Introduction

“This Little Corner of Europe”:
Slataper’s Reflections on and around
Trieste’s Cultural and National Identity

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When in 1909 Scipio Slataper, a young university student, published in the Florentine journal *La Voce* his *Lettere triestine* (*Letters on Trieste*, in this volume), in which he analysed and criticized the cultural and political situation of his native city, he was still completely unknown both in Trieste and in Italy. Who was this young man questioning the traditional Italian perception of Trieste as a wealthy Italian *città irredenta*, literally, an “unredeemed city” that longed to be reunited with its motherland but was still under the yoke of Austrian domination? How could he accuse the Triestines of lacking any cultural tradition, and of being so obsessed with their Italian identity that they ignored the Croatian and Slovenian population in their midst? And how dared he criticize the bourgeois, business-oriented mentality of the city, when it was that very mentality that allowed the city to grow and prosper, and to become one of the wealthiest cities in *fin de siècle* Europe?

And yet, the twenty-year-old Slataper who dared to reflect publicly on his city in the pages of *La Voce* was the product of the complex and conflictual essence of Austrian Trieste, and his letters offer a window into the irresolvable political, cultural, and social tensions present in this border city at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Fin de siècle Trieste

In order to understand the importance of Slataper’s *Letters* and the mixed reactions that they received, we must first understand the complex and often contradictory features of the city at that time. In 1909 when Slataper started his collaboration with the Florentine journal, Trieste was still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, having submitted to the Habsburgs in 1382 for fear of being seized by the expanding Republic of Venice. Situated on the north-eastern Adriatic coast, on the

western edge of the Austrian Empire, Trieste remained for centuries an insignificant fishing town.¹ Its destiny changed drastically when Emperor Charles VI saw the hidden commercial and financial potential of this coastal town and granted it the status of free port in 1719.² This significant fiscal privilege was followed in subsequent years by remarkable investments in Trieste's infrastructure, which permitted the construction of a bigger harbour, new roads, and railroad lines that connected the city to its Austrian hinterland. Moreover, in order to attract investors, experienced merchants, and labourers to the city, Charles VI issued a series of patents that permitted individuals from "any nation, social standing or religion" to settle in the city of Trieste to do business without any restrictions (Mainati 142).³

Furthermore, the government was willing to forgive debts that the relocated merchants had incurred in other countries and give them a clean slate from which to start their business (Mainati 163). Additional edicts specifically aimed at encouraging wealthy Austrian Jews to relocate to Trieste and to invest their capital there soon followed. The Theresian Diplomas of 1771 ensured the exceptional status of Triestine Jewry when compared to other Jewish communities within the Dual Monarchy. In Trieste, Jews did not have to wear any distinguishing sign, they could own real estate outside the ghetto, and they were allowed to worship in public and to engage in any kind of work or business. Moreover, they did not have to pay extra taxes for toleration or for travelling to other cities.⁴ In sum, they could participate *tout court* in the financial and cultural growth of the city. Of pivotal importance for the development of a multi-religious and multi-ethnic Trieste was the Edict of Tolerance of 1781, which allowed the settlement of Protestants and Eastern Orthodox Christians in the city. As a direct result of these policies and financial investments, the city grew into a powerful commercial and financial

1 Luzzatto Fegiz noted that "at the beginning of the eighteenth-century Trieste counted about 600 houses and a population of 5700 unities" (15), all living inside the walls of the medieval town. All translations from Italian are mine unless otherwise noted.

2 Joseph Cary defines a free port as "a port free of the usual protectionist devices (dock restrictions and custom duties; wharfage, portage, and storage charges) by means of which a modern port normally assures itself of order, upkeep and profit. The aim of a free port policy is, through the offer of optimal trade conditions, to attract an unusually large volume of business, which will outweigh the loss of conventional revenues" (96).

3 The text of the original patents is reprinted in Mainati's *Croniche*, a valuable early-nineteenth-century volume on Trieste's early history.

4 On the impact of the patents and the development of the Jewish community in Trieste see Dubin 40–62.

centre that attracted people from all over Europe: the city's population grew from 5,000 inhabitants in the early 1700s to 176,000 in 1890 and reached 250,000 people in 1914. By the middle of the nineteenth century its population comprised not only Italians but also Slavs, Germans, Austrians, eastern European Jews, Greeks, and Turks, giving it that multi-ethnic and multicultural quality that by the end of the century would become one of its most distinct characteristics.⁵

In the years following the declaration of the free port, the physical physiognomy of the city also changed drastically. The Maria Theresa and the Joseph quarters, erected outside the walls of the old medieval city and named after the two emperors who supported their development and construction, exemplified with their perpendicular grid of wide avenues flanked by neoclassical buildings the commercial ethos and wealth of the new city.⁶ By the mid-nineteenth century the city was an established site of major financial and insurance companies, such as the Assicurazioni Generali, the Union Bank, and La Riunione Adriatica di Sicurtà, which attracted large investments from all over Europe.⁷ It also housed a thriving exchange market, hosted since 1844 in the grandiose palace of the Tergesteo, whose glass arcades also housed the "Merchant Society," making it the epicentre of the financial life of the city.⁸ Here the groups of marble statues adorning the top of both facades of the building featured Mercury and Neptune, the gods of commerce and sea, reminding the businesspeople and merchants who came to buy stocks,

5 The poet Umberto Saba (1883–1957) captured the cosmopolitan essence of turn-of-the-century Trieste: "Its greatest charm lay in its variety. Turning a corner of the road meant changing continent. There was Italy and the desire of Italy, there was Austria (not nearly as bad as one thought), there was the East, there was the Levant with its merchants in red fez, and still many other things" (1089). On the city's economic development see Apih, *Trieste* 7–21; Ara and Magris 18–42.

6 The Borgo Teresiano, situated outside of the walls of the old medieval town, was built between 1754 and 1788, while the Borgo Giuseppino was erected along the coast between 1788 and 1825.

7 See Hametz 48.

8 The importance of the Tergesteo in the life of the city is testified to by its predominant role in Italo Svevo's masterpiece *Zeno's Conscience*. Zeno Cosini, the protagonist of the novel, frequents the offices of the bourse in the hope of gaining access to and understanding the intricate world of business that rules the city, and thus becomes a respectful member of Triestine society: "I had come to the Tergesteo building on the advice of Olivi, who told me that I would get my commercial activity off to a good start by spending some time at the Bourse, and that I might also garner there some useful information for him. I sat down at that table [...] and I never left it afterwards, since it seemed to me, I had really come upon a classroom of commerce, such as I had long been seeking" (62).

make deals, socialize, and hear the latest financial news and gossip who were the true patrons of the wealthy and cosmopolitan city.

Yet this city, which was at the turn of the twentieth century “one of the richest cities of this wealthy empire” (Bazlen 243) because of a strong and solid bourgeoisie, was also a city of poor immigrants: “the harbor where castaways find shelter and the promise of a new life [...] consolatrices afflictorum et refugium peccatorum: this is Trieste for its immigrants” (Pittoni 26). Slataper saw this refuge differently, describing it bitterly in one of his articles as a “true asylum for crooks” (“Trieste Has No Cultural Traditions,” in this volume, 81). The city’s financial and industrial development led also to a dramatic increase of its proletarian and sub-proletarian class, composed of both Slovenes who abandoned the nearby countryside to try to improve their economic conditions and, in a later wave, Italians from the Friuli region: between 1864 and 1909 the city population doubled, from 112,000 to 224,000 inhabitants.⁹ This ever-increasing number of unskilled immigrants who moved to Trieste as cheap labour found refuge in “*città vecchia*,” the old medieval town, a maze of small and dark alleys flanked by old, crumbling houses unfit for habitation, and in the adjacent district of San Giacomo, also overpopulated and lacking necessary infrastructure. Though the two poor quarters were geographically situated next to the new, thriving cosmopolitan city, which housed wealthy entrepreneurs and clever businesspeople in large and elegant palaces, their social and economic fabric made them a world apart. These were the poorest and sickest sections of the city, where the child mortality rate was one of the highest in all Europe and where tuberculosis, syphilis, and alcoholism abounded.¹⁰ Even the police avoided their dark, narrow alleys, allowing both petty and more serious criminals to act and move freely (Cattaruzza, *Proletariato urbano* 160). Although the bourgeoisie maintained their distance from these dangerous districts, with the exception of nightly anonymous rendezvous in the

9 Immigration from Carniola, the western region of Slovenia, was prominent until 1890 and was made up predominantly of peasants and day workers. After that date, with the extension of the port and aggressive industrial development, the city attracted factory workers, coming also from Italy. See Cattaruzza, *Trieste nell’ottocento* 125–7.

10 Compared to the rest of Europe, Trieste continued to witness “an abundance of infectious diseases” (Scartabellati 136) such as tuberculosis, diphtheria, and venereal diseases, which claimed the lives of a high percentage of the general population and an even larger percentage of young children. As Scartabellati noted, the major cause of infant and early childhood mortality was what the doctors defined as “congenital weakness,” a euphemism that referred to the conditions of extreme indigence and horrific malnutrition in which the poor of *città vecchia* lived (135–7). See also Cattaruzza, *Proletariato urbano* 63–4.

many brothels that thrived in the area, the wealthy city could not ignore the existence of the poor. The unemployed, the vagrants, the petty thieves, and the drunkards moved freely within the affluent districts, their presence calling into question the seeming coherence and strength of Trieste's bourgeois ethos (Cattaruzza, *Proletariato urbano* 163).

Throughout the nineteenth century, doctors, hygienists, public officials, and various governmental and philanthropic associations tried but mostly failed to improve the conditions of the proletarian and sub-proletarian class. For instance, a housing institute created to alleviate the housing problem of the poorest part of the population, although commendable in its efforts, was unable to offer an effective solution to the increasing number of poor residents. In 1902 doctor Achille Costantini wrote a disparaging report to the housing committee, noting that the density of the population per dwelling continued to be much higher in Trieste than in many other great cities, while most residences in San Giacomo and *città vecchia* continued to lack running water. Constantini concluded his report by remarking that the "unhealthiness of the dwellings for the lower classes exacerbates the overall mortality and the mortality due to transmissible diseases."¹¹ In spite of the increasing wealth of the city as a whole, the persisting lack of decent housing coupled with a poor diet and constant job insecurity led one of the authors of a 1908 report on the city's indigent population to note that the circumstances of the poor in Trieste not only had not improved from the previous century, but were actually getting worse every year (Scartabellati 132).

In 1910 Silvio Benco, one of the most outspoken and prolific Triestine intellectuals of the time, having described the modern city with pride and satisfaction as a site full of activity where "the restlessness of its working class people is spreading in all its districts" (52), condemned the old, morally decrepit section of Trieste. Here he witnessed

11 Achille Costantini, *Relazione e parere del Protofisico civico dottor Costantini* 1, cited in Scartabellati 124. See also the article "Il veicolo del colera" (The vehicle for transmission of cholera), *L'Indipendente*, 19 February 1893). Here the journalist exhorted the city's health officials to attend the next international health convention and use this venue to address the vulnerability of the city and the need for an organized worldwide system of quarantine that could identify and isolate infected individuals. The situation did not improve in the next decade, and in 1910 the newspaper *Il Lavoratore* published an article entitled "Le disastrose condizioni sanitarie di Trieste" (The disastrous health conditions of Trieste) in which the journalist wrote that deaths from cholera and tuberculosis in the old part of the city were still higher than in other Austrian cities (27 August 1910).

[a] mixture of misery and dirt in which human life festers [...]. The odor of deteriorating old masonry, the stench of viscous infiltrations, the miasma of the rotten air coming from dark doorways, they all blend together in a thick atmosphere [...] where the smell of cobwebs and rats, unkempt beds, grease, junk shops, alcoholism and prostitution lingers. (49)

Even the brightness of sunrays is tarnished in this environment, while the “sickly, contaminated air” impregnates everyone and everything (50–1). The moral debasement of the district is mostly visible at night, when “throngs of seamen” seek in its many brothels and lurid taverns the pleasures of the “obscene goddess” (51). Benco ends the description of the neighbourhood by demanding its *sventramento*, literally its disembowelment, the urban practice started by Haussmann in Paris, and embraced by nineteenth-century hygienists and urbanists who saw the demolition of a whole city quarter as a drastic but necessary surgical procedure needed “to save a badly infected urban organism” (Çelik et al. 10). The infection that Benco and others saw propagating from *città vecchia* and that had to be stopped was not just physical, but also moral. The many prostitutes and brothels that plagued the old quarter were a constant reminder that moral and physical degradation were intrinsically connected and just a few steps away from the beautiful cafes frequented by the proper wives and daughters of the wealthy bourgeoisie.¹²

Moreover, the proletarian and sub-proletarian uprisings and demonstrations that broke out time and time again in the city reminded the ruling class that the urban masses were very difficult to control, and that they could easily threaten the bourgeois order and productivity of the city. The strikes and popular uprisings of 1902 and 1907 are a case in point: they revealed the sense of anger and frustration that incited the poorest part of the population, and the fragile relationship that the city of wealth and commerce had with its indigent inhabitants.

In 1902 the Austrian Lloyd stockers’ union strike turned quickly into a mass uprising that the socialist party, which had organized the strike, was unable to contain. Within twenty-four hours, the lumpenproletariat, including women and children, were in the streets rioting and protesting. In the words of an anonymous journalist:

12 Many philanthropic associations tried, without success, to limit the practice of prostitution and reduce the number of people affected by venereal diseases. In his study of prostitution in Trieste, Schneider noted that prostitutes were the “embodiment of human and social error, failure and intractability” (152).

These were not Friday's strikers. It was a crowd made up of disparate elements who appeared, as if by magic, from the poorest slums, the stigmata of poverty on their forehead. A crowd that seemed summoned by the desire to avenge itself, [...] to vent their hate without really knowing against whom or why. [...] That crowd represented the rage of the abject against all of society; it was the lowest social class advancing on the tragic scene shouting, "I am here before the firing squad, ready to be executed, because I have nothing to lose." (Domokos 121–2)¹³

The journalist concluded his article by drawing a clear distinction between the socialist demonstrators, who had a class consciousness and protested for better working conditions and social reforms, and the unpredictable mob that lacked class identity and was indifferent to the socialist cause and ideals. Although the journalist recognized that the latter were the forgotten victims of capitalism, he was also quick to disown them as thugs, as "barbarians," living outside the parameters of civil society, beyond any possibility of rehabilitation or redemption (123). Only five years later, on 13 September 1907, another major uprising undermined the tranquility of the city, and this time it did not need the pretext of a strike. Incensed by the rising prices of bread and other basic goods, a mob of poor and disenfranchised men, women, and children vandalized public buildings, looted stores, attacked carriages, and destroyed many of the cafes situated in the centre of the city and frequented by the bourgeoisie.

Il Lavoratore, the organ of the Lega Socialdemocratica, as the Triestine socialist party was called, constantly denounced the tragic conditions in which the poor lived.¹⁴ The socialists wished to strengthen a supranational party that, leaving aside the various national identities of its members, could tackle and resolve the serious social problems that afflicted the proletarian population. The desire to construct a proletarian identity that transcended national Italian and Slovenian loyalties inspired activists and intellectuals such as Giuseppina Martinuzzi and Angelo Vivante, who in their works not only fought against the bourgeois financial elite,

13 This is a quote from an article that appeared in the socialist newspaper from Trento, *Il Popolo*, and that the journalist Lajos Domokos (1877–1903), who was at that time editor-in-chief of *Il Lavoratore*, reprinted in his detailed account of these events in his book *Trieste: I fatti di febbraio* (Triest: The events of February).

14 For an analysis of both strikes, see Cattaruzza, *Proletariato urbano* 137–47. While *Il Lavoratore* insisted on separating the riots from any socialist doing, the irredentist-nationalist *L'Indipendente* maintained that the socialists were directly responsible for the riots. See *L'indipendente*, 14 September 1907, 2.

but also emphasized the economic and social potential inherent in the multi-ethnic identity of Trieste. In her articles and public lectures, Martinuzzi (1844–1925), a writer and a journalist who taught elementary school in *città vecchia*, advocated for the education of the underclass. She underscored the futility of nationalistic identities and denounced the exploitation of the capitalist class that oppressed Italians and Slovenians alike. For her, “there are no distinctions between the two nationalities”; both proletarian groups should become conscious of their class struggle and come together to undermine the “capitalistic arrogance” of the ruling bourgeoisie (Martinuzzi 222). Starting from similar premises, Vivante (1869–1915) in his volume *Irredentismo adriatico* (Adriatic irredentism), published in the same year as Slataper’s *Il mio Carso* (*My Karst and My City*, in this volume) and favourably reviewed by Slataper in the pages of *La Voce*, noted that Italians and Slovenians should realize their best interests were served by a supranational state where both groups could live and thrive peacefully while maintaining their specific cultural identities. For Vivante, the multi-ethnic Habsburg Empire would not only guarantee the continuous financial and commercial well-being of the city but could also become the foundation for a new socialist confederation of diverse ethnic and national groups.

Martinuzzi’s and Vivante’s work brought to the fore the nationalistic tensions that existed in the cosmopolitan city. Trieste’s rapid population growth not only caused dramatic socio-economic clashes and urbanistic concerns within the city; it also fomented nationalist and ethnic conflicts. By 1900, almost half of the city’s population had been born elsewhere.¹⁵ The two largest groups living in the city at this time were Italian immigrants from the Friuli and Veneto regions and Slovenians from the surrounding countryside. Although in different numbers and percentages, both groups participated actively in the commercial and financial growth of the city.¹⁶ Like all the other ethnic and national groups living in Trieste, they were well aware that the economic success of their businesses and enterprises was linked to the Habsburg’s patronage of the city; however, starting in the second half of the nineteenth century, nationalist ideologies superseded the cosmopolitan identity of the city

15 The population of the city in 1900 was 178,599. Of these only 59 per cent were born there, while 30 per cent came from the surrounding Austrian territories, with a large Slovenian and Croatian population (such as Istria, Dalmazia, Carniola, and the area of Gorizia); the remaining percentage came from Italy and other states (Luzzatto Fegiz 22).

16 For a detailed analysis of the development of a Slovenian bourgeoisie in Trieste, see Cattaruzza, *Trieste nell’ottocento*, 136–7.

(Minca 164; Hametz 26–7). The nationalist sentiments that shaped the identity of Trieste's citizens were based on their sense of cultural, emotional and political identification with the nation state that embodied their ethnic group. Thus the Triestines who felt psychological ties to Italy because of their shared language, culture, and kinship, identified themselves as Italians, even if their own perception of Italy was more imagined than based on actual knowledge of that country. The same can be said of all the other ethnic groups present in the city. However, because the Italians represented the largest ethnic group living in Trieste and controlled the local government, the city's overall Italian identity remained unchallenged until the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁷ Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of Italian Triestines, in spite of their strong national identity, did not embrace the irredentist cause (the political movement to incorporate the city of Trieste into the Italian nation state) until the early twentieth century because they enjoyed the autonomous administrative status of the city,¹⁸ they appreciated the financial opportunities that Austrian Trieste offered them, and they recognized that it was unrealistic to think that Italy (still a young country, and an ally of Austria-Hungary)¹⁹ would fight for the political annexation of the city.²⁰

Nationalist ideologies became more radicalized in Trieste from the 1890s, when Slovenians refused Italian assimilation and the idea of a Slavic national identity started to take hold within a wider percentage of the population. Moreover, the Slovenians' allegiance to Austria-Hungary rendered the Italian nationalists suspicious of their fellow citizens.²¹ The

17 On the cultural and emotional development of irredentism in Trieste, see Todero 59–84.

18 Trieste was since 1850 a "*reichsunmittelbare Stadt*," a city that answered directly to the Austrian monarchy but could control its local government. "The Adriatic city possessed the right to raise taxes and had administrative responsibility for military conscription, the local police, urban planning and infrastructure, health, welfare, schools, and scientific institutions" (Cole 220).

