

Triestine Literature between Slovenia and Italy: A Case of Missed Transculturalism?

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This article examines a body of literature between Slovenia and Italy in the early Twentieth century. This literature will emerge as particularly modern due to the paradigm of its regional peripherality. Srečko Kosovel and Scipio Slataper, however, were not to realize transcultural projects at the regional level, notwithstanding their pro-European agendas.

Keywords: Slovenian literature / Italian literature / literary periphery / cultural identity / transculturalism / Kosovel, Srečko / Slataper, Scipio

This work centres on a body of literature from the broader northern Adriatic region in the early years of the Twentieth century. This region was regarded as peripheral, both within the cosmopolitan set-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and especially following the demise of the Empire in 1918. While it was traditionally employed pejoratively, a term suggesting marginality, even provincialism, the notion of ‘peripherality’ is, on the other hand, finding new currency in recent years. The ‘peripheral’ is becoming sexy: peripheral is the new global! Drawing from this revamped notion, my primary intention is elucidate some of the manners in which the literary culture in this ‘peripheral region’ became particularly dynamic and forward looking in this arc of years. I shall argue that the originality of a body of work published locally stemmed largely, in fact, from a regional paradigm. In other words, that this body of literature was particularly modern and forward-looking by virtue of its peripherality. The multi-lingual and multi-cultural make-up of this region, its national and ethnic ‘fluidity’, its relative geographic remoteness from the ‘official’, the canonic centres of culture, almost naturally led to eclectic forms of cultural experimentalism. Significantly, the manners and features whereby innovative cultural forms and pro-European agendas prevailed here, were steeped in a social and political landscape increasingly mired in national, ethnic and

class polarizations. An experience, in other words, which was more readily divisive, rather than conducive to transcultural approaches. My further intention will be to unpack this paradox, and expose it, to some extent, as a 'pseudo-paradox', when we reconcile the anti-traditional, radical experimentalism pursued in this border region within the overall framework of the fragmented, peripheral and de-centred experience of modernity itself.

I would therefore additionally argue that this region needs to be positioned firmly within the cultural and geographical area that, from Fernand Braudel onwards, has been regarded as an extraordinary incubator, a furnace of cultural imbrications, a convergence and cross-road of transcultural exchanges. Here, global and local identities, the regional, the national and the international, the general and the particular, collided and crashed, but also potentially intersected in manners that would not have been possible elsewhere. It seems now widely accepted that regions traditionally perceived as the geographical and cultural peripheries of global capitalism, are in fact best placed to capture voices and experiences of the most authentic and generative modernity.¹

My exploration of literature around this borderland – and I am using 'around' rather than 'across' with reason, given this exploration relies more frequently on a motion of skirting around rather than straddling across – aims to be a comparative one. In my conclusion I shall provide an argument as to why I believe comparative literary studies is still a useful critical tool. My investigation will rely, as far as possible, on transcultural hermeneutics and methodologies. At the same time, problems and pitfalls inherent to these methods, due to disconnects, dissonances or shifts of signification, will also emerge. Transculturalism, I believe, struggles to provide a viable methodology, under the weight of the brittle tectonics of history and memory between Italy and Slovenia at this juncture, as my examples will illustrate.

If it is true that urban centres are the focal points of the Mediterranean civilization from the Renaissance onwards, it is therefore necessary to begin our investigation with a major urban centre in this region: the city of Trieste and its curious history. Come into its own in the Eighteenth century due to an Imperial decree, Trieste contributed significantly to consolidate the Empire's fortunes through its commercial port, particularly after the opening of the Suez Canal. Beginning from the defeat and dismemberment of the Empire, however, Trieste experienced a progressive decline, eventually finding itself at the margins. The city and large parts of this multi-ethnic region were handed over to Italy following the 1920 Treaty of Rapallo. Under the competition of mightier Italian harbours, the Triestine port sunk into economic stagnation. Under the nationalist agen-

das imposed by the fascist rulers, groups of competing national, linguistic and ethnic profile were on a collision course. The dusk of Trieste's cosmopolitanism mapped onto a growing enthusiasm for Italy perceived as an idealized motherland, an enthusiasm articulated by the Italian-speaking middle classes, who were substantial due to Trieste's commercial profile. Under the fascist regime, these agendas reached violent and oppressive outcomes, particularly directed to non-Italian communities, such as forced nationalization, banning of language, attacks on cultural institutions, closure of schools, etc. A mono-cultural Italian agenda, which had run high with the Italian middle class before the War, became hijacked by, and subsumed under, fascist banners.²

