

Modernism and Multiethnicity? Interwar Czech Literature from Prague and Slovenian Literature from Trieste

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*This paper discusses the connection between Modernism and multi-ethnicity. The first part defines the historical features of multi-ethnicity in Prague and Trieste under the Habsburgs and shows how crucial the ethnic discourse was for the making of the modern metropolis in Western as well as in East-Central Europe. Through the analysis of two novels, Marie Majerová's *Přehrada* (The Dam) and Bogomir Magajna's *Graničarji* (The Border Guards), the author considers the question whether the multiethnic issue can be regarded as an element of modernist imagery of Prague and Trieste.*

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This article deals with the representation of multi-ethnicity in Czech literature from Prague and Slovenian literature from Trieste during the interwar period (1919–1939). I compare two literary works: *Přehrada* (The Dam), a novel written in Czech by Marie Majerová and published in 1932, and *Graničarji* (The Border Guards), a long story (or short novel) written in Slovenian by Bogomir Magajna and published in 1934. These texts both have modernist features. The story of the first is set in Prague, and an important chapter of the second is set in Trieste. My analysis therefore has three constitutive coordinates: multi-ethnicity, the city, and Modernism.

Multi-ethnicity

I would like to define multi-ethnicity here as the coexistence of various ethnic groups within the same geographic place. Here, the notion of “eth-

nic group” is not an essentialist one. As the Slovak ethnologist Gabriela Kiliánová states, an ethnic group is

a group of people, which shares a common image about common (original) phenomena distinguishing it from other groups. ... Similarly, it can include real or imaginary images concerning common origin, language, religion, certain aspects of the way of life and every day culture, historical/cultural traditions, physical (racial) differences, etc. (Kiliánová 26)

Moreover, I use the term *multi-ethnicity* in what is perhaps the most comprehensive and neutral way. According to this usage, any place where several ethnic groups cohabit is multi-ethnic. Their coexistence can be either extremely conflict-ridden or truly cooperative, or also anything in between. They may tend to radically or partially assimilate their mutual differences, but may also maintain them. Each one of these options (and combinations of them) is a possible form of multi-ethnicity.¹ Consequently, the term is used here in a rather descriptive way and with less dogmatic commitments than other categories connected to ethnic problems in the modern world. For example, it does not presuppose that the coexistence of several ethnic groups necessarily induces a clash of civilizations as Neoconservatism states (on this, see Meyer 92–96). On the other hand, I am not suggesting that there could possibly be an exclusively harmonious way of experiencing multi-ethnicity, as the term “multiculturalism” occasionally seems to imply. However, unlike the Neoconservatives I do not view the project of an open society, which knows how to benefit from respect for differences, as inevitably naive. Thus I prefer here not to use the term “multiculti,” which is nowadays often used in relation to discourses dealing with ethnic (and other) differences in a quite superficially optimistic way.

I would like to begin my reflections by avoiding any ideological assessment. Of course, as Althusser wrote, this cannot be done in the strict sense. Everyone thinks and argues ideologically; that is, according to a specific point of view. Nevertheless I do not discuss my own position in this study because this article is not supposed to be an explicitly dogmatic one. My purpose is to show how a Czech novel from Prague and a Slovenian one from Trieste represent the multi-ethnicity of the two cities. In this respect, ideology plays an important role: I consider whether both representations suggest a positive, negative, or ambivalent idea of multi-ethnicity.

Some preliminary notes about the ethnic history of Prague and Trieste are needed to contextualize both novels. As is well known, in both Prague and Trieste ethnic pluralism did not just begin in the twentieth century. In the Bohemian capital it was a legacy of the Middle Ages, when Jews and Germans settled in this Czech-speaking town. The origin, size, so-

cial composition, and reciprocal “trespassing” of the three major ethnic groups in Prague changed over time, but each of them was present in the Bohemian capital until the Second World War.² During the war, the Nazis nearly annihilated the Prague Jewish community, and in 1946 the Czechoslovak government exiled most Prague Germans together with the other Germans of Czechoslovakia.

Trieste became an ethnic melting pot after Charles VI’s decision to make it a free port in 1719. Starting in the eighteenth century, people moved to Trieste not only from all of the Habsburg countries, but also from the Ottoman Balkans and Greece, Germany, Switzerland, France, and England. However, two ethnic groups developed very strong identities and were determined to keep them even after the First World War: Italians and Slovenians.³ This situation has actually not changed very much because an Italian majority and a Slovenian minority are still living together in Trieste today.

Today, these two ethnic groups are not the only ones present in this city. Like every western city in the age of globalization, Trieste is a destination for people from various parts of the world, above all from those where life can be materially very hard. Today there are large Serbian and Chinese communities in Trieste. Similarly, there are also many Ukrainians and Vietnamese in Prague. Nevertheless there is a difference between today’s multi-ethnicity and that of the interwar period. Today Serbians in Trieste or Ukrainians in Prague see themselves as immigrants. They can get involved with the rights of immigrants, but do not consider themselves to be part of the city’s heritage, an inalienable part of its long history. This was the very way in which Czechs, Germans, and Jews in Prague as well as Italians and Slovenians in Trieste defined themselves between the world wars according to the nationalist discourse established in the nineteenth century. Nineteenth-century nationalism requires that every ethnic group define itself through the language it speaks and the country it inhabits. Nationalist thinking tends to mistrust the idea of multi-ethnic territories because every group is thought to best display its own potential without the interference of others (Anderson 72–114). It admits the presence of other groups on its own territory to a certain extent, but their members are considered (and have to consider themselves) foreigners or inferiors. This latter case represents the common equivalent of nationalism and imperialism (cf. Said).

It was not by chance that Czech nationalism in Prague argued from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards that Germans were simply colonists that had moved to Czech territory only in the late Middle Ages. Correspondingly, the Germans tried to demonstrate that German populations were present in Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia before the arrival of

the Czechs. Nevertheless the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germans from these regions could not easily define themselves as descendants of those ancient Germanic populations. However, they could stress their cultural superiority: according to German nationalism, they moved to the region not to colonize the Czechs, but to civilize them (Demetz 9, 286–300; Kořalka 99).