19 The Triple Alliance was forged secretly between Italy, Germany, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1882. It stated that each member would grant its support in case of military attack by another power. The Alliance was renewed until the beginning of World War I.

20 See also Della Venezia Sala 84–6. Alberti in his 1936 study on irredentism noted that only 2 per cent of the population identified itself as irredentist: "circa five thousand people over 250,000 inhabitants. Ten percent of this irredentist elite, that is, about five hundred people, was actively pursuing an irredentist agenda"; cited in Todero 59.

21 For a more detailed critical analysis of the political and nationalist tensions between Italian and Slovenian Triestines, see the section of this introduction where I discuss Slataper's political writings.

Austrian government, in order to undermine the Italian identity of the city and further assure the loyalty of the Slovenians in Trieste, favoured the hiring of Slovenians in the financial and political administration of the city. This dramatic increase of Slovenians holding important positions in the local government raised suspicion among the Italian community that they were the de facto controlling hand of the Austrian government (Gayda 83). In addition, the fact that most priests and bishops officiating in Trieste were Slovenians who supported the Austro-Hungarian Empire and thus could influence the Catholic masses was seen as another threat to the Italian identity of the city.²²

The increasing number of Slovenian cultural associations, private schools, and powerful financial institutions reminded the Italian leadership of the city of the potential uncertainty of their political prominence. The most powerful symbol of Slovenian ethnic and cultural identity in the city was the Narodni Dom, the Slovenian Cultural Centre, built in 1904 in the centre of the city in Piazza della Caserma, next to the terminal of the tramway line that led to the predominantly Slovenian village of Opicina, located just a few miles above Trieste, in the Karst plateau. The large, elegant Art Nouveau building held a theatre, a hotel, two restaurants, a cafe, a reading room, the offices of the Slovenian newspaper *Edinost*, and a bank. Its presence reminded Italians of the success of the Slovenian Triestines, who could not be easily forgotten or dismissed as “a people without a history,” as the Italians tended to do.²³ By 1910, more than 30 per cent of the Triestine population was Slovenian, and they saw

22 From 1831 until 1919, all bishops (except one) officiating in Trieste were Slovenian (Apih, *Trieste* 26).

23 Friedrich Engels used the term “nations without history” to identify the Slavic national groups that were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Engels perceived Austrian Slavs as barbarians who were incapable of establishing independent nation states because they were inherently politically and culturally inferior: “We repeat: apart from the Poles, the Russians, and at most the Turkish Slavs, no Slav people has a future, for the simple reason that all the other Slavs lack the primary historical, geographical, political and industrial conditions for independence and viability. People which have never had a history of their own, which from time to time when they achieved the first, most elementary stage of civilization already came under foreign sway, or which were forced to attain the first stage of civilization only by means of a foreign yoke, are not viable and will never be able to achieve any kind of independence” (367). Engels here adopted Hegel’s concept of “non-historic people.” According to Hegel, only a people who had the necessary cultural and spiritual strength to establish itself as an independent state could play an active role in historical progress. For a critique of Engels’s ideas see Rozdolski.

the city, which had a larger Slovenian population than Ljubljana, as their moral and material capital.²⁴

In order to undermine the increased social and financial status of the Slovenian minority, the Italian liberal-national party constantly refused to recognize the national rights of the Slovenian population or the use of Slovenian as an official language in public offices; they also obstructed the construction of Slovenian schools. The Italian nationalists, ignoring or disregarding the distinct Slavic national identities, referred to the Slovenian Triestines with the demeaning epithet “Slavs,” which denoted a menacing ethnic group whose national identity and political claims had to be repressed to preserve the Italian identity of the city, and the potential political unification of the city with Italy (Chmiel 108).²⁵ While the Italian nationalists felt threatened by the Slovenian inhabitants, the Slovenians felt besieged by the Italian population and increasingly frustrated by their lack of political control within the city government. The large number of Italian and Slovenian cultural, political, and social associations that emerged in Trieste during these years testifies to both groups’ intellectual and cultural yearning to express and identify their national character. For its part, the Austrian government, although it gave the city ample local independence, did not want to nurture the nationalist longings and ideals of its subjects. As a consequence, it never allowed the founding of an Italian university in Trieste, perceiving such an institution as a nationalist threat to the empire, and instead carefully played Italian and Slovenian identities against each other.²⁶

While ethnic and national tensions informed Triestine politics, its culture was deeply influenced by its border status. Successful Triestines were bilingual or trilingual: while Slovenian was spoken in the countryside

24 In 1910 there were more than 56,000 Slovenians in Trieste, as opposed to the 35,000 in Ljubljana (Valdevit 7). See also Cattaruzza, “Slovenes and Italians in Trieste.”

25 For an example of anti-Slavic rhetoric see Frà Giordano’s article “L’università italiana in Austria” (The Italian university in Austria). The author here noted how the Slavs, “an inadequate people, without history or hope,” incited by the Austrian government, “descended on the city like marauders, driven by a savage instinct of destruction” (1218).

26 The city council petitioned the Austrian government to establish an Italian university in Trieste as early as 1866, and in 1899 it created a special fund for the erection and maintenance of the university. Other neighbouring Austrian provinces with a sizable Italian population (Istria, Gorizia, Trento) joined the project wholeheartedly, and by 1902 the foundation included a capital of 50,000 krone. In spite of the financial efforts and political pressure by the Italian representatives in the parliament in Vienna, the government never approved the construction of an Italian university in Austria. See Presidenza municipale di Trieste 102–3, and Hortis; see also Sondel-Cedarmas.

surrounding the city, the Triestine dialect was the lingua franca for any business transactions. Moreover, knowing German was an important asset, and in spite of the fact that prestigious primary and secondary Italian schools were available, many members of the bourgeoisie preferred to send their children to the German gymnasium because it opened up possible careers in other parts of the empire, careers closed to anyone not proficient in the language. In his lyrical autobiography *My Karst and My City*, Slataper recounted his frustration at having been overlooked for a position at Union Bank because he attended the Italian high school instead of the Commercial Academy and his German was not fluent enough. Nevertheless, German and Austrian culture were easily accessible to Triestine intellectuals, who could read German texts in the original. The philosophical works of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the psychoanalytical theories of Freud, the cultural analyses of Nordau, Simmel, and Weininger, together with canonical and contemporary German-speaking writers from Goethe to Kafka, found in Trieste an attentive audience and greatly influenced Triestine intellectuals, affording them an unfiltered access to Mitteleuropean culture that would have been impossible in Italy.²⁷ They also had access to excellent German translations of Scandinavian works before they were available in Italian. Slataper's critical monograph on Ibsen, his essays and translations of Hebbel, his interest in Weininger, his awareness of contemporary German literary and cultural debates could only have developed in Austro-Hungarian Trieste.

Although Triestine intellectuals benefited from the multicultural fabric of this border city, they perceived the lack of a coherent, homogeneous cultural and national identity as a disadvantage that they had to overcome. The poet Umberto Saba lamented the cultural backwardness of Trieste vis-à-vis Italy, stating that being born in Trieste in 1883 was like having been born in Italy in 1850 (115). While Italy at the turn of the century was experiencing a literary and cultural renewal, the Italian culture available in Trieste, complained Saba, was still imbued with the

27 As Elizabeth Schächter noted, "Trieste's cultural elite at the turn of the century [...] had access, through their multi-linguistic patrimony, to a far richer cultural diet than their counterparts in Italy" (12). Although the impact of Freud's theories is essential to understand authors like Svevo, Saba, and Voghera (to mention only the most important ones), there is no evidence that Slataper knew Freud or engaged with his theories in his work. Slataper died in 1915, while Freud's influence in Trieste started after the end of World War I. Edoardo Weiss, who introduced Freud's theories in Trieste, did not receive his medical degree until 1914. By then Slataper's interests had shifted to political issues.

antiquated romantic rhetoric of the Risorgimento.²⁸ Giani Stuparich, a close friend of Slataper and the author of the first monograph dedicated to Slataper's work, clearly stated the sense of uncertainty and disorientation that characterized his generation: "Being born in these areas meant being born with an unsteady legacy, which needed to be propped up constantly. Walking meant clashing. There was no place, not a single one, where one could rest in contemplation" (19). In this complex border city, it was no longer possible to advance steadily towards a prescribed objective: walking meant constantly crashing into obstacles that frustrated and diverted the very possibility of a teleological aim. In Trieste uncertainty and doubts replaced dogmatic truths.²⁹ Years later, after the end of World War II when Trieste was facing geopolitical uncertainties once again, Bobi Bazlen, reflecting on the cultural milieu of Austro-Hungarian Trieste, noted with irony the unsolvable contradictions of his city. The image of the "melting pot" in which all differences are absorbed into a homogenous, organic society couldn't be applied to the reality of Trieste. As Bazlen pointed out, Trieste should be understood instead as a "sounding board" in which tensions coexisted and played against each other, producing

[a]ttempts, approximations, haphazard figures, God's unfinished experiments. People with different premises, who must try to reconcile the irreconcilable, which of course they were unable to do, and thus created strange characters,

28 The Triestine critic and intellectual Bobi Bazlen described with irreverence and irony the absurd and exaggerated veneration that the Triestines displayed for anything connected to Italy: "The situation was quite delicate: a city that speaks a Venetian dialect, surrounded by a countryside where people speak only Slovenian. The most intellectual part of the bourgeoisie, which feels isolated from the country it believes it should belong to in terms of language and culture [...] is compelled, in the twentieth century, to resort to a nineteenth-century rhetoric from the Risorgimento, which still believes that Italian is the 'sweet sounding and pure idiom' of yore, and Florence the city of flowers." He continued describing how, when the Teatro Comunale staged Verdi's *Nabucco* (whose famous chorus "Va Pensiero" became during the Risorgimento a popular anthem for the Italian people, expressing their longing for political freedom from Austria), "the thoughts of all businessmen, bank managers, insurance company directors, doctors, lawyers, importers and exporters sitting in the stalls, as well as those of middle school teachers in the gallery, of students and seamstresses [...] in the top gallery, all flew on golden wings [towards their distant homeland], and their enthusiasm was such that it brought down the theater" (247–8).

29 It is telling that Zeno Cosini, the great anti-hero of Svevo's *Zeno's Conscience*, is constantly limping, getting lost, or bumping into obstacles that distract him from his well-intentioned aspirations.

adventurers of culture and life, with all the oddest and most tormented failures that derive from such a background. (251)

Trieste's fragmented and contradictory national identity and its decentered position vis-à-vis a coherent, totalizing political and cultural centre rendered it a unique modern metropolis that stimulated and inspired its writers to reflect on and express the crisis of modern individuals who could no longer filter their particular reality through pre-established values and truths. The works of writers such as Slataper, Stuparich, Svevo, and Saba who were active in Austro-Hungarian Trieste at the beginning of the twentieth century cannot be divorced from the modern urban environment that inspired them. All these authors shared a vision similar to the one elaborated by another Austrian subject, the novelist Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who in an essay published in 1906 reflected on the existential crisis of his time: "the essence of our epoch is ambiguity and uncertainty. It can rest only on what is unstable, and it knows that it is unstable, whereas other generations have believed in things that were firm" (37). This unstable and shifting cultural and social environment undermined individuals' ability to believe in traditional values, such as the importance of religion or the respect for long-established authority, that once sustained and guided society. Giuseppe Prezzolini captured this generational crisis when he wrote that

modern man lives without the faith of the past and without any faith in the present and often without any faith in the possibility of a future faith. [...] He recognizes his tragedy [...] but he cannot overcome his own complexities. Hence the dismay, the darkness, the nihilism of so many souls. The church has fallen apart and on its immense ruin we are building haphazardly. The individual is no longer supported by social constructs [...] and every day he finds himself facing the possible alternative of becoming either the master of the world or the last rag that a blind force has seized to sweep the streets. [...] From this modern desperation, uncertainty and anguish we must create the heroism of modern man. ("Parole di un uomo moderno" 349–50)

Slataper's texts included in this volume – from his irreverent criticism of the Triestine cultural status quo in his early *Letters on Trieste*, to the lyrical prose of *My Karst and My City*, to his later essays on World War I – bring to light the ambiguity and uncertainty that informed the cultural and political milieu in which he lived, and gave voice to the existential crisis that plagues the modern individual.

Letters on Trieste and La Voce

A few months before the publication of the *Letters*, in the fall of 1908, Slataper, a fresh graduate of the Italian Classical Gymnasium in Trieste, had moved to Florence and enrolled at the prestigious Istituto di Studi Superiori, where he intended to pursue a degree in literature. Faced with the choice of pursuing a university degree in Austria or in Italy, many Italian Triestines chose Florence because the Italian city epitomized Italian cultural and national identity. Florence was the cradle of the Italian language, and many Triestines wanted to spend time in the city of Dante and Boccaccio to improve their linguistic abilities and absorb what the city had to offer.³⁰ The choice of Florence, although not original, is nonetheless quite indicative of Slataper's intentions. In Florence, Slataper sought not only to pursue a university degree, but also to find a national cultural milieu in which he could develop intellectually and spiritually. For the "peripheral" Slataper, Florence represented a modern literary and cultural capital where he could find artistic inspiration and quench his intellectual thirst.

It was a fortunate coincidence that his arrival in Florence corresponded with the beginning of a new journalistic and cultural enterprise. In 1908 a group of Florentine intellectuals, led by Giuseppe Prezzolini, launched the journal *La Voce*, whose goal was, as Prezzolini pointed out in his editorial of 27 December, "to be honest and sincere":

We feel strongly about the ethical foundations of intellectual life, and we are disgusted to see the misery, the narrow mindedness and the revolting trade that has become of all spiritual matters. [...] We want to work. We will follow certain social movements, which are influenced by different ideologies, such as modernism and syndicalism; we will inform you [...] of the best achievements abroad; we will propose reforms and improvements for public libraries. We will devote ourselves to the moral crisis of Italian universities; we will identify the literary works that are worth reading and we will comment on the degradation of contemporary life. [...] However, we need the public to respond. We want to stay in touch with the public, especially with the public in the provinces, in the small towns in the

30 The presence in Florence of the Triestine scholar Solomone Morpurgo, who was at that time the director of the Central Library of Florence, facilitated the growth of a small community of Triestine students in the Italian city: among them were Guido Devescovi, Augusto Hermet, Enrico Elia, Giani and Carlo Stuparich, Biagio Marin, Carlo Michelstaedter, and Giorgio Fano. On the relationship between Florence and Trieste, see Pertici.

countryside where the air is less skeptical than in the Italian big cities. (“La nostra promessa” 5)

The article emphasized the need for an in-depth analysis of contemporary life and its cultural institutions while welcoming the concerns and perspectives coming from peripheral areas, regions that were not, at least according to Prezzolini, as predisposed to the sensual aestheticism of D’Annunzio or to the emphatic poetic style of Carducci, the two most influential writers in Italy at that time. The main goal of the journal was to renew the cultural and sociopolitical fabric of contemporary Italy by establishing a new intellectual class attuned to the political and cultural changes occurring outside of the peninsula.³¹ *La Voce*’s young collaborators were weary of Giolitti’s government and its inability to solve Italy’s most pressing social problems, while at the same time feeling frustrated by the provincialism of the dominant intellectual class.³² They felt that the Italian intelligentsia remained fossilized in Italy’s century-long tradition and were ignorant or suspicious of contemporary literary and cultural developments happening abroad. On the contrary, the *Vociani* were eager to read and publish modern foreign writers and debate the most important events occurring in the rest of Europe.³³

It was *La Voce*’s openness to other literary experiences coupled with Prezzolini’s call for a more authentic and honest discussion of contemporary issues that moved the young Slataper to contact him. With youthful enthusiasm, he wrote to the editor introducing himself:

I am from Trieste. Which bookstore sells your journal? Maybe you would be interested in some advertisement in Trieste? I would be happy if my city, which is cut off from Italy’s intellectual life, became familiar with *La Voce*. And maybe you would be pleased by an exposé on our unique conditions both in art and science. (*Epistolario* 18)

31 As Francesca Billiani noted, *La Voce*, like other journals published in Florence at that time, aspired “to cross the boundaries between ethics, aesthetics, and politics, and create a modern, inter-discursive, and interdisciplinary intellectual space of debate” that “challenged the traditional divide between cultural and political engagement.” These journals became “a meeting point for both the political and intellectual elites, the bourgeoisie, and the growing general public of the new Italy” (445–6).

32 As Gentile explained, although the period of Giolitti’s government – which lasted from 1903 to 1914 – was a time of “economic progress, civil modernization, cultural renewal and democratic reforms,” the new generation saw it as a “reflection of political corruption, a crisis of the state, a weakening of the nation and serious moral decay of individual and collective conscience” (11).

33 See also Billiani 463–8.

Slataper was not just interested in making the journal available to Triestine readers. He was also eager to be recognized as an engaged intellectual who could help shape the discourse on Triestine's national and cultural identity on both sides of the border. In a letter written to his friend Marcello Loewy only a few months before leaving Trieste for Florence, he already envisioned his intellectual mandate: "I was born to give shape to clay. My thumb is steady: one stroke never erases the previous one. All of you who know me [...] will carry my imprint" (*Epistolario* 104). For Slataper, *La Voce* became the ideal platform from which he could offer to both the Triestine and Italian public a fresh and dispassionate analysis of his distant city, whose intricate cultural, social, and political physiognomy was overlooked by the Triestine intelligentsia and misunderstood by the majority of Italians. While the traditional Italian nationalist discourse revolving around Trieste emphasized a hegemonic and synthetic image of an irredentist city longing to be absorbed within Italy's borders, Slataper questioned such normative assumptions and strove instead to escape established interpretations of Trieste in favour of more unconventional and problematic visions of his city. At the same time, he was well aware that this would not be an easy task, as he confessed to Loewy:

In Florence Prezzolini and Papini – two feisty characters that I love – are publishing *La Voce* [...]. I am thinking of writing about Trieste, about our situation. But I choose to be stoned. I am tired of half-truths: I want to expand them. I want to be surrounded by so many conflicts that if I overcome them it will mean that I am worth something. (*Epistolario* 47)³⁴

"Trieste Has No Cultural Traditions," the first article of the series *Letters on Trieste*, was published in the winter of 1909, and gave Slataper the opportunity to dwell upon the cultural fabric of his city without the platitudes and clichés that typically informed such discourses, and without any qualms about offending some of his fellow citizens. Moreover, this first article already showed an intellectual trait that Slataper continued to pursue throughout his career. He was not interested in developing an organic and totalizing analysis of Trieste and its many challenges, but in offering multifaceted, often contradictory readings of his city that could stimulate critical debates and dialogues (Patrino 124). His *Letters* did not attempt to offer a synthetic solution to the "Triestine problem." Instead, they became a useful intellectual platform to engage in the contemporary

34 Giovanni Papini (1881–1956) was an Italian journalist and intellectual. He was one of the founders of the journals *Leonardo* and *Lacerba*. In 1912 he became the director of *La Voce*.

debate about the changing role of culture in a modern urban society. In the same years in which Slataper was writing his *Letters on Trieste*, German sociologists and architects were reflecting on the sociocultural impact that modern city life had on the individual and on how the new metropolitan experience drastically altered the production of culture. Ferdinand Tönnies, in his pivotal work *Community and Civil Society* [*Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, 1887], recorded the dissolution of the harmonic, organic existence that informed the life of the *Gemeinschaft*, the term he used to identify the traditional communities in which people lived and worked together joined by bonds based on family, shared traditions, and culture. In this traditional community, all individuals were part of an organic whole in which they could identify themselves.³⁵ However, the world of *Gemeinschaft* had been replaced by a modern urban society (*Gesellschaft*), “a purely mechanical construction” (17) where relationships were characterized by their individual nature and dictated only by selfish needs and rational calculations. Whereas in the small village knowledge and culture were transmitted to the next generation through example and experience, and their intrinsic value resided in their traditional capital, in modern societies everything was transformed into a commodity whose value depends only on its marketability.³⁶ Georg Simmel expanded on Tönnies’s ideas, noting that in the modern metropolis every human relation was reduced to its exchange value (Simmel, “Metropolis” 71) while, at the same time, the new urban experience fostered a blasé attitude that protected city dwellers from the overwhelming bombardment of violent stimuli that would otherwise swallow them up into the metropolis’s “socio-technological mechanism” (70). Ruled by an impersonal money economy, life in the metropolis has become “an arithmetical problem” where all “qualitative values” that once informed and anchored the life of the small town are now reduced to mere “quantitative terms” (72). For Simmel this also had a devastating effect on the cultural production of the metropolis, which privileged specialization, fragmentation, technological advances, and rational thinking at the expense of a traditional worldview that favoured instead intuition, wholeness, and classical ideals.