Earlier on, however, via their Florentine 'exile' on the eve of the Great War, Scipio Slataper and the brothers Carlo and Giani Stuparich enter the cultural scene of the region. These three authors were contemporaries of Srečko Kosovel, who will be discussed below and, significantly, all three played some instrumental role in inventing and constructing a literary culture in Italian in this region. Defecting from the Austrian conscript Army and seeking escape in mainland Italy, since the early years of 1900, they had pursued higher degrees at the University of Florence, traditional cradle of Italian language and civilization. Aesthetically and ideologically, the Stuparich and Slataper were influenced by Nineteenth century Italian poets, especially Giacomo Leopardi and Giosuè Carducci, whose work was also familiar to Kosovel, via different routes. Slataper and the Stuparich regarded Florence as an anchor of 'Italianness' (*italianità*): a powerful stabiliser and legitimiser of the multifarious, even 'shaky', cultural identity of a cultural periphery such was Trieste. It is precisely their eccentric peripherality, however, that spurred their confidence in pursuing a broad intellectual experimentalism. Slataper and the Stuparich were in fact open to cultural experimentation, from *repêchages* into the most hackneyed literary traditions, to leanings towards a robust autobiographism (typical of much literary output in this region, including Kosovel), combining heterogeneous cultural elements, dipping into cultures that were distant geographically (see Slataper's interests in Ibsen and Giani Stuparich's work on the Czech nation), achieving what Ernestina Pellegrini brands as a sort of 'spiritual encyclopaedism' (358).

In a well-known "Triestine Letter" published in the influential Florentine periodical *La Voce* in 1909, Slataper went as far as declaring that Trieste and its region had neither a cultural tradition nor a cultural scene at all at the beginning of the century. This was clearly a provocative nudge to complacent continental Italians who had very foggy notions of what the northern Adriatic region consisted of, blissfully ignoring its complexity.

In reality, Trieste at the time was far from being a cultural desert, boasting, amongst others, one of the first performances of Wagner's *Tetralogy* and the very first Futurist soirée before 1910. Though a 'counter culture' (Cattaruzza 199), the cultural life of the Slovene community was vibrant, as testified by the activity of high-profile theatres, libraries and concert halls, not to mention prominent periodicals, such as *Edinost* and *Novi rod*, two titles alone of particular relevance for Kosovel in a constellation of other notable periodical publications.

Having 'descended' onto Florence like a barbarian gasping for civilization, as Slataper himself puts it, he also edited *La Voce* from 1910. From *La Voce*, he advocated a pivotal role for his native town, seat of a conflict between the spirit of an elusive culture and the matter of an all too tangible trade. His major work *Il mio carso* (1912) may not always read convincingly, but is nonetheless largely an original, fragmentary, avant-garde lyrical prose. As such, it combines *Sturm und Drang* Romanticism, a rhetorical vitalism borrowed from the neoclassical rhetoric of Gabriele D'Annunzio, and modernist endorsements of the urban modernity of Trieste as opposed to the alleged self-effacement of the rural Karst. The Karst, one of the main sources of inspiration for the contemporary Kosovel, is evoked here as a psychological and affective landscape, but also as culturally backward, when compared with the urban modernity of Trieste. With the benefit of hindsight, it is interesting to note that this tumultuous, contradictory text became the *Ur-text* of Triestine literature, creating *ex novo* a literary tradition. This work was, in fact, to open the way, albeit unwittingly, for major modernist authors whose fame is linked to Trieste, from Italo Svevo to James Joyce. It is notable that, like Slataper, both Svevo and Joyce negotiated issues of language, imperialism, national identity and representation in their broader body of work.

For all his mono-national emphasis, Slataper was nonetheless the first author in the Italian language to draw attention in Italy to the presence of a Slovene culture in Trieste – possibly even before Angelo Vivante, who is generally credited with this primacy. Vivante's *Irredentismo adriatico* also first came out in 1912 and, although Vivante's views are more extensive and contextually aware when compared with Slataper's own, they may, on the other hand, have been subsequently circulated and debated mainly within the confines of this region. It must also be noted, as the name suggests, that Slataper was himself a hybridized ethnic Italian, unlikely to be well disposed towards the Slovenes of Trieste, as noted by Boris Pahor (48).³

