his way behind a certain ideal of spontaneity, a voluntary coarseness, a simplicity or, as he used to say, the shrewdness of an idea of which he believed that it must result in his artistic “I” deprived of all ideas or forms that come from others. [...] the reconquering of simplicity and ingenuity that the so-called classicists had stolen from us.]

In framing his own approach to writing as the aesthetics of the sculptor Balli one discerns the influence of his friend Veruda, who tried to capture evanescent moments of light and life in his canvasses, and who was largely influenced by French Impressionism. In his

¹⁵ Italo Svevo, “*Senilità*” *Romanzi e « continuazioni »* (ed.) Mario Lavagetto (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 2004) 410-411. These passages are also commented upon in A. Leone De Castris, *Italo Svevo* (Pisa: Nistri Lischi, 1959), reprinted in Nanni, *Leggere Svevo*, 94.

description of Balli, Svevo pairs also the artistic principles outlined above with the sculptor's indifference to public opinion; a trait that he undoubtedly observed in Veruda. For Svevo this meant that the ideals of simplicity, ingenuity and spontaneity indicate a conscious effort to draw upon immanent life experiences as the material for art, unclouded by formal and literary conventions. The "voluntary coarseness" of his literary language was inimical to the ornamental literary style that was fashionable at the time and exemplified by Gabriele D'Annunzio, whose flowery prose Svevo viscerally abhorred. The clear intentionality behind Svevo's aesthetic principles is incomplete without an appreciation of this conscious indifference to tradition or to public opinion. The reception of Svevo's art may have suffered as a consequence, receiving unfavourable comparisons to other literary works, but it was mostly the glacial indifference of the reading public that affected the author in spite of his professed ideals. Yet here it is worth keeping in mind that artistic styles going against the dominant grain at any place and time often receive the types of critique and treatment that I describe with regards to Svevo, and to some extent, Veruda. The Impressionists, to take the most obvious example, were derided by the French Academy. Avant-garde work usually follows this pattern: first, it is taken up only by a few who are "discerning" enough to see the artistic merit of a work, and then by the larger viewing public.

The first influential reader to appreciate Svevo's early novels was James Joyce. Joyce met the businessman Ettore Schmitz in 1907, while he was living in Trieste and working as an English teacher for the Berlitz language school. Schmitz needed to improve his English for business abroad and the young Irishman was available to oblige him. Schmitz revealed to the aspiring writer Joyce that he had also written some books under the pseudonym of Italo Svevo when he was younger, and shared them with his teacher. Joyce admired Svevo's prose,

compared some passages in his novels favourably with Anatole France, and encouraged the Triestine businessman to pick up the vocation of writing again. Inspired by psychoanalysis and the effects of the First World War, Svevo produced his third novel, *La coscienza di Zeno*. It was self-published in 1922 as the others had been, and it was received to equally disappointing indifference. However, at this juncture Svevo's most discerning reader had moved to Paris and was making a name for himself there. Three years later Svevo and his novels became a *cause célèbre*.

The controversy that followed was referred to as “il «caso» più singolare che offra oggi la nostra tranquilla repubblica libresca [the most singular “case” that has occurred in our tranquil republic of letters]”¹⁶ by the poet Eugenio Montale, who initiated Italian readers into the works of “Italo Svevo, scrittore assai amato da alcuni dei migliori italianists stranieri e ignoto affatto in patria [Italo Svevo, a writer who is loved very much by our best foreign *italianists* and completely ignored in our homeland].”¹⁷ His reference to Italianists in the French language is significant, since it was their favourable opinion of Svevo's works that motivated Montale to write about him to Italians, however indirectly. Montale was introduced to Svevo's novels by Roberto Bazlen, whose taste in literature was highly renowned in publishing circles, and wrote to the poet that *Senilità* “è un vero capolavoro, e l'unico romanzo moderno che abbia l'Italia (pubblicato nel 1898!) [is a true masterpiece, and the only modern novel that Italy has produced (published in 1898!).”¹⁸ It was also Bazlen who

¹⁶ Eugenio Montale, “Presentazione di Italo Svevo” *Il Quindicinale*, 1.2. 30 January 1926, p.4; reprinted in *Leggere Svevo: antologia della critica sveviana*. Ed. Luciano Nanni (Bologna: Nicola Zanchinelli, 1974) 141-145. 141. This was slightly preceded by Montale's article “Omaggio a Italo Svevo” which appeared in *L'Esame*, IV.11-12, Milano, November-December 1925, pp. 804-13.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Bazlen, *Scritti* 359. Letter to Eugenio Montale, 1 September 1925.

informed Montale that *Le navire d'argent*, a Parisian literary journal directed by Adrienne Monnier, was planning to publish a special issue dedicated to Svevo.¹⁹

Svevo's works took a rather circuitous path before they arrived in the hands of the Parisian *italianisants* in question as well. Benjamin Crémieux and Valéry Larbaud learned about Svevo from none other than the Triestine businessman's former English teacher. As the story goes, when Valery Larbaud had asked Joyce if he knew of any interesting prose writers in Italian recommended that he read Svevo.²⁰ Larbaud and Benjamin Crémieux saw to it that Svevo's novels were translated into French, and exposed Svevo to a wider and more appreciative audience. Crémieux featured some of these translations and an essay on Svevo in the literary journal *Le navire d'argent*, shortly after Montale's articles appeared in *L'Esame* and in *Il Quindicinale*, though he presented it as a discovery that had not yet taken place in Italy. The charge levelled against Italians was that they had stubbornly neglected this literary genius in their midst, who had, as he claimed, already written novels that were wholly original and distinct from the Italian tradition some twenty-five years before the first and only analytic novel in contemporary Italian literature. Crémieux also claimed that the singularity of Svevo to Italian literature was analogous to that of Proust to the French, after which many critics

¹⁹ Bazlen, *Scritti* 363; 365. Letters to Montale, November 16 and December 13 1925.

²⁰ Antonio Gramsci, who weighs in the difference of opinion regarding who discovered Svevo first cites a similar story from Carlo Linati, a translator of various works by James Joyce, who had written in *Nuova antologia* "Due anni fa, trovandomi a prender parte alla serata di un club intellettuale milanese, ricordo che ad un certo punto entrò un giovane scrittore tornato allora allora da Parigi, il quale dopo aver discusso a lungo con noi di un pranzo del Pen Club offerto a Pirandello dai letterati parigini, aggiunse che alla fine di esso il celebre romanziere irlandese James Joyce, chiacchierando con lui della letteratura italiana moderna, gli aveva detto: – Ma voi altri italiani avete un grande prosatore e forse neanche lo sapete – Quale? – Italo Svevo, triestino [Two years ago, finding myself taking part in a soirée of a Milanese intellectual club, I remember that at one point a young writer, just recently back from Paris, entered, and after having spoken to us at length about a lunch of the Pen Club offered for Pirandello by the Parisian literati, he added that at the end of it that the famous Irish novelist James Joyce, chatting with him about the modern Italian literature, said: – But you guys have a great Italian prose writer and you may not even know it – Who? – Italo Svevo, a Triestine.]" Antonio Gramsci, "La scoperta di Italo Svevo" *Letteratura e vita nazionale*. (Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1950) 95; cf. Carlo Linati "Italo Svevo, romanziere" *Nuova Antologia*. Roma, LXIII, 1 Feb. 1928.

after him called Svevo, “The Italian Proust.”²¹ Montale and Crémieux, nevertheless call him an Italian writer, but set him apart from the limited sphere of contemporary Italian literature. Montale claims Svevo for Italian literature, but nevertheless places him squarely within the sphere of international modernist movements when he writes, “*La coscienza di Zeno* è l’apporto della nostra letteratura a quel gruppo di libri ostentatamente internazionali che cantano l’ateismo sorridente e disperato del novissimo Ulisse: l’uomo europeo [*La coscienza di Zeno* is the contribution of our literature to that group of ostensibly international books that sing the smiling and desperate atheism of the new Ulysses: European man].”²²

The novelty of Montale’s article is that it constitutes an attempt to import Svevo into Italy for the first time, since his books are like the bourgeois protagonists of his novels who as Crémieux describes as living “in the commercial life of Trieste, like those of Proust who live in “*le grand monde*.” And yet there is another layer to Crémieux’s comparison of Svevo with Proust that should be familiar to us by now because of what it omits. Crémieux was clearly aware of Slataper’s involvement with *La Voce* and had translated his novel *Il mio Carso* into French in 1920, a few years before he had heard of Svevo, never once does draw any connection between the two Triestine writers, nor does he mention Slataper anywhere in the article. When Crémieux and Montale do write of Slataper it is in the context of his belonging to another group: the Florentine *Vocianti*. Svevo was as indifferent to *La Voce* and the Italian avant-garde as Slataper and his colleagues were to him. This is yet another aspect of Svevo’s singularity bears out Slataper’s hypothesis, “Trieste has no cultural traditions.” There was no

²¹ Among other articles written on Svevo by French critics, there is D. Braga, “Un Proust italien,” *Le Crapouillot*, Paris, November 1927. In numerous writings about Svevo, his works are looked at comparatively alongside Proust, notably by Giacomo Debenedetti « Svevo e Proust » *Il romanzo del Novecento* (Milano, Garzanti, 1971).

²² Montale, “Presentazione di Italo Svevo” 144.

reason for Crémieux or for Montale to make any associations between the two writers from Trieste.

While the championing of Svevo by Montale and Crémieux may have convinced some Italian readers and critics that his novels were worth discovering, others were enraged by implicit messages underlying the late discovery, whether it was the former's deference to the scope of influence that Paris had on world literature, or the latter's contention that Italian critics were short-sighted, provincial and not shrewd enough to appreciate Svevo's works. Several weeks after Montale's "Presentazione di Italo Svevo" was published and on the same day that Crémieux's appraisal of Svevo appeared in translation,²³ Giulio Caprin, a literary critic from Trieste who worked for the Milanese newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera*, wrote a scathing review on Svevo's works that also targeted those who championed him.

A leggerlo ora tradotto in francese dal Crémieux e dal Larbaud, che nell'ultimo fascicolo del *Navire d'Argent* lo presentano ai lettori francesi, lo Svevo pare un altro. Se questo sconosciuto italiano è destinato al compenso di una coscienza europea, sarà provvidenziale che questa cominci in un'altra lingua ma in una lingua. I suoi presentatori possono sorvolare su questa deficienza sostanziale e magari compiacersi che in questa nostra letteratura afflitta, se vogliamo, da troppi che "scrivon bene" venga fuori qualcuno che ha il coraggio di scriver male. Sullo "scrivere bene" e sulle imposture artistiche che ne derivano, ci intendiamo benissimo. Ma fin tanto che, per esprimersi sulla carta stampata, non si è trovato di meglio che l'adoperare il vocabolario e la grammatica di una certa lingua, si sono fissati dei limiti che, quando non sono raggiunti, l'arte svanisce e non resta che una pena.²⁴

[To read him now translated into French by Crémieux and Larbaud, that in the latest issue of the *Navire d'Argent* presents him to French readers, Svevo appears to be someone else. If this forgotten Italian is destined to have the compensation of a European renown, it will be providential that this starts in

²³ Benjamin Crémieux, "Italo Svevo," *Il popolo di Trieste*, 11 Feb. 1926 ; reprinted in Nanni, *Leggere Svevo* 145-147.

²⁴ Giulio Caprin "Una proposta di celebrità," *Il Corriere della Sera*, Milano, 11 febbraio 1926; reprinted in Nanni, *Leggere Svevo* 148-149.

another language but in a language. Its presenters can gloss over this substantial deficiency and perhaps, if it should please us, that in our literature afflicted, if you will, with too many who “write well” there emerges someone who has the courage to “write badly.” Of “good writing” and the ensuing artistic impostures, we understand each other very well. But as long as, to express oneself in print, you are not getting better than to use the vocabulary and the grammar of a certain language, you are set limits that, when they are not met, the art vanishes and there remains no more than penalization.]

Caprin acknowledges the charge of artistic insincerity that the avant-garde levelled against the ornate prose of writers like Gabriele D’Annunzio, even going so far as to call it an affliction, but emphasizes that Svevo’s prose is not the proper cure for it. Caprin holds the view that literature is a matter of working within certain limits, and conformity to a grammatically proper language is the precondition for literary art. Much of Caprin’s review focused on the “substantial deficiency” of Svevo’s literary language, which was “incredibilmente povero e confuso. Disgrazia connessa alle altre disgrazie dalla sua particolare triestinità, ma fatale [incredibly poor and confused. A disgrace connected to other disgraces of his particular *triestinità*, but fatally].”²⁵ Caprin considers Svevo’s *triestinità* to be the principal cause of his poor literary language, placing him at a disadvantage in terms of literary value according to two criteria: one is the “difficile ed angusta [difficult and restricted]” position of Trieste with regards to the Italian language, and the other is Svevo’s very Triestine occupation as a businessman, which exempts him from an artistic vocation and places him outside of an artistic community. The charge of “scriver male” (bad writing) would eventually become part of Svevo’s legend, but for Caprin, Svevo’s writing set a dangerous precedent for Italian literature. “Scriver male [Bad writing]” subtracts from the unity of the Italian tradition only when measured in the terms of that tradition and its system

²⁵ Ibid. 148.

of value. According to Caprin, when the printing press and the international literary community dignify such writing as that of Svevo, it pains the Italian reader because it damages the national literary tradition.

On this basis Caprin claims two rather dubious honours for the French *italianisants*, in spite of their having overlooked the atrociousness of Svevo's prose. First, he claims that Svevo's works did not benefit from being translated into another language, but that it benefitted from being translated into *a* language.²⁶ One can go further with this remark: Svevo becomes literature *only* in translation – that is, Svevo's language is never *literature* in Italian – hence, it is *anti-literary* insofar as it is ostensibly written in Italian. Second, Caprin closes his essay by crediting Crémieux and Larbaud with having brought critical attention to the neglected author, but takes Svevo out of their hands for his final judgment.

Si può essere grati a questi amici francesi di aver segnalato una curiosità antiletteraria nella letteratura italiana. Ma questo è quasi tutto. In sé par difficile ammettere che la forza d'arte dello Svevo sia, anche in questo che affermano il migliore dei suoi romanzi, più che una forza latente.

[One can be grateful to our friends in France for having signalled to us this antiliterary curiosity within Italian literature. But this is just about where it ends. In itself, it seems difficult to admit that the power of Svevo's art, even that which is affirmed as the best of his novels, is anything more than a latent power].²⁷

Whether or not Caprin is sincere in thanking the French for indicating Svevo's literary value to Italy, he indirectly concedes to their position as he identifies the "antiliterary" nature of the work. The final sentence in Caprin's article describes the antiliterary perfectly, whether

²⁶ Caprin echoes this sentiment in a letter written to Benjamin Crémieux on behalf of the editor in chief at *Il Corriere della Sera*, M. Croci. Caprin writes to inform Crémieux that Croci had refused to publish his article submitted to the newspaper concerning Svevo, and tasked him with writing on the Triestine author instead. In the letter he writes of "l'extrême pauvreté de la langue et du style de Svevo," and adds, 'Je crois que, traduite en français, sa prose y gagnera énormément.' Italo Svevo, *Carteggio*, ed. Bruno Maier (Milano: dall'Oglio editore, 1965) 74.

²⁷ Caprin, 151.

or not it was his intention to do so: Antiliterature is created in isolation and its power is indeed a latent one. In this respect, it is closer to what Roland Barthes had envisioned as “zero-degree” writing, in that it attains literary value or quality by the translator’s hand and not by that of the writer. If we are to follow Caprin’s logic in terms of market value, we might see that Svevo had turned his financial cunning to the world market of letters. One might also think of it as a kind of financial transaction, in which Svevo had received a loan of literary capital, undersigned by the arch-modernist author of *Ulysses*, James Joyce, and paid out by Larbaud, who was a preeminent shareholder in the world bank of literary value, Paris. The Italianists had lent to Svevo’s work a measure of literary value that it did not have before by translating it into French, and that literary currency was now producing a substantial return in its conversion into Italian literary value, which came at no extra cost to the author. In spite of the fact that Svevo’s novels fail on so many levels of what constituted literary value to Caprin and other defenders of the Italian tradition who shared his views, Svevo’s writing had become literature; a literary matter in the sense that his work was being printed and diffused, and his impact on European modernism was starting to take shape. Was Svevo an author worthy of “un riconoscimento molto serio e necessario [serious and necessary appreciation]” as Montale asserted, or was there any foundation for “il sospetto del *canard*” [the suspicion of a hoax] coming from France? Evidently, Caprin’s acerbic vindication of the Italian tradition against Svevo was not where “*Il caso Svevo*” ended.

For many Italian literary critics at the time of Svevo’s discovery, and continuing on while his works continued to produce debate among them, “literature” meant “tradition.” Language was one component of it among several, albeit an important one. Crémieux and Montale identify Svevo as a singular case of modern literature, which makes him an exception

to the tradition, whereas Caprin argues that Svevo is exceptional only as a curiosity that is foreign, inferior and unworthy of the tradition. Other early critiques of Svevo's works that attribute, directly or implicitly, an antiliterary quality to them, accentuate Svevo's difference from the Italian literary tradition, and often continue to assert his indifference to it. For example, in a 1927 review of *Senilità*, Sergio Solmi writes that the *antiletterarietà* of Svevo's works resides in its "accento di modernità senza legami con la tradizione [accent of modernity without any ties to tradition]," and tries to make sense of the polemicizing views aimed at Svevo's works by Italian critics in terms of this purported indifference to tradition:

La difficoltà, per l'opera di Svevo, di un adeguato riconoscimento critico, deriva in parte dall'impossibilità di inquadrarla negli schemi del romanzo contemporaneo italiano, d'inclinazioni così diverse, in parte dalla sua formazione del tutto antiletteraria, che ci interdice di compiervi attorno quel lavoro di comparazioni, legamenti e raffronti che, per quanto in fondo indifferente al giudizio, ne è spesso la necessaria preparazione [...] La maggior singolarità di Italo Svevo, scrittore triestino, sta appunto nel non aver sentito, neppure inconsapevolmente, la necessità di un qualsiasi ricollegamento alla tradizione formale della lingua in cui ha scritto, forse per caso, i suoi libri.²⁸

[The difficulty in obtaining an appropriate critical recognition of Svevo's work derives in part by the inability to frame it within the criteria of the contemporary Italian novel, having inclinations that are so different, in part from his altogether antiliterary formation, that inhibits us from accomplishing the job through the work of comparison, having ligaments and correlations that, insofar as they are basically indifferent to judgment, often resist the necessary preparation. [...] The major singularity of Italo Svevo, writer from Trieste, lies precisely in not having felt, even unconsciously, the need for any connection whatsoever with the formal tradition of the language in which wrote, perhaps by chance, his books.]

In Solmi's comments we can discern a few things about how their author views the literary tradition and how Svevo is inimical to it. The contemporary Italian novel is written

²⁸ Sergio Solmi "Italo Svevo: "Senilità" from *Il Convegno*, Milano, a. VIII, 1927 pp. 671-77; reprinted in Nanni, *Leggere Svevo* 154-55.

with the intention of engaging with the tradition, whereas Svevo's modernist novel, "spoglio di tutti gli ornamenti superflui di genere letterario, ha il naturale respiro della vita stessa immediatamente rispecchiata nella coscienza [stripped of all superfluous ornaments of the literary kind, having a natural scope within life itself, immediately reflected in the consciousness]", lacks this intention (though the description does bring to mind some of the principles of impressionist painting mentioned earlier). Solmi's comments also describe a structure; an edifice of frames, ligaments, criteria, correlations, comparisons, inclinations that delimit the sphere of the tradition, whereas Svevo lies outside of all of these. Another critic, Ferdinando Pasini, agrees with Solmi's judgment that Svevo's indifference toward Italian literary tradition is what makes him singular, except that he sees this as a carefully cultivated, even premeditated non-engagement. Pasini indicates Svevo's late novella *Una burla riuscita*, as a key to understanding Svevo's own attitude toward the tradition. The protagonist of the novella, Ettore Samigli, is an aging writer deluded and yet content with dreams of literary greatness that never come to fruition, and Pasini frames the attitude of this protagonist as indicative of Svevo's own attitude towards writing, isolation, literary work and literary value:

Il segreto della perenne vitalità conservata da Italo Svevo attraverso il lungo periodo di glaciale indifferenza, da cui vide circondata l'opera sua, è tutto qui: nella coscienza imperturbata e imperturbabile del proprio valore, nella indifferenza altrui, nell'essere prima artista per sé che per gli altri. Sono passati i veristi, i naturalisti, gli estetizzanti, i neoclassici, i neoromantici: egli ripiglia, a trent'anni dal suo debutto in arte, la sua maniera di novellare e si trova all'avanguardia della letteratura moderna.²⁹

[The secret of the perennial vitality conserved by Italo Svevo, through the long period of glacial indifference, of which emptiness surrounded his work, is entirely this: in the unperturbed and imperturbable awareness of his own value, in his indifference towards others, in first being an artist for himself than for

²⁹ Ferdinando Pasini, "Italo Svevo" *Corriere Emiliano – Gazzetta di Parma*, 7 July 1928. Reprinted in Nanni, *Leggere Svevo* 159-161, 161.

others. We have seen realists, naturalists, aesthetes, neoromantics and neoclassicists; instead he folds in on himself, for the thirty years since he began his art, his own manner of novel writing, and finds himself at the avant-garde of modern literature.]

Although many of Svevo's early readers find a certain kinship between Svevo's novels and exemplars of French literature, there was no novel in Italian that could properly be compared to the works of Svevo. Even Svevo's realism was so psychologically profound that it had no place beside the *Verismo* of Verga; his "*inetti*" were antithetical to "*I Vinti*" of Verga's novels. The Italian language was situated in Italy, as was the tradition, but there was no place where Svevo, "un scrittore di Trieste [a writer from Trieste]," could be adequately situated within the tradition. Solmi, a prolific reader who admired Montaigne and Rimbaud as much as he did Leopardi, took a rather sympathetic look at the antiliterary aspects of Svevo's writing, whereas more conservative critics raised on a diet of Pascoli, Carducci, Manzoni and Verga treated the antiliterary as a sacrilege. Caprin knew who would be receptive to his condemnation of Svevo when he chose to identify the French as those who discovered him instead of Montale. Positive comparisons between Svevo and foreign writers could not redeem him in the eyes of such critics, but quite the opposite; they condemned him further.

In 1926, the critic and poet Giuseppe Ravegnani faults the Crémieux and French literati for having ignored the merits of the Italian tradition, and emphasized that the positive qualities attributed to Svevo were even more present in Italian writers who came before him, such as Manzoni, Verga and Fogazzaro who also embodied the spirit of the tradition. The antiliterary characteristics of Svevo's novels are implicit in his comments:

Arte per eccellenza antitetica allo spirito della nostra tradizione, sia romantica sia classica, e che potrà essere genuina e schietta, e magari universale, quando quella del Proust, ma che a noi non soddisfa, forse proprio perché chi la scrive è quell'*amateur*, cioè, in parole povere, dilettante, di cui parla il Crémieux, e

che, scrivendo un po' sbadatamente, in un italiano approssimativo, snatura il meglio della nostra tradizione, esatta e tutt'altro che dialettale.³⁰

[Art that is exemplary in being antithetical to the spirit of our tradition, be it romantic or classical, and while it might be genuine and straightforward, maybe even universal, like that of Proust, that does not satisfy us, maybe because the person who writes it is this *amateur*, that is, simply put, a dilettante, of whom Crémieux speaks, and who, writing a little carelessly, in an approximate Italian, distorts the best of our tradition, exact and wholly other than dialectal.]

Ravegnani's remarks also illustrate that, while the literary language of Svevo was evidently not regarded as a good literary (or "Tuscan") Italian, it cannot be described as dialect either. Svevo's "bad writing" simply became his style and other critics tried to describe what his literary language actually consisted of.

Shortly after Svevo's death Giacomo Debenedetti described it as a kind of functional and provisional Triestine business Italian, peppered with Germanisms, dialectal syntax, and onomatopoeic approximations "e poi trapiantati senza adattamenti, a rappresentare un valore lirico e descrittivo [and then transplanted without adaptations, to represent a lyrical and descriptive value]."³¹ Natalino Sapegno defended Svevo's literary language from the pedantic generalizations of "puri grammatici [pure grammarians]" who vigorously sought out the "frasi barbare e dei solecismi [barbaric phrases and solecisms]" in Svevo's works as providing an easy target for their condemnation of his works.³² Sapegno distinguishes between two critical camps, one of literary critics acting as pedantic grammarians and the other consisting of those who can discern the truthfulness veiled in the "sobria e vivente efficacia [sober and lively efficiency]" of Svevo's language. He makes it clear which camp he belongs to, elaborating

³⁰ Giuseppe Ravegnani, "Da Freud a Svevo" *I Libri del Giorno*, Milano a IX, maggio 1926, pp. 233-35; reprinted in Nanni, *Leggere Svevo* 148-149, 152.

³¹ Giacomo Debenedetti, "Svevo e Schmitz" *Il Convegno*, Milano a. X, gennaio-febbraio 1929; Nanni, *Leggere Svevo*, 166-175, 175.

³² Natalino Sapegno « Il corto respiro dell'autobiografia » *La Nuova Italia*, 20 gennaio 1930, pp. 25-27 ; Nanni, *Leggere Svevo* 166-175, 177.

upon Debenedetti's description of Svevo's "sensibile, energetico e suggestivo gergo [sensible, energetic and suggestive slang]" and adds a comparison with André Gide's conceptual "volapuk" to Debenedetti's description of Svevo's "esperanto." Although critics who appraise Svevo's language in a similar way valorize the modernity of Svevo's "scrivere male" against the backwardness of many grammarian critics, this was not enough to dispel the irritation of many Italian critics. Whether a critique of Svevo's works was based on aesthetic or grammatical judgments, or it was understood as a unique style, Svevo was not thought of as antiliterary merely for writing badly – he was also considered unpatriotic.

Svevo's works were published at a time when the question of literary language was highly charged with nationalist significance. As the Triestine poet Ferruccio Fölkel remarks, some fifty years later, if not for the intervention of Joyce and the French *italianisti*, "l'iperbole irredentista e la miopia della cultura italiana avrebbero ucciso anche l'arte di Italo Svevo [the Irredentist hyperbole and the myopia of Italian culture would have killed the art of Italo Svevo]."³³ Caprin exemplifies the underlying urge to criticize Svevo from a nationalist perspective, which was feasibly galvanized by Fascism.³⁴ In other words, when Trieste was annexed into Italy, the art of Svevo went out of the frying pan of Irredentism and into the fire of Italian national literary institutions. The contrast in tone between Caprin's 1912 review of Slataper's novel *Il mio Carso* and his commentary on Svevo is highly suggestive of this. Thirteen years earlier he was much more sympathetic to the linguistic shortcomings of Slataper, attributed to his particular Triestine upbringing. According to Caprin, Slataper "si

³³ Ferruccio Fölkel, "Il pianeta Trieste," Carolus Cergoly, Ferruccio Fölkel *Trieste provincia imperiale, splendore e tramonto del porto degli Asburgo* (Milano: Bompiani, 1982) 127.

³⁴ The mere fact that Caprin's review was published in a major Italian newspaper in 1926 strongly suggests an inclination towards a homogenizing cultural policy, since by then Mussolini had all but stamped out all popular press that did not support him.

serve di tutti i mezzi verbali che vengono alla prima, dialettismi triestini [...] stranamente commisti a modi di preta toscana [uses all of the verbal means that come to mind, Triestine dialectisms [...] strangely commingled with decidedly Tuscan mannerisms.]”³⁵ This mixed, Triestine language-at-hand sounds oddly similar to descriptions of Svevo’s literary language by a few other critics, yet for Caprin, the patriotic yearning for Italy that Slataper expresses in his novel exonerates his particular *triestinità*. The fact that Slataper’s novel was published by *Libreria della Voce* in Florence may have also had an effect on Caprin’s generally favourable review, since the novel was consequently grouped together with other works of the *Vocianti* avant-garde literary movement that intentionally sought to rejuvenate the Italian tradition with new and experimental writing. Svevo had no such ties to an Italian literary community.

As a defender of the Italian tradition, Caprin regards Svevo’s *triestinità* as a “fatal” defect, however when other critics measure it in terms of modernist and cosmopolitan literary values, this localized particularity takes on a positive aspect, as does the idea of antiliterature. Such was the case when the literary critic Alberto Consiglio wrote an article about “l’opera del Triestino” in a special issue of the journal *Solaria* paying homage to Svevo a year after his death. Consiglio contemplates the heterogeneous and foreign elements of Trieste as providing Svevo with “le condizioni migliori d’ambiente nel quale potesse svilupparsi il più bel tipo di europeo [the best environmental conditions in which the finest kind of European can be developed].”³⁶ The critic goes on to observe that “la peculiarità dell’arte sveviana [...] è

³⁵ Giulio Caprin, “Confessioni documentario” *Il Marzocco*, 17.28. Firenze, 14 luglio 1912, p. 2.

³⁶ Alberto Consiglio, “Caratteri di Svevo” *Solaria* IV.03/04 marzo/aprile 1929. Special issue: “Omaggio a Svevo.” It is also worth noting that *Solaria*, founded in 1926, was considerably distinct from other Italian literary journals, like *La Voce* or *Il Marzocco*, owing to the predilection of its contributors for foreign literatures. In this respect, Montale, Debenedetti and Solmi were important contributors to the journal. *Solaria* introduced Italian readers to Joyce, Eliot, Woolf, Faulkner, Pasternak, Kafka, Rilke and others, who they translated into Italian. *Solaria* was censored in 1934 by the *Ministero della Cultura Popolare*, partly for its ideological leanings and partly because the journal’s mandate to publish writers from abroad contradicted Fascist cultural policy.

appunto questa : il suo valore come *non letteratura* [the peculiarity of Svevo's art [...] is precisely this: his value as *non-literature*.”³⁷ As the debated term suggests, what is meant by “antiliterature” depends a lot on what is meant by literature. Although the antiliterary became common currency in all critiques of Svevo, Consiglio attributes the author's particularity to positive literary values that are uniquely derived from his upbringing and life in Trieste, and not from the Italian tradition. The link between antiliterature and *triestinità* became a way of rooting Svevo's style in a particular place located outside of the Italian cultural domain.

The territorialisation(s) of antiliterature

The lineaments of a Triestine antiliterature are intuited in Slataper's self-cancelling antinomies of culture and commerce, and the term was frequently used in early critiques of Svevo's literary language, however the term was not used, as it is today, in reference to several authors writing in Trieste until well after a literary tradition began to emerge. Although it is understood that Triestine literature begins as an individual initiative in Svevo's self-published novels, and independently of this, through Slataper's call for a Triestine art in the pages of *La Voce*,³⁸ Triestine literature does not appear as a conceptual unity until the Italian literary historian Pietro Pancrazi began an essay on the Triestine novelist Giani Stuparich with the words, “Mi pare proprio si possa affermare che esiste oggi una letteratura triestina [It seems to me that one can now affirm that a Triestine literature exists].”³⁹ With this timid hypothesis Pancrazi appears to draw an end to the more provocative one that Slataper

³⁷ Ibid. My italics.

³⁸ Bruno Maier, *Saggi sulla letteratura triestina del novecento* (Milano : U. Mursia & C., 1972) 24.

³⁹ Pietro Pancrazi. “Giani Stuparich triestino” *Ragguagli di Parnasso: Dal Carducci agli scrittori d'oggi*. Ed. Cesare Galimberti (Milano: Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, 1967.) 303-304. Although this edition dates Pancrazi's article in 1929, most critics regard the publication of a slightly edited version of this essay, bearing the title “Scrittori triestini” in *Il Corriere della Sera* on 16 June 1930 as the moment when Pancrazi's definition of Triestine literature began to influence the literary culture of the city.

advanced when he began his *Lettere Triestine*. However, the antiliterary in Triestine writing reveals an ambiguity that remains unresolved, and this ambiguity is reflected in the multiple territorializations of Triestine literature. Whether it is regarded as a late addendum to the Italian tradition, an avant-garde contributor to European modernism, an object of Mitteleuropean comparatism or the patrimony of a local tradition, Triestine writing becomes Triestine literature by hegemonic practices of literary consecration that negate or domesticate the antiliterary.

Pancrazi, in this instance, negates the isolation of Triestine writers from each other by identifying them with a certain number of commonalities that are specific to the general cultural milieu of Trieste. He yokes Slataper and Svevo together with Ettore Cantoni, Carlo Michelstaedter, Virgilio Giotti and Umberto Saba and binds them to a common well cultural influences and experiences that indicate a tradition.

Non si pecca di retorica o di regionalismo dicendo che, negli ultimi trent'anni, si è rivelata a Trieste una famiglia di scrittori, poeti e prosatori, diversi ma in qualche modo consanguinei, intonati tra di loro.⁴⁰

[One is not guilty of rhetoric or regionalism in saying that, in the last thirty years, a family of writers, poets and prose writers has been revealed in Trieste, different but somehow consanguineous, attuned to each other.]

In spite of Pancrazi's caveat, his description of the connection between these writers relies heavily on metaphors and historical categories that pertain to the Italian tradition. The collective idea is all the more compelling since the writers who conveyed it were unaware of it, as they worked from within the specific time period indicated and lack in the required historical distance. The family kinship suggests an unconscious tribal collectivity, as opposed to a consciously national one, which absolves them of agency and intention in forging their

⁴⁰ Ibid.

own collective literary production into a tradition, as “le parentele sono cosa tutta da natura e non volontaria [these family relationships are natural and involuntary things].” He claims to distance his analysis from any grounding in a specific ethnicity,⁴¹ yet in writing of their “nature” he seems to view them with a distant ethnologist’s eye. The cultural communities that converge in the city have no common origin, but instead they share a specific geographical location that anchors their collective experience. Pancrazi discerns a “comunanza di cultura, e di esperienze nordiche [communality of culture and of Nordic experience],”⁴² in the fact that many writers in Austrian Trieste were given an education that exposed them to German and Nordic thought. He also reformulates some of the commonplaces that he may or may not have gleaned from reviews of Svevo or other individual Triestine authors in collective terms. For example, he equivocates upon Svevo’s idiosyncratic “scriver male [bad writing]” in asserting that the literary language of Triestines collectively demonstrate “una certa laboriosità del linguaggio; come tutti i non toscani (ma anche i toscani...) i triestini devono conquistarsi, sul loro dialetto, la lingua scritta [a certain laboriousness of language, of which all non Tuscans (but also Tuscans...) must avail themselves, over their dialect, in a written language].”⁴³ In addition, Pancrazi continually uses a referential pronoun that gathers together writers and characteristics previously thought of in terms of their irreducible singularity, as one of the most significant passages in the essay demonstrates:

Questi scrittori di lingua, di cultura e spesso di sangue misto, sono spesso intenti a scoprirsi, a definirsi, a cercare il loro punto fermo; ma quasi col presupposto di non trovarlo; come chi faccia della ricerca non il mezzo, ma addirittura il fine del suo cercare. E questi scrittori sempre *in fieri*, inventori di

⁴¹ Ibid. “Non faremo del Taine *a priori*; non diremo che un triestino, per essere scrittore, debba per forza accusare la sua origine etnica.” Pancrazi distances his analysis from trends in literary history associated with Hippolyte Taine, who argued that literature was the contextual result of an author’s “*race, milieu et moment*”.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

“problemi”, e romantici a vita, hanno pure avuto e continuano ad avere il loro compito in una letteratura come la nostra che spesso s’adagia volentieri in schemi chiusi, e scambia la retorica per classicismo e l’inerzia per nobiltà.⁴⁴

[These writers of mixed language, culture and often blood, are usually intent on discovering themselves, to find their solid ground; but almost with the presupposition of not finding it; like someone for whom the search is not a means, but verily the end of their search. And these writers, always *in fieri*, inventors of “problems”, and romantics of life, have had and continue to have their task to do in a literature like ours that is often willing to remain within the comfortable limits of closed values, and exchanges rhetoric for classicism, inertia for nobility.]

Pancrazi’s assertion of a Triestine literature rests on a number of oppositions, many of which set “these writers” apart from those of Italy and make them foreign. Triestine authors are portrayed in *chiaroscuro* contrast with the rhetorical and self-assured hegemony of the Italian tradition, as possessing a Nietzschean vitalism, moral restlessness and romanticism derived from Germanic models. The drive toward self-determination, being one of the most salient characteristics of Triestine writing, is culled into a tradition, whereas the premises for such a drive were different in each writer.⁴⁵ Although Pancrazi does not mention antiliterature in conjunction with “these writers,” his observations suggest it, and well beyond the question of difference from traditional Italian literary values. Specifically, the antiliterary temperament that he describes is dynamic as opposed to the static condition of the Italian tradition; it is located in the work of writing as an end and not a means. Writers who seek to acquire an identity are nevertheless denied its grounding. Yet by grounding these commonalities in a

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Roberto Bazlen notes this divergence with regards to points of departure and intentions as one of the reasons why there is no Triestine literary type. « Intervista su Trieste » *Scritti* (Milano : Adelphi, 1984) 251. Bazlen describes Triestines in general as « [g]ente con premesse diverse, che deve tentare di conciliare gli inconciliabili, che naturalmente non riesce, e saltan fuori tipi strani, avventuri della cultura e della vita, con tutti i fallimenti più strani e più tormentati che derivano di una tale impostazione. [People with different premises, who must attempt to reconcile the unreconcilable, who naturally do not succeed, and strange types jump out, explorers of culture and life, with all of the strangest and most tormented failures derived from such a formation.

specific place, Pancrazi lays out a very fertile soil for the seeds of the antiliterary to sprout in such critics as Bruno Maier, who was among the first and most influential literary scholars to devote books to Triestine literature.⁴⁶ It was not until after the Second World War that the term “antiliterature” moved out of Svevo criticism to be applied to a wider and more established concept of Triestine literature, and by then there really was a Triestine literary tradition. Antiliterature lost its meaning once it became anchored to a place, because Triestine writing had effectively become literature.

Literary history honours Triestine writers in the best way it knows how to: by conferring upon them the very literary legitimacy that their works criticized, by identifying them with a discernible local tradition and by bestowing an image of totality and unity to their works. Many writers and scholars since Pancrazi and Maier have reflected upon the city’s literary history and traditions, its increasingly self-important particularity, and its wider conceptual and cultural implications. While some literary scholarship focusing on Trieste builds upon commonplaces attributed to Triestine literature by Pancrazi, most of it is animated by a critical impulse to expose and document the ossification of literary history into historical myth. This would be better understood as reconstructive narrative, and an extension of Triestine writing, which has as its essential premise the acquisition of an identity over and against the detritus of historical and ideological traumas that have been visited upon the city.

⁴⁶ The Istrian-born literary critic Bruno Maier (1922-2001) is recognized as being one of the foremost experts in Triestine literature, having written a number of pioneering studies on Triestine writing, and most notably on Svevo. His books include *Profilo della critica su Svevo 1892-1951* (Trieste: Università di Trieste, 1952); *Introduzione a Svevo* (Milano: Dall'Oglio, 1959); *Motivi e caratteri dell'“Epistolario” di Italo Svevo* (Udine: Del Bianco, 1967); *La letteratura triestina del '900* (Trieste: Lint, 1969); *Saggi sulla letteratura triestina del novecento* (Milano: Mursia, 1972); *Iconografia sveviana* (con Letizia Svevo Fonda Savio) (Pordenone: Studio Tesi, 1981); *Dimensione Trieste: Nuovi saggi sulla letteratura triestina* (Milano: Istituto Propaganda Libreria, 1987); *Il gioco dell'alfabeto: Nuovi saggi triestini* (Gorizia: Ed. dall'Istituto Giuliano di cultura, storia e documentazione, 1990); and *La letteratura italiana dell'Istria dalle origini al novecento* (Trieste: Istituto Italo Svevo, 1996). In addition to writing on Svevo Maier produced important studies of Triestine poets Virgilio Giotti and Umberto Saba. Through multiple collaborations on editorial, academic and public fields Maier played an important role in promoting Triestine literature locally and in Italy.

As a result, Pancrazi's definition of Triestine literature has been criticized on the basis of its Italian language bias.⁴⁷ Even though Pancrazi acknowledges the subjective nature of his claim, the influence of this article on Triestine culture shows another example of how the city's writers acquired a literary identity by means of intervention from outside, and specifically from Italy. In contrast to this tendency, much of the scholarship on Triestine literature produced in the 1950s and 60s came from intellectuals native to the city, many of whom were sensitive to the anxieties of the unstable border, which placed Trieste within the territorial jurisdictions of Austria, Italy, Germany, Yugoslavia and the Allied Nations in less than half a century. In this fertile period, the awareness of a rich Slovene language literature in Trieste arose more or less in parallel with Habsburg nostalgia and the renewal of the idea of Mitteleuropa as a cultural concept. In the last years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Triestines regarded the Slovene presence as a threat to the Italian identity of the city, but in this Mitteleuropean iteration of the city's past, the presence of other cultures in Trieste fed the Habsburg myth of peaceful, plurinational coexistence.

Several publications from Triestine writers in and around the year 1963 generated much interest in the supranational concept of Mitteleuropa. Many sources point to Claudio Magris as one of its initiators, and when he published his highly influential study *Il mito absburgico nella letteratura austriaca moderna* [*The Habsburg myth in modern Austrian*

⁴⁷ Pancrazi's assertion is especially problematic in this regard as he acknowledges Germanic and Slavic influences on Triestine writing, yet appears to be unaware of any Triestine writing that is not in Italian. "A ben intenderla, quella della "letteratura triestina" è una definizione territoriale, geografica, addirittura municipale che dovrebbe contraddistinguere (il condizionale è d'obbligo!) una letteratura nata, ispirata o scritta a Trieste e non dovrebbe assumere perciò ulteriori connotazioni linguistiche o nazionali [It is well understood that "Triestine literature" is a territorial, geographic, even municipal definition, that should contradistinguish (the conditional is obligatory!) a literature born, inspired or written in Trieste, and therefore should not assume any ulterior linguistic or national connotations]." Miran Košuta, "*Scritture parallele: Dialoghi di frontiera tra letteratura slovena e italiana* (Trieste: Edizioni LINT, 1997) 130. Košuta argues that existing works of Slovene literature not acknowledged in Pancrazi's article shared many of the same characteristics that he identifies with Triestine literature.

literature], the myth that he described and censured took on a greater opacity and became all the more pervasive because of it. Gilbert Bosetti, who describes the Habsburg Myth as “une illusion retroactive des années soixante-dix,” nevertheless reminds us that it had its roots in the interwar years.⁴⁸ The view of Triestine literature as a species of Mitteleuropean cultural production has its antecedents in the memoirs and historical novels of Giani Stuparich, who was to Trieste what Stefan Zweig or Franz Werfel were to Vienna.⁴⁹ Stuparich championed the writings of Slataper after his death and refers to his fallen friend’s writing as Trieste’s *Sturm und Drang*, frequently drawing attention to the author’s German language education and other cultural foundations rooted in the Austrian port city. Umberto Saba, who outlived Slataper and Svevo, conjectures that Svevo might have written better – and thus sidestepped his literary detractors in Italy – had he written in German. As with many Triestines who were unsatisfied or traumatized by Trieste’s inclusion in Fascist Italy, utopian and nostalgic longings for a more peaceful time before the city’s annexation fomented into the dream of Mitteleuropa.

The comparatist view of Mitteleuropean literature cultivates a similar understanding to that of Pancrazi, except that it draws commonalities between writers who belong to different linguistic groups. Just as Svevo, Slataper and Saba worked in isolation from each other and the commonalities were discerned between them by the retrospective eye of literary history, they were equally, if not more isolated from their Mitteleuropean counterparts, encompassing

⁴⁸ “Une décennie après la libération de Trieste et de l’Istrie, est déjà perceptible *in situ*, sous le fascisme et malgré le nationalisme ambiant, une réhabilitation de certaines valeurs telles que la pluriculturalité habsbourgeoise et la dignité aristocratique de la *felix Austria*.” Gilbert Bosetti, *De Trieste à Dubrovnik: Une ligne de fracture de l’Europe* (Grenoble, Editions De L’Ellug, 2006) 285.

⁴⁹ Many of Stuparich’s literary memoirs and novels are set in Habsburg Trieste, notably *Colloqui con il mio fratello* (Milano: Treves, 1925); *Un anno di scuola* (Milano: Treves, 1931); *Ritorneranno* (Milano: Garzanti, 1941); and *Trieste nei miei ricordi* (Milano: Garzanti, 1948). Stuparich was also a contributor to *La Voce* and wrote about the Czech and Slav peoples of the Austro-Hungarian empire in *La nazione ceca* (1915).

writers as diverse as Joseph Roth, Rainier Maria Rilke, Jaroslav Hašek, Franz Kafka, Ivo Andrić, Sandor Marai, Leopold von Sacher Masoch, Robert Musil and Karl Kraus. By drawing family resemblances between Triestine writing and the non-tradition of its Austro-Hungarian hinterland the linguistic and territorial anxieties of Triestine writers are no longer isolated either. Triestine problems gain clarity by comparison across languages; in Viennese writers like Robert Musil, or Hugo von Hofmannsthal whose *Chandosbrief* (Lord Chandos' letter) sparked a theoretical language crisis. The literary economy of Mitteleuropa is a unified market of multiple currencies where Trieste is no longer a periphery to a national center, but instead a microcosm radiating its culture outward into the ghostly territorial remainder of the Habsburg Empire. Mitteleuropean comparatism transcends multiple anchorings of the literary, such as language, and the canonical claims of national literature and political collectivities. Mitteleuropa is not a political entity with territorial claims, but a purely imaginary one, materially generated by print, attesting to the atopian dimension of this "imagined community" that exists only in the no-place of literature that overlaps with existing historical and political demarcations. The supranational territorial parameters of Mitteleuropa, its pluricentricity and its no-place-ness can be expanded and grafted onto the idea of the global, or as the socialite Diotima remarks in Musil's novel *The Man Without Qualities*, "Indeed, Austria is the whole world."

The perception of Trieste as a microcosm for Mitteleuropa entails a centripetal force in world letters that is as comparative as it is literary. In this sense, the metaphor of a "*città di carta*" (city of paper), and that of Borges' map, signifies that Trieste is experienced as a non-place, that is, the city has a fuller existence on paper than it does as a real city. To someone growing up in Trieste this means that one no longer seeks to acquire an identity through

writing, as did the generation that preceded the establishment of a Triestine literary tradition, but by reading. Ara and Magris draw the antiliterary and the literary vocations of the city into contrast with each other; between a present literary milieu that one is born into and out of, and the past absence of a literary tradition, which occasions the act of writing to bring one into existence.

In tal modo la letteratura acquista un valore esistenziale, una ragione di vita che non vuole essere confusa con l'esercizio letterario. L'"anti-letterarietà" dei triestini, di cui si è tanto parlato, e l'atteggiamento di uomini che chiedono allo scrivere non bellezza ma verità, perché essi scrivere vuol dire acquistare un'identità, non solo come individui ma come gruppo. In dichiarazioni famose, gli scrittori triestini rifiutano la letteratura quale "menzogna", quale cosa "ridicola e dannosa", quale "triste e secco mestiere".⁵⁰ In tali posizioni echeggia certamente la passione per una poesia rivolta all'esistenza anziché al gioco formale, sull'esempio della letteratura d'oltralpe e in polemica, spesso faziosa, con quella italiana. Ma non si tratta soltanto di una poesia che deve fondare la vita: di una triestinità che pretende sincerità assoluta dalle carte della letteratura, perché senza di esse non esisterebbe. L'antiletterarietà si trasformerà facilmente in un *topos* letteratissimo, in una convenzione stilistica e comportamentale alla quale gli scrittori successivi, nei decenni seguenti, chiederanno la legittimazione e la premessa del loro lavoro letterario. (15-16)

[In this way, literature acquires an existential value, a way of life that is not to be confused with literary practice. The "anti-literariness" of Trieste, which has been much talked about, is the attitude of men who ask of writing not beauty but truth, because writing means acquiring an identity, not only as individuals but as a group. In famous statements, Triestine writers refute literature as "falsehood", as something "ridiculous and harmful", as a "sad and dry métier." The passion for a poetry addressed to existence rather than to formal games

⁵⁰ Ara and Magris draw specifically from the following passages from Saba, Svevo and Slataper. "La letteratura sta alla poesia come la menzogna alla verità [Literature is to poetry as a lie is to truth]." Umberto Saba, *Storia e cronistoria del canzoniere* (Milano 1948) 24. "Io, a quest'ora e definitivamente ho eliminato della mia vita quella ridicola e dannosa cosa che si chiama letteratura [I have, now and definitively, eliminated from my life that ridiculous and damning thing that is called literature]." Italo Svevo, *Racconti, saggi, pagine sparse* (Milano: Dall'Oglio, 1968) 818. "Ma i discorsi d'arte e di letteratura m'annoiano. Io sono un po' estraneo al loro mondo, e me n'addoloro, ma non so vincermi. [...] Perché io non sono affatto superiore agli altri, e la letteratura è un tristo e secco mestiere ["But discussions about art and literature bore me. I'm somewhat outside their world, and it pains me, but I can't help it. [...] Because I'm not at all superior to others and literature is a sad and solitary vocation"]. Scipio Slataper, *Il mio Carso* 68-69; *My Karst*, trans. Nick Benson.

certainly echoes in these positions, following the example of literature from across the Alps, and polemically opposed, often factitiously, with that of Italy. But it is not just a poetry that must look at life, but more to the point it must anchor life: of a *triestinità* that claims absolute sincerity from the pages of literature, because without them it would not exist. This antiliterariness is transformed easily into a most literary *topos*; into a convention to which the style and behaviour of later writers, in the decades following, ask the legitimacy and the premise of their literary work.]