35 “Wherever human beings are bound together in an organic fashion by their inclination and common consent, Community of one kind or another exists” (Tönnies 28). For a detailed analysis of the discourses on the metropolis at the turn of the twentieth century, see Dal Co. For an analysis of Slataper’s appropriation of the metropolitan discourse, see also Coda, “Representation of the Metropolis.”

36 “In the big city, in the capital, and especially in the metropolis, family life is in decline. [...] The mechanism of money [...] seems to overcome all resistance, to accomplish all desires, to eliminate all dangers and to heal all ills” (Tönnies 255).

The tension between the alienated life of the metropolis and the organic world of the village is also reflected in the dichotomy between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*, which occupies much of the discourse on the metropolitan experience at the beginning of the twentieth century. While *Kultur* represented everything that was authentic and organic and originated from the rooted world of small communities, *Zivilisation* was instead the product of the modern metropolis, defined by alienation, inauthenticity, and mechanization.³⁷ The conflict between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* found a fertile ground in a city like Trieste which, as we have seen, did not undergo an organic urban evolution throughout the centuries, but instead came into being “artificially” in the eighteenth century out of the financial, strategic, and economic interests of the Habsburg monarchy (Apih, *Trieste* 21; Cova 9).

Slataper in his letters brought to the fore the tension between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* that plagued his city. Against the status quo that saw Trieste as unquestionably Italian, he recognized the impossibility of creating a traditional, homogenous Italian culture in a city that, in his own words, “cannot contain all its contradictions within a single frame of thought” (“The Life of the Spirit,” in this volume, 87). While Slataper’s recognition of Trieste’s complexity led him to try to formulate a new cultural identity for his city, he continued at the same time to waver between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*, between tradition and modernity. It is precisely in his attempts to come to terms with Trieste as a modern metropolis that Slataper reveals a modern sensibility and emerges as a unique modernist intellectual.

The provocative implication embedded in the title of his first *Letter on Trieste*, “Trieste Has No Cultural Traditions” (in this volume), indicated

37 *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* are the traditional terms used by German urbanists and philosophers at the beginning of the twentieth century to describe the tension between the traditional, organic culture of the past and the disjoining, alienating forces of modernity. As Dal Co noted, for many early-twentieth-century intellectuals the modern metropolis “represents a mortal challenge to culture” (55). In his 1911 essay “On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture,” Simmel described how modern technological processes, together with the current drive towards “extreme and total specialization,” have rendered the possibility of a unifying meaningful culture obsolete (43). For modern man everything has become interchangeable, nothing holds an absolute value: “Thus, the typically problematic situation of modern man comes into being: his sense of being surrounded by an innumerable number of cultural elements which are neither meaningless to him nor, in the final analysis, meaningful. In their entirety they depress him, since he is not capable of assimilating them all, nor can he simply reject them, since after all, they do belong *potentially* within the sphere of his cultural development. [...] [M]an has become richer and more overloaded: *Cultures omnia habentes, nihil possidentes* (cultures that have everything own nothing)” (44).

Slataper's position in the debate on the cultural fabric of his city: Trieste suffered an intrinsic dissonance between its quick economic and urban growth and its antiquated cultural expressions. Moreover, the bourgeois, financial ethos of the city had always taken precedence over anything else, *de facto* undermining the possibility of any imaginative endeavour: "Slave to her compulsive thirst for profit, [Trieste] could never look ahead boldly and imaginatively, not even to open new routes for her commerce; she never had even a minor version of Christopher Columbus or Marco Polo" (84).

At the same time, the cosmopolitan, multinational character of the city further hindered any homogenous artistic or intellectual growth: "But how can we think about the development of the city's [Italian] culture when a great number of families are neither Triestine nor Italian? And our surnames (like mine! pure Slavic) are evidence of this fact" (83). For Slataper, the lack of a homogenous national identity undermined the possibility of a totalizing, hegemonic culture in which all Triestines could easily recognize themselves. The linguistic fragmentation of the city and the predominance of the Slavic element, which weakened the Italian character of Trieste, were obstacles that should have propelled the city to define and imagine its own unique cultural character outside of any predetermined national identity. But the Triestines, Slataper pointed out with bitter irony, comparing them to a sheltered and inexperienced Parsifal, were unable to "accord [their] life to another rhythm, beyond the blows of a steam engine, and delight [themselves] with something more than the melody of silver coins jangling inside the pockets of [their] bulging vest[s]" (81). Like the character in Wagner's opera, the Triestines remained ignorant of the complexities of the world they inhabited and were incapable of critical thinking; and like Parsifal, they were too disoriented and lost to envision a distinctive Triestine identity that could help them fulfil their cultural potential.

After defining in the first article the crux of the Triestine cultural situation, Slataper proceeded in the following two articles – entitled "Cultural Means" and "More Cultural Institutions" – to describe in detail the city's cultural institutions. Fully aware of the stir that his essays would cause among his fellow citizens, before tackling the task at hand he pre-emptively presented himself as a resolute individual who could single-handedly build the foundations upon which to establish a new Triestine culture. Drawing a comparison between the recent collapse of Trieste's newest and largest pier, whose foundations were not solid or deep enough to sustain its weight, and the cultural background of his city, Slataper noted that he had the strength and the will to provide the much-needed footing upon which to build a new, innovative Triestine

culture. His weak and inept fellow citizens should not bother him with their empty criticisms. Instead, they should move aside and let him do his job.³⁸ Slataper's belief in his artistic and ethical mandate to rejuvenate the cultural stagnation of his city followed closely the cultural mission of *La Voce*, whose aim was to explore the many political, social, and cultural issues that concerned contemporary Italy from different, often contradictory perspectives.³⁹

For Slataper, culture in Trieste was a superficial capitalist enterprise that did not expand with the multicultural development of the city to enhance the intellectual and spiritual growth of its inhabitants. The various cultural associations, theatres, and artistic initiatives present in the city catered only to the shallowest and most fashionable desires of its population. Culture in Trieste was defined by money alone and, "just like in America, it too often mistook face paint for a life-giving tonic" (*Lettere triestine* 24).⁴⁰ Moreover, culture was reduced to the by-product of the Italian dominant business class, which was only interested in endorsing its own nationalist values. The only noteworthy exception to this sad state of affairs was the socialist Circolo di studi sociali (circle of social studies), which housed a good library and hosted interesting conferences

38 As Angelo Ara and Claudio Magris have noted in their seminal work on Trieste, "the historical significance of Slataper's denunciation consists in its unilateralism, which is typical of any individual or group that wants to found a new culture, and must therefore reject [...] the previous one" (9).

39 Reflecting on the experience of *La Voce*, Prezzolini described the group of the *Vocianti* and their journalistic endeavour: "*La Voce* in its first year brought together very different people: by origin, by age, by purpose, by culture. The rapports [were] often violent, the statements contradictory. Their attitudes clashing among themselves. [...] Yet why did the public feel a family air, a sense of unity, something that bound everyone to the same task? We do not know how it happened, but it happened. Or better, we do know how it happened: this unity, this family really existed, in contrast with the disorganization of [our] schools, parties, religions, everything. The previous generation was an unbelieving, sceptical generation. Now these collaborators of *La Voce* were different: one way or another, they believed, arbitrarily or rationally, striving towards the universal or shrinking within themselves, with or without prejudices, with a dogmatic or philosophical approach, but they believed. One felt that life was in and of itself serious, and they took it seriously" (*Italia* 1912 83–4).

40 It is interesting to note that here as in many other articles, Slataper embraced a common European criticism against American society as being defined by unrestrained consumerism and industrialization. The lack of homogenous historical roots together with "the predominance of a commercial mind-set, the enthusiasm for business and moneymaking, and the subordination of all moral, spiritual and aesthetic values to the dollar [...] constitute a favorite Romantic objection to the United States" (Guldal 26). This negative romantic perception of America continued to flourish in Europe in the early twentieth century.

on timely socio-political and economic issues that addressed both Italian and European concerns.⁴¹ It is thanks to this institution that the Triestine public was introduced to the ideas of some of the most interesting intellectuals active in Italy at that time, but the Triestine intelligentsia and conservative political class, threatened by the circle's socialist ideology, boycotted it and favoured instead the more stodgy and conservative Minerva Society, which favoured the Italian nationalist agenda and maintained its elitist standing by allowing only members to participate in its series of lectures and other programs (*Lettere triestine* 28).⁴²

After having summarized in detail the shortcomings of the various cultural institutions present in the city, in "The Life of the Spirit" (the fourth article in the series, in this volume) Slataper insisted on the need for a more objective and comprehensive investigation of the complex cultural and political problems that burdened his city. Slataper recognized that the multi-ethnic growth of Trieste led to a profound crisis of its collective Italian cultural identity. He asserted that his detractors should look at this reality and confront openly the intellectual stagnation of Trieste instead of hiding behind their irredentist and nationalist rhetoric for fear of being judged negatively by their Italian brothers and sisters. Slataper made clear that the multi-ethnic and commercial identity of the city should not be perceived as an obstacle to the city's cultural development. On the contrary, Trieste's cosmopolitanism and economic ethos were unique assets upon which the city could build its own original traditions, which should be influenced by its role as a dominant financial and commercial hub of the Austrian Empire. Instead of passively absorbing its culture from Italy, Trieste should try to forge its own distinctive voice. However, Slataper asserted, the Triestines were lazy and cowardly; they would rather yield to the Italian canon than interrogate and explore their own contradictory nature: "we are afraid of what surrounds us: if our spirit were to dwell on it, it would be shattered. There is a terrible anxiety in our affairs, but we keep it hidden, we do not probe it with any analysis" (in this volume, 92). For Slataper the Triestines were afraid to face their own diversity, because by doing so they would

41 "We must be grateful to the Socialists if we became acquainted with Lombroso, Ferrero, Salvemini, Labriola, Zerboglio, Sergi, Battelli [...]; if we heard, for the first time Salvemini and Ferri speak about Mazzini and Garibaldi" (*Lettere triestine* 27–8). The events and conferences organized by the circle were very successful in Trieste, "often attracting more than 1,000, sometimes more than 2,000 people – and not only workers – in the name of internationalism" (Rutar 97).

42 For an analysis of the irredentist associations present in the city, see Rutar, and Millo, *L'élite del potere* 133–41.

destroy the precarious sense of cultural and national wholeness that they had forged for themselves. Against the superficial irredentist ideology embraced by Trieste's bourgeoisie, Slataper contrasted a more complex and tormented image of his city, which must continually seek out the causes of its own restlessness. Trieste should not deny its cultural connection with Italy, but it should do so without disregarding its own unique peripheral perspective: "we must [...] accept that Trieste is Italian in a different way from other Italian cities. [...] Then we need to express this difference" (92).⁴³

Trieste could thrive culturally and artistically only if it embraced what its diverse ethnic groups could offer and if it recognized the pivotal role that its financial institutions and the Austrian Empire played in its economic survival. Truth be told, noted Slataper, it would be a financial disaster for Trieste if it became Italian. Thus, Trieste should accept its double Italian and Austrian souls (93) and learn how to negotiate them. Here lay the tragic modernity of Trieste, a multi-ethnic and multicultural capitalist city that could no longer aspire to a coherent and totalizing identity: "This is Trieste. Composed of tragedy. In sacrificing the possibility of a straightforward existence, Trieste gains her own anxious originality. We must sacrifice our peace in order to give it expression. But express it we must" (94). The tragic modernity of Trieste was also what rendered it a potential laboratory for a modern cultural enterprise, one that combined both literary and artistic endeavours with the many commercial and entrepreneurial activities of the city. Instead of looking with nostalgia towards an organic wholesome cultural identity, Slataper recognized the alternative and innovative cultural potential of his city. In other words, he realized that it could become the site where *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* could find their own unique mode of expression. From this perspective, if we follow Deleuze and Guattari's insights on "minor literature," Trieste could also be understood as the place where a new, minor literature could take place, a literature "that is radically heterogeneous" with respect to a national canon (Deleuze and Guattari xv). Similarly, Slataper concluded that Trieste should "strive for a Triestine art capable of reproducing, through joyful clear expression, our fragmented and difficult existence" (in this volume, 94). This could be accomplished only by bringing together in a confident and uncompromising manner Trieste's Italian, German, and Slovenian voices and perspectives: its workers, powerful businesspersons, and financiers; the bourgeoisie living and working in the modern quarters of the city; the poor of *città vecchia*; and

43 On Slataper's cosmopolitan outlook, see Pizzi 45–57.

the Slovenian population living and thriving in the city (168–9). Furthermore, Slataper's particular stylistic choice of emphatic short phrases coupled with syntactical inconsistencies and unexpected shifts of register highlighted his preoccupation with creating a personal style that countered the prevailing decadent movement of the turn of the century, epitomized by D'Annunzio's aestheticized prose. Slataper's work poses a particular challenge to the reader (and to his translators) because, like Kafka's oeuvre, his "expression ... break[s] forms, encourage[s] ruptures and new sprouting. When a form is broken, one must reconstruct the content that will necessarily be part of a rupture in the order of things" (Deleuze and Guattari 28).⁴⁴ Thus, through his innovative use of language Slataper was able to question the cultural and political fabric of his city and redefine the role of the intellectual, while maintaining his own sense of otherness vis-à-vis traditional Italian literature.

Slataper's articles on Trieste spurred quite a controversy both in his native city and in Italy. *La Voce* received angry letters that ignored Slataper's attempt to understand Trieste as a modern metropolis that needed to foster its multifaceted cultural identity and focused instead on his political views and his lack of support for the irredentist cause. Mostly, these articles brought forth the anti-Slavic sentiments that fomented discord in local politics. *Il Piccolo*, the most widely read local newspaper, criticized by Slataper for presenting an outdated view of the national issue in Trieste (*Lettere triestine* 43–7), publicly attacked Slataper's views and *La Voce*. Prezzolini himself intervened in defence of his young collaborator, while Slataper, in an unpublished article entitled "Letters on Trieste: Why Do I Write Them?" noted that the foremost reason for writing about his city was to debunk the irredentist myth that Trieste had constructed and exported to Italy, a myth that undermined the multicultural potential of his city and hindered the possibility of truly understanding its identity and unique potential. The irredentist narrative that shaped the local perception of the city was not based on an objective understanding of Trieste's history and present situation, but was instead the product of a bourgeois mentality that was moved by fear: fear of the new socialist forces that were gaining popularity in Trieste at that time, and fear of the Slovenian minority living in their midst.⁴⁵

44 As Giuliana Minghelli also noted "The 'arte impura' [impure art] of Svevo, Saba and Slataper contains all the disruptive and innovative force of what Deleuze and Guattari theorized as 'minor literature,' a force that opens Italian Literature to modernist experimentation and contamination, making of it *something other*" (13).

45 "I am convinced," wrote Slataper, "that Trieste is not irredentist, and that irredentism can no longer be awakened in any way" (*Lettere triestine* 60). See also Coda, *Slataper* 21.

After the controversy created by the *Letters*, Slataper continued to write for the Florentine journal, establishing strong intellectual relationships with some of its most important collaborators, whose artistic and philosophical work influenced his development as a writer and a critic. Slataper's friendship and close collaboration with the philosopher Giovanni Amendola and Prezzolini were pivotal in helping him further develop the ideal of an intellectual ethically and culturally engaged with current social and political issues. In his writings Amendola emphasized the philosophical importance of the ethical will. He stated that the ethical value of one's existence depended on one's will, understood as a moral act able to bring unity and coherence to one's personal, empirical life, which Amendola perceived as a mass of unruly and impulsive tendencies that if left unchecked would lead to existential chaos.⁴⁶ What attracted Slataper to Amendola's theories was above all the philosopher's emphasis on the "terrible seriousness of every individual act" (Amendola, "Il convegno nazionalista" 686), which should become the foundation for the regeneration of the whole society. Against the "inertia, the scarce sense of responsibility, the lack of active and constructive energy" (686) that characterized Italy's political leadership at the time, he stressed the necessity for every individual to strive towards the "highest ethical value," which would allow Italian citizens to renew and reinvigorate their newly unified country and fulfil the Risorgimento's ideals. On the other hand, Amendola recognized that if such ethical drive "did not arise and flourish in individuals, they would remain isolated and divided, since they would not have within themselves the ability to overcome the boundaries of a single individuality and bring them together." The result would be an alienated "collection of individualities," not a functioning and organic society (687). Meanwhile, Prezzolini continued to articulate in his articles and editorials his suspicion towards "any piece of writing that is purely artistic" ("Relazione del primo anno" 134). In a long editorial piece published at the end of the first year of the journal's publication, Prezzolini noted how *La Voce* did not want to give too much space to mere literary concerns or to fashionable contemporary artistic expressions. Instead, he invited aspiring young artists to concentrate on critical thinking, on the study of history, and on the investigation of contemporary issues (134–5).

The article "To Young Italian Intellectuals" (in this volume, 97), published by Slataper shortly after his *Letters*, reflected Slataper's own ethical and

46 The tension between empirical life and ethical will is a common concern for many early-twentieth-century writers. For a superb analysis of this existential issue and its aesthetic ramifications, see Harrison. See also Amendola, *La volontà è il bene*.

aesthetic concerns and showed his intellectual debt to Amendola and Prezzolini's ideas. Here the author exhorted young intellectuals to desist from publishing their early works. They should instead use their writing skills first and foremost to question themselves and resolve their own inner dilemmas. Only then should they worry about publishing: "We write: but to clarify for ourselves who we are" (98), noted Slataper, underscoring the existential anxiety that afflicted this new generation of intellectuals who could no longer solve their ontological quests with simple, coherent answers. Slataper's statement indicated the ethical importance that he assigned to introspective journal writing, a practice that he maintained throughout most of his life.⁴⁷ This practice became a valuable tool to question himself and his beliefs and offered him the opportunity to give voice to his fears and doubts. At the same time, the diary never became for him a form of solipsism or escapism. In more than one instance, the author confessed his yearning to participate in life and play an active role in current events: "acting among people, that's my diary!" (*Appunti e note* 133). Similar concerns informed his address to the new generation of intellectuals. To gain a sense of who they are, young writers should articulate their thoughts, explore their ideas, and question themselves and others within the privacy of their journal, while at the same time they should not shy away from participating in all different aspects of practical endeavours and should not be afraid of confronting the cacophony of contemporary life with all its contradictions, noises, and crises. In this way, writing could become a useful tool not only to interrogate oneself and mature intellectually, but also to examine the cultural stagnation that afflicted contemporary life. Like Amendola and Prezzolini, Slataper also believed that superficiality and conventionalism dominated present-day culture. As a consequence, young authors would never be able to question and undermine the bourgeois cultural status quo unless they first fostered their inner strength and learned how to critique the world that surrounded them. "To continually push forward and clarify this reality," concluded Slataper, was the responsibility and the challenge that every intellectual should embrace ("To Young Italian Intellectuals," 100).

