
Inscribing the 'Self' in the City: Stelio Mattioni and Trieste

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Trieste is perhaps best known for its geographical eccentricity. Perched on the upper North-Eastern corner of the Adriatic sea, Trieste has enjoyed or, perhaps, suffered almost since its foundation around the fifth century B.C., the status of *border city*. The proximity of the border is crucial. The border has shifted at different times (owing to changed historical circumstances) bringing with it a redefinition of identity at each move. The border has been, and in many respects still is, experienced as a source of permanent anxiety and displacement. The border, most importantly, acts in the literary realm as a *chronotope* in the Bakhtinian sense.¹ The seemingly inescapable presence of the border is considered to be one of the distinctive features which are most ingrained in Triestine writing.

'Triestinità' (= 'Triestinness', the quality of being Triestine) is however not merely confined to the presence of the border.² Other ingredients of 'triestinità' include conspicuous references to an outmoded literary tradition; an emphasis on details of the landscape or local topography; an interest in the local dialect; an eagerness to produce an 'epic'. I do not wish to dwell further on the many facets of 'triestinità', but intend to focus on a predilection for autobiography displayed by virtually all Triestine authors.

My intention in this paper is to discuss the work of Stelio Mattioni, a little known contemporary Italian author from Trieste. Mattioni's writing is of relevance essentially for two reasons. Firstly because of its connection

with a 'myth of Trieste', a sort of 'invention of tradition' in Hobsbawm's sense (see note 2. above).

Secondly, Mattioni not only chooses his home-town as main focus for his writing. Indeed, his writing itself purports to stem from within Trieste (I shall clarify below what I mean by this). The aim of this type of writing is to attempt to erase any screens between writer and place of writing, to inscribe, as the title of the present paper goes, the 'Self' in the city (a procedure I shall refer to below as an ideal superimposition, an identification between Trieste and the writer's *Ego*). In this respect Mattioni is not an entirely singular case. He has various models, including, first and foremost, his better known predecessor Italo Svevo, whom I shall discuss as an introduction to Mattioni.

I shall then proceed to introduce my author and his works very briefly before focusing on the main interest of this paper: *Il richiamo di Alma* (*Alma's Call*).³ This novel is not an autobiography in the traditional sense. It is rather what the critic Bruno Maier calls a 'crypto-autobiography'.⁴ Mattioni, that is, never makes the connection between himself and the first person narrator explicit, even though the reader can safely assume, on the basis of confessional tone, psychological characteristics and biographical details, that narrator and author are the same. However, my conclusions aim to highlight the role played by *Il richiamo di Alma* in the context of Triestine writing rather than to focus on its autobiographical premises.

My contention is that autobiography in Trieste is another facet of 'triestinità'; that is, an aspect of the construction of a local literary identity. Particularly for authors who started writing and publishing after the Second World War the autobiographical genre is an important facet of their notion of 'triestinità'. For these writers, autobiography is instrumental in turning the city itself into the antagonist of their narrations. Their preference for autobiography produces a criss-crossing of events and personalities between real life and fiction which tends to blur the boundaries between the two. Ultimately, they succeed in transforming Trieste into a landscape of the mind, a city shaped by the authors' personal experiences, a city where cafés, streets and squares all take on symbolical significance.

If a preference for an autobiographical form of writing is an essential characteristic of post-war Triestine writers, this preference has in great part been inspired by Triestine authors of the inter-war generation (Scipio Slataper, the brothers Giani and Carlo Stuparich, Virgilio Giotti and others). The earlier generation of authors tended to write about painters or attempted, quite literally, to depict Trieste in the style of those painters. Sculptors modelled busts of writers and their children and painters drew their portraits. Authors frantically purchased and reviewed one another's books. They printed, edited and dedicated volumes to one another, while also marrying and eloping with one another's wives, sisters, and friends. This situation, no doubt typical of many intellectual communities, in Trieste was emphasised by the small, concentrated and isolated character of the local cultural environment. Any critic who looks into the work of Triestine writers is inevitably confused by a hall of mirrors of artistic personalities and works reflecting one another's image.