On the wake of Slataper's initiative, a sizable group of young intellectuals from the northern Adriatic region moved *en masse* to Florence and took residence there in the years straddling the First World War; to cite only a

few: Gemma Harazin, Virgilio Giotti, Biagio Marin, Carlo Michelstädter, Alberto Spaini and various others also attended lectures at the University of Florence. All contributed to *La Voce*, both absorbing and disseminating the modernist and pro-European agenda of this periodical, which was extremely influential in Italy and, to some extent, outside Italy, at this time. Slataper and his acolytes hoped to achieve a firm national and cultural integration by delving into the most canonical, but also most idealized, centre of Italian language and culture. As in a veritable ‘invention of tradition’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 4), this group ‘invented’ a brand new Triestine culture in the Italian language. In order to do so, they drew from an established legacy, rooted in the heart of peninsular Italy. One could argue that, to some extent, this ‘invention’ also seemed to dispense these authors from engaging fully with other linguistic and cultural realities in the region. As happens only too frequently in multi-lingual and multi-cultural areas, a unique and mono-cultural tradition tends to provide safe anchorage and a powerful stabilizer in the face of a perceived centrifugal multiplicity. In legitimising the idea of an Italian cultural primacy, while at the same time drawing attention to the multi-cultural mix at home, Slataper’s group contributed dynamically, but also contradictorily, to the intercultural and European agenda of *La Voce*. At once Italian and European, and also interested in the Slovenian neighbours, if not militantly, this cultural programme was to lend only too easy ammunition to nationalist agendas shortly after the end of the War.

Trans-cultural methods are clearly not easily mapped here onto mono-national discourses. The latter stemmed from invocations of nation as essential and ultimate giver of identity. More so, in a region that experienced the disintegration and fallout of the Imperial cooker, under the pressure of combusting national forces. It seems to me that both Slataper, and his contemporary Kosovel were eager proponents of transcultural dynamics, albeit at a wider European level. Their respective national frameworks inevitably inflected their cultural reception, dissemination and transmission. Transcultural communication, in short, experiences a power cut here, due to received patterns of mutual cultural suspicion. Yet, both Kosovel and Slataper hailed from the common premises of achieving a common European identity and culture. Could one suggest that an abstract entity called Europe may have acted as a neutral ground, able, by virtue of its remoteness, to diffuse the powerfully divisive forces at play closer to home?

Enter Kosovel. Kosovel, of course, embraced the modernist aesthetics in constructivist and socialist inflections. Kosovel’s intellectual and political militancy had a transnational goal: to transcend the region and aim for a progressive and liberal idea of Europe. A Europe understood as provid-

er of a genuinely international and transcultural platform. A contemporary of Slataper's – Kosovel was a boy of eleven years of age when Slataper died in the trenches of the Great War in 1916 – Kosovel, like Slataper, was devoted to an idea of Europe erected on strong ethical foundations. In both poets, in Kosovel especially, this broad engagement was conveyed in experimental, avant-garde forms that joined up with, and contributed to, the most forward-thinking experimentations across Europe.

There is clearly a 'fracture' here, a breakdown. National and ethnic boundaries, whether real or perceived, denied fruitful interactions between neighbouring intellectuals of comparable ilk. No evidence exists, to my knowledge, that Kosovel became aware of Slataper's work. Kosovel was familiar with the Italian language, even though he lamented not speaking Italian well (cit. in Pahor 54). And yet his cultural interest in the canon of Italian literature could hardly be mediated by Triestine Irredentists who defected to Italy before the War. Growing up in the 1920s, even from the relative distance of a distinctive cultural centre such as Ljubljana, Kosovel could hardly have been privy to Slataper's pro-Italian endorsements. Rather, his interest in Italian literature was mediated, amongst others, by the influential translations of the Slovene minister and scholar Ivan Trinko (1863-1954), who had translated many Italian classics, through his friendship for a fellow contributor to *Lepa Vida*, Mirijam (Fanica Obid), and through his affectionate friendship for the Neapolitan Carlo Curcio. *Mutatis mutandis*, a similar binary of missed regional transculturalism, Giani Stuparich spent time and effort studying the Czech nation, while almost entirely ignoring the Slovenes closer to home, as observed by Mark Thompson (103).⁴

These contradictions help explain why this region was not at all a melting pot, or 'crucible of cultures', but rather a 'bulwark' (Apih 75; Ara and Magris 111). Torn apart by centrifugal forces, this border invokes more frequently the status of a rift, an obstacle or a barrier, rather than a cultural intersection and overlap. Confusion and confrontation are overpowering, fanatic even, in border zones. A region that was historically unsure of itself, and a city, Trieste, in search of a literary identity it could call its own, became all too vulnerable to notions of an undisputed, and pre-eminent, mono-cultural identity. This clinging on to a monolithic culture is, once again, an all too common feature in border zones, where identity is predicated on the negative, in opposition to the culturally and linguistically alien 'others'.