Slataper's frustration with the dominant intellectual class became the underlying theme of many of the articles he wrote for *La Voce*. In general, he attacked the intellectuals' careerist obsession and mocked their

47 Giani Stuparich, who edited and published Slataper's diaries and notes, observed that the author was not interested in creating a sentimental or aesthetic diary; instead he strove to produce a "moral diary" where he could address and express freely his ethical and political concerns (Slataper, *Appunti e note* 10).

desire of becoming full-fledged members of a cultural elite that was as snobbish as it was vacuous.⁴⁸ He favoured instead the work of Hebbel, whose play *Judith* and a selection of his *Tagebücher* (Diaries) he translated together with Marcello Loewy, making them available to an Italian audience for the first time.⁴⁹ For Slataper, Hebbel was still relevant to contemporary readers because he was able to give voice to the existential anxiety that plagued contemporary society. In his introduction to the play, he emphasized how Judith and Holofernes, the two main characters, were driven by doubts and existential uncertainties: Judith knew that she must kill Holofernes despite his being the only man whom she might be able to love, while Holofernes no longer believed in the traditional values that still informed his actions. Hebbel's *Judith* expressed the crisis of pre-established values and became for Slataper a predecessor of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. Hebbel was, like Nietzsche, critical towards tradition, Christianity, and authority, and recognized the fragility of a world that had lost its foundations. However, following Amendola's philosophical ideals, Slataper believed that to provide a fulfilling aesthetic expression the play should also aspire to overcome the moment of crisis and transform it into "a new law" (*Scritti letterari* 145) that could guide the individual towards an ethical vision of life. While Slataper felt a strong affinity towards the heroes torn by doubts that inhabited Hebbel's tragedies, he also believed that the aim of the artist was to go beyond the simple representation of the existential anguish of the single individual. The artist should instead be willing to envision "a whole metaphysical system" (*Epistolario* 268) where ethics and aesthetics came together. As he wrote in his review of Claudel's *Partage de midi*, "art is the triumph of cosmos over chaos" (*Scritti letterari* 266). Ultimately, he argued, artists like Claudel and Hebbel failed because they offered us only the struggle, the degradation of the individual who lost his bearing in the chaos of a fragmented existence, and not his redemption (266–7).

Yet Slataper was very aware, as he had already made clear in his articles on Trieste, that the complexities of modern existence could not be easily absorbed into a totalizing organic whole that eliminated all discrepancies

48 See Slataper's articles "Il solidificatore del vuoto" (The solidifier of emptiness; *La Voce* 1908–1913, 425–6) and "La claque letteraria" (The literary claque; *Scritti letterari* 11), where he railed against intellectual poseurs who had nothing culturally or socially innovative to offer to society.

49 Hebbel's diaries, translated by Slataper and Loewy, were published in 1912 for the Carabba editions (Lanciano). Hebbel's *Judith*, translated and edited by Loewy and Slataper, came out in 1910 in the *Quaderni della Voce*, the publishing house affiliated with *La Voce*.

and contradictions. This is why he looked for inspiration in the works of Goethe, Dante, and Shakespeare, authors who, he felt, were able to integrate the alienated experience of the single individual within a wider ethical perspective and bring to life a polyphony of individual voices while maintaining an overarching unity true to the artists' own beliefs. It was especially Goethe's ability to represent a world that comprised both complexity and unity that influenced Slataper's artistic vision. In 1911 Slataper published a review of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Theatralische Sendung* (Wilhelm Meister's theatrical mission), the original version of the first six books of his famous Bildungsroman *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (Wilhelm Meister's apprenticeship), which had been lost and was rediscovered in 1910. These first books, written between 1777 and 1785, which Goethe later rejected, recounted the adventures and passions of the young Wilhelm, who wanted to dedicate his life to the creation of a national theatre. For Slataper, the significance of this manuscript surpassed his purely literary or philological interest: it demonstrated Goethe's intellectual and ethical growth and his willingness to dismiss a text that no longer satisfied the intellectual and emotional maturity of its author. When Goethe revisited the novel nine years later, after his Italian journey, he changed it completely. In the finalized *Lehrjahre*, Goethe transformed Wilhelm Meister from a single-sided character solely driven by passions to a full-fledged human being, well integrated within society. In the final version of the novel, the protagonist renounces theatre and chooses instead to become a surgeon, a profession that was gaining more respect at that time.⁵⁰ However – and here, according to Slataper, resided Goethe's brilliance – although the mature Goethe recognized the limits of the young passionate Wilhelm, and of his world populated by “overgrown puppets full of nerves, ignorance and phoniness,” he was still able to appreciate and forgive “these people he knows are false. [...] Goethe's serious mind now condemns unrestrained passion, – but those feelings and passions are still his. It's foolish – but it's wonderful to live in this way” (*Scritti letterari* 257–8). Slataper's admiration for Goethe derived from the poet's ability to transform the contradictions, tensions, and passions that inform human existence into a coherent work of art while still embracing the complexity and multiplicity of the world. Goethe became for the critic a symbol of modernity and a meaningful model to emulate because he was able to “solve from its roots the anxiety of his century” (278) by integrating all aspects of life with his artistic endeavours: Goethe

50 On the debate about the medical profession during Goethe's time and the author's fascination with medicine, see Tobin.

did not chose to be secluded from the world he inhabited, but instead remained interested in the world of sciences, was socially engaged, and participated actively in the political life of Weimar, taking on various political and civic duties. Goethe's ability to overcome the dichotomy between life and art was the lesson that Slataper aspired to apply to his own existence. As he wrote in a letter to Gigetta:

[T]o live, organically, all the complexity of human life (through its history and its people, through friends and through adversaries), such that I'll be able to express myself, and to work for all. *To be a man*. Whatever else life gives me, I would not be completely content when my time comes, I would not have arrived, I would be lacking. Art would not be enough for me. Action would not be enough. Nor would knowledge. And not a formal plan; but the blood of the earth, harmonized in my veins. So that it would make no difference if I were writing, speaking, acting, thinking, wanting, desiring. [...] Also, if I am not able to encompass all the complexity of human life, witnessing and participating in all its apparently contradictory forms, commerce and literature, salon and tenement, Karst and pavement, Slovene and Italian, I am not a *poet*. (in this volume, 168–9)

Slataper's *Lebensphilosophie* clearly conveyed the cultural climate of his times and echoed the cultural discourse on Goethe and geniality that was being articulated in different ways at that time within the group of *Vociani* working with him in Florence and by German and Austrian sociologists and philosophers such as Otto Weininger and Georg Simmel. On both sides of the Alps Goethe's ability to "encompass all the complexity of human life" – to use Slataper's words – was viewed as both an artistic and an ethical model whose example could be followed to confront the mechanization and fragmentation of modern life. In Florence, Prezzo- lini and Spainì appreciated the inventiveness of Goethe's *Lehrjahre* and admired its social and ethical lesson. The novel emphasized the spiritual development of Wilhelm Meister, who abandoned a life only concerned with pure aesthetics, as represented by his commitment to the theatre, in order to pursue an ethical existence dedicated to action among other human beings.⁵¹ Otto Weininger's reading of Goethe was filtered instead by his misogynistic and anti-Semitic views. In his text *Sex and Character*

⁵¹ Alberto Spainì and Rosina Pisaneschi translated Goethe's *Lehrjahre* into Italian and published it in two volumes (1913 and 1915) for the publishing house Laterza. The translation included an introduction in which Spainì expressed the ethical importance of Goethe's novel. For a detailed analysis of the importance of Goethe for the *Vociani*, see Biagi 143–53.

(1903) Weininger blamed “Jew” and “Woman” for the crisis of traditional values that he was witnessing in *fin de siècle* Vienna and called for a new era in which Aryan, masculine, and Christian principles could heal “the spiritual emptiness of Viennese life” (Sengoopta 459). He upheld Goethe as the perfect example of a genius able to experience “a conscious connection with the whole universe” (149)⁵² and put an end to the alienating and disintegrating forces at play in contemporary society. In Berlin, Georg Simmel offered instead a subtler interpretation of geniality, closer to Slataper’s own reading of Goethe. For Simmel, Goethe’s geniality did not derive from condemning the sense of ambiguity and uncertainty of his time, or by embracing anti-Semitic views, as Weininger postulated, but instead from embracing “difference and the whole” as “two twin primal motors of Life in its constant journey of discovery and turmoil” (Harrington 185). Simmel saw in Goethe’s life and work the poet’s ability to overcome the mechanistic duality of subject-object, and embrace instead “Life” as the principle that encapsulates all the forces and potentialities of a lived experience. As Simmel explained in an article published in Berlin in 1914:

The marvel of Goethe’s existence is that subjective life naturally flows into objectively valuable productivity in art, knowledge and practical conduct. The fundamental tone [*Grundnot*] of his life rings out in the wonderful harmony of personal existence and self-development with the objective image and the ethical structuring of things. (“Goethe and Youth” 88, revised)

What made Goethe remarkable for Simmel was the fact that he maintained a living relationship (*Lebensverhältnis*) with the world in its multifaceted, everchanging expressions, and thus questioned the viability of a synthetic system of thought that, “following its own absolute logic, would erase all differences and expressions of multiplicity to give way to a rigid and sterile unity in which all thought ceases to exist” (Simmel, *Goethe* 94). Goethe understood the consequences of this synthetic view, and he did everything to avoid it because “nothing could come from this rigid and lifeless unity” (94). Thus, even “all the great maxims or formal ideas” are useful only as “means to represent the unity of the world as a living entity” (94).

⁵² Weininger’s work was first reviewed in Trieste’s newspaper *Indipendente* in 1905. In 1910 it was reviewed by *La Voce*, and his theory of geniality as presented in *Sex and Character* appealed to the *Vociani*, who found in his writing a “satisfactory answer to their quest for a unified ethical personality” (Cavaglion 35).

In the letter to Gigetta quoted above, Slataper expressed a similar aspiration. Yet while Goethe was blessed with a “tremendous instinctual certainty, [... a] confidence in the simple, autonomous process of his life” (Simmel, “Goethe and Youth” 89), for the young Slataper the certainty and confidence that informed Goethe’s work and worldview remained a constant struggle that not only influenced him as a critic and as a poet but also defined his political choices.

His yearning to find an artistic form that would capture the complexity of modern life while at the same time preserving an overarching ethical vision informed the many articles he wrote for *La Voce*. It was, however, a desire that at times hampered his critical judgment. Thus, he remained quite critical towards the new poetic trends that were developing in Italy at that time, especially those that criticized Dannunzian aestheticism. He did not understand the new poetics of the crepuscular poets and remained suspicious of Marinetti’s futurist movement. His position was not unique; it followed the path traced by Prezzolini and *La Voce*. Although Slataper and *La Voce* were against the cultural and aesthetic status quo of Italy’s highly conservative and elitist academic tradition, they questioned the innovative literary elements expressed by the crepuscular poets who at the beginning of the twentieth century were proposing a new, anti-Dannunzian aesthetic and a more intimate and ironic worldview. As Slataper noted in his article on crepuscular poetry, their lack of engagement with the world at large and their indifference towards the regeneration of society rendered them ineffective, their existential plight futile and meaningless (“Crepuscular Confusion,” in this volume, 106). Similarly, he was frustrated by the futurists’ bombastic rhetoric and their obnoxious self-promotion, which, according to him, hid their lack of an authentic vision and of “true spiritual content” (“Futurism,” in this volume, 102).

The futurist movement, which began on 20 February 1909 with Marinetti’s publication of “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” on the front page of the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, rejected traditional artistic expressions and celebrated instead a new aesthetic based on technological progress, the power of speed, movement, and violence. The futurists called for a rejuvenation of Italy by repudiating the bourgeois values of their society and Italy’s overwhelming veneration of its classical past. Italy’s “passatist” attitude not only stifled the imagination of the new generation of Italian artists, but also hindered the progress of Italy as a modern nation. Thus, they asked for the destruction of cultural institutions such as academies, museums, and libraries, which they saw as mausoleums celebrating a derelict past that had nothing more to offer to a

modern society.⁵³ Although the *Vocianti* and the futurists shared the same frustration towards the bourgeois conservative society of early-twentieth-century Italy and agreed that Italy's strong classical tradition stifled progress and innovations in the arts and in society, Slataper and the *Vocianti* did not believe that the futurists' bombastic and violent approach could offer a serious alternative to Italy's social and cultural stagnation. As Emilio Gentile explains, while "the futurist threw himself into an assault on the world armed with a destructive will, a savage aggressiveness and [...] an idolatrous faith in modernity" (35), the *Vocianti* challenged the shortcomings of their society through "serious and severe" work. The *Vocianti* "did not exalt physical force, [they] did not develop a cult for sports, [they] did not glorify militarism and imperialism, [they] did not become apologist[s] for violence" (35). Moreover, the *Vocianti* accused the futurists of insincerity and charlatanism. In April 1909, only a few months after the publication of Marinetti's futurist manifesto, Ardengo Soffici made fun of it in a satirical piece entitled "La ricetta di Ribi buffone" (The recipe of Ribi the buffoon) where he criticized the artificiality of the movement and its lack of originality. According to Soffici, futurism was nothing more than a badly mixed concoction of French influences combined with modern technologies and spun into a vacuous fabrication ready to be consumed by the Italian public.⁵⁴

Slataper's critique of futurism followed a similar path, further emphasizing the insincerity of the movement whose success was defined only by outrageous statements, publicity stunts, and the financial support of Marinetti. Futurists lacked the "interior drama" necessary to express the complexity of the cultural and historical epoch in which they lived. Their vision of modernity remained superficial and focused only on reality's "exterior appearance: the haste, the quick consumption of energy,

53 On museums Marinetti wrote: "Museums: cemeteries! Identical, really, in the horrible promiscuity of so many bodies scarcely known to one another. Museums: public dormitories in which someone is put to sleep forever alongside others he hated or didn't know! [...] To admire an old painting is the same as pouring our sensibility into a funerary urn, instead of casting it forward into the distance in violent spurts of creation and action" (Rainey et al. 52).

54 "Here we go: Grab a kilo of Verhaeren, two-hundred grams of Alfred Jarry, one-hundred of Laforgue, thirty of Laurent Tailhade, five of Viéél-Griffin, a handful of Morasso – yes, even some Morasso – a pinch of Pascoli, a little phial of Nunzian water. Grab again: fifteen cars, seven planes, four trains, two steamships and two bicycles, various electrical generators, a few red-hot boiler engines: add your best flower of impotence and pomposity; blend it all into a lake of grey matter and aphrodisiac dribble, bring the mixture to a boil in the emptiness of your soul, over the fire of American charlatanism and then offer it over as drink for the Italian public" (Soffici, cited in Gentile 30).

Americanism, etc.” (in this volume, 104). Slataper ended his article by dismissing their cultural and historical significance. He believed that their movement would pass without leaving any meaningful trace: “Because of this thoughtlessness, their books are read without any liberating joy. I do not believe at all that Marinetti’s movement has any purpose, not even a historical one” (105).

Slataper’s faith in the regenerative power of artistic endeavour and his suspicion of any aesthetic expression that did not take into account “the concreteness of life” (Gentile 34) explains also his indifference towards literary works that were being published in Trieste at that time. Not only was he unaware of Italo Svevo, who by 1909 had already published (albeit without any success) his novels *A Life* (1892) and *Emilio’s Carnival* (1898), but he was also unable to recognize the literary novelty of Umberto Saba’s poetry, although the two writers shared similar modernist concerns and were critical of the normative poetics of their time. Although in his *Letters on Trieste* Slataper showed critical acumen towards the cultural ambience of Trieste and was able to address the sociopolitical and cultural complexity of his native city, he offered quite a narrow and ungenerous reading of Saba’s poetry. In 1911 Saba published his first book of poetry and Slataper reviewed it negatively for *La Voce*, denouncing the poet’s lack of regenerative vitality. Slataper dismissed Saba as a member of the crepuscular movement and compared the poet to a weak and disoriented insect that can be either destroyed or pitied:

I paused, feeling at first a bit of the indulgent pride and complacency that every large animal feels when it stops in order not to squash the tiny insect that gropes confused in the blinding whiteness of the street pounded by the constant racket; then, feeling a sympathetic sadness, a desire to offer a helping hand to hold his tired head. (*Scritti letterari* 212)

Saba in his poetry used the city of Trieste as a modern poetic site in which to confront his own fears and doubts. Slataper misunderstood Saba’s poems as a gratuitous display of meekness and anxiety. While Saba’s “meek, pale, and a bit anxious poetry” (213) could inspire in the reader some sympathy, that did not make it morally acceptable: his weariness remained for Slataper ethically repugnant, while his inspiration was too derivative, too much influenced by Pascoli’s intimate subjectivity and too close to the aesthetic vision of the crepuscular poets. Slataper’s inability to understand Saba’s poetry was confirmed by his refusal to publish Saba’s article “Quello che resta da fare ai poeti” (What remains for poets to do) in which the poet explained his poetic and existential vision, which underscored the necessity for poets to free themselves from the burden

of literariness in order to find an “honest” expression that could help reveal one’s true self. Like Slataper’s own interpretation of poetic language as a way to gain self-examination, Saba’s poetics of sincerity, honesty, and originality led to “a daily scrutiny of conscience” that ultimately produced a better understanding and a more “honest” representation of reality (Saba 676–7). We do not know why Slataper refused to publish an essay that was so much in line with his own aesthetic concerns, but his refusal, as Saba himself noted in his *Storia e cronistoria del Canzoniere* (in *Tutte le prose*), hindered the critical reception of Saba’s poetry (146). His essay remained unpublished until after his death, in 1959.

Ibsen

Slataper’s monograph on Ibsen can also be filtered through his perception of geniality as embodied by artists like Goethe, and it reflects Slataper’s own aesthetic, intellectual, and ethical concerns. The volume developed from his university thesis and was later revised and expanded during his stay in Hamburg, where he had moved in 1913 as an Italian lecturer at the university. He finalized the manuscript in 1914 and made the last corrections on the proofs during World War I, while fighting on the Italian front. The revised manuscript was published posthumously two years later. Slataper’s fascination with Ibsen was part of the wide appeal that the Norwegian playwright exercised on modernist intellectuals, who recognized in his plays the attempt to resolve the tension between “society and the individual, state and church, reason and faith, old and new, flesh and spirit” (Walker 152). Slataper was not the first Triestine writer to publish a study on Ibsen. In 1893 Alberto Boccardi had published *La donna nell’opera di Ibsen* (The representation of women in Ibsen’s work) based on a conference that he held at the Minerva Society in Trieste. The book focused on Ibsen’s reception in Italy and noted the Italian audience’s difficulty in accepting Ibsen’s complex female characters. Slataper was unaware of Boccardi’s work and had no knowledge of the sporadic work by Carlo Michelstaedter on the Norwegian playwright. In fact, although Michelstaedter was from nearby Gorizia, and overlapped with Slataper at the Istituto di Studi Superiori, the two young men never met.⁵⁵ In an article on Tolstoy published in 1908, Michelstaedter had already noted the pivotal role that the individual will played

55 Carlo Michelstaedter (1887–1910) was born in Gorizia, a small town not far from Trieste that also belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Slataper became aware of Michelstaedter’s work only after the latter’s death. He published a short review on Michelstaedter’s poetry and *Dialogo della salute* in 1912 in *La Voce*.

in Ibsen's work: Ibsen "wants man to break free from the circle of lies that chokes him. He wants man to know how to own his truth and make it triumph; he must fight the lies that are in him and must educate his will to the struggle" (*Opere* 653). What attracted Michelstaedter to Ibsen's characters was their drive towards what he called "persuasion," the determination to strive for an uncompromising authentic self as the only possible alternative to what he perceived as the world of "rhetoric," where individuals are lost in the deceiving and distracting multiplicity of everyday life, and one's meaning and value are imposed from without (Campanilla 57).⁵⁶ For Michelstaedter, an individual can find redemption only within him or herself, never in another person.

