

SPACE OF CHANGEABLE IDENTITY AND THE MARGINS OF LITERATURE

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The paper of the author, who is Triestine by birth, grasps in essayistic style the social, linguistic and world-view intricacies of Trieste, an exemplary metropolitan, but incomprehensibly disheartened city, and the steep rim of the Trieste Karst behind it. As a complex and contradictory meeting point, Trieste is strongly faced by two identities, Slovenian and Italian. Its literature inscribes in itself unique topographies, a vast panorama of images imbued with distinct philosophies, incongruent ideas and thematic interests.

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Identity is never static, unchangeable, or determined in advance. Such a view is commonly accepted, and certain regions corroborate it well. There are cultural topographies where identity simply cannot be but a dynamic event. Europe often experiences strong dynamics and transpositions of identities, all the while facing their differences and a vast possibility of choices. Social inertia effectively disclaims and indirectly weakens, suppresses and rejects identity as such, be it linguistic, cultural, national, religious, or as worldview. Identity – namely linguistic, cultural and national – is humanity's open project, both personal and communal. As such, *i.e.* as a personal, subjective and collective task, or a calling to build, research, create and appropriate forms through which we are more than eager to approach beauty and truth, it does not have a final definition. Construing identity reminds us of Martin Buber's observation that man is an uncompleted project. Similar principles were advocated by the Personalists, who related them to the ethical principle of man., Such a (very modern) notion had already been articulated by the Renaissance thinker Pico della Mirandola in 1486 in his *Oratio de hominis dignitate*. We find there the evident position that humanity has no predestined form, and thus has to chose and form its own essence.

The creation, formation and mediation of identity seem to be related in the very core to art, literature and ethical principles of existence. It is, therefore, no surprise that we can detect in the last few years in Europe a growth of uneasiness and a certain hesitation regarding the process of globalization as dictated by the USA. In this process, the driving engine is economic consumption and the correlated levelling of practically all human criteria: aesthetic, axiological, communicational, applicable, essential, even ethical. Instead of a canon, hierarchy, evaluations, limits of expression and forbidden fruit, what has come to the fore is the apology of levelling of tastes, and expression, ever stronger relativity of criteria, whose sole principle is an increase in consumption. Instead of a vertical line, a horizontal; instead of a tree, a fern or rhizome, as Felix Guattary and Gilles Deleuze predicted years ago in an essay, and later in the introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*.¹ A thousand plateaus of the network, each equally within one's reach, even though reduced to *elementary particles*, the title of a novel by Michel Houellebecq. Even certain metaphors, skilfully intertwined in the works of Borges or Italo Calvino, speak to us today with exciting realism: all we have to do is remind ourselves of the long corridors of the library labyrinth, of language, of the spider web, of paths branching out without end, where we feel comfortably at home. But is it a potential transgression of expression in the textual space of art, literature and in identity as such?

European countries identified themselves with their microcosmic, vertically created identities. We are constituted and defined by the common – the forest, yet there are trees in it. There are many, and each has its own name: oak, pine, birch, maple, elm, beech, cherry, yew, fir, and not simply 'tree'. The plurality is of essential importance here, for it provides grounds for identity and also transgression. Every tree descends into the depths and rises into the sky.

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I come from Trieste. That is where I was born and where I spent my childhood years. Although I live and work in Ljubljana, I go back to Trieste regularly every month to visit my relatives, or just to experience the space, its symbolic and real atmosphere, the nature of *Kras* (or Karst) and Istrian landscape, the urban and historical city landscape, determined by names, identities, history and imagination; because of the cultural geography. This has always been my home. There exists a space in which we live, but we leave it behind and transgress it, measure its margins, experience distance, and return to it. We experience it in our life, with literature as its true and vital witness. For me, however, transgression takes place in an oblique line. I don't take it to be a dividing line, drawing a clear delineation between well-defined categories: good/evil; canon/non-canonized forms of expression; right/wrong; ours/theirs; normative and acceptable/alternative; Slovenian/Italian; or, to put it differently, a dividing line between two worlds, the world of London and Paris from that of

Moscow and Vladivostok, the line we lived with not so long ago right there; but the majority of the local population knew how to transgress it and knew how to live on the frontier. Transgression is not black or white; it cannot be founded on Manichean logic. It is evasive, implied, and indirect in its nature, traversing all the fields of our creativity and life. Every tree has its good and bad branches, its own creative, open direction, or a blind withered branch. I lay particular stress on transgression in aesthetics, art, and thinking in general. It incites our creative endeavour to think beyond canons, to go beyond margins, to look for new syntheses. Our goal is harmony. It is founded on this, on complementary, balanced entities.