In this analysis Ara and Magris articulate the relationship between *antiletterarietà* and *triestinità*. They cite significant passages from unrelated works by Saba, Svevo and Slataper respectively and interpret them as reflecting a specific antagonism towards literature as a pedantic and hegemonic form of cultural production, except that now these declarations have become touchstones and clichés. The significance of the *antiliterary* in this context lies not so much in stylistic and linguistic approaches to writing at odds with existing literary conventions as much as it positively forms the premise of giving Trieste a sense of particularity, of place and of community. The transformation of antiliterature into a literary *topos* effectively obliterates it, since these writers have attained the power to confer the legitimacy to writing that they were lacking, premises that were once personal are transformed into modalities of belonging. The authors oppose Triestine writers to the Italian tradition and ally them with that of the Austrian hinterland, which also draws from the geocultural particularity of Trieste's "border identity." As a city that mediates Romance and Germanic thought, the local grounding of antiliterature has a decidedly Mitteleuropean character, and conversely, the authors extend the antiliterary to the supranational and pluricentric literature of the former Empire. In this way, Triestine literature is doubly territorialized: first in the Borghesian map that covers the city, and then in the one that covers the old Empire.

Trieste is now so thoroughly saturated with its literature and literary history that the term “antiliterary” seems no longer pertinent to Triestine writing anymore, yet it persists because it has been domesticated as one of the city’s myths. Much of the city’s core appears as a museum to an illustrious literary past, numerous buildings are commemorated with plaques identifying where writers lived and worked, and life-sized statues of Svevo, Joyce and Saba greet the casual walker in prominent locations. If one wanted to sit among them in a park, the majority of the bronze busts of illustrious Triestines that populate the Giardino Pubblico are those of Trieste’s “scrittori, poeti e prosatori,” some of whom were later added to the family identified by Pancrazi. At a short distance from the park one finds the Café San Marco, one of several coffeehouses with Italian names that preserve a nostalgic Viennese ambience, serving as tourist attractions and as cultural hubs, where book launches and other cultural gatherings take place. In *Microcosmi* Magris describes the San Marco as a kind of Noah’s ark that preserves the past from the ravages of history.⁵¹ As discussed at the beginning of this study, the image of Trieste as a *città di carta* [city of paper] refers to the *material* of the literary; paper, printing, distribution, readers, scholars, and so on, in which the sense of being Triestine is anchored. One could even call it *hyperliterary*, as Triestine literature resembles the simulacrum identified by Jean Baudrillard as hyperreal, which is appearance of reality that conceals the lack of anything real to anchor it.⁵² But Trieste is no longer simply *la città di carta* of Ara and Magris according to the poet Luigi Nacci: “Trieste, una città contemplata al di fuori della storia, simbolo di qualcosa che non esiste più, somma esponenziale di stereotipi

⁵¹ Claudio Magris, *Microcosmi* (Milano : RCS Quotidiani S.p.A., 2003) 15.

⁵² One of the ironies of Trieste’s literary consecration is that there was an exhibition in 1985, accompanied by an anthology of Triestine writing translated into French called « Pour un temps : Italo Svevo et Trieste », at the Centre Georges Pompidou. Baudrillard was critical of the government sponsored Centre Pompidou for neutralizing and domesticating the creative and political power of art by making it accessible to the general populace, making a “hypermarket” of culture for mass consumption. By this logic Triestine literature is rendered artistically inert and “implodes” on itself there, in this space that Baudrillard metaphorically calls a black hole.

e luoghi comuni, *città-cartolina* [Trieste, a city contemplated from outside of history, symbol of something that doesn't exist anymore, the exponential sum of stereotypes and commonplaces, the *postcard city*].”⁵³

The legend of “*scrivere male*”

In an essay entitled, “Considerazioni eretiche sulla “scrittura” di Italo Svevo [Heretical considerations upon the “writing” of Italo Svevo]” the Triestine essayist Giorgio Voghera reflects upon Svevo’s legacy and the perniciousness of the literary history that consecrates his works.⁵⁴ Voghera’s notion of “heresy” implies that his considerations diverge from an existing orthodoxy in Svevo scholarship, manifested in two polarizing tendencies in the reception of Svevo’s works: “Prima lo ha rifiutato perché non scriveva bene. Dovutolo poi accettare, ha scoperto che scriveva benissimo [First they dismissed him because he did not write well. After they had to accept him, they discovered that he wrote very well]” (49). It is the second opinion that Voghera finds to be more problematic, since Svevo’s consecration is mired in “una leggenda che si è andata molto diffondendo negli ambienti letterari [a legend which has been widespread in literary circles]” (45). The orthodoxy of “la critica ufficiale [official criticism]” which is communicated by “i soliti pappagalli equilibristi della critica postcroceana [the same old equivocating parrots of post-Crocean criticism]” (48) stipulates that great writers must write well. The acceptance of Svevo as a great writer, largely because international acknowledgement had changed the critical consensus, engenders the myth whereby Svevo, “magari inconsciamente, si sia andato formando una lingua propria, adatta ai propri contenuti; e che in questa lingua egli abbia scritto benissimo [maybe unconsciously, he

⁵³ Luigi Nacci, Trieste nello Specchio : Indagine sulla poesia triestina del secondo Novecento (. 222.

⁵⁴ Giorgio Voghera, “Considerazioni eretiche sulla “scrittura” di Italo Svevo,” *Gli anni di psicanalisi* (Pordenone: Edizioni Studio Tesi, 1980) 45-51.

formed his own language as he went along, adapted to his own content; and that in this language he wrote superbly]" (45). Voghera's central argument is that Svevo was a great writer, in spite of the fact that he wrote badly, and from this perspective he exhorts his reader to think of "scriver male" more critically and intuitively in relation to other writers, traditions and literary languages.

E invece, se forse si può dire che Dante scriveva un "dantiano" sublime, che non era però l'italiano o non lo era ancora; oppure che Virgilio Giotti adoperava con grande sensibilità e con notevolissimi effetti poetici un "giottiano" che non è per nulla l'autentico triestino, e così via in tanti altri casi; non si può dire ad ugual ragione che Svevo scriveva in "sveviano" (o, se proprio si volesse affermare egli scrive in "sveviano", bisognerebbe aggiungere che egli scrive male anche in questa lingua, ossia che non scrive in "sveviano" come avrebbe desiderato). Non è facile spiegare con considerazioni teoriche perché si abbiano a giudicare diversamente le "irregolarità" linguistiche di Svevo e quelle, ad esempio, di Giotti; ma che questa diversità di giudizio sia giustificata, lo intuisce qualsiasi persona che non si sia troppo imbottita la testa con teorie estetiche o simili. (48-49)

[In effect, if we could say that Dante wrote in a sublime "Dantean" language, that was not Italian or was not Italian yet; or perhaps that Virgilio Giotti adopted with great sensibility and with noteworthy poetic effect a "Giottian" that was not in any way an authentic Triestine dialect, and so on in other cases; one cannot say along the same lines of reasoning that Svevo wrote in "Svevian" (or, if one truly wanted to affirm that he wrote in "Svevian," one would have to add that he wrote badly in that language as well, or in other words, that he did not write in "Svevian" as he would have wanted to). This is not easy to explain with theoretical considerations because the linguistic "irregularities" of Svevo and those of, for example, Giotti have been judged differently; but in order for this diversity of judgment to be justified, it is to be intuited by anyone whose head is not too stuffed with aesthetic theories or something similar to it.]

We can recognize an antiliterary sentiment akin to Slataper's disdain for *letterarietà* in the way Voghera writes of "theoretical considerations" against which he counterpoises his heretical ones, and notes of Svevo's self-deprecating humour in the parentheses. His

understanding of “*scrittura*” and “*sveviano*” rests upon the idea that the essence of Svevo’s writing cannot be thought of in terms of the theoretical categories that purport to “inquadrala nei loro schemi [frame it in terms of their designs],” or redeemed by introducing some notion of “regularity” into it such as that of an idiosyncratic language or a dialect. Yet this is what literary consecration does: it makes abstractions in order to transform writing into literature. The idiolect of Giotti can be held in place by grammar, as well as that of Dante, which was abstracted from his writing just as some systems of measurement are reputed to be taken from the bodily dimensions of emperors and kings. Dante’s writing governs the Italian language as a historical paradigm for the national literary tradition, and Giotti manifests this potential on a local level, but Voghera argues that Svevo should be thought of differently.

The question of scale is introduced by the analogies and contrasts that Voghera draws between the beloved national poet of the Italian language and the Triestine dialect poet of local fame. The analogy implies that Giotti and Dante write in idiosyncratic poetic languages that ground them in the linguistic communities to which they belong.⁵⁵ By not writing in a pure dialect they anticipate a wider extension of their languages and reflect openness to the contingencies of history. The contrast lies in the historical fact of Dante’s poetic language achieving hegemony as a national language, yet in the context of Voghera’s comparison, it is framed in Dante’s historical present as a latent power. This potentiality is also inherent in the language of Giotti’s verse, only that it has “not or not yet” achieved the historical and spatial

⁵⁵ Giotti’s dialect poetry is often described as highly refined, and his language as “aristocratico terso severo monolinguismo [terse and severe aristocratic monolingualism].” Roberto Damiani. *Poeti dialettali triestini : profilo storico-critico (1875-1980)* (Trieste: Edizioni « Italo Svevo », 1981) 14. “E noto che il Giotti soleva ricorrere nella conversazione privata a un italiano coretto e decoroso e persino toscaneggiante, mentre considerava il dialetto triestino la sola “lingua” della poesia [It is known that Giotti used to use a decorous, correct Italian in conversation, often with Tuscan inflection, whereas he considered the Triestine dialect to be the only “language” of poetry].” cf. Pier Paolo Pasolini, “La “lingua della poesia”, in *Passione e ideologia* (Milano, Garzanti, 1960); qtd, in Bruno Maier, *Italo Svevo*. Sixth edition (Milano: Mursia, 1961-1980) 202.

extension of Dante's idiom. The linguistic "irregularities" of Giotto are different from those of Svevo because Giotto writes very well in *giottiano*, and what is "irregular" about it is simply the fact that it is different from Italian, but it has enough internal logic and regularity to serve as the foundation for a language, a grammar and a paradigm of local or national belonging. Dante and Giotto are paradigmatic of "dantiano" and "giottiano" and for the modalities of belonging that can be historically abstracted from these languages. The most obvious example of this abstraction from contingent to paradigmatic is that Dante is regarded as the father of the Italian nation and its greatest poet.

Literary canonization is the result of a consecration that survives within the tradition as a paradigm of original creation, whereby the private act of writing connects with a public through material practices of dissemination. Canonical works speak for that public and organize a collective consciousness, whether it remains local, or expands to become national or universal. Underlying these processes of literary consecration there is a specter of Kantian moral absolutism, disguised as orthodoxy and myth. Svevo's writing undermines the categorical imperative of the Italian literary tradition, which stipulates that writers must write well in a national language so that it should become a universal law. Every national literature is something of a monad in this respect, projecting and reflecting the absolute identity of its own universality through economies of literary exchange. Traditionally, a great writer forms or uses a language that successfully adapts to the content it expresses, but Voghera tries to discredit the notion that Svevo formed such a language.⁵⁶ The question of whether or not

⁵⁶ "Vorrei solo esprimere la mia impressione che difficilmente "scrivere bene" potrebbe significare qualche cosa di molto diverso di saper usare opportunamente, con proprietà ed efficacia, un determinato linguaggio già adoperato, almeno nelle strutture essenziali, per le comunicazioni entro un determinato gruppo umano e comprensibile senza eccessive incertezze dai componenti del gruppo stesso. [I only wanted to express my impression that it is with great difficulty that "writing well" could have signified something very different from knowing how to use, properly and efficiently, a determined language that has already been adopted, at least

Svevo can be assimilated into a national or local literary tradition hinges on that of writing well in an existing language or creating a suitable one as a moral imperative.

What is “Svevian” about Svevo’s writing is that it lacks this internal logic and regularity, and if these elements were to be introduced into it to ground a language, a grammar, or a paradigm, then Svevo’s writing would not exemplify any of these because he writes badly. In Aristotelian terms, the potential (*dunamis*) of Dantean and Giottian is fulfilled in the actuality (*enteléchia*) of writing, having its completion (*telos*) in the paradigmatic language. “Scriver male” undoes the completeness of this actuality (takes the *telos* out of *enteléchia*), since the potency (*dunamis*) of Svevian writing does not have its fulfillment in a paradigmatic language. The actuality (*energeia*; or being-at-work-ness) of “scriver male” has the work of Svevo writing as its own end. In other words, there is no “svevian” language (*logos*), and if one existed then it would be mythological (*mythos-logos*), hence, the “legend” identified by Voghera at the beginning of his essay refers to is the misconception that Svevo writes well in a paradigmatic language. Svevo is paradigmatic of his writing in a different way, that is, Svevo is a “great” writer, but his writing does not exemplify the kind of paradigm that written language expresses.

Voghera is essentially in agreement with critics who claimed that Svevo wrote badly, but his heresy lies in his disagreement with the critical consensus that a great writer is necessarily someone writes well. This consensus is orthodoxy in literary history, such that it distorts the paradigm expressed by Svevo’s writing. Italian critics who had rightly judged Svevo as “writing badly” had to change their minds and say that he wrote well, and in this way they blinded themselves to the real value of his work. This showed that the critical community

in its essential structure, for communications within a determined human group and comprehensible without excessive uncertainty from the components of the same group]” (Voghera 45).

who praised him was equally as incapable of regarding Svevo's writing on its own terms as those who scorned him in the past. They may have felt that they fell behind critically because Svevo's works bypassed national consecration on their way to a more extensive European consecration. Svevo's third novel, *La coscienza di Zeno*, became a canonical work of world literary modernism, but when Svevo is assimilated back into local and national literary traditions, the arbiters of the literary create a myth that is consonant with the *doxa*. The tradition, in turn, transmits and extends this myth of a "sveviano" language as the original paradigm that his writing projects.

Voghera's perspective on Svevo's writing, or "scrivere male," can be extended into the European and global context of Svevo's reception as a translated text. He would agree with Caprin's remark that Svevo did not write in a language, and contemplates the opinion that Svevo's novels benefit from translation for this reason. Translations create disparate, nationalized and linguistically unique versions of Svevo's novels, which outpace the original texts in distribution, in international prestige, and even in legibility.⁵⁷ And yet this "scrivere male" is the first thing that gets lost in translation. In this respect, there is an English Svevo, a German Svevo, a French Svevo and even a Japanese Svevo, but there is not an Italian Svevo – nor is there, for that matter a Triestine Svevo – because the text does not go through the translation process whereby the linguistic structure and content are corralled into the

⁵⁷ Pascale Casanova writes about translation as an act of literary consecration in her book *La république mondiale des lettres* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 2008) in a way that resonates with Svevo's reception in Paris and how it gained in literary *capital*. « La notion de « littérarité », c'est-à-dire de crédit littéraire attaché à une langue, indépendamment de son capital proprement linguistique, permet donc de considérer la traduction des dominées littéraires comme une acte de consécration qui donne accès à la visibilité et à l'existence littéraires. Ceux qui créent dans des langues peu ou pas reconnues comme littéraires, très démunies de traditions propres, ne peuvent être d'emblée consacrés littérairement. C'est la traduction dans une grande langue littéraire qui va faire entrer leur texte dans l'univers littéraire : la traduction n'est pas une simple « naturalisation » (au sens d'un changement de nationalité), ou le passage d'une langue dans une autre ; c'est beaucoup plus spécifiquement, une « littérisation » (201-202).

categorical imperative of national languages. A corrected version would be equivalent to a translation and vice versa. When reading William Weaver's English translation of *Zeno's Conscience*, for example, it is difficult to discern what it was about Svevo's writing that made people say that he wrote badly, and as Voghera observes, "[S]ia invece un fatto che gli stranieri apprezzano spesso Svevo – sia nei testi tradotti, sia in quelli originali italiani – assai più dei lettori italiani, proprio perché i primi non si scontrano con certe particolarità linguistiche, o sono meno sensibili ad esse [it is rather a fact that foreigners often appreciate Svevo – both in translated texts, and in the original Italian – far more than Italian readers, because the former do not come up against certain linguistic peculiarities, or are less sensitive to them]" (47).

Translation is a cultural form capable of imposing a sense of regularity on Svevo's writing, in which the Svevian paradigm of "scrivere male" is demoted to a mythological expression. Voghera extends this loss of sense to non-Italians who read Svevo in the original language, like James Joyce, who may have also appreciated Svevo because he had difficulty in identifying how badly Svevo writes. This charge implicates the critical consensus fostered by Joyce and the French *italianisti*, as well as Svevo's prominence within the framework of a cosmopolitan, modernist literary avant-garde. Indeed, one such as myself can only become attuned to this aspect of Svevian writing by reading the analyses of Italian critics, which brings us around to the ironic conclusion that you have to be either highly fluent or native in Italian in order to comprehend how badly Svevo wrote. What could be more literary, and more ideologically potent in consolidating a collective sense of belonging to a linguistic community, than a sharing a disconcerting sense of grammatical and syntactic impropriety when reading the prose of this unusual, barbarian other? The perception of Svevo's grammatical errors

presupposes the hegemony of the literary that anchors linguistic regularity and stabilizes Italian national identity.

The second half of the pseudonym Italo Svevo, which refers to the author's schooling in the German province of Swabia, engenders another myth that Voghera is well situated to comment upon since it originates much closer to home. Svevo was born in Austria and died in Italy while never leaving Trieste, and the Mitteleuropean cultural revival prevalent in his native city regarded Svevo through the lens of late-Habsburg Trieste's more Germanic proclivities. Much of Voghera's writing attests to the influence of Austro-German and Jewish intellectual culture on Trieste, and in this context he contemplates the dual opinion that it would have been better for Svevo to write in German, or that a German translation would be richer than the original text.⁵⁸ This would constitute another critical fallacy that relies on the *doxa* of good writing, and by failing it, falls into myth – specifically a Mitteleuropean one. While partly conceding to the opinion that some of Svevo's expressions are enriched by substituting German words for badly used Italian ones, Voghera insists that, “le strutture della prosa sveviana sono per una parte preponderante triestino-italiane, e le traduzioni tedesche, per quanto ottime, non possono far subire a questo testo delle trasformazioni piuttosto notevoli, data anche la grande diversità fra le due lingue [the structures of Svevian prose are, for the most part Triestine-Italian, and in German translation, however excellent, the text cannot be subjected to notably significant transformations, due to the large differences between the two languages]” (47). It is also well known that Svevo could read very well in German, so it was widely held that he could write in it too. A Triestine poet, Umberto Saba, once famously

⁵⁸ *Gli anni di psicanalisi*, the collection of essays in which one finds Voghera's considerations on Svevo's writing, explores other topics related to the cultural influence of Austria, such as Freudian psychoanalysis and the Triestine Jews, Edouardo Weiss and Roberto Bazlen, who communicated them to Italians, as well as a number of essays on Jewish writers, such as Umberto Saba, and Jewish themes in Triestine literature.

remarked, “Svevo poteva scrivere bene in tedesco; preferì scrivere *male* in italiano. Fu l’ultimo omaggio al fascino assimilatore della “vecchia” cultura italiana. È la storia dell’amore – prima della “redenzione” -- di Trieste per l’Italia [Svevo could write well in German; he preferred to write *badly* in Italian. It was the last homage to the assimilating charm of the “old” Italian culture. It is a story of the love – before “redemption” – of Trieste for Italy].”⁵⁹ In response to this myth Voghera writes, “Svevo scriveva e parlava anche un tedesco tutt’altro che inappuntibile [Svevo wrote and spoke in a German that was anything but faultless]” (47). In other words, Svevo would have written badly in German too.

Antiliterature: the atopia of literary history

The provisional territorializations of Triestine authors in local or national contexts have always been problematic. In 1930, when the Italian literary historian Pietro Pancrazi advanced the hypothesis that Trieste had a distinct community of writers, isolated from each other yet somehow consanguineous, he had to yoke together a quorum of them to assert that they also formed the basis of an Italian language literary tradition. However, since Triestine authors were very different from each other and worked in isolation, Roberto Bazlen argued that no Triestine literary type had ever emerged. Bazlen disputed the idea that a “croglio di culture [melting-pot of cultures]” in which the many cultures of Trieste could be melted down into a homogenous type or literary tradition, preferring to view it as a “crocicchio di molte civiltà [crossroads of many civilizations],” in which the modalities of belonging that the works of Triestine writers produced were only accidental, resulting from a drive towards provincialism, but not intrinsic to their writings. Bazlen extends the heterogeneous and unclassifiable artistic production of Trieste to authors who come from abroad to live there:

⁵⁹ Umberto Saba, *Scorciatoie e raccontini* (Mondadori 1946) 79.

E come non esiste un unico tipo triestino, non esiste nemmeno una cultura creativa triestina; creare un'opera omogenea con premesse simili sarebbe stato impossibile... E pensa che anche gli artisti stranieri sbattuti a Trieste sono tutti tra i meno catalogabili, quella strana linea Burton Lever Joyce... e Stendahl, e Hamerling e la strana infanzia di Feruccio Busoni.⁶⁰

[And as a single Triestine type does not exist, there isn't even a Triestine creative culture. To create a homogenous work with similar premises would have been impossible... And just think of the foreign artists to visit Trieste that were all among the least classifiable, that strange line of Burton Lever Joyce... and Stendahl, and Hamerling and the strange infancy of Feruccio Busoni]

Implicit in Bazlen's "Intervista su Trieste" is his view that the paradoxes of cultural indeterminacy that produced the Triestine literary non-tradition, as well as the city's rare atopic quality, had a profound effect on the foreign authors who had lived there. The Triestine canon was a purely geographical coincidence – a heterogenous space in which native writers and those who sojourned there produced a canon of literary works that could not be seen in terms of a single language, territory or collective consciousness. Hence, Trieste is equally renowned for its influence on those who sojourned there, such as Charles Nodier, Rainier Maria Rilke, Stendhal, and James Joyce, as it is for native writers like Svevo, Slataper, Gianni Stuparich or Umberto Saba. The concept of Triestine literature makes the same fallacious claim on Svevo and Slataper that Irish literature makes on Joyce. The words that Bazlen uses to describe Joyce – as belonging to a "strange line" among the "least classifiable" artists – recalls how Alcibiades described Socrates as *atopos*; unique, strange, and by virtue of this, placeless. *Atopos* is nevertheless the term that is used in the Western tradition to recuperate him.

The *atopia* of Triestine writing in the sphere of world letters, however, has been recuperated in a manner that resembles the city's predicament in the ten years following the

⁶⁰ Roberto Bazlen, "Intervista su Trieste", *Scritti* (Milano: Adelphi, 1984) 253.

Second World War. As a solution to the problem of conflicting national claims from ethnic communities, the architects of the Marshall Plan proposed to make Trieste and the surrounding Karst plateau into an independent nation state. The territory was too heterogeneous to belong to either Italy or Yugoslavia, but independence required the presence of the Allied Nations to maintain it militarily. Triestine literature, similarly, is not autonomous, in that literary value has been conferred upon it by European modernism, based in Paris, integration into the regionalisms of the Italian tradition or as one of the hubs that tie together the pluricentric sodality of Mitteleuropa. When Pancrazi theorized about a nexus between geography, language, cultural patrimony and territory in Triestine writers, his identification of a local literature exaggerated certain aspects of Triestine writing and forgot about others. Many of the writers who have been joined to the Triestine literary tradition and its pantheon have since been painted with the brush of “antiliterature” simply by virtue of being from Trieste. Despite the local context, Triestine writing exceeds the qualities of an indigenous sensibility that its denomination is supposed to exemplify.

In other words, before Triestine antiliterature became a *topos letteratissimo* there was no universality between Triestine writers in terms of a unified, local literary tradition, nor was there a unity between these writers and any established literary tradition, such as the Italian tradition; not in terms of wholeness, nor of integration. The cultural fragmentation and the complex identitary negotiations that marked each writer made them very different from each other, but in such a way that the denomination can only inhere if it excluded something that was constitutive of the city’s “multianime” fabric. Perhaps we could make a more inclusive argument and claim that it is the fact of cultural fragmentation and complex identitary negotiations that unify these writers, and that each one of them negotiated their fragments

differently, which accounts for the richness of the city's literary output. In this case, they would not be Triestine writers but global ones. Triestine literature is global literature *ante litteram*.

“Scriver male” and “antiliterature” underline the ways in which the non-place (atopos) of Trieste is recuperated as a place (topos), and how it returns to being a non-place again. The case of Svevo problematizes the territorial certitude of any literary nationalism, since the totality of the Italian national tradition could not assimilate him without changing. Yet even the ambivalence that these narratives engender cannot resist being flattened out by the temporal and territorial abstractions of literary history. Antiliterature, as a critical art, invests in the periphery as opposed to the center, but when Triestine *writing* became *literature*, many of the oppositions that characterized it were subject to a radical inversion. The Triestine periphery became the centre of a local tradition; the outsiders became insiders. However, as Voghera suggested, whatever “scriver male” exemplified in Svevo's writing was lost in acts of literary consecration. Like so many of the iconoclasts who smashed through the paradigms that constrained or oppressed them, Triestine writers became paradigms themselves, posthumously. The provisional territorializations of Svevo and Slataper, which impart immutability and stability to territorial identities and mediate the international scope of a local Triestine literary tradition, are the results of a post-mortem. Triestine writing, however, maintains a critical ambivalence about itself as “placed,” as well as a number of palpable tensions between the local, the national, the institutional, the cosmopolitan and the global. Global literature is not opposed to national literature; rather it does not admit the national to maintain a foothold. Triestine literature is territorially unresolved and undermines the

provisional alliances of the local, the regional, the collective and the national. Atopia straddles the ambivalence between all of these dimensions and the global.

The critical consciousness that precluded the domestication of Svevo and Slataper in a national literary tradition or a local patrimony can still be discerned in narratives of fragmentation, ineptitude, hybridity and exile, which we will deal with in remaining chapters. However, before we move on, let me attempt to summarize this discussion about the place of antiliterature in Triestine writing by listing a few provisional deductions. Antiliterature is *atopos*, but it is recuperated as *topos letteratissimo*. In other words, antiliterature is conspicuously “literaturized;” it does not insert itself into literary traditions without controversy. Antiliterature is what gets lost in literary consecrations, in national literature or in translation; it is resistant to territorializations. Antiliterature does not serve the utopian idea that literature promises to the nation nor to any collectivity, which is the myth of a lost unity that can and must be regained. Antiliterature does not join movements (one thinks of Pancrazi’s “family” metaphor) in the same way as literature does; it does not constitute itself as a totality, it moves between associations, and the globe is its ideational limit (but even that gets blown up at the end of Svevo’s novel). Antiliterature is a problem for the hegemony of literary establishments that idealize historical distance, invoke collective spirit and underwrite territorial imperatives. Antiliterature does not seek out a distant origin; it is “original” in an atopic way (like Socrates). It is an activity; it is characterized by its being-at-work-ness; as *energeia* and not *enteléchia*, as it lacks or defers any exterior *telos*. This is what “scriver male” and “scriver triestinamente” imply, as well as “dilettantism,” which Svevo invests with vital significance. Antiliterature resists grammatical authority; it is exemplified in idiosyncratic negotiations between language zones, idiolects as opposed to dialects.

Antiliterature cannot take sides, and when it does it breaks up into fragments. This is what the borders, the war and the image of the nebula at the end of Svevo's *Coscienza* illustrate.

In order to explore the antiliterary – and perhaps to indicate what lies beyond the dual aporias of literary history and local myth – our next step will be to conduct our theoretical narrative toward moments of writing that precede print, readership and the absorption of Slataper and Svevo into local, national, European and world literary traditions. It was through the medium of literature that Virgil acted as a guide to Dante, and in a similar manner we can take these Triestine writers as guides to the antiliterary landscape. It is in this allegorical context that several *signposts* of the antiliterary – recurrent themes, figures, motifs and allusions – appear on the poetic terrain of the Triestine imaginary. Specific signposts, such as the figure of the barbarian, the theme of ineptitude, the conceit of lying and the scribbling of the dilettante, are indicative of a critical art. For example, the figure of the *inetto* in Svevo's novels and the “sick” conscience of Zeno act as allegorical figures for Triestine writing, in the sense that it does not do what literature is traditionally supposed to do. Antiliterature resists the idealization of *italianità*, whereas the universalism of national literatures relies upon the idealized link between language and territory. Yet if we follow the directions that such signposts lead us to we find out where literary history has turned many of them into myths. In the place where they once forged paths upon a landscape traversed by acts of writing, one now finds paved roads. Yet in the paths and roads themselves we can anticipate footsteps that have not yet formed paths or paved roads on any literary landscape.

CHAPTER 4

SIGNPOSTS ON THE LANDSCAPE OF NOWHERE

« Je m'intéresse à l'idée des coïncidences à travers le temps, j'essaie de déterrer les traces laissées sur les lieux par les écrivains qui ont habité la ville il y a plusieurs siècles ou par les événements qui ont marqué le territoire. Ce sera une espèce de toile de pensées qui se rencontrent, dans une certaine suspension de l'espace-temps. »

– Marie Brassard¹

Antiletterarietà was not only a censoring judgment rendered upon Svevo by the Italian literary tradition: it was an aspect of the author's critical consciousness, inherent in his artistic practice and in his understanding of literature. It was also an important aspect of Slataper's work, as his critique of *letterarietà* took a polemical and discursive form in his literary criticism and his writings for *La Voce*, before it took a narrative and lyrical form in *Il mio Carso*. In this chapter we will explore the antiliterary dimension of Triestine writing as a critical art that frustrates fixity and emphasizes the interior dimension of writing as a conscious and situated act as opposed to the externalized product of that writing as literature. In this respect, antiliterariness is *atopos* because it refers to a critical consciousness that precedes literature; it refers to writing before it becomes territorialized as the substance of a literary tradition. At the same time, it underlies possibilities for artistic and cultural renewal, as well as self-determination in a space not territorialized by language. However, when Triestine writing took on the trappings of local and national cultural production, the critical art and pre-literary potentiality antiliterature was, for the most part, buried beneath a powerful mythology of its own making. Recovering or examining the antiliterary dimension of

¹ Quoted in Philippe Couture, "Ville souterraine" *Voir*, Montréal 9 mai 2013. Review of Marie Brassard's theater performance *Trieste*, presented in the Festival TransAmérique 2013.

Triestine writing requires a certain kind of excavation. “L’uomo è sepolto nell’uomo [Man is buried within man]” Slataper writes, “bisogna dissotterrarlo [you have to exhume him].”

This chapter will undertake such an exhumation and examine some of the signposts that Slataper and Svevo place these in their works so as to direct our footsteps to the peripheral, to the latent and the not-yet-literary dimensions of writing that get lost in literary traditions. As discussed in the previous chapter, Slataper and Svevo were sensitive to the antinomies of culture and commerce that characterized the Triestine’s ambivalence towards national culture. Consequently, many of distinctions that demarcate the place of the antiliterary from that of the literary are framed in *chiaroscuro* contrasts.² Figures of bourgeois ineptitude and romantic barbarism illustrate the disparity between the Triestine “dilettante” writer and the civilized Italian *letterato*. Like the barbarian, the *inetto* (the ineffectual man) is an outsider, estranged by from the comforting universalism of the literary. The comparison also implies that a Triestine who writes in Italian does not occupy the same nationalist space as their Italian counterpart. The pedantic literary scholar (Pascoli), the classicizing *patria vates* (Carducci) or the decadent prose ornamentalist (D’Annunzio) act as foils to Slataper’s barbarian poet, much as the *inetti*, or ineffectual men, who populate Svevo’s novels stand in satirical contrast with *I vinti* (the “winners”) of Verga’s socially stratified realism. Through such contradictory figures Slataper and Svevo comment upon the conflicted identity of the Triestine writer who spiritually, politically and artistically invests in a stigmatized and peripheral position. We begin our tour of this imaginary landscape with the figure of the barbarian, who waits in the borderlands of all nations territorialized by language.

² For this idea I am indebted to Elvio Guagnini, who suggested in one of our interviews that I look at the cultural contradictions in Triestine writing in terms of this painting technique, describing the pictorial arrangement and representation of light and shade. In this sense, one can regard the antiliterary in terms of how the “darkness” (antiliterature) expresses something about the “light” (literature).

Borderland barbarisms

Era, fino a ieri, il barbaro irredento che offendeva le nari schizzinose de' linguaioli saccenti: oggi, dal centro della Toscana, egli mostra a tutti gli italiani come si possa rinnovare la più sana tradizione indigena.³

[He was, until yesterday, an unredeemed barbarian who offended the fastidious nostrils of the know-it-all language police: now, from the heart of Tuscany, he shows all Italians how to renew the healthiest indigenous tradition.]

At the end of an article on Italo Svevo for *Corriere Emiliano – Gazzetta di Parma* in 1928, the Triestine literary critic and scholar Ferdinando Pasini joins the past of Svevo's reception to a hopeful future for Italian literature. Pasini's comment is also interesting because it illustrates negative and positive aspects of the antiliterary idea, contrasting notions of renewal from the periphery of Italian literature with decadence and stagnation at its center. In addition, it brings together linguistic and geospatial aspects of the adjective "barbarian," which Italian literary critics used pejoratively to censure Svevo for writing badly. Specifically, they used the term to describe the grammatical and stylistic inferiority of his works in comparison with the standard Italian emanating from Tuscany; however, the term carried multiple connotations for the Triestine artist. The idea of a "barbarian," coming from the "unredeemed" territory of late-Habsburg Trieste (annexed into Italy only ten years before this article appeared), and rejuvenating the centre, or "heart" of the literary tradition, was a prominent theme in Slataper's work as well.

For the Triestine writer, who occupies a peripheral position in Italian culture, the figure of the "barbarian" stands as an outsider to the literary tradition, in contrast with the "civilized" Florentine insider that speaks for it. The geometrical metaphor of centre and periphery

³ Ferdinando Pasini, "Italo Svevo" *Corriere Emiliano – Gazzetta di Parma*, 7 July 1928. Reprinted in Nanni, Luciano (ed.) *Leggere Svevo: antologia della critica sveviana* (Bologna: Zanchinelli, 1974) 159-161. 161.

describes the opposition between places in a conceptual hierarchy in which one pole commands and benefits from the relation of dependence and deficit (or as Slataper put it, “Trieste non ha tradizioni di cultura”) that characterizes the other. The Tuscan city of Florence has been long regarded as the eminent cultural centre of the Italian Kingdom. It was the birthplace of Dante and the *patria* of Machiavelli where the Milanese novelist Alessandro Manzoni would go to “sciacquare i panni in Arno [rinse his linens in the Arno]” and revise his most celebrated novel *I promessi sposi* into a masterpiece of Tuscan prose. The predominance of the Tuscan idiom in the Italian language privileged its native speakers in matters of culture in a manner comparable to how the official use of German in the Austro-Hungarian Empire privileged certain portions of its supranational population in the field of politics. Trieste was doubly peripheral, owing its economic existence to the Austrian Empire that had its nucleus in Vienna, and looking toward Florence in matters of culture. Triestine writers who wrote in Italian wanted to contribute to the literary tradition, but the sense that Italy’s culture was a unilateral gift, and that they were not permitted to give anything back to it, engenders the resentment that characterizes much of their polemics and cultural critique. Slataper’s vision of Triestine art required the dissolution of such hierarchical structures and a reformed understanding of cultural centres, and when he came to write his Triestine novel the figure of the barbarian played a crucial role.

The term barbarian has been used throughout history to encapsulate all that was foreign, strange and ignorant, but it did not always have a pejorative connotation. Originally derived from the Greek, the onomatopoeic phoneme “*barbar-*” referred to and described foreigners by their unintelligible language as they seemed to make the sound “bar-bar” (or to us “blah-blah”) when they spoke. It had a more specific meaning in the *Iliad* (II.2.867), where

Homer refers specifically to the Carians alone as *barbarophonon* (of barbaric speech). The collective designation of *barbaros* [βαρβάρους] (barbarian) is absent from this early example. For Strabo, the ancient Greek geographer who inquires into the origins of this word, *Barbarophonous* [βαρβαροφώνους] has a specifically linguistic meaning and develops into a term of reproach, referring to those who spoke Greek badly “having a thick and harsh enunciation,” as well as those speaking a foreign language, before *barbaros* came to refer to all peoples who were non-Greek.⁴ The antithetical othering of foreigners and their language that the term implies was to have a wider currency than Ancient Greece or the Greek language. For the Romans (who were technically *barbaroi* themselves) it referred to tribes and nations who had no specifically Greek or Roman accomplishments, such as the Gauls.

Giosué Carducci recalls the ancient non-pejorative sense of Homer’s usage of the word in his *Odi barbare* [*Barbarian Odes*] so as to identify “we Italians” as the barbarians. For Carducci, the revitalization of the Italian tradition through classicism meant rooting Italian literature deeper into antiquity by using Greek and Latin as an immediately available resource to ennoble the Italian language and tradition.⁵ Svevo and Slataper recuperate the ancient, non-pejorative sense of the word in a different manner from Carducci, yet they accomplish a similar effect. Self-identification with the barbarian other signals a historical potential toward self-determination that would distinguish them from the Italian tradition, much as the poetry of Dante dignified a vernacular distinct from the ecumenism of Latin. “Dante stesso è un barbaro [Dante himself is a barbarian],” writes Francesco De Sanctis, “un eroico barbaro, sdegnoso,

⁴ Strabo, *Geography*. XIV.2.28. *Persueus Digital Library*.

<<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0099.tlg001.perseus-eng1:14.2.28>> Strabo, ed. H. L. Jones, *The Geography of Strabo*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, Ltd. 1924. Also Strabo takes as his point of departure for his inquiry into the etymology of the word its use in Homer. Strabo continues his analysis to trace how the word, which had a delimited linguistic meaning, came to have a geographical and political one in subsequent generations of the Greek language.

⁵ Vittorio Coletti. *Storia dell'italiano letterario* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1993) 258.

vendicativo, appassionatissimo, libera ed energica natura [a heroic barbarian; disdainful, vindictive, most passionate, free and naturally energetic]" (185-186). The figure of the poet idealized in Slataper's writings resonates with this description, signifying forgotten energies at the distant heart of the Italian tradition. Slataper and Svevo appropriate pejorative and non-pejorative senses of the word "barbarian," used by Italians to refer to those living in the Austro-Italian borderlands, and the antiliterary, in this case, refers to how they use it to undermine the dominant structures of meaning that were attached to literature in the early twentieth century.

In fourteenth century Latin, the word *barbaria* was equivalent to saying "foreign country" though it referred to no place in particular. Trieste was positioned close to the borders of cultures that for centuries Italians would have labeled with that non-specific geographical designation. Ever since Dante and Machiavelli used the term "*barbaro*" to refer to populations living beyond the borders of an imagined, ideal Italy, it became a highly significant stereotype for Italians. For Machiavelli, who regarded the Florentine language as paradigmatic and eminent among Italian languages, he uses the term *barbaria* in reference to the corrupting influence of foreigners (*forestieri*) upon languages spoken in a given place.

Et così li vocaboli forestieri si convertono in fiorentini, non i fiorentini in forestieri; né però diventa altro la nostra lingua che fiorentina.

Et di qui dipende che le lingue da principio arricchiscano, e diventano più belle essendo più copiose; ma è ben vero che col tempo, per la moltitudine di questi nuovi vocaboli, imbastardiscano e diventano un'altra cosa; ma fanno questo in centinaia d'anni; di che altri non si accorge se non poi che è rovinata in una estrema barbaria. Fa ben più presto questa mutazione, quando egli avviene che

una nuova popolazione venisse ad habitare in una provincia: in questo caso ella fa la sua mutazione in corso d'una età d'un homo.⁶

[And in this way foreign words are converted into Florentine, not Florentine words of Florentines into the languages of foreigners; our language, however, becomes something other than Florentine.]

And from here it depends on the principle that languages enrich, and become more beautiful by becoming more abundant; but it is true that over time, many of these new words bastardize themselves and become something else. But they do this over hundreds of years; in such a way that if nobody pays attention unless it is ruined in extreme barbarity. This mutation comes a lot sooner when a new population comes to live in a province: in this case the mutation takes place over the course of a human life.]

The antithetical distinction between *fiorentini* and *forestieri* in this passage recalls the ancient othering of foreigners by Greeks, implicit in the term *barbaroi*, and anticipates the cultural and linguistic role that Florence would play in the Risorgimento. By the time of Italian unification, the language that Machiavelli referred to as “fiorentina” became national, as did the concept of *patria*, which had a more limited scope in his time. However, the dialect spoken in Habsburg Trieste seems to exemplify the model of linguistic disintegration that Machiavelli describes above. Trieste was a city largely populated by expatriates from Italy

⁶ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discorso o dialogo intorno alla nostra lingua*. Ed. Paolo Trovato (Padova: Editrice Antenore: 1982) 31-32. “Caposaldi concettuali dell’operetta (ma anche di altri scritti fiorentini coevi e quindi – ben inteso, con rettifiche di grande rilievo – della Crusca o poi del Purismo) sono la nozione grammaticale e retorica di *puritas* linguistica e quella, articolatissima, di *barbarismus*. L’innegabile prestigio del linguaggio di Firenze, il cui accostamento alle linguisticamente paradigmatiche Atene e Roma era quasi un luogo comune, consentiva di ricavare dalle definizioni classiche della *latinitas* («... quae sermonem purum conservat ad omni vitio remotum» [Rhet. Her. IV 17 12], «...incorrupte loquendi observatio secundum romanam linguam [Varr. Gramm. 115]») la nozione di una *puritas* fiorentina, rispetto alle quale le divergenze fonetiche e morfologiche delle altre lingue italiane si configuravano come *vitia*, difetti” The conceptual cornerstones of the short work (as well as the writings of other Florentine contemporaries and then – of course, with adjustments of great importance – of the Crusca or later on of Purism) is the grammatical and rhetorical notion of a linguistic *puritas* and, most articulately, of *barbarismus*. The undeniable prestige of the language of Florence, of which similarities to the linguistically paradigmatic Athens and Rome were almost commonplace, allowed it to derive from classical definitions of *latinitas* (“... which keeps the language pure, and free of any fault” [Rhet. Her. IV 17 12], “... the observation of uncorrupted speech in the Roman manner” [Varr. Gramm. 115]) the notion of a Florentine *puritas*, compared to which the phonetic and morphological differences in other Italian languages could be construed as *vitia*, defects] (XLIV-XLV). Paolo Trovato “Introduzione” Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discorso intorno alla nostra lingua*, IX-LV.

and from elsewhere who brought with them diverse national cultures, religious practices and languages.⁷ Many of those who came to the city in its most prosperous years were assimilated into the Triestine dialect and incorporated borrowings from other languages, while at home they practiced customs and spoke languages belonging to their birthplaces. Although many Italian nationalists in Trieste viewed the foreign elements of the city's population as foreign and/or lacking in refinement, many of the assimilated thought of themselves as culturally Italian, bearing Italian first names and Slavic, German and Greek surnames. This mixed nomenclature was a sign of the "multianime" Triestine identity that Slataper described, but for many Italians this non-monolithic national identity signified that the Triestine was a foreigner. Slataper and Svevo wrote in Italian, however they reflected the manner in which that language was spoken in Trieste. Their works were not unintelligible to Italians; however, literary critics intent upon imposing grammatical and aesthetic standards of linguistic purity upon Italian language literature employed existing stereotypes about foreigners to label their works as barbarian.

The pejorative aspect of the word relates to the position of the barbarian as a foreigner to the *logos*, whether we understand this to mean *word*, *law* or *reason*. From the perspective of those who regard themselves as members of a society civilized by the *logos* the barbarian is

⁷ In the first of his *Lettere triestine* for *La Voce*, Slataper explains the impressive population growth in Trieste – from 5,600 inhabitants in 1717, when the Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI declared Trieste to be a free port, to 220,000 in 1908 – to be largely the result of immigration from multiple national communities: “Ma – da notarsi – per la sua posizione geografica, commerciale, etnica, Trieste non s’aumento d’italiani, di connazionali, com’è avvenuto per molte altre città della penisola; ma assorbì gente accorsa da tutto il mondo, sedotta dalla facilità di guadagno e da ogni sorta di privilegio e garanzie allettatoie che Carlo VI – sapiente uccellatore – aveva emanate. [But – it should be noted – for its geographic position, commercial and ethnic [population], Trieste did not grow in Italians, in fellow nationals, as has happened in many other cities of the peninsula; but instead absorbed the people who flocked there from all over the world, seduced by easy gain and from all sorts of privilege and guarantees to alight there that Charles VI – a skilled bird-catcher – had issued].”

without language, he is lawless, and he is irrational. As Arthur Schopenhauer writes in *The World as Will and Representation*,

All concepts, and concepts only, are denoted by *words*; they exist only in *the faculty of reason* and proceed therefrom; hence with them we are already at a one-sided point of view. But from such a point of view, what is near appears distinct and is set down as positive; what is more distant coalesces and is soon regarded only as negative. Thus each nation calls the other foreign; the Greeks called all other men barbarians.⁸

The perspective that Schopenhauer criticizes in this passage is germane to discussing the sustained reflection upon the way that Italians viewed Triestines that Slataper initiated while living in Florence, and the cultural superiority that Svevo criticized in numerous works. Barbarian language is unintelligible to those dwelling within the confines of civilization, having no foothold in the rational *logos* of the Italian. Consequently, the “civilized” aesthete, intellectual or ideologue perceives the barbaric outsider as a mute. In this sense, barbarian “muteness” refers to the denial of linguistic legitimacy exercised by the center upon the periphery.

Constituting himself as a “barbarian” outsider among his colleagues at *La Voce*, Slataper projects an image of the Triestine artist in an analogous relationship to the one-sided point of view that the Italian tradition epitomizes. Pennadoro, the protagonist of Slataper’s “lyrical autobiography” *Il mio Carso*, assumes the mythical persona of the barbarian poet attuned to what the muteness of nature speaks, but when he tries to communicate with his Florentine peers, their cultural superiority denies him expression. Slataper’s novel calls into question the self-other dichotomy on which the representatives of the Italian literary culture identify themselves collectively as speaking subjects by evoking the cultural relativism that

⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer. *The World as Will and Representation*. Vol. 1. Trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1969) 52.

would label the Triestine artist as a barbaric mute. To circumvent this barbaric muteness we come to another signpost, which is the theme of *lying* that signals an ironic, subaltern response to the Italian tradition that adjudicates the language of its literary expression. For both authors, themes of lying, misrepresentation and auto-deception reflects upon the way in which Triestines viewed themselves through the lens of the Italian language and tradition.

Consequently, the protagonists in *La coscienza di Zeno* and in *Il mio Carso* manifest an exaggeratedly guilty conscience; however, it is an ingenuous guilt that acts as a foil to the assured yet culpable hegemony of Italian culture.

