

'SELF' AND THE MODERNIST CITY: STELIO MATTIONI AND TRIESTE

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Trieste has traditionally suffered the status of a border city. This border has been experienced as a source of permanent anxiety and displacement, acquiring the status of a chronotope in the Bakhtinian sense. The city's eccentric position has frequently resulted in Trieste being personified or emerging as an overwhelming presence in its literature. Local authors have experienced the city 'from within', as superimposed, 'merged' with their 'Selves'. My discussion includes the canonic author Italo Svevo and focuses in particular on the contemporary Stelio Mattioni and his novel Il richiamo di Alma (1980).

Key words: Italian literature / urban space / literary topographies / chronotope / Trieste / Svevo, Italo / Mattioni, Stelio

The city of Trieste occupies a particular position in the imagination of Italians. Its geographical eccentricities are brought powerfully to the fore in the experience of the adjacent borders, veritable *chronotopes* in the Bakhtinian sense, and sources of displacement and anxiety. Compounded with a number of complex historical processes, Trieste has been constituted as peripheral, marginal, and irresolute: a quintessentially 'liminal' city locked between a number of conflicting cultures and heritages: Mitteleuropean, Slav, Jewish, Italian.

Trieste's eccentric position has typically been featured in its literature. Its topography has similarly emerged as uncompromising, angular, rugged and vertical: not accidentally, a variously inflected metaphor equating Trieste to a prison, concentration camp or isolation unit, recurs in literary portrayals of the city. As landscape of the mind, Trieste has of course been largely forged also by its literature becoming a sound chamber of memory where streets, corners, squares and banks have all acquired symbolical meaning and are continuously set against their numerous literary renderings.¹

Trieste's contradictory and displaced position was well understood, for instance, by filmmakers. Without dwelling at length on the cinematic fortunes of Trieste, it is worth noting that themes of an exquisitely local nature, such as the quest for identity, the mystery embodied by women pursued in a coil of dark and dingy back streets and alleys, Trieste's role in the collective imagination as both *frontier* and *military front*, were thematics all prominently displayed in film particularly during the post-war and cold war, when Trieste's contended geo-political position was under close international scrutiny. In the Neo-realist film *Alfa Tau!* (1942; directed by Francesco De Robertis) Trieste stands as metonymy of a generic metropolis, a radically modern and crowded urban space. Trieste features as a seedy microcosm populated with spies, clandestines, refugees, exiles operating in a climate of ambushes, betrayals and unrestrained passions and violence in films such as *Sleeping-car to Trieste* (1948; directed by John Paddy Carstairs), *Clandestino a Trieste* (1951; directed by Guido Salvini) and *La ragazza di Trieste* (1951; directed by Bernard Borderie). Finally, in *Cuori senza frontiere* (1949; directed by Luigi Zampa and starring Gina Lollobrigida and Raf Vallone) the prevailing clichéd sentimental theme is overpowered by the pressing territorial concerns following the geo-political re-mapping of the area after the end of the war.

Consonant with historical developments, as well as the place and role played by the city in the collective imagination, the Trieste emerging in cinema complements Edward Timm's argument that in modern literature: 'there is no longer any position *outside* the city from which it can be viewed as a coherent whole. The poet, novelist or painter is trapped within the turmoil of the metropolis'.² Although Trieste can only partially be viewed as a metropolis, despite many Futurist claims to the contrary, Timms implies here that a modernist approach to the city must be, first and foremost, existential. The artist's position must be that of an insider, whose experience of the city is 'from within', closely related to, indeed, conflated with, the turmoil of her/his unconscious mind.

I will argue here not merely that this is the case with much of modern Triestine literature in Italian, but also that a substantive number of Italian Triestine authors have superimposed, inscribed, as it were, their 'Selves' into the city. These authors include better and lesser-known writers of the pre-war and inter-war generation, from Italo Svevo to Scipio Slataper, from Carlo Stuparich to Virgilio Giotti, as well as contemporary ones such as Giuliana Morandini, Renzo Rosso, and Stelio Mattioni. All of these authors welcome the autobiographical genre as a means of enclosing, almost 'burying', themselves further and further within the city walls. In reflecting a difficulty in severing their umbilical chord with Trieste, their predilection for autobiographical narratives articulates a clear diffidence for alien horizons, powerfully illustrated in the Oedipal attachment binding these local authors with their native town.³ This inability, or unwillingness, to escape the fetters of Trieste has frequently produced a compulsion to inscribe themselves, merge their 'Selves' with the city, or, to put it in Enzo Bettizza's words, 'essere una cosa sola con la città che brulicava alle

sue [di Daniele Solospin] spalle, con l'aria stessa che respiravano insieme, lui e la città'.⁴