However, before this can happen, we should come to know the margins, as they were experienced by Michelangelo, who loved his stone, but worked with it by seeking its limits of expressiveness, until his last, astonishingly beautiful unfinished creation *Pietà Rondanini* (1564). Art has always been the battlefield of the artist and form. I am very fond of two lines by the Slovene poet Srečko Kosovel about his struggle with form, with its limits, in search of a higher, complementary harmony:

“... I smash my Kras,
thinking of Beethoven’s face.”

Why is it important to experience the margins, to be able to create something new? Art is never mimetic, it is creative. In this sense, transgression and its transposition of identities, worlds and borders, with which the people of Trieste have been very familiar, has always been to me something positive. It seems stimulating, polyphonic, binding, and closer to a vertical line. Identity is an experience which comes about in meeting and struggling with form. The part of identity which has been given to us is never perfect: we draw closer to it, build it by the margins of the possible, creating the new, returning to and seeking complementary balance. I can think here of two figures, one mythological, literary, and one religious, who as true archetypes fundamentally determine our civilization: Odysseus (Ulysses) and Abraham.

The first returns home, where his wife and son await him. After all manner of adventures, experienced on the margins of transgression, after experiencing numerous forms, women, perilous dangers and roles, and being Nobody, after losing his friends, Odysseus returns to his island, to his wife and son, to his microcosm and his tree.

Abram (Abraham) does not return to his homeland. His ethical commitment to God directs him to the new, brings him hope, the desire and obligation to transcend, create the new, perfect ideal non-space (utopia), which is the highest expression of man’s calling, and is founded on the criteria of righteousness and covenant, on ethics and dialogue. Implicitly, it is grounded in the principle of otherness, the not-everything and the not-yet; as explicated in the title of one among the rare, if not the only, Slovenian novels on a Biblical theme, by a native of Trieste and the Kras, Alojz Rebula: *Tomorrow across the Jordan*; tomorrow, not today.

Transgression in literature is likelihood of margins. As an expression of the confrontation with form, as the fascination of the new, this keeps alive our hopes. As an expression of an endeavour transcending canonized forms – not because of its tendency towards nihilism and the denial of every positive existence, but rather because of its transcending the margins in order to shift and expand the limits of the possible; to enlarge worlds of and art, to name and humanize the boundless mass of chaos, to integrate it in their selves. This is one of the first cultural categories we encounter in Early Palaeolithic hominids, (c. 40,000 BCE), of which Leroi-Gourhan spoke very beautifully, notably of so-called colonising migrations. Humans appropriate and integrate space around their dwellings by naming the configuration of the terrain: the common, tree, pond, hill, crossroads, meadow... In mythology, which accompanied the further developed culture of the Neolithic and the nascent stage of agriculture and cattle breeding, this category of migrations is manifested as the path of a hero, such as Heracles, who has to overcome various dangers as expressions of chaotic forms: freaks, monsters, the limits of the unsettled. Odysseus' path is of the same kind, a true matrix of our literature, showing the grasping of limits, their transgressing, and a return, which is a comeback enriched by the experience of the new. A journey finds a solution to both the outer and inner worlds; with a delightful halt on the island of Scheria, inhabited by the Phaeacians, an island placed at the centre, between our real world and the semi-divine world of the imagination, creative memory or simply *storytelling*... there appears a world of narration. No sooner is he beside the Phaeacians, than Odysseus decides to tell his story, confessing it for the first time, giving it a narrative form, repeating it, for the first time becoming aware of certain things. This magically creative space of storytelling enchants the listeners. It makes possible a halt, self-recognition and return.²

One code of perception, the acoustic or auditory, is occupied and gives itself in its form, motivating and encouraging us to active imagination, to self-recognition and mental creativity, only because the second code, the visual, is free and left undefined. By way of analogy, a similar effect can be traced in the visual arts, in graphics, painting, photographs, or slides. There is a visual image, and narration is given its full momentum in the active imagination.