The work of the Norwegian dramatist became for Slataper, as for Michelstaedter, a means to explore the unresolvable dichotomy between life and art, and the tension between the belief in an authentic, ethical self and the multifarious inauthentic world that surrounds us. However, while Michelstaedter refused to compromise his quest for authenticity and strove to turn empirical life "into a coherent totality that is governed by the ethical will" (Harrison 182), Slataper maintained a much more complex and nuanced approach towards contemporary reality, its fragmentation, and its loss of absolute values. It is telling that even Weininger, whose work Slataper admired and read with attention, did not convince *tout court* the Triestine critic. As Slataper noted in his analysis of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, Weininger's schematic oppositional worldview that claimed that morality, wholeness, coherence, and totality belonged to a superior masculine principle, whereas women were defined by amorality, incoherence, distraction, and fragmentation and were therefore intellectually and morally inferior, led Weininger to a misreading of Ibsen's drama.⁵⁷

Slataper's interest in history and philosophy led him to filter his analysis of Ibsen through the lenses of the literary critic Francesco De Sanctis and the philosopher Giovanni Amendola, whose works satisfied him better than Weininger's philosophy. While Amendola's ethical perspective

56 See also Michelstaedter, *Persuasion & Rhetoric*. On Michelstaedter's work in English see Bini; Harrison; and, more recently, Angelucci. For a comparison between Michelstaedter and Slataper, see Camerino.

57 Weininger dedicated a whole chapter of his book *Über Die Letzen Dinge* (On last things; 1904) to Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, a play that he had seen performed during his stay in Christiania in August 1902. His reading of the play was informed mainly by Kant's moral interpretation of the individual will and Weininger's own misogyny. Slataper noted: "Because of his schematic dualism [Weininger] did not understand the meaning of Solveig in *Peer Gynt*, as he did not understand all the women characters in Ibsen, just like he did not understand women in general. [...] Therefore, I lean on him, but on my own legs" (*Ibsen* 113).

informed his overall judgment of Ibsen's plays, from De Sanctis Slataper learned the necessity of situating every work of art within the specific historical moment that produced it, and the inseparable correlation that existed in a work of art between ethics and aesthetics.⁵⁸ In this light, Slataper considered Ibsen's plays effective only if they expressed a historical truth and brought to the fore the importance of actively engaging with the multiplicity of experiences that life could offer.⁵⁹

Thus, the critic privileged works like *A Doll's House* or *The Wild Duck*, where the artist was able to express a coherent, self-contained world, albeit one ruled by social and psychological deceptions. The controversial play *A Doll's House*, one of Ibsen's most acclaimed works, was for Slataper also one of his most accomplished dramas because the artist was able to give a vivid historical representation of the theoretical core of the woman question as it unfolded at the turn of the twentieth century.⁶⁰ Comparing Ibsen to the genius of Dante, Slataper emphasized the artist's ability to create a work of art that was convincing, true to itself, and ethically charged, and that as such transcended time and place. Nora, the heroine of the play, who abandons her husband and children because she does not want to continue to live a lie, exposes the crisis of every human being who strives to find a sense of authenticity in a bourgeois world built on lies and conventions. A similar critical stance can be found in *The Wild Duck* and *Rosmersholm*. Ibsen's creative imagination turned the wild duck with its broken wings into a powerful symbol of the predicament of all the characters and their claustrophobic

58 In a note from 1911 Slataper wrote: "I never write an article on aesthetics, but I always pay attention to man and history. I cannot conceive of anything that is not complete" (*Appunti e note* 141).

59 For De Sanctis the modern individual must recognize the limits of contemplation and the necessity to participate actively in the unfolding of existence: "The starting point is no longer – as was the case at the time of Dante – ignorance, the dark forest, but [...] the inadequacy of contemplation, the need for an active life. The wise Beatrice is transformed into the ignorant and naive Margherita; and Faust does not contemplate but works; in fact, his sin was precisely contemplation, the study of science, and the remedy he seeks is to be born again in the fresh waves of life" (153).

60 The Triestine bourgeoisie enjoyed attending theatrical performances, as the many theatres present in the city attest. It is therefore not a surprise that Ibsen's dramas found a very receptive audience in Trieste, where many of his plays were performed. *A Doll's House* was staged for the first time in 1892, with Eleonora Duse in the main role. A year earlier the famous actress had appeared in *The Wild Duck* at the Teatro Comunale, and the company Vitaliani Salsilli decided to open its Italian tour of *Hedda Gabler* in Trieste (Coccani and Pagnini 151).

environment.⁶¹ Furthermore, the symbol illuminates the whole play and gives it unity and coherence. Rosmer and Rebecca, the doomed protagonists of *Rosmersholm*, in the moment when they open themselves to one another, express the intrinsic value of every human being who longs for meaningful connections. In their doomed relationship, all these characters foreground an ethical project: “the good truth that can educate humankind” (271). Slataper saw in the representation of this desperate communion of human beings the same greatness that informed the work of Leopardi. Both Leopardi and Ibsen were able to give voice to the fragile, flawed existence of a humanity condemned to live in a world that no longer offers any metaphysical certainty.

These favourable reviews were, however, exceptions in Slataper’s analysis of Ibsen’s work. The critic’s aesthetic and ethical vision could not but be at odds with many of the characters and situations portrayed in Ibsen’s dramas. Although Slataper recognized that Ibsen was the artist who best represented the fractures brought forth by modernity, with its dissolution of traditional beliefs, the playwright’s inability to overcome the sense of unredeemable alienation that permeated many of his characters and plays frustrated the critic. His reading of the epic play *Brand* is a clear example of his struggle to come to terms with the Norwegian playwright.⁶² On the one hand Slataper understood Brand’s aspiration to a world of authenticity freed from the standards of bourgeois society where “everything is a compromise” (67), but he was also suspicious of Brand’s moral fanaticism, which negated any possibility of redemption. The volitional act that pushed Brand in all his choices, his categorical “all or nothing,” never led him to an ethical act that could expand into the lives of other individuals; a moral life that takes into account only oneself is not truly moral – it reduces everything to a desert (96). In his solipsism Brand was unable to reconcile his ethical quest with the modern bourgeois world that he inhabited. He refused the inauthentic world that surrounded him without understanding that it was only through the love of his fellow human beings that he could have assumed the prophetic role he aspired to. Slataper condemned Ibsen’s moral rigidity and

61 “The Ekdals and the rest of the characters are like the wild duck, which is completely domesticated, but still needs to imagine itself wild” (Slataper, *Ibsen* 248).

62 The play tells the story of Brand, a clergyman who sacrifices every human connection and defies the local religious authority for his obsessive love of God. His rigid, unforgiving attitude leads to the death of his family. Unmoved, he exhorts his flock to follow him to the mountains where he wants to build an “ice church” that will bring him closer to God. After he is abandoned by his people, who stopped believing in him, he dies in an avalanche. Before dying he hears a voice “crying through the thunder-roar” “God is Love” (Ibsen, *Brand* 223).

noted how Brand “tries to be the new Christ who dictates a pure moral law. He offers only suffering” (99–101).

However, even *Peer Gynt*, whose freshness and playfulness captivated the critic, was considered a failure because the playwright did not offer a satisfying, comprehensive solution between the two existential possibilities that inform the play: the moral imperative to be true to oneself against the motto of the trolls that try to lure the protagonist into their world of pleasure and deceit where “it is enough to be as you are” (114).⁶³ Gynt’s final realization of his worthlessness and his encounter with Solveig, the woman who has loved him and waited patiently for him all her life, do not bring to the play the kind of spiritual uplifting that Beatrice could inspire in Dante. Even in a play as fantastic and as carefree as *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen cannot resist judging and condemning his character according to his rigid worldview. As a result, the play as a whole remains “disharmonious” and “unconvincing,” its ethical tensions unresolved (121).

His final judgment on the Norwegian writer that, with few exceptions, informed all of Slataper’s critiques of Ibsen’s theatrical production, was already present in his reading of *Peer Gynt*. At the end of his analysis he compared Ibsen to Goethe and Dante: “Ibsen is not a poet of Goethe-like epics. [...] He is profound, morally profound, he knows the essential truth: but his intellect does not grasp this truth in its multidimensional forms. He is an insightful personality, not a genius.” On the contrary, works like *The Divine Comedy*, or *Faust*, which gravitate around an ethical centre that informs their values and worldview, can grasp and illuminate every aspect of life (120).

This criticism is later reiterated in the pages dedicated to the play *Ghosts*, where Slataper contrasted the claustrophobic, anguished world inhabited by Ibsen’s characters to the open, multidimensional world full of life and possibilities that defined Shakespeare’s plays. Like the works of Dante and Goethe, Shakespeare’s dramas and comedies become the perfect example of a work of art in which the characters can fully express themselves without the author constantly wanting to curb them because of an ethical will imposed from the outside. To the unforgiving Ibsenian world conditioned by “Lutheran aridity,” where the characters are always torn between unresolvable tensions (authentic and inauthentic life in *Brand*; mendacity and truth in *Doll’s House*; courage and cowardice in

63 In the play, the troll king that Peer encounters explains to him the difference between trolls and men, a difference that Peer is unable to see: “Just as morning’s different from evening, / So there’s a real difference between us, / And I will tell you what it is. Out yonder / Under the skies men have a common saying: ‘Man, to thyself be true!’ / But here, ‘mongst Trolls, ‘Troll, to thyself be – enough!’ it runs” (Ibsen, *Peer Gynt* 62).

Ghosts; joy and duty in *Peer Gynt*), Slataper juxtaposed the serene genius of the English playwright who allowed his characters to express all their complex humanity:⁶⁴

Reading, rereading Ibsen over and over again, you are suddenly seized by an indescribable restlessness: give me some air! some blood! Go back to Shakespeare. Look at this joyful poet, who lets all his characters roam around the world, without a worry, without fear of losing control! The good shepherd does not keep his sheep locked next to the arid rock where he is sitting, but lets them graze free on the mountains, each searching out the grass it likes best. Live as masters of your own lives, my brothers! Attend to your business, your loves and your sorrows – cocky and strong, beaten and hesitant, ridiculous, bestial, or delicate – but always filled with your rich and full potential. Get lost, as you please, in the world. The poet loves you just as you are. He has only love for you. He gives himself wholly to you. We cannot find Shakespeare, the poet, in you, because he disappeared in you, and has identified himself with our life. He had so much faith in himself that his genius, with his cheerful voice, could instantly summon all his creatures back to him. (in this volume, 117–18)

Although Slataper analysed Ibsen's work through De Sanctis's literary historiography and contextualized his plays historically and culturally, emphasizing the stifling milieu in which Ibsen lived and against which he rebelled, he did not use the same critical approach with Shakespeare. Instead, Slataper filtered Shakespeare's work through his own modernist lenses in order to find in his plays a key to solve the rigid dichotomy of Ibsen's worldview: "His kingdom is wide, and every vice and virtue has free access there, because vice and virtue are connected within this certain, internal, essential faith. Life, all of it, is truly holy. Ibsen aspires to this holy life, but he is unable to enjoy it: he needs to judge it" (in this volume, 118). The great lesson that Slataper learned from Shakespeare, Dante, and Goethe was that our participation in the world that unfolds around us must be filtered through love, a generous, non-judgmental love for our fellow human beings in their daily toils, struggles, and limitations. Thus, he concluded, "It is not society that ruins us, but serving it falsely, with an impure heart" (*Ibsen* 171). The crisis of modernity and the centrifugal forces that it unleashed can be overcome only if we are willing to turn our eyes away from the uncontaminated heights of the mountaintops where Brand hoped to find his authentic, uncompromising self,

64 See also Coda, *Slataper* 89.

and to embrace instead the multifaceted, kaleidoscopic experience of everyday existence. It is only here, in the rootlessness of the modern condition, in the daily toil and in the love for fellow human beings, that the artist can capture a deeper meaning of life and then transform it into a work of art.

In December 1912, just a couple of weeks after he concluded his dissertation, and the same year of the publication of his *My Karst and My City*, Slataper wrote to Elody Oblath – the friend who had engaged Slataper in an intense intellectual dialogue throughout his critical and literary endeavours – and reflected on the underlying perspective that had informed both *Ibsen* and *My Karst and My City*. From the top of the barren Mount Morello, the highest mountain near Florence, Slataper took in “the view of the golden Tuscan plains below” and wondered why they produced such a sense of peace and happiness in his tumultuous soul. The answer was that the ploughed fields below expressed “solution, fertility, [and] wealth” (*Alle tre amiche* 265). They represented humankind’s accomplishments, its need for constructive work and a sense of purpose that could alleviate its existential sorrow. “I defend bread and work,” he continued, and noted that meaningful work could be accomplished only in a well-functioning society that must defend itself from its disintegrating elements. He asserted the importance of becoming an active member of society and of taking responsibility for its well-being: “the funny thing is that everyone benefits from society, but only few are willing to take on the burden” (266). However, being the “armed champion” of engaged work is not enough. Love, as he already noted in his *Ibsen*, must enter the equation as well: “a love that extends to every moment and every creature” (264).

My Karst and My City

“We yearn to love and to work” are the concluding words of *My Karst*, the “lyrical autobiography” that explored his own existential crisis and his relationship with the modern urban environment of Trieste.⁶⁵ However, as the author noted on more than one occasion, the text defied any facile classification, and it should not be read as a simple autobiography; this was a mistake that the influential critic Emilio Cecchi made in his review of the

65 In a letter to Marcello Loewy, Slataper defined the various parts of his new work: “Now I am working at *My Karst*. Subtitle: Lyrical Autobiography. Three parts: Child, Adolescent, Young Man. Two intermezzi: *The Descent*, *The Ascent*, and an end: *Among Men*; more or less” (*Epistolario* 91). However, Slataper eliminated all the titles for the publication.

work. Cecchi's unforgivable error, noted Slataper in a letter he drafted but never sent to the critic, was to identify the author with the protagonist, and he thus failed to understand that the story presented in *My Karst* departed from personal experiences to artistically express a more universal truth.⁶⁶ However, this universal truth could not be expressed any longer in a traditional linear style. For Slataper, a modern, "lyrical" autobiography did not aim at capturing the totality of a particular individual, but only certain angles and facets filtered through the eyes of the author.⁶⁷ Slataper closely followed the aesthetic tendencies of many collaborators of *La Voce*. As Prezzolini observed, positivism, naturalism, and aestheticism had nothing more to offer to the generation born around 1880: Carducci, D'Annunzio, and Sighele, with their aloof and arrogant intellectualism, did nothing but restrict the creativity and originality of the new generation that had to find its own voice and mode of expression (*Italia 1912* 58–9). The autobiography and the fragment became for the *Vocianti* the genre and the style that could best render their modern sensibility: "where could they find a more authentic truth than in one's intimate heart and for a brief moment?" asked Prezzolini (*La Voce 1908–1913* 107).

The prose fragments produced around 1910 by *Vocianti* such as Jahier, Rebora, and Papini testify to their need to break free both ideologically and stylistically from a tradition that they found stifling, while allowing them to explore new ways to give voice to their own intimate and subjective experiences and bring forth a renewal of culture and society. The same can be said for Slataper's *My Karst and My City*. As a fragmented lyric autobiography it erased chronological continuity to give way to the instant as an incisive moment, essential to express a new vision of existence filled with conflicting moments (the contrast between present and past, the self and the world, the countryside and the city, the desire to sublimate reality and the attempt to express the unsolvable multiplicity of human becoming) that refused to be absorbed into a coherent whole.⁶⁸ At the same time, Slataper composed the text according to a precise ethical and social trajectory already outlined in a letter to Marcello Loewy: from a carefree childhood in contact with nature, to the relationship with the mountain as a site of ethical inspiration, to the acceptance of the city as the only place where he could live a meaningful life among other human beings.

66 See Martignoni.

67 In a letter to a friend he noted: "[This] book is not at all my autobiography, but the life of anyone (even mine) seen from particular visual angles, [...] which exaggerates some characteristics and forgets many others; so that it is more myth than history" (*Epistolario* 323).

68 See also Milanini.

However, while the novel's overarching trajectory might appear to borrow the traditional telos of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman*,⁶⁹ in which we witness the urbanization of the protagonist who "becomes enlightened by experience and successfully and unequivocally integrated into society" (Summerfield and Downward 108), here Slataper offered a more modern rendering of *Bildung*, as defined by Claudio Magris in his collection of essays *Journeying (L'Infinito viaggiare)*. In the introduction to his book Magris notes that while the protagonist of the traditional *Bildungsroman* embarks on his journey in order to "discover his own truth" and "find himself through the journey" (7) in a trajectory that inevitably leads back to a sense of home and authenticity, the modernist *Bildungsroman* did not allow its protagonists such a fulfilling destiny. This modern version of the novel unveils the impossibility of its protagonist's gaining a sense of univocal identity "within the increasingly complex [...] workings of society" (7):

Soon enough something in the relationship between the individual and the totality that surrounds him cracks; [...] the journey uncovers the precarious nature not only of the world, but also of the traveler, the lability of the individual "I" whose identity and unity begin to break up. (7)

Similarly, the protagonist's temporal and geographical journey does not end with a return to a reassuring sense of coherence and totality, but instead propelled him into losing his fixed, singular identity and embracing instead the multiplicity of Trieste and its many voices, linguistically emphasized by the change of the narrating subject: from the first person singular at the beginning of the story ("I would like to tell you"; *My Karst*, in this volume, 5) to the first person plural with which it ends ("We yearn to love and work"; 78).

The powerful incipit "I would like to tell you ...," repeated three times as a seductive refrain, not only functions as an effective rhetorical strategy to capture the reader's attention, but also problematizes, right from the beginning, the possibility of embracing a coherent identity that could still be conveyed through a highly evocative prose:

I would like to tell you that I was born in the Karst, in a hut with a thatched roof blackened by rain and smoke. [...]

69 Lukács identifies the *Bildungsroman* as a narrative that describes how the individual growth of the protagonist is achieved only through his active engagement within society, noting that "the development of qualities in men [...] would never blossom without the active intervention of other men and circumstances" (134).

I'd like to tell you that I was born in Croatia, in a great oak forest. In winter everything was white with snow, the door would open only a crack, and at night I heard wolves howl. [...]

I'd like to tell you that I was born on the Moravian plain and would run like a hare through the furrows, startling chattering crows into the air above. (5)

The narrator *would* like to assume one of these identities and narrate his story from one of these exotic perspectives, but this would be nothing more than a lie. The timeless impression evoked in the first three paragraphs, emphasized by the use of the imperfect tense that dominates the narrative structure, is abruptly countered by the return to the simple past that, with its strong temporal connotation, highlights the gap between the imaginative beginnings and the actual reality: "Then I came here, tried to tame myself, learned Italian, made friends with the most sophisticated young people; but I'll have to return home soon because I'm miserable here" (5). The narrator, in Florence, surrounded by the sophisticated young *Vocianti*, must recognize his own alterity and his frustrated attempt to assimilate into the new social setting by appearing more exotic than he really is (5–6). And yet, despite admitting the futility of his deception, in the first part of his narrative he adopts a sensual, aestheticized style, similar to the one used in the incipit, to recount the story of his childhood. Tired of listening to the clever discourses of his Florentine friends, the protagonist lets his mind wander back to his childhood, spent in contact with a reassuring and benign natural setting centred on the country house where his grandmother still lived.

The reverie of his childhood dwelling is strongly linked with an idealized vision of the feminized natural world where the young Slataper experienced a sense of wholeness and belonging that his current life in Florence has rendered impossible. The old patriarchal house and its natural surroundings are described as a space of bucolic serenity with a fairytale flavour, "a felicitous space" to use Bachelard's famous phrase (xxxv), "a maternal paradise" (6) "that gives mankind proofs of illusions of stability" (17). Stylistically, this is achieved both by the soothing repetition of the phrase "there was" used to enumerate the many different trees and flowers growing on the estate, and by the exotic names associated with them. Nature is not only a specific setting that the young child can explore in his games and adventures, but is also represented as a benign mother, ready to nourish the hungry child. The repetition of the verb *ciucciare* (to suckle), with its strong onomatopoeic connotation, further emphasizes the maternal relationship that exists between the child and the natural world that surrounds him, a relationship that also embraces

the many female figures who love and protect him. Slataper here clearly embraces the common early-twentieth-century gendered construction of space that sees femininity as existing within an organic, natural community that functions outside the realm of modernity.⁷⁰ Within this feminine space everything is order and clarity, including his faith in God and in an idealized, distant Italy: “At that time I believed in God, and [...] I prayed for my beautiful Italy, [...] over there, across the sea” (8).