The novels of Italo Svevo (1861-1928), the internationally renowned Triestine author who exercises to this day the most significant influence on local writing in Italian, provide a useful term of comparison. 'Svevo blurred the line between art and autobiography. [...] Trieste and his own life were always the source of his work', as Charles Russell puts it.⁵ In his first novel *Una vita* (1892), the author's alter ego, Alfonso, marches up steep Triestine alleyways and the panoramic road leading to the village of Opčina in pursuit of his recovery from a nervous breakdown: through his climbing, Trieste's sharp verticality comes prominently to the fore. Recognizable sites and landscapes are distorted and reshaped by memory, remoulded on the basis of the author's mental geographies and topographies. Trieste's rigorous, even hostile, 'geometricity' is profoundly dissonant with the disorder, apprehensions and turmoil agitating the autobiographical protagonist's mind.

In Svevo's following novel, *Senilità* (1898), the presence of the city is equally pervasive. The protagonists Emilio Brentani and his lover, Angiolina, meet in 'Passaggio Sant'Andrea', a favourite boulevard for strolling on Sundays, and, later on, again along the rugged road leading to Opčina. The two kiss and 'make love' in every corner of Trieste: 'Amarono in tutte le vie suburbane di Trieste. [...] Si baciavano lungamente, la città ai loro piedi, muta, morta, come il mare, di lassù niente altro che una grande estensione di colore misterioso, indistinto: e nell'immobilità e nel silenzio, città, mare e colli apparivano di un solo pezzo, la stessa materia foggiate e colorita da qualche artista bizzarro, divisa, tagliata da linee segnate da punti gialli, i fanali delle vie.'⁶

In its leaden greyness Trieste takes after Emilio's sister Amalia, who lives a desolate, self-constrained existence, while the city's ruthlessness is personified by Angiolina who conceals the materialism of a pragmatic 'Giolona' behind the glory of her sun-kissed hair and sky-blue eyes. Like Alfonso, the autobiographical Emilio is unable to escape a Trieste equated with unhappiness and betrayal. The city is carved out of a heavily layered oil painting, dominated by shadows and punctuated with sudden brush-strokes that cover the previous impression, continually imposing a new, if still uncertain, order.

In Svevo's best-known novel *La coscienza di Zeno* (1923), the meanderings of Zeno's own 'consciousness' replicate the wind-swept verticality of Trieste, in search of a direction that psychoanalysis appears unable to indicate. Zeno is progressively drawn to projecting his own tortuous, ambiguous and compromised 'Self' onto the city, in short, to collude Trieste with his own 'Self'.

A collusion between the disquieting 'geometricity' of Trieste and the 'Self' of the autobiographical protagonist is also laid at the foundations of the novel *Il richiamo di Alma* (1980) by Stelio Mattioni (b.1921).⁷ Set in Trieste at an unspecified time of the XX century, *Il richiamo di Alma* displays a number of features already encountered in Svevo and other major Italian Triestine writers. Without ever mentioning the city by name,

Mattioni details all the while an extremely accurate, circumstantial topography which coincides with Trieste's own. Rare, if non-existent, hints to a plausible chronology allow all characters, whose numbers are kept to an absolute minimum and who normally remain nameless, to interact awkwardly and within a historical vacuum. They move, though their movement is typically apparent rather than real, in a Trieste reduced to a metaphysical, De Chirico-like space, populated with few objects and forms of a highly abstract or symbolic nature, 'come in un'atmosfera rarefatta, fra case e persone che erano concrete sì, ma rese sfocate da un miraggio.'⁸ The narrative relies on a subtle dialectic of 'open' vs. 'closed' and 'up' vs. 'down' emphasising the psycho-geographical verticality of the city throughout.