Italians from Trieste began to argue in the same period that Slovenians were immigrants that had come to Trieste, a traditionally Romance town, up to the eighteenth century, and that they had been “civilized” there by Italian culture. Slovenians countered that in the nineteenth and twentieth century only very few Trieste natives were descendants of the medieval Romance population of Trieste. Most were foreigners from all over Europe that had been partly assimilated by Italian culture. Moreover, Slovenians mentioned that they had been living in the surroundings of the urban center for centuries and were consequently a traditional population of the Trieste region, just like the Italians (see Slovenian-Italian Historical and Cultural Commission 69–77, Ara and Magris 48–55, Verginella).

Thus during the second half of the nineteenth century the success of nationalism became a problem for the stability of multi-ethnic centers like Prague and Trieste. Here not only one but many groups regarded themselves as an integral part of the territory and its history – in a word, as indigenous. Until the First World War, the two cities belonged to an empire in which urban centers that had been multi-ethnic for a long time were no exception at all. Near Prague and Trieste there were the multi-ethnic Habsburg cities of L'viv (*Lemberg*), Chernivtsi (*Czernowitz*), Brno (*Briinn*), Timișoara (*Temeswar/Temeschwar/Temeschburg*), Zagreb (*Agram*), and so on. Emperor Franz Joseph I, who ruled from 1848 to 1916, defined his dominions as a state of many peoples (*Vielvölkerstaat*), in which every ethnic group was a constituent part of the monarchy, its history, and, using a present-day word, its identity. In fact, there were very real power dynamics involved that determined different positions of the various ethnic groups.⁴ Germans from all over the empire and, after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, also Hungarians enjoyed strong political, social, and cultural power. Other groups such as Italians, Czechs, or Poles could also have considerable power in specific crownlands. Nevertheless every ethnic group, at least in the Austrian part of the monarchy (Cisleithania), had the same rights to maintain and develop its own language and culture, as the Article 19 of the Austrian constitution of 1867 stated. This is a crucial prerequisite for understanding the way in which multi-ethnicity worked in the Austrian part of the Habsburg Empire.⁵ The equal status of nearly all ethnic groups of Cisleithania provided each of them with consider-

able symbolic capital that helped them affirm their own identity (Stourzh). This makes the position of many “Habsburg peoples” very different from that of the colonized peoples that belonged to the British or the French Empires. Colonized ethnicities did not enjoy the same status as French or English people. In addition, the territories they came from – the colonies – did not have the same position as the “motherland.” In the Austro-Hungarian Empire, considerable differences could be felt between the crownlands, but *de jure* they were all parts of the empire in the same way. There was no internal political relationship of dependency among them. In fact, the legal and social status of (for example) Czechs in Prague and Slovenians in Trieste was not the same as that of East Indians in London or Algerians in Paris. The former were European citizens and belonged to one of the equal peoples of the Habsburg Monarchy. Because of this they were able to quickly develop successful cultural, economic, and social nationalisms in the second half of the nineteenth century.

It is all the more interesting to compare the situation of multi-ethnicity in the various regions of the Habsburg monarchy after its break-up in 1918. The new states constituted on the territory of the old empire or those that annexed parts of it dealt with multi-ethnicity within their new borders in different ways. After the First World War, some of the east-central European ethnic groups received their own nation-states, but because of the ethnic patchwork composition of the region there were many ethnic minorities (or “nationalities”) in nearly every new state. Minorities were protected in the interwar period by special minority treaties and had a very different status from the indigenous people in the colonies. Nevertheless, their rights were often not respected and the winner states of the war did not sign the minority treaties. Prague and Trieste are excellent examples of the new diversities regarding multi-ethnicity. Czechoslovakia guaranteed the right of its ethnic minorities (not only Germans and Jews) to preserve their languages and cultural identities until the German annexation of the Sudetenland (see *Gemeinsame deutsch-tschechische Historikerkommission* 17–31). The Italian fascist state rejected these rights and tried to assimilate ethnic minorities such as Slovenians or Croatians (Kacin-Wohinz and Pirjevec 54–58).

The gap between the Czechoslovak and the Italian attitude toward multi-ethnicity in the 1920s and 1930s makes a comparison of its representation in literary texts of the period very interesting. Do they reflect the changes that occurred in Prague and Trieste after 1918? It is important to emphasize that democratic Prague had also changed compared to Austrian times. Before the war, the traditional ethnic groups of Prague were equal before the Habsburgs: The empire was not a nation-state, even if two of

its ethnic groups were generally more powerful than the others. In Prague, Czechs and Germans had the same basic rights and they could fight for their practical application and observance in daily politics. Any attempt by some ethnic groups to concentrate power in their hands to the detriment of other groups could be legally questioned in Habsburg Austria. In the interwar period the situation changed: Prague Germans had more or less the same rights as in the past, but they became an official ethnic minority in a state that defined itself as Czech and Slovak. According to the constitution, minorities did not have the same status as the two “national ethnic groups” of Czechoslovakia.⁶ This was of course a diminution of the Prague Germans’ symbolic capital (on European ethnic minorities in the interwar period, see Corsini and Zaffi; for more details on their conditions in east-central Europe, see Lemberg).

Prague became the capital and internationally acknowledged center of a new country, whereas Trieste became a border city, and, moreover, was contended for by Italians and Yugoslavs at the end of the First World War. The political conflict polarized the ethnic discourse in the city, as is often the case “on the frontier,” where for many people merely the fact of having a certain ethnic identity almost necessarily implies supporting a specific nation state.

Metropolis

Georg Simmel stated that the experience of modernity is equivalent to the experience of metropolis. Anthony Giddens (17–21, 53–54, 79–83) defined modernity as a double process: strong differentiation of both items and agents of reality (e.g., institutions, commodities, media, producers, politicians, and traders) on the one hand, and an extreme networking among them on the other hand. Following Simmel (129–131), I suggest that this process has two sides: an objectifying one, which aims at systematizing identities and relationships of the various components of the modern world, and a subjectifying one, which wants to stress the uniqueness of each of the world’s components, above all of its individuals. The modern subjective attitude breaks the modern objective attitude; that is, the rules that aim to give society a strongly defined structure. It also over-emphasizes the singularity of subjects and objects.

In a similar way Remo Ceserani (369–372) reminds us that self-determination is the very core of modernity, but it is also a process full of tensions. Individuals and groups have to mediate between the exigencies of several systems on the one hand and unique individual personalities on

the other hand, such as their own, for example. This can lead to a deep internal disorder, disruption, and madness.