Beginning especially from the mid-1920s, the fascist regime became busy institutionalizing official discourses of 'Italianness'. Trieste suffered the indignity of donning a straightjacket of *italianità*, notably imposed through acts of violent persecution against the Slovene Triestines. A

major example is encapsulated by the emblematic arson of Hotel Balkan or Slovenian Cultural House on 13 July 1920. This act of heinous violence repelled and outraged Kosovel, as evidenced, for example, from the poem “Italijanska kultura”, an atrocity which may have also informed a larger portion of Kosovel’s work. Ernesto Sestan described this national sentiment as ‘hypertrophic’ (402): an over-inflated, monolithic sense of national belonging and national entitlement. The example set in Rijeka (Fiume) by Gabriele D’Annunzio and his legionnaires, who occupied the city and turned it into an Italian enclave between 1919 and 1920, also contributed to making Italy synonymous with fascism in this region. Official ‘Italianness’ predicated itself on anti-Slavness.

It is worth spending a few words on Italian Futurism at this juncture, not merely because of its later crossovers with fascism, but especially because avant-garde aesthetics cut across Kosovel’s own poetics. It is not widely known, for instance, that the very first Futurist performances were staged in Trieste between 1908 and 1909, even prior to the publication of the first Futurist Manifesto on the part of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the movement’s official leader, in 1909, on the pages of the French periodical *Le Figaro*. The first proper Futurist *soirée*, the first in a long series of interactive and often boisterously provocative performances, took place at Trieste’s main theatre, Politeama Rossetti, on 12 January 1910. Srečko Kosovel, who was later to become a regular at the Rossetti theatre, would have been too young to have been in the audience. Yet, echoes of Futurist radical poetics and agit-propism lingered on.

An official Futurist group gathered in Trieste in the early 1920s, under the leadership of the poet Bruno Sanzin. Even though Sanzin’s poetic production remains, to some extent, a nationalistic no-go area, a small vanguard of local poets and artists produced valuable work that echoed more widely on the international stage. Sanzin wrote a Futurist column in *Italia Nova*, a journal later repackaged under the title *Energie Futuriste*. *Energie Futuriste* was edited by Kosovel’s friend, Giorgio Carmelich. In the mid-1920s, Carmelich was also invested in two momentous projects: the “School of Modern Activity” (*Scuola di Attività Moderna*) and the “Triestine Constructivist Group” (*Gruppo Costruttivista Triestino*). A year earlier, in 1924, of course, Avgust Černigoj had co-organized, together with Kosovel, the first Constructivist exhibition in Trieste.⁵ All these experiences stand at the forefront of the international avant-garde and need to be situated firmly at the heart of the most radical modernism. It is notable that transnational and transcultural cross-overs and overlaps emerge forcefully here.

It appears to me, in fact, that this region gave its most original and enduring contribution in a constructivist direction, that is to say at the

juncture where modernism intersects and joins up with radical socialist politics, in central and eastern Europe. It is, of course, also in this direction, that Kosovel offered his most significant and enduring contribution. In the summer of 1925 Kosovel started writing constructivist poetry with the title *Konsi*, which was shorthand for ‘constructions’. His style was futurist, consisting of words in freedom and typographic syntheses. His content encompassed both national and international identities. Kosovel, of course, regarded the Slovene nation as integral part of a new Europe. The *Kons* advocated Kosovel’s pan-European, socialist politics, as well as offering a precedent and a platform for radical experimental poetry from Slovenia and beyond from here onwards.

To sum up, the avant-garde experimentalism pursued by Kosovel and his Italian counterparts, demonstrate the extent to which the culture of this region needs to be reassessed in the light of comparative methodologies. The respective search of a cultural identity, the radical politics, and the international and European breadth of investigation, even the fragmented, syncopated writing mode shared by most of the authors discussed here, help build bridges across divided national and linguistic fronts. They help recompose the ‘fractures’ of official history, commemoration and memory (Klabjan 403; Foot 1). Those very ‘fractures’ that kept neighbouring groups apart for far too long.