The fairy tale atmosphere of this first part of the narrative is also captured by the never-ending story that the narrator tells the other children in the hot summer afternoons.⁷¹ The hero of the story, identifiable with the protagonist, has all the attributes traditionally bestowed on such heroes: health, strength, and beauty. He is the beloved leader of his companions, ready to lead them in many adventures. The fragment that follows describes one of these playful adventures: the children rush to the sea and attack a group of German tourists who, unaware of the children, are enjoying swimming off the coast. This episode departs stylistically from the evocative description of the bucolic setting in order to capture in a style and language that closely recalls futurist narratives the liveliness and strength that define the young protagonist as he leads

70 Georg Simmel in his essays “The Relative and the Absolute in the Problem of the Sexes” (1911) and “Female Culture” (1911) described the close link between masculinity and modernity. For Simmel, woman, because of her undifferentiated essence, was excluded from the objective social and cultural forms of modernity: “our objective culture is thoroughly male. It is men who have created art and industry, science and commerce, the state and religion” (“Female Culture” 67). The neurologist and cultural critic Paolo Mantegazza (1831–1910) in his book *Il secolo nevrosico* (The neurotic century) maintained a similar position, underlining the restorative role of women in modern society, precisely because they can bring back a sense of order and serenity to the life of man, subjected to the disruptive stimuli of society. In his essay “The Uncanny,” published in 1919, Freud noted the restoring power of the female body as “the entrance to the former Heim [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning. There is a joking saying that ‘Love is home-sickness’; and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, while he is still dreaming: ‘this place is familiar to me, I’ve been here before,’ we may interpret the place as being his mother’s genitals or her body” (245). For a recent analysis of femininity and modernity, see Lichtblau; Felski; and Witz.

71 Slataper proved his hand at writing fairy tales, such as “The Rose Petal,” published in 1909 in the *Giornalino della Domenica*, a popular children’s periodical, and “Professor Ausserleben and His Soul,” published in *Riviera Ligure* in 1911. Highly influenced by German romanticism, especially by the works of Kleist, Tieck, and Novalis, Slataper saw the fairy tale as a way to express the totality of the world where peace and harmony were still accessible to the uncorrupted imagination of children.

his friends into battle.⁷² However, the description of the battle and the children's victory against the bathers is unexpectedly juxtaposed with a sudden return to a much more sombre present. Years later, Steno, their leader, who became a professor, suffers from a nervous breakdown and kills himself. The interpolation of the present within the playful and carefree description of the children pestering the vacationers shows the impossibility of remaining absorbed in the idyllic world of an idealized past. The present, kept at bay by the narrator's recollections, resurfaces, exposing the fragile essence of the human condition.

Similarly, the sensual episode of the grape harvest, which focuses on the protagonist's infatuation with Vila, the young niece of the farmer who lives on his family estate, is suddenly interrupted by the narrator's realization that there is something disturbing and violent that surrounds her family. Unlike the protagonist's harmonious household, centred on his loving mother and other female relatives, the world inhabited by Vila is characterized by physical and moral decrepitude. Instead of the airy rooms full of light of the narrator's home, Vila's house is characterized by a disorder "reeking [...] of rags, bottles, and boxes, with plaster walls peeling from the damp" (15). The behaviour of Vila's grandmother and uncle mirrors the decrepitude of their physical surroundings: the grandmother is described as a hateful decaying animal with "the eyes of a barn owl [...] steady and full of cunning," while the uncle, when drunk, cursed and "spat in his mother's face" (15). Vila's world of moral decay is also morally infectious: not only does the protagonist start acting as a thief as soon as he enters Vila's house, but he also shows absolute indifference when he finds out about the uncle's brutal behaviour towards his mother.

The narrator's attempt to stop these disturbing recollections ("But I don't want to talk about those people!" [15]) reveals how difficult it is to retain a bucolic image of his childhood. The sudden return to the present tense introduced by the adversative clause and his attempt to deflect his memories towards a more pleasant past by focusing on his infatuation for Vila do not allow him to regain the sense of Pan-like immersion with nature that he previously experienced. The "[p]recious days [...] full of love and glory" (16) that marked his relationship with the young woman within a benign natural setting unexpectedly come to an end as Nature unveils its own mystery and vulnerability: "Because the

72 In a letter to Marcello Loewy, Slataper recognized that, in spite of his dislike for the futurist movement, he felt close to their aesthetics of violence: "You know what a violent man I am. [...] I am in a futurist mood. The only difference is that I am intelligent while the futurists are not" (*Epistolario* 76).

earth is full of suffering. [...] All trunks bear a scar or wound" (21). The narrator must finally accept that his attempt to reconstruct a fictional rendering of his childhood only further emphasized his present sense of displacement: "Where am I going? My country is far away, the nest is shattered" (22).

The irrevocable loss of his childhood, and the sense of irremediable homelessness that pervades him, marks the turning point of *My Karst and My City*. From now on the text underscores the crisis of the modern individual who must live in the alienating, fragmented world of modernity. Trieste, the multi-ethnic, cosmopolitan metropolis with all its contradictions and complexities, replaces the organic sites of his idyllic childhood. However, before being able to confront the chaos of the modern city, the protagonist needs the reinvigorating force of Mount Kâl, the mighty peak rising on the barren Karstic plateau that surrounds the city. It is worth noting that the symbolic transition from childhood to youth is marked by nature's switch of gender: from the organic feminine principle that defined his childhood to a powerful masculine principle that will enable him to gain the power and strength necessary to withstand the disaggregating forces of the city and to bring new life to the weakened and decadent urban society. Following closely the traditional image of the mountain as a site of moral and physical rejuvenation, the author presents the protagonist's ascent as an initiation rite that transforms him into Alboino, the king of the Lombards, who led his tribe from the eastern plains into Italy. In his description of the mountain as a site of ethical and moral inspiration, Slataper clearly had in mind both Ibsen's poem "On the Heights" and Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

The protagonist of Ibsen's epic poem, which Slataper analysed in detail in his monograph dedicated to the Norwegian playwright, abandons his old mother and fiancée in the valley below and finds refuge on the mountaintop where he decides to live and pursue his aesthetic ideals, forever breaking off the emotional ties that bound him to the life of his native village. From up above he witnesses the death of his mother and the wedding of his former fiancée, but nothing makes him abandon the heights of the mountain: "I am clad now in steel, I follow the commandment/ that bids me to wander in high-country! / I have lived out my lowland life / Up here on the heights there is freedom and God / down there the others are groping."⁷³ Slataper, however, as we have already seen in his analysis of Ibsen, did not perceive the rarefied world of the mountain as his ultimate goal. Like Zarathustra, he saw the solitude of the mountain

⁷³ Ibsen, "On the Heights," cited in Moi 174.

as a necessary stage to gain the ethical strength needed to descend into the valley and bring his teaching to the people living down below. However, as with Zarathustra, his attempt to redeem mankind soon revealed its inefficacy: the narrator's efforts to incite the Slovenian peasants who live in the Karst to descend with him into Trieste fail miserably, and he must realize that he needs to be more than Alboino, the strong warrior and leader. He must become *Pennadoro* ("golden pen," the literal translation of the word "Slataper"), the poet who can combine the might of the mountain and the courage and strength of Alboino with the narrator's creative and philosophical aspirations. Yet the protagonist becomes quickly aware that even as *Pennadoro* he cannot fully negotiate the urban chaos that surrounds him. The first encounter with the urban environment quickly overwhelms him: the crowds, the red lights, and the architectural structures close in on him, producing a sense of threat and claustrophobia: "you're not really free to walk in the city. In the city, your every step is observed by spies who pretend they're not watching. [...] And though I'm well covered by my cloak, these eyes, this covert surveillance oppresses me. The street lamps light up with a blinding red glow; the big rectangular houses press in. Why not just stretch out here, on the cobblestones? I'm exhausted. I turn around abruptly. Up there is Mount Kâl. Why did I ever come down?" (30). The view of the mountain allows him to recover his strength, at least momentarily, and to confront the most threatening part of the city, the infamous *città vecchia*, to prove to himself that he can indeed redeem, through his poetic language, the lost humanity that lives there. The episode that follows, which takes place in the old quarter of town, and the protagonist's attempt to interact with the drunks in the old tavern only further demonstrate the inherent contradiction between his lofty ideals and the squalid reality that surrounds him. His claim at the end of part I, "I'm among thieves and murderers; but if I leap onto a table and Christ inspires my words, I can destroy and remake the world with them" (31), remains unanswered, followed only by the empty page that marks the end of the narrative's first section.⁷⁴

In an attempt to distance himself from the decrepitude of the Old Town, the narrator shifts his attention to Trieste as a site of excitement, wealth, and opportunities, the place where "the future of the world is being decided" (32). However, the image of Trieste as a modern metropolis made wealthy by its ports and its international trade, bustling with possibilities, noises, and colours, is countered by more subdued images

74 On the episode in the tavern in *città vecchia*, see also Coda, "Representation of the Metropolis"; and Bond.

of the city as a site of political frustrations and economic uncertainties. The protagonist's eagerness to participate in the political life of Trieste is quickly deflated once he realizes that the diverse groups that make up the political structure of the city, with their disorganized meetings and ineffective protests, lack a clear political vision. The city also unveils the tragic outcomes of a world that is ruled by financial institutions and an unstable money economy. He describes the financial distress incurred by his family, the humiliation of having to move to a small apartment, the worsening of his mother's illness, and his frustrated attempt to find a job at the "Credit," the Triestine branch of the prestigious Austrian Bank. In a desperate effort to escape his predicament, the narrator introduces a fragment in which he returns to the Old Town looking for a prostitute, "hoping to find some dirty fun" and distraction (42).

Here the protagonist seems to embrace the "blasé attitude" described by Georg Simmel in his essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life." Slataper asserts that he understands the money economy that rules modern cities and sees prostitution as simple commerce, void of any moral judgment; he also seems to accept the monetary exchange that his interaction with the prostitutes implies (43). However, this attitude comes to a quick end the moment he comes face to face with these women. Their sickly appearance, emphasized by the heavy make-up, greasy hair, and strong perfume, makes him retreat immediately for fear of becoming infected, and makes him long for his clean and bedbug-free bedroom. The bedroom, just like the house of his childhood, becomes the Bachelardian space where he imagines that he can still withdraw from the corrosive reality of urban life and maintain a wholesome existence where everything is stable and complete. However, as we have already seen, the centrifugal forces shaping the modern metropolis have already contaminated his home as well. The protagonist's home is not immune from the laws of the market that govern the city, nor is it free from sickness and suffering. Its wholeness is an illusion. The domestic serenity that characterized the protagonist's childhood spent in the patriarchal house in the country cannot subsist in the modern metropolis. Even his mother, as a representative of the organic feminine principle, loses her unifying role once she is faced with the harsh laws of the market economy: her ill health worsens once the family faces financial distress.

The sense of disorientation the protagonist experiences at this point of the narration is exposed thematically by imagining alternative existential possibilities expressed stylistically in disconnected fragments: he dreams of running away to exotic, violent places; he sees himself as a cynical journalist looking for the latest scoop or as an artist who has lost his inspiration; and finally, more realistically, he reflects on his role as a

young contributor to *La Voce*. As such, he recognizes his own contradictions and inadequacies while expressing frustration at the narrow literary and philosophical interests of his Florentine friends: “I much prefer speaking with ordinary people and finding out what interests them. It could be that my whole life will amount to a vain search for humanity, but for me philosophy and art don’t suffice, nor do they fill me with enough passion. Life is broader and richer than that” (47).

Here again, the protagonist seeks the mountain as a site of strength and rejuvenation. While his descent from Mount Kâl aimed at regenerating the morally weakened Trieste, his ascent to Mount Secchieta, east of Florence, is an attempt to counteract the intellectualism of *La Voce* in order to revitalize it and make it more relevant to the concerns of a wider humanity. Like his descent to Trieste in the first part of the narrative, his ascent of Mount Secchieta does not have the expected results. The strenuous climb through a frozen landscape and his final ascent to the summit does not give him access to the strength and power he imagined. In fact, the rhetoric of moral strength ascribed to the mountain is somewhat undermined by the fragment that follows. Through a sudden association of images, the protagonist finds himself unexpectedly immersed in the depths of the sea, described as a reassuring female principle where he can dreamingly lose himself, just as he did in the natural bucolic landscape that defined his childhood.⁷⁵ The unexpected change of topography, from the mountain in Tuscany back to the gulf of Trieste, coupled with the shift of linguistic register (from the harsh tone used during the ascent to the dream-like description of the protagonist drifting away in the immensity of the sea), point once again to Slataper’s unresolved modernist angst: on the one hand his desire to engage in the complex cultural and social reality of the world he lived in; on the other hand his unquenchable sense of nostalgia for the organic world of a benign nature, where unity, coherence, and love are still possible.

The sense of homelessness that he perceived at the end of the first part of the narrative deepens in the final section of the text when he must come to terms with the suicide of his girlfriend, Anna Pulitzer. Anna, his “Little Joy” as he affectionally called her, the young woman who was his confidante and listened to the turmoil of his soul, killed herself after a failed rendezvous with the author in Florence. The note that she left him in which she stated, “this will be for your work [*opera*]. [...] be Scipio forever” (where *opera* might refer specifically to his literary

75 As Deborah Amberson noted, “this marine episode would not seem remotely out of place in the first part of the text” (14).

text *My Karst and My City*, the project he was working on at that time, or more generally his comprehensive life work) suggests that her final act was intended as a sacrifice to allow the writer to be always true to himself and pursue his intellectual and ethical dreams.⁷⁶ Moreover, as Thomas Harrison noted in his analysis of Anna's suicide, "by rejecting the limitations of life," her death became the "irrefutably dramatic, historical proof" (91) of the existential need to gain that sense of authenticity that many early-twentieth-century intellectuals were still desperately seeking and that Slataper himself was exploring and problematizing in the pages of his lyrical autobiography.⁷⁷ At the same time her suicide showed the shortcomings of such a way of thinking. If at the beginning of the twentieth century "suicide was not only accepted among the options of those who insisted on ruling their lives; it was often viewed as the most laudable of acts" (92), it also questioned the validity of a traditional system of beliefs that still embraced ontological and epistemological certainties.

After Anna's death, the narrator's belief that he could affirm the autonomy of the individual self as an absolute agent who could bring new life to a decadent society came to an end. Stylistically this change of perception is rendered through disconnected fragments in which he describes his movements throughout the city, his thoughts, and his fears. Thematically, this shift is expressed through the description of his loss of direction and an overwhelming sense of disorientation that accompanies his meandering through a nocturnal, lifeless Trieste and a dark, mysterious Karst. In these new, alienating surroundings the protagonist must recognize the absurdity of his previous self-perception as the strong individual whose words and actions could rejuvenate a decadent, weakened society. Now he can only admit to his own lack of direction and existential estrangement: "I don't know what will become of my life [...] and I look upon this unknown life like a stranger" (56).

76 The note, together with a detailed description of Anna's last attempt to see Scipio in Florence, is recounted by Stuparich in a footnote to his edition of Scipio Slataper, *Alle tre amiche* (503–4). Slataper never understood Anna's deep-seated unhappiness because he was too taken by his own intellectual aspirations to pay attention to her existential angst. Moreover, as he noted in a letter to the young woman, he was not interested in her as a full-fledged human being, but as inspirational, idealized muse: "You are not any woman: you are Anna. You understand that for Scipio to give himself completely [to you] it is necessary that Anna be Beatrice, Salome, Sappho, Juliet [...]" (*Alle tre amiche* 53).

77 Harrison, noting the similarities between Anna Pulitzer's suicide and the suicides of Irma Seidler (Lukács's fiancée) and Nadia Baraden (Michelstaedter's love interest), comments that the three deaths "reaffirm a principle to which the young Lukács, Michelstaedter and Slataper are absolutely attached: the autonomy of the single self, rejecting the effacements it risks in erotic fusion" (91).

Whereas earlier in the narrative the protagonist believed in his own power as a poet and a leader who could “destroy and remake the world” (31), now his journey does not promise a return to a familiar setting or a rewarding ending. Quite the opposite: “Where am I? My eyes are squinting in the heat, and I stroll along in a daze. I walk slowly and watch everything, like a stranger exhausted from travel who must still stay alert because someone is waiting for him, someone full of love and curiosity. But no one is waiting for me, and upon my return no one will sit with me, and ask with loving eyes: ‘And so? How was the journey?’ ... nowhere can I lay my great weariness down” (57). The narrator’s endeavour is an apt illustration of the modern traveller, whose journey, as Magris put it, “becomes an avenue of no return, leading to the discovery that there is no, there can be no, and there must be no return” (7). Here we can only experience “a journey that moves in an ever forward direction [...] like a straight line lurching into space” (7–8).

The new condition of homelessness that the protagonist faces leads him at first to express his sense of alienation towards a world that appears to have lost its meaningful core: “The whole world is working in a great frenzy of self-obliterating pain. And it builds houses and closes itself within walls so that bodies can’t see each other tossing sleeplessly between the sheets, and it weaves itself clothes so it can think that at least someone else’s body is healthy and sound, and it issues millions of clocks so that the moment is whipped on perpetually through space, like one of the damned ceaselessly pushing ahead so as not to fall” (57). However, Slataper’s vision of an existence centred solely on illusions and deceptions (what Michelstaedter in the same years called “rhetoric”) does not lead him to descend into a defeatist attitude towards life or to reclaim his earlier vision of stability and certainty centred in the world of his childhood or in the heights of the mountains.

Instead, facing the abyss of nothingness, he is now willing to question the traditional belief in a totality that can sublimate the multiplicity of existence: “And the whole: what is it? They’ve conditioned you to use the word. Maybe there is no whole, only fragments seeking fusion in vain” (68). Life must be accepted in all of its fragmentary and contradictory expressions. In this new, truly modern perception of life, a transcendental, absolute truth ceases to exist.

As a consequence, the emphasis of his writing process changes; rather than trying to give a unitary meaning to the various fragments that compose human existence, now he is compelled to grasp and record his urban experiences in their fleeting, splintered essence. It is in his aim to give poetic expression to the contingency and ambivalence of life that Slataper shows his modern sensibility. Slataper’s notion of the

task of the poet as well as his depiction of the reality that surrounds him has changed drastically. He has gone from the romantic belief in the poetic possibility of bringing order and clarity to a fragmented urban reality to the modern concept of the poet as a person who must express, in the words of Baudelaire, “the transient, the fleeting, the contingent” (403).

The new hero envisioned by Slataper at the end of his narrative is the individual who can overcome the absence of grounding traditional beliefs, not by recreating some transcendent synthesis and teleological aim, but by forging relations, and finding ways of constructing a shared destiny concretely and historically grounded in the reality of Trieste. The city is no longer perceived as a space of alienation or degeneration that needs to be revived by the young poet, but as an exciting and tangible expression of human creativity, energy, and work. His description of the city is now determined by careful observations of the early-morning activities, “full of movement and colour”: gatekeepers opening warehouses, pilots preparing to depart, empty carts ready to be loaded with the goods that have just arrived, foremen efficiently selecting day workers. Moreover, the bustling activity of the city is not an end unto itself, but offers unforeseen experiences and possibilities:

Our big steamers weigh anchor for Salonika and Bombay. And tomorrow locomotives will thunder across the iron bridge over the Vltava, then rush alongside the Elbe into Germany. [...] We will travel, uncertain and nostalgic, compelled by hopeful memories that we won't recognize anywhere as our own. Where did we come from? Our country is far away, the nest undone. But moved by love, we will return to our country, Trieste, and from here we will begin. (77–8)

The centrifugal force of the metropolis that propels its inhabitants to distant places, the mixture of nostalgia for the sense of home that has forever been shattered coupled with the thirst for novelty, action, and movement, render Trieste the symbol of the only possible homeland for the modern individual. As a home, Trieste offers all that is exciting and new without, however, bestowing the consolation of a traditional, romantic idea of fatherland as something that is defined by fixed, immutable beliefs.