According to Simmel, the focal point of these modern tensions is the metropolis. Here a strong intensification of emotional life⁷ can be observed: on the one hand, large cities are characterized by the extreme economization of urban, social, and mental spaces; on the other hand, they reveal the constant presence of “deviant” behaviors (these can partly be regarded as Foucauldian *hétérotopies*). To find a balance between the contradictions of modernity, individuals develop survival strategies. Simmel stresses the importance of indifference for city residents. In order not to be overwhelmed by their surroundings, city dwellers often have to alienate themselves; otherwise they have no chance to master the complexity of the world they are living in. According to Benjamin, another strategy is the possibility of filtering reality through imagination (phantasmagorias). In his *Passagenwerk*, Benjamin gives splendid examples of this process: through objects and spaces such as commodities, *passages*, department stores, and *interieurs*, people sublimate their social and personal problems and express their desire for existing utopias.

Benjamin is also important for another consideration about the metropolis: its physiognomy is closely related to the existence of capitalist empires. Neither department stores nor *interieurs* would be possible if colonization had not enabled the rise of the European middle class. The function of *passages* and so on is first of all to let city dwellers forget that in capitalism they pay a high price for their wealth. They have to adapt to a highly controlled society incessantly planning its structure and they have to submit to rapid changes without being overwhelmed by the demands of the system. Commodities allow them to suppress the fact that in the large cities there are many people that actually go down as the losers of history. Moreover, positive phantasmagorias keep away the realization that in capitalism everyone that is sitting in an *interieur* today could become a loser tomorrow, inhabiting Foucault’s heterotopias such as prisons, hospitals, parks, and poor neighborhoods. The conflict between the city’s center, which symbolizes power and progress, and its peripheries, which show the dark side of the system, is very typical for modernity. It makes the traditional opposition between city and countryside more complex. Nevertheless it remains important further on because the countryside is often represented as the space in which modernity cannot completely penetrate.⁸

Fancy department stores and *interieurs* also enable the citizens to forget another contradiction of modern life and modern cities: as capitals of empires, their prosperity was founded on the exploitation of the conquered. This exploitation often happened in the name of civilization. Thanks to

Europeans – it was said – the colonies could contribute something to mankind as elevating as the development of modernity and progress. Edward Said and postcolonial studies initiated an important debate on the role of colonies and colonized people for the large cities. According to these studies, Benjamin's losers of history are not only the European lower classes, but also the people from the colonies.

The new interest in the presence and role of non-Europeans in the European capitals of colonial empires awakened interest in multi-ethnicity in large cities. Multi-ethnicity was actually a quality of large cities that had to cope with the typical trends of modernity. They had to be well regulated and controlled by the colonial system (an objectifying trend), yet specific ethnic agents including some colonized individuals wanted to decide freely on the matter of their own ethnicity (a subjectifying trend). Although the presence of many different ethnicities and languages was considered an asset to the large cities, a somewhat definite sign of progress, ethnic conflicts were simultaneously obscured, just as were their connection to social tensions.

In recent years works by postcolonial scholars have also stimulated east-central European studies, which must address the multi-ethnicity of many cities of the region (cf. Müller-Funk et al., Feichtinger et al.). Nevertheless – as I pointed out in the previous section – there are important differences between the multi-ethnicity of east-central European cities and multi-ethnic centers such as London and Paris, and later Berlin as well.

Multi-ethnicity is always also a matter of power. Without simplifying and dispensing with crucial historical and geographical distinctions, it can be very stimulating to apply some findings of postcolonial studies to east-central Europe. Also here the “strong” ethnic groups developed cultural power strategies to manage multi-ethnicity and the weaker ethnic groups. To connect Said, Simmel, and Benjamin, it can be assumed that power practices always put pressure on emotional life and produce different kinds of phantasmagorias. One can thus also follow the traces of these cultural processes in literary texts. I do precisely this in my interpretation of *Prebrada* and *Graničarji*.

Modernism

Literary scholars still debate the definition of Modernism, its constitutive features, and its periodization. Nevertheless, most of them would agree that the metropolis plays a crucial role in modernist imagery. It is not difficult to find the reason for this: if the experience of modernity really

coincides with that of metropolitan life, then metropolitan life cannot help but be the major theme of Modernism, whose very aim is to represent modernity. It is not by chance that Walter Benjamin in his *Passagenwerk* and other works constantly refers to modernist authors such as Proust and the surrealists. Moreover, Benjamin and Simmel are often connected with the cultural atmosphere of Modernism. As David Frisby points out in his study on Benjamin, Kracauer, and Simmel, these authors strove for a definition of modernity. The title of Frisby's essay is *Fragments of Modernity*: Benjamin and Simmel (and also Kracauer) did not think that there could even be a systematic definition of modernity. According to them, the very result of modernity was the segmentation of the world into many parts that coexist and rapidly multiply without converging into a unitary system. Because an overview of the global structure of the world is impossible, these thinkers tried to find the significance of modernity from fragments of reality. They looked for particular objects that could show them the significance of the world they lived in – including money for Simmel and *interieurs* for Benjamin.

Peter Zima notes that the criticism of the possibility of a unique system and systematic knowledge is a fundamental feature of Modernism as well as criticism of the concepts of truth, reality, subjectivity, and rationality. Zima affirms that Modernism is essentially a sort of “metamodernity,” an expression of modernity reflecting upon itself and its limits. In this sense, Modernism belongs to late modernity. It does not matter what date is chosen as the onset of modernity: one can choose as its starting point the discovery of America and the Renaissance, but also the French Revolution and the dialectic Enlightenment/Romanticism. In both cases, modernity is linked to confidence in the means of individuality and humanity in general. Modernism enters the stage when modernity has reached an advanced stage and represents a critical afterthought on the potentiality of human beings and the world they constructed during the Modern Age. This afterthought concerns the achievements of rational and systematic thinking. In this concern, Modernism actually continues the Romantic tradition, but it also questions whether a strong individual subjectivity and emotionality can stand and prometheanly change a world that is becoming increasingly “massified” and “massifying” (this is, in a way, a criticism of the Romantic point of view).