Tuscan words and barbarian wood

Svevo occupies the barbarian stereotype as a critical vantage point for his satirical worldview, and distinguished the premises of his writing as constituting an “outside” in relation to the “inside” occupied by the academic, the literary critic or the professional writer. Svevo explicitly treats these themes in *La coscienza di Zeno*, where his literary language opens up a space between the Italian tradition and a dialect that this tradition calls “barbaric.” This rift between an idealized, national, grammatical language and a devalued, local, practical one becomes one of the primary sources of epistemic instability in Svevo’s novel.⁹ Yet it also illustrates the ongoing ambivalence towards territorializing the language of the writer in terms of its nationality, not only by critics, but also in the self-understanding of the author. Svevo projects his ambivalence about the territorial imperatives of language into Zeno, whose name, after all, is derived from the Greek word “*xénos*”, which means “foreigner.” In an episode from the final chapter of the novel, Zeno is confronted with the omission of important facts

⁹ Richard Robinson, *Narratives of the European Border: A History of Nowhere* (Houndmills; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

from his narrative. The omission in question pertains to a valuable stock of lumber belonging to his friend and rival, Guido Speier, who was supposed to have been bankrupt before his accidental suicide.

Se ne avessi parlato sarebbe stata una nuova difficoltà nella mia esposizione già tanto difficile. Quest'eliminazione non è che la prova che una confessione fatta da me in italiano non poteva essere né completa né sincera. In un deposito di legnami ci sono varietà enormi di qualità che noi a Trieste appelliamo con termini barbari presi dal dialetto, dal croato, dal tedesco e qualche volta persino dal francese (*zapin* p.e. e non equivale mica a *sapin*). Chi mi avrebbe fornito il vero vocabolario? Vecchio come sono avrei dovuto prendere un impiego da un commerciante in legnami toscano? Del resto il deposito legnami della ditta Guido Speier & C. non diede che delle perdite. Eppoi non avevo da parlarne perché rimase sempre inerte, salvo quando intervennero i ladri e fecero volare quel legname dai nomi barbari, come se fosse stato destinato a costruire dei tavolini per esperimenti spiritistici. (1060-61)

[“If I had mentioned it, it would have been an added difficulty in my already quite difficult exposition. This omission is simply the proof that a confession made by me in Italian could be neither complete nor sincere. In a lumberyard there are enormous varieties of lumber, which we in Trieste call by barbarous names derived from the dialect, from Croat, from German and sometimes even from French (*zapin*, for example, which is by no means the equivalent of *sapin*). Who could have given me the appropriate vocabulary? Old as I am, should I have found myself a job with a lumber dealer from Tuscany? For that matter the lumberyard belonging to the firm of Guido Speier & Co. produced only losses. So I had no call to mention it, as it remained always inactive, except when thieves broke in and made that barbarously named wood move, as if it were destined to make little tables for spiritualist séances.” (414)]

Zeno blames the inaccuracy of his account on the claim that there is no equivalent in Italian for this “barbarously named wood” in Guido’s lumberyard. In calling the dialect and the language of the lumberyard “barbarian” he opposes it to the “cultured” language of Italian and alluding to an implicit opposition between the foreign and the domestic. In the narrative economy of the psychoanalytic memoir, important details are passed over by the narrator who

is prone to being identified as a non-Italian by his inability to master the language of the dominant culture. The language of the lumberyard is that of plural “forestieri” in Machiavelli’s sense of the word (which, by the way, is by no means the equivalent of “forester”) meaning “foreigners.” As a mixed language of commerce, employing words from Croatian, German and French, its provenance comes from peoples who have been called “barbaro” (Slavs, Germanic tribes and Gauls) in Roman and Italian history.¹⁰ In addition, the ways in which these words are used do not necessarily correspond to how they might have been used in their source language, but have their own particular signifying function in Trieste. The spoken language of the Triestine lumberyard is truly *atopos*, not only strange to the Tuscan Italian, but dislocated from the source language of their foreign origin. Whether the source of the appropriate vocabulary that would make the picture complete is a handbook of tree species in Italian or the expertise of a Tuscan lumber dealer, its source is either a book or someone extraneous to the dialect of the lumberyard that contains the wood. But Zeno cannot blame his failures in life, his impostures or his inability to turn a situation to his advantage on the absence of an instruction manual that would tell him how to live. It is not the instruction manual that is at issue here, but the language in which that manual would be written that is absent.

Does Zeno leave this detail out of his narrative because he has no language in which to speak truthfully, or simply because he hates Guido? His sarcastic dig at Guido’s penchant for spiritualist séances alludes to a specific series of events that introduced an element of

¹⁰ While the Germanic tribes and the Gauls were traditionally associated with barbarian nations by the ancient Romans, Italians in late-Habsburg Trieste also associated Slavic and German populations with barbarity and foreignness in different measures, as evidenced in an article by Ferdinando Pasini, “Gli slavi sono de’ barbari: ma i tedeschi sono più civili di loro, e vengono più di lontano [The Slavs are barbarians, but the Germans are more civil than they are, and they come from farther away].” Ferdinando Pasini “Lettere dal Trentino. (Nazionalismo positivo)” *La Voce*, 21 October 1909.

linguistic tension into the novel: Guido's courtship of Ada Malfenti, who Zeno had hoped to marry. Indeed, much of Zeno's resentment towards Guido was provoked by the latter's assertion of cultural superiority over the former, as a cultured Florentine over a barbarian Triestine. Zeno intuitively mistrusts Guido, whereas the Malfenti family esteems him. He possesses the qualities of a cultured Italian, but most importantly, "Egli parlava il toscano con grande naturalezza [He spoke Tuscan fluently]," Zeno observes, "mentre io e Ada eravamo condannati al nostro dialettaccio [while Ada and I were condemned to our horrid dialect]" (735 [109]). The insecurity that Zeno already feels toward his manner of speaking is already apparent before he meets Guido, when he questions the appropriateness of using the dialect to ask Giovanni Malfenti for his blessing in courting Ada, "Mi preoccupava tuttavia la quistione se in un'occasione simile avrei dovuto parlare in lingua o in dialetto [Yet I was troubled by the problem of whether, on such an occasion, I should speak to him in dialect, or in standard Italian]" (723 [97]). Zeno's question of using the dialect to discuss serious matters, in this case a father's approval, recalls the dilemma at the heart of Dante's writings on the vernacular and its legitimacy. The disparity between Tuscan "lingua" and Triestine "dialetto," an established grammatical language and practical vernacular, a good language and a bad one (as the suffix "-accio" implies), underwrites Guido's cultural superiority to Zeno in the eyes of the Malfenti family.

Zeno's resentment towards Guido underscores relations of force between the centre and the periphery, in which a foreign, formally learned idiom is privileged over a local and living one. This resentment also characterizes Svevo's position in relation to Italian, but the relation of unequal force also resembles that of Dante towards the ecumene of Latin in his time. In this way, and in several others, Svevo recuperates the ambivalence and relativism of

Dante's language and his linguistic treatise "*De vulgari eloquentia*" for his novel. This will be explored further in the following chapter, but in this one I want to show how the motif of lying and the figure of the barbarian act as signposts indicating Svevo's critical art. Svevo undermines the hegemony of the Italian language by persistently referring to it by its historical designation as a local idiom or as "toscano [Tuscan]," and in doing so he refuses to concede to the historical ascendancy whereby the Tuscan dialect became a national language. At the same time, the Italian language is unavoidable if he wants to express himself, which entangles him in the hegemonic power of the tradition. In response to the sense of cultural inferiority engendered by his perceived "barbarian" foreignness to the source of the language that he speaks and writes with, the motif of lying (which is also manifested in omissions of fact) signals the critical art of the Triestine writer who speaks truth to power in the language of cultural imperialism.

The unresolved conflict between narrative language of Zeno's confessions and the national language of Italy plays out in the dissolution of the narrator's reliability, which is hinted at throughout the novel, and acknowledged by Zeno in a confession to the reader that also serves as an excuse for lying:

Il dottore presta una fede troppo grande a quelle mie benedette confessioni che non vuole restituirmi perché le riveda. Dio mio! Egli non studiò che la medicina e perciò ignora che cosa significhi scrivere in italiano per noi che parliamo e non sappiamo scrivere in dialetto. Una confessione in iscritto è sempre menzognera. Con ogni nostra parola toscana noi mentiamo! Se egli sapesse come raccontiamo con predilezione tutte le cose per la quali abbiamo pronta le frasi e come evitiamo quelle che ci obbligherebbero di ricorrere al vocabolario! È proprio così che scegliamo dalla nostra vita gli episodi da notarsi. Si capisce come la nostra vita avrebbe tutt'altro aspetto se fosse detta nel nostro dialetto (392-393).

[“The doctor puts too much faith also in those damned confessions of mine, which he won’t return to me so I can revise them. Good heavens! He studied only medicine and therefore doesn’t know what it means to write in Italian for those of us who speak the dialect but can’t write it. A confession in writing is always a lie. With our every Tuscan word, we lie! If only he knew how, by predilection, we recount all the things for which we have the words at hand, and how we avoid those things that would oblige us to turn to the dictionary! This is exactly how we choose, from our life, the episodes to underline. Obviously our life would have an entirely different aspect if it were told in our dialect.” (404)]

When the eponymous narrator reflects upon his therapeutic confessions and the language in which he writes them, the critical rupture that occurs has numerous intertwining literary, political and philosophical implications for the narrator as well as the author.¹¹ The critical self-awareness that this passage expresses precludes all truthfulness on the epistemological level of Zeno’s recollections, but there is a concealed truth that is expressed by the idea of lying: Svevo’s artistic sincerity resides in this critical self-awareness. Zeno’s epistemological ambivalence undermines the most elemental categories of narrative literature within the sphere of national culture: the universality of national language and the constitution of a stable self-image, which extend into the role that literature plays in consolidating national identity. By having Zeno refer to the language of writing as “Tuscan,” Svevo segregates it from the larger national context of the Italian language that grew out of it, and returns it to its former status as a local idiom, placing it on more equal footing with the Triestine linguistic sensibility that animates his narrative. In observing the locality and historical contingency of all modern languages, Svevo recalls Dante’s relativistic attitude toward the primacy of the

¹¹ The relationship between the historical person of Ettore Schmitz a.k.a Italo Svevo and the narrator Zeno Cosini has been interpreted extensively, and as a result, much has already been written on the Triestine sense of inferiority with regards to the Italian culture and the national literary tradition.

Tuscan vernacular and indicates a perennial problem that precedes the renewal of literary traditions.

If “writing well,” in the literary sense, means that one conforms to the laws of grammar, then the prose writer is obliged to “turn to the dictionary” to verify these laws, but even Dante could not confirm the correctness of his literary language by comparison with paradigmatic or grammatical models for it. In *De vulgari eloquentia* Dante conjectures that the Italian *vulgare illustre* evaded his understanding and that no existing literature exemplified it, but in his *Comedia*, he would not have avoided “those things” that constitute lacunae in Zeno’s narrative. Like Dante, who wrote in a Tuscan vernacular, incorporating Latinisms and borrowings from other dialects, Zeno’s narrative highlights events from his life based on “words at hand.” Dante was not writing in the Tuscan dialect, and Svevo was not writing in Triestine, yet Zeno tells us that something is missing from his confessions because he is not writing in dialect.

Zeno rationalizes his unreliability by highlighting the essentially perspectival basis of his local and particular language, as well as that of the dictionary that would supposedly contain the obligatory “Tuscan” words for his truth. Zeno’s emphasis on his “predilezione [predilection]” to recount certain things and avoid speaking of others refers to a subjective process of selection, but it also has other connotations. It indicates to the doctor the kind of writer that Zeno is; a dilettante, which Svevo defines as someone who does things “per diletto [out of delight].”¹² It also hints at a pre-theoretical language that in turn constitutes the unwritten laws of language that conduct Triestine life. Zeno’s language is not predicated (*prae-dicare*) on the authority that such a dictionary of correct terms might confer; rather it is

¹² Italo Svevo, “Del sentimento in arte” *Racconti, saggi, pagine sparse* (Milano: Dall’Oglio, 1968) 667. This definition of dilettantism will be explored further on page 240.

pre-selected (*prae-dilectus*) by sentiment and situation. We recall that Dante referred to Latin as a “secondary” language, in that that one acquired it by what the Romans called *gramatica*, and in Svevo’s time Italian was that secondary language. Dante asserts the primacy of vernacular language, which one learns before entering into the classroom, and is therefore it quite literally “pre-di-lezione” or preceding the lesson or lecture, which is what turning to the dictionary implies. The language of the dictionary is one of obligation as opposed to predilection, attesting to the linguistic hegemony that emanates from Tuscany (indeed, all of Guido’s legitimacy as a suitor for Ada is based on the culture and language that he had gotten there).

Zeno, (as much as Svevo) is intuitively averse to the requisite of conforming his prose to a required grammar that overlooks the contingencies and particularities of language use in a living context. Yet this predilection also underlies the inherent perspectivism and unreliability of Zeno’s account, much as Dante criticized those who mistook their mother tongue as universal, thinking their birthplace the most delightful (“*locum sue nationis delitiosissimum*”) place on earth, and admonished his reader to temper such sentiments with reason.

Paradigmatic writers like Dante anchor institutions and ground the habits of categorical thought that underwrite literary traditions, but the subjective and contextual acts of writing in which they originate are occluded by temporal distance, idealism and the abstractions of literary history. By reverting Italian back to its status as a local dialect, and stripping the language of its universality, Zeno exposes an important categorical mechanism that underwrites the hegemony of the Italian literary tradition, which is the standardization of Tuscan Italian into a grammar. In doing so, he accentuates the local nature of national languages and implies that all writing originates in a situated context and in an ephemeral act

of inscription, which also suggests that the language of Dante, father and prophet of the Italian language and its literature, originates in a subjective idiom and an act of writing.

Although one could argue that Svevo might have been capable of writing in dialect, the emphasis is placed on its status as a spoken language, which is contextual, relational and ephemeral, in that its materiality evaporates after the act of speaking. The language of writing implies spatiotemporal extension, the domination and ordering of experience, and the nexus between power and knowledge. Italian, for Svevo, is an expressive and oppressive language, comparable to the Greek and Latin employed by the Church, against which Dante writes, and from which he borrows. The dialect that Zeno identifies as the core of his linguistic and epistemic universe originates in Zeno/Svevo's everyday life in Trieste, yet the dialect is mostly omitted from the narrative because of a literary tradition that demands its suppression. Svevo's critique of Italian hegemony engenders a radical displacement of the Italian tradition's ideological centre, but it does not disperse the hegemonic power of Italian within the economy of the literary, as Dante had done with Latin, because, as Voghera pointed out, there is no paradigmatic *Svevian* language. In this instance, Svevo's critical awareness is parasitic because he offers no alternative to take the place of that leaky universality, least of all, a vernacular tradition. "Scriver male" takes place between an imperfect Italian, the Babel out of which it emerges as a literary language, and the Babel to which it will eventually return. The literary, philosophical and political implications of Zeno's confession go beyond the critical commonplace of a tension between the centralized Tuscan-Italian language and the peripheral Triestine-Italian dialect, which has so often been used to characterize Triestine literature. When Triestine writing becomes literature, images of its excluded otherness are domesticated as a series of myths and commonplaces (*topoi koinoi*) that lose their immediacy.

The unavoidability of lying in a written language strains against the limits of Triestine complicity with the hegemony of Italian literary culture, much like how Slataper's "multianime" national identity does when he wants to ("vorrei dirvi") speak of it to his reader.

The consolation of myth: Slataper's barbarian poet

Vorrei dirvi: Sono nato in carso, in una casupola col tetto di paglia annerita dalle piove e dal fumo. C'era un cane spelacchiato e rauco, due oche infanghite sotto il ventre, una zappa, una vanga, e dal mucchio di concio quasi senza strame scolavano, dopo la piovra, canaletti di succo brunastro.

Vorrei dirvi: Sono nato in Croazia nella grande foresta di roveri. D'inverno tutto era bianco di neve, la porta non si poteva aprire che a pertugio, e la notte sentivo urlare i lupi. Mamma m'infagottava con cenci le mani gonfie e rosse, e io mi buttavo sul focolaio frignando per il freddo.

Vorrei dirvi: Sono nato nella pianura morava e correvo come una lepre per i lunghi solchi, levando le cornacchie crocidanti. Mi buttavo a pancia a terra, sradicavo una barbabetola e la rosicavo terrosa.¹³

[“I'd like to tell you that I was born in the Karst, in a hut with a thatched roof blackened by rain and smoke. There was a mangy, raucous dog, two geese spattered with mud, a spade, a hoe, and, from a dung-heap nearly without straw, brown rivulets that colored the ground after every rain.

I'd like to tell you that I was born in Croatia, in a great oak forest. In winter everything was white with snow, the door would open only a crack, and at night I heard wolves howl. Mamma wrapped my swollen red hands in rags, and I threw myself onto the hearthstones, moaning from the cold.

I'd like to tell you that I was born on the Moravian plain and would run like a hare through the furrows, startling chattering crows in the air above. I threw myself onto the earth on my belly, pulled up a beet root, and nibbled its earthy flesh.”]¹⁴

¹³ Scipio Slataper, *Il mio Carso* (Milano, RCS Libri, 2000) 47-48.

¹⁴ Scipio Slataper, *My Karst*, trans. Nicholas Benson (unpublished translation, 2014) 1.

Il mio Carso begins with three statements that address a Florentine interlocutor and they reveal an impulse to lie, but it is a lie that would arise from an even deeper impulse to be sincere. The three “Vorrei dirvi...” refer to foreign lands – to Croatia, to Moravia and to the rural Karst – predominantly inhabited by a Slovenian population – surrounding Trieste, indicating the desire for a symbolic birthplace to serve as a homeland.¹⁵ The anaphoras serve as false starts to an origin narrative; as hesitations before an unasked question: “Where are you from?” The asking of such a question would immediately identify him as a foreigner, as would his reply, as each evocative image is discarded and replaced with another. His lyrical prose expresses nostalgia for a foreign past and a bucolic childhood outside on the outskirts of civilization, but he cannot claim any of them wholly. His mythical birthplaces allude to modalities of belonging that preceded the modern nationalisms that defined the political limits of the nation-state as coextensive with language. He equivocates because he cannot express his “multianime” identity in the language of modernity’s national paradigms. Like Zeno, Pennadoro is aware of the added difficulty involved in speaking about Triestine reality, and he wants to avoid telling his interlocutor – who clearly identifies as Italian – that he was born in Trieste, which is a city where no nationality offers a complete sense of belonging. His ambivalent response towards this implicit question destabilizes his subjectivity and renders him more contrite, until his third mythical origin story brings him up to the present:

Poi sono venuto qui, ho tentato di addomesticarmi, ho imparato l’italiano, ho scelto gli amici fra i giovani più colti; — ma presto devo tornare in patria perché qui sto molto male.

¹⁵ “Vorrei dirvi” is followed by “sono nato,” which alludes to earlier conceptions of nationality, such as that of Dante or Giambattista Vico, emphasize that the word “nation” is derived from the Latin word for birth (“natio”).

Vorrei ingannarvi ma non mi credereste. Voi siete scaltri e sagaci. Voi capireste subito che sono un povero italiano che cerca d'imbarbarire le sue solitarie preoccupazioni. (48)

[“Then I came here, tried to tame myself, learned Italian, made friends with the best young people; but I’ll have to return home soon because I’m miserable here.

I’d like to fool you, but you wouldn’t believe me. You are cunning and wise. You’d understand right away that I’m a poor Italian trying to *barbarize his solitary preoccupations*.” (1; my modifications to the translation in italics)].

The narrator admits to his ruse, in part because he feels that his interlocutor looks upon him as an inferior. His mythical concealment gives way to his identity as a “poor Italian,” not only a culturally impoverished Italian, but an unfortunate and unhappy one as well.

Pennadoro, like Slataper, grew up in Trieste speaking Italian, and it is the predominant language of his thoughts, so it would have been a lie to say that he learned it upon immigrating. He grew up immersed in Italian culture, so the taming or domestication that would have occurred by coming to Florence never took place. The attempt to “barbarize” his narrative, which is capital among his “solitary preoccupations,” implies a dissimulation through imitation.¹⁶ His barbarian origins are as imaginary as is the *patria* to which he longs to return, but he cannot return to it because it is nowhere. From the temptation to lie, to admitting his will to deceive, Pennadoro moves on to confess his motives:

È meglio ch’io confessi d’esservi fratello, anche se talvolta io vi guardi trasognato e lontano e mi senta timido davanti alla vostra coltura e ai vostri ragionamenti. Io ho, forse, paura di voi. Le vostre obiezioni mi chiudono a poco a poco in gabbia, mentre v’ascolto disinteressato e contento e non

¹⁶ Slataper’s use of the word “imbarbarire” brings to mind Strabo’s observation that the word “βαρβαρίζειν; *barbarezien*” was also used to refer to the speech of those who were not barbarians, but behaved like them or imitated their speech. Strabo, *Geography*. XIV.2.28. *Persueus Digital Library*. <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0099.tlg001.perseus-eng1:14.2.28>> Strabo. ed. H. L. Jones, *The Geography of Strabo*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, Ltd. 1924.

m'accorgo che voi state gustando la vostra intelligente bravura. E allora divento rosso e zitto, nell'angolo del tavolino; e penso alla consolazione dei grandi alberi aperti al vento. Penso avidamente al sole sui colli, e alla prosperosa libertà; ai veri amici miei che m'amano e mi riconoscono in una stretta di mano, in una risata calma e piena. Essi sono sani e buoni. (48-49)

[“I should confess to being your brother, even if at times I watch you with a distant, abstracted eye, made timid by your culture and your reasoning. Perhaps I'm afraid of you. Your arguments gradually cage me in as, docile and content, I listen to you, unaware that at every moment you're revelling in your show of intelligence. Then I turn red and fall silent at a corner of the table, and I think of the consolation of the great trees at the mercy of the wind. I think longingly of the sun on the hills, of ample freedom, and of my real friends, who love me and greet me with a hand-clasp, with a calm and deep laugh. They are strong and good.” (1)]

The oppositional logic with which Pennadoro describes his relationship to the Florentine interlocutor indicates an interiority that is extraneous to the sphere of Italian culture. He does not see himself as being on equal footing with this “brother” who masters and possess the Italian culture, occupies its conceptual centre and constitutes himself as an active, speaking subject. He envisions himself through their eyes as a passive object for them to project their categories and theories upon. Listening, and too intimidated to speak, he occupies a peripheral space at the table; estranged from the rational vantage point that colonizes his Triestine difference. In addressing the Florentine, the narrator has two options: one is that he remains silent; the other is that he lies in lyrical images so that he may speak.

While the narrator speaks to a Florentine interlocutor, he also expects that his imagery will speak poetically to the Triestine, who shares his malaise as well as a similar repertoire of muted images given a lyrical form. Pennadoro's lyricism retreats into a foreign, imaginary *patria*, and evokes a community of compatriots that he might find there. The association that Slataper draws between sentiments of recognition and friendship connected to physical contact

and non-verbal gestures contrast with the abstract distance and rational language that accompany his encounters with his Florentine peers. As Romano Luperini observes, the qualities of generosity, straightforwardness, goodness and health (“sani e buoni”) arise spontaneously from contact with nature for Slataper, who characterizes the friends with whom he grew up in the Karst with these qualities. By contrast, his Florentine colleagues are characterized in the novel as domesticated and anaemic, not having enough of this barbaric vitality, goodness and health in them.¹⁷ The oppositional dynamics of the novel (poetic/literary, barbaric/ civilized, instinct/ideology, nature/society) generate a perspectivist critique that seeks to dissolve the conceptual hierarchy of the centre and the periphery. “Barbarian” is what he calls himself when he looks at himself from the ideological centre of Italian culture, and while Slataper’s lyricism invests in the positive inferences of this stereotype, his critical conscience precludes complete identification with it.

Pennadoro’s sentiments of idealization, devaluation and ambivalence reflect those expressed by Slataper in his letters and diaries during the years that he worked for *La Voce*. As a regular contributor to the journal and a member of the editorial staff, Slataper found himself in the midst of a vibrant literary movement, becoming a *de facto* representative of “unredeemed” Italian culture from beyond the borders of Italy. *Il mio Carso* was published by *Libreria della “La Voce”* in 1912, alongside works by other contributors to the journal who sought revitalize Italian culture through fresh new voices. His literary production aligned with the goals of the Florentine avant-garde,¹⁸ and Benjamin Crémieux, who translated Slataper’s

¹⁷ Romano Luperini, *Scipio Slataper* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1977) 40.

¹⁸ Numerous studies support the argument that Slataper would not have attempted to create a Triestine art and conscience had he not gotten involved with *La Voce*. A few of them include Maria Luisa Patruno, *Il “Chiarimento” di Slataper: dalla “Voce” all’“Ibsen”* (Manduria, Piero Lacaita editore, 1987); *Intelletuali di frontiera: Triestini a Firenze (1900-1950)* Atti di convegno (18-20 marzo 1983) 2 vols. Ed. Roberto Pertici

novel into French, referred to him as “le plus pur de l’esprit vocien.”¹⁹ His involvement with *La Voce* arose out of his admiration for the ethical and social mandate of the journal, articulated by its founders Giuseppe Prezzolini and Giovanni Papini, who he saw as fellow combatants in a culture war that crossed swords with the Italian literary tradition.²⁰ Accordingly, Slataper envisioned his *Lettere triestine* as a cultural critique that would enrage readers in Italy and in Trieste. It would therefore be difficult to conceive of Slataper’s Triestine art without taking into consideration the conversation that took place between the intelligentsia of the Austrian port city and the cradle of Italian literary culture, Florence, in the early twentieth century.

In spite of his fruitful collaborations with the *Vociani*, Slataper often expressed a sense of cultural malaise among them in his letters and journals. As Giani Stuparich observes, Slataper’s letters to Triestine friends are characterized by “una sicurezza piena, un guardarsi dentro senza scherzo, un buttarsi fuori senza scrupoli né calcoli [an ample self-assurance, an introspection without jest, exposing himself without scruples or calculation]” whereas one finds in his correspondences with the *Vociani* “una specie d’imbarazzo, una volontà d’essere e di reagire, un senso d’inferiorità e di sfida insieme [a kind of embarrassment, a will to exist

(Firenze: Leo S. Olschki editore, 1985); Simone Volpato, *La lingua delle cose mute: Scipio Slataper lettore vitalissimo* (Udine: Forum, 2008).

¹⁹ Benjamin Crémieux, *Panorama de la littérature italienne contemporaine*, (Paris: Kra Éditeur, 1928) 204.

²⁰ In January of 1909, Slataper writes of them to his Triestine friend Marcello Loewy, “A Firenze Prezzolini e Papini — due tempre di battaglia che io amo — pubblicano la *Voce*. Ti spedisco saggio. Se ti piace abbonarti: merita di aiuto e di interesse. Io penso di scriverti su Trieste: le nostre condizioni. Ma mi farò lapidare. Sono stufo di sincerità contenuta: voglio espanderla. Voglio creare d’intorno a me tante ostilità che se vincerò la mia vita vorrà dire che io sono qualche cosa [In Florence Prezzolini and Papini – two tempers of battle that I love – publish *La Voce*. I’ll send you an essay. If you like it, subscribe: it deserves help and interest. I think I’ll write about Trieste for it: about our condition. But I will be stoned for this. I’m sick of contained sincerity: I want to expand it. I want to create around me so much hostility that if I win my life it will mean that I am something]” (*Epistolario*, 47-48).

and to react, a sense of inferiority and of struggle at the same time].”²¹ In a diary entry where he reflects upon his collaboration with Prezzolini, Slataper defines his sense of Triestine difference in the following terms:

Io sono molto più sano di lui. In generale anche ora mi sento molto giovane qui fra gli amici della *Voce*. È in me qualche brutalità fresca che loro non hanno. Può essere del resto che la mia barbarità non sia che un mito creatomi da me a mia consolazione.²²

[I am healthier than he is. In general, also now, I feel very young here among my friends at *La Voce*. There is some kind of fresh brutality in me that they don't have. However, it could be that my barbarity is no more than a myth that I have created for myself and for my own consolation.]

The opposing sentiments that are generated by Slataper's interactions with his Florentine colleagues are channelled into the consoling myth of Triestine difference that he gives lyrical form to in *Il mio Carso*. The consoling myth inverts his perception of the polarized cultural dynamic that he experiences, but he injects doubt into his identification with the perspective it privileges. In the novel, Pennadoro identifies his poet-persona with the barbarian king of the Lombards, Alboino, who descended from the Julian Alps into the neighbouring kingdoms of Italy in 568 A.D., taking over Friuli, Milan, Venetia and Liguria before turning his attention to Tuscany. Imagining himself thus, he claims an innate love for nature and vitality that is more stereotypical of the Slavic and Germanic elements of his composite identity, and lends itself to the *Sturm und Drang* temperament of the novel. He characterizes the Florentine with obverse traits from the idealized perspective of the barbarian invader, describing the otherness of his Italian peers in unflattering terms:

²¹ Giani Stuparich, "Introduzione," Scipio Slataper, *Epistolario*, ed. Giani Stuparich (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1950) 10.

²² Slataper, *Note e appunti* 132.

Povero sangue italiano, sangue di gatto addomesticato. È inutile appiattarsi e guatare e balzare con unghioni tesi contro la preda: la polpetta preparata è ferma nel piatto. Tu sei malato d'anemia cerebrale, povero sangue italiano, e il tuo carso non rigenera più la tua città. Sdraiati sul lastrico delle tue strade e aspetta che il nuovo secolo ti calpesti. (87)

[“Weak Italian blood, blood of a house cat. There’s no point in creeping along, crouching and pouncing with claws tensed for the prey; the prepared meal is sitting on the plate. You’re sick with cerebral anemia, weak Italian blood, and your Karst won’t regenerate your city any longer. Lie down on the stones of your streets and wait for the new century to run you over.” (28)]

From Monte Kâl, in the Karst plateau surrounding Trieste, Pennadoro-Alboino also looks down upon the cityscape as an emblem of civilization. He gains a similar perspective by climbing Mount Secchieta outside of Florence. The poet-warrior ascends into the wilderness and descends into urban society. Slataper had unofficially entitled these sections of the book “La salita” (the climb; ascent) and “La calata” (the fall; descent), structuring the novel to mirror the topography of Trieste. From above he looks at the domestication of space as an expression of the modern Italian spirit, where urban planning abstracts culture from the vitality of the natural world, generating a new form of sickness comparable to a blood disease.²³ Pennadoro’s devaluation of civilized, urban order is more ingenuous than it is cynical,²⁴ which

²³ The metaphor of the domestic cat, of urban weakness and the wilderness as therapy are themes that Slataper treated in in an essay for *La Voce* entitled “Ai giovannti intelligenti d’Italia [To the young intelligentsia of Italy]” (26 August 1909). “La campagna e il concentrarsi in sé, certo: ma come preparazione, bagno: a contatto delle cose primitive rinselvaticirci, noi gattini di cucina e di sofa. Per sentire veramente con senso di stupor, di rabbia, di venerazione, di *amore*, la vita di oggi [The countryside is a concentration of itself, certainly: but as a salve, a bath, in contact with primitive things we make ourselves wild again, we housecats of the kitchen and the sofa, so as to truly feel with a sense of stupor, of rage, of veneration, of love, the life of today].”

²⁴ Pennadoro expresses a view of technological progress that resembles what Svevo refers to as a “malattia della materia [disease of material],” since it is the “matter” of civilization — physical matter, but also subject matter, academic disciplines, concepts, history and the books that act as their vehicles — that generate the imaginary sicknesses of Zeno, as well as the perception of dilettantism as a cultural illness (see the following section on Svevo’s dilettante art). Svevo would go on in *La Coscienza di Zeno* to contrast “bespectacled man” with animals living in the wild; whereby animals are healthy because they adapt to nature with their bodies, and man adapts through his “ordigni,” referring to genius but also to the technologies that arise from it. While both narratives express views about societal “sickness” as the result of this separation from

leads him to call upon another idealized agent of his barbarian myth: the Slavic farmer who lives in the Karst, who serves as an anti-historical symbol of nature's brutality and rejuvenating power. Pennadoro seeks an ally – an army for his barbarian invasion – and exhorts a Slovenian peasant to descend into civilization with him and infuse Italy's weak blood with his barbaric vitality.

Perché tu sei slavo, figliolo della nuova razza. Sei venuto nelle terre che nessuno poteva abitare, e le hai coltivate. Hai tolto di mano la rete al pescatore veneziano, e ti sei fatto marinaio, tu figliolo della terra. Tu sei costante e parco. Sei forte e paziente. Per lunghi lunghi anni ti sputarono in viso la tua schiavitù; ma anche la tua ora è venuta. È tempo che tu sia padrone. (86)

[“Because you are Slav, a son of the new race. You came to lands no one could inhabit, and you planted them. You took the net from the hands of the Venetian fisherman and made yourself a sailor: you, a son of the soil. You are loyal and frugal. You are strong and patient. For so many years they spat servitude in your face; but your hour too has come. It's time you became a master.” (27)]

Pennadoro exalts the Slav for his enormous capacities for work, and tries to provoke him into taking revenge for the exploitation of that capacity by bourgeois masters who assert their cultural superiority, seeking alliance in a shared sense of resentment. The peasant declines the poet's entreaty indifferently, even disdainfully, and the poet is left disillusioned with his consoling myth, “io l'aizzo come se fossi slavo di sangue. [I'm provoking him as though I were Slav myself]” (86 [27]).

Pennadoro's idealization of the barbaric Slav relates to his reveries about the world of manual labour, as opposed to that of commercial or academic work, and when he becomes disillusioned with his thoughts on this subject, he makes another confession to his Florentine interlocutor: “Io sono come voi, non badate. Le mani del giovane barbaro sono diventate

nature, Slataper animates a perspective that romanticizes natural and instinctive values against it, whereas Svevo's view is one of Darwinian theory and resignation.

bianche e deboli come le mani delle femmine [“I’m the same as you, you can be sure. The hands of the young barbarian have become the pale and weak hands of a girl”]” (148 [70]). The vocations of the poet-barbarian and the man of letters, domesticated by the material of literary culture, both dwell within the Triestine poet. The two vocations present the reader with the interior duplicity that *Il mio Carso* painfully expresses in the topographical features of the Karst (on high) and the city (down below).

Pennadoro’s idealizations are repeatedly followed by moments of disillusionment with the perspective that exalts one position over the other, and Slataper emphasizes this as a function of the inherently critical perspectivism of the narrative when he explains his work. In a letter to a friend, he frames the internalized, externalized and depersonalized perspective on his own life story as a type of mythical dimension to the autobiographical project of expressing identity:

Basta che la dica che quel libro non è affatto la mia autobiografia, ma la vita d’uno qualunque (anche se mia) vista sotto certi angoli visuali, con un certo senso sì complesso che esagera alcuni caratteri e ne dimentica molti altri; in modo che è piuttosto “mito” che storia.²⁵

[Suffice to say that this book is not exactly my autobiography, but the life of anyone (even if it is also mine) seen under certain visual angles, and with a certain sense so complex that it exaggerates certain characteristics and forgets many others, in such a way that it is more “myth” than history.]

Slataper’s concept of myth in autobiography is comparable with the consoling myth that he describes in his diaries. Firstly, perspectivism eschews the historical pretext of referentiality that would normatively accompany the project of autobiographical documenting. Viewing this life from a number of different visual angles bring to mind the three anaphora with which he begins his novel, the lyrical mode of his birth narrative, and the impulse to

²⁵ Scipio Slataper, *Epistolario* 323. Letter to Elsa Dobra, 20 May 1912.

deceive. Myth, in this instance, is not a mode of lying, but way of animating one's sense of the world through narrative. The image of the barbarian is inherited from his language, and the personality of the barbarian king is carried by the historical tradition that inscribes it. Slataper's Alboino is a mythical persona and not a historical (documentary) one, because it concretizes his reality.

The gestures of mythical personae, as Roberto Calasso suggests, serve as models for human action and “seducono l'anima a imitarle, come se appartenessero ineluttabilmente alla circolazione dei simulacri [seduce the soul to imitate them, as if they inevitably belonged to the circulation of simulacra].”²⁶ Calasso uses the word *simulacra* to translate the Greek word *eidolon* (εἶδωλον) from Homer, which also means apparition, idol, image, or phantom. In this sense, the consoling myth of the barbarian belongs to a circulation of simulacra inscribed in a language and inherited from the literary-historical tradition. By this use of myth, Pennadoro imagines himself descending from the Karst as Alboino, the King of the Lombards and leader of barbarian hordes. When he tries to galvanize the Slav peasant to accompany him “laggiù [down there]” he invokes the gesture of the barbarian hero: “Così calava Alboino [“Alboin came down this way”]” (87 [28]).

This mythical invocation also pertains to the relationship between the author and his protagonist, since it is just as easy to conflate Pennadoro with Slataper as with Svevo and Zeno, or Joyce with Stephen Dedalus. In these particular cases, the protagonists are writers who are made to identify with mythical personae, which inform and animate the idea of

²⁶ Roberto Calasso, *I quarantanove gradini* (Milano: Adelphi, 1991) 492. “Ma osserviamo da vicino i pericoli dell'imitazione: le storie mitiche, per loro natura, seducono l'anima a imitarle, come se appartenessero ineluttabilmente alla circolazione dei simulacri. E come avviene questo processo di imitazione? [...] Che i gesti del mito siano modelli per le azioni umane ci viene testimoniato per la prima volta nell'*Iliade* [But take a closer look at the dangers of imitation: the mythical stories, by their nature, seduce the soul to imitate them, as if they inevitably belonged to the circulation of simulacra. And how does this process of imitation come about? [...] That the gestures of myth are models for human actions is testified to for the first time in the *Iliad*].

writing (Zeno of Elea as a maker of paradoxes, Daedalus as an architect of mazes) as well as a standpoint for literary interpretation. The image of the barbarian king allows Pennadoro to conceive of his poetic role and his Triestine condition as timeless or universal. However, much as Slataper dismisses the mythical barbarity that he ascribes to himself in his diary, Pennadoro admits to being a “poor Italian” on many levels, undermining not only the natural vitality and dominance of Alboino, but also his foreignness to the Florentine, who is a “sick” Italian. Yet Pennadoro does not find his place in this disillusionment either, as it represents another visual angle that exaggerates and forgets specific aspects of the complex autobiographical project.

The barbarian myth acts as a consolation for the anxiety of placelessness that inhabits the historical *topos* of this autobiography. The three “vorrei dirvi” that do not literally or factually correspond to his birthplace point to something forgotten or passed over in silence. Pennadoro’s mythical homelands indicate an empty space where nationalists usually stake their historical claim on the individual psyche. The autobiographical dimension of the novel means that Slataper tells a story in order to acquire a national identity, whereas the nationalist claim of Irredentists and Italians upon Trieste is just as spurious if their criteria rely on the history of Trieste originally belonging to Rome or Venice. After admitting his impulse to deceive, and then confessing to his sense of inferiority, Pennadoro speaks of his “true” birthplace:

Penso alle mie lontane origini sconosciute, ai miei avi aranti l’interminabile campo con lo spaccaterra tirato da quattro cavalloni pezzati, o curvi nel grembialone di cuoio davanti alle caldaie del vetro fuso, al mio avolo intraprendente che cala a Trieste all’epoca del porto franco; alla grande casa verdognola dove sono nato, dove vive, indurita dal dolore, la nostra nonna. (49-50)

[“It is of my distant unknown origins that I am thinking, of my ancestors tilling the endless field with a plow pulled by four dappled draft horses, or in leather aprons bent over the drop forge of molten glass, and of my enterprising grandfather, who came upon Trieste in the days of the Free Port; of the great faded-green house where I was born and where, inured to suffering, my grandmother still lives.” (2)]

Slataper describes the house on the outskirts of Trieste and his ancestors, but what is absent from this revised origin narrative are any reference to the nationalities of his forebears. The narrator speaks without the memory or the documentation of a nationality, instead remembering his grandparents and his birthplace, and transforms his contemplations upon them into lyrical images. The images refer to an elsewhere that is not situated anywhere except in the author’s imagination. The non-specific ancestor ploughing a field may bring to mind the Moravian origin story above, just as the reference to glasswork might bring to mind nearby Venice, but national origin is voided from these accounts. His grandfather is not characterized by where he came *from* but by where he came *to*; Trieste, motivated by his enterprising nature to take advantage of the favourable economic conditions of Austria’s most important shipping hub. Yet it is also worth noting that the word that Slataper chooses to describe his grandfather’s arrival in Trieste, “cala,” which brings to mind Alboino and the barbarian hordes “coming down” as it were from the mountains; a “distant” and “unknown” place. Slataper’s Trieste does not belong to any single nation; rather, the *patria* he envisions is the product of the Austrian free port’s centripetal economic force. When Slataper continuously revisits the question of national origin throughout the novel, and near the end it is the city’s centrifugal economic force that serves as a metaphor for the Triestine *patria*:

E levan l’ancora i grossi piroscafi nostri verso Salonicco e Bombay. E domani le locomotive rintroneranno il ponte di ferro sulla Moldava e si cacceranno con l’Elba dentro la Germania.

E anche noi ubbidiremo alla nostra legge. Viaggeremo incerti e nostalgici, spinti da desiderosi ricordi che non troveremo nostri in nessun posto. Di dove venimmo? Lontana è la patria e il nido disfatto. Ma commossi d'amore torneremo alla patria nostra Trieste, e di qui cominceremo. (177)

[“Our big steamers weigh anchor for Salonika and Bombay. And tomorrow these locomotives will thunder across the iron bridge over the Vltava, then rush alongside the Elbe into Germany.

And we too will obey our instincts. We will travel, uncertain and nostalgic, compelled by hopeful memories that we won't find anywhere again. Where did we come from? Our country is far away, the nest undone. But love will move us to return to our country, Trieste, and from there we will start again.” (92)]

The unifying principle that Slataper identifies as the basis of his *patria* is the idea of a law that the Triestine obeys instinctively, identified as “work and love” at the end of the novel, and this is an independent *nomos* that reconciles the *antinomial* tensions of Triestine life. The defining characteristics of his *patria* are incertitude, ambivalence, inadequacy, atopia as well as the desire for totality represented by the idea of a homeland. Responding again to the question of an original, national *patria*, Pennadoro finally accepts the metaphor of a disassembled bird's nest to which he cannot return to speak of the non-place that this striving represents. Trieste is therefore a starting place, which intersects with the nineteenth century Philadelphia myth of a new world in the old and Marx's claim that Trieste is a city without a past. For Slataper, the present that writing attains is not a meandering out of the past but a culmination of it, suggesting that one writes from where one is and identity begins with what one has at hand.

From polemics to poetics: a critical art

The political impact of literature was a critical preoccupation of the Italian avant-garde, especially for intellectuals associated with *La Voce*. The avant-garde responded to a

perceived hegemony in the post-Risorgimento Italian tradition with the literary movements of *Crepuscolarismo* in poetry and *Futurismo* in poetry and visual art. The antiliterariness of Slataper is not a product of either of these two movements, from which he articulately, and often arrogantly, chose to distance himself. *Crepuscolarismo* highlighted the exhaustion of the tradition whereas *Futurismo* violently dispensed with the tradition altogether, though as we know, with the glorification of machinery and war, Futurism was recuperated into the aesthetics of Fascism. Although Futurism cultivated an elaborate barbarian myth,²⁷ Slataper's rejection of the past as a basis for situated identities has a very different character from that of Marinetti and his followers, since he had a very personal way of conceiving his work as "classical." Like many of the *Vocianti* in Florence, Slataper was especially suspicious of Italians who claimed to possess and safeguard the tradition from corruption. However, coming from Trieste, Slataper was sensitive to misleading Irredentist claims regarding Trieste's *italianità*, insofar as they had a highly literary (which in this case suggested unrealistic and bourgeois) character about it. Here we will look at how Slataper initially articulates his critique of culture as an invective aimed at the sanctioned role of the *letterato*, beginning in his journalism and private correspondences, and then how he channels this critique into the barbarian myth and perspectivism of *Il mio Carso*.

In an article on several key figures in the poetic movement known as *Crepuscolarismo*, Slataper turns his attention to the duplicitous outlook exemplified in the state-sanctioned literature of his time. The status of the *letterato* finds its most archetypal expression in the "falsa magniloquenza fastosa di Carducci e D'Annunzio [false, pompous magniloquence of

²⁷ Although Slataper subscribed to "the myth of rejuvenation through barbarism" as did Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and the Futurists, Lucia Re observes, "it is the very will to enact in the present a destruction of the past – a violent destruction of history – that constitutes their barbarism." Lucia Re (2012) "'Barbari civilizzatissimi': Marinetti and the futurist myth of barbarism," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 17:3, 350-368. 355.

Carducci and D'Annunzio]" as well as other "[rompescatole *vates patriae* [troublemaking *vates patriae*]" like Pascoli.²⁸ Slataper takes issue with poets, prose writers and critics who employ the Italian tradition as "rhetoric," which he defines as "questa mancanza di coscienza attiva [...] che cerca di ripagarsi con quello che "tutti sanno" per abitudine — ed è immorale perché eccita un'abitudine rachitica, dando l'illusione d'aver infuso un valore [a lack of active consciousness [...] trying to pay for itself with what "everyone knows" out of habit – and it is immoral because it excites a stunted habit, giving the illusion of having infused it with value]."²⁹ Where Slataper defines the rhetorical aspect of literary value, we can also read the inverse: a valorization of "*coscienza*" in both critical and the moral senses of the word. According to this view, the literary professional is a kind of modern Sophist; immoral because he traffics in clichés; he cultivates a passive, uncritical civic culture, and he strategically channels art into literary capital and political advantage. In this instance, Slataper castigates Carducci who "dimostra in atti di non *credere* alla patria; proprio nel momento che la canta romanamente coreografica invece di dire la sua semplice grandezza moderna [shows that he does not really *believe* in the homeland; at the very moment when he sings it Romanly choreographed instead of stating its simple modern grandeur]."³⁰ Carducci is recognized as

²⁸ Scipio Slataper, *Scritti letterari e critici*, ed. Giani Stuparich (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1956); "Perplessità crepuscolare" *La Voce*, 16 novembre 1911. The Latin term "*vates patriae*," translates as "bards or prophets of the homeland." Carducci was emblematic of the neo-classical trend in Italian literature, and D'Annunzio with decadentism, which, as Ortensia Ruggiero claims, "Après que l'Italie eut atteinte son unité politique, la littérature italienne est marquée décidément par une réaction au romantisme. Celle-ci se manifeste en trois courants tout à fait différents : le néo-classicisme, le vérisme, le décadentisme. Et c'est dans leur différence même que l'on peut retrouver l'inquiétude et le bouleversement des esprits à la recherche d'un nouveau credo littéraire." Ortensia Ruggiero, *Valery Larbaud et l'Italie* (Paris, G. A. Nizet, 1963) 171.

²⁹ Ibid. Slataper's critique of the rhetoric of popular poetry makes reference to verses by Guido Gozzano, whom he cites in his article: "La Patria? Dio? l'umanità? Parole che i retori t'han fatto nauseose [Homeland? God? Humanity? Words that rhetoricians have made nauseating]."

³⁰ The "Romanly choreographed" language of Carducci brings to mind how Fascism would later employ Roman gestures to link their regime to that of the Ancient Roman Empire as a means of "rhetorically" justifying Italy's imperial ambitions. Gabriele D'Annunzio, who is criticized in Slataper's article, was instrumental in popularizing the Roman salute as part of the Fascist movement's symbolic repertoire.

one of Italy's most important poets, yet Slataper regards his reliance on past models as proof that his patriotism lacks conviction.³¹ Although Carducci's claim that Italy was a "literary expression" as opposed to a "geographical expression" is not treated in this essay for *La Voce*, one could conjecture that Slataper would have called the Italy of Carducci's poetry a "rhetorical expression" which shored up his moral authority. In other words, when Slataper uses the adjective "literary" it is almost always a metonym for "rhetorical," and this equivalence was especially significant in the Triestine context, discussed in the previous chapter: Antiliterature is quite useless.³²

Coming from Trieste, Slataper was especially sensitive to the ideology for which literature acted as a vehicle. Irredentists called for the banishment or assimilation of foreign elements in the city, and as Claudio Minca comments, "[t]he 'Italianness' of Trieste, previously simply a key cultural marker of the uniqueness of this 'urban nation', is progressively transformed into a marker of exclusive national belonging, into territory" (270). For Slataper, Irredentism had a particularly "literary" quality about it, describing the image it projected as "una Trieste fantastica [...] creata dall'esagerazione di quella parte della realtà che era vista dalla coltura letteraria. L'ideale dei letterari triestini diventava fatto concreto tra

³¹ Slataper's comment on the "simple modern grandeur" of the *patria* illustrates a difference in modes of historical being and mediation that distinguish Carducci's version of classicism from his own. Roberto M. Dainotto describes Carducci's classicism in the context of his cultural politics: "Thus, for Carducci, the rich apparatus of classical citation, allusions, and reminiscences represent a form of poetic militancy against the corruption of both taste and virtue in present-day Italy. Classicism become a cultural program that identifies poetic value with the overcoming of Romantic sentimentalism and a return to the civic morality of the poet-patriot." Roberto M. Dainotto, "Giosue Carducci (1835-1907)" *Encyclopedia of Italian Literary Studies*, 389.