As Slataper wrote to Gigetta Cariel, his future wife, conflating the destiny of his city with his own, Trieste has become the symbol of a new, modern vision of the world:

Trieste is my country. Every day I find more of Trieste in myself. Trieste, which is the obstacle to victory, and could be its symbol. [...] The city contains,

restless, the elements that disturb us moderns: we must truly reconcile them. I can try to convince myself that I'm calm, while I write in Italian and read German books, and I contemplate our nation with a human conscience, but unless I am able to realize and spread this balance of mine, it does not really exist. Also, if I am not able to encompass all the complexity of human life, witnessing and participating in all its apparently contradictory forms, commerce and literature, salon and tenement, Karst and pavement, Slovene and Italian, I am not a *poet*. [...] This is a man: this being who combines tragic opposites and gives a cry of joy. ("To Gigetta," in this volume, 168–9)

The city of Trieste becomes the symbol of a modern existence where differences and contradictions can coexist. As Slataper had already stated in his articles for *La Voce*, just as the city maintains its ethnic, linguistic, and cultural multiplicity, the poet must be able to give voice to the "tragic opposites" that make up modern individuals. Moreover, the lack of a unifying organic totality does not lead to a nostalgic longing for a romantic dwelling that is fixed and immutable. On the contrary, the metropolis, with its chaotic energy and centrifugal forces, becomes the true homeland of the city-dweller. It is here, not in the solitude of the Karst, that the individual can find his destiny: a destiny that no longer privileges the individual I but, as the sudden linguistic change from the "I" to the "we" of the final paragraphs suggests, embraces instead the plurality of a whole community. The powerful final pages of the narrative indicate Slataper's awareness that a solipsistic view of existence is no longer viable or desirable within the modern context of the metropolis. In this new environment where it is impossible to find a unifying meaning, where one cannot alleviate the existential angst of one's fellow human beings, it becomes necessary to accept the help of others and offer them the same humble sympathy that we expect in return. The sentence that concludes the text, "we yearn to love and work," suggests Slataper's intention to participate emotionally, intellectually, and practically in the life of his city, the only possible homeland for the protagonist of *My Karst and My City*.

Political Writings

Slataper's belief in a collective ethical commitment expressed at the end of *My Karst and My City* became the driving force of all his political writings. After the publication of his lyrical autobiography and the completion of his volume on *Ibsen*, he devoted his remaining years to reflecting on the evolving delicate political situation of Trieste, Italy, and Europe as they headed towards World War I. These texts show Slataper's ideological move from a form of cultural irredentism to the interventionist cause as

the war approached. Although, as Ballinger has noted, Slataper's political views turned out to be "firmly Italian" (37) and revealed the limits of his political multicultural project, he strove to maintain a historical perspective of the events as they evolved. Following Machiavelli's political belief that it is "more fitting to go directly to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it" (61), Slataper acknowledged the ethical need to look with honesty at political events without deceiving oneself or others by blindly following a predetermined ideological perspective.⁷⁸

His collaboration with *La Voce* and the publication in 1909 of his *Letters on Trieste* already indicated his commitment to analysing the cultural and political situation of Trieste without buying into the popular irredentist narrative that usually informed such discourses.⁷⁹ A couple of articles written in response to the reaction triggered by his *Letters* clearly showed his political acumen and his ethical commitment to always strive to report the "effectual truth," especially if such a truth would undermine preconceived political notions not based on facts. Slataper's intention, throughout all of his writings, was not to deny the Italian identity of his city, but to look at it as objectively as possible. Such an approach allowed him to separate himself from the conventional political and nationalist discourses that were taking shape in Trieste and in Italy. In a short piece published after the local elections of 1909, Slataper defended the choice of the Triestine socialist party to open its ranks to Slovenian nationals because this alliance allowed for a better understanding between the two ethnic groups while counteracting the popularity that the nationalist Slavic movement was gaining at that time (*Scritti politici* 338). Slataper was not a socialist

78 In a letter to Giani Stuparich, where he discussed a new editorial enterprise (the publication of *Trieste*, a new journal that addressed the political and cultural reality of Trieste), he noted the seriousness of such an endeavour and stressed how Machiavelli could become their maximum example of moral rectitude because the Florentine author never deceived himself: "politics (like 'morality') is so often immoral because one who is worthless believes he can do something by telling a few lies and cheating a couple of people. Machiavelli, on the other hand, is very moral: because his greatest aim is always to teach that those who deceive in order to achieve a certain purpose, [...] should never deceive themselves. This is for me the fundamental point: one should always be accountable" (*Epistolario* 162).

79 See also the short "Caricatures" that Slataper penned for *La Voce* in 1909: "The serious irredentist" and "the 'figs and raisins' irredentist" in which the author describes with irony two different attitudes towards irredentism – on the one hand, the serious young republican who believes blindly in the need for violent irredentism without understanding the contemporary political situation and, on the other, the typical Triestine trader, who poses as an irredentist, because that is the accepted norm, but is in reality more interested in his commerce of figs and raisins (*Scritti letterari* 12–13).

(notwithstanding his youthful sympathies for the party),⁸⁰ but he understood that it was absurd to ignore the increasing political influence held by the Slovenians living in Trieste. For this reason, it made much more sense for the party to embrace Slovenian members than to alienate them and thereby widen the divide between the two groups. The second article, in polemic against the newspaper *Il Piccolo*, which constantly minimized the importance of the Slovenian presence in the city, emphasized once again the fact that Trieste had indeed a large Slovenian population “with its own will and thoughts” and condemned with harsh words “the presumption of ethnic superiority that shrouds us [Italians] in a veil of disastrous ignorance” (343). The aim of a newspaper, he argued, should be to inform its readers both locally and abroad of the actual reality of the city, rectifying misrepresentations and errors. *Il Piccolo* had become instead an organ of disinformation in order to advance its political nationalist agenda: thus the paper had no qualms insisting that “Istria is almost completely Italian, [...] that Trieste as a whole wishes to be united with Italy, that the barbarian Slovenians live only in the outskirts of the city, but not in the city proper” (343). Slataper stated that false reporting, by sustaining a distorted image of reality, undermined any potential concrete solution to the ethnic and political complexity of the city.

For Slataper, speaking of irredentism without knowing the history and development of the city and without truly understanding its present situation was a useless and detrimental exercise. A year later, in order to put an end to the “disastrous ignorance” regarding Triestines’ affairs, he edited two special numbers of *La Voce* dedicated to irredentism and nationalism, with articles by various intellectuals who explored irredentism from different ideological perspectives.⁸¹ Slataper himself contributed two groundbreaking and well-researched articles, the first on the historical

80 Slataper’s sympathies for an anti-bourgeois socialism were expressed in the short story “Il freno” (The break), published in 1907, when he was still a high school student in Trieste. However, he never adhered to the ideology of the party because he could not imagine an individual submitting to a collective will (*Appunti e note* 21). Years later, reflecting on his youthful attraction to socialism, he confessed to Elody: “I used to have sympathy only for the working class and for democratic principles, although I was always an aristocrat” (*Alle tre amiche*, 293).

81 In addition to two articles by Slataper, the two special issues included articles by Angelo Vivante, Ruggero Timeus, Giuseppe Prezzolini, Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, Alberto Spaini, Benito Mussolini, Giovanni Papini, Gaetano Salvemini, and Giuseppe Vidossich. Slataper’s articles appeared on 8 and 15 December 1910, and are reprinted in *Scritti politici* 39–90. “Nothing had been published on the issue of irredentism that could be compared to these writings,” Stuparich admiringly noted in his work dedicated to his late friend (245).

development of Triestine Italian identity and the second one on the city's current conditions. The articles were accompanied by an extensive bibliography dedicated "To the nationalists!" (84–90). Although Slataper did not add any comment to this dedication, the exclamation point at the end can be easily interpreted as an ironic exhortation to the nationalists to base their assertions on careful documentation, just as he did, by consulting not only articles and books but also the necessary archives in Trieste and in Rome. In his analysis of the irredentist phenomenon, Slataper strove to present the current situation in objective terms, refraining from nationalist ideology or rhetorical platitudes. In the first article, entitled "Un po' di storia" (A bit of history; 39–60), the critic described the specific realities of the various unredeemed territories (Trentino, eastern Friuli, Istria, Trieste), inserted their history into the wider Italian and European historical context, and provided an in-depth survey of European history, from the Napoleonic years to the Risorgimento uprisings to the Triple Entente. Here the author made two important points. He noted that Trieste's national identity was a very recent phenomenon that started only after Italy's unification and, second, he emphasized that the newly created Italian state had very little political or economic interest in those geographical areas. Even the pages dedicated to Oberdan, the major hero and martyr of the irredentist cause, were filtered by Slataper's desire to maintain his historical objectivity.⁸² While he gave a heartfelt description of Oberdan's personality and ideals and showed his admiration for Oberdan's resolution to participate actively in the political and historical arena no matter the consequences, he also noted the political uselessness of his gesture: "His sacrifice was unsuccessful, like any individual attempt that tries to oppose the historical *raison d'être* of a city. Trieste has continued on its way, without stopping to meditate in front of the tomb of Oberdan. Thus, instead of igniting [the irredentist movement], it was the proof that clearly showed Trieste's anti-irredentism" (56). Trieste's irredentism was, in his view, a rhetorical pose void of any political significance.⁸³

The political absurdity of pursuing a nationalist campaign is further developed in the second article dedicated to irredentism. After

82 Guglielmo Oberdan, born Wilhelm Oberdank (1858–82), was a Triestine irredentist who plotted the assassination of Austrian emperor Franz Joseph in 1882, when the emperor was visiting Trieste on the occasion of the city's celebrations for the five-hundred-year anniversary of its annexation to Austria. The plot was discovered, and Oberdan was arrested and hanged. He became the most important martyr to the irredentist cause and a symbol of the oppression of the Italians under Austrian rule.

83 See also Tommasini 226.

providing a detailed historical background of the development of the political situation in Italy and in Trieste, Slataper in the following article, entitled “Oggi” (“Irredentism Today,” in this volume), directed his attention to the present situation. With the same historical lucidity, he noted the need for the still young and weak Italian nation to submit to the will of the great European powers. Therefore, he recognized the strategic necessity for Italy to sign the Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria in 1882. Indeed, although such an alliance with Austria could be seen as the ultimate betrayal of the Risorgimento ideals, Slataper noted its inevitability. He acknowledged that the Triple Alliance was “a harsh necessity” for Italy as it entered the European political arena (“Irredentism Today,” in this volume, 125), but he added that it was also a fact that the popular anti-Austrian sentiments one witnessed in Italy at that time had not yet been elaborated into actual political consciousness. This lack of a clear political agenda, he continued, was due to the chaotic and disorganized proliferation of many contradictory forms of irredentism that coexisted in Trieste and in Italy. Slataper distinguished and described in detail five types of irredentism: republican, masonic, imperialist, moral, and cultural. The only valid kind of irredentism in the present situation, he concluded, was the cultural one, which he had already discussed in his *Letters on Trieste*. This type of irredentism did not concern itself with political borders, but instead advocated the creation of cultural relationships among all Italians, on both sides of the border. It did not aim to achieve a politically unified Italy, but it claimed the importance of an ideal, transnational cultural homeland where Italian values and identity could thrive. One of the objectives of this type of irredentism was to inform all Italians living in Italy and in Austria about the present reality with historical clarity. What was needed, he felt, was not an irredentist war dictated by imperialistic aspirations, which Slataper rejected *tout court*. Instead he advocated the need to embark on a programmatic path towards cultural, political, and military preparedness for any future eventuality.⁸⁴

After analysing the political power that Austria and Germany exerted over Europe, Slataper noted that, in order to defeat the German-Austria coalition, Italy should be willing, if necessary, to pursue a philo-Slavic

84 In the article “L’Università Italiana a Trieste” (The Italian university in Trieste), published in 1911 in *Il Giornalino della Domenica*, Slataper asserted the need of an Italian university in Trieste that could forge the basis for a national cultural identity: “Only when we are able to study in our own language will we be able to become a nation. We will be able to know who we are. Today we do not. Today we shout and trade” (*Scritti politici* 321). See also note 26.

alliance with all the Balkan states. However, this meant that Italy should “renounce Trieste, Istria, and its aspirations in the Balkans” (139). It is not difficult to imagine the reaction that such a statement produced in the local papers. Once again, *Il Piccolo* accused Slataper of endorsing anti-Italian, philo-Slavic positions. The author defended himself by stressing, once again, the need for a true, disinterested analysis of the present conditions. The true enemy of Trieste, he concluded, was not the Slavs or the Austrian government, but the Italian irredentists who, blinded by lies and moved by purely dogmatic stances, were unwilling to look at the current reality and therefore resisted any rational attempt to become better equipped to handle the present and future political life of the city (*Scritti politici* 366–8).⁸⁵

Slataper returned to the political reality of Trieste in his 1912 essay “L’avvenire nazionale e politico di Trieste” (“The National and Political Future of Trieste,” in this volume, 140). The long and complex article marked an important passage in Slataper’s political views. While he continued to reject the nationalist irredentism of many Triestines, he also questioned the internationalist views embraced by the Austro-Marxist socialists. Furthermore, he started to reflect on the intrinsic value of the nation state, embracing Hegel’s conception of history as the manifestation and unfolding of the *Weltgeist*. The point of departure for this article was Angelo Vivante’s recently published book *Irredentismo adriatico* (Adriatic irredentism, 1912). Vivante, the director of the socialist paper *Il Lavoratore*, analysed Trieste’s political situation from a strictly economic perspective. For Vivante the ethnic tensions present in the city could not be divorced from the city’s financial identity. Like Slataper, Vivante recognized that Trieste’s commercial strength derived from its port, and that such a privileged position would cease to exist once Trieste became Italian. While Austria would move its commerce to another port in the Austrian littoral, Italy, which already had other thriving ports, would have no reason to invest in Trieste, and the city would quickly decline.⁸⁶

Vivante was deeply influenced by the internationalist socialism known as Austro-Marxism, theorized, among others, by Otto Bauer in his important volume *The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy*. Bauer

85 The article, entitled “I nostri due numeri sull’irredentismo” (Our two volumes on irredentism), appeared in *La Voce*, 2 February 1911.

86 On Vivante’s thought, see Apih, “La genesi di ‘Irredentismo adriatico’” 265–313, and Millo, *Storia di una borghesia* 142–216. On Vivante and Slataper, see also Cella 21–7 and Pertici 635–59. On Angelo Vivante and Austro-Marxism, see Cangiano 117–30. For a summary of the political discourses in Trieste at that time, see Cattaruzza, *Italy and Its Eastern Borders* 30–50. On the development of the socialist party in Trieste, see Cattaruzza, *Socialismo adriatico*.

recognized that the socialist movement, before addressing the issues of the proletarian masses, should come to terms with the nationalist problem, which in a multinational state like the Austrian Empire was of pivotal importance. Bauer never questioned the legitimacy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (357). For him and other Austro-Marxist theorists, the empire should continue to exist as “a federal state that regulates matters relevant to all nations and that safeguards the interests shared by all nations” (259). Within this federalist structure each national group would maintain the political autonomy necessary to develop its own cultural institutions and foster its own national identity.⁸⁷ Vivante applied Bauer’s lesson to the ethnic reality of Trieste. He noted that the growth of Trieste’s population, in terms of both Slavic and Italian elements, was a direct consequence of its commercial and financial development, and that it would have been anachronistic and detrimental to the well-being of the city to ostracize a large part of its inhabitants in the name of nationalist ideologies. Furthermore, the ethnically mixed working class was more interested in its daily struggles for better living conditions than in irredentist and nationalist alliances (Vivante 204–5). He concluded his work by envisioning an ethnically peaceful Trieste, perceived as “a vehicle and a link between different ethnic and economic currents, in a necessarily neutral and autonomous administration. [...] Here the two ethnic groups [Slovenian and Italian] would find the foundations of a peaceful national coexistence, facilitated by the existence of shared economic concerns that need to be protected” (259).

Slataper appreciated Vivante’s analysis and accepted Vivante’s view that “the historical mission of Trieste is to serve as a crucible and source of civilization – of three civilizations” (“National and Political Future,” in

87 Bauer elaborated the idea of “the personality principle”: “In its pure form, the aim of the personality principle is to constitute the nation not as a territorial corporation, but as an association of persons. The national bodies regulated by public law would thus constitute territorial bodies only insofar as their efficacy could not extend, of course, beyond the borders of the empire. Within the state, however, power would not be given to the Germans in one region and the Czechs in another; rather, each nation, wherever its members resided, would form a body that independently administered its own affairs. It would very often be the case that two or more nations would construct their own national administrative bodies within the one city, erect national educational institutions side by side, but undisturbed by one another – in exactly the same way as Catholics, Protestants, and Jews independently attend to their religious affairs side by side within the one city. The realization of the personality principle would require the division of the population according to nationality. However, the state would not be able to decide who was to be regarded as a German and who as a Czech; rather, it would be the mature citizen who was accorded the right to determine to which nationality he wished to belong” (281).

this volume, 157). He also admitted that being able “to choose a clear position between these two mindsets [the nationalist and the socialist]” was not an easy task and that managing to do so “would mean resolving the anxiety and uncertainty around ideas of nationality, country, moral and practical action, and much else besides all this” (151). Indeed, Slataper’s article did not offer a univocal interpretation of the national issue but showed instead his own intellectual and ideological struggles and contradictions. He disagreed with Vivante’s internationalist thesis because it ignored the national sentiments that motivated and inspired every ethnic group to belong to a single nation state. Following Mazzini’s ideal of a republican nation, Slataper noted that it was only when the people belonged to a nation state that they could participate in its historical process and therefore fulfil their ethical responsibility. However, Slataper did not believe in Mazzini’s universal ideal of nationality.⁸⁸ While Mazzini could still aspire to an alliance with “the southern Slavs and all the other populations ruled either by the Austrian or the Turkish Empire” (Mazzini 148), Slataper recognized that Mazzini’s romantic principle did not hold in the present historical situation. He disagreed also with Herder’s position “that all people are equal in history” (*Scritti politici* 107). Instead, noting Italy’s recent success in the war in Libya, he asserted that a stronger Italy could pursue, if necessary through war, its own national identity. Yet, although he posited that “the conflict between nations is natural and good” (107) and perceived Italy as a political and cultural force that could eventually absorb Trieste and its mixed population into a unified Italian nation, he also emphasized that a nation’s superiority could never be taken for granted; it must always be questioned and revisited, and most of all, it should lead to the betterment of society as a whole. Ultimately, he concluded, only history could demonstrate if men’s undertakings were just and morally correct. Slataper’s theoretical stance was certainly informed by a sense of cultural superiority, and by a questionable Hegelian perspective that made him assert that “the concepts of [military] force and justice coincide” (108).⁸⁹ At the

88 “May Italy ally itself with the peoples who are forcibly kept under Austria’s yoke; with the peoples who also want to vindicate their liberty and independence. May our war be a war of Nations. Let us raise up high our flag, not in the name of local interests but rather in the name of a principle; the principle that for more than half a century has inspired and led every European popular movement. Let us write on our flag these sacred words: “For our own sake and for yours” (Mazzini 148). Giuseppe Mazzini (1805–72) founded the secret society Giovane Italia (Young Italy), whose aim was to free and unify Italy.