Zima dates the onset of modernity and Modernism back to Baudelaire, and also includes Decadence/Symbolism/Aestheticism in this cultural period. He considers the avant-garde to be a part of Modernism, with some specific features, and also thinks that movements such as Existentialism were a late form of Modernism. All of these cultural phenomena are char-

acterized by their critical reflection upon modernity. All of them long for a solution to modernity's contradictions, but they do not find the same answer for their longing. Some cannot find any satisfaction at all, others think that only a personal answer to the contradiction of the world is possible (a sort of Voltaire's "own garden"), and last but not least there are the avantgardists that believe in a collective renewal of the world. Common to all of these positions is nevertheless a kind of thinking and feeling "in the shadow of the absolute." They can pitilessly criticize every truth and every system and they do not always propose an alternative, but this existential condition makes them suffer. Zima suggests that a defining feature of Modernism is that it takes utopias very seriously even if it parodies and regards them as impossible.⁹

I do not want to discuss Zima's proposal in its entirety here. I leave open the question of whether Modernism does or does not begin with Baudelaire and finish with Existentialism. Nevertheless, I certainly agree with Zima that Modernism was our metamodernity – the moment at which western culture had to face the limits and failures of the project of modernity. In this sense, it is important to consider the "VIPs" of Modernism such as Joyce, Kafka, Musil, and Proust, and the great currents of the avant-garde such as Constructivism, Futurism, or Surrealism as two different answers to the same disease and dissatisfaction with modernity. All important formal innovations of Modernism such as stream of consciousness and interior monologue, hybridization of genres, and linguistic and multimedia experiments are simply ways to react to modernity and its way of representing reality. First of all, these new formal techniques are an attempt to better represent the world – especially, but not exclusively, contemporary history. Second, they aim to influence the way people perceive reality, in order to make it better.

For the purpose of this study, the question is thus the following: Is the modernist discussion of the metropolises and contradictions of modern life also relevant to the representation of multi-ethnicity? It is true that postcolonial studies devoted a lot of research to the presence of "others," the colonized, and the natives inside the European colonial empires. As Edward Said pointed out: "The formal dislocations and displacements in modernist culture, and most strikingly its pervasive irony, are influenced by precisely those two disturbing factors . . . : the contending native and the fact of other empires" (189). Not only the cultural (including literary) texts about the colonies are full of "contending native[s]." As postcolonial studies observes, these characters are also staged in texts whose settings are the European capitals of empires. So what about east-central European cities in modernist literature? They had the distinction that here the "contending

native[s]” were not natives of non-European countries, of the colonies, but were also Europeans and had a different status in comparison to colonized populations.¹⁰ The above quotation from Said is taken from *Culture and Imperialism*, in which he included “A Note on Modernism” (186–190). Here Said mainly concentrates on Modernism, multi-ethnicity, and the colonies, but also reflects on Joyce’s *Ulysses*:

Similarly Joyce, for whom the Irish nationalist and intellectual Stephen Dedalus is ironically fortified not by Irish Catholic comrades but by the wandering Jew Leopold Bloom, whose exoticism and cosmopolitan skills undercut the morbid solemnity of Stephen’s rebellion. Like the fascinating inverts of Proust’s novel, Bloom testifies to a new presence within Europe, a presence rather strikingly described in terms unmistakably taken from the exotic annals of overseas discovery, conquest, vision. (188)

The volumes *Kakanien Revisited* (2002) and *Habsburg Postcolonial* (2003) show that not only a new – in Said’s diction, “ethnic” – presence can model modernist literature and literature from other periods. Old presences such as the east-central European Jews and other ethnic groups of the region can also play the same important role in literature that Bloom plays for Dedalus. Did the presence of Jews and other ethnic groups in Prague and Trieste, where Joyce lived for about ten years and had Jewish friends such as Italo Svevo, inspire Majerová’s *Přehrada* and Magajna’s *Graničarji* to represent relativist and tolerant characters? It is of course also possible that multi-ethnic discourse fills them with nationalist “solemnity,” just as the contrast between Irish and English people does in the case of Stephen Dedalus before he meets Bloom.

Prague in Marie Majerová’s *Přehrada* and Trieste in Bogomir Magajna’s *Graničarji*. Social and Ethnic Spaces Intertwined

Among the Czech and Slovenian literary works dealing with multi-ethnicity, I opted for these two for the following reasons:

– They were written by authors that knew the cities they wrote about quite well. Majerová was born near Prague and spent the major part of her life in this Czech metropolis. Magajna came from the Karst plateau near Trieste.

– They refer to the multi-ethnic situation of Prague and Trieste between the world wars. This reference is quite strong, even if it is mediated in both cases (neither text is classifiable as historical fiction explicitly dealing with contemporary history).¹¹

– Both of them are relatively comparable with regard to their genre. This allows for a direct theme-oriented analysis, whereas long preliminary notes would be necessary to show the level of thematic compatibility of texts belonging to completely different genres, even if they were devoted to similar themes.

Přebrada is a sort of utopian socialist novel, written in the interwar period, in which the author imagines that sometime between the 1950s and the 1960s communists take over power in Prague.¹² They succeed in convincing Prague's citizens that the huge dam built on the Vltava to generate electricity is actually defective because the construction companies used inferior cement. They argue that the dam will break and Prague will be destroyed by water. People panic and the communists exploit the critical situation, turning it into a general revolution and seizing power. The report on the defective dam is indeed only a trick: the contractors in fact used regular cement and the dam is functioning perfectly. The communists simply exploit the bad reputation of the contractors as people without scruples to agitate against the power elite. At the end of the novel, revolutionaries are planning how to use the dam for the benefit of everyone and not only for increasing the wealth of the upper class.

In the novel the juxtaposition nature versus culture and countryside versus city is symbolized very strongly. The river, the Vltava, is nature, but people exploit it for their purposes. In some lyrical passages the narrator, who introduces himself as the author of the book, emphasizes that it is necessary for culture to win its struggle against nature in order to control it (Majerová 169–172). The only problem is how. The capitalist way is not the right one because it is unequal. Only communism can realize the utopia of nature and culture for everyone: a river for everyone and electricity for everyone (Majerová 266–269). The Vltava has to become a communist river. Similarly, Prague has to become a communist city. According to modernist conventions, the city is represented in the novel as the real center of modern life and its contradictions. On the one hand, Prague is the place where the emancipative technological process happens, but on the other hand the city is the space in which a small elite oppresses the masses (by means of technology, among other things). Modernistically, Majerová criticizes modernity for the distorted attainment of its potentials. Nevertheless *Přebrada* belongs to the avant-garde milieu of Modernism and suggests a model for the social progress of humanity. Against the bourgeois oligarchy in Prague, the social force of factory workers, taxi-drivers, students, and so on awakes, and these people come together to plan the revolution.