Authors of Mattioni's generation are the heirs to this situation. In particular, they appear to welcome autobiography as a means of enclosing themselves further within their city walls, thereby withdrawing from wider circles. Autobiography articulates and justifies a certain diffidence experienced by these authors about exploring wider and different intellectual territories. It reflects their difficulty in severing the umbilical link with Trieste.⁵ This inability to escape from their native city translates, psychologically if not physically, into a compulsion to attempt to inscribe themselves completely in Trieste, merging their *Egos* with Trieste, 'breathing the same air and pumping the same blood'.⁶

An emblematic example of the extent to which 'Self' and city merge in Triestine writers is provided by the case of Italo Svevo (1861-1928).⁷ Svevo is the best known of all Triestine authors, possibly the only one who ever achieved a truly international literary reputation, and an author who clearly had great influence on Mattioni. For the critic Charles Russell: 'Svevo blurred the line between art and autobiography. [...] Trieste and his own life were always the source of his work.'⁸ In his first novel *Una vita* (1892) Svevo introduced an obvious *alter Ego* of himself, Alfonso: the character follows the trail of lovely scented ladies up steep Triestine alley-ways, or alternatively finds himself recovering from nervous

breakdowns by taking strolls along the panoramic road to Villa Opicina.⁹ Svevo emphasized the city's sharp verticality throughout.¹⁰ He devised sentimental itineraries where recognizable places are distorted and reshaped by memory, almost remoulded on the basis of the author's psychological landscape. Trieste's 'geometricity' reflects the inner order, or in many cases disorder, of the autobiographical protagonist's mind. Alfonso's suicide, which concludes the novel, is the expected outcome of an individual rejected by his own diseased imagination as well as by a hostile environment.

In *Senilità* (1898) the presence of the city is equally pervasive.¹¹ Emilio Brentani and Angiolina, the two protagonists, embrace and kiss on every corner of Trieste. They often choose to meet in 'Passaggio Sant'Andrea', a favourite boulevard for Sunday strolling, then they move to the steep road leading to the village of Opicina.¹² In *Senilità*, Trieste is still presented as dark, gloomy and leaden coloured. The greyness of the city takes after Amalia, the sister of Emilio, who lives a desolate, self-constrained existence, while Trieste's ruthlessness is personified by Angiolina who hides the business-like materialism of a pragmatic 'Giolona' behind the glory of her sun-coloured hair and sky-coloured eyes. Trieste is painted in *Senilità* not as a delicate water-colour, but rather as a heavily layered oil-painting where dark hues prevail, and sudden brush-strokes cover the previous impression imposing a new if still uncertain order. Like Alfonso, Emilio (a figuration in which Svevo is again clearly present) is unable to find an escape from Trieste, a city destined to betray him and make him unhappy.

In his best known novel, *La coscienza di Zeno* (*The Confessions of Zeno*) (1923), Svevo even more clearly abandoned any delusions of a realistic representation.¹³ The meandering of Zeno's 'coscienza' follows the zig-zagging wind-swept verticality of Trieste, looking for a direction which psychoanalysis seems unable to indicate. Zeno is drawn to project his tortuous 'coscienza' onto the city. The city becomes, to put it again in Russell's words: 'the eternal touchstone of his [Svevo's] imagination'. Russell optimistically suggests that Svevo was able 'to come to grips with' Trieste in *La coscienza*. However, I would suggest that Svevo reached in this narrative his closest point in the collusion between Trieste and 'Self'.¹⁴

It would, of course, be possible to elaborate on Svevo's relationship

with Trieste or to provide further examples,¹⁵ but I shall proceed immediately to a discussion of Mattioni's autobiographical Trieste.