89 M.A.R. Habib noted the intrinsic imperialistic and expansionistic characteristics that underlie Hegel’s dialectics: “[Hegel’s] dialectic can be characterized as intrinsically

same time he rejected the intolerant views of irredentists such as Fauro Timeus, who denied the Slovenians the right to their own culture and education.⁹⁰ On the contrary, following Vivante and Bauer, whose work Slataper knew well (*Epistolario* 160), he emphasized the importance of a cultural irredentism, which would protect the cultural development of any ethnic group living within a single state: “but when the Italian nation [...] in our own provinces [...] denies *the means*, the schools, the right of national existence to the Slavs, it denies the principle upon which it bases its own existence: not just absolute justice, not merely ‘the principle of nationality,’ but the recognition of the humanity, of the very same virtues by which it enriches itself through the cultures of other peoples” (*Scritti politici* 110, italics in the original). After reiterating the importance of cultural irredentism, he reaffirmed the political necessity for Italy to maintain its alliance with Austria and admitted that at this point in time irredentism was not a viable solution. He exhorted his fellow citizens to continue to work for the future of their city, even if it was impossible to know exactly what that future would hold.

Slataper’s political analysis did not offer a clear, univocal solution to the Triestine problem. As critics have already noted, it remained contradictory and vague because it lacked a clear historical methodological approach.⁹¹ Yet we should also keep in mind that Slataper was not a

expansive and imperialistic, since it negates whatever is immediately given in the world, and ultimately integrates all forms of otherness into our equally expansive subjectivity, which in this way progressively ‘conquers’ the world beyond it, absorbing it into its own self. Indeed, Hegel sees this dialectical movement as characterizing history itself, where the principle of earlier civilizations gives way to the principle of more advanced cultures” (6).

90 Ruggero Fauro Timeus was one of the most vocal proponents of a racist and imperialist irredentism based on strong anti-Slavic sentiments. In addition to claiming Trieste for Italy, Timeus advocated Italy’s imperialist role within Europe: “We do not accept the possibility of Trieste as an autonomous entity within the Austrian Empire. We shove our dream of an empire in everybody’s face. We want to conquer: we do not care about national justice, international treaties or moral conveniences. [...] We launch a new act of faith and a new challenge that does not debate, does not doubt, does not compromise [...]. Italy should become the ruler of peoples, if not, the sea should swallow it” (210–11). In his vision, Trieste’s importance did not reside in being a commercial hub, or a point of entrance for foreigners, but as a strategic point of departure “for [Italy’s] future conquests” (198). Slataper never embraced these imperialistic positions. Reflecting on the issue of political supremacy, he wrote to Gianni Stuparich: “For me, this is the main issue: we must be for intransigence, but against intolerance; we must fight, but not deny others the means to fight back” (*Epistolario* 155). On the imperialist nationalism of Timeus, see Diego Redivo.

91 Mutterle (150) and Damiani (54–8) criticized his historical superficiality and his lack of a serious methodological and scientific approach to the events, while Benevento

historian, but a journalist whose aim was to pose questions and inform his readers of the geopolitical complexity of his city. Moreover, his temporal and geographical closeness to the events did not allow him, in spite of his striving to do so, to gain a comprehensive view of the historical problems he witnessed. Although Slataper's complex and contradictory approach might frustrate historians, it also foregrounds his modernist spirit, a spirit that is suspicious of facile certainties and simple answers, and offers instead only doubts, questions, and ambiguities.⁹²

After defending his thesis on Ibsen in 1912, Slataper received a post as a lecturer at the Kolonial-Institut in Hamburg, where he remained until the declaration of war in 1914. Here he continued to record and comment on the political situation of Italy and Europe in private letters to his close friends in Florence and Trieste. As in the articles written thus far, these letters expressed both his commitment to understanding the historical events as they were quickly unfolding, and his constant concerns about the ethical responsibility of single individuals as well as nations. On this topic he wrote a particularly interesting letter to Elody on 17 May 1913, in which he described an afternoon spent at the Hagenbeck Park, the famous Hamburg Zoo, where he observed the ethnographic exhibition of a small Burmese village. Watching a Burmese couple intent on making paper flowers for European children who gathered around their hut to observe them, Slataper expressed his deep embarrassment "for Europe that was watching them so shamelessly as if they too were not human beings" (*Alle tre amiche* 285). The exhibit also inspired him to reflect on Europe's cultural and political influence on the rest of the world: "Just think how terrible this Europe is, which penetrates, reduces, changes, corrupts, and destroys everything, so that she can conquer, take possession, exploit everything [...] for eternity" (286). For the critic, the colonial conquests of the present were comparable to the wars of religious intolerance of the past: if the latter fought to impose Christendom on the rest of the world, the former were violent attempts to impose Western values of labour and production. Faced with two opposing civilizations, Slataper wondered if "our winning civilization *is right*, and not the one that is oppressed?" (286, italics in original). The answer to his question revealed his vision of history: "And here there is no other solution than the one offered by the great Hegel: everything that happens,

(128–9) and Tommasini praised his historical commitment. On the complexity of Slataper's political thought and on Vivante's influence on Slataper, see Lunzer 21–35.

92 Moliterni recently noted the conflictual, constantly *in fieri* approach of Slataper's political analysis, which, for the critic, never led to a synthetic, ideologically comprehensive answer to the political situation of his time (63–77).

happens only because it is right: the real is the ideal. Hegel in this sense is the philosopher who explains and directs our entire era. [...] And yet, this way of thinking leaves us sometimes dissatisfied" (286–7). Although Slataper was unable to offer an alternative to Hegel's *Weltgeist*, and seemed to accept history as the manifestation of an absolute spirit that inexorably followed its course, he also recognized how such a view did not take into account the ethical responsibility of Europe towards its victims and could therefore not satisfy him completely. For this reason, he felt that it was his moral duty to record historical events as they were evolving, to try to understand them and, most importantly, to communicate them to a wider public.

Thus, in a letter to Giovanni Amendola written in the summer of 1913, he lamented his physical distance from Italy and his journalistic inactivity, and asserted his desire to deepen his knowledge of history by living for a couple of years in Vienna or Belgrade as a foreign correspondent for some Italian paper: "History above all attracts me more and more: and I realize that you cannot make history if you do not gain an in-depth knowledge of people and movements for a precise purpose and objective" (*Epistolario* 292).⁹³ The choice of Belgrade as a place where Slataper, burdened by his new academic post, wished to go to is particularly telling, and it demonstrates his understanding that although the city was still "a small provincial town, just starting to pave its main streets" (MacMillan 467), as the capital of Serbia it was becoming one of the hot places where the destiny of the Balkan states and of the whole empire was being decided. Slataper never had a chance to report from Belgrade, but in his letters to Amendola he continued to emphasize the need to keep the Italian public informed of the delicate situation of the Italian citizens living in Austria at this time: he described in detail the consequences of the Balkan wars for Trieste, noting how while the strengthening of Serbia and the South Slavs had unveiled the inefficiency of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, they had also revealed the fragile state of Trieste's

93 His interest in history was also expressed in an unpublished article about the institute Revoltella (Trieste's school of commerce), where he emphasized the educational value of cultural history even for students interested in business: "All schools of commerce [...] had to convince themselves that the focus of their multiform activities could only be historical, [...] not a chronological or dynastic history, but [a history] of the abilities and movements of people. [...] We must raise a generation of educated young people who are less interested perhaps, in Foscolo, Petrarch, Schiller, or what not, but much more in the whole history of Germany, Italy, etc. Even literature professors (nice title!) should realize that literature does not exist detached from the living history of all the endeavours of a people" (*Scritti politici 1914–1915*, 125–7).

maritime power in the Adriatic.⁹⁴ In March 1914, just a few months before his return to Italy, he wrote to Amendola again, this time explaining why the current European situation required a different political approach.

While previously he had asserted that Italy should renounce the Adriatic provinces and allow the formation of small Slavic states that could limit Austrian power on the Adriatic, now he acknowledged that the newly formed Greater Serbia was not just threatening the existence of Austria-Hungary ("I believe that if one understands well the significance of the most recent events [...] one can predict *finis Austriae*," he noted with historical acumen [*Epistolario* 296]), but was a political power that Italy could use, in the event of war, to reshape the current political situation and establish control over the Adriatic Sea.⁹⁵ Thus,

Italy [...] must support the South Slavs, but on specific terms: Trieste, all Istria, Fiume, and at least some Italian-Croatian islands of the Quarnaro (Lošinj for instance), and if it were possible also Lissa should go to Italy. This would now be the definitive solution: an eastern coast divided between Greece, Albania, the South Slavs, Italy, and watched over by Italy from Pula, Lissa, and Otranto. (*Epistolario* 295)

Aware of the power that nationalist and irredentist forces would wield against Italy in some of the other territories with a strong Slavic population, Slataper emphasized the need for Italy to treat the new subjects well, affording them the ability to continue to pursue their cultural identity by maintaining their schools and cultural centres.⁹⁶ He also stressed the need to help the South Slavs in a war against Austria. This possible war, he concluded, would mean the rebirth of the Slavic nations against the combined powers of Austria and Germany, and could escalate into a

94 For an overview of Italian and European foreign policy towards the Adriatic region and the creation of a Slavic nation, see Klabjan.

95 The events Slataper referred to are, other than the Balkan wars and the creation of a powerful Greater Serbia, the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in Europe and the diplomatic interferences of Russia and Austria-Hungary in the Balkan states. For a recent account of these events see MacMillan 465–543.

96 See also his article "The Eastern Borders" where, addressing the problem of diverse ethnic groups living within a state, he wrote: "If we desire assimilation to take place and spread as much as possible, we must not do anything artificial to promote it." Again, he affirms the necessity of creating bi- or trilingual schools, where Italian is taught together with German and/or Slovenian: "school is sacred, and therefore it is also the most tremendous political weapon. [...] We will have to allow all Slavic and German cultural manifestations, perhaps even encourage them. But we should prevent any political revolt from the very beginning with decisive serenity" (*Scritti politici* 300).

full-fledged European war, in which Italy would also be involved. Slataper could clearly see the possibility of this conflict, and therefore he urged Italy to start preparing for the eventual war by developing diplomatic relationships with Russia and France and, if pressed, to renew its adherence to the Triple Alliance, but only for a limited time (*Epistolario* 298).

Just a few months after Slataper's letter to Amendola, on 28 June, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, was killed in Sarajevo and Slataper's predictions became reality, confirming Slataper's understanding of the current historical moment. After Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on 28 July, Slataper, who had already highlighted the strength of Serbia and the inherent weakness of Austria-Hungary, embraced the interventionist cause. From Trieste, where he had returned after the proclamation of war, he wrote again to his friend in Florence, uncertain, however, if his letter would ever reach him because of the strong censorship imposed by the Austrian government. In agitated tones he described the dramatic situation of the city, which was then completely isolated from the rest of the world. While the Triestine regiment had been sent to fight in Galicia, on the eastern front, the Austrian government had moved all its offices, archives, and money to the city of Gorizia, leaving Trieste in administrative and financial chaos.⁹⁷ In the meantime, the Triestines were unable to receive news of what was happening abroad and were fed only Austrian propaganda. They did not know what to expect, and waited, disoriented, to see Italy's next move. Many of them, lamented Slataper, moved by their distrust and hate for the Slavs, were still willing to support Austria, while others hoped that England would quickly occupy the city and in this way end its state of uncertainty. Slataper concluded his letter by proclaiming his frustration at Italy's neutrality and noted that only by participating in the war on the side of the Entente and supporting the South Slavs would Italy be able to claim its unredeemed lands and become a player in European politics.

In September 1914, in order to avoid conscription into the Austrian army and to fulfil his mission to continue to write and analyse the evolving political situation, Slataper crossed the border into Italy with his wife Gigetta Curiel and settled in Rome, where he joined other Triestine exiles, among whom were his close friends Carlo and Giani Stuparich

97 There are some interesting journals and memoirs produced by Triestine women writers who described in detail the dramatic situation of Trieste after the declaration of war. See Haydée; Haydée and Astori; Rossi Timeus; and Cesari.

and Elody Oblath.⁹⁸ Here, together with many other Italian intellectuals, he participated in the interventionist campaign by collaborating with the newspaper *Il Resto del Carlino*.⁹⁹ The aim of his articles was twofold: to further the interventionist cause by presenting the dramatic destiny of Trieste, waiting to be liberated by the Italian army, and at the same time to continue to offer his interpretation of the events as they were unfolding. The first article published for *Il Resto del Carlino* is a good example of Slataper's convincing rhetoric. With an emotional appeal to his audience, he described the absurd and cruel situation of the Triestines who by wishing the defeat of the Austrian army are de facto wishing the death of their own children, Austrian subjects fighting against Russia on the Eastern Front (*Scritti politici* 152). He then explained to the Italian public how the Triestines had changed their mind about the war. Because Trieste had financially benefited from being part of Austria-Hungary, and had always looked at the Slavs with suspicion, it was at first indifferent to or against the war. However, after England declared war against Austria, Trieste realized that this "was truly a European war [...] against pan-Germanism" (156). Slataper's message was clear: just as Trieste changed

98 Elody Oblath recalled the sense of exaltation for the interventionist cause that moved her and her Triestine friends in Rome: "We thought we knew the horrors of war for having imagined them with our brain and our hearts, but in reality, we only knew our exaltation. Still, we knew with conscious certainty that whatever these horrors were, none of us would have retreated. [...] For it [the war], I am sure, each of us would have gone willingly to the gallows, just as we consciously instigated and helped all our friends (the best part of ourselves) to go to die. Days of foolish illusions, faith in a better humanity that made us exult and ask for the death of millions of men!" (32).

99 The majority of Italian intellectuals embraced the war as a means to rejuvenate a stagnant Italian state, finalize its national borders, and gain political credibility in the international arena. Antonio Gibelli summarizes how the Italian intellectuals saw the war: "Many expected from the war a restoration of order, of the principle of authority, of moral unity and of social discipline, which were all threatened by the ascent and insubordination of the subaltern classes, the fights among political parties and the crisis of [current sociopolitical] institutions. To others the war appeared instead as the instrument for the disintegration of the status quo that would have allowed the eruption of new forces and the elimination of the old and mediocre world of parliamentary democracy; it appeared as the opportunity for an outburst of healthy vitalism [*una esplosione vitalistica salutare*]. The intellectuals' motivations and their ways of elaborating the myth of war are the most varied, but they all share the common element of war as an inevitable necessity, a fatal attraction, and a political, cultural, and above all existential opportunity not to be missed" (32). On the failure of European intellectuals to take a critical stance towards the war, see also Isnenghi, *Il mito della grande guerra* and "La letteratura italiana." On the role of the propaganda machine, see Prochasson; on Italian nationalist political thinkers on the eve of the war, see Mondini 17–57; and see Ungari.

its mind about the conflict, so should Italy. Italians should stop engaging in theoretical debates on Italy's new borders and instead join the fight, because, as the title of one of his articles clearly stated, "national rights are affirmed with war" (in this volume, 158). Only "through victory in war" (161) would Italy be able to demonstrate its political worth. Another rhetorical device used by Slataper to encourage his compatriots to embrace the war was to diminish the image of the Austrian Empire as a great power. In more than one article he depicted it as an anachronistic political entity, nothing more than a bureaucratic apparatus that had allowed its multiple lands to develop financially without, however, developing a common cultural identity that would sustain its existence in case of war. There was no such a thing as an Austrian citizen, claimed Slataper, and as a consequence, it was also impossible to talk about an Austrian soldier (*Scritti politici 1914–1915* 76). The image that he wished to conjure was that of a weak monarchy defended by an unreliable army. Although Slataper was correct in pointing out the lack of a unifying cultural identity for the subjects of the Dual Monarchy, it is also true that its soldiers, including the many Triestine soldiers who were in its ranks, rarely questioned their loyalty to Austria-Hungary.¹⁰⁰ At this point, however, Slataper was no longer interested in presenting an accurate image of the Austrian Empire, but in persuading Italian public opinion, which was still against the war, to join the interventionist cause.

As time passed his articles emphasized more and more the political necessity for Italy to join the conflict on the side of the Entente. The active support of interventionism, he noted, was not just the task of the intellectual class, but the moral duty of the whole country. Everyone should participate in the practical preparation of the war effort: "If you act, you do not have any time left to waver and debate. As the soldier who is part of his military squadron loses his anarchist tendencies, so does each one of us, and the whole nation must find little by little its war character" (*Scritti politici 1914–1915* 119). The time of doubting and debating, in which he participated during the previous years, was over. Now he felt that it was time for action.

The articles he produced in 1915, while Italy was still neutral, stressed over and over again the political urgency of the situation. However, even as the propaganda machine became more and more emphatic and violent, Slataper never embraced the imperialist demagoguery of

100 For a recent analysis of the complex relationship between imperial loyalty and nationalist patriotism, see Cole. On the Triestine soldiers fighting for the Dual Monarchy, see Di Michele 47–54. As the latter noted, more than one hundred thousand soldiers from Trento, Trieste, and the coastal areas fought with the Austrian army.

some of his fellow journalists. He believed that intervening in the war was Italy's opportunity to consolidate its power in the Adriatic and to defend itself against the creation of a strong Slavic state in the area after Austria-Hungary's defeat. Thus, the war should not be viewed as expansionistic, nor just as an irredentist conflict that would fulfil the nationalist dreams of Trento and Trieste: "today we must not want war on our own initiative, but because others have imposed it on us. [...] Right now we should not think about the unredeemed lands, but to redeem ourselves from this great menace. Our war will not be sentimental or imperialistic, although sentiment and imperialism will also demand it and rekindle it: it will be a war to defend ourselves. Trieste counts, but Italy counts much more" (*Scritti politici* 193). Thus, as he noted in an article probably meant for the *Resto del Carlino* but never published, the war must be accepted with a "quiet spiritual resignation." He explained: "There is no propaganda that can persuade a people to war. War is an imposition and a heroic resignation. War is a command. The order will come. And the nation will become an army. [...] Then, perhaps carrying with us, each on his own, our little cowardice and worries, we will all align ourselves, Germanophiles and democrats, supporters of the clergy [*clericali*] and artists, peasants and socialists" (190–1). As Mutterle noted in his study, Slataper's reflections on the imminent war and his interventionist agenda, coupled with his more insightful and introspective pages, revealed the tragic position of an author "who, like few others at that time, was able to grasp and underline the contradictions of his whole world, including the political ones" (179), but was unable to find alternative solutions that would have helped to maintain the peace.

On 23 May 1915 Italy declared war on Austria. Shortly after, Slataper, who was a citizen of the Dual Monarchy, enlisted as a volunteer in the Italian army. The letters he wrote to his wife and his few journal articles from the following seven months underscored the "sacred cooperation" that existed among his fellow soldiers, which "allows us to go beyond our human condition" (*Appunti e note* 264). The perception of the war as a "collective effort," where the single individual was part of a larger community of fellow soldiers united by a cause that superseded any single individual, becomes a recurrent theme in his letters: "I see that we are all men, that war demands more than human strength, that it has in it something higher and far more frightening than one single man can, by himself, offer or bear. But it is the community of men that succeeds, it is the collective effort of mutual help, of support, of cooperation that brings out our love for each other, and this is the real war" ("To Gigetta," in this volume, 171).

Slataper here gave voice to the same sentiments that informed the end of *My Karst and My City*, where the author finally recognized the need to overcome the self-centred view of himself as the strong, super-heroic individual who could endow the world with absolute meaning, and accepted instead his destiny among his fellow human beings in a quest for “work and love.” With irony, Slataper told Gigetta that now that his beloved Karst had become the theatre of war, his novel had gained much popularity among the soldiers. Yet he felt very distant from the book he had completed only a few years earlier. “To you,” he told his wife, “I will dedicate another book, if I will be able to write it. If not, [I dedicate to you] my life, as it is, in all honesty” (*Alle tre amiche* 483). But Slataper would never write a book dedicated to his wife. He died on the front only a few days later, on 3 December 1915. To us, he left his reflections, his contradictions, his attempt to find answers and to give voice, “in all honesty,” to the complex reality in which he lived.

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