To represent the complexity of the city and the greatness of the revolution, Majerová avails herself of typical modernist formal strategies such as

multiperspectivity and play with genres. In many short chapters, a kind of cinematographic shortcut, the reader probably encounters more than 100 characters. The author's and narrator's style is modeled on their features. It tends toward the Dickensian realist novel when it portrays the poor children of the suburb of Podskalí (Majerová 108–118), towards decadent literature when dealing with a beautiful woman that fell into disgrace (Majerová 226–228), and towards the fantastic while describing the souls of two important dead sculptors of the Czech national renaissance discussing the fate of their works in the impending flood (Majerová 102–107). Of course, the text follows the example of socialist literature representing the secret work of the revolutionaries (Majerová 63–77). Yet the novel does not belong to mimetic socialist literature, which operated with the stylistic features of nineteenth-century realist and naturalist literature in the interwar period. The characters in *Přebrada* are too heavily stylized and reduced to personifications of good and evil social attitudes. Nevertheless they are not like the characters of the orthodox Socialist Realist literature that began in the 1930s. They are not as “solemn” and homogeneous as is typical for Social Realism (Groys 44–95). The various revolutionaries in Majerová's novel have different ideas about the revolution – which partly depend on the social milieus they come from – and they discuss them openly. There is no single doctrine to follow. Moreover, this play with different genres is so prominent that it works as a sort of amusing quotation of representational genre conventions. The story seriously supports the idea of a revolution, but displays this in a playful way in which the fantastic also has its place. (For example, the statues of old Prague abandon the city to save themselves from the inundation.) Majerová's novel does not intend the reader to see the story as a realistic description of a future revolution. The reader knows that this is a phantasmagoria on the revolution; that is, a revolution as though it were and could be like a fairy tale or an American film with a happy ending. This very irony is what Said finds so constitutive for Modernism.¹³ In Czech culture of the period, this kind of pastiche of (high and mass culture) genres was characteristic for the avant-garde movement of Poetism (Ripellino 37–40).¹⁴

The question is whether there is also a place for Prague's multi-ethnicity in this modernist and avantgardist novel. One can find only very feeble traces of multi-ethnic discourses. The richest Czech contractor of the dam is a Jew (Majerová 242), and another one reads German newspapers (Majerová 175), but they do not have German surnames. Having said that, the flyers that are supposed to stir people into revolting are printed in both Czech and German (Majerová 64). This is an indirect homage to communist internationalism and perhaps also to the Prague German workers,

who were very few before World War One (Cohen 191–193). Last but not least, one of the revolutionaries, actually an American, is said to be very precise because he is of German extraction. These references to multi-ethnicity are relatively stereotypical and neither the author-narrator nor the characters attempt to problematize them. They are merely brief hints that help contextualize the characters. Moreover, they are not really important as ethnic classifications, but function as social indicators.

According to the Czech national awakening (*národní obrození*), Germans (and Jews, especially if they spoke German) were in fact the upper class of “foreigners” that was accused of having oppressed the Czech nation since the seventeenth century. Czech nationalists claimed that it was necessary to stage a revolution against them, now a definitive version of the year 1848. This revolution indeed happened in 1918, when Czechoslovakia proclaimed its independence, following the traditional Czech historiographic narrative. On the other hand, another tradition spread in Bohemia at the end of the nineteenth century, in which the juxtaposition was no longer between ethnic communities. According to socialism, the fight was between upper class and proletarians – and proletarians could be also German! Internationalism was relatively strong especially in Austro-Marxism because the worker communities of the Habsburg Empire were often ethnically mixed. Nevertheless Czech communists tended to stress before and especially after the foundation of Czechoslovakia that in large Bohemian and Moravian cities Germans usually belonged to the upper class and consequently had to be fought against (Rupnik 17–35, 41–56).

The few traces of multi-ethnic discourses in *Přehrada* show how a novel of the Prague communist milieu related multi-ethnic discourse to social discourse. In accordance with the national awakening tradition, Majerová seems to suggest that some important upper class enemies of the proletarians are Jews and Germans (or that they read the German press). On the other hand, the author supports the communist internationalist tradition: the revolutionary flyers in the novel are bilingual.

Bogomir Magajna, the author of *Graničarji*, came from the Karst Plateau in Trieste’s hinterland, but left the region after the First World War, when it was annexed by Italy. He went to Yugoslavia to study and work. *Graničarji* and his other works were written and published there. In this story the protagonists are Yugoslav border guards based at the border with Italy near Logatec, between Postojna and Ljubljana. The book relates their adventures in the woods along the border. Nature plays a fundamental role in the story both in its idyllic and dangerous aspects. The guards hike through the woods and contemplate their beauty, but one of them has to kill a bear to save his own life, for example (Magajna 77–84). Nevertheless, danger is

generally represented by the enemy on the other side of the border rather than by nature. Unexpected shots fly from the other side of the border across the woods and kill some Yugoslav border guards (Magajna 48). The enemies are thus described as particularly evil and devious: they kill from ambush, hiding themselves. The only visible enemy from the other side of the border is a man trying to rape a girl (Magajna 104–105). Otherwise they are very mysterious and do not have a clear identity in the novel. They are simply described as enemies wearing black clothes. The reader does not learn anything else about their identity in the book.

The conflict between the Yugoslav border guards and their very un-specific enemies takes place above all through nature, but in one case there is also the opposition town versus countryside/forest. One of the protagonists is asked to go to Trieste behind the back of the enemies. This character, the guards' physician Volarič, is actually a Slovenian from the Karst Plateau. His family lives on the other side of the frontier in territory controlled by the enemies. However, he cannot cross the border and visit his relatives because as a Yugoslav soldier he is considered a traitor by the other side – because he was born in the territories controlled by the enemy, he should have served his time in the enemy army.¹⁵ When Volarič begins to help the Slovenian resistance fighters trying to fight the enemy directly on the other side of the border, he is told to go to Trieste to bring some money to one of the fighters. Volarič's journey to the city (Magajna 88–95) is divided into three parts. First he has to secretly cross the forest, then go by train through the Karst Plateau to Trieste, and finally meet the member of the resistance there. The second part of the journey is very painful: Volarič sees the Karst Plateau from the train window, the Trieste countryside and even his parents' house, but he cannot stop. He must not be recognized because this could endanger his mission. He can survive in the station, in the train, and in Trieste because he is perfectly able to speak the language of the enemy and imitate his behavior. Trieste is described as a large and lively city, but nevertheless filled with mortal danger behind its beautiful facade: around every corner there is someone spying. The omniscient narrator tells us that the city looked different in the past: once Volarič used to go to Trieste often, in a certain sense it was his city, the city of his countryside. Now it is the city of the others and he can stay alive there only because of his mimicry abilities.