On the other hand, contemporary film or video art, with their moveable tape, occupy both codes of perception simultaneously, making the spectator passive, since both forms, the visual and the auditory, are given and formulated in advance. Audiences are limited to chewing on popcorn. They might be thinking about getting home and what would happen afterwards. Is transgression here still conceivable, if we set aside principled moral criteria regarding conceptual questions, historicity or sexual domain? New forms of art and communication implicitly push us into a network, making us feel at home with the rhizome and fern, drawing us away from the tree. Physical reality is gradually becoming replaced by a cybernetic network which indirectly overturns and appropriates narrative, and does away with traditional heroes through new technology, which in consequence incites a certain kind of indifference to the world.³

In Trieste, we have become fairly familiar with transgression. Despite terrible episodes in our history, facing us day by day and ever since early childhood with the margins of identity, as well as with the borders of the primary homeland represented by the mother tongue, we have continually experienced these margins as a stimulating principle of constituting one's identity. This could also serve not only as a metaphorical and historical, but also as a prime example of the margins and pluralistic unity of the newly unified Europe. The old continent's identity has rested on integrated polar principles since Late Antiquity. This should have become uppermost in the minds of all of us: Slovenians – here in Lipica, and not only on the occasion of a literary festival, and also in Ljubljana; my Italian friends in Trieste and elsewhere, who I believe still have great difficulties coming to the Vilenica Festival, because they somehow cannot feel that this place is their own; the same goes for the Croats, who could recognize and admit that the cultural geography from the Kvarner, Lošinj and Cres all the way to Northern Istria and Kras is actually closely related, and to a great extent a common microcosmic world, in which we understand one another, drinking the same wines. We know that this common space in life and in literature is traversed by numerous margins and transgressive borderlines – sometimes with tragic outcomes. Despite all this, I believe they have also strengthened and polished us in forming our identities; that these tragic mistakes, like the monsters and fears of the mythical hero, enriched us with a unique experience as we made our way towards our own identity and complementarity in the world. There has always been something alchemistic about art: the desire to create gold from base metal.

Literature is a journey. Boundaries are a necessity; they create criteria for the right direction. Those that have marked the existential experience in the Trieste microcosm and the broader Kras-Littoral world have been carefully articulated by numerous texts. I have not spoken about this. So let me just mention some of the authors who have fully articulated their experience, their works being today precious witnesses of the existence of borders, as well as microcosmic gardens and trees, and the search for open, creative and complementary co-existence, although these authors have had several experiences of arguing for the fact that transgressive borders are not always only a domain of academic form, but a reality, which is the basic prerequisite for freedom, righteousness as well as the most elementary identity. Literature as form is a space of expression, a real labyrinth; in a maze we can not play academic games, it is better not to transgress.

Among Slovene writers, we should first mention Boris Pahor and Alojz Rebula. The former vividly described the Trieste existential and transgressive labyrinth. The latter is renowned for his epic narrative orientated to the concrete earthly world, as well as otherworldly spirituality. St. John in Trieste was the home of Vladimir Bartol. Like Pahor and Rebula, he was homely, amiable and flexible on the borders of transgression. His transgression, however, is not determined by the search for modernist form; rather, as in Pahor, Rebula and also Kosmač and at least

in principle in Pregelj, it is orientated to the borders in terms of content. In Bartol, we encounter the Persian motif of Alamut, the wall as the dividing line between good and evil Al-araf, and also humour, set in post-war Trieste, which appears as an immensely interesting border region. In Pregelj, the role of transgression is played by erotic Catholic aesthetics.

An exceptional case is the poet Srečko Kosovel, who felt greatly inspired by transgressive modernist expression. Such are his *Cons*, most probably due to his close contacts with the fine-art avant-garde, and his friends Bambič and Černigoj. In the fine arts, form seems to cross borders more easily, or in a fashion different from others.

A similar outline can be traced in Italian authors in Trieste. Umberto Saba (of Jewish origin), Italo Svevo, Scipio Slataper, Fulvio Tomizza, who came from Istria, and nowadays, Claudio Magris and other contemporaries. In Triestine literature, we often encounter transgressions of motif and subject, as for example in one of the first literary transpositions of psychoanalysis in Svevo's novel *La coscienza di Zeno*. There are fewer attempts and ambitions to seek and find academic counter-canonical forms. For a couple of years, Trieste was also the home of Joyce. However, literature in Trieste was first and foremost experienced as a journey, in its archetypal role almost a colonising migration contributing to the constitution of identity, watching out for its borders, testing them, transgressing them, but also stepping back within the borders. After all, even Srečko Kosovel remains an expressionist.