³² Another significant figure in this context, not discussed in the previous chapter, is Carlo Michelstaedter, a poet and philosopher from Gorizia who also studied in Florence while Slataper was living there. He became famous for his posthumously published *tesi di laurea, La persuasione e la retorica in Platone ed Aristotele* (1910), which associated rhetoric with, among other things, literature. For Michelstaedter, rhetoric was not only a way of using language, but also a mode of being aimed at compensating for one's sense of lack. This is consonant with Slataper's critique of Carducci, D'Annunzio and Pascoli. Further parallels between Slataper and Michelstaedter are explored in Giuseppe A. Camerino, *La persuasione e I simboli. Michelstaedter e Slataper* (Napoli: Liguori, 2005).

l'ignoranza dell'Italia [a fantastic Trieste [...] created out of the exaggeration of that part of reality that is apprehended through literary culture. The ideal of Triestine men of letters becoming a concrete fact through the ignorance of Italy].”³³ Irredentism, according to Slataper, generates a false historical conscience out of the literary culture based in Italy by reproducing the rhetoric that he associated with the *letterato* and the *patria vates*: complacency, false consciousness, academism, exaggerated cultural value, and political utility, removed from any basis in the city's economic realities. Slataper criticized the borrowed cultural hegemony of Italy's “literary expression,” claiming that it was not universally representative in its modern form, but emanated from the removed perspective of Triestine bourgeois intelligentsia.³⁴

In his writings for *La Voce*, Slataper distinguished between several forms of Irredentism in Trieste, but the two predominant ones were irreconcilable with each other.³⁵ Nationalist irredentism was predicated on an idea of Italian culture that was for the large part literary, whereas the socialist view was predicated on Trieste's economic function. Angelo Vivante exemplified the latter view and in his book *Irredentismo Adriatico* (1912) he promoted a moderate cultural irredentism that kept the economic role of the city intact within the Austrian Empire. Slataper considered Vivante's book to be an important corrective to many of the Irredentist fallacies spread by nationalists, and in particular his appreciation of

³³ “Lettere triestine. Perché le scrivo.” *Lettere Triestine: Col seguito di altri scritti vociani di polemica su Trieste* (Trieste: Edizioni Dedolibri, 1988) 55.

³⁴ Ibid. 59. “L'irredentismo triestino è prodotto di cultura – ho detto: e di cultura borghese: cioè di quella borghesia che non vive del fatto brutto, ma che anzi la guarda dall'alto in basso pur vivendo alle sue spalle. Nutrita, ha tempo di crearsi delle realtà al di fuori della realtà: e poiché non può dare loro sangue, lei, cerca di spillarcelo dalle vene sane della plebe [Irredentism is a product of culture – I declare – and of bourgeois culture; that is, of that bourgeois culture that does not live by brute facts, but rather looks down upon them while making their living. Nourished by them, they have time to create a reality that is completely outside of reality: and since they cannot shed their own blood, they seek to spill it out of the health veins of the plebs.]”

³⁵ Slataper catalogues the different “irredentisms” as *republican, masonic, imperial, moral* and *cultural*. Slataper, Scipio. “Irredentismo: Oggi” *La Voce*, 15 dicembre 1910; “Oggi” *Scritti Politici* 95-104.

Trieste's role as a crossroads of civilizations.³⁶ However, Slataper saw a fundamental defect in Vivante's Austro-Marxism, which was that he thought of Trieste too pragmatically of the city in terms of its economic needs, "Cossiché oltre il merito intrinseco del libro, c'è questo: che il Vivante non è un letterato [In such a way that, besides the intrinsic merit of the book, there is this: that Vivante is not a man of letters]."³⁷ In other words, nationalism simply made no sense to Vivante, and his failure to take account of the literary component in collective life rendered his views irremediably flawed. "La nazione è una complessa, compatta, integra tradizione di civiltà [the nation is a complex, compact, integral tradition of civilization]," Slataper argues, "cioè non solo di letteratura, ecc., ma di bisogni, istinti, ecc. — una forma non dello spirito in astratto, ma di vita, che è impossibile disciogliere nei suoi elementi [that is, not only of literature, etc., but of needs, instincts, etc. — not an abstract form of the spirit, but of life, that is impossible to separate from its elements]."³⁸ Italian nationalism sanctifies the literary idea of the nation so as to disregard the economic realities of Triestine life, whereas the Austro-Marxist view equivocates and rationalizes the national idea with theories of class struggle and capital, reducing humanity to the status of "*homo homini lupus*."³⁹ In Irredentist

³⁶ Many of Slataper's views on Trieste resonate with those of Vivante, who writes: "Trieste veicolo ed anello di congiunzione tra correnti etniche ed economiche diverse" (259) Vivante highlights the antithetical relation between commerce and culture that reflected the nineteenth century attitude toward nation building, "L'antitesi tra il fattore economico e quello nazionale è, lo vedemmo, il filo conduttore di tutta la storia triestina" to which he adds, "Inutile dilungarsi sulla storia economica, anteriore al porto franco" (221). Slataper took issue with Irredentist accounts of Triestine history, which portrayed the city as an eternally Italian territory usurped by the Habsburg State: "Ma anch'io, col Vivante, anzi col Valussi, col Tommaseo, vedo chiaramente che il compito storico di Trieste è di esser crogiolo e propogatore di civiltà, di tre civiltà." Slataper could not endorse a monolithic cultural nationalism that aimed to exclude German and Slavic elements from the city's cultural fabric, referring to Pacifico Valussi and Niccolo Tommaseo, men of letters who envisioned the city's cosmopolitan purpose in the mid-nineteenth century and founded the first literary journal in Trieste, *La Favilla*, along with the poet Francesco Dall'Ongaro.

³⁷ Scipio Slataper, "L'avvenire nazionale e politico di Trieste," *Scritti politici*. Ed. Giani Stuparich (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1954) 141.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 149-150.

³⁹ *Ibid.* "Il punto di vista socialista, che pur ammette e accetta e santifica la lotta di classe, lotta di bisogni economici, lotta inferiore cioè, d'istinti radicali, materiali, necessari, non riesce a spiegarci la lotta nazionale che

discourse the antinomy of culture and commerce not only exclude each other, but according to Slataper they engendered two fallacious views: “La propaganda irredentista si basa su due menzogne: la nazionale e l’economia [Irredentist propaganda is based on two lies: the national one and the economy].”⁴⁰ The dual impostures of Irredentism relate to Slataper’s self-described task as a poet, and to the desire for totality that motivates it.

On both fronts, from Florence and from Trieste, Slataper’s critique of the *letterato* is motivated by a need for cultural renewal, but not the kind of renewal that comes from rational ideological, political or social reform, nor from the wholesale destruction of past culture envisioned by the Futurists. His distinction between the *poeta* and the *letterato* plays a key role in *Il mio Carso*, as he characterizes the literary milieu of Pennadoro’s colleagues as a place where intelligence is measured as a capacity for logical argument and rhetorical persuasion.⁴¹ He imagines the Karst as a mythical site where he discovers an instinctive and

è la lotta di civiltà, di domino di forme culturali, lotta cioè che dovrebbe escludere per definizione l’*homo homini lupus*” (149).

⁴⁰ Ibid. 141.

⁴¹ There are many resonances between the passage from *Il mio Carso* and a letter dated 2-3 February 1912 that Slataper wrote to his friend Marcello Löwy in Trieste: “In questi due mesi son successe molte cose; e ora ho un terribile desiderio di lavoro *silenzioso e preparatorio*. Nel momento in cui io da compagno Prezzolini, da *collaboratore*, sarei dovuto (e potuto, se non ufficialmente, ma in realtà) diventare direttore, mi son trovato impreparato. Allora mi è venuto a galla più crudamente di prima la mia non completa quiete nella Voce, il mio *stato di preparazione armata*. Mi sento abbastanza *estraneo*, non al passato comune, ma all’avvenire di questi uomini stanchi e deboli, che la mia molta gioventù e poca coltura e poca tenacità non riusciva a comprender bene a ricollocare in ordine. *Sono assai incerto, in fondo; e ballo tra il pro e il contro di tutte le cose*. [...] Studio storia e popoli, palpitando nei miei sogni sempre più vasti; ma *la coscienza del mio disquilibrio* tra desiderio e sapienza me fa più umile e più cristiano [...] Per ora, a esser sincero, ti dirò che per *mi par di mancare di molte qualità d’organizzazione, di persuasione* ecc. ecc. – Insomma mi preparo, vigilando.” [In the last two months many things have happened; and now I have a terrible desire for quiet work and preparation. At the moment that I – from companion to Prezzolini, to collaborator – should (and very well could, if not officially, but in reality) become director, I found myself unprepared. Then it came to the surface more starkly than before that I was not completely at ease at *La Voce*, my state of armed preparation. I feel quite extraneous, not from a common past, but from the future of these tired and weak men; that my great youth and little culture and little tenacity could not succeed in comprehending well enough to put everything into order. I am very uncertain, after all; and I dance between the pros and cons of all things. [...] I study history and peoples, throbbing in my dreams ever wider; but the consciousness of my disequilibrium between desire and knowledge makes me more humble and more Christian [...] For now, to be honest, I’ll tell you that I seem to be missing a lot of quality of organization, of persuasion and so on. etc. – In short, I prepare myself, watching.” Scipio Slataper, *Epistolario*, ed. Giani Stuparich (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1950) 94-95.

primitive humanism that he wants to bring back to civilization with him, which reveals itself as the “active consciousness” that is potential but never actualized in the current literary hegemony. Pennadoro expresses his discontent in the Florentine environment as well as what his barbarian art might entail for Italy, in stark contrast with how his journalist colleagues go about trying to enrich Italian intellectual culture, and the myth of barbarism provides the poet with a cognitive foundation for his critical, outsider’s perspective:

No, no, la mia vita non fu così, ma lo stesso io mi trovo inquieto e spostato. Io ho trovato compagni e amicizia, e ho lavorato con essi, ma io sono meno intelligente di loro. Io non so dir niente che li persuada. Essi invece sanno discutere e dimostrare che bisogna esser convinti di questa o quella cosa. Io sono impersuaso e contraddittorio. Bisogna star zitti e prepararsi.

Ma perché essi qualche volta s’accasciano disperando di tutto? Chi vuol riformare gli altri non ha diritto d’esser debole. Bisogna andar avanti e dritti. Bisogna accogliere con amore la vita anche quand’essa è pesante. Bisogna obbedire al proprio dovere. Essi sono più intelligenti e più colti e più stanchi.

Forse io sono d’una città giovane e il mio passato sono i ginepri del carso. Io non sono triste; a volte mi annoio: e allora mi butto a dormire come una bestia in bisogno di letargo. Io non sono un *grübler*. Ho fede in me e nella legge. Io amo la vita.

Ma i discorsi d’arte e di letteratura m’annoiano. Io sono un po’ estraneo al loro mondo, e me n’addoloro, ma non so vincermi. Amo di più parlare con la gente solita e interessarmi dei loro interessi. Può essere che tutta la mia vita sarà una ricerca vana d’umanità, ma la filosofia e l’arte non m’accontentano né m’appassionano abbastanza. La vita è più ampia e più ricca. Ho voglia di conoscere altre terre e altri uomini. Perché io non sono affatto superiore agli altri, e la letteratura è un tristo e secco mestiere. (122-123)

[“No, no, my life was not like that, but all the same I felt anxious and out of place. I found companions and friends, and I worked alongside them, but I’m not as intelligent as they are. I can say nothing to impress them. They on the other hand know how to argue and demonstrate that one must be convinced of this or that thing. I am unsure and inconsistent. Better to stay silent and get ready.

But why are they so down and despairing sometimes? Those who want to reform others cede the right to have weaknesses. They must stride forward unbowed. They must welcome life with love, even when it's a burden. They must obey their duty. They are more intelligent, more civilized, and more exhausted.

Maybe it's just that I'm from a young city, and the junipers of the Karst are my past. I'm not sad; sometimes I'm just bored, and then I throw myself down to sleep, like a beast in need of rest. I don't brood. I have faith in myself and in life's laws. I love life.

But discussions about art and literature bore me. I'm somewhat outside their world, and it pains me, but I can't help it. I much prefer speaking with ordinary people and finding out about what interests them. My whole life might amount to a vain search for humanity, but for me philosophy and art don't suffice, nor do they fill me with enough passion. Life is broader and richer than that. I want to know other lands and other men. Because I'm not at all superior to others and literature is a sad and solitary vocation." (51-52)]

The anti-literary sentiment expressed by Pennadoro mitigates his alienation from his colleagues and his anxiety. Silence, in this instance, is not only a state of exile, but one of introspection and poetic potentiality; that is, his unsophisticated, *de facto* muteness generates a poetic sensibility attuned to life, to nature and to the present; it signifies preliterary potentialities that are inimical to the rhetoric, erudition and virtuosity that he associated with the literary culture of Italy. Slataper's critique of the literary class mirrors his thoughts on Henrik Ibsen's formative years, "Solo fabbricati, niente verde [Only manufactured, nothing green]," which Romano Luperini paraphrases as, "Solo volontà, solo lavoro, solo sforzo; non spontaneità, vita [Only will, only work, only force; no spontaneity, no life, no immediacy]."⁴² He feels the impulse toward expression, but regards the burden of literary knowledge that he

⁴² Scipio Slataper, *Ibsen* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1944) 11; Romano Luperini, *Scipio Slataper* (Firenze: La nuova Italia, 1977) 82. Slataper might also be alluding to Mephistopheles lines in Goethe's *Faust*: "My friend, all theory is gray, and green | The golden tree of life." J. W. von Goethe, *Faust, Part I*, trans. David Luke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) 61.

witnesses in his colleagues as inimical to it, placing them at a distance from their conscious awareness of sentiment. This is why the subaltern, engagé pretensions of *La Voce* ring hollow on Pennadoro's ears. The literary environment is characterized by discourses that work to maintain a sense of petit bourgeois superiority, as opposed to raising consciousness in the direction of human or universal truth, as the poet does in relating his empirical and imagined world to each other.

Coming from "a young city," Pennadoro does not proceed from a long past that one can *ruminate* upon (as a "grübler" does). The juniper tree of the Karst is imagined as a mute bearer of auguries that his idealized Slav peasant might read, and a congenial metaphor for the matter of literature that realizes his intimate kinship with the poets throughout the ages, from whom he learns the history of the present symbolically. As Slataper writes in one of his letters, "Gli alberi erano i miei amici. Ci dormivo, sai? proprio m'addormentavo fra ramo e ramo. Non invidio quel passato, perché è vivo in me. M'arrampico ancora, molto bene. Tutto il passato è vivo tutto in me [The trees were my friends. I slept there, you know? I used to fall asleep right there between the branches. I do not envy the past, because it is alive in me. I still climb them, very well. All of the past is alive in me and entire]."⁴³ The trees are a metaphor for the ahistorical dimension of Slataper's classicism, rendered into a barbarian *logos* by the muteness of nature. The barbarian poet does not create universal works of literature out of an exhausting ideological duty, but out of "faith in myself and in life's laws." Slataper's invocation of life's laws should also bring to mind the antinomial character of Triestine writing, which is quite literally "against the law," (ἀντί, *antí*, "against, in opposition to," and νόμος, *nómos*, "law") insofar as literary traditions and conventions consolidate themselves

⁴³ Slataper, *Alle tre amiche*, 85.

into the sacred “laws of art” invoked by thinkers like Mazzini, and upheld by the rhetoric of the *patria vates*, to which the avant-garde reacts, and from which Irredentism draws its territorial fantasy. Life’s laws are more universally encompassing than the *nomos* that colonizes Triestine difference, bringing to mind Dante’s claim, “*Nos autem, cui mundus est patria*” while in exile from Florence. Indeed, there is much in Slataper’s writing to suggest that he looked to Dante as a model for what he should do, not because he created a literary language where there was none before, but more importantly, because he understood that one always writes from where one is. Triestine writing mediates the universal in a different way than nationalism does. “Trieste has no cultural traditions” can also be read as a paraphrase of how Slataper imagined the premises of Dante’s treatise in his own call for a Triestine art.

“Scrivere triestinamente”: a poetic ontology

Thus far, we have looked at themes of lying, misrepresentation and auto-deception in Slataper’s novel, as well as in that of Svevo whose Zeno lies with every Tuscan word. Both of them reflected upon the way in which Triestines viewed themselves through the lens of the Italian language and tradition, and responded to this by conceptualizing literary practices that were not rooted in the territorial imperatives of language, but in situated acts of writing. From vantage points at the centre of the Italian tradition, and from the Triestine periphery Slataper conceives of poetry as a task, which is to fuse the fractured elements of his national identity into a “complex, compact and integral” whole, not to segregate one vital aspect of it from another, or to adopt a standpoint that is extrinsic to his sense of life and place. He opposes a cultural and linguistic home to imperial and national homelessness and critiques conventional nationalist discourses finding in neither Austrian imperialism nor Italian nationalism a

sufficient cultural identity. The Triestine artist, according to Slataper, is tormented because of the antinomy between life and literature that he tries to express in a critical art, and he foregoes the universality promised by literary consecration in order to be sincere.

Slataper was especially sensitive to the epistemic and affective impostures of “scriver bene,” and he equates “*letterarietà* [literariness]” with “la falsità del sentimento [falsity of sentiment].”⁴⁴ In a personal letter Slataper confides to a friend that he would receive a compliment on his writing as the equivalent to an insult:

Quando uno mi dice: Come scrivi bene, io arrossisco e sento che un rimorso mi rode dentro, perché vuol dire che io non so ancora pigliar una cosa nella sua realtà, com'è, cioè profonda, divina, di significato proprio; ma ci appiccio delle mie preoccupazioni, esterne ad essa.⁴⁵

[When someone tells me, “How well you write,” I blush and I feel a remorse that eats away inside of me, because it means that I still do not know how to take hold of something in its reality, that is, as something profound, divine, significant in itself; but instead I stick with preoccupations that are external to it.]

Those “external preoccupations” are academic, classicist, formal, and political – all of which pedantically impede the task that he ascribes to his higher vocation as a poet. At the same time, we know that Slataper was critical of the conceptual nexus that joins national identity to works of literature and consolidates the literary tradition as a closed and repetitive system. *Letterarietà* falsifies poetry because it contradicts the changeable, particular and relative way that people experience it, offering instead a univocal perspective on the world informed by historical detachment and theoretical abstraction from objects of consciousness. The compliment of “scriver bene” that he receives from his Florentine friends and peers identifies him as a “letterato, cioè la più antipatica razza umana [literary type, that is, the

⁴⁴ Scipio Slataper, *Epistolario*, ed. Giani Stuparich (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1950) 136.

⁴⁵ Idem. *Alle tre amiche*, 153.

nastiest race of humanity],” who produces “immagini di penna, non di anima [images of the pen, not of the soul].”⁴⁶ Slataper feels stained by the literary, which is why he wears his acquired mastery of Italian eloquence and grammar as a badge of shame. His relation to literature is tormented because he does not want to renounce it, but instead to realize his own life in it surpass it profoundly and intimately, thereby becoming “più *poeta* e meno scrittore [more of a *poet* and less of a writer].”⁴⁷ According to Slataper, the poet works on achieving a synthesis between being and historical extension in writing, and reconciles opposing categories that have attained power through historical and literary traditions.

Finché, anche, io non so divorare tutta la complessità della vita umana, assistendo partecipe delle sue forme apparentemente contraddittorie, commercio e letterature, salotto e città vecchia, carso e lastricato, sloveni e italiani, io non sono poeta.⁴⁸

[Until, also, I know how to devour the complexity of human life, helping to take part of its apparently contradictory forms, commerce and literature, salon and the old quarter, Karst and paved roads, Slovenes and Italians, I am not a poet.]

The contradictions implied by these forms of life in Trieste generate an existential insight and a tragic torment exacerbated by an “apparent” idealism that materially stands between his poetic and literary vocations. The poetic ontology of this passage is also striking, as it implies an idea of writing as a situated act whose historical extension (in literature; in matter) is secondary. Conceived of in this way, poetry signifies writing-as-presence; the appearances of contradictory forms are absorbed into the act of working itself. The poet is not in a liminal state between full presence in life and the temporal postponement of its meaning, but has all of that entire in literary work. This poetic ontology is antiliterary in the sense that

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 154.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 425.

literature and language traditionally impose historical distances between the poet and his or her world. Slataper's critique of literariness implies distinctions that are both material and categorical, and impede the poetic synthesis of opposing principles in the work of writing on its own. However, this operation also subsumes such concepts as the Triestine type he refers to, or the Triestine literature that he calls for, and this is a situation of tragic torment. This concept of poetry is difficult to reconcile with the Triestine art that he calls for in his *Lettere Triestine*, where reality and symbol are opposing forces: "Ma dove la vita è uno strazio così terribile di forze opposte e aneliti fiaccantisi e crudele lotte e abbandoni? [But where else is life such a tormented struggle of opposing forces and exhausting yearnings and cruel wars and desertions]." ⁴⁹ Slataper must instead frame Trieste as a site for the universal, and in several personal letters, he describes it as a place where these apparently contradictory elements inhere in forms of life. Slataper's poetic ontology involves a kind of equilibrium between the spatial and scalar hierarchies of the universal and the particular:

Io non posso dimenticare queste cose essenziali della mia natura: prima di tutto sono *uomo*. Poi sono *poeta* (e non letterato). Poi sono *triestino* (cioè senza una tradizione letteraria, ma devo fare tutto da me, e sopra un materiale storico ed etnico molto più intenso che per lo più). Bisogna che io sappia fondere queste tre cose. Bisogna che io mi equilibri su esse, senza rinunciare a nessuna, perché se no la mia vita sarebbe manchevole e guasta. Il corso del mio sviluppo è appunto questo sempre maggiore allargarsi. ⁵⁰

[I can't forget these essential things of my nature: above all I am a man. After that I am a poet (and not a man of letters). After that I am a Triestine (that is, without a literary tradition, but I must make all of it out of myself, and above a historic and ethnic material that is all the more intense for it). I need to know how to amalgamate these three things. I need to find equilibrium among them,

⁴⁹ Scipio Slataper, *Lettere triestine: col seguito di altri scritti vociani di polemica su Trieste* (Trieste, Edizioni Dedolibri, 1988) 37; Scipio Slataper "La vita dello spirito" *La Voce*, 25 March 1909.

⁵⁰ Idem. *Alle tre amiche*, 419.

without renouncing one or the other, because if not my life will be wasted. The course of my development is indeed always this greater self-expansion.]

Slataper begins this passage with humanity as the universal, macrocosmic foundation from which he departs toward more specific, microcosmic criteria. Being human precedes the vocation of the poet and the geo-historical context of Trieste, and to Slataper, it “means living human complexity (in history and in the people, in friends and in adversaries) organically, in such a way as to *express* it, and to *work* for men.” Poetry is the literary “expression” that flows from human life, and it is also an active “work” of consciousness that is not reducible to the literary tradition, or to the material of history. The distinction that he draws between *letterato* and *poeta* is largely a function of this poetic ontology, and it also, paradoxically mediates his relationship to past writers. Slataper claims that he has no tradition (also “Trieste non ha tradizioni di cultura”), yet he admired and wrote often about Dante because he embodied the *ethos* of presence described above; not because he was a great Italian poet, but because he made a literary tradition *ab ovo*; not because he created a literary language where there was none before, but because he understood that one writes from where one is; not because he was a father, but because he was a friend.

In another letter, Slataper conceives of his poetic ontology in more particular terms, as an active flow that mingles apparently contradictory elements in the metaphor of a bloodstream.

Tu sai che io sono slavo-tedesco-italiano. Sta a sentire. Del sangue slavo ho in me nostalgie strane, un desiderio di nuovo, di foreste abbandonate; una sentimentalità bisogna di carezze, di compiacimenti; un sognare infinito e senza confini. Del sangue tedesco ho l'ostinazione mulesca, la voglia e il tono dittatoriale, la sicurezza dei miei piani, la noia del dover accettare discussione, un desiderio di dominazione, di forza. Questi elementi son fusi nel sangue italiano, che cerca di armonizzarli, di equilibrarli, di farmi diventar “classico”,

formato endecasillabo invece che metro libero. Così che, in questo senso, la mia vita deve cercar di rendersi cosciente dei vari elementi perché io ne sia padrone.⁵¹

[You know that I am Slavic-German-Italian. To be is to feel. From my Slavic blood I have strange nostalgias, a desire for new, for abandoned forests; a sentimentality in need of caresses, of contentment; a dreaming that is infinite and boundless. From my German blood I have that mule-like stubbornness, the will and the dictatorial tone, security in my plans, the boredom of having to accept discussion, a desire for domination, for power. These elements are fused in my Italian blood, which seeks to harmonize them, to balance them, to make me become “classical”, in hendecasyllabic format instead of free verse. So that, in this sense, my life has to try to make itself aware of these various elements for I must master them.]

In the above passage Slataper bases his tripartite, hyphenated identity in intuitions that preclude rational expression. The image of three bloodstreams, mingling in his predominantly “Italian” soul portrays a tripartite, compound structuring of identity that make up a whole human being: an intuitive, emotional, lyrical aspect deriving from his Slavic heritage; a rational, philosophical and vitalistic aspect derived from his German language education.⁵² The fusing of these streams takes place in the language of his writing, which is Italian; however, he wants to distance himself from Italian literature, which he associates with the domestication of “free verse” poetic expression by anachronistic “classical,” formality and the categorical demands of a language subservient to a literary tradition. The task of the Triestine poet, according to Slataper is to speak about his reality and to express an authentic way of living, while remaining aware of his plural nationality, but this task is inimical to the paradigm of nationality in his time. Writing is the only conceptual space where all three streams of Slataper’s identity can be fully realized.

⁵¹ Slataper, *Alle tre amiche*, 421.

⁵² Slataper and Svevo were both influenced by a number of German thinkers whose works they had read in the original language, and it can be argued that they reflect the vitalism, voluntarism, irrationalism of these philosophers, poets and playwrights, as well as the more pessimistic aspects of German Romanticism.

The antiliterary dimension of Slataper's writing implies a way of writing rather than a concrete manifestation of it; an idea of literary work that produces the matter of literary tradition as a side effect of poetic presence. Gilbert Bosetti uses another term, "*scrivere triestinamente*," to describe Slataper's poetic ontology, how it relates to his sense of being Triestine, and how it relates to questions of literary language:

Per quanto riguarda Slataper, possiamo mettere in relazione due fattori. La sua città e il suo Carso erano doppiamente periferici, ai confini di un Impero di legge scritta tedesca e di nazioni diverse e nello stesso tempo ai confini della penisola italiana, ossia all'estremo limite di un territorio linguistico. Slataper è un austro-triestino e scrivere triestinamente in un certo modo è l'equivalente stilistico del suo fingersi (nel senso leopardiano e non nel senso del preteso inganno confessato nella palinodia iniziale), del suo immaginarsi carsico (lo è), croato (lo parla) o moravo (lo è simbolicamente nel suo sogno di una Mitteleuropa federata in regioni in cui il triestino sarebbe stato promosso allo stesso livello per esempio del ceco). Certo che non scrive addirittura in triestino; ma nemmeno Kafka scriveva in ceco, scriveva praghianamente in tedesco. Scrivere triestinamente significa, mediante il dialetto, comunicare con le altre culture del porto franco.⁵³

[Regarding Slataper, we can place two factors in relation to each other: His city and his Karst were doubly peripheral, at the borders of an Empire with its laws written in German and of different nations, while also at the borders of the Italian peninsula, which is the extreme limit of a linguistic territory. Slataper is an Austro-Triestine and writing *Triestinely*, in a certain way, is the equivalent of his stylistic pretence (in the sense of Leopardi and not in the sense of the alleged deception, confessed in the preliminary recantation), imagining himself to be Karstic (he is), Croatian (he speaks it) and Moravian (which he is symbolically, in his dream of a federated Mitteleuropa of regions, where the Triestine would be promoted to the same level as, for example, the Czech). Of course he doesn't really write in Triestine; but not even Kafka wrote in Czech; he wrote *Praguerly* in German. Writing *Triestinely* signifies communicating with the other cultures of the Free Port, through the intermediary of the dialect.]

⁵³ Gilbert Bosetti. "Identità e dialetto ne *Il mio Carso*" *Scipio Slataper: L'inquietudine dei moderni*, ed. Elvio Guagnini (Trieste : Edizioni ricerche, 1997) 38-39.

Bosetti poetically articulates the ontological parameters of Slataper's writing as a mediating activity, displacing the noun-adjective syntax of "materiale storico ed etnico" and replacing it with the verb-adverb syntax of action and ways of life. Slataper's situated act of writing enters into the sphere of rhetoric with the historic material of "Triestine writing," is as misleading as "Triestine literature." Since the negation of *letterarietà* is the point of departure for Slataper's work, so the "doppia anima" of Slataper has a corollary in a way of writing as opposed to any particular literary language. Bosetti also identifies Slataper as writing *dialectically* as opposed to writing *in dialect* – writing *Triestinely* as opposed to writing in *Triestino*.

According to Bosetti, this historical consciousness is intrinsically related to the opening of *Il mio Carso*. Pennadoro tries to fuse together the social divisions that conflicting exigencies of nationalist cultural politics engender. The three "Vorrei dirvi" with which he begins *Il mio Carso* arise from what Ronald Niezen describes as a "sense of malaise that results from the *rejection* of cherished identities (they become cherished largely through such rejection)", which Slataper felt as the demand of Italian nationalism to renounce cultural plurality, and "from efforts to impose ideas, values and culture upon those who seem to be lacking in the essential virtues of "civilization."⁵⁴ The alignment with Leopardi's poetics, which Bosetti associates with Slataper's pessimism, suggests that the professed repudiation of these cherished identities should not be taken as descriptive but as evocative. The cultural identities that the narrator disavows are antithetical to his description of national identity, and "vorrei dirvi" draws attention to territorial imperative that the prohibition of plurality implies. "Scrivere triestinamente" mediates these components of plural identity evocatively and hence

⁵⁴ Ronald Niezen, *A World Beyond Difference: Cultural Identity in the Age of Globalization* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) 39-40.

“sopra un materiale storico ed etnico,” which also transcends the materiality of the word and the territorial imperative of the language. Writing the first self-consciously Triestine novel involves working against the grain of the Italian literary tradition in the sense described above, as historical and cultural matter. *Il mio Carso*, however, is not characterized by the way in which the author depicts his protagonist as constituting an autonomous Triestine psyche, but in how he demonstrates the incapacity of the Triestine artist to aspire towards universalism or totality. *Scrivere triestinamente* expresses the desire for unity and integrity of the self and evokes the moment of writing as the temporal space where that self is constituted.

Antiliterature as a dilettante art

As Slataper famously observed in 1909, there was no cultural or literary tradition in Trieste that was both local and paradigmatic, which would have especially been the case when Svevo was writing in the 1890s, and then after his twenty-year hiatus from literature. As Slataper had convincingly argued in his *Lettere triestine*, the idea of an autonomous or a national Triestine literary culture was not unthinkable, but the general practice of Italian-speaking residents in the cosmopolitan Austrian port was to import history, culture and literature from elsewhere – preferably from Italy – as they would any other commodity. Trieste, which did not have a representative literary culture of its own, was a marketplace for such commodities if nothing else. Ettore Schmitz, who wrote clandestinely under the pseudonym Italo Svevo while employed in various commercial enterprises, was sensitive to this cultural economy. In the twenty years that stood between his disappointment after the self-publication of his first two novels and the prospect of writing a new one he would have had ample time to reflect upon his own cultural capital as a Triestine writer. Taking into

consideration his non-literary profession, one could also conjecture that he regarded his situation in terms that would be understood at the *Tergesteo* (the Triestine stock market).

Svevo's difficult rapport with Italian publishers who rejected him and the indifference of the public left him so disillusioned with his literary ambitions that he declared in his diary, "Io, a quest'ora e definitivamente ho eliminato della mia vita quella ridicola e dannosa cosa che si chiama letteratura [I have, now and definitively, eliminated from my life that ridiculous and damning thing that is called literature]." ⁵⁵ In spite of his disappointment he did not give up writing altogether. What he cast aside was the recognition of a reading public. Reflecting upon the years between his renunciation of literature and his third novel, Svevo writes in a letter to Ferdinando Pasini, "Resto fermo nella mia idea acquisita con lunga, dolorosa meditazione che scrivere a questo mondo bisogna ma che pubblicare non occorre [I remain convinced of my idea, acquired after long and painful reflection, that you have to write in this world but it is not necessary to publish]." When Svevo set to writing again in 1919 he approached his third novel with a mature, serene perspective upon his youthful failures in art, with cunning gleaned from his successful navigation of the business world, and with a seasoned appreciation for his own particular brand of dilettantism.

In 1884 Svevo had written an article in defence of dilettantism in the Triestine journal *L'Indipendente*, and he revisits the theme in an essay entitled "Del sentimento in arte," shortly before writing his third novel. ⁵⁶ In the earlier article, "Il dilettantismo," Svevo took issue with the consensus of literary critics who condemn non-professionals and amateurs in the arts – those who write "Morte ai dilettanti" in the pages of literary journals – and who describe

⁵⁵ Italo Svevo, *Racconti-Saggi Pagine sparse*, ed. Bruno Maier (Milano : Dall'Oglio, 1968) 818.

⁵⁶ Italo Svevo. "Il dilettantismo" *Racconti, Saggi, Pagine sparse* (Milano: Dall'Oglio, 1968) 592-595. First published in *L'indipendente* - Trieste 11 novembre 1884.

dilettantism using the metaphor of an “epidemia coleroso generale [general cholera epidemic].” Out of this image Svevo developed some of the predominant themes and motifs that crop up in his later narrative work:

Visto il grande numero di dilettanti penso che prima di lanciare l’anatema sarebbe indicato di esaminare le cause che producono tanti ammalati moralmente, perché l’individuo colpito da una malattia non prova altro che l’esistenza di un organismo debole; mille o più individui, colpiti dalla medesima malattia, fanno pensare ad una causa unica, esterna, che influisca su molti organismi nel medesimo senso.⁵⁷

[Given the large number of dilettantes I think that before launching into an anathema it would be instructive to examine the causes that produce so many of these morally sick people, because the individual suffering from a disease does not prove anything but the existence of a weak body; a thousand or more individuals, affected by the same disease, suggests a single, external cause, since it influences so many organisms in the same way.]

In trying to furnish a diagnosis for this “sickness,” Svevo develops the hypothesis about modernity that he would write down more succinctly elsewhere in one of his notebooks: “La vita è una malattia della materia [Life is a disease of matter].”⁵⁸ The exponential growth of print and of cultural production not only multiplies the actors in art, while diminishing the time that they may consecrate to them (think of Schmitz writing these pages from his desk at the Banca Union), but “i uomini di genio [...] si perdono nella folla [the men of genius [...] get lost in the crowd].” Whatever this epidemic of material is — physical matter, but also subject matter, concepts, disciplines, and their transmissible material vehicles, books — its proliferation makes it more difficult to discern not only the masterpieces among the increasing matter of cultural production, but “la tendenza al dilettantismo, cioè la passione per molte materie [the tendency for dilettantism, that is, the passion for many materials,” that is shared

⁵⁷ Ibid. 592.

⁵⁸ Italo Svevo. *Racconti, Saggi, Pagine sparse* (Milano Dall’Oglio, 1968) 842. The aphorism appears in a collection of short writings that are gathered under the title of “Nietzsche.”

by such “uomini celebri [celebrated men]” as Goethe, Machiavelli and Cellini and Buonarroti. What all of these historical personalities have in common is that they are polymaths, or what one might also refer to with the term “Renaissance men” embodying humanist values of self-development, an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and a eudaemonian “godimento dell’arte [artistic enjoyment]” that goes beyond one’s field of expertise. Dilettantism is found in such *homo universalis* as Goethe not only by virtue of his attention to fields outside of literature, but because the impulse that inspires his dilettantism is common to humanity, not as a full blown disease, but as a “germ” in the ambivalent sense with Socrates invested the mythical, poisonous/curative *pharmakon* of writing.

Ma nell’organismo umano in generale c’è già il germe della malattia. È un germe il quale sorvegliato razionalmente produce una virtù; occorrono certe condizioni speciali acciocché produca la malattia. Alla nostra mente, se è sana, non basta lo sviluppo che dà una materia; essa richiede l’esercizio e non del tutto superficiale di più materie.⁵⁹

[But in the human body in general there is already the germ of the disease. It is a germ of which when rationally overseen produces a virtue, though certain special conditions are needed in order to produce disease. To our mind, if it is healthy, the development that one material gives is not enough; it requires the exercise and not entirely superficial, of many materials.]

It is therefore, as Svevo argues, excusable that “nostro agente di commercio o di banca” pursue the same aesthetic and epistemic impulses as Goethe. For the literary critic, whom Svevo associates with a pedantic adhesion to the “certain special conditions” of aesthetic judgment, the dilettante is an aberration. For those working at the same bank as Svevo, his passion for literature was eccentric — quite literally ex-centric — especially in Trieste. This brings to mind an observation expressed only a decade before Svevo’s article by the French voyager Charles Yriarte, “Il me semble qu’un homme oisif serait une monstruosité

⁵⁹ Svevo, “Il dilettantismo” 593.

à Trieste, et l'oisiveté intelligente, le dilettantisme occupé seraient une anomalie.”⁶⁰ Svevo would not feel the indifference or the rancour of literary critics until much later, but in his article he seems prescient in writing, “La critica negativa, tanto patente oggidi e che crede di scoraggiare gl'*inetti*, incoraggia ambizioni sperticate, nutre ogni specie di illusioni [Negative criticism, too often the official policy nowadays, believes that it is discouraging the *inept*, whereas it encourages exaggerated ambitions and nourishes all kinds of illusions].”⁶¹ The hubris of the “letterato” was precisely the “malattia della materia” that Svevo was referring to, in that they exaggerated their “health,” and in their short-sightedness showed their illusion. “Scriver male,” which could just as easily be translated as “sick writing” is the property of the *inetto*, much as the poetic potentiality of the barbarian’s silence.

Giorgio Voghera identified Svevo’s eccentricity when he claimed that Svevo was a great writer who wrote badly. Dilettantism, however, was to become a commonplace that followed Svevo’s works ever since Domenico Oliva described *Una vita* as a novel that showed “un valore tecnico assai limitato [limited technical skill].” The stigma of a negative judgment upon Svevo’s language haunted the silence produced by the publication of his first two novels, and critics would later associate his linguistic deficiency with his primary occupation as a businessman. Svevo revisited the theme of dilettantism and reflected upon his disillusionment with literary criticism in “Del sentimento in arte.” It is an essay about the art of criticism and also about critical art, vindicating “*scriver male*” against the imperiousness of the literary tradition, and setting out what might be seen as an antiliterary program for his own future

⁶⁰ Yriarte, *Les bords de l'Adriatique et le Monténégro* 80-81. “It seems to me that an idle man would be a monstrosity in Trieste, and intelligent idleness, or engaged dilettantism would be an anomaly”.

⁶¹ Svevo, “Il dilettantismo” 595. My emphasis.

work. He begins with a meditation on ignorance,⁶² and under the self-disparaging pretext of trying to describe his own folly, he finds that the ignorance of the dilettante in artistic production and criticism is more genial to him than the two other kinds he attributes to the idiot (*l'ignorante assoluto*) and to the pedant (*il dotto, il pedante*), since dilettantism lends itself to a philosophical valorization of sentiment in art:

Il dilettante. Rappresenta una scienza minore, superficiale: una riflessione non matura. [...] Dilettante vorrebbe significare che fa le cose per diletto. [...] Autore di giudizi errati è il dilettante che avvicina l'arte con scopi d'ambizione più o meno confessi. [...] Dilettante è veramente la persona colta che per sua condizione più spesso avvicina l'arte e che non aspira neppure al titolo di amatore e che manca completamente di scopi egoisti.⁶³

[The dilettante. Represents a minor science, superficial: not mature reflection. [...] "Dilettante" means one who does things for delight. [...] The dilettante who approaches art for purposes of a more or less confessed ambition is the author of a miscalculation. [...] A dilettante is a truly cultured person who often approaches art for his condition, and who does not even aspire to title of amateur, which completely lacks in selfish purposes.]

The dilettante is antiliterary by virtue of rejecting the purposeful and political activity of the *letterato*, who sets himself up as a judge of cultural production, and Svevo compares his three forms of ignorance to ideological polemics: "Esistono dei partiti estremi in arte come in politica fra questi uno che somiglia molto all'anarchico [There are extreme parties in art as there are in politics and among them one strongly resembles the anarchist]." The dilettante,

⁶² Ibid. 663. "Per sua natura stessa e per il suo modo di manifestarsi sull'individuo l'ignoranza in arte differisce tanto da quella in scienza che si esita a designarla col medesimo vocabolo. [...] Premesso questo per provare che la mia ignoranza, quella di cui voglio parlare per il momento, è molto complessa e che non presenta l'aspetto sciocco della cosa fatta di un pezzo, aggiungerò che non soltanto per questo ha maggior diritto di venir studiata che non la sua sorella in scienza ma anche perché è più importante. [By its very nature, and for its way of manifesting itself in the individual, ignorance in art differs so much from that in science that one hesitates to designate it with the same word. [...] Having said this to prove that my ignorance, of which I want to speak for the moment, is very complex and that it does not present its silly aspect as though it were made of one piece, I should add that not only for this that it has as much right to be studied as its sister in science, but also because it is more important]."

⁶³ Svevo, "Del sentimento in arte" 667.

like the anarchist, liberates what is original about art from beneath the weight of tradition because his interest is instinctive and not rational. The critical art of the dilettante is a minor science in the sense that its epistemological scope is personal and not institutional; it is superficial in the sense that it does not try to shore up its historical value with the accumulated authority of the tradition; it is conceptually immature in the sense that it is characterized by process and incompleteness. The dilettante, whose motivations are personal, contemplates existing art in order to relate it to his own life, and his critical reflection generates a historical understanding distinct from that of the literary critic, who approaches art with a baseless reverence for antiquity, narrow-minded rationality and a sense of cultural superiority, not only over the idiot and the dilettante, but also over the artist and the work of art itself.

Le arti non hanno in comune che un vago sentimento dell'idea; non a pena questo sentimento si concreta diverge e quando il pittore ha il pennello in mano è pittore e null'altro, mentre finché perdurava la pura tendenza a ideare il suo stato era identico a quello d'ogni altro artista. Dovrebbe riapparire quest'analogia nell'effetto dell'opera artistica sulle persone che rimangono passive spettatrici ma non per chi vuol giudicare di arte, perché allora ha da fare con i particolari suoi più concreti. Ma è inutile fare distinzioni fra giudicare e sentire a proposito specialmente del letterato, è lui che più spesso giudica di cose che non sa. Non si accontenterebbe di sentire. Chi ne viene preso può essere in chiaro sul proprio sentimento ma questo sentimento diverrebbe un giudizio se volesse comunicarlo. Il sentimento è per sua natura muto. Goethe vedendo per la prima volta in sua vita il mare scrisse: "Il mare è indescrivibile!" e pochi letterati sarebbero capaci di altrettanto. Sentire e tacere? Ma al letterato la mancanza di parola sembra proprio degli esseri inferiori. Il letterato in arte è simile agli scrivani nei villaggi; tutti pensano, tutti fanno, lui scrive. È lui che dà alle arti l'aspetto di guerre guerreggiate. [...] Il letterato non ha sempre né tempo né voglia di addentrarsi nei misteri dell'arte di cui si fa il paladino e rimane buono o cattivo letterato ma molto spesso cattivo critico.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Ibid. 667-668.

[The arts have in common no more than a vague feeling of the idea; just as soon as this feeling is realized it deviates and when the painter has a brush in his hand he is a painter and nothing else, although this lasts up until the pure tendency to conceive of their status as identical to that of any other artist. This analogy should reappear in the effect of the artistic work on people who remain passive spectators, but not for those who want to judge art because then it has to do with its more concrete details. But it is useless to make distinctions between judging and feeling, especially where the man of letters is concerned, since he is most often the one who judges things he does not know. He is not content to simply feel. Whoever is taken could have a clear sense of his own feeling, but this feeling would become a judgment if he wanted to communicate it. Sentiment is mute by its very nature. Goethe, seeing the sea for the first time in his life, wrote: "The sea is indescribable!" And few men of letters would be able to follow suit. Feel and be silent? But for the man of letters the lack of words seems proper only to inferior beings. The man of letters in art is similar to the scribes in the villages; everyone thinks, they all do, he writes. It is he who gives the appearance of wars to combat arts. [...] The man of letters does not always have the time or the inclination to delve into the mysteries of art, for which he poses as a paladin and he remains a good or bad man of letters but very often a bad critic.]

Svevo's characterization of the *letterato* resembles the type of intellectual that Slataper associates with institutionalized tradition, inimical to the critical and historical perspective of the *poeta*. He is also critical of the positivism he finds in decadent (D'Annunzio), classicist (Carducci), and naturalist (Verga) models of writing valorized by the literary institutions of his time. Svevo distinguishes between judging and feeling (*sentimento*) when art is subjected to the scrutiny of the intellectual, and sets up a number of polemical oppositions: muteness and speech, nature and artifice, originality and predication, truth and certainty. Goethe, who exemplifies the historical perspective of the universal poet for Svevo, is portrayed realizing that the sentiment evoked by nature is accompanied by a prohibition to speak. The work of art is an expression of this mute sentiment, and the analogy of a unity between the painter and the act of painting at the moment when he holds a paintbrush describes the concept of writing that

Svevo articulates in his diaries. In the entry wherein he ostensibly renounces literature, he writes of “non saper pensare che con la penna alla mano [not knowing how to think without a pen in hand]”, and of the “grezzo e rigido strumento, la penna [rough and rigid instrument, the pen]” which aids him “ad arrivare al fondo tanto complesso del mio essere [to get to the very complex bottom of my being].” Consistent with the description of the dilettante, Svevo writes in the same entry, “Io voglio soltanto attraverso a queste pagine arrivare a capirmi meglio [I want only, through these pages, to understand myself better].” This is also precisely what Zeno hopes to achieve by writing out his memoirs. Consonant with the notion of writing as a hygienic practice that sustains life but does not culminate in an ideal state of health, there is much to suggest that Svevo understood writing as such a practice, expressing as much in a diary entry written shortly after the self-publication of his second, unsuccessful novel.

Io credo, sinceramente credo, che non c'è miglior via per arrivare a scrivere sul serio che di scribacchiare giornalmente. Si deve tentar di portare a galla dall'imo del proprio essere, ogni giorno un suono, un accento, un residuo fossile o vegetale di qualche cosa che non sia il o non sia puro pensiero, che sia o non sia sentimento, ma bizzarria, rimpianto, un dolore, qualche cosa di sincero, anatomizzato, e tutto e non di più. Altrimenti facilmente si cade, – il giorno in cui si crede d'esser autorizzati di prender la penna – in luoghi comuni o si travia quel luogo proprio che non fu a sufficienza disaminato. Insomma, fuori della penna non c'è salvezza.⁶⁵

[I believe, truly believe, that there is no better way to get to write seriously than by scribbling daily. One should attempt to bring to light, from the bottom of one's own being, every day a sound, an accent, a fossil or vegetal remnant of anything that is or is not the pure thought, that is or is not feeling, but bizarreness, regret, pain, something sincere, anatomized, is everything and no more. Otherwise one falls easily, – the day when one believes they are authorized to take up the pen – into commonplaces, or one is led astray from one's proper place that was not sufficiently examined. In short, there is no salvation outside of the pen.]

⁶⁵ Italo Svevo. *Racconti, Saggi, Pagine sparse* (Milano: Dall'Oglio, 1968) 816. Diary entry dated 2-10-1899.