It is interesting that *Graničarji* is quite precise in the use of geographic names on both sides of the border, especially in the region around Logatec, but one can also find the name *Trst* 'Trieste'. However, concerning the characters' names and ethnicity there are consistent differences according to the side they belong to. The border guards have names and

regional origins that point to regions of Slovenian ethnic territory (for example the Karst Plateau and Ljubljana), but also to Macedonia. On the other hand, the enemies are an indistinct mass without an ethnic profile. There is no clue that allows identification of their ethnicity – for example, language or other features. Of course many readers will think that the enemies are Italians: the story is set on the border at Logatec, which was the Yugoslavian-Italian border between the world wars. At that time Trieste already belonged to Italy and the text explicitly mentions the names of real Slovenian fighters from the Trieste region that were executed by the fascists (112). Finally, as is commonly known, the fascists wore dark clothes like the enemies in the story. Nevertheless the fact that the identity of the enemies is never specified allows them to appear very sinister. They are like the personification of a generic evil. This is at least what the text deliberately tells the reader. Then again, the author is perfectly aware that every Slovenian reader will correctly identify the enemy. His abstract description paradoxically strengthens the reference to the Italian oppression of the Slovenians rather than weakening it: In the novel fascism becomes the undisclosed symbol of the absolute evil.

In *Graničarji* multi-ethnic discourse is very strong in its national form, even if the name of the second ethnic group, the Italians, is never mentioned. In this discourse Trieste plays the role of the enemy's headquarters, whereas the discourse of Trieste as a metropolis is not very important. Trieste's size and business are only briefly mentioned when Volarič has to go there. This character is moved by the beauty of the Karst Plateau and Trieste and by the contrast of their different natures. The narrator stresses the opposition between the Karst Plateau villages and their poor inhabitants on the one hand, and the dynamism of the city of Trieste on the other (Magajna 92). He also describes how the enemies, the men of the city, people from Trieste, cannot comprehend the beauty of the Karst Plateau and find it boring and desolate. As a matter of fact, this is a typical city versus land discourse. Nevertheless the narration interprets it through the lens of ethnicity: the men in black (the Italians) oppress the Slovenians on the Karst Plateau after they have taken Trieste from them. The Slovenians do not yet have enough strength to defeat their enemies, but nevertheless they resist and the novel finishes with a reminder that a future will come in which they will liberate themselves.

The structure of *Graničarji* actually invites analysis of the text according to some categories of postcolonial studies. Homi Bhabha has pointed out that mimicry is a very typical survival strategy of postcolonial cultures. They (partly unwillingly) respect the colonizers' rules and customs from the outside, but in reality preserve their awareness and intention to be

different. Moreover mimicry is a form of profound proximity. This only works if the imitator has an intimate knowledge of the imitated, and is thus able to put himself in the position of the other. In *Graničarji* mimicry works together with the modernist interest in the hybridization of genres. What actually is Magajna's literary text? A historical novel about the fascist oppression of the Littoral region? A sort of allegoric epic story about heroes that challenge nature and evildoers? The text has features of both genres. Mimicry is not only an element of the story, it is also one of its formal strategies: the historical reference to fascism is hidden but at the same time alluded to throughout the book.¹⁶

Nevertheless the universal allegoric and epic level has its own autonomy: the story is a reflection upon the power of nature, the importance of homeland, and the violence of human relationships. One final remark is very important: even if mimicry does always imply a second level of meaning, this does not lead to irony in *Graničarji*. The novel is very serious and by no means as playful as *Přebroda*.

There are evidently some differences in the way in which *Přebroda* and *Graničarji* represent Prague and Trieste, connecting the theme of the metropolis with that of multi-ethnicity. It seems that multi-ethnicity as a challenge for the national struggle is a very important subject for *Graničarji*, whereas social conflicts inside the large town are the very theme of *Přebroda*. Both novels have in common their juxtaposition of urban and rural space, but Majerová's novel regards the city as the very space from which something new and crucial for civilization will come (the social revolution), whereas Magajna's story is centered around the land and its people, who try to defend their civilization from the invaders coming from the city (and belonging to a different ethnic group). Furthermore it is not only with regard to content that both novels differ. Their "modernist gaze" also diverges. Showing advantages and disadvantages of modern life in the metropolis, Majerová's work seems to be characterized by a touch of Leopold Bloom's irony, whereas Magajna's work reminds one of Stephen Dedalus' solemnity.

To conclude, I would like to suggest some very general considerations that can help explain the different attitudes of Majerová's and Magajna's works. These two attitudes reflect the very different power dynamics established in Prague's and Trieste's multi-ethnic spaces after the fall of the Habsburg monarchy. The situation of Trieste is perhaps easier to interpret: the fascist repression and assimilation of Slovenians from Trieste, the Karst Plateau, and the entire Littoral had the effect of orienting most of their literary production to the present political history of the region (with exceptions such as Vladimir Bartol). Both the writers in Yugoslav exile and

those that remained in the new Italian territories wrote extensively about the situation of the Littoral under fascism. Under these critical circumstances, literature assumed a very important role. It was a charge against fascism and at the same time a way to strengthen the ethnic awareness of Italian Slovenians that fascism tried to assimilate. Because of their inherent ideological functions, texts were often very extreme. The ethnic dynamics of Trieste were thus reduced to a great simplification in order to create consent in public opinion: Italian strangers, enemies or fascists, on the one side and Slovenian natives, friends and resistance fighters, on the other. This left less space for playfulness and irony. Moreover, the ethnic theme also attracted and absorbed the subject of the modern metropolis, which was important for the epoch and for Modernism. The contrast between Trieste as large center and the Karst Plateau as its hinterland is important for a major part of Slovenian literature from the Littoral even today, and it has retained these ethnic connotations to the present. These were nevertheless particularly strong during the interwar period. This is not very surprising, considering the fact that interwar (and other) totalitarianisms often tried to instrumentalize ethnic issues in order to distract people from other problems such as social issues. One of the strategies of fascism in Trieste was to present itself as a paladin of the city's Italian character and as a promoter of Italian expansion towards the east in order to compensate the lost rank and wealth of the formerly most important port of the Habsburg monarchy (Pizzi 117–128). It was actually not too difficult for fascism to succeed politically because Trieste effectively lay in a border zone disputed between Italy and Yugoslavia. Regardless of the ideology of interwar fascism, frontier spaces tend to polarize ethnic discourse.