The first person narrator, whose name is also never disclosed and who clearly functions as the author's alter ego, roams streets, marches up steep roads or down vertiginous sloping alleys in the exhausting pursuit of a mysterious young woman called Alma, whose name barely conceals a transparent metaphor. Name and metamorphoses undergone by Alma throughout the narration, from Persephone to Virgin Mary, from Eve in the Garden of Eden to Trieste itself as necropolis in the final pages, corroborate the hypothesis that she descends directly from the figurations of *Anima* as devised by Carl Gustav Jung. Not accidentally, Jung's symbols were extremely influential in Trieste via the local intellectual Roberto (Bobi) Bazlen, who not only brought Jungian analysis to Italy via the Triestine route, but also played a pivotal role in discovering and launching Mattioni as an author.⁹

Alma is periodically, if elusively, found, and rapidly lost again in the most prominent streets, squares, corners and back-alleys of this metaphysical Trieste, and with a predilection for the semi-abandoned, sordid area of Cittavecchia. The novel, however, opens in aunt Francesca's small flat, on the first floor of a building located in Via del Monte, and more precisely in her large garden, 'un giardino aperto e chiuso nello stesso tempo'.¹⁰ Circumstantial topographic information details that from this garden: 'si udiva la città, ma come da dietro un muro, così che si poteva immaginarla come si voleva, e anche che non esistesse, che fosse il lontano rumore della risacca o il proprio sangue che scorre nelle vene.'¹¹ Mattioni strikes a delicate balance here between a 'real' topography, registered by the eye, and a symbolic one, experienced through consciousness.

Complete absorption with the city, indeed the 'flowing' of the city inside himself like his own blood running through his veins, are recurrent states of mind for the autobiographical protagonist. Exploring the city's labyrinthine topography, being engulfed in the vortex of its back streets, coincides with losing himself in a pattern of sinister symbols punctuated with complex literary references and allusions. The resulting sense of estrangement is all-encompassing: the protagonist cannot help but walking down the familiar streets of his home town as if for the first time: 'nel mio girovagare [...], facevo sempre le stesse strade. Non starò a dire quali, [...], ma erano tutte intorno ad un punto, il punto in cui dovevo incontrarla. Quasi un labirinto.'¹² Mattioni powerfully creates an illusion of movement

within a very circumscribed, concentric and progressively shrinking space. Indeed, the protagonist's 'Self', his *Anima*, are to be found at the centre of these concentric circles, ultimately in his own psyche: he pursues a tour of his own mind disguised as a tour of Trieste.

Alma's mystery will never be fully revealed. After allusively exposing her naked body against a landscape steeped in literary references and allusions, drawn from classical mythology to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Alma is never to be seen again by the protagonist who attempts to sever his umbilical chord with his native city by moving out of Trieste. However, a further clue to Alma's relevance is provided in the final pages of the novel, when, minutes before abandoning the city, the protagonist visits Trieste's necropolis: the 'Orto Lapidario' located on top of the hill of San Giusto. Here, an ancient tombstone carries the carved name of Alma, followed by the motto: 'SE TI AMI, AMAMI' (= 'you must love me, if you love yourself').¹³ The circularity and self-referentiality of this motto leave little doubt as to the collusion of Alma/*Anima* with Trieste and with 'Self'. The 'Orto Lapidario' sits on one of the highest grounds in Trieste. From this altitude, intoxicated by a heady perfume of grass and soil, Mattioni contemplates Trieste itself as if reflected in a mirror: a necropolis, the custodian of a sterile archaeology of memory: 'vedevo la città dall'alto, [...] quasi fosse la continuazione del luogo in cui mi trovavo, disseminato di emblemi e di tavole di pietra, sulle quali in vario modo erano incisi dei messaggi, delle date e dei nomi che, [...], invece di comunicare qualcosa, ingeneravano solo monotonia, una scansione anonima senza fine.'¹⁴

At this highly charged juncture, the city is called upon as provider of 'Self', as well as in terms of its wider historical and literary status. Trieste itself is a graveyard where debris of memory, a useless 'scanning', a repetition of themes of strictly local interest prevails in similar fashion to the dusty tombstones filling the 'Orto Lapidario'. Strewn as it is with literary 'relics', Trieste's own topography is a primary condition for the protagonist's quest for 'Self'. The city demands complete identification: it is no accident that he feels compelled to leave Trieste once his *Anima* has been revealed to him. The city understood as fossil condemns the protagonist to a self-awareness he must expiate in the loneliness of ostracism knowing no return.