Written more than two decades before he began writing about Zeno, this passage illustrates a view of literary work as having value in itself. Writing is an expression of life, and at the same time removed from it, but writing is an inner remove (*enstasis*) whereas literature is removed by historical distance (*dis-stasis*), and Svevo's conscious act of observing himself writing is transposed to that of Zeno, where the re-enactment of the past and the construction of a narrative present flow together. In the case of Zeno's writing, the continuous dialectic between re-enactment and construction, between confession and imposture, between memoir and novel seems to be not only the vital principle of Zeno's self-constitution, but unravels as a guiding thread uniting Svevo's essays, his letters, his diaries, unfinished works and fragments. The salvation of "la penna," which is a metonym for the act of writing, is not fulfilled after the act is completed but while it endures, and the paradox of "serious literature" is that "scribbling daily" is not compelled by the potency (*dunamis*) of an external literary hegemony, nor by its own latent power, but by an attentive attitude towards presence that requires a silencing of the tradition and its language.⁶⁶ For Svevo, writing is an activity, and its being-at-work-ness (*energeia*) collapses the teleological redemption narrative of the Italian literary tradition. When we recall how Dante uses the word "salute" to express what Svevo calls "salvezza" in the above passage, and how in *La coscienza di Zeno* "salute" refers to health, we can see how Zeno, by the end of the novel, regards writing as a therapy that is more hygienic than curative.

⁶⁶ This attentiveness that produces Svevo's living *loquela* can also be found at the heart of Joyce's *Epiphanies* and in the "little things" of Peter Altenberg. It is implicit in the mystical silence that concludes Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and in the poetic "language of mute things" of Hofmannsthal's *Lord Chandos*, following the *Sprachkrise* [language crisis] described in a fictional letter to Francis Bacon. It is also discernible in Slataper, who writes at the end of his *Lettere triestine*, "you must silence the cawing of the crows to let the nightingale sing," lamenting his role as a journalist and literary critic after issuing his call for a Triestine art.

Svevo aligns his intuitions about artistic work with the critical perspective of the dilettante, behind which, the work of the universal artist conceals itself. It is through his dilettantism that Svevo bypasses the mediation of the professional class of literary producers and critics to commune with Goethe, whereas the idealization of the *writer-persona* out of *the person who writes* describes the sickness of the *letterato*. When Bazlen wrote about Svevo as “un genio e nient’altro [a genius and nothing more]” and Voghera described him as a great writer who wrote badly, both were referring to the perception of Svevo as a dilettante, but also to Svevo’s non-traditional universality. Antiliterature is a dilettante art, but it always carries with it the potential to wrest the conferring power of the universal away from institutions. In this sense, the antiliterary extends not only into our time, but also back into the time of Dante, who chose to dignify the vernacular over and against the ecumenical and academic universalism of Latin. The personal scope of writing as a redemptive act is also an aspect of Dante’s pilgrimage, since he depicts his private spiritual redemption in the allegory of a journey through the underworld, purgatory and paradise. That is the literary landscape we will explore in the next chapter, when we look at Svevo’s take on the Dantean project and how he leads it to failure. However, if I am reading Svevo in the twenty-first century, and far from where he wrote, it is obvious that his works have not failed entirely as literature...

CHAPTER 5

ZENO'S CONSCIENCE AND COSINI'S NEBULA: A PSYCHIC ADVENTURE OR A DIVINE COMEDY?

As a foundational work of the Triestine literary tradition, and as a work of world literature, *La coscienza di Zeno* brings to mind the function of Dante's *Divina Commedia* as the preeminent work of the Italian literary tradition. That is, if one considers Svevo's famous novel as a foundational work.... tradition. Trieste occupies an eccentric position in relation to the historical understanding that establishes Florence as the heart of the literary tradition, and many of the Italians living in Trieste draw upon the poetic authority of Dante and of Svevo in local practices of cultural production and history making.¹ Svevo helped to bring a sense of *triestinità* to the level of cognition in a way that was comparable with how Dante inscribed the Tuscan idiom as a language to unite a future Italy. Italy did not exist as a national-political entity in Dante's time, but the city-state of Florence did, and by writing poetry in a literary language that employed the Tuscan vernacular, Dante was able to conceive of a spiritual, linguistic and territorial idea to unify the scattered kingdoms. Yet Svevo's *Zeno* rather

¹ Pamela Ballinger, who writes about her experience interviewing people displaced by the Istrian diaspora, observes the impact of literature in identity and history making, and identifies Dante and Svevo as two touchstones for groups of people whom she identifies as "esuli" (exiles) and "rimasti" (those who remained). "At various points in this book, I draw on literary figures such as Svevo in order to highlight, rather than downplay, the textuality of my own discussion and that of my informants (particularly in part I). Whereas this textuality reflects the specificity of the Julian March case, literary products more generally retain wide currency in Italian culture and society even in an era dominated by visual communication. Many of the Italians I knew in both Trieste and Istria thought of the Romans and Dante, as well as homegrown figures like Svevo, as their ancestors. Informants often cited the poetic authority of these figures in order to illustrate their point. | In his role as progenitor of the standardized Italian language (the Tuscan dialect) and thus as national poet, for example, Dante stands as the embodiment of that Italian high culture or civilization (*civiltà*) often invoked by esuli and rimasti alike as distinguishing them from "Balkanic" peoples. Dante also refers to Istria in *Inferno*, describing Pola as the natural terminus of Italy. Many esuli take this as irrefutable proof of their historical right to Istria (for details consult Bogneri's *Il culto di Dante a Pola nell'ultimo secolo*). The work of literary figures such as Dante or Svevo not only provides further poetic "evidence" for certain claims made by the esuli or rimasti, however, but also actively shapes the rhetorics of purity and hybridity which inform the history-making practices of these two groups." Pamela Ballinger. *History in Exile: Memory and Identity at the Borders of the Balkans*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) 27-28.

portrays the impossible cohesion of Triestine literature and incarnates a consciousness of a new form of globalness that refuses to coalesce into a unity. Unlike Dante's literary language, that of Svevo ("*scrittura sveviana*" also known as "*scriver male*") does not become universal because it resists the regularity and fixity of grammar, but it shows the workings of the universal in its *antiletterarietà*. In terms of literary patrimony, Svevo and Dante are both credited with founding models of identity that exceeded them, and even if the self-awareness that Zeno achieves at the end of the novel does not generate the same historical universality as that of *La Divina Commedia*, *La coscienza di Zeno* is still an auspicious title for what the novel accomplishes.

As Svevo writes of his protagonist Zeno, "Passa continuamente dai propositi più eroici alle disfatte più sorprendenti [He passes continuously from the most heroic intentions to the most surprising undoings]." ² Zeno's quest for health conveys a desire for personal integrity and spiritual universality, but his diacritical conscience undermines the presuppositions of such a totality at every turn. Psychoanalysis – which takes the form of the protagonist-narrator's act of writing – oscillates between referential acts of remembering and compositional acts of self-creation, but this does not produce the desired effect, which is to attain a "healthy" sense of personal integrity. Exiled from this perfect state and unable to return, the Svevian protagonist diagnoses his condition of alienation as "sickness," professes his ineptitude and curtails any possibility of productive action. This "sick" man is nevertheless extremely active – mentally active – though he does not benefit from his incessant activity in the way he wants. One side effect of this ineptitude is that he cannot partake in the collective self-deception with which hegemonic systems of thought sustain their

² Italo Svevo, "Profilo autobiografico" 809.

optimistic visions of progress. From the estranged perspective of his sick *coscienza*, this *inetto* observes with great clarity the webs of mystification, imposture, censure and repression that the “healthy” world ignores.

The dynamic interplay between the poles of health and sickness, which undermines Zeno’s attempts to see his life as a whole in his memoirs, also plays out in the vacillation between the author’s attempts at public literary legitimacy and relevance (“scrivere sul serio [writing seriously]”) and his impulse to write for himself, *per diletto* (“scribacchiare giornalmente [daily scribbling]”). Satire is the lubricant in the oscillating machinery of the novel, where the antagonistic strivings that torment and animate Zeno’s conscience express the inner tensions of Triestine art. The drama of a desire for totality and estrangement from it is enacted in the writing practices of the author, and mirrored in those of his protagonist Zeno, who tries to either exorcise his imaginary ailments completely, or to prove them beyond any doubt. The latter is what happens when a physician diagnoses Zeno’s diabetes following a urine analysis, putting an end to the reign of fake illnesses by confirming that he has a real one. The chemical analysis expresses a tautological truth and operates on a literal-historical level, where “tutto era verità. [...] Quand’esso arriva essa diceva sempre la stessa parola. Nella psico-analisi non si ripetono mai né le stesse immagini né le stesse parole [“all was truth. [...] When it arrived it always said the same word. In psychoanalysis there is never repetition, neither of the same images nor of the same words”]” (1062 [415]). Zeno articulates the allegorical structure of *La coscienza* in terms of a comparative deontology, and thusly renames the psychoanalytic memoir in terms that resonate with those of Dante’s pilgrimage:

Chiamiamola l’avventura psichica. Proprio così: quando s’inizia una simile analisi è come se ci si recasse in un bosco non sapendo se c’imatteremo in un

brigante o in un amico. E non lo si sa neppure quando l'avventura è passata. In questo la psico-analisi ricorda lo spiritismo. (1062)

[“Let’s call it psychic adventure. That’s right: when you begin such an analysis, it’s as if you were going into a wood, not knowing whether you will encounter an outlaw or a friend. And even when the adventure is over, you still don’t know. In this psychoanalysis recalls spiritualism.”] (416).

Psychoanalysis, as a “psychic adventure,” resembles the allegorical redemption of the Tuscan poet. The image of wandering into a forest brings to mind the incipit of *Commedia*, where the poet finds himself lost in “la selva oscura.” The characters that Dante meets on his pilgrimage are categorized as outlaws or friends depending on their embodiment of Christian virtues or vices, but for Zeno they are often both. Giovanni Malfenti, for example, who comes in the place of Virgil, is a “brigante” and “un amico” who educates Zeno in *furberia* and takes pleasure in swindling his disciple. Guido Speier’s penchant for spiritism and the table where he holds séances in the Malfenti household brings to mind Dante’s conversations with the dead. However, these particular allusions are secondary to the function of the Malfenti family within the allegorical economy of the novel, which is to conduct him towards his future spouse, who stands in for Beatrice. In *La Divina Commedia* and in *La coscienza di Zeno* the trajectory of pilgrimage “verso l’ultimo salute,” intersects with that of courtly romance. By the end of the novel, Zeno claims that he is finished with psychoanalysis, but the writing cure does not resolve his ambivalence in the way that Dante’s allegorical pilgrimage figuratively redeems the poet. While this seems to be a patently tragic situation, *La coscienza di Zeno* is a *comedia* in every sense that Dante gives to the title of his work in his letter to Cangrande, before Boccaccio rechristens it as *divine*.³

³ Bianca Garavelli, “Per leggere la “Commedia,” Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia: Inferno* (Milano: RCS Libri, 1997) 5-17: 17. Garavelli explains how Dante’s *Commedia* came to be retitled with the

Incipit Comedia Italus Svevus

In his famous letter to Cangrande della Scala, Dante declares the title of his work to be “*Incipit Comedia Dantis Alagherii, Florentini natione, non moribus*,” which can be translated as “Here begins the Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Florentine by birth, not by way of life.” In his *Inferno*, which he specifically calls “questa comedia” and “la mia comedia,” the placement and the authorship of his work are important, as is his identity in exile. He chose to call his work a *Comedia*, from the Greek word κωμῳδία (kōmōdía), composed of κῶμη (*komos*, village) and ὕδῃ (*oda*, song) – quite literally, a “village song.”⁴ Dante also gives other reasons for calling his work a comedy: Borrowing the distinction between comedy and tragedy from Horace’s *Ars Poetica* (also see *DVE* II.4), Dante characterizes comedy as a narrative that begins in despair and ends in happiness. Another distinguishing trait of *comedia* is that it is written in the vernacular: in “the language of women” as opposed to the scholarly and clerical languages of Latin and Greek that his male peers had to learn, or in the “low” style according to Horace (*DVE* II.4). The dismal beginning and the exultant culmination of comedy are accomplished in the vernacular language, which is ennobled and dignified by the poem. This is how Dante’s epic poem is a comedy. What makes it divine?

In the final canto the *Commedia*, Dante describes the accomplished work as a “poema sacro | al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra” (*Par.* 25.1-2), having shed the tropological sense of the allegory to reveal the anagogic universality that it conceals. The totality of Dante’s work

adjective “divina” in her introduction to a three-volume edition of *La Divina Commedia*. Boccaccio was the first to use the “divina” in his encomium *Trattello in laude di Dante* (c. 1357-1361), in reference to Dante’s journey into the realms of the afterlife. It was later that commentators and editors referred to the poem as “divine” on the basis of its exceptional linguistic and poetic unity. It was not until 1555 that a Venetian editor, Gabriele Giolitto, printed the poem with the expanded title *La Divina Commedia*.

⁴ This is a rough translation and paraphrase of Dante’s letter to Cangrande, which he wrote in Latin. “Libri titulus est: ‘Incipit Comedia Dantis Alagherii, Florentini natione, non moribus’. Ad cuius notitiam sciendum est, quod comedia dicitur a ‘comos’, ‘villa’, et ‘oda’, quod est cantus, unde comedia quasi ‘villanus cantus’.”

characterizes the *telos* of the literary tradition to which it serves as an exemplar – redemption, universality, legitimacy and wholeness – extending the geographical and historical terrain of an ideal Italy. The lens of historical distance that peers back at Dante, calling him the spiritual father of the Italian nation and the prophet of its unity, raises the Tuscan poet above the limits of his Catholic, medieval worldview, as if he could already see the entire historical unfolding of Italian nation and inscribe its lineaments as auspices for future generations to discern. This providential view is implicit in Boccaccio’s rechristening of Dante’s epic poem as *La Divina Commedia*, and in the sanctification of Dante as a national poet by the Italian literary tradition. The unity of Dante’s oeuvre was also the basis of the “literary expression” that Carducci spoke of, when he responded to Metternich’s dismissal of “Italy” as a “geographical expression.”

The title *Divina Commedia* is not a contradiction in terms, but an effective *coniunctio oppositorum* that describes the unity of Dante’s work and the working of its universality through language, tradition and the worldviews they engender. The work moves from the situated relational and contextual origins of *comedia* (i.e. the “low style,” village song, vernacular language, the personality of Dante, and the *patria* of Florence) to the scalar and spatial extensions of the *divine* (transcendent, universal, complete, spiritually redeemed). The *telos* leading from the personal to the universal is implicit in the *terza rima* metric structure of the poem and its macrostructure of a hundred *cantiche* (cantos) divided into three equal parts, symbolizing the Holy Trinity, and in the allegory of a pilgrimage towards redemption. In constructing a language and a poetic style that gives sense and authority to his vernacular poetry, Dante enlists the linguistic ecumenism of Latin and invokes the ideal universality of his Catholic worldview. Love is the impulse that characterizes his striving and Beatrice appears the idealized object of the poet’s earthly and divine love, directing him out of the *selva*

oscura where he finds himself *nel mezzo cammin della vita* and placing him on *la dritta via* towards redemption. Her earthly language is the Tuscan vernacular of *La vita nuova*, which is corralled into the *dolce stil novo* that Dante and his contemporary Guido Cavalcanti exemplified in poetry. On his pilgrimage he is guided by the ghost of Virgil (“Non omo; omo già fui [Not man, man once I was] (*Inf.* 1.67), whom Dante reveres as a universal author because his works comprised “quella fonte / che spandi di parlar sì largo fiume [that fountain / Which spreads abroad so wide a river of speech]” (*Inf.* 1.79-89). Dante borrows literary capital from Virgil’s pre-eminence and authority among Latin poets by metaphorically and allegorically following in his footsteps (even climbing onto the poet’s back at the end of the *Inferno*) and positioning himself as an heir to the lineage that Virgil represents, from Homer onward to himself (*Inf.* 4.80-102). For as long as people have been aware of an Italian literary tradition, Dante has been held in the high regard that he attributed to Virgil, but that does not mean they share in his historical understanding. Those who have interpreted Dante’s literary language as the logical conclusion of his linguistic treatise seem to forget the ambivalence with which he actually treated the question of a national language to unite the Italian Peninsula.

Many of Svevo’s early critics wrote of his indifference to the Italian tradition, and many contemporary ones focus instead on the characteristics of a Mitteleuropean tradition in his writings. This discussion of Svevo’s writing will examine how he engages with the Italian tradition critically, through an elaborate allegorical structure and a satirical parody of the tradition’s most cherished work, *La Commedia*. *La coscienza di Zeno* presents the reader with allusions to characters and places described in Dante’s allegorical poem in such a way that one can think of the novel as a Menippean satire; it is an *Anti-Inferno*. Whereas, the chemical

analysis of his urine “always says the same thing,” operating on the level of the literal and historical, the constant deferrals and displacements of truth in psychoanalysis correspond to allegory, which (as Dante recalls in his letter to Cangrande) comes from the Greek *alleon*, meaning “other” or “different.” Even without the reference to Dante, Zeno’s psychoanalytic therapy can be read as an allegorical pilgrimage toward an ideal state of health, and the narrator’s imaginary “sick” conscience can be understood as a state of exile from it. Underlying this allegory is the author’s sense of occupying a peripheral position with regards to Italian national identity, language and literary traditions, while at the same time publishing out of a genuine longing to belong to them.

Svevo’s personal contact with James Joyce is significant in the context of the Triestine businessman’s revived literary efforts and his writings about the author of *Ulysses* offer insights into how he might have drawn upon Dante; notably, when he reflects upon Joyce’s use of Homer’s *Odyssey* in the composition of his highly allusive “comic epic poem in prose.”

È una parodia questa? [...] Se ora non è, non fu mai quest’opera nella giovine mente dell’artista una parodia? Forse sì. Oggi però è divenuta una nuova tragedia in cui il filo della parodia si perde. Restano delle aderenze accompagnate da grandi risate: [...] Ogni personaggio di Omero trova qui il suo corrispondente moderno ed ogni episodio è ripresentato in una luce che deride e avvilita la modernità.⁵

[Is this a parody? [...] If it is not one now, was it ever a parody in in this young artist’s mind? Maybe it was. But today it has become a new tragedy in which the thread of the parody is lost. There remain adhesions accompanied by great laughter: [...] Every character in Homer finds here its modern counterpart and each episode is represented in a light that mocks and demeans modernity.]

⁵ Italo Svevo “Scritti su Joyce” in *Racconti, Saggi, Pagine sparse*, 735. In an alternate version of these observations, prepared for another discussion about Joyce, Svevo writes “Fu forse immaginata una parodia dapprima. Oggi è un dramma in sé. La parodia si perde in confronto. Restano delle adesioni accompagnate da risate veramente omeriche [It was perhaps imagined as a parody at first. Today it is a drama in itself. The parody is lost in the comparison. There remain adhesions accompanied by truly Homeric laughter.” (717)

Svevo treated Dante's epic poem in a similar manner to how Joyce chose to parody the universal *urtext* of European literature. The "adhesions" to the Homeric epic in Joyce's satire produce laughter because we recognize the immortal Odysseus in the banal, modern life of Leopold Bloom. However, unlike Joyce, Svevo did not furnish any kind of schema to indicate such a reading,⁶ and his allusions to Dante are only subtle enough to suggest the intention of parody that may have been in Svevo's mind when he began writing *La coscienza di Zeno*. The parody of Dante's oeuvre is also lost in Svevo's novel, which is original in the sense that *Ulysses* is also an original work of modern literature. In this final chapter of our study we will carry out a reading of Svevo that might easily be characterized as "Joycean" though our intention is to underline the ways in which Svevo undertakes the Dantean project of a universal literature in his work. While Zeno's thoughts, reflections, antics and failed resolutions might give us plenty to laugh about when reading the novel, I'd like to tease out a few of the initial Dantean "aderenze [adhesions]" that accompany them on occasion.

Zeno's redemptive strivings are characterized by the secular, modern and bourgeois value system that he places at the center of his moral compass, yet it resonates with Dante's pursuit of Christian spiritual redemption. The trajectory of the pilgrimage intersects with the theme of courtly love, as Beatrice is the one who confers beatitude. "Salute," the Italian word for "health," almost always means "salvation" in Dante's *Commedia*, which leads him "verso l'ultimo salute [toward the ultimate salvation]" (*Par.* 33.27). However, "salute" has a particularly psycho-physiological connotation in Svevo, which informs the interpretative structure of his text. In the comparative deontology mentioned earlier, psychoanalysis serves

⁶ I am referring to the two schema that Joyce produced for his friends Carlo Linati in 1920 and Stuart Gilbert in 1921 in order to help them understand the fundamental structures of *Ulysses* and the specific allusions to characters and episodes in Homer's *Odyssey*.

as a metaphor for allegory. The *Commedia* enacts medieval allegories of courtly love that through the themes of *virtus* (virtue), *venus* (love) and *salus* (valor) have their modern, bourgeois counterparts in the allegory of Svevo's novel. The allegorical structure of the novel also allows us to engage with the questions raised at the beginning of this study and themes that have been introduced throughout. Although this could serve as the basis for another dissertation, I will be limiting my analysis to four scenarios that represent different modalities of how Zeno strives towards health (redemption, universality, the absolute), and manifests the critical "sickness" that undoes his intentions. These four scenarios treat questions raised in our "groundwork" chapter, which looks at the universal paradigms operating in the economy of global literature pertaining to language, canon, cosmopolitics and worldviews.

First, we look at how Svevo salvages the historical and critical underpinnings of Dante's vernacular project from underneath the most paradigmatic and universal work of the Italian literary tradition. We reflect upon how Svevo demystifies its ennobled language by recovering concepts of his literary language as a *loquela*. The idea of writing in a "lingua viva" concurs with Voghera's heretical reading of Svevian *scrittura*. Svevo's literary language resists grammatical fixity, much as the accomplishment of his work is the result of abandoning it, allegorized in the image of Zeno's memoir being taken away from him so that he cannot revise it. In this context, we explore theological connotations of this word, as "interior speech" which resonates with psychoanalysis, before turning to how Svevo's understanding of Triestine writing reflects upon the various ways in which Dante used it. Zeno's addiction to cigarettes also provides us with an image of Dante's unresolved hunt for the fragrant panther of the *vulgare illustre*: a last cigarette that *is* and *is not* the last one, an "*ultima loquela*" that takes the place of an "*optima loquela*," conceived of as a resting point on a hunt for a prey that

always eludes one's more concrete senses. The medieval concept of *homo viator* and Dantean tropes of exile have traditionally served as metaphors for the iconic status of modernism's cosmopolitan exemplars, including Svevo. In this case, we relate it to the "unredeemed" status of Triestine writing, since there is no ideal linguistic territory to which it can be attached. From this analysis, we can surmise that Svevo acknowledges the universal impulse of languages to exceed their grammatical borders, spatially, historically, and even conceptually; such that one can call English, in its present function as the *lingua franca* of global nowhere, and as a continually evolving language based on use, a "Svevian" language.

Second, we look at how he engages with questions of style, canonicity and literary traditions through the allegory of a mock-heroic romance. Zeno's courtship of Giovanni Malfenti's daughters demystifies several providential myths that sustain the Italian tradition by satirizing their embodiments and in themes of courtly love. The idea of the writer, wed to his *patria*, and thereby becoming a national *paterfamilias*, is implicit in the idea of Dante's universality. As a linguistic and literary paradigm, Dante's "literary expression" realises itself in the national tradition and the territorial impulse of national language. Svevo used parody and satire as cognitive instruments to mock the pedantic and sanctimonious attitudes of the Italian *letterati* who would disdain his works. By looking upon himself through the eyes of the Italian literary tradition, he satirizes the paradigm of "health" implied by those who claim to belong to it. By staging his resentful acquiescence to the inferiority of Triestine culture as "sickness," he infuses the paradigm with a comical relativism that levels the hierarchies of language use that confer legitimacy upon literary work. The results of Zeno's romance are ambivalent redemptions, atopias of incertitude, spaces of transit, temporary stopovers and uninhabitable places. What this means for the work of Svevo is that it does not do what he

intends for it, which is to insert itself into the Italian tradition or constitute a local one. Instead, it becomes a work of world literature, never completely territorialized in national or local contexts, and never quite at home in the universal either.

Thirdly, we look at how Svevo engages critically with totalizing ideas attributed to paradigmatic thinkers. He relativizes several ways in which abstractions inform worldviews, and calls attention to literary paradigms that impact upon philosophical problems. Svevo's allegory, modeled on the comparative deontology between science and psychoanalysis, relates to the problem of Kant's idea of reason as a "useful fiction" to ground cosmopolitical history. Zeno's reflections on a possible world informed by Basedow syndrome demonstrate the inherent interchangeability between rational paradigms for ordering world history and ultimately the absurdity of taking a relative paradigm as universality. As a corrective to the pragmatic fictions that underwrite totalizing worldviews, Zeno invests in an idea of "originality" divested of its mode of predication on historical and spatial distance. In this way he also shows up the universalizing ideology that is not only at work in the national tradition, but in the cosmopolitical economy of *Weltliteratur*. Originality is also the microcosmic basis for his musings about the cosmos, and resonates with his reflections on dilettantism, which is his spiritual point of contact with the universal artist Goethe. By treating its foundational text of the Italian tradition as "original" on his terms, as a situated act of writing, he recuperates Dante's ambivalence and relativism in his novel.

Finally, Svevo parodies Dante's allegorical cosmology, depicted in the journey of the pilgrim through Hell, and upsets its hierarchical structure through satire and non-linear narrative progression. The image of the nebula that concludes Svevo's novel is antithetical to the spherical concept of universality and totality that the Dantean paradigm engenders. Before

relating Zeno's cosmic vision to the question of global literature, we follow how he constructs it narratively. The nebula is what happens when Zeno expands his situated originality into a worldview; it is a macrocosm of what happens when micronationalisms try to take themselves as microcosms, each one aspiring to be universal. The Svevian microcosm expands quantitatively and not qualitatively, abolishing generality, measure, and the micro-macro proportions of the global idea inherent in the Dantean model as well as that of Goethe.

De tergestinum loquela: a language of literary exile

As a Triestine writer, Svevo occupies a peripheral position in relation to the center of the Italian literary imaginary, whereas he is central to that of Trieste. However, much as his language was difficult to insert into the Italian tradition, it does not constitute a foundation for a Triestine literary tradition either. There is no *Svevian* language, as Voghera argues, to anchor a sense of local or national belonging, and the territorial imperative of language grounds the literary and cultural universe from which he feels exiled. Svevo's marginal position in relation to the linguistic and literary traditions of Italy places him among a long list of modernist writers who suffered from political, cultural, linguistic or existential exile, and those who chose it as an artistic stance, such as his contemporary, James Joyce, who often compared his voluntary exile from Ireland with that Dante from Florence.⁷ Svevo's problem with writing in

⁷ Contemplating the role of exile in Joyce's writing, Seamus Deane observes, "Exile is (in certain circumstances) only the loss of one possible home; it can lead from belonging nowhere to becoming at home everywhere, a migrant condition that owes something to the old Enlightenment ideal of the Citizen of the World, but also owes much to the contemporary belief that there is an essential virtue and gain in escaping the singularity of one culture into the multiplicity of all, or of all that are available. In such a turn we witness a rejection of nationalism brought to an apparently liberating extreme." The theme of exile in Joyce's critical art is accompanied by notions of "silence" and "cunning", much scholarship that identifies Joycean writing with this *ethos* takes a passage from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as its point of departure: "I will tell you what I will do and what I will not do. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it calls itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use -- silence, exile, and cunning." Seamus

Italian, for example, resonates with a sentiment expressed by Franz Kafka in his diaries towards German.⁸ The loss of sense that Kafka experiences when he uses the German word “*Mutter*” to describe a Jewish mother is accompanied by the sentiment that he never felt at home in his “mother tongue.” There are several analogies between this *ethos* of exile characteristic of literary modernism and the ideological constraints faced by Svevo in the early twentieth century that also bring to mind the hegemony of Latin in the time of Dante when he was writing *La Divina Commedia* and his treatise on the vernacular, *De vulgare eloquentia*. Although Svevo never wrote a treatise on the eloquence of the Triestine vernacular, there is much to suggest that he thought about the language he used in his writing. After he had achieved some celebrity in Europe, he wrote a “Profilo autobiografico,” in the third person, wherein he suggests that his literary language was consistent with a desire to speak truthfully:

Non si può raccontare efficacemente che in una lingua viva e la sua lingua non poteva essere altra che la loquela triestina, la quale non ebbe bisogno di attendere il 1918 per essere sentita italiana.⁹

[One can’t effectively narrate in anything but a living language and his language could not be anything but the Triestine manner of speaking, which did not have to wait until 1918 to feel Italian.]

The word “*loquela*,” is one of the many archaisms that Svevo’s idiosyncratic writing is known for, and it can be translated as “a manner of speaking.” Svevo chooses this word to describe his narrative language as local, living and necessary. Also, *loquela* does not refer to a

Deane, “Imperialism/Nationalism,” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 367.

⁸ In his diary entry of October 4, 1911, Kafka writes, “Yesterday it occurred to me that if I did not always love my mother as she deserved and as I could, only because the German language prevented it. The Jewish mother is no “Mutter,” to call her “Mutter” makes her a little comic... “Mutter” is peculiarly German for a Jew, it unconsciously contains, together with the Christian splendor Christian coldness also, the Jewish woman who is called “Mutter” therefore becomes not only comic, but strange. Mama would be a better name if only one didn’t imagine “Mutter” behind it. I believe that it is only the memories of the ghetto that preserve the Jewish family, for the word “Vater” too is far from meaning the Jewish father.” Franz Kafka, *The Diaries: 1910-1923*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Joseph Kresh and Martin Greenberg (New York: Schocken Books, 1976) 88.

⁹ Italo Svevo, “Profilo autobiografico” 806.

written language, a dialect or even an idiom.¹⁰ While it would be impossible to conjecture upon the frequency of the word in Svevo's time, or where the author might have read it himself, there are several noteworthy precedents. St. Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order of the Catholic Church uses the term *loquela* to refer to "inner voices" in his *Spiritual Exercises*, which as Julia Kristeva observes, is consonant with the work of psychoanalysis.¹¹ The writing cure that Zeno ostensibly undertakes in *La coscienza di Zeno* would also seem to suggest this, however, Svevo's use of the term *loquela* seems to be better suited to the way Dante uses it in his *Convivio*,¹² *La Divina Commedia*,¹³ and in the Latin treatise *De vulgari*

¹⁰ In *De vulgare eloquentia* Dante has words for language, vernacular and idiom available to him in Latin (*locutio, vulgare, ydioma*), which he differentiates from his use of the word *loquela*.

¹¹ "St. Ignatius of Loyola's *loquela*, an intimate word if there ever was one, is a speechless voice, at the borders of affect and hallucination, that initiates representation (the images of Augustine) and, later, the signs of language. With this mysterious *loquela* (which will not surprise the analyst attuned to *Grundsprache* and the semiotic tonality of poetic language), we encounter the register of a prerepresentation, an embodied speech, that nevertheless is already appropriated by the subject in the process of coming about. Loyola describes "taking excessive pleasure in the tone of the *loquela*, that is in the mere sound, without paying attention to the meaning of words," that the tears relay in order to peruse once again the affected soul, depriving it of even this zero degree of speech that is "the wonderful internal *loquela*". Keep in mind this intimacy of Loyola's, made of *loquela* and tears, subjacent to the thought of prayer and which seems to indicate the ultimate register of what he calls the "unfolding of thought" targeted by the spiritual exercises, closest to the unthinkable pathos of the soul." Julia Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, Vol 2. Trans. Jeanine Herman (New York, Columbia University Press, 2002) 47.

¹² In the *Convivio* he uses the word to refer to a *koiné*, a local knowledge and a native tongue that is nevertheless a written one. Specifically, it is a property of poetic language that is characterized by its untranslatability. This poetic *loquela* is the first thing that is lost in translation, and this loss of meaning applies to his own poetry as much as it does to that of Homer. "E però sappia ciascuno che nulla cosa per legame musaico armonizzata si può de la sua loquela in altra trasmutare, senza rombere tutta sua dolcezza e armonia e questa è la cagione per che Omero non si mutò di greco in Latino, come l'altre scritture che avemo da loro". (*Convivio* I.vii. 14-15) ["Therefore everyone should know that nothing harmonized according to the rules of poetry can be translated from its native tongue into another without destroying all its sweetness and harmony. This is the reason why Homer has not been translated from Greek into Latin as have been other writings we have of theirs."]

¹³ In the sixth ring of Hell, Dante's poetic avatar comes across the heretic Farinata, who interpolates the poet as a native of his city by his manner of speech. "O Tóscio che par la città del foco | vivo ten vai così parlando onesto | piacciati di restare in questo loco. || La tua loquela ti fa manifesto | di quella nobile patria natio, | alla quale forse fui troppo molesto? (*Inf.* X 22-27) O Tuscan, thou who through the city of fire | Goest alive, thus speaking modestly, | Be pleased to stay thy footsteps in this place. | Thy mode of speaking makes thee manifest | A native of that noble fatherland, | To which perhaps I too molestful was. Dante's use of the term *loquela* in this context indicates a local, spoken language that mediates a particular relationship with place. A Florentine visiting Rome or another exile could recognize Dante as someone who belonged to the same *patria natio* by his *loquela*, as Farinata did in the underworld, demonstrating the outward mobility of his vernacular its potential for sodalities of

eloquentia;¹⁴ as what cannot be translated from a native vernacular; as an indicator of locality that can be activated in exile, and as a manner of speaking subject to the changeable nature of human beings. Dante's use of the word *loquela* resonates with that of Svevo's, referring to a literary language as *local*, referring to a modality of belonging; as *living* in reference to its spoken and mutable nature; and as *necessary* in that what it communicates is categorically lost in translation. Translation is predicated on the idea of a universal structure that runs through all languages, but according to Dante the rules of poetry differ from the rules of grammar. Svevo's reflections upon his writing suggest that this *loquela* was crucial to his understanding of writing, and inimical to the hegemony of a universal and time-honoured language.

Svevo qualifies this *loquela* with a remark on how he did not have to wait for the annexation of Trieste into Italy to sense that it was Italian, and this also brings to mind how the medieval Florentine poet identified his own writing with allegories of an absent Italian language. By referring to the Italian language as Tuscan, Svevo reminds the reader that Dante's vernacular literary language was *not yet* Italian when he was writing, and that the Italian nation did *not yet* exist in the modern sense of the concept while he was alive. The Italian language presupposes, at least, a national ecumenism, but as Svevo reflects upon his living *loquela*, he does not have to wait until Italy *redeems* Trieste by annexing it into its political, territorial borders in order to feel Italian. Cultural hegemony determines whatever counts for knowing how to write, whether it is "scriver bene" or "scriver male." However, one could say that Dante did not *know* how to write, in the sense that he did not have a pre-

expatriate identity. Dante and Farinata are not in their homeland (*patria natio*), but their language communicates a common origin and a sense of belonging.

¹⁴ In *De vulgare eloquentia* uses of the word *loquela* to refers to a local manner of speaking that is subject to human mutability, and it is antithetical to a language that endures over time through writing and grammar. See commentary in Chapter 1, "The language of Dante."

established Italian grammar to refer his works to, whereas Svevo does not know how to write because his writing does not follow the linguistic paradigm prescribed for him. In other words, Svevo feels as Italian as Dante in the sense that the Tuscan poet, by writing in a language that was *not yet* Italian, was paradigmatically Italian.

Triestine Irredentism by its very name implies a redemption narrative; that annexation into Italy is its national *telos* – its meaning, its purpose and its destiny – conferring upon the city’s residents an Italian identity, legitimizing it through a political act. The Italian literary tradition also held the keys to Trieste’s national-cultural “redemption,” but Dante’s language was also unredeemed in his time; only an abstract view of literary history could make it whole and redeem national culture by it. Svevo’s living *loquela*, also known as “*scriver male*” and the silent truth-aspect of Zeno’s unwritten dialect, are all animated by a desire toward wholeness, peace, comfort, belonging, but the critical conscience expressed by the idea of sickness undoes that desire for totality. Svevo’s problem with the ecumenical language that mediates Italian national identity is that he is estranged from it by the ambivalence with which he treats the literary language that he reads and aspires to (Italian), the dialect that he speaks (Triestino), and the written *loquela* that does not resolve itself into any of them. The difference between Svevo’s unredeemed language and Dante’s redeemed one is more than a question of historical distance between two *not-yet* Italian languages. Dante did not capture the *vulgare illustre* in his vernacular poetry, but he did settle upon an *optima loquela* to write with. Svevo wrote in his *ultima loquela*. The difference between a literary language and an antiliterary one lies in this distinction. Zeno is also a kind of pilgrim, like Dante, in the sense of *homo viator*, and his “sickness” is a state of exile from that of “health” to which he constantly strives.

Unlike the trajectory of Dante's narrative, which moves towards redemption, Zeno constantly wavers, defers, postpones, expressing his dissatisfaction with the narrative and expresses the wish to revise it, reiterating his repeated attempts to quit smoking in his therapeutic writing. As Zeno reflects in the *Continuazioni*, which picks up his story after *La coscienza di Zeno*, "La cura non riuscì, ma le carte restarono [The therapy didn't work, but the pages remain]."¹⁵ Dr. S. had initially proposed the writing cure as a prelude to psychoanalysis, but the therapy fails because Zeno could not see himself whole in his memoirs. For the Triestine Zeno, this projected revision is only another fractal, another "*ultima sigaretta*," and even the idea that it might be closer to the completion of a series than the one before it is an illusion.¹⁶ Recalling Zeno's complaint in the final chapters of the previous novel, what does he hope to revise by getting those confessions returned to him: his story or his language? Is Zeno in a better position to look back upon his past than he was when he was writing those confessions down? Even if Zeno does get his memoirs returned to him the revision he plans to carry out would only be the latest iteration of its incompleteness. He does not create a definitive, corrected version of the narrative, yet there is one that remains because Dr. S. takes the pages out of Zeno's hands and publishes them. Hence, it is not the best (*optima*) version, but the last (*ultima*) one. And since there is no definitive, corrected version that would indicate a successful outcome to the therapy, what difference does it make if he revises it, even once? The work of writing that strives towards a paradigmatic language is not completed, but as

¹⁵ Italo Svevo "Prefazione" *Romanzi e "Continuazioni"* (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori, 2004) 1227. Svevo wrote this "Preface" shortly before his sudden demise in a car accident, possibly towards the sequel to *La coscienza di Zeno* that he was planning to publish someday but never got to complete.

¹⁶ In this respect Zeno resembles his Eleatic namesake, the disciple of Parmenides who attempted to defend his master's monistic notions of being against those of Heraclitean flux and becoming, by creating a number of logical paradoxes to prove that change and motion were illusory. The work of writing can never be complete, only abandoned, which also recalls how Diogenes the Cynic refuted Zeno's paradoxes of motion by simply standing up and walking away.

Zeno's complaint suggests, it is abandoned quite by chance: "Lo scrivere [Writing]," which Zeno continues beyond the narrative published by Dr. S. "sarà per me una misura d'igiene [will serve as a measure of hygiene]."¹⁷ Svevo's idea of a living *loquela* and the critical commonplace of "*scriver male*" corroborate the linguistic image of an unrevised text. The pejorative connotation of the latter only appears when it is set against the territorial imperative of an Italian literary tradition that prohibits misuse.

The effort to quit smoking is one of several ways in which Zeno tries to regain his health and his courtship of Giovanni Malfenti's daughters is another, depicting an exile and a pilgrimage comparable to that of Dante's protagonist-narrator, and it proves to be an effective allegory for Svevo's linguistic and literary preoccupations. Dante's allegorical pilgrimage towards redemption and the classical concept of *homo viator* – itinerant man, or man-on-the-way – contributed to the way he understood his exile from Florence as a kind of pilgrimage and wrote about it allegorically.¹⁸ The search for a universal language can also be seen as a heuristic journey towards redemption, and the hunter in *De vulgare eloquentia*, is a *homo viator*, since it is implied that will never trap the panther that serves as a figure of thought for the *vulgare illustre*. As the proverbial hunter explores the different vernaculars of the Italian Peninsula to find this panther, he can only take temporary comfort as he pauses upon the relative universality that the Panther's scent bestows upon them. The panther, too, is always

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Gerhart B. Ladner, "Homo Viator: Mediaeval Ideas on Alienation and Order" *Speculum*, 42.2 (Apr. 1967) 233-259. "So also for Dante, it was not only the spiritual goodness of a glorified Beatrice, but also the recollection of her corporeal earthly beauty, which extracted him from the *selva oscura*, the dark wood, that old symbol of alienation, in which, *nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*, he had lost the straight path, *la dritta via*, that old symbol of order. [...] It is deeply significant that Dante did no longer adhere to the tradition which saw Ulysses, that great symbol of *Homo Viator*, as a type of Christian *peregrinus* on the road to his heavenly home. Dante's Ulysses never returns to restored order in his fatherland, for out of measureless curiosity he pursues his erratic course through the seas until he is smashed against the Mountain of Purgatory, which likewise is not for him" (251).

moving on, and so is the health that eludes Zeno with his every “*ultima sigaretta*.” In his written confessions he punctuates his last cigarette with the shorthand “U.S.,” but as there are many of them throughout the text we know that it is never really the last one. His efforts to quit smoking, which would supposedly make him healthy again, mirror the desire for totality and the critical conscience that undoes it. One contemporary blogger cleverly expresses this dynamic of doing and undoing as Zeno’s e-mail address: “domanismetto@Ilovesmoking.it [tomorrowiquit@Ilovesmoking.it].”¹⁹ In other words, quitting may be the intended destination of Zeno’s correspondences, but the domain name is the vice of smoking.

Salus, Venus, Virtus: Zeno’s courtly romance

The narrative arc of Svevo’s *Comedia* begins with the tragedy of his father’s death, and following the guidance of his Virgil it culminates with Zeno becoming a *paterfamilias* himself. As a mentor to Zeno in the *Tergesteo*, Giovanni Malfenti’s wisdom with regards to the commercial life of the city casts him as the embodiment of *virtù*. As Zeno recalls, “Quando io ammiro qualcuno, tento immediatamente di somigliargli. Copiai anche il Malfenti [“When I admire someone, I try at once to resemble him. So I also imitated Malfenti”]” (687 [63]). Dante also admires, studies and imitates Virgil, and in the allegorical scheme of Dante’s epic poem, the revered Latin poet is the *maestro* who embodies *virtù* and imparts it upon the poet (*Inf.* I.85-89). Virgil is sent by the Christian Beatrice to guide Dante through the underworld, and Malfenti conducts Zeno toward his future spouse. If the Italian literary tradition can be seen as the offspring of Dante’s spiritual union with Beatrice, the marriage

¹⁹ Annamaria Martinolli “La coscienza di Zeno Comic Version, ovvero: il curriculum vitae di Zeno Cosini”, *Fucinemute*, 22 Agosto 2102. < <http://www.fucinemute.it/2012/08/la-coscienza-di-zeno-comic-version-ovvero-il-curriculum-vitae-di-zeno-cosini/> > Consulted on 23 March 2015.

between Zeno and Malfenti's daughter ought to generate a Triestine literary tradition, but the problem of Zeno's self-generated illness gets in the way.

Giovanni's family embodies Trieste as a microcosm of local archetypes and bourgeois values, much like how the apparitions in Dante's epic poem represent a variety of Florentine personalities. Between his commercial apprenticeship and his amorous courtship, Zeno remarks, "la famiglia Malfenti divenne il centro della mia vita ["the Malfenti family became the center of my life"]" (705 [80]). The prospect of marrying one of Malfenti's daughters evokes in Zeno's mind, "il sentimento che stessi per prendere moglie lontano dal mio paese ["the sensation that I was about to take a wife very far from my own country"]" (693 [68-69]). Zeno's foreignness to this central household is suggested by his name, which means "stranger" (*xénos*) in Greek and his presence there as a Cosini, meaning "little thing" in Italian (*cosa* with the diminutive suffix *-ini*), supports the image of the Malfenti household as a microcosm. When Zeno learns that the names of Malfenti's daughters begin with the letter "A" he ponders what that auspicious initial means for his prospect of finding a wife.

Quell'iniziale mi colpì molto più di quanto meritasse. Sognai di quelle quattro fanciulle legate tanto bene insieme dal loro nome. Pareva fossero da consegnarsi in fascio. L'iniziale diceva anche qualche cosa d'altro. Io mi chiamo Zeno ed avevo perciò il sentimento che stessi per prendere moglie lontano dal mio paese. (692-93)

["That initial made a deeper impression on me than it should have. I dreamed of those four girls linked so firmly by their names. It was as if they were a bundle, to be delivered all together. The initial said something else: my name is Zeno and I therefore had the sensation that I was about to take a wife very far from my own country." (68-69)]

In this passage Zeno also identifies himself as a foreigner by maximum alphabetical distance, and the initial "A" portends totality to him, since his name begins with the letter at

the end of the alphabet (as in, alpha and omega). When Zeno reflects upon his courtship of Giovanni Malfenti's daughters, he writes "Correvo dietro alla salute, alla legittimità ["I was pursuing health, legitimacy"]" (694 [70]). By marrying into a respectable Triestine family Zeno pursues "health" through monogamous heterosexual love and "legitimacy" through homosocial kinship, as well as rivalry. Svevo's allegorical courtship satirizes the ostentatious "health" of the Italian tradition and the conventional "legitimacy" that underwrites its universalizing hegemony. On the literal level this microcosm and the body politic of the family correspond to the bourgeois values of the world they live in – turn of the century Trieste – but as a parody that alludes to *La Commedia*, the "health and legitimacy" that Zeno seeks intersects with the medieval allegory of courtly love, alluding to themes that were prominent to poets of *lo stil novo*, of whom Dante was an exemplar.

As Erich Auerbach observes: "For the Provençals and the poets of the "new style," there was but one great theme: courtly love. It is true that in his *De vulgari eloquentia* Dante enumerates three themes (*salus, venus, virtus*, i.e., deeds of valor, love and virtue), yet in almost all the great *canzoni* the two others are subordinated to the theme of love or are clothed in the allegory of love."²⁰ Across Dante's entire oeuvre the theme of love moves toward reconciling his divine love for God with his human affection for a woman named Beatrice Portinari, whom he met only a few times in his life and idealized in his poetry. As Dante carries his love for Beatrice with him throughout his life, her image changes alongside the evolution of Dante's vernacular poetic style from the *dolce stil novo* of *La vita nuova*, through to the personification of lady philosophy in *Il Convivio*, and up until the encyclopedic, philosophical and religious poetry of *La Commedia*, which represents his mature, universal

²⁰ Erich Auerbach, "Farinata and Cavalcante" *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953. 188-189.

style.²¹ In Svevo's satirical allegory, *Virtus* pertains to literary value in a cultural economy, *Salus* to the hegemony of the literary establishment, and *Venus* to the *eros* of poetic language. Zeno's apprenticeship with the *virtuous* father figure parodies the way that Dante uses the Latin tradition, and Zeno's *amorous* relationships with women parody Dante's development of a mature vernacular style. The allegory of marrying into a family like that of Giovanni Malfenti intimates the legitimacy of an Italian language literature in Trieste, much as the household symbolizes the prospect of the author being wed to his *patria*, also Trieste, but the path of Zeno's ascendance to the status of *paterfamilias* is a crooked one.