In Prague, ethnic conflicts were not as strong at that time. This is supposed to be the typical situation of multi-ethnicity in democracies. In a certain sense I believe this is true. However, in the 1930s tensions grew rapidly between the Germans of Czechoslovakia and the state, as well as within the state between Germans and Czechs. There was also a third non-democratic agent in this conflict radicalizing tensions: the Third Reich. Nonetheless, not only in the 1920s, but also in the 1930s there were only a few Czech literary works that would have been interested in describing the Prague German and German-Jewish community (see Maidl 300). The reason for this could be that this community had a special position in the context of German Bohemian and Moravian centers. It was not very large, even though it was economically and culturally relevant, and it was deeply characterized by the Jewish element. The German-speaking Jewish citizens of Prague did not feel particularly close to the German culture of the Sudetenland (Kosatík 72, 209–216). Those that were not Jews were used

to the multi-ethnic atmosphere of Prague anyhow, and did not have serious difficulties accepting it. Many Germans in Prague sustained Masaryk's idea of a multi-ethnic Czechoslovakia even if they did not always agree with the programmatic fundamental Slavic character of the state. Thus, unlike Germans from the Sudetenland, Prague's Czech population did not consider Prague Germans and German Jews a problem or large divide that had to be overcome (Gruša et al. 17–18).¹⁷

Usually problems and divides – that is, differences – play an important role in the production of literature. Literature seeks to deal with difference, to describe, to deny, to emphasize it. Presumably in the 1920s and in 1930s Prague Germans and German Jews were not different enough for Prague's Czech literature because they lived more or less in harmony with the Czechoslovak idea. Of course it could be objected that, even if they supported the state, they were not Czech. There were actually differences between them and the Prague Czechs. This is true, but on the other hand Prague Czechs did not have the time to literarily reflect upon the special features of Prague Germans and German Jews because they were very busy with other subjects. During the interwar period social differences played a much larger role among Prague's citizens than ethnic differences. They were a very important driver of Czech Prague literature in the 1920s and 1930s – not only for communist authors such as Majerová (recall only the two Masarykians Karel Čapek and Frantisek Langer). Multi-ethnicity remains here a sort of secondary aspect of the social and class discourse, an echo of a (recent) part of Czech history and culture in which this aspect was much more important.

Nevertheless the importance of discourses often changes over time. Very soon multi-ethnicity in the Bohemian capital became important again, so important that today in postmodern Prague there is no more indigenous German community and only a very small Jewish one. Postmodern Trieste has kept its Slovenian minority, but many older Slovenians (and Italians) complain that for the new generation ethnic matters no longer have enough value. In my opinion, these older people should not be afraid: every principle of difference can remain latent for a long time, but as long as it exists it will be reactivated and attract people's imagination sooner or later. This is the case with the differences between countryside and city or within the various parts of the city. This is also the case with ethnic differences. On the other hand, perhaps old people *should* be afraid: imagination is a very ambivalent factor, which normally leads to variety, mutual interest, and tolerance as well as to homogeneity, segregation, and violence. I expect both from the confrontations of the future between city and countryside as well as among ethnic groups.

NOTES

¹ The case of the complete perfect assimilation of one ethnic group into another is no longer a condition of multi-ethnicity. Nevertheless, I believe that the process through which assimilation is achieved is one of the ways to experience multi-ethnicity.

² Speaking of Prague “Czechs,” “Germans,” and “Jews” in the Middle Ages, I of course do not use these terms in the national sense they acquired in the nineteenth century. The Middle Ages had a different perception of ethnicity. Nevertheless, already at that time Prague’s people had different native languages. This does not imply that Prague’s inhabitants each spoke only a single language and that the linguistic divisions between the groups were unequivocal, neither in the Middle Ages nor in the Modern and Contemporary Age. Interesting remarks on the dynamics of the fluidity and rigidity of these divisions over the centuries can be found in Peter Demetz. On the nineteenth century, see Cohen.

³ Just like Prague, Trieste had a strong Jewish community. In the interwar period and earlier it was very well integrated and largely assimilated with the Italian population. Until the fascist Manifesto of Race was enacted in 1938, Jews seemed to have no problem with anti-Semitism in Trieste. Some of them supported Fascism and felt betrayed by the Manifesto of Race (Ara and Magris 171). In Prague, Jews were similarly assimilated to the Germans and the Czechs, yet in both assimilating ethnic groups anti-Semitism was quite strong. Jews were always perceived as a third agent in Prague and their assimilation criticised. Consequently, as a rejected minority in spite of assimilation, Jews maintained and developed a stronger Jewish identity in Prague than in Trieste (Stözl). Concerning this matter, one should differentiate between German- and Czech-speaking Jews. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to underestimate the presence of Jewish identity in Trieste. Further distinctions unfortunately go beyond the scope of this study. My intention here is only to stress that, concerning multi-ethnic discourse, the Jewish element in Prague played a greater role for public opinion than in Trieste.

⁴ I prefer here to speak of “ethnic groups” rather than “nations” because the latter concept strongly relates to the political issue of a separate nation-state. As Anderson points out, the idea and also the practice of nation changed over the centuries, but in general it can be said that a nation, whoever its members are, is a community that strives for its own state. The concept of the ethnic group is historically determined (Kiliánová), but it does not stress the question of the nation-state so strongly. As a “we-group,” an ethnic group can long for its own nation-state as the nineteenth-century nationalisms did, but it can also define its identity through regionalism, internationalism, minoritarianism, and so on.

⁵ I cannot discuss here the situation in the Hungarian part of the empire (Transleithania), where the Austrian constitution was not recognized. Here the law defined a difference between Hungarians and the other ethnic groups that were regarded as minorities. Nevertheless they had some rights, and Croatia as well as the city of Rijeka (Fiume) enjoyed a certain autonomy. In the other parts of Transleithania, minorities’ rights were disregarded and Hungarians tried to magyarize the other groups.