Stelio Mattioni was born in Trieste in 1921 and published his first volume, a collection of poems entitled *La città perduta* (*The Lost City*), in 1956. Although poetry is a genre Mattioni never turned to again, it is apparent that Trieste is the one city which features endlessly both in his poems and in his subsequent publications in prose. In the course of forty years Mattioni has published a dozen novels and collections of stories, all of them set in or around Trieste.¹⁶ Mattioni's most successful novels are *Il re ne comanda una* (1968) and *Il richiamo di Alma* (1980).¹⁷

The reader finds in *Il richiamo di Alma* many features already encountered in Svevo and other Triestine writers. Mattioni's Trieste is made up of a detailed topography, even more frequently emphasised by Mattioni than it had been by Svevo. Mattioni also makes a point of stressing the labyrinthine quality of Trieste's topography.¹⁸ He rarely gives any indication at all of the historical setting: his characters, whose number he keeps to an absolute minimum, interact awkwardly among themselves and with their environment in a fashion which reminds the reader of Franz Kafka, an author from the contiguous Mitteleuropean area. They interact against the background of a Trieste reduced to a metaphysical place, outlined by a few architectural spaces and populated by a few objects of an abstract or highly symbolic nature:

come in un'atmosfera rarefatta, fra case e persone ch'erano
concrete sì, ma rese sfuocate da un miraggio.

in a rarefied atmosphere, amongst buildings and people
who were real, but out of focus at the same time, as if in a
mirage.¹⁹

The protagonist and narrator (his name is never disclosed, but he is nonetheless subtly portrayed to identify autobiographically with the author) roams the streets of Trieste in search of a mysterious lady called Alma. Alma is found and rapidly lost again in the most prominent streets, squares, corners, and back-alleys of this metaphysical Trieste.²⁰ She is a charming young woman whom the protagonist chases, exactly as happens in Svevo's

Una vita, through a maze of crooked streets and alleys, particularly through the sordid, abandoned area of 'Cittavecchia', the city's old quarter. The narrative is constructed on a subtle dialectic of 'open/closed' and 'up/down' which keeps the tension high from the first to the last page.²¹ In a similar fashion to Svevo, the verticality of the city is respected; in fact: it is emphasised by the frequent brisk excursions undertaken by the protagonist up steep roads or down sloping alleys which exhaust him in his endless pursuit of the elusive Alma. The presence of the border, though never explicitly mentioned, is obvious in the disquieting, ominous atmosphere which haunts all characters, seemingly preparing them for final doom.

The novel opens in aunt Francesca's little flat, on the first floor of a building in Via del Monte, and more precisely in her large garden, 'un giardino aperto e chiuso nello stesso tempo' - 'a garden which was open and closed at the same time'. The topographical indications are extremely circumstantial and from the garden:

si udiva la città, ma come da dietro un muro, così che si poteva immaginarla come si voleva, e anche che non esistesse, che fosse il lontano rumore della risacca o il proprio sangue che scorre nelle vene.

the city could be heard, as if from behind a wall, so that it could be imagined as one wanted, even as not existing at all, or existing merely as the distant whisper of the undertow or as one's own blood running through one's veins.²²

Mattioni strikes a delicate balance here between a 'real' topography, registered by the eye, and a symbolic one, experienced through consciousness.

From the *incipit* of the novel the protagonist is completely absorbed by Trieste and aspires to identify, to merge with it. As in Bettiza, the protagonist aspires to feel Trieste inside himself, as his own blood running through his veins (see note 6. above). Exploring the labyrinthine topography of Trieste coincides for the protagonist with being swallowed by the city's back streets, and losing himself in a pattern of sinister symbolism made up of complicated literary references. The estrangement of the protagonist,

and of the writer, in search of his *Anima* is all-encompassing: he walks the streets of his home town, the streets he has walked down thousands of times, as if for the first time:

nel mio girovagare [...], facevo sempre le stesse strade.
Non starò a dire quali, [...], ma erano tutte intorno ad un
punto, il punto in cui dovevo incontrarla. Quasi un
labirinto.

in my wanderings I always walked down the same streets.
I do not wish to mention their names, but they all circled
round one specific location, exactly where I was destined
to meet Alma, as if in the centre of a labyrinth.²³