Virtus: Giovanni as paterfamilias and “famoso saggio” of furberia

With telegraphic brevity, Zeno dates and notes the death of his father: “15.4.1890 ore 4^{1/2}. Muore mio padre. U. S.” He goes describes this event as one of the most significant events in his life, “una vera grande catastrofe [a great, genuine catastrophe]” (654 [32]), punctuated with his shorthand for another *ultima sigaretta*. Zeno elaborates on the significance of this shorthand message in terms that resonate with the incipit to Dante's *Commedia*. “Il paradiso non esisteva più ed io poi, a trent'anni, ero un uomo finito [...] Lui morto non c'era più una dimane ove collocare il proposito. [Heaven no longer existed and

²¹ Massimo Verdicchio. “Machiavelli on Dante and language” *Forum Italicum: A Journal of Italian Studies*. 47(30) 2013, 522-539. “The difference could not be greater because the poet of the *Commedia* is no longer the poet of the *Vita nuova* whose youthful and passionate poetry he dismissed in the *Convivio* in favor of the more mature and rational poetry inspired by Lady Philosophy: ‘veggendo sì come ragionevolmente quella fervida e passionata, questa temperate e virile esser conviene’ (Dante, 1966: I, i, 16). The difference does not consist in a simple change of love object but points to a radical difference in love poetics expressed by the term ‘ditta,’ ‘dictates,’ that alludes to two different conceptions of love: a tyrannical love that makes demands on the loved one and a rational love that dictates wisdom. The former characterizes the poets of the Tuscan school, the so-called poetry of the ‘dolce stil nuovo,’ whose major representative is Guido Guinizzelli as well as the Dante of the *Vita Nuova*. This type of love, inspired by Eros, is tyrannical because it demands that those who are loved love them in return. [...] The latter type of love, Dante's new love for Lady Philosophy, is rational and philosophical, inspiring the poet with the knowledge and the wisdom to write the *Commedia* for the edification of his readers” (527).

furthermore, at thirty, I was finished. [...] With him dead there was no longer a tomorrow to which I could address my determination.]” The death of his virtuous father, Silva Cosini (“una selva oscura”),²² estranges him from the *telos* represented by the family home. He loses his sense of direction (“la via dritta”) in midlife²³ (“nel mezzo cammin di nostra vita”), that is, until a second *paterfamilias* comes to take his place: Giovanni Malfenti. His paternal role in Zeno’s memoir fulfills that of Virgil in the *Comedia*.²⁴ This wealthy trader serves the highest form of Triestine society: the *Tergesteo* (the Triestine stock market). He has all of the veneration and purpose that Zeno lacks, and prepares Zeno to become more like him: a wealthy, bourgeois Triestine businessman.

Malfenti is also a *maestro* to learn matters of commerce from and other traders might draw upon his authority (as an *autore*) to shore up their investments.²⁵ Many approach him for advice, giving him valuable information, and he gives them “consigli utilissimi confermati da un’esperienza raccolta dal Medio Evo in poi [the most helpful advice, confirmed by experience accumulated ever since the Middle Ages]” (687 [63]). Dante’s allusions to universally renowned poets illustrate these workings of literary capital: He claims to have derived his poetic style from his apprenticeship in Latin and Greek poetics, and in the fourth

²² We find out that his father’s name is Silva, which carries the same meaning as Dante’s *selva*: “forest” and is synonymous with “foresta.” Since so many names carry an allegorical significance in the novel, it is fitting that Zeno’s father is named as such. The Latin and Italian name Silva, carries with it a similar connotation as the name Zeno, which translated from the Greek, means stranger, or foreigner. The Italian word “forestiero” does not mean “forester” but “foreigner”, “stranger”; someone who comes from the forest.

²³ At the age of 30 Zeno is roughly half of his age, 57, at the time of writing his memoirs. However, Zeno is in error since the date would indicate that he is 33 years old when his father dies. Dante’s verse also alludes to finding himself in midlife, at the age of 35, at a point in life where he has lost his sense of direction. The date of 15.4.1890 is also significant, since it would be a week after Easter that year, and the *Inferno* takes place between Good Friday and Easter 1300.

²⁴ Virgil sometimes address Dante as *figliuol mio* [my son] and Dante, who only addresses Virgil by name at the first canto, and continues addressing him as *Maestro* and at times referring to him as *dolce padre* [gentle father].

²⁵ “Tu se’ lo mio maestro e il mio autore: | tu se’ solo colui da cui io tolsi | lo bello stile che m’ha fatto onore. (*Inf.* I.85-87)

Canto, he makes his appeal to authority explicit in claiming a the sixth position for himself among the eminent universal poets after Homer, Horace, Ovid, Lucan and his master, Virgil (see *Inf.* IV.80-102). Closer to Svevo's time, Giosué Carducci reprises these gesture in his *Rime nuove*, a title that alludes to the *dolce stil novo* of Dante and the vernacular poets of the Tuscan Middle Ages, and he appeals to the authority of classical and vernacular poets revered by the Italian tradition with poems entitled "Omero", "Virgilio", "Dante" and "Commentando il Petrarca."²⁶ This critical perspective can be reflected back to way in which the politicized sphere of Italian letters uses Dante, since Svevo witnesses the colossal scope of Dante scholarship being employed for the "health and legitimacy" of the tradition, shoring up the ideological investment in Italian national identity. Zeno's narrative comically deviates from that of cultural hegemony, as does the *virtù* that he learns from his mentor.

Virgil is the "acknowledged sage" ("famoso saggio," *Inf.* I.89), because of his stature and renown, and Malfenti is proud of his reputation for *furberia*,²⁷ Much of the novel's ironic humor is derived from Zeno's *opposite* opinion, asserting that true *furberia* consists in appearing foolish (687 [63]). The image of Svevo as an ingénue, a bourgeois dilettante or an amateur who, in spite of writing badly is a great author, speaks to Zeno's divergent application of Malfenti's *ethos* of *furberia*. It relates to Svevo's value in the domain of literary exchange. Indeed, as Eugenio Montale wrote of Svevo's novels, celebrated in France, but overdue for acknowledgement in Italy, "Si tratta di un riconoscimento molto serio e necessario, dal quale occorre tener lontano fin il sospetto del *canard*. [This is a matter of a very serious and

²⁶ Dainotto, 394.

²⁷ The art of *furberia* or *furberia*, which one might render in English as "cunning," or a "cleverness," but it doesn't quite get at the Machiavellian sense of *virtù* that is implied by it, nor to the acceptance or admiration of this quality by Italians. *Farsi furbo* means to outmanoeuvre one's opponent, whether they be an adversary or a friend, the tax collector, a colleague or your life partner, and it generally leads to getting what you want out of life.

necessary acknowledgement, from which suspicions of a hoax should be held at a far distance].”²⁸ From what we can understand about Zeno’s ambivalent successes in life, as a mirror for the fortunes of Svevo, we should not hold the suspicion of a hoax, in this French sense of the word, at *too* faraway a distance. The Triestine author develops the allegory of literary capital in his novella *Una burla riuscita* [*A successful hoax*], which he had written after he had become famous. After nearly three decades of writing without success, and publishing his own novels, Svevo reiterates Zeno’s understanding of the relationship between *furberia* and *fortuna* in the story of Mario Samigli, this time with far more conviction after having seen it proven to him.²⁹ Yet Malfenti was also somewhat prescient of Svevo’s success in concluding the matter of Zeno’s success involving a shares in a sugar refinery: “Non è un utile quello che ricavi di tale affare; è un indennizzo. Quella tua testa ti costò già tanto, ch’è giusto ti rimborsi di una parte della tua perdita [“What you earn from such a deal isn’t a profit: it’s a reward. That mind of yours has already cost you so much that it’s only fair for it to reimburse you for a part of your losses”]” (691 [67])!

The success of the *inetto* comes from no power of his own, but from blind chance, which he then frames as the work of his own will by embellishing upon what actually occurred, much like he had done with his fortunate transaction in shares of sugar. Convinced

²⁸ Eugenio Montale, “Presentazione di Italo Svevo” (*Il Quindicinale*, 1.2. 30 January 1926, p.4) *Leggere Svevo: antologia della critica sveviana*. Ed. Luciano Nanni (Bologna: Nicola Zanchinelli, 1974) 141-145: 141.

²⁹ *Una burla riuscita*, a novella by Italo Svevo has often been called “un’autobiografia travestita [an autobiography in disguise],” since the allegory closely follows the trajectory of indifference to Svevo’s work followed by his luck and sudden fame in Europe. The protagonist of the novella, Mario Samigli, is a failed writer of parables working as a bank clerk in his old age and is not at all perturbed by the fact that his youthful dreams of literary glory did not come to fruition. His contentment irks a colleague, Gaia, who develops an elaborate hoax to revive Samigli’s dreams only to dash them more cruelly to the ground. Gaia convinces Samigli that he had arranged a deal with a German editor to publish the novel Samigli wrote as a young man, and convinces the ingenuous clerk to place an amount of money as a deposit on the first printing. When Samigli discovers the hoax, he also finds out that the money he placed in the bank had doubled because of the depreciating Austrian currency in wartime, and turns a tidy monetary profit as compensation for the injury caused by the hoax.

to sacrifice his interest in Ada, for example, the happiness that Zeno finds with Augusta is not a *profit*, obtained through the merit of his own *furberia* that would have gotten him what he wanted from the Malfenti family, but a *reward* in that it results from the unexpected appreciation of devalued merchandise. Theory, according to Malfenti, should be applied retroactively to give sense to concluded transactions, since they are guided by chance, or by the more cunning of the two parties involved. Only after the conclusion of the deal does one begin to make sense of its history, otherwise, the most *furbo* of all (namely, Hegel) speaks of it as already accomplished. A truly critical literary history would begin with disenchantment, and it would turn upon the virtuous, the *furbi* as well as the *saggi*, since knowledge as power has its own self-interest in appearing healthy and legitimate. Giovanni Malfenti, who has managed to achieve the reputation of an authority by capitalizing on his *furberia*, easily passes off his certitude, as well as his impostures, as truth. Blind chance, the image of dilettantism and the suspicion that “Il caso Svevo” might be a hoax all play into the reception of Svevo’s works, and undermine the providential narrative of destiny, the image of genius and integrity upon which national literatures found their canons.

Salus: Guido, Cavalcanti and the agon of the contemporary

The demonstration of *salus* (*valor*) belongs to the order of dealings with contemporaries in relation to the Italian tradition. The introduction of Guido into the Malfenti household, an eligible bachelor from Tuscany who comes to Trieste for a commercial career presents Zeno with a rival who complicates his courtship of the serious and beautiful Ada, and introduces an element of linguistic tension into the household. The civilized rivalry between Zeno and Guido, as well their many contests for love, wealth and prestige, parody Dante’s relations with his contemporaries and his eminence among them to literary history. The

character is also the most direct allusion to Dante's contemporaries, Guido Guizini and Guido Cavalcanti, who also practiced *lo dolce stil novo*. The theme of *valor*, which pertains to demonstrations of honour, worthiness, nobility, courtesy and bravery that would be associated with the code of chivalry and combat in medieval romance, is transmitted to the composition of poetry for the beloved or for a reading public. Guido is a composite of qualities that Svevo attributes to the Italian tradition and as a consequence he resembles the neo-classical "*poeta vates*" and decadent writers who were considered to be representative of Italian national literature by literary establishments at the time.

When Antonio Gramsci wrote of the "sacristan" intellectuals who argued over Svevo's work, his comments pertained to observations about the incongruities between "national" and "popular" literature that are particular to Italy. He describes the Italian literary tradition as "libresca" e astratta ["bookish" and abstract], tied to a precious intellectual caste that has never been broken into from below. Hence, the reason for "la facilità sciocca e in fondo pericolosa di chiamare "antinazionale" chiunque non abbia questa concezione archeologica e tarmata degli interessi del paese [the stupid and downright dangerous ease in calling whoever does not have this archaeological and moth-eaten interests of the country "antinational"]."³⁰

³⁰ Gramsci, *Letteratura e vita nazionale*, 105. The entire passage from which these quotations are drawn gives us a more complete picture of Gramsci's views: "In Italia, il termine "nazionale" ha un significato molto ristretto ideologicamente, e in ogni caso non coincide con "popolare," perché in Italia gli intellettuali sono lontani dal popolo, e sono invece legati a una tradizione di casta, che non è mai stata rotta da un forte movimento politico popolare o nazionale di basso: la tradizione è "libresca" e astratta, e l'intellettuale tipico moderno si sente più legato ad Annibal Caro o a Ippolito Pindemonte che a un contadino pugliese o siciliano. Il termine corrente "nazionale" è in Italia legato a questa tradizione intellettuale e libresca, quindi la facilità sciocca e in fondo pericolosa di chiamare "antinazionale" chiunque non abbia questa concezione archeologica e tarmata degli interessi del paese. [In Italy, the term "national" has a very narrow ideological scope, and in any case does not coincide with "popular," because in Italy the intellectuals are far removed from the people, and they are related to the tradition of caste, which has never been broken by a strong popular or national political movement coming from below: the tradition is "bookish" and abstract, and the typical modern intellectual feels more connected to Annibal Caro or to Ippolito Pindemonte as he does to a farmer in Puglia or Sicily. The current term "national" in Italy is tied to this intellectual and bookish tradition, hence the stupid and downright dangerous ease in calling whoever does not have this archeological and moth-eaten interests of the country "antinational"]."

While Gramsci's observations are germane to thinking about how Svevo's novels bypassed the national tradition in becoming works of world literature, and how he broke into it quite strangely from above, instead of from below they offer insights into the literary sacristans of Italy are personified in the character of Guido, and Zeno's interactions with him reflect upon Svevo's ambivalence toward contemporary Italian writers. The demonstrations that Guido chooses to present to the Malfenti family are satirical manifestations of how the *letterati* of post-Risorgimento Italy legitimize "*scrivere bene*." Unlike Zeno, who merely shows up and tells stories, Guido creates spectacles for the Malfenti family, which are consonant with his character: Guido is a fashionably dressed dandy who carries a gaudy walking stick, speaks impeccable Tuscan, plays the violin beautifully and conducts a séance. Zeno's aversion to Guido is initially related to the latter's projected cultural superiority, and manifests itself as moral repulsion throughout the narrative, beginning with an auspicious first impression.

Guardai meglio quel Signor Guido. Era vestito con un'eleganza ricercata e teneva nella destra inguantata un bastone dal manico d'avorio lunghissimo, che io non avrei portato neppure se m'avessero pagato per ciò una somma per ogni chilometro. Non mi rimproverai di aver potuto vedere in una simile persona una minaccia per Ada. Vi sono dei loschi figuri che vestono elegantemente e portano anche di tali bastoni. (734-35)

["I took a closer look at this Signor Guido. He was dressed with an affected elegance, and in his gloved right hand he held a walking stick with a very long ivory handle, which I would never have carried, not even if they were to pay me a sum for every kilometer. I didn't reproach myself for having actually considered such a person a threat to Ada. There are some shady characters who dress elegantly and carry similar canes." (108)]

Guido's affected elegance and his manner of speaking are symbolized by his walking stick, and in it Zeno intuits a threat to Ada, as that object could be used for a purpose other than walking – that is, to beat her. Zeno insists that he would never use it, and there is a

comical aspect to Zeno's disdain for Guido's ivory walking stick, and in his subaltern pride, especially as he limps through Trieste with his own ordinary cane to offset the imaginary pain in his leg. At first Guido's prestige makes him attractive to Ada, but after she chooses to marry him, his cultural superiority gives him license to mistreat her. The cane that helps to support or measure one's steps is like the language that helps one to get around the world, and for Svevo, writing in his "sick" Triestino-Italian is better than expressing himself with the ornamental redundancy of D'Annunzian prose.³¹ Zeno perceives Guido's preciousness, his arrogance and his self-superiority beneath the sheen of his highly cultured exterior, and when he observes the effectiveness of Guido's suit he tries to delegitimize his rival through jokes and denigrations, though all of his attempts at character assassination backfire on him. In the violin playing one intuitively feels the rhetorical flourish of D'Annunzio's prose style. Guido's conceitedness in claiming that he improved upon a composition after Zeno points out where he deviates from it attests to the haughtiness of the writer who self-identified as a Nietzschean superman, fulfilling an imperial destiny and improving upon the past.³² In the séance one finds Carducci's classicism and his drawing of authority from past models. Both of these

³¹ "[Svevo] challenged Joyce to find any page by D'Annunzio which did not contain at least one meaningless sentence and, opening one of the Pescara writer's books at random, read the following passage: 'The smile which pululated inextinguishably, spreading among the pallid meanders of Burano lace'" Quoted in Richard Robinson, "From Border to Front: Italo Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno*", *Narratives of the European Border: A History of Nowhere* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 47; cfr. John Gatt Rutter, *Italo Svevo: A Double Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) 231. No Italian text is quoted.

³² In a memoir entitled "Soggiorno londinese" Svevo's critique of the D'Annunzian *superuomo* resonates with his characterization of Guido, which we will explore further on in this chapter. In the context of the memoir, Svevo criticizes the misuse of philosophy to undergird literary hegemony in the field of national politics. "Noi romanzieri usiamo baloccarci con grande filosofie e non siamo certo atti a chiarirle: Le falsifichiamo ma le umanizziamo. Il superuomo quando arrivò in Italia non era precisamente quello di Nietzsche. Attuato in Italia in prosa, in poesia ma anche in azione, non so se Nietzsche lo riconoscerebbe per suo ormai sarebbe tanto peggio per lui se ne rifiutasse la paternità [We novelists use great philosophers to whittle away our time, and we are certainly not suitable to clarify them: we falsify them, but we humanize them. When the Superman arrived in Italy he was not exactly that of Nietzsche. Realized in Italian prose, in poetry but also in action, I do not know if Nietzsche would recognize him as his own, by now it would be so much worse for him if he refuses paternity.]" (686)

demonstrations mirror tendencies inherent in the historical understanding with which the Italian tradition views Dante, and against which Svevo recuperates Dante's "originality."³³

Venus: from the court of "stil novo" to the boudoir of "dialettaccio"

Dante sought to ennoble the Tuscan vernacular, and on his allegorical linguistic pilgrimage toward a redeemed language, Virgil is there to give Dante support when he finds himself in the *selva oscura*, and Beatrice is the light that guides *la via dritta*. Ada, Augusta and Alberta embody *amor* as a fragmented Beatrice taken together as a group, and Zeno's marriage to one of them, Augusta, shows Zeno the way through love to health. Beatrice, the name to which Dante addresses his love, is the same in all of Dante's works, whereas Zeno's muses retain the same first initial. By marrying one of them he realizes that he must fracture their imagined unity of spirit: "Sta bene che in quell'iniziale *a* erano racchiuse quattro fanciulle, ma tre di loro sarebbero state eliminate subito e in quanto alla quarta anch'essa avrebbe subito un esame severo [True that initial *A* embraced four girls, but three of them had to be eliminated at once, and as for the fourth, she too would be subjected to a stern examination]" (694 [70]). In this elimination process, whereby Zeno proposes to three of Malfenti's daughters, Svevo parodies Dante's artistic trajectory.

³³ We will take up the question of how Zeno articulates an idea about originality that sets him apart from Guido in a later section entitled "The grammar of ideology and the originality of life." However, in this context, I want to briefly touch upon Svevo's earlier thoughts on "originality" from the essay "Del sentimento in arte." Svevo writes of critics who "avverte che l'idea della *Divina Comedia* non è originale [claim that the idea of the *Divine Comedy* is not original], based on arguments pertaining to derivative aspects of the work, but who fail to see that originality consists in "la franca espansione di una carattere non affettato, non tolto a prestito [the frank expression of a character that is unaffected and unborrowed]. Zeno projects all of the vices of the *letterato* onto Guido, and we can also assert that he would have been this kind of critic, whereas "Il critico quando ha sufficiente sentimento artistico non deduce da questi fatti argomenti a sminuire il valore dell'artista. L'originalità risiede nel temperamento, nella personalità dell'artista. Produca francamente; sarà originale o meno; artificiosamente non lo diverrà giammai [When the critic has sufficient artistic feeling he does not deduce arguments from these facts to diminish the value of the artist. He produces frankly, it will be original or not; artificially is will never become original]." Italo Svevo, *Racconti, Saggi, Pagine sparse* 672.

Zeno is first enamoured with the symbolic Beatrice of *La vita nuova*, and the *dolce stil novo*, which is embodied in the serious and beautiful Ada. After she rejects him, he proposes to the scholarly Alberta, who wishes to remain celibate, offers instead her friendship and embodies the rational prose represented by Lady Philosophy who consoles in *Il Convivio* after the death of Beatrice. In *La Divina Commedia*, Beatrice is the revelation of truth and the one who confers beatitude and in Svevo's novel it is Augusta, who shows Zeno the way through love to health. As he recalls later in the novel, "Non so più se dopo o prima dell'affetto, nel mio animo si formò una speranza, la grande speranza di poter finire col somigliare ad Augusta ch'era la salute personificata [I'm not sure whether it came before or after my affection, but in my spirit a hope was formed, the great hope finally to come to resemble Augusta, who was the personification of health]" (786 [156]). Giovanni and Augusta Malfenti act as guides to Zeno at different stages in his journey, and in such a way that one recalls the thirtieth canto of *Purgatorio*, where Virgil hands the duty of guide to Beatrice.³⁴ Zeno's marriage to Augusta also allows him to assume a patriarchal role in the family, and as Augusta transmits her own healthy routine to him, Zeno finds himself freed the influence of strong paternal figures, such as his father-in-law Giovanni Malfenti, acquiring a measure of legitimacy in this union.

In this satirical interpretation of a narrative that moves towards an absolute "*ultimo salute*" there is no absolute love without adultery, no familial bond without chicanery, and carnal love threatens to derail his pursuit of redemption and wholeness. Courtship, competition, engagement, marriage and infidelity are allegories that serve to illustrate Italo Svevo's problematic relationship with the "living language" of his novels. Zeno's extramarital

³⁴ "Ma Virgilio n'avea lasciati scemi | di sé, Virgilio dolcissimo padre, | Virgilio a cui per mia salute die' mi; [But Virgil had deprived us of himself, | Virgil, the gentlest father, Virgil, he | to whom I gave my self for my salvation;]" Purg. XXX.49-51. Also worth noting is the use of the word "salute" which refers in this context to salvation.

affair with Carla Gerco, a singer of *canzonette triestine* in dialect, portends the unsustainability of his integrity and the allegory demonstrates unresolved tensions within the sphere of Triestine culture as well as the author's aspirations toward Italian legitimacy. If the Malfenti sisters are the soul (*anima*) of Trieste, Carla is its flesh (*carne*), and Guido follows a parallel route by marrying Ada, and taking on a mistress named Carmen. As Zeno moves between the poles of an idealized national language and a local dialect that is devalued in the national context, he finds a language that he can work with, but that renders him "inert." Zeno idealizes Ada, who was his first intended bride, he devalues his mistress Carla, and his love for his wife Augusta is ambivalent. In all of these situations, Zeno realizes that he is powerless to choose: "Le donne sanno sempre quello che vogliono. Non ci furono esitazioni né per parte di Ada che mi respinse, né dall'Augusta che mi prese, e neppure da Carla, che mi lasciò fare ["Women always know what they want. There was no hesitation on the part of Ada, who rejected me, or of Augusta, who accepted me, or of Carla, who let me have my way"] (824 [192]). This dynamic is played out in the that Svevo writes in: his aspiration towards Italian and his rejection as an Italian writer, the sensuous temptations of an existing dialect poetry tradition, and the ambivalent "health" of his living, Triestine-Italian *loquela*, referred to by critics as "scriver male." The allegory of Svevo's literary language and style as a non-place is illustrated in three images that relate Zeno's courtship, marriage and infidelity.

First, the courtship: Before Guido enters the picture, Zeno courts Ada at the home of Giovanni Malfenti and tells stories to her in the company of her sisters, but he learns much later from Augusta that his strategy was equally ill chosen. In narrating his stories Zeno wants his fictions to have aesthetic and affective value: Ada does not find Zeno's stories amusing and they breed only contempt in her, while Alberta is amused but they don't inspire an emotional

reaction in her. Augusta is entertained by Zeno's fictions and they evoke her love, all the more because they come from him. "Coi miei sforzi a me toccava come a quel tiratore cui era riuscito di colpire il centro del bersaglio, però di quello posto accanto al suo. ["For all my efforts I achieved the result of that marksman who hit the bullseye, but of the target next to his"]" (708; 83). Zeno fails to win Ada's affection, though he finds that his campaign for love was successful, only not in the way that he had intended: The image of the marksman illustrates for us that Svevo's writing does something very well, but not what he wishes it to do. This also relates to Svevo's reception: his intention was to insert himself into the Italian tradition, as Voghera avers, but instead he was taken up as world literature.

Second, Zeno's marriage: How does one write well in a language that is personified by Augusta? When Zeno meets the Malfenti daughters for the first time, Zeno eliminates Augusta at first sight, describing her thusly:

La prima cosa che in lei si osservava era lo strabismo tanto forte che, ripensando a lei dopo di non averla vista per qualche tempo, la personificava tutta. Aveva poi dei capelli non molto abbondanti, bionda, ma di un colore fosco privo di luce e la figura intera non disgraziata, pure un po' grossa per quell'età. (695)

["The first thing you noticed about her was a *strabismus* so pronounced that if someone tried to recall her after not having seen her for a while, that defect would personify her totally. Her hair, moreover, was not abundant; blonde, but a dull color without luster, and her figure, while not graceless, was still a bit heavy for her age." (71, my modification to the translation in italics)]

Zeno conjures in his mind the image of a lackluster and sparse language, with little grace and an uncanny defect that draws one's attention, to the point of excluding other qualities. Whether Augusta is wall-eyed or cross-eyed, her *strabismus* defines her so totally because it makes her appear uncanny. Her unattractive features, at first, serve as a foil to

highlight the beauty of the other daughters. Then, as her instinctive love for Zeno becomes more apparent, she is devalued in proportion to his idealization of Ada: “Per la brutta fanciulla che m’amava, avevo tutto il disdegno che non ammettevo avesse per me la sua bella sorella, per me la sua bella sorella, che io amavo [Toward the ugly girl who loved me I felt the very disdain I could not believe was addressed to me by her beautiful sister, whom I loved]” (724 [98]). Zeno had eliminated Augusta from his marriage prospects first because he found her to be the most unattractive among the siblings, but after their betrothal her image becomes more attractive to him, not manifested in any external or physical change, but within Zeno’s perceptions and revised recollections.

Ma sentivo una certa simpatia per la sua taglia che avevo stretta e che avevo trovata più sottile di quanto l’avessi creduta. Anche la sua faccia era discreta, e pareva deforme solo causa quell’occhio che batteva una strada non sua. Avevo certamente esagerata quella deformità ritenendola estesa fino alla coscia. (749)

[“But I found a certain fondness for her waist, which I had clasped and found slimmer than I believed. Her face, too, wasn’t bad, and it seemed malformed only because of that eye that looked in an errant direction. I had surely exaggerated that malformation, believing it extended also to the thigh.” (121-122)]

This change in Zeno’s way of seeing Augusta presages the radical shift in perspective with which he will come to look at his own life. It is only after he touches Augusta – when mistaking her for Ada during Guido’s séance – that he begins to realize that his devaluation of her physical beauty was exaggerated, and this inaugurates an ambivalent relationship where he simultaneously loves and hates Augusta, he is grateful and resentful for being grateful, he is dominant and submissive, dependent on her and independent from her at the same time. Reflecting upon his love for Augusta, Zeno remarks, “È un dubbio che m’accompagnò per tutta la vita e oggidi posso pensare che l’amore accompagnato da tanto dubbio sia il vero

amore [This is a doubt that has accompanied me all through my life, and today I believe that when love is accompanied by such doubt, it is true love]" (770 [141]). Zeno's sentiment towards his spouse, an imperfect love that is no less true for it, is a metaphor indicating the problematic relationship between Svevo's literary language and the ideal territory to which it belongs. Zeno's marital home is a space of ambivalence and doubt, however the marital home of Guido and Ada turns out to be a much worse place. Zeno's failed courtship of Ada, his happy marriage to Augusta and the revision of his matrimonial intentions parody the providential historical understanding that speculates upon Dante's amorous relationships with earthly and divine muses.

Third, Zeno enters into his extramarital affair with an ambivalence that resonates with the question of literary language, since he is not sure to think of his mistress as a boon to his health or a damaging vice. His attraction to Carla is of a sensuous nature as opposed to a spiritual one, and this is reflected in his comparison between her manner of speaking and that of Ada: "La sua voce aveva qualche cosa di musicale quando parlava e [...] il suo linguaggio aveva qualche cosa di straniero. [...] Era proprio tutt'altro pronuncia di quella di Ada. Ogni suo suono mi pareva d'amore ["There was a musical quality in her voice when she spoke, and [...] her speech had something foreign about it. [...] Her pronunciation was something quite different from Ada's. Her every sound seemed to be one of love"]" (809 [178]). Svevo's familiarity with vernacular poetry and song has been well documented by Simone Volpato and Riccardo Cepach, who affirm that Svevo possessed a dictionary of the Triestine dialect as well as a substantial collection of dialect poetry.³⁵ Dialect poetry also constituted its own sphere of

³⁵ "Una lingua trova la sua codificazione in un vocabolario e Svevo aveva sotto le mani il principe dei dizionari triestini, ossia quel *Dizionario-vocabolario del dialetto triestino e della lingua italiana* (Trieste, Tipografia Figli di C. Amati, 1889) di Ernesto Kosovitz nel quale Svevo sottolinea diversi vocaboli. Attorno al

literary culture in Trieste, separate from the Italian tradition and some of its representative poets, like Giglio Padovan, who wanted to conserve the “purity” of the dialect as historical record, thereby introducing a national-political aspect to the municipal vernacular tradition, protective of its literary language against “i barbarismi che per lo passato deturpavano il vernacolo triestino [barbarisms that had disfigured the Triestine vernacular] and “voci stranieri con coi si tenta di infestare il nostro vernacolo [foreign tongues that have tempted to infest our vernacular].”³⁶ His famous verse, “co’l Jegher e ’l patòc no se fa scola,”³⁷ roughly means that words of German and Slavic derivation should be ostracized from dialect poetry. Vernacular poetry, as a means of jealously guarding a sense of local particularity is also acted out in Zeno’s dalliance with Carla Gerco.

Carla is a pure dialect speaker and Zeno’s affair with her begins under the pretext of being a patron to her singing career. His relationship with Carla threatens his status within the family structure. He cannot make a home there, even a temporary one, and after much coercion from Carla he agrees to sleep beside her instead of going home, but this provokes his anxiety. Zeno can convince himself that his encounters with Carla Gerco improve and expand upon his love for his wife, but the betrayal weighs on his conscience and he finds it difficult to quit his mistress. Much like the shorthand that he used to indicate his last cigarettes (“U.S.”),

vocabolario entrano in relazione non semplici autori dialettali ma gli amici di Svevo che componevano poesie, scherzi in dialetto triestino, canzonette; fra tutti Giglio Padovan e Giulio Piazza che nel 1920 per l’editore Risorgimento di Trieste pubblicherà il volumetto *Trieste vernacola. Antologia della poesia dialettale triestina*. Del Padovan (1836-1895) *nom de plume* Polifemo Acca Svevo ben tre opere (*Rime in dialetto veneto* del 1875, *Miscellanea* del 1893, *Scritti vari* del 1913) tutte compulsate; del Piazza ne possiede altrettante tre (*Maciete* del 1885, *Brustolini e mandole* del 1893, *Fargnòcole* del 1899).” Simone Volpato and Riccardo Cepach, *Alla peggior andrò in biblioteca : i libri ritrovati di Italo Svevo*. Digital edition. (Bibliohaus, 2013).

³⁶ Quoted in Roberto Damiani. *Poeti dialettali triestini : profilo storico-critico (1875-1980)* (Trieste : Edizioni « Italo Svevo », 1981) 20-21; Giglio Padovan (Polifemo Acca), *Rime triestine e istriane* (Trieste: Balestra, 1885) 231.

³⁷ Giglio Padovan, “L’eco del klutsch”, *Poesia dialettale triestina: antologia (1875-1975)*, eds. Roberto Damiani and Claudio Grisancich (Trieste: Edizioni «Italo Svevo», 1976) 20.

Zeno's account is punctuated with unfulfilled resolutions to put an end to his affair.³⁸ His marriage to Augusta represents his striving towards health and legitimacy, and his affair is neither healthy nor legitimate. Zeno, with his bourgeois values, wants to enter into the Italian tradition, and looks down somewhat on the working-class vernacular tradition.

Doveva pur esserci qualche comunicazione fra' miei due stati d'essere ed io non volevo diminuire la mia già scarsa libertà di passare dall'uno all'altro. Perciò non sapevo accettare una tale proposta che invece mi rese più cauto così che anche quando ero esasperato dalla gelosia, seppi celarla. Il mio amore si fece più iroso e finì che quando la desideravo e anche quando non la desideravo affatto, Carla mi sembrò un essere inferiore. Mi tradiva o di lei non m'importava nulla. Quando non l'odiavo non ricordavo che ci fosse. Io appartenevo all'ambiente di salute e di onestà in cui regnava Augusta a cui ritornavo subito col corpo e l'anima non appena Carla mi lasciava libero. (882)

[“There had to be some communication between my two humors, and I didn't want to reduce my already scant freedom to pass from one to the other. Therefore I couldn't accept such a proposal, which instead made me all the more cautious, so that even when I was exasperated by jealousy, I couldn't conceal it. My love for her become more wrathful, and in the end, when I desired her and even when I didn't desire her in the least, Carla seemed to me an inferior being. So she was unfaithful to me? I cared nothing about her. When I didn't hate her, I forgot her existence. I belonged to the atmosphere of health and honesty, the realm of Augusta, to whom I returned immediately in body and soul the moment Carla left me free.” (246)]

In the context of this allegory, where prose style and linguistic tradition are portrayed as the protagonist's object of affection, it is significant that Zeno sees the freedom to move back and forth between his wife and his mistress as moving between one state of being and another. Zeno needs to move between but cannot stay with any of them for too long. Even

³⁸ The connection between smoking and adultery is made even more explicit with Zeno's next mistress who sells cigarettes for a living. We don't read about her in *La coscienza di Zeno* but in “Il mio ozio [My idleness],” one of short stories that extend the Zeno narrative past the novel. In this narrative an older Zeno Cosini takes salutary long walks to buy cigarettes from a tobacconist, where he meets his next mistress Felicità. He begins his illicit affair with her out of love for Augusta, having convinced himself that he must trick death into thinking him young by taking on a mistress, so that death will not take him too soon from his marital life.

with the personification of health, as this would mean a kind of stagnancy. After his Carla decides to marry her music teacher and break her affair with Zeno he returns to his wife:

Passai anche il pomeriggio e la sera con Augusta. Essa era occupatissima ed io le stavo accanto inerte.

Mi pareva di essere trasportato così, inerte, da una corrente, una corrente di acqua limpida: la vita onesta della mia casa.

M'abbandono a quella corrente che mi trasportava ma non mi nettava. Tutt'altro! Rilevava la mia sozzura. (908)

[“I spent the afternoon and also the evening with Augusta. She was very occupied, and I remained beside her, inert. I felt that, inert, I was being carried along by a current, a current of clear water: the honest life of my house.

I abandoned myself to that current that carried me but didn't cleanse me. Far from it! It emphasized my filth.” (270)]

Zeno returns to his wife, and even contemplates suicide, but he is saved by the idea that his mistress is replaceable and takes many forms, always colors his relationship with his wife, sometimes adding to his love, sometimes detracting in the Zeno narrative, which extends into the *Continuazioni*. His wife and his mistress hold something for him, the value of his ambiguity is precisely this freedom to pass from one to the other, and this is why his resolutions never stick. The language of Svevo is constituted in the freedom to move between all of these approaches to literary language. What Zeno finds instead is a kind of golden mean: “una sosta [a way station]” as he puts it elsewhere, signifying a transitory present in Zeno's construction and deconstruction of himself in writing. In any case, it is somewhere that he cannot stay. The engine of Zeno's writing is fuelled by a cautious freedom to move between spiritual love, or health, and carnal desire, or vice – not exactly the *via dritta* attributed to Dante's redemptive vernacular poetry, yet it is no less of an allegorical pilgrimage for the Triestine artist.

Zenoworlds: totality, ideology and originality

Il poeta – anche se canta lievemente, se ha un mondo di piccole cose che pare gli si concedono senza forza – è sempre un forte, uno che diventa signore di tutto: tutto: poeta è chi del suo piccolo o grande mondo fa l'unico mondo possibile. Fuori del mondo di Dante o di Gozzano niente è possibile: quando tu li leggi. L'attimo in cui tu aggiungi, collabori a loro (come Desanctis per Dante, Cecchi per Gozzano) segna la nascita d'un altro mondo. Il genio non si distingue in geni piccoli o grandi: ma *quantitativamente*: mondo unico più vasto o meno. E anche questa è distinzione filosofica, non artistica. (Slataper, *Epistolario* 114)

The poet — even when singing softly, who has a world of little things that seem to be granted without effort — is always a strong one: one who becomes the lord of everything: everything. A poet is someone who makes out of his little or vast world the only world possible. Outside of the world of Dante or of Gozzano nothing is possible — when you read them. The moment in which you add, or collaborate with them (as De Sanctis with Dante, Cecchi with Gozzano) signals the birth of another world. Genius is not distinguished in little geniuses or great ones, but *quantitatively*: a world more or less vast. And this distinction is philosophical, not artistic.

Why does Slataper think of his remarks on poetry as a philosophical problem? It is because the poet's world is not only epistemic but cosmopolitical. His juxtaposition of Dante, a great poet, and Gozzano, a minor one; a poet from which the tradition draws its vitality, and the poet who attests to the exhaustion of the tradition, relates to the way he sees his own role as a poet, whereby “Il corso del mio sviluppo è appunto questo sempre maggiore allargarsi.” Slataper was thinking of the irradiation of culture through the reading of others (De Sanctis, Cecchi) enlarging their worlds by interpreting them (quantitatively) and creating new worlds in the process. Dante is no less exempt from the collaboration of which Slataper speaks, and it is significant that the pilgrim gets a ride from Virgil as he goes through the centre of the Inferno. Dante's new world and its language are piggybacked on the *latinitas* and ecumene of Virgil's language and literary culture. Zeno, instead, embarks on a locomotive, which is a

symbol of the modern technological mediation of space and time, and mechanical forces that include print, presenting his own particular *loquela* for a cosmopolitical public.

Dante and Goethe are both figures of genius that have historically and conceptually occupied the centres of totalizing worldviews. Like the concentric spheres, illuminated by the point of light in *Paradiso*, the poet's language and his vision intersect with the outer world and irradiate into the peripheries of a language territory. Upon reaching the limits of the language territory, it may transcend them materially through the economy of print circulation, linguistically through translation into other languages, or spatially upon the language in which they are written being understood in other places. With the literary economy of the Dantean model conceived of thusly, Slataper's observations indicate how the paradigm of genius transcends the territorial imperative conceptually by generating worldviews. The world of the poet is like Kant's Idea of reason, which would gather together the "planless conglomeration of human actions" that make up human history. Paradigmatic authors like Dante provide "useful fictions" that generate worldviews in which the territorial imperatives of language can gain a foothold. Antiliterature, by contrast, is quite useless in this respect.

When Voghera claimed that Svevo as a *great* writer who writes badly, and Bazlen described Svevo as "a genius and nothing more," both suggest that the nature of Svevo's genius belonged to a different order than that of Dante, who created a language, became the prophet of the Italian nation and the archetype of the universal artist. The author of *La coscienza di Zeno* was none of these things, yet he was universal and paradigmatic in a very particular way. The universality that was supposed to anchor Svevo's sense of cultural identity could not be found in any of the territorial imperatives that made claims to Trieste, neither by the supranational empire nor by the nation-state across the border. The particularity of Trieste,

which Tom Nairn describes as an “overlapping catchment area” was inimical to the kind of cultural homogenization that Italy demanded of them, while at the same time “the live political forces in Trieste know that there is no escape from nationalism in a political sense.”³⁹ At the border of a multilingual Empire where one was educated in German, spoke a local dialect based on Veneto, mixed with contributions from the residual vocabularies of assimilated groups who came to Trieste after the establishment of the free port, and looking towards Italy for its spiritual patrimony inhabited multiple worlds. Svevo recognized how relative and interchangeable those worlds were, and the trauma of Zeno’s encounter at the border occurs when he is longer permitted to move between them. Relegated to a domain of absolute state power, on one side of the border between Austria and Italy, Zeno finds himself confined to a Babel state with no ideal linguistic territory; an “overlapping catchment area” on a grand scale. The vital principle of Zeno’s existence, much like Svevo’s language, is how he inhabits the liminal, and constantly moves between territorializations.

Planet Basedow: the world as a waystation

The border is not only a metaphor for territorial limits, but for spiritual and cognitive ones as well. Zeno’s border experience returns at the end of the novel as a macrocosmic projection of his worldview, but before he gets there, Zeno occupies multiple worlds or is preoccupied by them. Near the beginning of the novel Zeno asserts that his “sickness” is a conviction, but as doctors continually find him healthy, it becomes obvious to us that it is something invented, yet the narrative manifestations of his imaginary sicknesses demonstrate how conviction generates totalizing worldviews in Zeno, and how he makes sense of his fragmented histories through them. First, it is Malfenti whose commercial axioms stand in for

³⁹ Tom Nairn, “Internationalism and the Second Coming” *Daedalus*, 122.3 (Summer, 1993) 155-170; 166.

historical ones, and at one point the sage of *furberia* admits to Zeno that his axioms are correct because the history of the world has proved them to be true. This also bears out Malfenti's third axiom, which is that theory should only be applied in retrospect. Zeno contemplates what a cosmos ordered by Basedow syndrome, a real sickness that afflicts Ada, must be like. Before launching into his analysis of the worldview engendered by this disease, he remarks on the world-generating nature of ideas and the historical personalities that personify them:

Io credo che da molti come da me vi sieno dei periodi di tempo in cui certe idee occupino e ingombrino tutto il cervello chiudendo a tutte le altre. Ma se anche alla collettività succede la stessa cosa! Vive di Darwin dopo di essere vissuta di Robespierre e di Napoleone eppoi di Liebig o magari di Leopardi quando su tutto il cosmo non troneggi Bismarck!

Ma di Basedow vissi solo io! (957)

[“I believe that many people, like me, go through periods of time when certain ideas occupy, even cram, the whole brain, shutting out all others. Why, the same thing happens to society! It lives on Darwin, after having lived on Robespierre and Napoleon, and then Liebig or perhaps Leopardi, when Bismarck doesn't reign over the whole cosmos!

But only I lived on Basedow!” (316)]

The Basedow world is not unlike the Darwin world that he imagines near the end of the novel, or for that matter, those of Marx or Freud who are not mentioned here, but would also qualify as paradigmatic creators of discourse, generating the kinds of worldviews that Zeno might occupy single-mindedly or contrast with each other, as he does in the case of the chemical analysis and psychoanalysis. Karl Adolph von Basedow, the German physician “ch'era stato l'amico di Goethe” (957), as Zeno rejoinders, initially described the disease and gave it his name, provides the “useful fiction” that allows one to make sense of what Zeno would later describe as an “enorme, costruzione senza scopo [enormous, aimless

construction]” when seen from on high. In this case, Zeno accentuates the interchangeability of discursive worldviews, in such a way that none are absolute, and that any could give a shape to history. However, the Basedow cosmos that springs from Ada’s disease can also be seen as an outgrowth of the Malfenti world. As Zeno claimed earlier, between his apprenticeship with Giovanni and courtship of the daughters, the household was the centre of his world, its function in the narrative as a microcosm for Triestine society. Zeno is thinking of the “health and legitimacy” that he sought to acquire there, and contemplates its perversions in the path not taken.

The Basedow cosmos engenders a line with two absolute poles between a hypertrophy of the disease (edema) and its hypostasis (goiter). In between them, Zeno writes, “Il giusto medio fra le due malattie si trova al centro e viene designato impropriamente come la salute che non è che un sosta [“The golden mean between the two poles is found in the centre and is improperly defined as health, which is only a way station”]” (958; 316). In Zeno’s Basedow world the middle ground is represented by “coloro che hanno incipiente o gozzo o edema e su tutta la linea, in tutta l’umanità, la salute assoluta manca [“those who have either incipient goiter or incipient edema, and along the entire line, in all mankind, absolute health is missing”]” (958 [316]). “Salute” is like Zeno’s earlier conviction of “malattia,” only now he realises that the worldview informed by his “conviction” does not offer him a “giusto medio,” or a right middle-ground, since it is only a “sosta” which is a temporary stop, or a way-station on a journey. The “sosta” in the Basedow world is a fitting political metaphor of Zeno’s unredeemed Trieste, since as Slataper noted, Trieste had a commercial and national “doppia anima” that could not be resolved into an absolute without harming the city economically or

culturally.⁴⁰ For Slataper, the Irredentist discourses of Vivante and those of ideologues like Ruggero Timeus represented the two opposite poles of a socialist lie and a nationalist lie. The example of the Basedow world shows how the particular and the contextual nature of Ada's disease, and metaphorically the antinomy of Triestine life, extends conceptually to the general and the universal *ad absurdum*, and seeing as the way station is uninhabitable, the Basedow world foreshadows Zeno's final diagnosis, "La vita attuale è inquinata alle radici! ["Present day life is polluted at the roots"]" (1084 [436])! The stopover is a synthetic solution; a systematic coherence imposed upon his situation by fixing structures in place. Absolute health, which is an Idea in this Kantian sense, sustainable only in fiction, engenders a dialectical tension, a stasis in which equal and opposing forces do not cancel each other out, as they should. For Zeno this dialectical tension, which does not resolve itself into absolutes of sickness or health, cannot be maintained. Therefore Basedow does not offer a foothold for a sense of historical order. However, Zeno does find another Idea to make sense of his world, and that is "originality."

The grammar of ideology and the originality of life

For Svevo, the idea of a remote or paradigmatic "origin" narrative implies a forgotten and irretrievable sense or meaning, or as Zeno remarks in *La coscienza*, "Ricordo tutto, ma non intendo niente [I remember everything, but I don't understand anything]."⁴¹ The expansive content of Zeno's remembered past is available for him, but its meaning is predicated upon the aspirational ideal of a future "health" that might redeem him.⁴² Literary

⁴⁰ Scipio Slataper, *Lettere triestine : col seguito di altri scritti vociani di polemica su Trieste* (Trieste: Edizioni Dedolibri, 1988) 31-39; Scipio Slataper "La vita dello spirito" *La Voce*, 25 March 1909.

⁴¹ Svevo, *La coscienza di Zeno* 654; untranslated in Weaver.

⁴² This also applies to Slataper, who uses the metaphor of a "nido disfatto [unmade nest]" to which one cannot return when contemplating the national origins of his forebears in *Il mio Carso*. According to Slataper

history, like the printed word, fixes a moment of writing in time and place, whereas writing is the original substance upon which literature is based. Literary traditions predicate their historical and territorial hegemony upon the material and conceptual apparatus of literary history. Antiliterature, in this sense, does not dispense with notions of “originality” but with the mode of predication that characterizes the literary tradition. In Zeno’s dealings with Guido, Svevo makes us aware of how he distinguishes his writing from what was generally accepted as literature. The episode in which Guido conducts a séance suggests that literary traditions often predicate their authority on ancestral conceptions of origin that are distant in time or space, and these origins conceptually anchor their territorial centres of irradiation.

In one exchange with Guido, Zeno illustrates a critical distinction between originality and predication, insofar as literary traditions predicate their historical and territorial hegemony upon the conceptual and historical weight of literary history. Svevo illustrates this eloquently in an exchange between the two, in which Guido laments to Zeno about the misfortunes that he has brought onto himself:

– La vita è ingiusta e dura!

A me sembrava assolutamente che mi fosse vietato di dire una sola parola che implicasse un mio giudizio fra lui e Ada. Ma mi pareva di dover pur dire qualche cosa. Egli aveva finito col parlare della vita e le aveva appoppati due predicati che non peccavano di soverchia originalità. Io scopersi di meglio proprio perché m’ero messo a fare la critica di quello ch’egli aveva detto. Tante volte si dicono delle cose seguendo il suono delle parole come s’associarono casualmente. Poi, appena, che vi si è consumato e qualche volta si scopre che la casuale associazione partori un’idea. Dissi:

– La vita non è né brutta né bella, ma è originale! (972-3)

the meaning of the past culminates in the language one actually speaks, in the life one actually lives, and in the act of poetry as an expression of the present. Contrary to this idea, “La letteratura è far della poesia ispirati da parole stampate; è aver sentimenti finti [Literature is making poetry inspired by printed words; is having faked sentiments].”

[“Life is unfair and hard!”

I felt that it was absolutely forbidden for me to utter a single word that suggested any judgment concerning him and Ada. But I also felt a duty to say something. He had ended by mentioning life and by applying two predicate adjectives to it, neither of them supremely original. I found something better precisely because I had set myself up as a critic of what he said. Often we say things following the sound of the words as they are casually connected. Then, as soon as you look to see what was said was worth the breath it consumed, you sometimes discover that the casual association generated an idea.