⁶ Alternatively, one spoke of only one ethnic group (Czechoslovak) with two components.

⁷ *teigerung des Nervenlebens* in the original (Simmel 116).

⁸ To these oppositions should be added that between large and small cities because the latter are often regarded as not really modern. They are considered provincial, traditional, and conservative (Bakhtin 395).

⁹ According to Zima, this is the major difference between Modernism and Postmodernism, which has developed a kind of indifference towards utopias. In some cases, Post-

modernism can nostalgically look back at them, but it tries to imagine human life without them in any case.

¹⁰ I cannot discuss here the particular case of the Gypsies and the Jews, who were considered not completely European. Moreover Jews had an ambiguous status, oscillating between religious and ethnic identification.

¹¹ The subject of this study is interwar literature, which is connected to the contemporary historical situation. Nevertheless, other approaches are also possible: Czech Literature in the 1920s and 1930s also deals with the past multi-ethnic history of Prague (in the Middle Ages or the Early Modern Age). One could also analyze these texts. In this regard it is just relevant that literature can prefer to tie in with the past rather than the present. Moreover, it happens quite often that the past is portrayed in order to state something about the present.

¹² In spite of its future setting, the novel strongly relates to the social, political, and urban situation of Prague during the 1920s, as Majerová points out in her introduction for the book edition of 1950. Perhaps she exaggerates the “realistic” intention of the novel here, according to the aesthetics of Socialist Realism. Nevertheless the reference to the historical Prague of the 1920s plays an important role in the novel.

¹³ In my opinion, irony is a possible and relatively common feature of Modernism, but it is not its distinctive feature. The main characteristic of Modernism is the sense of crisis, the feeling and idea that the “traditional” concept of modernity no longer works. Modernism questions what western culture developed from the Renaissance to the dialectic Enlightenment/Romanticism. The reaction to this crisis can be ironic, but may also be very serious.

¹⁴ Majerová was criticized for this novel – which is the only “poetic” one in her oeuvre – by more orthodox communist critics: Bedřich Václavěk defined the story as a revolution “in fine gloves” (*v rukavičkách*).

¹⁵ This is an autobiographic element because under Fascism Magajna could not return to his village on the Italian Karst Plateau for the same reason (Zoltan 13).

¹⁶ Magajna’s use of mimicry may also have practical reasons. Even if he published the book in Yugoslavia, the Italian authorities had means to control the content of the publication through the Slovenian and Croatian minority in Italy. Moreover, these minorities secretly imported books from Yugoslavia. Mimicry was consequently also a way to deceive police and censorship if those books were found in Italy.

¹⁷ I cannot discuss here the problematic question of Germans from the Sudetenland living in Prague for university studies or other reasons.

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Modernizem in večetničnost? Češka književnost iz Prage ter slovenska književnost iz Trsta med obema vojnama

Ključne besede: primerjalna literarna veda / slovenska književnost / češka književnost / Avstro-Ogrska / Praga / Trst / večetničnost / multikulturalnost / modernizem / Majerová, Marie / Magajna, Bogomir

Prispevek govori o zvezi med modernizmom in večetničnostjo, pri čemer se ukvarja z zgodovino književnosti in analizo tem. Na vprašanje, ali so modernistična dela tematizirala večetničnostni položaj Prage in Trsta, odgovarja z analizo dveh primerov: češkega romana Marie Majerovás *Přebrada* (Nasip, 1932) in kratkega romana Bogomirja Magajne *Graničarji* (1934). Članek najprej oriše zgodovinske poteze večetničnosti v Pragi in Trstu znotraj večnacionalnega habsburškega imperija, pri čemer upošteva neesencialistični koncept narodnosti (Kiliánová) in naroda (Anderson). Pri ugotavljanju podobnosti in razlik glede večetničnosti v avstrijskem imperiju (Müller-Funk in dr., Feichtinger in dr.) in v evropskih kolonialnih imperijih (Said) se sklicuje na zgodovinske študije o Pragi in Trstu. V avstrijskem imperiju je imela večina narodnostnih skupin enak položaj pred zakonom, pravico do uradne rabe lastnega jezika in razvijanja kulture. Zato so lahko razvile močne in tekmovalne nacionalizme. Po propadu imperija so bile pravice manjšin (vsaj) pravno zagotovljene v

demokratični Češkoslovaški, medtem ko je italijanski fašizem zatiral manjšine in jih skušal denacionalizirati. Narodnostna dinamika moči je bila pomembna za nastanek modernih metropol. Bogastvo velikih mest imperija (Benjamin) ni temeljilo samo na izkoriščanju nižjih slojev, ampak tudi na nadzorovanju določenih narodnostnih skupin. Metropolita igra ključno vlogo v modernističnem podobju. Modernizem želi predstavljati to jedro modernega življenja (Simmel). Modernizem je mogoče razumeti kot vrsto »metamodernosti«, kritično presojo moderne ideje o zgodovini človeka, ki verjame v kolektivni napredek in/ali posameznikove možnosti (Zima). Postkolonialne in vzhodno-srednjeevropske študije kažejo, da je večetničnost eden od modernih (mestnih) problemov, o katerih želi modernizem razmisliti. Ne glede na to je v komunistično utopični *Přebradi* večetničnost samo izjemoma predstavljena kot poseben vidik pomembnejšega socialnega razrednega problema v Pragi. V *Graničarjih* pa je zelo pomembna, saj na predstavitev Trsta in njegove okolice vplivajo konflikti med Italijani in Slovenci. Za opise obeh mest romana uporabljata modernistične strategije, kot je hibridnost žanrov, ki avtorjema omogoča, da pokažeta kompleksnost mest. Medtem ko je učinek *Přebrade* rahlo parodičen, so *Graničarji* politično militanten tekst, ki svoj angažma deloma prikriva z vzorcem nezgodovinske, legendne povesti. Razlike v vsebini in obliki lahko povežemo z različnim zgodovinskim položajem večetničnosti v Pragi in Trstu med obema vojnoma. V Pragi je bila češka kultura bolj zavezana socialnemu govoru, ki so ga dojemali kot bolj nujnega. Slovenska kultura v Trstu (ali v eksilu) je morala preživeti italijanski fašizem in se je močno posvečala političnim temam.

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