I might say – using a Šalamun metaphor familiar to Slovenes – that in the literature one encounters in this region you cannot become fed up with the image of your tribe. Transgressive configurations are an everyday element of identity. Literary, as well as a broader formal, ideological and cultural challenge finds its form in manifesting a certain archetype, capturing the transcendent, transpersonal symbol, and mediating a specific archetypal form, which proves a constitutive, rewarding and precious part of the microcosmic tree and its identity. As such, it is not an easy task. The very titles of some works by Trieste authors make a crucial point, indeed almost an allegory: *Nomads without Oasis*, *Within the Labyrinth*, *Bay City*, *Itaca e oltre (Ithaca and the Region)*, *Lontano da dove (Far from Where)*, *Scholar of Devin*, *Odysseus at the Mast*, *Green Exile*, *In Sybil Wind*, *Better Life*, *Microcosms*, etc.

If a symbol or a deeper archetype cannot be embraced, expressed, balanced and integrated so as to profess an existential truth, which addresses us, motivates us and becomes a part of the whole, it can come back to us as a symptom, as a point of expression in which contrasts, suppressions and conflicts are manifested in pathological form. This story and its tragic transgressions are also well known in Trieste, extending from the irredentism of the last period of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy to the last decades.

All this notwithstanding, 16th-century Trieste saw Bishop Bonomo and Primož Trubar meet and encourage each other, the former the follower of Erasmus and a humanist, the latter a protestant and father of Slovene literary language. He was also in contact with the Bishop Vergerij of

Koper, who was also an evangelist reformer and finally an emigrant, as a follower of Calvin in Switzerland. Borders can be creative and of great importance, if they are properly transgressed, if we know how to come back, dedicatedly to outline a new form of expression at the margins, finding traces of complementary harmony.

In conclusion, I would like to mention an interesting parable which is related to my own personal viewpoint, and also quite telling about this region's broader patterns of thought, identities and transgressions.

Not so long ago I talked to an Italian poet, Dedenaro, from Trieste, who was born, I believe, somewhere in southern Friuli. I told him about my home quarter St. John in Trieste and the high hill rising above it, representing a true Kras ridge. It is called Globojner; and the slopes of Dražce. Extending behind them is a Kras plateau. All through my childhood years and in all the seasons of the year, I would climb this high hill, rising from its marlite St. John base into white Kras limestone. It is a natural borderline of a kind, some sort of a Kras ridge, extending from inner Istria near Motovun, across Črni Kal, Socerb, Globojner Hill over St. John in Trieste, all the way to Devin, where it dives into the Adriatic. It is extremely interesting to discover that the geological borderline between marl and limestone is followed by a linguistic border. Above it, or rather to the East, a Kras dialect is spoken, whereas below, or to the West, the Mandrje dialect, and to the South, the language of the villages Ricmanje and Dolina, and then the Istria dialect. I told the colleague about the breathtaking view from the top, with Trieste city and its thousands of little houses lying far below, as if collected into a basket, with the sea in the background, and then in good weather you can see to your right, Northeast, the Soča estuary, named Punta Zdoba, and on the left, to the Southwest, you can see with the naked eye the slopes of Istria and the Church of St. George in Piran. I have carried this view within me ever since, partly also because you can clearly see towards the hinterland to the East and Vremščica, Nanos and Trnovski gozd. I told him how this view of the two worlds, downwards to the city, upwards to the Soča and on the other side to Piran, has always been mesmerising. He, on the other hand, was surprised to hear it, which was a surprise to me, too. He then said: "Interesting to say two worlds. I have always considered it to be one world. Because of my Italian Istrian roots I have also always found Piran to be part of the same world." This is what he said. I perfectly understand him, and I find it to be a well-articulated archetype, which has never even crossed my mind.

But as far as I am concerned, when I look from the Kras ridge towards the city, the Soča, Piran, I always see two worlds, partly also because of Nanos, Trnovski gozd, Krn and Kanin at my back. Worlds as old as the Roman limes, many a time eyeing each other coldly on the borders I know, each cherishing their own unique archetypes. With a difference in expression, language, beauty, humour, ritual, identity and transgression, this is worth retaining rather than losing. Since I can transgress it, I leave to alterity, to others and their hospitality, to forget all about myself for a moment, and then go back.

This much I do know, and trust my neighbour, that we breathe the same air, that we have similar frailties and fears, that we love the same women, and drink the same wines.

NOTES

¹ The philosophical essay *Rhizome* was published for the first time in 1976. It was later included as an introduction to the Book *Mille Plateaux, Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, Ed. De Minuit, Paris 1980.

² This aspect was well described by Pietro Citati in *La mente colorata Ulisse el'Odissea*, Mondadori, Milano 2002.

³ This issue is tackled by several modern authors. Com. for example Jean Baudrillard, *Le crime parfait*, Ed. Galilée, Paris, 1995.