Mattioni creates powerfully the illusion of movement in a very circumscribed, definite space. Indeed, it appears as if his very essence, his *Anima*, ultimately his home town, is to be found at the centre of a series of ever narrowing circles, enclosed one within the other, ultimately in his own psyche, where this concentric itinerary springs from and where in the end it must return. He pursues a tour of his own mind, disguised as a tour of Trieste. In this respect one could argue that Mattioni is not 'inscribing the "Self" in the city' but he is doing exactly the opposite, i.e. 'inscribing, incorporating the city in the "Self"'.

Alma's mystery will never be fully revealed. After allusively showing her naked body against the background of a mythological, Dantesque landscape, Alma is never to be seen again by the protagonist.²⁴ He moves away from Trieste without having solved her riddle.

However, a clue to Alma's identity is revealed at the end of the novel, when the protagonist, minutes before abandoning the city, takes a last walk up to the 'Orto Lapidario', a Roman necropolis located at the top of the hill of San Giusto.²⁵ Here he discovers an ancient tombstone on which the carved name of Alma precedes a motto: 'Se ti ami, amami.' - 'You must love me, if you love yourself'. The circularity and self-referentiality implied in the motto shed light on the collusion of Alma/*Anima* with Trieste.

From amongst the ruins and the intoxicating perfume of grass and soil

of the 'Orto Lapidario', Mattioni contemplates Trieste as the custodian of a sterile archaeology of memory:

Vedevo la città dall'alto, [...] quasi fosse la continuazione del luogo in cui mi trovavo, disseminato di emblemi e tavole di pietra, sulle quali [...] erano incisi dei messaggi, delle date e dei nomi che, invece di comunicare qualcosa, ingeneravano solo monotonia, una scansione anonima e senza fine.

I contemplated the city from above, as if it were an extension of where I was, a place scattered with emblems and tombstones. Engraved on those stones were dates, names, messages which failed to communicate anything. They represented nothing but an anonymous and endless scanning.²⁶

This highly symbolic moment ideally brings together the author's psychological history with his personal statement on Triestine literature as a whole. Trieste itself is a graveyard of memory where a useless repetition of dead themes of strictly local interest prevails like the dusty tombstones that fill the 'Orto Lapidario', but also where original products are not unknown:

'Eppure, nell'aria c'era un pulsare di vita che mi incitava a muovermi e a respirare profondamente.' - 'In the air, however, the beat of life was urging me to move on and breathe in deeply.'²⁷

To conclude, the geometry which characterises the city in *Il richiamo di Alma* qualifies Trieste as a stifling perimetric space which hampers the 'Self's wish to open up to the new and yet is in itself a primary condition of this search for 'Self'. The city demands total identification, the grip of 'triestinità' is a binding moral imperative that the protagonist/author strives to shun in order to preserve his individuality. As compared with Svevo and other Triestine authors, the conflict of city and individual has reached a peak in Mattioni: it is in fact not by chance that the protagonist of Mattioni's novel feels compelled to leave Trieste once his *Anima* is finally revealed to him. Once he has found Trieste the protagonist has also discovered his own 'Self' and at this point he has nothing left to do but

leave. Self-appreciation and self-affirmation, once they have been achieved, must be expiated in the loneliness of an irreversible ostracism. The city is to this extent reluctant to admit individuality and originality.

Mattioni has, however, managed to produce an original novel while all the time talking about himself and about Trieste. If it is true that: 'there is no longer any position *outside* the city from which it can be viewed as a coherent whole', Mattioni has not merely successfully immersed himself, or his literary *persona*, in Trieste in *Il richiamo di Alma*.²⁸ He has not merely inscribed his own 'Self' in the city. He has also cleverly added one more piece to the jigsaw of Triestine literature. Under the guise of autobiography, albeit a 'masked autobiography', if such a notion exists, or a 'crypto-autobiography', the myth of 'triestinità' continues to thrive.