It is often remarked that the experience of modernity is an experience of marginality and fragmentation. At the brink, and in the aftermath, of the First World War, in its very complex, and divided, identity, in its very disjunction and peripherality from the centres of global capitalism, it seems to me that this region kept its doors wide open, contributing significantly to the international avant-garde. As a way to point to future directions, my conclusion advocates for comparative literary studies as a useful critical container. Comparative literature alone encompasses the hermeneutics of liminal spaces, as well as advocating for a ‘glocal’ hermeneutic of the national, in a dialogue with the hegemony of the centre. I would therefore also suggest that a notion of a semi-periphery may be better suited to describe the particularities of this region, as it may help negotiate between the categories of ‘the national’ and ‘the transnational’, both within, and outside, in a context of globalization and multiculturalism which is prevailing today. I’m thinking here of the refreshing transcultural approaches to the national question voiced by authors who emerged more recently to the literary scene, such as Nelida Milani. And also, given that this region is now experiencing sustained immigration from south-east Asia, north-Africa and the Middle East, it is worth mentioning the emerging of a new generation of authors who bring in radically unfamiliar

languages and cultural contexts. Take, for example, the Indian Lily Amber Laila Wadia, who writes in Italian, her second language. Wadia's hilarious volume, entitled *Come diventare italiani in 24 ore. Diario di un'aspirante italiana*, is an ironic and tongue-in-cheek autobiographical manual, which plays round with received notions of 'national' and 'cultural' in re-constituted national contexts. This production manages to scramble and re-situate once again received and by now obsolete paradigms. Through the medium of irony, it engages playfully with ossified categories, such as centre and periphery, national, regional and transnational, re-configuring them in novel and always varying ways.

NOTES

¹ See Benita Parry, "Stylistic Irrealism as Symptom, Mediation and Critique of Peripheral Modernity", *passim*.

² From the large body of critical literature exploring the vicissitudes of the Trieste port and the wider Karst region, I draw especially from my monograph *Trieste: italianità, triestinità e male di frontiera*.

³ See also my article "'Quale triestinità?'"

⁴ M. Thompson, *The White War*, 103: 'He himself [Stuparich] wrote a fine book about the Czechs. Yet the Czechs were comfortably remote; about the Slovenes, his fellow Triestines, he had little to say.' While I agree that Stuparich usually casts Slovenes in minor or subordinate roles in his prose work, I cannot, on the other hand, agree with Thompson's view of Giani Stuparich as an anti-Slav nationalist and proto-fascist.

⁵ I am grateful to my friend Ravel Kodrič for our conversations on Carmelich and Černigoj.

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Tržaška književnost med Slovenijo in Italijo: primer zamujenega transkulturalizma?

Ključne besede: slovenska književnost / italijanska književnost / literarno obrobje / kulturna identiteta / transkulturalizem / Kosovel, Srečko / Slataper, Scipio

V članku avtorica preučuje književnost, ki je na začetku dvajsetega stoletja nastala na območju severnega Jadrana. V svetovljanski Avstro-ogrski monarhiji in še zlasti po njenem razpadu leta 1918 je to območje veljalo za obrobno, v zadnjih letih pa prav njegova obrobnost, ki je ne razumemo več slabšalno, dobiva nov pomen. Na podlagi spremenjenega dojemanja pojma obrobnosti skuša avtorica ponazoriti nekatere načine, na katere je literarna kultura na tem »obrobnem območju« v vseh letih postala še posebno dinamična in napredna. Izvirnost lokalno objavljene književnosti pravzaprav večinoma izhaja iz regionalne paradigme. Z drugimi besedami, ta književnost je bila še posebno sodobna in napredna prav zaradi svoje obrobnosti. Večjezična in večkulturna narava tega območja, njegova nacionalna in etnična »pretočnost« ter precejšnja geografska oddaljenost od »uradnih« ali kanonskih kulturnih središč so že skoraj samodejno vodile v

razvoj eklektičnih oblik kulturnega eksperimentalizma. Načini in prvine, ki so povzročili razvoj inovativnih kulturnih oblik in proevropskih usmeritev, so bili prepojeni tudi z družbeno in politično pokrajino, ki jo je kazila vse večja nacionalna, etnična in razredna polarizacija. Z drugimi besedami, šlo je za izkušnjo, ki je transkulturne pristope prej zavirala kot pa pospeševala. Avtorica ta paradoks nadalje predstavi oziroma ga v določeni meri izpostavi kot »psevdo-paradoks« na osnovi primerjave antitradicionalnega, radikalnega eksperimentalizma v obravnavani mejni pokrajini s splošnim okvirom razdrobljene, obrobne in decentralizirane izkušnje v sami sodobnosti. Članek konča s kratkim opisom tega, kako književni proizvodi nedavnih priseljencev z juga spreminjajo in na novo umeščajo sprejete in zdaj že zastarele kulturne paradigme.

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