I said: “Life is neither ugly nor beautiful, it is original.” (330)]

Zeno analyses himself reacting to Guido’s statement and then the idea occurs to him spontaneously, but the recollections that take place in the interstice speak to Svevo’s reaction to the Italian literary tradition.⁴³ Guido’s statement is initially followed by an inner prohibition to speak, but then he feels compelled, even obligated to say something in response. He ruminates upon Guido’s words and what stands out for him are the two predicate adjectives. He acknowledges the bias that inclines him to be critical of Guido and his response seems counter-punctual and automatic, but if he is sincere in helping Guido, then he wants to indicate to him that “unjust” and “hard” are only judgments that come from him and colour his world in a negative light. In Zeno’s impulses, a staccato of restraint and compulsion, we have all of Svevo’s acculturation leading to a sense of inferiority as well as his intuitive rebelliousness. Zeno’s response could be translated into a credo for Svevo’s writing in a “lingua viva,” since it is not predicated on its ugliness or its beauty, judged according to some benchmark, but on its originality. Yet this originality is only a “sosta [way-station]” – not a foundation or a golden mean. *Originality* situates him squarely in life, however this

⁴³ I will not pursue it here, but the parody of this exchange alludes to comparisons between Dante and Guido Cavalcanti, insofar as the latter conceived of love as a force that can bestow unbearable anguish and death in his poetry, whereas in all of the former’s oeuvre it led to supreme happiness and beatitude.

instance also bears out Zeno's hypothesis in the "Continuazioni" which is that "la vita sarà letteraturizzata." There is a literary quality in the interstice that allows Zeno to manipulate narrative time, to freeze the time of the action in order to create expanded spaces of commentary, explanation and justification. The literary – print, distribution, readers, canons and so on – provides the ideal foothold that is lacking in the transitory originality of life, and as Svevo wrote in his essay on dilettantism, this "letteraturizzazione" is the *pharmakon* "germe" that can either be developed into universal value or into the "malattia della materia" which characterizes the material of literary history. Zeno also reacts to the sudden literaturization of his own statement, once it is uttered, as it immediately strikes him as aphoristic. Yet Guido's response to Zeno's statement speaks volumes about the material and conceptual presuppositions of the Italian literary tradition:

— Originale la vita! — disse Guido ridendo. — Dove l'hai letto?

Non importò di assicurargli che non l'avevo letto in nessun posto perché altrimenti le mie parole avrebbero avuta meno importanza per lui. (973)

["Original? Life?" Guido said, laughing. "Where did you read that?"]

I didn't bother to assure him that I hadn't read it anywhere, because otherwise my words would have held less importance for him." (330)]

Guido's discourse moves from predicate adjectives to the ideology of predication.

Zeno understands that in order for his statement to have any authority or truth-value to Guido, who is a true *letterato* in Slataper's pejorative sense of the word, it would have to be predicated on something already declared (or its Latin etymology: *prae*- "beforehand" and *dicare* "to make known"). He posits the legitimacy of his worldview upon publication and documentation, and he tries to delegitimize Zeno's statement for not being based in them. What Guido is incapable of seeing is that his miserable situation is the result of his attempts to

apply theories to the market and to his life that he sees as authoritative because they are published: He reads Otto Weininger and subscribes to the doctrines of the Austrian misogynist in his marriage; he reads a convincing book about investing in the stock market and loses all of his wealth in speculation. When he ruins his marriage and loses his fortune, he thinks that it is only bad luck that befalls him. For Guido only the provenance of the worldview gives it importance; it must come from anywhere else besides what is right in front of him. This mode of predication underwrites literary hegemony, anchors institutions, channels human action, and influences understanding. Predication is the grammatical function of ideology because it modifies the meaning of experience as a predicate does the meaning of a sentence.

Guido's function in the allegorical scope of the novel is to show how the "literariness" of literature manifests itself as an alibi for cultural hegemony. As a way of contextualizing Svevo's reception, Bruno Maier describes the sanctioned literature of the nineteen twenties:

In quel periodo, infatti, prevaleva il concetto d'una letteratura altamente "letteraria", preziosamente classicista, imperniata sulla estrema purezza e raffinatezza formale [...] per tacere delle possibili implicazioni politiche d'un simile tipo di letteratura, costituente una specie di prudente "alibi" morale o di saggia alternativa alle insidie dell'"oratoria" e della "retorica di Stato," imposte agli scrittori dalla dittatura fascista.⁴⁴

[At that time, in fact, the concept of a highly "literary" literature prevailed, preciously classicist, based on extreme purity and formal refinement [...] not to mention the possible political implications of such a type of literature, constituting a kind of prudent moral "alibi" or a wise alternative to the snares of "oratory" and "rhetoric of the State," imposed upon writers by the fascist dictatorship.]

Maier's hyperboles describe the caste of intellectuals who aligned exceedingly precious or rigorous standards with the ideological manacles of the totalitarian state. From

⁴⁴ Bruno Maier, *Italo Svevo*. Sixth edition (Milano: Mursia, 1961-1980) 180.

such a perspective one can also surmise that contempt for Svevo's language was often caught up in totalitarian ideologies operating in the field of national literary culture. When critics scorned the Triestine novelist for his unusual syntax or his dilettantism, it was often a cover for what was tacitly a denunciation of his Jewish-German-Italian descent, or of characters and themes in his novels that were difficult to reconcile with their patriotism. However, to the chagrin of Enrico Falqui, who was one of Svevo's most vitriolic critics and exemplified the state ideology in literary criticism, "il debito di riconoscimento e di stima [the debt of acknowledgement and respect]" owed to Svevo by Italian literary culture for his many years of obscurity had been "abbondantemente saldato [abundantly paid in full]." In the context of extreme nationalist ideology, the rhetorical valorization of "scriver bene" occults a system of ideological values, and Svevo's critical art undermines it. Antiliterature is anti-ideological; however, as Ara and Magris observe, when it is taken up as literature – as a literary commonplace (*topos* letteratissimo) or as a "stylistic convention" upon which the legitimacy of literary work is predicated – then it becomes ideology par excellence. In other words, to answer Guido's question, we the readers, ghosts of the future, know where we *read* about the originality of life!

The extraterrestrial view: "Molto originale!"

However, we can also look at this exchange from another angle: After Zeno utters the words intended to help Guido change his view of things, he is immediately struck with the importance of what he has said, and in the interstices that lie between moments of dialogue, Zeno's reflections upon those words lead him into some of his cosmic musings:

Quando ci pensai mi parve d'aver detta una cosa importante. Designata così, la vita mi parve tanto nuova che stetti a guardarla come se l'avessi veduta per la

prima volta coi suoi corpi gassosi, fluidi e solidi. Se l'avessi raccontata a qualcuno che non vi fosse stato abituato e fosse perciò privo del nostro senso comune, sarebbe rimasto senza fiato dinanzi all'enorme costruzione priva di scopo. M'avrebbe domandato: "Ma come l'avete sopportata?" E, informatosi ad ogni singolo dettaglio, da quei corpi celesti appesi lassù perché si vedano ma non si tocchino, fino al mistero che circonda la morte, avrebbe certamente esclamato "Molto originale!"

— Originale la vita! — disse Guido ridendo. — Dove l'hai letto?

Non importò di assicurargli che non l'avevo letto un nessun posto perché altrimenti le mie parole avrebbero avuta meno importanza per lui. Ma, più che ci pensavo, più originale trovavo la vita. E non occorre mica venire dal di fuori per vederla messa insieme in un modo tanto bizzarro. Bastava ricordare tutto quello che noi uomini dalla vita si è aspettato, per vederla tanto strana da arrivare alla conclusione che forse l'uomo vi è stato messo dentro per errore e che non vi appartiene. (972-3)

[“When I thought about it, it seemed to me I had said something important. Thus defined, life seemed to me so new that I stood there looking at it as if seeing it for the first time, with its gaseous, liquid and solid bodies. If I were to narrate it to someone unfamiliar with it and therefore lacking in our common knowledge, that listener would remain mute in the face of the enormous, aimless construction. He would ask me: “But how have you borne it?” And, having inquired into every single detail, from those celestial bodies suspended up above so that they can be seen and not touched, to the mystery that surrounds death, he would surely exclaim: “Very original!”

“Original? Life?” Guido said, laughing. “Where did you read that?”

I didn't bother to assure him that I hadn't read it anywhere, because otherwise my words would have held less importance for him. But the more I thought about it, the more original I found life to be. And it wasn't all that necessary to come from outside to see how it was put together. Simply recalling everything we humans expected from life sufficed for us to see how strange it was, and to arrive at the conclusion that perhaps mankind is located in its midst by mistake and doesn't belong there.” (330-31)]

Zeno's reflection upon the significance of his statement relates to the dynamic of introspection and transcendence that characterizes the movement from *Commedia* to *Divina*.

The statement seems revelatory to him precisely because they arise from his situation, and in his cosmic imaginings they demonstrate a kind of divine provenance. In Zeno's recollections (that is, if we suspend our awareness of his liar's paradox, and the dialectical movement between recollecting and writing) what he said seemed meaningful to him instantaneously and not retrospectively. Zeno's cosmic consciousness is analytical, but it is informed by a naive, intuitive beholding of life. His intuitive response strikes him as important, such that it is an idea that is capable of irradiating into his entire life and narrative.

Before Guido responds, Zeno imagines an interlocutor who corroborates his view on the originality of life. The imagined interlocutor who joins Zeno in his vision of the cosmos is a stranger (*xénos*) to the ways of the planet. Zeno joins this extraterrestrial figure in gazing down upon life from above. From what could be described as a celestial perspective, they would see precisely this “enorme costruzione senza scopo [enormous, aimless construction].” The question posed by this extraterrestrial interlocutor implies that the world seems uninhabitable, accidental, and out of place, and yet he is amazed by the fact that sentient beings do, in fact, live on it. From the perspective of this extraterrestrial other, the “originality” of life has another meaning: it is a euphemism for “strange.” The world is a liminal place, and the originality of life is also its atopic quality.

This passage illustrates the enstatic-exstatic dynamic of Zeno's worldview. *Enstasis* is Zeno's cosmic intuition of fragmented totality, and it involves a telescoping, collapsible worldview, beginning from the awareness of life's originality. His consciousness (*coscienza*) manifests a progression from the *enstasis* of a situated historical realism, from the “originality” of life to the inverse of the same view, which projects outward to a supratemporal *ekstasis*, which means to stand outside of oneself, and even outside of history by turning

inward. There are many philosophical and theological connotations to these terms. For Aristotle *enstasis* is a way of “stepping in” to a problem, it is an “instance” that serves as a point of departure.⁴⁵ For Diogenes Laertes it is the essence of cynical philosophy as a way of life (*enstasis biou*), or as Pierre Hadot avers, “Cynicism is not a philosophy in the proper sense of the word, but a state of life (*enstasis*).”⁴⁶ Svevo’s *loquela* and Zeno’s sense of “originality” are based on an *enstatic* conception of life in an initial microcosmic state, whereas the rapture (*ekstasis*) at the end of the novel is the consciousness of experience as a macrocosmic state. For Dante, *enstasis* is the exploration of an inner world through allegory, which signifies quite literally an “other” place (*alleon*). The cosmic vision at the end of his pilgrimage is an *exstatic* image of it, and characterises the *coniunctio oppositorum* of “la mia comedia” and the “poema sacro” implied in the title that was given to it by later generations: *La Divina Commedia*.

For Guido, who is a prototypical *letterato*, “originality” implies historical or theoretical distance (*dis-stasis*), as well as documentation and ancestry (*ana-stasis*: resurrection). Guido’s response to Zeno demonstrates the grammar of predication that underlies and thereby limits of his worldview. His séances to conjure spirits from the past (*anastasis*) are a metaphor for the far away (dis-static) place of reference where his truth comes from. Yet after getting seconded by this otherworldly interlocutor and after hearing Guido’s response, Zeno turns the gaze inward, and reflects that the extraterrestrial perspective is not necessary. One had to simply see the strangeness of life from within. The originality of life, which does not support absolutes, is pre-theoretical and does not offer a “useful fiction” to unite the “planless

⁴⁵ Glenn Friesen: “Enstasy, Ecstasy and Religious Self-Reflection: A history of Dooyeweerd’s Ideas of pre-theoretical experience,” at [<http://www.members.shaw.ca/aevum/Enstasy.html>] 2011. “Early Greek thought used ‘enstasis’ to refer to an objection to a premise in a logical argument. It is finding an “instance” to counter the argument. See Aristotle: “*enstasis d’ esti protasis protasei enantia*” (*Anal. prior.* II, 28; II 26, 69a 37)” (5).

⁴⁶ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase (London: Blackwell, 1996) 103-4; quoted in Friesen, 5.

conglomeration of human actions” that Kant spoke of. Life’s originality is also quite useless – unless it gets literaturized – in which case it can be idealized and made into a universal paradigm, like Basedow.

Zeno’s namesake is also significant in the enstatic-exstatic dimensions of the narrative, moving between situated acts of writing and the cosmic intuitions generated in such moments, which also carry in them the germ of apocalypse. In the first interstice he was Zeno the “stranger” or “foreigner,” coinciding with his cosmic other, much like the intergalactic historian that Eric Hobsbawm evokes in the introduction to his book on nationalism, who visits earth after humanity has destroyed itself.⁴⁷ For this extraterrestrial documentarian planetary history would make no sense without an intimate knowledge of the historical concept of nationalism that we are embedded in. In the second interstice, he is Zeno the Eleatic maker of paradoxes that have no resolution, moving between poles of individual situated-ness and imaginary transcendence. The narrative of looking down upon human life also brings to mind the historical consciousness expressed by the scenario at the opening of Nietzsche’s essay “Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense” which posits how infinitesimally small human history is in the cosmic scheme of things, and the vanity of human preoccupations with world history can be compared with that of a gnat, or a mosquito (*der Mücke*) who expresses his inflated sense of self-importance by flying around in what seems to humans as aimless buzzing.⁴⁸ *Der Mücke* in Nietzsche’s parable is the basic unit of self-conscious individuality, and it is in this latter sense that the narrator of *La coscienza di Zeno* is

⁴⁷ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1990) 1.

⁴⁸ Friedrich W. Nietzsche, “Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense” (1873), *Friedrich Nietzsche on rhetoric and language*, ed. trans. Sander L. Gilman, Carole Blair, David J. Parent (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 246-257: 246.

emphatically a *Cosini*, which is a diminutive of “cosa”, meaning “small things.” Zeno Cosini is a small, situated microcosm of fragmented Triestine identity and paradoxes that do not resolve themselves into clear categories. In Svevo’s novel psychoanalysis is the science of trying to grasp the totality an individual human life in the middle of it all, and by seeing it reflected on all sides, constituting a centre. Yet the ridiculous image of *der Mücke* is an apt characterization of the narrative perspective when Zeno confronts the deadly comedy of the border and finds himself in the midst of a warzone. The divine, celestial projection of this comedy imagines a planet occupied by self-important parasites, which are expelled from its surface by a catastrophe that returns the cosmos at last to a state of health.

Cosini’s Nebula: from *enstasis* to *exstasis*

The synchronisation called for by the global world is not one of the soul to the cosmos, but one of bubble to bubble, of immune sphere to immune sphere. How this synchronisation is to be achieved, how a belonging together of a multitude of isolated but codependent ‘worlds’ can be created is the political question of the global age.

– Peter Sloterdijk

In the final canto of *Inferno*, after having descended through the hierarchy of sins and sinners, Dante and Virgil begin to discern a gigantic figure in a dense fog, surrounded by a lake of ice. As they approach, they find that it is three-headed Lucifer (also known as Dis and Satan), who is located at the bottom, at the centre and at the midpoint of the earth’s core. After Virgil declares to Dante that they have finally seen all that there is to see of the infernal realm, Dante climbs onto the back of Virgil, who then proceeds to climb down Lucifer’s body, grabbing onto tufts of the giant’s hair. At one point the downward journey is reversed, and, continuing in the same direction after deftly Virgil pivots his body, they pass through the

centre of gravity and their descent becomes an ascent, and the way down leads up to *Purgatorio*. There the poets find themselves at another circumference, at the base of a mountain, which is an inverse image of the cone down which he travelled earlier. The trajectory of the pilgrim's journey continues upward in concentrically smaller spirals, and after another inversion of gravity, into the heavenly realm of *Paradiso*, which culminates in the poet's ecstatic and mystical vision of divinity. The indivisible point of light at the heart of this vision, which irradiates the angelic hierarchies and all of the concentric circles of the heavens, is a vision of unity and simplicity of essence. At the end of *Inferno*, however, the two poets are afforded a glimpse at the stars "*per un pertugio tondo*" (*Inf.* 34.138), a portent of this cosmic vision and salvation.

All three works, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, end with the word "stelle [stars]," signalling the completion of the pilgrim's journey from the point of departure to its redemptive end. The Dantean narrative, as well as that of Zeno, depict protagonists who move from positions of situatedness to positions of transcendence. Dante moves down through concentrically smaller circles of human temptation and vice until he arrives at the embodiment of evil. Zeno is a fictional eyewitness to wartime territorial disputes between nations, and what he recounts is almost an ant's eye view of history unfolding, which then extends to the cosmic vision of the planet as a formless nebula. Zeno's celestial image does not constitute a centre, and yet it irradiates all that he had seen. In the *exstasis* of Dante, the spheres of heaven reveal themselves to him as a series of concentric spheres. For Svevo, however, the spheres only multiply, and burst from their theoretical generality into the image of an uninhabitable cosmic cloud. The shift from *enstasis* to *exstasis* moves from situatedness to transcendence, from the personal to the universal, from the particular to the general, from the local to the

global. However, the micronationalisms envisioned by Zeno parody the generalities that emanate from the multiplication of individuals who colonize space, wherein each person takes himself or herself to be a nation, and every nation takes itself to be a world.

The Dantean pilgrim narrates the final circle of hell, where the movement down is also a movement to the centre. Zeno narrates from the ground and he approaches the border, where the agents on the circumference enact the will of the centre. Zeno's journey has been one of constant deferrals, in the manner of his namesake, to resolve his writing into some kind of absolute or finality. He also defers his understanding of the situation he finds himself in at the border until he is banished from it under the threat of violence. The situated view of the final chapter is signalled by a switch in narrative modes, whereby Zeno abandons the project of writing memoirs of a distant past, and switches to a diarist mode, complete with dated entries, recounting recent events had occurred to him more recently. In the penultimate entry, Zeno describes his encounter with another kind of diabolical figure:

La guerra m'ha raggiunto! Io che stavo a sentire le storie di guerra come se si fosse trattato di una guerra di altri tempi di cui era divertente parlare, ma sarebbe stato sciocco di preoccuparsi, ecco che vi capitai in mezzo stupefatto e nello stesso tempo stupito di non essermi accorto prima che dovevo esservi prima o poi coinvolto. Io avevo vissuto in piena calma in un fabbricato di cui il pianoterra bruciava e non avevo previsto che prima o poi tutto il fabbricato con me si sarebbe sprofondato. (1070)

[“The war has overtaken me! I, who was listening to the stories of war as if it were a war of olden days, amusing to narrate, but foolish to worry about! I stumbled into its midst, bewildered and at the same time amazed at not having realized that sooner or later I would have to be involved. I had lived, completely calm, in a building whose ground floor was on fire, and I hadn't foreseen that sooner or later the whole building, with me in it, would collapse in flames.” (423)]

In the story that Zeno recounts over the following pages, the war that he fails to comprehend while he is in its midst is personified as a giant who “mi prese, mi squassò come un cencio [“grabbed me, shook me like a rag”]. Much like the heinous figure that emerges from the fog in the final canto of *Inferno* (“ecco Dite,” Virgil says to the pilgrim), the same name is also given to a city (“la città ch’ha nome Dite”) that they pass through along the journey. The war that Zeno walks into, quite by accident, is a space that becomes a place that becomes an embodiment in the allegorical economy of Zeno’s “avventura psichica [psychic adventure].” The placeness of the warzone, made concrete by the militarized border, would be better described as a spatio-temporal situation that has important territorial consequences on Zeno’s life. Zeno recounts his leisurely walk just outside of the town of Lucinico, where he has been staying with his wife and daughter on vacation, and his encounter with a ragtag outfit of Austro-Hungarian soldiers who set up a border between the two warring nations. Zeno has left his hat, his jacket, his *caffelatte* and his wife on the other side. Instead of a limit inscribed on a territory that one approaches and crosses, the border approaches and crosses him, not only separating him from Lucinico, but from his family and his coffee. Lines on a map are suddenly made concrete in territorial space, and they cut him off from his comfortable and self-important life, or as Slataper would put it, dividing the plural aspects of his Triestine “*doppia anima*,” thereby cutting “Italo” off from “Svevo.”

The state of unawareness and situational uncertainty that Zeno finds himself in before discerning its diabolical outlines is not unlike the *Nebel des Krieges* (fog of war) that the German military analyst, Carl von Clausewitz described in his 1834 opus *Vom Krieg*. Instead of the omniscient and masterful narrative in which history is habitually recounted, Svevo offers the limited narrative of Zeno’s experience from the ground. Cosini’s perspective is

indeed an ant's eye view, recalling the Nietzsche's image of *der Mücke*. When Zeno recalls the events of May 23 1915, the setting of the episode is as significant as the date, which marked Italy's declaration of war on Austria and its entry into the First World War. It takes place on along the Isonzo front between the towns of Lucinico and Gorizia, a geographical territory that had become the site of a militarized border. Svevo would have also known that it was on this front that many Italian soldiers died, as well as many Triestine Irredentists who joined them, including Scipio Slataper who fell on the Isonzo front at Podgora in December of that year. Yet for all of the seriousness and horror that history has remembered upon this time and place, Zeno's experience there unfolds as a serio-comic burlesque. "La guerra ed io ci siamo incontrati in un modo violento ["The war and I met in a violent manner,"] Zeno writes, "ma che adesso mi pare un poco buffo ["though now it seems a bit comical to me]" (1071 [424]).

Comedy, according to Dante's letter to Cangrande, starts in despair and ends in happiness, whereas tragedy, which comes from the word "*tragos*" meaning "goat" always has something foul smelling about it. When Zeno encounters "quel plotone di soldati dall'odore di selvatico ["the platoon of soldiers with the gamey smell]" (1075 [428]), he comes across a portentous sign, but the comedy lies in Zeno's optimism, which manifests in an unwillingness to take in what is going on around him. The situation at the border demands presence, but Zeno continually defers it, and distances himself from it cognitively. When a farmer asks him if he has had any news of war, Zeno replies that the wars will be fought in France and Flanders, and when he sees that this account has made the farmer happy, he embellishes upon it by adding that the war was to be fought at sea, whereas here on land they would be immune to it. Yet even one of the soldiers from the platoon that he encounters asks Zeno the same

question as the farmer, leading him to the realization that “neppure loro che la facevano sapevano se la guerra ci fosse o no! [“not even they, who were waging the war, knew if it existed or not”]” (1078 [430]). He gives the same optimistic answer to the very agent of state power presently establishing the border and bringing the war to land. Reflecting on the situation, Zeno compares his optimism to the calm demeanour of someone who is unaware that their house is being engulfed in flames. The scope of this satirical narrative also reflects political and existential tensions that Svevo experienced in Trieste, especially during the First World War.

The obliterated circumference: poison clouds from the Isonzo to Ypres

Svevo recounts in his “Profilo autobiografico [Autobiographical profile]” that he was put in charge of the Veneziani family’s paint factory in Trieste at the beginning of 1917, since he was an Austrian subject whereas the proprietor was an Italian citizen. The Austrian authorities shut down production and Svevo, who was confined to the factory in Trieste, “godette di una grande tranquillità interrotta dalle bombe che giornalmente piovevano sul distretto industriale di Trieste [enjoyed a great tranquility interrupted daily by bombs that rained down on the industrial district of Trieste].” Without anything to do and with the war testing his nerves, Svevo describes how he tried to make his idleness productive:

E lo Svevo s’accese ad’un opera quasi letteraria, un progetto di pace universale suggerito dalle opere dello Schücking e del Fried. Naturalmente a questo mondo non si può mai pensare niente senza arrivare al padre di ogni letteratura, l’Alighieri. Con un certo ribrezzo lo Svevo si adattò. L’opera che ne risultò non esiste più.⁴⁹

[And Svevo set about a quasi-literary work, a project of universal peace suggested by the works of Schücking and Fried. Naturally, in this world you

⁴⁹ Italo Svevo, “Profilo autobiografico” 808.

can never think of anything without going to the father of all literature, Dante. With a certain shudder Svevo adapted to it. The work that resulted no longer exists.]

We should not take Svevo at his word when referring to this nonexistent work, since there are several clues that point to the posthumously published essay, “Sulla teoria della pace” which Svevo would have likely have wanted to publish as a pamphlet if he had completed it.⁵⁰ The Dantean work in question is the Latin treatise *De Monarchia*, which he refers to in the essay and admires as a universal model for theorizing about peace. However, when reading Svevo, who writes an autobiographical essay in the third person and a novel in the first, who clandestinely writes as Italo Svevo and addresses himself in person as Ettore Schmitz, and who vehemently insists that Stephen Dedalus is James Joyce,⁵¹ one could have reason to imagine another “quasi-literary work” that arose out Svevo’s reading of Dante. Svevo goes on to explain that he began writing *La coscienza di Zeno* in 1919, but there is much to suggest that Svevo’s third novel could have been imagined as a parody, and that the resulting work, which “no longer exists” is the intertextual parody. *La coscienza di Zeno* ends in wartime,

⁵⁰ Ibid. Walther Schücking and Alfred Hermann Fried were well known German pacifists. Fried was an Austrian Jewish journalist, one of the co-founders of the German Peace Society in 1892, a prominent member of the Esperanto movement and he won (with Tobias Asser) the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1911. Schücking was a German liberal politician and was one of the six German delegates to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. Svevo probably wrote the essay with the intent of publishing it as a pamphlet, much like Walther Schücking’s widely circulated *Die Organisation der Welt* (Leipzig: Kröner, 1909), in which the author proposed “a European confederation with the long term objective of a World State. [...] The position arose from a genuine but ethnocentric faith: World State meant a gradual Europeanization of the world.” Martti Koskenniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations: The Rise and Fall of International Law 1870-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 216-217. Svevo unfinished essay also has a decidedly European scope and advocates for Italy to join the League of Nations, indicating Dante as an exemplar of Italian pacifism. “L’Italia dovrà collaborare attivamente nella Lega. Essa ha il diritto di occuparvi un posto importante già per il fatto che lo sforzo più magnanimo per creare una teoria della pace fu fatto qui. Una teoria completa e perfetta se anche non più applicabile alle nostre circostanze flui dalla nobile mente di Dante che per aver conosciuto gli orrori della Guerra Senese divenne un pacifista fervente [Italy will have to actively cooperate in the League. It has the right to take an important place there already for the fact that the most magnanimous effort to create a theory of peace was made here. A complete and perfect theory, even if it no longer applicable to our circumstances, flowed from the noble mind of Dante who had known the horrors of the Senese War and became a fervent pacifist]” (650) The work by Dante that Svevo refers to in this passage is the Latin political treatise *De Monarchia*, which Svevo admires as a universal model for theorizing about peace.

⁵¹ Italo Svevo. “Scritti su Joyce”, 730.

bringing us back to the years in which Svevo was contemplating universal peace and universal literature while the bombs he could hear exploding on the Isonzo front spoke their opposite.

World War I was raging on multiple fronts in 1917, and Svevo could hear the battles that were being fought on the Austro-Italian front from Trieste. In the novel Zeno is aware of the war on the Western front, and he assures a farmer that the fighting is taking place over there and not where they are. If Svevo was aware of this distant war he may have also learned about the use of poison gas in Ypres, and here perhaps the news media may have played a role. In the final image from the novel Svevo draws from two battles that were being fought at roughly the same time: it begins with poison gas and ends with an enormous explosion. The battle of Caporetto was an overwhelming catastrophe for the Italian forces, such that it soon became legend. The use of poison gas was a decisive and horrifying moment in battles of the Isonzo that raged close to Trieste. In September of 1917, Austria, together with their German allies launched canisters of poison gas into the trenches of the Italian army. The introduction of chemical warfare posed not only a unique threat, but raised a number of pressing moral questions pertaining to the use of science to wield godlike destructive power. One German chemist, Fritz Haber, weaponized chlorine and other poisonous gasses in 1915, and he directed the special unit for chemical warfare.⁵² That special unit sent another chemist, Otto Hahn, to Caporetto to find the best location from which to launch a gas attack against Italian forces for maximum effect. Both would later on be awarded Nobel Prizes for chemistry. In the same year that poison gas was used to decimate Italian forces at Caporetto, aerial photos taken on the Western front showed the town of Passchendaele, bombed out of existence, to the world.

⁵² Frederick Joseph Brown, *Chemical Warfare: A Study in Restraints* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2009) 3-12.

After the First World War had devastated Europe, many were confronted with images of destruction that defied words. The massive scale of death was shocking, but one of the most surprising effects of mechanized warfare was how it changed landscapes. Images of completely destroyed places that might have come to Svevo via the newspaper must have made an impression on him as he alludes to them in in “*La teoria della pace*”:

La guerra poi non somiglia più alla lotta per la vita in natura. L’animale che lotta per il pascolo non comincia a distruggerlo ma lotta finita lo ha intero. Invece la guerra che lotta anch’essa per le cose – in questo adagiata nello stato di natura – nel suo corso ne distrugge tante che vincitori e vinti ne risultano impoveriti e non per una ma per molte generazioni. Mentre scrivo infuria la guerra; ma io già so che nessuno pagherà degl’indennizzi. Donde avrebbe da trarli? Perciò la guerra manca al suo scopo. Le cose per cui lottò non esistono più. (661)

The war then no longer resembles the struggle for life in nature. The animal who fights for the pasture begins to destroy it but when the fight is over he has it to himself whole. The war instead that fights also for things – in this lies in the state of nature – in its course destroys so much that the victors as well as the losers come out of it impoverished and not for one generation but for many. Even as I write the war rages; but I already know that no one will pay out compensation. Where then would it go into? Hence war misses its purpose. The things for which we struggled no longer exist.

One can only speculate upon which images of war Svevo had been exposed to when he wrote of war’s absurdity. Such destruction was going on in France and in Flanders, where Zeno had reassured the farmer that the war was taking place. Svevo does discuss the Western Front in his novel, alluding to a war at the northwestern edge of a circumference whose southeastern edge touched Trieste. The image of Passchendaele, before and after bombardment, bears out what Svevo writes about war and provides us with a suggestive visual model for the final pages of *La coscienza di Zeno*:



Figure 1. Aerial view of Passchendaele village before and after the battle (1917). Official photograph.

Looking at images of Passchendaele before and after massive bombardments during World War I, one gets an idea of how Svevo might have conceived of the final image in *La coscienza di Zeno* as a response to war as a moral problem as well as a philosophical one. The idea that such a small thing as man (a “*cosini*”) could cause such unbelievable destruction with his inventions (“*ordigni*”) was very easy to visualize after looking at photos of Passchendaele. In the first image we see a town organized by roads and sections of land, marks of human intervention, traces of lived history, thoroughfares and buildings that conduct and contain a

community. In the second, we see an inchoate image of the same place, only that almost every sign of human civilization is erased from it – save for a few traces where roads once were, and the fragmentary remnants of a church. In some sense it has “returned” to a state of formlessness, but as Svevo avers in “La teoria della pace,” there is no “where” left to return to. In this way, the image of the nebula at the end of Svevo’s novel has analogues in European history that were very real to him, from the battles along the Isonzo river where thousands died in Italian-Austrian battles, often fighting against former countrymen, to a relatively unknown rural Belgian village which entered world history only after it was bombed into oblivion. Passchendaele is a geographical expression of the loss of placeness that human inventions can engender, a symbol of uninhabitable space, formlessness, absurdity and anti-nature.

The final circle of Zeno’s pilgrimage is the war, which begins on the borderlands between Austria and Italy. It was also the war that spurred Svevo into writing “La teoria della pace” which called for a unity of European nation-states that would include Italy, stressed the importance of keeping borders open. However, we know that he abandoned that work, and perhaps the nebula also has some connection with the “theory of war,” articulated by Clausewitz. The interstellar cloud of “gaseous, liquid and solid bodies” that Zeno imagines in faraway galaxies could also be seen as a metaphorical expression of a poison cloud, which gives an entirely different meaning to the *Nebel des Krieges* that describes Zeno’s confusion at the border. But gas kills people whereas bombs destroy places, and in Zeno’s imagination the massive explosive comes into play only after poison gases no longer suffice. The “sickness” of a man who destroys the ground that he and his entire species walk upon was something that

Svevo could easily imagine, since it folds into the lack of situational unawareness that Zeno experiences inside a warzone.

The absurd accidentality of the border

Jorge Luis Borges, one of the most eminent among the great Europeans in every except the geographical sense, wrote of the ‘perplexity’ that cannot but arise whenever the “accidental absurdity” of an identity tied down to a particular space and time is pondered, and so its closeness to a fiction rather than to anything we think of as “reality” is inevitably revealed.⁵³

As Zeno begins to comprehend his situation, his perplexity and sense of disbelief resonates with yet another one of Borges topographical conundrums, which Zygmunt Bauman refers to in the opening pages of *Europe: An Unfinished Adventure* (2004). Zeno’s experience of being prevented from returning to Lucinico dramatizes the “accidental absurdity” of nationalism, the border that violently demands national allegiance, and identities “tied down to a particular space” are among the fictions that suddenly materialize with deadly potential. Yet the episode also brings to mind the bizarre originality of life in which “l’uomo vi è stato messo dentro per errore e che non vi appartiene” (972-3). The border is an invisible, transitory, and heterochronic line; and Zeno’s morning walk is a departure from Lucinico in time as well as in space. Like the Basedow world, the disease of the territorial imperative is always incipient, and once the line between Italy and Austria is established and militarized Zeno describes it as a “piagia cancrenosa [“gangrenous wound”]” (1080 [432]). It is not simply that Zeno disagrees with the ordering of the world along the lines of the nation-state. The imposition of a nationality, whereby the soldiers hail Zeno as an Austro-Hungarian based on his position on one side of a border is predicated on a patent and dangerous absurdity, which “non peccavano

⁵³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Europe: An Unfinished Adventure* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2004) 5.

di soverchia originalità” as Zeno said of Guido’s lamentations earlier. The concretization of the border, when space becomes place, signals an inversion of the allegorical logic of the novel, comparable to the inversion of gravity that Dante and Virgil experience at the very centre of Hell.

Fu qui che cominciò la mia avventura. Ad uno svolto di via, mi trovai arrestato da una sentinella che urlò:

– *Zurück!* – mettendosi addirittura in posizione di sparare. Volli parlargli in tedesco giacché in tedesco aveva urlato, ma egli del tedesco non conosceva che quella sola parola che ripeté sempre più minacciosamente.

Bisognava andare *zurück* ed io guardandomi sempre dietro nel timore che l’altro, per farsi intendere meglio, sparasse, mi ritirai con una certa premura che non m’abbandonò neppure quando il soldato non vidi più. (1075)

[“It was here that my adventure began. At a turn in the road I found myself halted by a sentinel, who shouted: “*Zurück*,” putting himself actually in the position to fire. I wanted to speak to him in German, since he had shouted in German, but that was the only German word he knew, so he repeated it, more and more menacingly.

I had to go *zurück*, and, looking always over my shoulder in fear that the other man, to make his meaning clearer, might fire on me, I withdrew with a haste that remained with me even when I could no longer see the soldier. (427)

The violence of the border upsets the order of his comparative deontology of the allegory, illustrating what happens when psychoanalysis is taken as a chemical analysis. The word spoken by the soldier – “*Zurück!*” – is like the chemical reagent that awaits the urine in the test tube and repeats the same thing. Although Zeno can converse in that language, and assumes that he may do so, the sentry cannot converse in the language of his threat, and the word is like an ordinance prescribed by an authority centralized in Vienna to maintain the integrity of the state organism. The sentry is a unit in an army that carries out actions for the supranational State, and like many of his fellow soldiers who are culled from all regions of

the Empire, and who speak a multitude of languages and do not effectively speak a common language. He repeats the same word more insistently, underlining its semantically reduced status as a pure sign without any underlying meaning. If Zeno disobeys the word then the soldier must shoot – like the reagent in the test tube. From comical to deadly, the territorial situation – which passes from the strategic to the political to the ideological to the historical – becomes a biological reality threatening Zeno’s life, akin to gravity and other laws of natural science. It is at this border, the southeastern front of the war, that the “avventura psichica” starts turning into an “avventura chimica” and when Zeno gets back to Trieste he benefits from the violent inversion of meaning in the wartime economy. The inversion of this allegorical order will be complete by the time he gets back to Trieste, however at this beginning of his adventure, Zeno has not yet confronted his Lucifer.

Zeno leaves the soldier and makes another attempt to cross the border elsewhere, finding it occupied by other gamey smelling soldiers, standing in a semicircle around a commanding officer, who points to a map and shouts at them in German. The same threat is uttered, but at least Zeno can converse with this corporal, and tries to reason with him.

Gli raccontai che a Lucinico m’aspettava il mio caffelatte da cui ero diviso soltanto dal suo plotone.

Egli rise, in fede mia rise. Rise sempre bestemmiando e non ebbe la pazienza di lasciarmi finire. Dichiarò che il caffelatte di Lucinico sarebbe stato bevuto da altri e quando sentì che oltre al caffè c’era anche mia moglie che m’aspettava, urlò:

– *Auch Ihre Frau wird von anderen gegessen werden.* – (Anche vostra moglie sarà mangiata da altri). (1076)

[“I told him that at Lucinico my morning coffee was awaiting me, and I was separated by it only by his platoon.

He laughed, I swear he laughed. He laughed, still cursing, and without the patience to let me finish. He declared that the Lucinico coffee would be drunk by someone else, and when he heard that in addition to the coffee, my wife was also awaiting me, he yelled, “*Auch Ihre Frau wird von anderen gegessen werden.*” (Your wife, too, will be eaten by someone else.)” (429)]

The corporal who responds to Zeno’s with a joke that seems fantastically cruel illustrates the new poetics of territorial war. The coffee is a reason to return to Lucinico because it symbolizes the legitimacy of his freedom to live his life as he chooses, and when he asserts his right to return to his wife, the claim is treated with a disturbing equivalence. “La Totalité tout à la fois fait rire et fait peur,” writes Roland Barthes, who then solicits a conceptual frame for interpreting the corporal’s joke: “comme la violence, ne serait-elle pas toujours *grotesque* (et récupérable alors seulement dans une esthétique du Carnaval)?”⁵⁴ It is one thing for a coffee to be drunk by someone else, but the image of his wife being cannibalized, aside from bringing to mind the sinners who are being chewed in Satan’s mouth, is the carnivalesque humour of totality where wife and coffee are to be consumed on the same platter. In war, the allegorical logic of psychoanalysis becomes real. “*Haben Sie verstanden?*” the corporal asks. In “La teoria della pace” Svevo explains the understanding implied by the corporal in his question: “Infatti quella che si chiama “proprietà legittima” è quella conquistata in guerra. Altra legittimità non c’è [In fact, that which one calls “legitimate property” is that which is conquered in war. There is no other legitimacy.]” (659). Failing to understand, Zeno tries one last time to ask if he could retrieve his hat and jacket, to which the commanding officer, barks at him to leave at once and tells him to go “*wo der Teufel Sie tragen will* (wherever the devil wishes to take you).” Zeno must accept the absurd

⁵⁴ Roland Barthes, “Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes”, *Oeuvres complètes: livres, textes, entretiens: 1972-1976*, vol 4, ed. Eric Marty (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002) 752.

geographical logic of another soldier who tells him that the shortest way back to Lucinico – which is less than half a kilometre away from where they are standing – would be to go through Trieste (which is over 80 kilometers away).

As Dante makes part of the descent towards Purgatorio on Virgil's back, Zeno returns to Trieste by locomotive, and once in Trieste he finds that the inverted world creates conditions that are also ripe for Zeno to reverse his fortune. He recounts how he is able to make a fortune by procuring a large stock of a superfluous luxury item, incense, at a discount, and turns it around to sell it as a substitute for resin, even though “io quale chimico sapevo con piena certezza che l'incenso mai più avrebbe sostituire la resina di cui era differente in *toto genere* [“as a chemist, I knew with absolute certainty that incense could never replace resin, which was different *toto genere*”]” (1083 [435]). However, after returning to Trieste from the warzone, Zeno has understood the corporal's joke tropologically – or in the polysemic logic of the allegory, the carnivalesque “moral” of his adventure: “Secondo la mia idea il mondo sarebbe arrivato ad una miseria tale da dover accettare l'incenso quale un surrogato della resina [“The way I looked at it, the world was going to reach such a state of poverty that they would have to accept incense as a surrogate for resin”]” (ibid.). Zeno benefits greatly from this transaction and then declares, “Nel momento in cui incassai quei denari mi si allargò il petto al sentimento della mia forza e della mia salute [“At the moment I pocketed that money, my chest swelled, as I felt my strength and my health”]” (ibid.). Only in the inverted semantic order of wartime Trieste does the hypochondriac Zeno adopt health as a conviction. He profits from the wartime market, his sickness becomes health and he is afforded an anagogical cosmic vision that resonates with what he had experienced.

The global nebula

Over the four paragraphs that serve as a conclusion to the novel, Zeno's cosmic vision projects on a massive scale what he had experienced on the small scale, and it functions as both revelation and prophecy. The difference from the Dantean model is that the microcosm model does not expand into a macrocosm, but instead it multiplies the microcosms exponentially. The narrative ends with a Darwinian parable that takes a turn into Malthusian dystopia, beginning with the proposition, "La vita attuale è inquinata alle radici [Present day life is polluted at the roots]" (1084 [436]). He then contemplates the historical present in which he is rooted from the supratemporal perspective that he visited earlier on, and projects it onto global space: "L'uomo s'è messo al posto degli alberi e delle bestie ed ha inquinata l'aria, ha impedito il libero spazio [Man has put himself in the place of trees and animals and has polluted the air, has blocked free space]" (ibid.). Zeno, of course, recalls how he himself was blocked from moving freely across the border by the imposition of the Austro-Hungarian State's territorial imperative, only here he makes the border universal. "V'è una minaccia di questo genere in aria ["There is a great threat in the air"]," Zeno writes alluding to what he experienced there and to the general state of humanity, "Ne seguirà una grande ricchezza... nel numero degli uomini ["It will be followed by a great gain... in the number of humans]." This is how State expresses itself topographically: by making every unknown corner of the world known through the Imperial project of mapping.⁵⁵ However, even Svevo's idealization of the natural world extends into the very idealization that colonizes it. Everything comes pre-interpreted as knowledge invades every aspect of space, much as the imperial cartographers of

⁵⁵ Jane M. Jacobs, *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City* (London: Routledge, 1996) 19; cfr. J. B. Harley, "Maps, Knowledge and Power" *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic representation, Design and Use of Past Environments*, ed. Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 278.

Borges have to stand in the spaces that they delineate, only they don't move on. "Ogni metro quadrato sarà occupato da un uomo. Chi ci guarirà della mancanza di aria e di spazio? Solamente al pensarci soffoco! ["Every square meter will be occupied by a man. Who will cure us of this lack of air and of space? Merely thinking of it I am suffocated!"] This suffocating thought of the world as a totality of the human species, geographically organized by the square metre apportioned to every man, brings to mind the nation-state in its most microscopic manifestation: the individual.

James Joyce alludes to a similar micronational view in *Ulysses* through the joking patrons of Barney Kiernan's Pub, who react with malevolent humour to Leopold Bloom's definition of a nation:

- A nation? says Bloom. A nation is the same people living in the same place.
- By God, then, says Ned, laughing, if that's so I'm a nation for I've been living in the same place for the past five years.
- So of course everyone had a laugh at Bloom and says he, trying to muck out of it:
 - Or also living in different places.
 - That covers my case, says Joe. (430)

Like Barney Kiernan's Pub, Zeno's world of micro-national individuals is full of tensions, conflicts and threats. What the joking in the pub underlines is the totalitarian humour of nationalism, which delegitimizes those who do not fit in or appear foreign. The only reason why Bloom has to define the concept of nationality is because the patrons of the pub want to undermine his claim that he is Irish and that he belongs to the Irish nation. Zeno manifests his a-national or anti-national tendencies in as similar way as Bloom does: what is important is to live one's life unhindered. The malady of individualistic micronationalisms with which *La coscienza di Zeno* culminates is a satirical counterpoint to the politically powerful, broad-

based, assimilative and populist nationalisms that informed the hegemony of the political system. For Slataper, those institutions that tried to digest the “*multianime*” Triestine culture. Indeed, sickness is another modality of belonging in Svevo’s world, one that seems more persuasive to Zeno than the nation that he is forced to confront on the newly established border at Lucinico. The microcosmic, ground view of the war is projected into a technological, dystopian future whereby man becomes unhealthier as he becomes more technologically progressive, and diverges from the order of natural selection.

Health, as Zeno continues “non può appartenere che alla bestia che conosce un solo progresso, quello del proprio organismo [“can only belong to the animal who knows a sole progress, that of his own organism”] (1084 [436]). Channelling Darwin as well as Schopenhauer, Zeno conceives of the animal’s *progress* as a series of organic adaptations to environmental conditions over time, which the animal experiences as the present, and all of the examples that he draws from nature relate to how the animal crosses distances: the progress of the organism through space. The swallow strengthens the muscles that flap the wings, the horse transforms his hoof, and the mole adapts his whole body to the imperative of life. “Ma l’occhialuto uomo, invece, inventa gli ordigni fuori del suo corpo e se c’è stata salute e nobiltà in chi li inventò, quasi sempre manca in chi li usa [“But bespectacled man, on the contrary, invents devices outside of his body, and if health and nobility existed in the creator, they are almost always lacking in the user”]” Man, referred to by the epithet of the device that acts to extend or correct one’s vision, lets his inventions, which are both material technologies and theoretical abstractions, do the adapting for him.

Glasses, typically used for reading, also allude to the *letterato* who has turned literature into a “useful fiction” and here one imagines the “health and nobility” of Dante’s poem

becoming a useful “literary expression” in Risorgimento Italy to crystalize the territorial imperative of unification, whereby every square meter of space is occupied. It is this historical materiality that underlies the universality of the national, and the economy whereby “Gli ordigni si comperano e si rubano e l’uomo diventa sempre più furbo e più debole. Anzi si capisce che la sua furbizia cresce in proporzione della sua debolezza [“Devices are bought, sold, and stolen, and man becomes increasingly shrewd and weaker.” Truly, one understands that his shrewdness grows in proportion to his weakness].⁵⁶ Zeno alludes to the market and to the *virtù* of *furberia* that he learned from Giovanni Malfenti, as well as the axioms that the businessman applies to trade in order to make history into a commodity, which he had learned from Machiavelli. “I primi suoi ordigni parevano prolungazioni del suo braccio e non potevano essere efficaci che per la forza dello stesso, ma, ormai, l’ordigno non ha più alcuna relazione con l’arto [“His first devices seemed extensions of his arm and couldn’t be effective without its strength; but by now the device no longer has any relation to the limb”]. The devices, increasingly divorced from their conception as extensions of the body’s presence in the world, require the user’s presence to make them forceful, but the historical distances of literary history render the originality of the world that informs the word of the poet inert, much as the *patria vates* uses a rhetoric of what “tutti sanno” as Slataper wrote of Carducci. Man becomes sick, physically and morally, in proportion to the distance that his inventions place between his organism and the conditions of his surroundings, taking the substitute, literature, for the thing itself, life, much like the incense that Zeno sells on the wartime market as a surrogate for resin, where he proved himself to be as *furbo* as his virtuous master, if not moreso, by appearing foolish. “Ed è l’ordigno che crea la malattia con l’abbandono della legge

⁵⁶ Svevo, 1084; Weaver (trans.), 436. The second sentence is my translation as it is not included in the Weaver translation.

che fu su tutta la terra la creatrice [“And it is the device that creates sickness, abandoning the law that was, on all earth, the creator”].” The war that crystallizes the reversal of Zeno’s comparative deontology is that myth of nationality, channelled through the workings of the literary economy, to territorialize space and constitute a totality.