NOTES

¹ See Michail Bachtin, 'Le forme del tempo nel cronotopo e nel romanzo' (1937-1938), in *Estetica e romanzo* (Turin, Einaudi, 1979), pp.231-405.

² The term 'triestinità', ugly as it may sound, is not of my invention but has been invoked and advertised by local writers and critics since the beginning of the century. In particular, the term was created to define and advertise a local specificity, a local literary (though not exclusively literary) aura. 'Triestinità' is sustained by a dubious 'myth of Trieste' which, as all myths of identity formation, was constructed as a tradition in the course of the present century and in the sense suggested by Eric Hobsbawm (cf. *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. by E.Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983). The 'myth of Trieste' was somewhat powerfully boosted in the 1980s with the publication of a number of critical studies on Trieste and its literature aimed at trumpeting as loudly and as widely as possible not merely the specificities of Triestine literature but also a local literary excellence. It is precisely in the course of the 1980s that a number of otherwise obscure local writers came forward to the national, in some cases to the international, scene. Stelio Mattioni is one of a long list including Giuliana Morandini, Enrico Morovich, Renzo Rosso, Giorgio

Voghera up to the most recent case of the best-selling young novelist Susanna Tamaro.

³ If not stated otherwise, all translations, both in the text and in the endnotes, are my own. These include various passages from Mattioni's *Il richiamo di Alma* (Milan, Adelphi, 1980), a novel that has not been translated into English.

⁴ B.Maier, 'Mattioni tra confessione e narrazione', in *Il gioco dell'alfabeto: Altri saggi triestini* (Trieste, Istituto Giuliano di Storia, Cultura e Documentazione, 1990), pp.139-148 (p.140).

⁵ The writer and critic Claudio Magris talked about an 'Oedipal relationship' between Triestine writers and their city -see C.Magris, 'Una storia si chiude', in *Dietro le parole* (Milan, Garzanti, 1978), pp.173-179 (p.177).

⁶ I am quoting from a novel by Enzo Bettiza, *Il fantasma di Trieste* (Milan, Mondadori, 1985), p.123, where a similar attitude towards Trieste is displayed. The novel was first published in 1958.

⁷ Taking Svevo as a prototype of this kind of attitude also gives me the opportunity to approach and discuss the best known Triestine modernist author from a slightly eccentric angle.

⁸ See Charles C.Russell, *Italo Svevo the Writer from Trieste* (Ravenna, Longo, 1978), pp.127 and 135.

⁹ I.Svevo, *Una vita* (Trieste: Vram, 1893 (1892); translated into English by Archibald Colquhoun as *A Life* (London, Secker & Warburg, 1963).

¹⁰ Trieste is built on a series of hills and many of its streets, namely in the old area, 'Cittavecchia', are extremely narrow and steep.

¹¹ I.Svevo, *Senilità* (Trieste: Vram, 1898); translated by Beryl de Zoete as *As a Man Grows Older*, with an introduction by Stanislaus Joyce (London and New York, Putnam, 1932). See a footnote to a letter from the poet Umberto Saba to the novelist Giovanni Comisso in *Saba, Svevo, Comisso: Lettere inedite*, ed. by Mario Sutor (Padua, Gruppo di Lettere Moderne, 1967-68), p.63: '[Trieste] takes possession of *Senilità*; [...]' See also C.C.Russell, *Italo Svevo*, p.144: '[...] Trieste will not allow Svevo to forget her. They are too much part of each other. She hovers in the background like a grey specter [*sic*] of the unconscious.' I disagree however with Russell when he declares that

in *Senilità* Svevo 'has momentarily shunned the confrontation with Trieste which brings him most alive.' (p.158)