With *Il richiamo di Alma*, Stelio Mattioni has managed to produce an original novel while all the while talking about himself and about Trieste. If we conclude, with Timms, that 'there is no longer any position outside the city from which it can be viewed as a coherent whole', Mattioni has not merely successfully inscribed his own 'Self' in the city.¹⁵ He has also woven one more thread in the tapestry of Triestine literature in Italian. Under the guise of Mattioni's 'crypto-autobiography', Trieste's imagined topographies continue to thrive.¹⁶

NOTES

¹ The city in its literature has typically been personified with a view to reinforcing its status as particular and specific. Personification, usually employed in the iconic representation of nations, from Marianne to John Bull to Uncle Sam, is here applied to Trieste itself.

² Edward Timms, 'Unreal city - Theme and Variations' in *Unreal City: Urban Experience in Modern European Literature and Art*, ed. by E. Timms and David Kelley (Manchester: Manchester University Press, c1985), p.3.

³ Claudio Magris analyses in detail the relationship between Triestine writing and the city in Oedipal terms, see 'Una storia si chiude', in *Dietro le parole* (Milan: Garzanti, 1978), pp.175-179.

⁴ E. Bettiza, *Il fantasma di Trieste* (Milan: Longanesi, 1958), p.123: 'being one with the city swarming behind him [Daniele Solospin], with the air they were breathing together'. The translation is mine.

⁵ Charles C. Russell, *Italo Svevo: The Writer from Trieste: Reflections on his Background and his Work* (Ravenna: Longo, 1978), p. 127.

⁶ Italo Svevo, *Senilità*, in I. Svevo, *Romanzi*, ed. by Pietro Sarzana (Milan: Mondadori, 1985), pp.405-637 (pp.430-431); trans. by Beryl de Zoete, I. Svevo, *As a Man Grows Older* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p.22: 'They had made love in all the suburban roads of Trieste. [...] They remained folded in a long embrace, with the city at their feet, as silent and dead as the sea which, from that height, seemed one vast expanse of colour, mysterious, undefined. Motionless there in the silence, city, sea, and hills seemed to be all of one piece, as if some artist had shaped and coloured all that matter according to his own strange fancy, and dotted the intersecting lines with points of yellow light which were really street lanterns.'

⁷ Born in Trieste in 1921, Mattioni's first publication was the collection of poems *La città perduta* (Milan: Idos, 1956). Mattioni has however subsequently mainly published fiction in prose, featuring Trieste in all of his work. In a career spanning over forty years, Mattioni's novels and collections of stories include the prominent *Il sosia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1962) and *Il re ne comanda una* (Milan: Adelphi, 1968).

⁸ S. Mattioni, *Il richiamo di Alma* (Milan: Adelphi, 1980), p.76: 'in a rarefied atmosphere, amongst buildings and people who were real, but out of focus at the same time, as if in a mirage.' All translations from this novel quoted here and below are my own.

⁹ See in particular Bazlen's incisive influence in advising major publishers in Italy and in founding the publishing house Adelphi.

¹⁰ S. Mattioni, *Il richiamo*, p.11: 'a garden which was both open and closed at the same time.'

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.12: 'one could hear the city as if from behind a wall, so that one could imagine it as one wished, even as non-existent at all, or existing merely as the distant whisper of the undertow or of one's own blood running through one's veins.' Cf. also with E. Bettizza's novel *Il fantasma di Trieste* quoted in footnote 4 above.

¹² S. Mattioni, *Il richiamo*, p.26: 'in my wanderings I always walked down the same streets. I do not wish to mention their names, but they all circled round one specific location, exactly where I was destined to meet Alma, as if in the middle of a labyrinth.'

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.156.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.154: 'I contemplated the city from high up, [...] as if it was an extension of the place where I was, strewn with emblems and tombstones. Engraved

on those stones were dates, names, messages that [...] failed to communicate anything and bore nothing else but an anonymous, endless scanning.'

¹⁵ Cf. footnote 2 above.

¹⁶ See Bruno Maier, 'Mattioni tra confessione e narrazione', in *Il gioco dell'alfabeto: Altri saggi triestini* (Gorica: Istituto Giuliano di Storia, Cultura, Documentazione, 1990), pp.139-148 (p.140): 'non c'è un'effettiva differenza di *Weltanschauung* tra il recente libro di "confessioni" e le opere anteriori di Mattioni [...] che [...] sono più "soggettive" e autobiografiche (o criptoautobiografiche) di quanto non si possa supporre'.

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