The Darwinian model for man is thereby perverted, “Sotto la legge del possessore del maggior numero di ordigni prosperano malattie e ammalati [“Under the law established by the possessor of the greatest number of devices, sickness and the sick will flourish.”] Zeno’s use of this model reflects common fin-de-siècle pessimisms, and preoccupations with degeneration; however, the idea of man invading the globe and displacing what lives there is terribly prescient of the global consciousness, which emerges as “the response to a perceived threat to the continued viability of life on the planet through some ecological disaster.”⁵⁷ Indeed, Svevo finds the influence of man on global ecology to be problematic in “La teoria della pace,” where he writes of an American engineer who was working on technologies to divert the gulf stream, claiming that this project, hatched from the mind of one individual (another “Cosini”) could not represent the will of the human species, let alone all of the animal species that would be subjected to its implementation (652). The spatial consequences of such images bring Zeno to focus on in depicting an uninhabitable world where people and inventions multiply. Whether or not Svevo had images of Passchendaele in mind when he wrote the apocalyptic ending to his novel, the thought of one man inventing a device capable of such power over the oceans would have been a potent model for the scenario that Zeno envisions, thoughts wherein man’s technological extensions (*ordigni*) attain such power over space that they are capable of destroying the planet. Yet here it is also in these final images

⁵⁷ Featherstone 1995: 90; quoted in King, 27.

where the ironic distance between the narrator and author seems to evaporate and they are one voice.

Forse traverso una catastrofe inaudita prodotta dagli ordigni ritorneremo alla salute. Quando i gas velenosi non basteranno più, un uomo fatto come tutti gli altri, nel segreto di una stanza di questo mondo, inventerà un esplosivo incomparabile, in confronto al quale gli esplosivi attualmente esistenti saranno considerati quali innocui giocattoli. Ed un altro uomo fatto anche lui come tutti gli altri, ma degli altri un po' più ammalato, ruberà tale esplosivo e s'arrampicherà al centro della terra per porlo nel punto ove il suo effetto potrà essere il massimo. Ci sarà un'esplosione enorme che nessuno udrà e la terra ritornata alla forma di nebulosa errerà nei cieli priva di parassiti e di malattie." (425)

[“Perhaps, through an unheard-of catastrophe produced by devices, we will return to health. When poison gases no longer suffice, an ordinary man, in the secrecy of a room in this world, will invent an incomparable explosive, compared to which the explosives currently in existence will be considered harmless toys. And another man, also ordinary, but a bit sicker than the others, will steal this explosive and will climb up at the centre of the earth, to set it on the spot where it can have maximum effect. There will be an enormous explosion that no one will hear, and the earth, once again a nebula, will wander through the heavens, freed of parasites and sickness.” (436-437)]

The nebula is a strange image of salvation. Why does this scenario imagine a return to health? The nebula is a projection of Zeno's microcosmic worldview onto imagined cosmopolitical space and with the allusion to poison gas, it seems that the post-Caporetto Ettore Schmitz, author of the unpublished essay “La teoria della pace,” steps out from behind the *prospon* of Zeno Cosini. When Zeno projects the violence of opposing micronationalisms onto a global scale, the universality of “nationalism” is exposed as an intermediary generalization of the exponentially multiple microsovereignties that colonize terrestrial space. The individual does not have to displace himself physically and climb to the centre of the

earth, since Svevo, even in his conception of originality, defers to Schopenhauer: “But just as every point on earth is the top, the *present* is the form of all life.”⁵⁸

At the origin, where the explosion forces us to return to, there is no mythical unity, but rather, the same fragmentation that underlies our experience of the present, and we only give the image of unity to it through the impulse to narrate. However, it is also consonant with Svevo’s idea of originality, which emphasizes the strangeness of all life, and how uninhabitable it seems to be when considered from some imagined supratemporal distance. Before the final four paragraphs of the conclusion, Zeno complains that the doctor will not return his memoirs to him, so that he can revise them and thus make them orderly, as if this was a solution. Zeno’s “conscience” is not resolved in making his past into something whole, but rather it consists in an awareness of the way that things are. Every attempt to create unison leads to more fragmentation, so we have recourse to different notions of origin, which involves a “return” to unformed and inchoate being; a return to the original state (i.e. “life is original”).

We recall that Svevo describes the explosion that ends his novel as inaudible, twice; and twice in the same paragraph he writes of a return: first to health and then to the form of a nebula. The nebula means that man is no longer capable of being in the moment – this is what the animals exemplify. The nebula is not even a return to nature; hence it resists idealization in every sphere. It does not offer a foothold for idealism or romanticism. Man’s abstractions, characterized as “*ordigni*” are created to produce order, but they lead to fragmentation. Systems multiply systems, abstractions lead to more abstract forms of being in the world. Man cannot be whole as an animal can be because “La salute non analizza se stessa e neppur

⁵⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* 278.

si guarda nello specchio. Solo noi malati sappiamo qualche cosa di noi stessi. [“Health doesn’t analyze itself, nor does it look itself in the mirror. Only we sick people know something about ourselves”] (793 [163]). Zeno, who comes from a position of exile, like Dante, aspires toward some ideal health, and “*salute*” like Dantean “salvation” is represented by the idea of a healthy and legitimate literary tradition, but Zeno’s critical “sick” conscience, failing to achieve that idea of health, also undermines it. By the end of the novel he transforms his “sickness,” or alienation from the universality promised by literary tradition, into a worldview of original fragmentation, symbolized by the image at the end of the novel an explosion generated by man’s inventions (*ordigni*) which returns the planet to its state as a nebula, but the return is antithetical to the idea of an original unity on the macroscopic scale. Svevo’s macrocosm does not multiply in scale but in quantity, in contrast with the Dantean model where the telescoping of the particular and the universal takes place in concentric spheres irradiated from a center. With Svevo the universal is endlessly multiplying microspheres, each one a centre in itself, which Peter Sloterdijk conceptualizes through the metaphor of *foams*: “Nous donnons le nom d’*écumes* à des points excentriques autorreferentielles.”⁵⁹ In Zeno’s cosmos each micronation seeks to make itself universal, but can only achieve that effect by destroying the *ground* of everyone else’s universality. That ground is the originality of life, which is more comparable to the fractal than to the sphere. Zeno must accept that sickness is his human condition, and that the originality of life, the pre-theoretical, intuitive sense of being, is a kind of health that can only exist on the micro end of the scale.

Zeno’s consciousness is a representation of the fragmented cosmos, and the nebula, which is a metaphor of it, is an emblem and incarnation of the no-place that is Trieste. The

⁵⁹ Peter Sloterdijk, *Globes : Spheres II*, trans. Olivier Mannoni (Paris, Librairie Arthème Fayard/Pluriel, 2010) 122.

nebula is a potent symbol for Triestine writing because it does not allow you to get a foothold. The nebula is *atopia*, the opposite pole of the local, national or global *topos*, and it symbolizes the city where Svevo and Zeno may walk and write freely without the territorial imperative of language achieving hegemony, while suffering from the ambivalent position of being out of step with the universalism of nationality. The micronational identity also serves as a metaphor for the isolation of Triestine writers from each other, and Bazlen's assertion that all of them start from a different point of departure, arriving at no common Triestine type. As Slataper wrote in an article entitled, "L'avvenire nazionale e politico di Trieste":

Trieste è posto di transizione – geografica, storica, di cultura, di commercio – cioè di lotta. Ogni cosa è duplice o triplice a Trieste, cominciando dalla flora e finendo con l'etnicità. Finché Trieste non ha coscienza di sé, finché gli slavi parlano italiano e la cultura si compie e si soddisfa nel commercio, nell'interesse commerciale, la vita è discretamente pacifica. Appena nasce il bisogno d'una cultura disinteressata, la crosta fredda è rotta e si scoprono i dibattiti ansiosi.⁶⁰

Trieste is a place of transition – geography, history, of culture, of trade – that is, of struggle. Everything is double or triple in Trieste, starting from the flora and ending with ethnicity. Until Trieste has no self-awareness, until the Slavs speak Italian and culture is fulfilled and satisfied in commerce, in commercial interests, life is discretely peaceful. As soon as the need for a disinterested culture is born, the cold crust is broken and anxious debates are discovered.

This is what national culture means to the Triestine: it is an anxious truce with one's own plurality or it is an incipient war. You can't be territorialized there unless you do some kind of epistemic, linguistic or other categorical violence to some part of yourself. The transitory place of Trieste – the "*sosta*," or waystation of the Basedow world – is not subsumed into another sphere and its complexity exceeds even Mitteleuropa. It doesn't fit into any other sphere unless it is wedged in there violently, which is why Trieste's literariness is so

⁶⁰ Scipio Slataper, *Scritti politici* 134.

exaggerated and put on display. If Mitteleuropa defines the nostalgic dream of supranational harmony, Balkanization is the opposite face of the coin, describing the situation of conflict and war between small national spaces. If Mitteleuropa and Balkanization are opposite poles of the same illness, the idea of Trieste is a *sosta* between the two, and the nebula obliterates the circumference of the national sphere. The nebula is the idea of Trieste and the unresolved dialectic of its literary economy writ large, which is why it resonates with the emerging postnational paradigm of market utopias and global atopias. The only thing that serves as an ideational limit to Trieste is the world entire, since all that we have in common is the capacity to look at life and see that being in the world is strange (*atopos*) and it is original. The nebula is Trieste, but it could also be anywhere (*atopos*), and this relates to the relationship between universal history and territorial space.

Let us compare one last time the conceptual dimensions of Dante's narrative cosmos against those of Svevo. Dante's world is measured and contained: It is metered in verse, and then its language (*logos*), its territorial imperative (*topos*) and its ecumenical worldview (*cosmos*) is contained entirely in the *Commedia* (*mythos*). Cosmopolitics and the ecumene are ways of conceptualizing the immeasurable, which is the universal. Universal history is animated by the worldview of whatever modernity is hegemonic at any given point in time, and in Kant's time it was reason – that was his useful fiction (*mythos*) – which animated the cosmopolitical. In our age it is globalization that makes us think about cosmopolitics. As Peter Sloterdijk writes in *Globes*, “Globalisation commence avec une géométrisation de ce qui n'est pas mesurable” (41). Globalization is the realization of the Enlightenment ideas of reason and order in space, but totality also inhabits the medieval idea of measure, the proportional relationship of the microcosm to the macrocosm, and the idea of man as the

measure of all things. Whereas the global realizes itself in the geometrization of the immeasurable, and the universal is obliterated in the realization of the global, Zeno's nebula has no measure; the nebula obliterates the imagined circumference and center of the geometrical. For Baudrillard the universal is voided from space when it meets its ideal image in globalization. Where globalization can be thought of as a geometrization of the immeasurable; as an ideal container of the universal, the nebula that imagines a world freed from sickness and parasites obliterates the container that constitutes its totality. The nebula is like a bubble filled with the smoke of the universal: when it pops its gasses drift away. Much as Svevo imagines the state of absolute health as a body with all of its orifices sealed up, what the nebula indicates is that any totalizing vision of history is uninhabitable, hence the atopia of his macrocosm. The idea of Trieste with its roots in this atopian myth – can also be a useful fiction underlying the cosmopolitical – as it helps us to understand the global nowhere of today.

CONCLUSION

THE IDEA OF TRIESTE AND THE GLOBAL ATOPIA

They came from another planet and so did we. Our presence here was a presence “elsewhere”, and this house was simply a house that was not the other house we left behind.

— Witold Gombrowicz, *Cosmos*

La coscienza di Zeno has the distinction of being the most widely known work of Triestine literature in the world, and on a local level, Italo Svevo is often credited with the creation of original and paradigmatic works of Triestine literature. As discussed in the previous chapters, Svevo’s unique brand of *antiletterarietà* was frequently been associated with his Triestine language and identity, in such a way that “*Il caso Svevo*” could otherwise be called “*Il caso Trieste*.” This literary controversy marked the beginning of Svevo scholarship, and the cultural awareness that it generated about his native city would eventually become part of the wider knowledge industry to which this study hopes to make its contribution. Scholarship and literary criticism produce cultural capital, elaborate upon authors, correct them, bring them into contact with other writers, make implicit meanings explicit, and often attach ideologies to them. However, there is also a spirit of inquiry that inhabits the work of literary study, which we can relate to the the words of the South African artist William Kentridge, who says of his own artistic creations, “Let yourself be taught by what you have made, rather than thinking you can tell it what to – or what you want it to – do.” We construct a coherence of things, he adds, and that is sometimes an exhausting process, but we start from the same point of uncertainty. When the trajectory of such a process applies to literary study,

it can resemble a pilgrimage, and I now it seems that I come to the end of mine, but this is only one of Zeno's last cigarettes...

Like Zeno's habit, some works of literature keep us coming back to them, and as Joyce famously boasted about *Ulysses*, "I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that's the only way of insuring one's immortality."¹ The same can be said for Svevo, whose presence in local and global literary culture is attested to by a proliferation of essays, conferences and books in numerous languages and across multiple fields in the humanities. Among them, a two-volume, bilingual (Italian and English) collection of essays was published last year with the fitting title: *Italo Svevo and his Legacy for the Third Millennium*. Its editors, Giuseppe Stellardi and Emanuela Tandello Cooper, give a number of compelling reasons for Svevo's longevity:

It is precisely the unstable complexity of Svevo's creation (and consequent impossibility to fixate it within one single and definitive interpretative framework) that – together with the undeniable, enduring pertinence of his ideas, and vividness of the figures that he conjured up from his imagination – perpetuates the interest of his readers well into the new millennium. To this, one must of course add the impressive range of issues elicited by Svevo's language and style.²

The international reception of Svevo played a large part in making Trieste the centre of irradiation for the idea of a place that is a non-place. Those who write about Svevo, in effect, create Triestine culture, since that culture did not know itself before, which was what Slataper argued about when he wrote about Triestine cultural traditions. In this cultural economy, Svevo, the writer who ostensibly doesn't know how to write, finds many who will do that

¹ Interview with Jacques Benoist-Méchin, 1956, qtd. in Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce*. New and revised edition (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1982) 521.

² Giuseppe Stellardi and Emanuela Tandello Cooper, "Introduction" *Italo Svevo and his Legacy for the Third Millennium, Vol. 1: Philology and Interpretation* (Leicestershire: Troubadour Publishing, 2014) vii-ix: vii-viii.

writing for him in the last years of his life, and posthumously. Within the scholarly discourse, *antiliterature* seems like something of a misnomer; an initial misidentification of Svevo's now evident genius (as a "genio e nient'altro," as Bazlen remarked), but I think that it can still be of value as a critical category, as it functions in a similar way to *atopos*, which the Greeks used to describe Socrates' personality. *Atopos*, in that context, meant that Socrates was paradigmatic in a unique way that was resistant to categorization, and in much the same way, Italo Svevo became paradigmatic of Triestine writing.

Before numerous critics came to associate Svevo with the non-place of writing and Trieste as a Borghesian *città di carta*, his works emerged against the grain of an established canon of Italian language texts. We recall that when literary critics used the adjective "antiliterary" to describe Svevo's oeuvre, those who used it with disdain wanted to dismiss the Triestine writer as unworthy of an Italian readership or of international esteem. Yet it behooves us to think that numerous scholars worldwide who would disagree with this now in regards to Svevo probably think of other writers who practice divergent literary forms or write "badly" in terms of a standardized national language as such. Even those who used the term in praising the linguistic and thematic vitality of Svevo's novels nevertheless regarded him as an unconventional or non-traditional writer. Yet as I have asserted here, Svevo had a particular way of engaging with tradition and convention, and so did Slataper. Antiliterature, most simply put, indicates something that literature is not, and what conceptually qualifies as literature is historically and culturally specific at any given time. In these instances the term antiliterature implied a strong opposition to literary traditions, but it would be better characterized as a critical art that renders the way in which those traditions assert historical and territorial hegemony problematic.

So how does this relate to the idea of global literature, as a reconceptualized *Weltliteratur* in the age of globalization, that we introduced at the beginning of this study? We could interpret the case of Trieste using insights from contemporary writings on globalization and culture in social and cultural anthropology, and these would also illuminate the literary practices of these Triestine authors. Conceptualized processes such as “the work of the imagination” and “the production of locality” in Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996), for example, are useful in framing the kind of cultural production one finds in Triestine writing, or the poetic ontology of “scrivere triestinamente.” Appadurai’s diacritics illuminate the critique of the universalism of the nation-state in identity politics, as well as the attempt at creating a local literary imaginary in Trieste. The “work of the imagination as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity” is a central concept in Arjun Appadurai’s “theory of rupture that takes media and migration as its two major, and interconnected, diacritics” (3). These “diacritics” are especially significant in the context of the project of literary modernity that we are currently dealing with – the cultural forms of a post-national imaginary engendered by the discourse on globalization, and the unevenly conceived of experiences of it that writing tries to describe. This much we already understand, and while it would be rich to explore this approach to global culture, the resonance that I hear between this discourse and the one about Trieste is not where I want this study to lead us to. Have we come all this way to merely state that globalization was the paradigm needed to understand Triestine writing? If I want to assert the relevance of the idea of Trieste for literary studies in the third millenium, and especially for questions of global literature, I must think about it in terms of what makes it unique.

In Svevo's writings, and in those of Slataper, the idea of "Trieste" as a perception, as an identity, or as a sentiment, exceeds immeasurably its living or lived historical reality. Italy did not exist as a national-political entity in Dante's time, but the city-state of Florence did, and by writing poetry in a literary language that employed the Tuscan vernacular, Dante was able to conceive of a spiritual, linguistic and territorial idea to unify the scattered kingdoms. Unlike Dante's literary language, that of Svevo ("*scrittura sveviana*" also known as "*scriver male*") does not become universal because it resists the regularity and fixity of grammar, but it shows the workings of the universal in its *antiletterarietà*. Antiliterature resists not only the idealization of *italianità*, but also that of *triestinità*; whereas the universalism of national literatures relies upon the idealized link between language and territory. The idea of Mitteleuropa, actually and conceptually, is an outgrowth of the Trieste idea, just as global literature is a generalization of the discursive economy present in the idea of Trieste generated by Svevo and Slataper. However, the universal literary framework and its collapse also inhabit Svevo's work, since there is no ideal territory to which Triestine writing can be attached. The production of an idea of this nature – which relies heavily on portrayed imaginaries – is closely intertwined with literary "work" without being the simple result of fiction. Ideas, when bound up with traditions of thinking, require physical manifestations bearing witness to them, and in this instance it is in literature that we find them. That is why the idea of Trieste offers a model – as in a microcosm – for understanding global belonging, manifested in acts of writing, engagement or disengagement with literary traditions.

Let me now summarize where our theoretical narrative has taken us to, and then point us towards where it can go. This study interrogates the idea of Trieste as a microcosm and a nowhere and how that relates to the idea of the globe as a macrocosm and a nowhere. It

interrogates the idea of Trieste through its narrative myths, its problematic sense of place, and the worldview that it generates.

In the first chapter we explored the historical groundwork and the conceptual framework operating in the sphere of world literature, categories of the universal against which this discussion of Trieste takes place. The first chapter sets up our understanding of the ways in which Trieste has been thought of as an *atopia* by looking at how we think about the relationship of literature to place. A place is a *topos*, like a commonplace (*topoi koinoi*) and it is the territorial imperative operating of literary language signified that establishes the connection between the *topos* and the *logos*. First we looked into the idea of a language for a place in Dante, the poetic effort to dignify the vernacular against the ecumenism of Latin, and his view on the contextual and the universal. His success as a poet, the totality of his vision gave us a model for the universality of vernaculars, whereas the critical relativism that precludes the hegemony of one vernacular over another was lost. Then we look at the Idea of the universal as the basis for cosmopolitical thought. Kant thought of reason as a “useful fiction” for organizing the apparent contradictoriness of history and giving it the appearance of unity. For Goethe the Idea that related the particular to the whole was *Weltliteratur*, a world marketplace of letters and an expanded homeland that would supposedly make national literature antiquated. *Weltliteratur* was a useful fiction that could give literary history a planetary shape, and subsume the fragmentariness of writing under the conceptual universality of the Idea. However, the Eurocentrism of this enlightenment ideal, and the romantic nineteenth century notions of national spirit in Herder, Schlegel and Hegel allowed for the national idea to gain a foothold on the universal. For Giuseppe Mazzini – an Italian patriot at home and an influential figure for modern nationalism abroad – this universal Idea from

Goethe meant internationalism, which supported the idea of nationalism and the territorial imperative of language. For Francesco De Sanctis – the influential post-Risorgimento literary critic – the Italian nation fit into the Hegelian shape of history, as the microcosm of universal history, realizing Machiavelli’s vision in the providential moment of unification.

When we introduce Svevo in the middle of the chapter, we take a brief look at how he destabilizes the microcosm-macrocosm model in *La coscienza di Zeno*. The critical pretext of the novel is framed as a prelude to a psychoanalytic treatment, and the problem is the narrator’s smoking habit. The analyst prescribes to his patient, Zeno Cosini, that he write out his memoirs in order to see himself whole, and by this he would return to a state of health (*salute*). Zeno’s attempts to quit smoking are represented in a series of last cigarettes that resemble the application of Eleatic paradoxes. They animate a dynamic of a desire for integrity and the unconscious impulses that undo that integrity, which serves as an allegory for the Triestine identity that is created in acts of writing. Zeno comes to the realization that the “health” he sought was an ideal unity; that his entire account could not be taken as truthful; that the integrity he seeks is always deferred and that he could not give shape to his history by revision. The critical conscience expressed through the figure of the *inetto* was inimical to the cultural politics of Italian nationalism and Triestine Irredentism, both of which fostered the specific goal of nation building and regimes of representation that collectivized the “imagined community” of a unified Italian nation-state. Projected onto the macro level, the wholeness of Zeno’s therapeutic narrative is imagined as a nebula as opposed to the spherical or complete image of universality. This universal literary framework and its collapse inhabit Svevo’s work, as there is no ideal territory to which his Triestine writing can be attached.

The discussion then moves up to our time and examines a couple of influential books on world literature, both of which claim to transcend the national scope but manifest how the hegemony of national literature shows up in other ways. The first example posits the territorial stability of the reader or scholar who frames world literature as a window on the world. The second illustrates what I have termed the geocentric fallacy of language, which relates to how the language we speak generates the image of a grounded, centered worldview. Triestine literature does not animate either of these perspectives, since its writers look at themselves through the eyes of a hegemonic other. They also speak a language of hereness and elsewhere, as Claudio Minca described their dialect, and I extend this idea into the Italian they spoke as well. We then take a brief look into how Trieste has been thought of as a non-place, and how the critical conscience expressed by Svevo and Slataper in narrative work reflects upon the metastases of national canonicity in world literature today. The idea of Trieste, in historical narratives as well as fictional ones, destabilizes the concentric hierarchies of world literature by creating microcosms that do not expand into its spherical image. Instead, they are fractals that exhaust their singularities in the global nowhere.

The second chapter pertains to how people have tried to understand the non-place as a place and examines efforts to define Trieste historically. We inquired first into how writers tried to interpret Trieste's place in the world history from within the perspective of its unfolding in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and second, how those who wrote about them later looked back upon them. Trieste was understood historically in a variety of ways by those who lived there, visited or knew about it, and in their writings we can discern how it was thought of in terms of other places (Moré's "Philadelphia of Europe," Asselineau's "Antechamber to Venice"), as a spectacle and a carnival of cultural diversity in the form of an

amphitheater, opening out to the global sea (Desaix, Nodier), how it was seen as a city without a past (Marx) or a high culture (Yriarte) or somewhere that you could go to leave your past and identity behind (the case of Joseph La Brosse). We also examined the cultivation of Trieste's mercantile identity (De' Giuliani) and how it was perceived as antithetical to civic identity (Yriarte). The significance of George Sand's novel, *Simon*, was that she conceived of a Triestine type of cosmopolitan out of the historical personality of Joseph LaBrosse, except that his characterization resembles the "Mercurio" worshipping Triestine cosmopolitan of Antonio De'Giuliani, as opposed to the new European depicted by De Moré. We then turn to how historians in Trieste recuperate these ideas to add to Triestine sense of particular cultural identity, and work them into a hermeneutic of placeness that reinforced the modality of belonging known as *triestinità*. There is something of a kinship between what I am doing and what Morandini and Pittoni were doing with their anthologies and interpretations of texts about Trieste, preceding (or anteceding) the great generation of Triestine literature. This study also proceeds as a "critical and hermeneutic montage" of chosen texts, such that I have also tried to articulate a hermeneutics of *antiletterarietà* – or maybe a rhetoric of antiliterature. At the end of the chapter we examine one example of contemporary poetry to hint at how those ideas can also be recuperated to undo that sense of place.

In the third chapter we begin with the opening salvo of Triestine modernity, which began when Slataper wrote in *La Voce*, "Trieste non ha tradizioni di cultura." Slataper tried to raise the Triestine experience of placelessness to a new level of cognition by telling Italians and Triestines that the city had no cultural traditions, and he effectively communicated the nineteenth century antinomy between commerce and culture as a source of spiritual and poetic torment. Slataper's feeling of living in a city without a civic culture was justified, since there

were no cultural traditions to gather Triestine writers into a literary category, or root them in a the territorial imperative of a national language tradition, as was the case with Svevo who was writing “modern” novels in the 1890s. In the context of Trieste’s non-culture, Svevo was almost completely ignored, at home and abroad. Then we inquired into the controversy known as “Il caso Svevo,” how Svevo bypassed national consecration in becoming a world renowned author through the cosmopolitan hub of Paris, and how a literary culture emerged in Trieste through the negative terms of literary criticism. Italian literary critics tried to delegitimize the place of this Triestine writer in literary history by creating a special discourse, which came to be known as *Il caso Svevo*, that used such negatively charged terms as barbarian, antiliterary and “scrivener male” to talk about his works. We then examine how Svevo and other Triestine writers were territorialized by the same terms of deligitimization that belonged to that critical discourse, as the literary history that looked back upon this author repatriated him from the sphere of world literature. When those terms get recuperated into the discourse about Trieste, they give a strange sense of placeness to the city – a liminal status both inside and outside of the national paradigm. In addition, there is no local paradigm because Triestine writers do not display the conventional characteristics of a collectivity except in the geographical sense. Pietro Pancrazi, nevertheless, conceived of one way to think about Triestine writers collectively and asserted that if the collective was there then we could speak of Triestine literature. However, Pancrazi’s model fails because Triestine writing exceeded the limits of the Italian-language paradigm. It was not merely that Pancrazi’s model did not face up to the historical realities of other linguistic groups living and writing in Trieste. For Roberto Bazlen, the differing premises of each writer, and the ways in which they dealt with their particularity could allow no foothold for a local or national paradigm. Since this

local constellation of writers was difficult to insert into a national paradigm, the discourse about Mitteleuropa, which channelled post-“redemption” frustrations into nostalgia for the halcyon days of the Habsburg Empire, emerged in post-World War II Trieste and included Triestine writing within the purview of a supranational and pluricentric field of comparative literature. Adopting Mitteleuropa as a literary-cultural paradigm also absolved Triestine literature of its Italian language chauvinism, and embraced the Slovene community that was rejected by Fascism, but did so on almost equal footing with all of the linguistic and national communities that made up the supranational concept outside of Trieste.

When we reframe this history conceptually, we see how the idea of antiliterature emerges as a literary-historical paradigm for thinking about atopia. Initially, it signified everything from writing badly, to being untraditional, to being un-Italian, but then the terms become inert clichés as Italian letters adapt to the idea of a great writer who writes badly. Giorgio Voghera’s argument reframes the critical discourse on “scriver male,” claiming that Svevian language does not coalesce into a language from his novels in the way that Dante’s language becomes Italian in his vernacular poetry. It does not become a dialect either, as he argued making reference to the poet Virgilio Giotti, but resists regularity. In critical, mythoclastic writings about Svevo and Trieste, Voghera and Bazlen destabilize the territorialisation of antiliterature, and establish, or return it, to an atopic state. We begin with the declaration that Trieste has no cultural traditions and end with the same statement, but we have not come full circle: it is more like a spiral. All of what has been introduced in these three chapters have been drawn into the vortex of any attempt to portray Trieste and its literature. We follow where the signposts lead us to in the following chapters, which look into narrative works, journal articles, diaries, letters and essays by Scipio Slataper and Italo Svevo.

In the fourth chapter we were trying to understand how Triestine writers might have seen themselves, from within the act of writing, and how they looked at themselves through the eyes of a hegemonic other. We tease the atopian dimensions of writing out from under the ossification of tropes into commonplaces in order to trace out how antiliterature is problematically territorialized as a myth. In other words, we inquire into *writing* as a situated act where the territorial imperative of national language fails; writing, as opposed to the enduring material of literature and its effects on collectivities, languages and territories. Svevo and Slataper articulate the myth of Trieste as a non-place through their writing, and we can discern it in a mythopoetics of antiliterature, where a number of recurring motifs express their sense of placelessness: the barbarian which symbolizes foreignness and unintelligible language, the trope of lying because there is no language in which one can tell the truth, the muteness of a suppressed plurality. I called them signposts because they emerge on an imaginary landscape; a Trieste depicted in literature that somehow accentuated the unreality and fictional basis of world historical understanding. All of the signposts are metaphors for the problematic relationship that Triestines have with writing. On one level we examine how both writers were openly opposed to writing and writers who were “literary” in a hegemonic sense, and therefore political. On the other, we bring to the surface aspects of them that resist the idealizations that would make them into collective, linguistic and territorial modalities of belonging.

Initially, Slataper wrote polemically about the *letterato* and the *patria vates* who occupied the centre of the literary tradition, and he gives narrative and lyrical form to them in his novel *Il mio Carso*, which sets his peripheral Triestine identity against the literary traditions of Italy based in Florence. Svevo was much more subdued about his cultural

politics, cultivating writing like a vice and trying to insert himself into the national tradition while commenting on the impostures of “scrivere bene” through highly ironic and ambivalent narratives. The signposts that emerge in their writings have spatial connotations (i.e. barbarian=outside; coming from the north or the mountains) and linguistic ones as well (i.e. barbarian: non-language; muteness, incomprehensibility), which raise questions about the language and non-language of Triestine writing. As Zeno writes “noi mentiamo con ogni parola toscana”: they “lie” because there is no territorial linguistic paradigm in which they can express their truth. The spatial dimensions of these signpost are also manifest in how they conceive of writing as an act that does not offer foundations: they are way-stations instead, from Slataper’s poetic ontology of presence to Svevo’s ideas about “scribbling” as a way to know oneself better, and only while holding the pen in hand. Svevo’s conceptualization of dilettantism shows how acts of situated writing can wrest the conferring power of the universal away from the hegemony of national literature. All of these fed into the idea of Trieste as a non-place, with a non-culture and a non-language. World literature tries to tell us that there is a relationship between place and national literature, and this is the point that Triestine writing disproves.

In the fifth chapter we look into the attempt of one Triestine artist to create a universal work of literature through the allegorical structure of his work, and we trace how he runs that project into the ground. Svevo parodies Dante’s encyclopedic poem, *La Divina Commedia*, which exemplifies the project of the universal artist who creates an original worldview and an original language. Svevo’s work is a comedy of Triestine ambivalence, highlighting obstacles to his self-determination, many of which have to do with the way in which neither the national Italian culture nor the Austro-Hungarian State allows him to feel whole, or “redeemed.” The

ambivalence of the narrator is depicted in a number of idealizations and devaluations that never resolve them into absolutes (i.e. his doubtful love for his wife, who embodies redemption). Zeno says that he is seeking “health and legitimacy” when he pays court to the Malfenti daughters, and this quest is dramatized in the allegory of a courtly romance, which leads Dante to redemption, but leads Zeno to more fragmentation. Where the former is a medieval catholic poet and the latter a modern bourgeois dilettante, their strivings are the same: both want to be redeemed (salute) but Zeno defers his redemption through a number of strategies that act as structural metaphors for placelessness. Svevo’s novel allows us to think about writing as transitory non-place; as a “sosta” (stopover), where every place is only a place of transit, or like the *furberia* that he learns from his father-in-law, it is a kind of dissimulation of life. These metaphors indicate a view of his literary project that is antithetical to that of a redeemed language or literature, whereby the originality of life never falls to an absolute category, but stays in motion between states of being. Svevo’s universal work of literature does not constitute the foundation for a Triestine literary tradition or for a local literary language; nor does Svevo insert himself into the Italian tradition as an Italian writer. In this way, Svevo paradoxically recuperates the fundamental ambivalence at the heart of Dante’s writings on the vernacular: the metaphor of a hunt for the elusive panther of the *vulgare illustre* never ends: the *optima loquela*, Dante’s vernacular, is only a resting station. Svevo’s language, like all of his cigarettes, is only an *ultima loquela*; the last one in a series that leads to the now. Svevo frees his language from the territorial imperative of the national literature, and anticipates the idea of Global English.

Then we look at how this Dantean project engenders a worldview for Zeno. The failure of the Dantean project in *La coscienza di Zeno* is symbolized by the final image, which

is that of a nebula. The idea of universality in Dante is geometrically represented as a totality in the structure of heavenly spheres and concentric circles, signifying harmony between the part and the whole, the microcosm and the macrocosm, the man Dante and his language, measured out into the vision of a spherical cosmos. The nebula is also a way of conceptualizing the world through the microcosm of man, however its macrocosm is not a world-totality but a fragmented world; it is not a sphere, but a cosmic cloud. Zeno's worldview is informed by Svevo's concept of modernity, at odds with the spiritual values that the bourgeois ideology holds dear: the idea of universal genius whose ideas are generalized as worldviews, transcendence and the cosmos (universal history), the territorial imperative, bourgeois individualism, and the ideological mode of predication that belongs to literary traditions. Zeno's confrontation with the newly established border in the final chapter of the novel allegorizes the situation of Svevo as a writer who is both inside *and* outside of that tradition narratively and linguistically. The narrative premise of the border allegory is mirrored in Svevo's literary language, his political identity and his spiritual sense of being in the world and the nebula is a kind of macrocosm of these things.

At this juncture, I mean to expand upon the metaphor of the nebula as an expression of my title "The Doing and Undoing of Global Literature," and return to the questions we raised at the beginning of this study. I'll reiterate my question from the incipit: where is Trieste? From this theoretical narrative, which traces the idea of Trieste as a non-place historically, critically and conceptually, we see the doing and undoing of a paradigm, Triestine literature, and we begin to see how it sheds an unusual light on the project of global literature. The desire for totality, and the critical *coscienza* that undoes that desire was the "seed" that Joseph Rossi spoke of when he explained how Carducci saw Italy as a "literary expression." Trieste,

as a literary expression needed to find fertile soil in which it could sprout, and finds it today. But it is not located in Trieste anymore, and that is the difference. It is not in Italy nor is it in Mitteleuropa. It is in that part of Diotima's "whole world" which makes sense to us: the whole world that is like the old Empire: it falls outside of classification, it is undefineable and thereby *atopos*.

The reference to the literary map of Mitteleuropa, alluded to by Claudio Magris, and of his vision of Trieste as a "luogo di scrittura" and a "non-luogo" seemed equally as germane to discussing global literature as they were in describing the "literary expression" of Mitteleuropa when I began this study. In the imaginary geography that Magris attributes to Roth, Trieste is a peripheral microcosm of Austria, and the Borgesian map that had fallen into disuse and now blows around the city in pieces is Mitteleuropa; a phantasmic remainder of the Empire's dissolution. Yet when we consider the allusion that Magris makes to Robert Musil's novel *The Man Without Qualities*, even the macrocosm of Habsburg Imperial unity and dissolution seems a bit constraining. In Musil's novel, a group of Viennese intellectuals and socialites task themselves with defining the spiritual essential of the Austrian Empire, and their failure to do so relates to Trieste's own indeterminacy. Diotima, the wealthy socialite who hosts these gatherings, sums up the vagueness and variety of the group's collected ideas with the remark, "Indeed, Austria is the whole world." The protagonist of the novel Ulrich understands the vagueness of Austrian national identity a bit differently, which is only arrived at by subtracting stronger competing national identities. Diotima's statement reflects the semantic vagueness of Austria, and it mirrors the "globe" of globalization on a conceptual level: Austria, like globalization, is the image of a reality that has no centre; it is a fragmentary, evolving reality; more of a process than a place, having so many divergent meanings as to

make it essentially nonsensical. The phantasmic cultural unity expressed such ideas as those of the Habsburg Myth, Mitteleuropa and Trieste's *città di carta* approximate the atopia of globalism.

Magris alludes to Ulrich's view in his description of Triestine identity, but the allusion also pertains to Triestine writing as a conceptual unity in the system of world literature, since it is often defined by what it is not in comparison with other literatures (and I should add, it is also diluted by them). The identity that one obtains by subtraction is another example of how Triestine literature has not been examined on its own terms since it emerged in its modern form in the early twentieth century, as well as how it has often been identified as a kind of liminal non-place. Triestine literature was created by authors who did not have careers as writers and who resided at the peripheries of two geographical territories: the supranational Austro-Hungarian Empire, not yet described in the works of Roth and Musil, and the nation state of Italy with its strong and centuries-old literary traditions. However, the manner in which Trieste's peripheral literature fed into the geographical expression of Roth's Austria did not apply to the manner in which Trieste's dialectically inflected Italian-language literature emerged in Italy between the Risorgimento and the decade following the First World War. Irredentism was the name of the popular anti-Austrian political movement that demanded that Trieste, once a Roman colony and included in the imaginary geography of Dante, be included in the newly united Kingdom of Italy, and as the name implies, it channeled the sense of the city's unredeemed national and cultural unity into political resistance. Bound to the economic interests of Austria and looking towards Italy as its cultural homeland, Trieste was a city with a divided spirit. Residues of that internal division and the sense of incompleteness persist in Trieste's literary production, like the fragments of Borges' map.

Zeno's border has also been recuperated as a symbol of Triestine particularity, signifying an identity is not hybrid but plural; fragmented by the borders of nations:

Se Trieste è una frontiera, quest'ultima diviene, in alcune opere letterarie, un modo di vivere e di sentire, una struttura psicologica e poetica. La frontiera è una striscia che divide e collega, un taglio aspro come una ferita che stenta a rimarginarsi, una zona di nessuno, un territorio misto, i cui abitanti sentono spesso di non appartenere veramente ad alcuna patria ben definita o almeno di non appartenere con quella ovvia certezza con la quale ci si identifica, di solito, col proprio paese. (Ara and Magris 192)

[If Trieste is a border, it becomes, in some literary works, a way of living and feeling, a psychological and poetic structure. The border is a stripe that divides and connects, a rough incision like a wound that is hard to heal over, a zone of nobody, a mixed territory, where its inhabitants often feel that they don't belong to any well-defined homeland, or at least do not feel their belonging to one with that obvious certainty with which, usually, one identifies with their country.]

With this image Ara and Magris recuperate the atopia of the border in their history of the city, which is called *Trieste: un'identità di frontiera*. Other metaphors have been recuperated in the titles of history books, such as Gianpaolo Valdevit's economic history: *Trieste: una periferia insicura*. Trieste finds itself in peril not only because it is at the border, but also because it is located on the outer circumference of multiple national centers. The nebula, however, obliterates the border, the circumference and the center. The nebula is an emblem of Triestine difference and a symbol of *atopia*, but idealisms are not allowed to gain a foothold there. This image ultimately relates back to the model of *anteliterary* historical understanding discussed in the second chapter.

For the last two centuries people have been trying to say that the strangeness of Trieste is its essence: That is what the Welsh writer, Jan Morris, underlines with the title of her book *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere*. Nowhere is an ambivalent designation for such a place

with such a storied history, but when I followed Voghera's thoughts on Svevo, about *la scrittura sveviana* – the totality of his language that never happened – the image of the nebula took on a greater prominence in my mind than the image of Diotima's world.

Attempts to take the non-place of Trieste as a place go beyond the local paradigm and extend into the global one. In this way, the territorialisation of Triestine literature, as a *città di carta*, and a *topos letteratissimo* (Ara and Magris) takes place in a historical solitude bookended by Slataper's statement about Trieste having no cultural traditions, and the erasure of the border that defined Trieste as a *città di frontiera*. The old anxieties about the border, which defined Trieste, was giving way to a greater anxiety concerning what the loss of the border would come to signify for the idea of a Triestine identitary particularity when Slovenia joined the European union. This incipient loss of border identity was manifested in a hyperactive preoccupation with preserving the past and the placeness of Trieste: the museum city. The poet Luigi Nacci, who spoke of the "città-cartolina [postcard city]" once told me that Trieste "non è più al confine, né il confine di niente [is no longer at the border, nor is it the border of anything]."³ Now Trieste suffers from an excess of culture that forms a closed circuit, and Nacci (as a "poeta e non letterato") explained it to me with another play on words, "Per via del mito si costruiscono l'idea di essere diverso, e quando penso di essere diverso non cerca la diversità [The way in which the myth constructs the idea of being diverse, and when one thinks about being diverse one doesn't look for diversity.]" According to Nacci, the myth of Trieste stifles the imaginary of the city for the contemporary Triestine artist, and prevents it from seeing itself in the moment as Slataper wanted to in his own time. At there is something

³ Personal interview with Luigi Nacci, May 25, 2011.

to be said for contemporary poets who mobilize tropes of the Habsburg Myth against *triestinità* by divesting them of their anecdotal quality and making them experimental.

Therefore, I don't want to dismiss the idea of the "città di carta" or the "identità di frontiera" entirely, but instead I want to accentuate the pertinence of this historical understanding for literary studies, and to elevate the myth into a paradigm, as the Triestine poet Fabio Doplicher does, when asked a question about how the specificity of Trieste relates to the general loss of identity felt in many Western cultures.

L'intero mondo è diventato frontiera, nel bene e nel male. I singoli Paesi sono adesso frontiera al proprio interno. Ci sono frontiere intelligenti che rendono riconoscibile e quindi intellettualmente e civilmente più agevole il riconoscersi e lo scambiarsi esperienze e frontiere incivili, quelle che si arroccano nell'incomprensione e nel razzismo. Ogni luogo deve scegliere che tipo di frontiera vuol essere. Per la sua storia, per i suoi meriti e per i propri errori, Trieste potrebbe trasformare questo momento di crisi epocale in una opportunità.⁴

[The entire world has become the border, for better or for worse. Individual countries are now bordered internally. We have intelligent borders that make it recognizable and thus intellectually and civilly easier to recognize and share experiences, and uncivilized borders, those that are who are stubbornly defended in misunderstanding and racism. Every place has to choose what kind of border it wants to be. For its history, for his achievements and for its mistakes, Trieste could turn this moment of epochal crisis into an opportunity.]

Trieste's atopia occurs locally and globally, but we call it a local paradigm because its writers created a sense of place in the transitory no-place of Trieste – which is why it is the capital city of nowhere for Jan Morris – and in the economy of global literature, Trieste becomes a centre of irradiation for other nowheres. In the place of national languages that have territorial (and grammatical) imperatives, the nebula can serve as a metaphor for the loss

⁴ Quoted in Luigi Nacci, *Trieste allo specchio : Indagine sulla poesia triestina del secondo Novecento*
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of language as an ideal container for the collective territorial identity. This also differs from the dialect which is an ideal linguistic container, which as Claudio Minca observes, is a language of hereness and elsewhere.

In Global English, the hereness of local usage and the elsewhere of the global is more difficult to define. The sense of global unity that it expresses cannot be found in one way of using the language – and yet the act of writing always carries with it the potential of regularity and repetition. Global Englishes do not refer to the same thing as dialects, nor to the paradigm of language distribution implied by the idea of a *litterature monde en francais*. The English dictionary is based on usage, whereas in French the authorities decide what goes in the dictionary, which is why French dictionaries have one quarter the number of words. In this respect, English today is a Svevian language: it has no center and no circumference. From the territorialisation of nowhere we return to the originality of anywhere, where we can imagine Svevo's nebula as a symbol for global literature, and understand his Triestine writing as a seed-like "literary expression" that has found its fertile soil in the global atopias of modernity.

A case in point for me is the artist who I spoke of at the end of my preface and the beginning of this conclusion, William Kentridge, who made a film inspired by his reading of Svevo and describes his initial experience thus:

How can this man writing in Italy in 1920s know what it feels like to be in Johannesburg, eighteen years old in 1970? It's that point of contact with the sense of the other, with the sense of community of understanding of the world, of how we construct our sense of the world that for mw is the vital part. For me the thing that art can do, whether it's films or music, is make an important polemical space for uncertainty, for not having completely clear endings. All completely clear endings in the end become authoritarian and need to be defended to the hilt. So I think that if people understand the plurality of voices

that exist, and each time that they say, “This is what the world is,” instead of understanding, this is the way I construct my understanding of the world. I think that’s the way, and it’s an indirect way, that art has a vital role to play. [...] It can have a very strong showing of a communality of understanding in different continents, in different people, and understanding that problems that we think of as being so local, not that they’re universal, but that similar local understandings can exist in different places, and it’s that communality of local understanding that becomes a very powerful thing.⁵

This was what I was feeling from Montreal – and it made me realize that I did not have to come from Trieste to know what the idea of Trieste means to me. Kentridge’s intuitions about Svevo, and how he relates them to polemical spaces of uncertainty and the similarity between local understandings that can exist in different places, articulated how I was trying to think of the universal in terms of local experience and personal, situated historical consciousness. It is through Svevo and Slataper that I have attempted to imagine the idea of Trieste in a more universal way. Slataper seems to speak directly to Kentridge in his letter to Elsa Dobra,

Basta che la dica che quel libro non è affatto la mia autobiografia, ma la vita d’uno qualunque (anche se mia) vista sotto certi angoli visuali, con un certo senso sì complesso che esagera alcuni caratteri e ne dimentica molti altri; in modo che è piuttosto “mito” che storia.⁶

[Suffice to say that this book is not exactly my autobiography, but the life of anyone (even if it is also mine) seen under certain visual angles, and with a certain sense so complex that it exaggerates certain characteristics and forgets many others, in such a way that it is more “myth” than history.]

The literary history of Trieste presents us with a similar kind of “autobiographical” narrative, operating on the level of myth, and with a personal ambivalence whereby

⁵ *Entrevista con William Kentridge, como parte de la exposición Fortuna en Bogotá*, dir. Lilian Tone, perf. William Kentridge, Museo de Arte del Banco de la Republica, en Bogota, Colombia. Online video clip. *YouTube*, May 16, 2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5XdHW59PgMs>> October 09, 2014.

⁶ Scipio Slataper, *Epistolario* 323. Letter to Elsa Dobra, 20 May 1912.

Kentridge's sense of local understanding can exist in different places; where the autobiography as myth can be anyone's life but "also mine." Trieste was a place where border identities and mixed populations mediated their living identities in writing. When the types of identitary negotiations that happen there happen everywhere, then the Triestine *atopos* is no longer a non-place. Trieste was a non-place when it did not have a way to understand local identity within the basic paradigms for universality, such as the Nation-State or language, but in a post-national world, the complex negotiations of language, culture and identity, which are manifest in the cultural production of literary practices, are everywhere. In short, the globe is now truly the atopian non-place of modernity. The modernity of Trieste in the sense articulated by its most exemplary authors is emphatically elsewhere. Or, instead of returning to the formless – a nebula perhaps - the literary history of Trieste tries to imagine itself entire as a world out of history and a closed system. Here I'm referring to Trieste's city-museum culture, whereas everything that rises spontaneously and new for Triestine culture cannot sustain comparisons with the illustrious past that preceded it. The idea of Trieste is an historical image, but nowadays Trieste no longer exemplifies the paradigm that it once defined.

In conclusion, let me try to explain the spirit of inquiry out of which this study departed, and how it inspired this attempt to "construct a coherence of things," as Kentridge would say. It was during my sojourn in Trieste that I met the Simone Volpato, a scholar who spoke to me about Slataper, and I asked him why placed so much emphasis on the writer's approach to literary study: "Non è importante la lettura," he replied, "ma di abituarsi a scalare nelle profondità della letteratura; a dare del "tu" a Dante, Shakespeare, e Ibsen. [The reading is not the important thing, but to become accustomed to climbing down into the profundity of

literature; to address Dante, Shakespeare and Ibsen *with the [informal pronoun] “you”*].” Volpato held that Slataper entered into a very human friendship with these writers, and read in them the questions that he was posing to himself: “Quali sono le domande universali su cui possiamo fondare la nostra esistenza? Quali sono le domande che inquadrano la mia vita? che legano la mia vita alla tua? [What are the universal questions upon which we can found our existence? What are the questions that frame my life? that link my life to yours?]” We ask these question of the authors we read, we ask them of ourselves, and we ask them of each other. I ask you. This relation of friendship, and these universal questions, were part of the profound spiritual significance of literary history that nationalisms forgot, and I wanted to recover them in my work by making them relevant to those who will be thinking about the global literature of today. I had to *dare del “tu”* to Svevo and Slataper, and they have not stopped posing their questions to me since

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