¹² 'Amarono in tutte le vie suburbane di Trieste. [...] Si baciavano lungamente, la città ai loro piedi, muta, morta, come il mare, di lassù niente altro che una grande estensione di colore misterioso, indistinto: e nell'immobilità e nel silenzio, città, mare e colli apparivano di un solo pezzo, la stessa materia foggata e colorita da qualche artista bizzarro, divisa, tagliata da linee segnate da punti gialli, i fanali delle vie.' -I.Svevo, *Senilità* (Milan, Dall'Oglio, 1963), p.32. 'They had made love in all the suburban roads of Trieste. [...] They remained folded in a long embrace, with the city at their feet, as silent and dead as the sea which, from that height, seemed one vast expanse of colour, mysterious, undefined. Motionless there in the silence, city, sea, and hills seemed to be all of one piece, as if some artist had shaped and coloured all that matter according to his own strange fancy, and dotted the intersecting lines with points of yellow light which were really the street lanterns.' -translated by B. de Zoete, I.Svevo, *As a Man Grows Older* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977), p.22. The pictorial quality of the Triestine land and seascape is emphasised here too.

¹³ I.Svevo, *La coscienza di Zeno* (Bologna, Cappelli, 1923); translated by B.de Zoete as *Confessions of Zeno* (London, Putnam, 1948).

¹⁴ Cf. C.C.Russell, *Italo Svevo*, pp.204 and 212.

¹⁵ It would be both useful and interesting to compare, for instance, Mattioni with Giorgio Voghera (born 1908), another contemporary Triestine author who is affected by a similar type of 'autobiographical constriction'. However, while in Mattioni the city acts as a gaoler, in Voghera his close family circle is responsible for building and maintaining the autobiographical boundaries.

¹⁶ For a complete Mattioni bibliography cf. Andrea Rondini, 'Stelio Mattioni: Bibliografia delle opere', in Giorgio Baroni, 'La recente narrativa di Stelio Mattioni', *Otto/Novecento*, (1995), Vol.5, 193-200.

¹⁷ The title of the novel *Il re ne comanda una* (Milan, Adelphi, 1968) could be translated as *The King Summons One of Them* -this is taken from a verse in a very popular Italian nursery rhyme. *Il richiamo di Alma* (Milan, Adelphi, 1980).

¹⁸ See Giuliano Manacorda, 'Il richiamo della regione: Un po' di Mitteleuropa', in *Letteratura italiana d'oggi: 1965-1985* (Rome,

Editori Riuniti, 1987), pp.300-314 (p.313): 'Stelio Mattioni's fiction takes a double direction, between realism and symbolism, between a Triestine topography and its escape routes, [...].'

¹⁹ S.Mattioni, *Il richiamo*, p.76. Mattioni's ambience, and specifically his singular sense of space, are reminiscent of the symbolic 'metaphysical' and mnemonic spaces depicted in paintings by Giorgio De Chirico.

²⁰ Mattioni was greatly influenced by the Triestine intellectual Roberto Bazlen (1902-1965), probably the first propagator of the doctrines of Carl Gustav Jung in Italy and the first editor who promoted Mattioni in his career as a writer. Alma is a transparent metaphor for Jung's *Anima*. Also, Mattioni's publishers are 'Adelphi' and 'Spirali', two Italian publishing houses of obvious Jungian interest and inspiration. Jung dwelled on the presumed feminine qualities of cities and nations in their capacities as metaphorical wombs -see in particular 'Symbols of the Mother and of Rebirth', in *Symbols of Transformation: An Analysis of the Prelude to a Case of Schizophrenia* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), V, pp.207-273.

²¹ In this respect the novel could be read as a thriller.

²² S.Mattioni, *Il richiamo*, pp.11-12.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.26.

²⁴ In this episode Alma is modelled very closely on Maddalena, protagonist of the novel *Simone* by another Triestine author, Giani Stuparich, (Milan, Garzanti, 1953).

²⁵ This is one of the highest spots of Trieste, from where the whole city can be seen from above.

²⁶ S.Mattioni, *Il richiamo*, p.154.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.154.

²⁸ See Edward Timms, 'Unreal City -Theme and Variations', in *Unreal City*, ed. by E.Timms and David Kelley (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1985), pp.1-12 (p.3).