

Frontier Writings

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In an ironic yet amiable passage, Kafka narrates his meeting on a train before the Great War with a German officer.¹ The officer is a subject of the Germanic Empire; Kafka is a subject of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which embraced numerous diverse nationalities. The two start talking; at a given moment, the officer asks him where he is from and then which nationality he is. Kafka answers, but the other does not really manage to understand his nationality. Kafka was born in Prague, but he is not Czech; he is an Austrian citizen but the officer cannot identify him simply as Austrian; he is a Jew but a Jew uprooted from the origins of Judaism. Kafka's identity leads the soldier, the accidental travel companion, astray. Kafka is himself a frontier: his body is a place where many diverse frontiers meet, cross and overlap each other like scars.

This episode is, I believe, one of the many that could be cited to highlight a complex and contradictory aspect of the frontier identity, the difficulty experienced in making oneself understood, in expressing oneself. The lack of understanding frequently accompanies the frontier intellectuals or writers, but perhaps there is also some satisfaction on their part in feeling themselves misunderstood. All this indicates that in some way they want to find their real identity in this impossibility of being understood.

In the early 20th century, in 1911, a writer from Trieste, Scipio Slataper, started his book *Il mio Carso*, in which in some way he created, invented, the Triestian literary landscape, with three sentences, all of which opened with the words "I would like to tell you" (*Vorrei dirvi*). Trieste was at that time a complex reality: an Italian town that had for centuries belonged to the Habsburg Empire; even a multinational town because of the presence of other nationalities, from the Slovene minority to the Austro-German community, from the Greek to others numerically less important, such as the Armenian or the Serbian, not to mention the major role played by the Jewish community, in its turn formed by individuals from the most diverse countries of Europe and rapidly Italianised, and from the contact, through the Venetian and Slav Istria, with the Croatian world. A town that was experiencing this complex nature either as a richness or as a difficulty or as an obsession; a town that was experiencing contradictions, in which not by chance many of the most passionate irredentist Italian patriots, who desired separation from Austria and the union with Italy, bore, like Slataper, names of Slav, German Greek, Armenian or any other origin. This mixing is characteristic of Trieste, which sometimes feels proud of it and at other times rejects it angrily, claiming itself to be purer than the rest of Italy. In some way the

1. A first version of this article was published in *Revista de Occidente*, no. 316, September 2007, pp. 5-23.

intellectual often slightly resembles a *pachuco*² who at once exhibits and dissimulates, affirms and denies his own identity – there is a “Triestinity”, true and false, creative and stereotyped like all the analogous metaphysics of identity, from the *Deutschtum* to “Mexicaness” including “Negritude”.

The first three paragraphs of *Il mio Carso* begin with the words “I would like to tell you.” Slataper would like to say that he was born in the Carso – the stony area surrounding Trieste –, would like to say that he was born in Moravia, would like to say that he was born in Croatia. Of course, it is not true. He was born in Trieste, but he expresses his desire to speak to the others, to the Italians; although he is also Italian and a little later he died in the Great War, for the cause of Trieste’s Italianess. Slataper makes clear that, in order to express his own status – as Italian, although not completely, a special Italian in relation to his compatriots –, he must do what, according to the Greeks, the poets used to do; that is, lie. Lies, or some metaphors, which are the same thing, are often the only way of expressing certain truths, of stating what you are, what your adventure is. The Triestian writer – and before the writer, the inhabitant of Trieste who knows his town – has a strong sense (sometimes uneasy; sometimes, pleased, almost narcissistic) of personal otherness, as Octavio Paz would say.

In Trieste you did not know very well who or what you were, and this involved constant dramatisations of one’s own identity. This is the reason why Trieste has had a great literature, because literature is the place to seek out, find, invent, construct or also dissolve and shatter one’s own identity. It is this uneasiness that Joyce enjoyed so much. The writer, who lived for ten years in Trieste, where he began writing *Ulysses*, usually spoke the Triestian dialect.

Joyce felt at home in Trieste because he found it as unbearable as Ireland.

Trieste formed part of the Habsburg Empire until its dissolution, at the end of the First World War in 1918, and later continued to have a dramatic history. There have been many national tensions there: until the First World War, tensions between the Austrians and the Italian Triestian patriots who wanted Trieste to separate from the Habsburg Empire and become part of Italy. After the First World War, tensions between Italians and Slavs, first with the Italian fascist attacks against the Slavs, next with the horrors of the Nazi occupation (in Trieste there was the only Nazi concentration camp in Italy) and later, after the end of the Second World War, with the acts of violence by the Slavs who, with Tito, occupied the Eastern territories of Italy, expelling the Italians from them.

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I believe that the only way of talking, of explaining something of one’s own experience, is by speaking of others. This is why I chose as the legend for one of my books, *Microcosms*, a parable by Borges. Borges speaks of a painter who represents landscapes – mountains, rivers, trees – and at the end he warns that he has painted his self-portrait, and not because he had distorted reality with subjective highhandedness but because his being consists precisely of the way he lives the experience of others.

It is not by chance that I chose Borges’ parable as the legend of *Microcosms*, which – like another of my books, *Danube* – has a lot to do with the frontier. The experience of the frontier was fundamental for me, even before I was

2. In the early and mid-20th century United States, a person of Mexican origin, antecedent of the Chicano.

aware of it. When I was a child – I was born in 1939 – the frontier, very close, was not like any other, but a frontier that divided the world in two. It was the Iron Curtain; at the end of the Second World War the West and the Soviet Union had divided up Europe between them and the limit between the two worlds passed through Trieste. After the Second World War, with the defeat of Italy, Tito's Yugoslavia had occupied territories of Eastern Italy and also claimed Trieste, which in its turn Italy did not want to surrender. Trieste, which would not form part of Italy until many years later, in 1954, was a provisional Free Territory governed by the Americans and the British. A town in which everything was uncertain, which did not know what its political future would be, or which state it would finally belong to; and this created an atmosphere of uncertainty and violent tension. The town seemed like a no man's land between two borders. When I used to go out for a walk or to play I saw the frontier of the Carso. And behind it an unknown, immense, threatening world stretched out; the world of the East under the dominion of Stalin, a world which was unreachable because the frontier, at that time, was impassable, at least until 1948, when the rupture between Tito and Stalin took place. It was the East – the East which in Europe is so often ignored, rejected, feared, despised. All European countries have an East which must be kept at a distance. Meanwhile, behind the frontier there was a world that I knew very well, those lands that had formed part of Italy and that Tito's Yugoslavia had annexed at the end of the Second World War; lands where I had been as a child, and which were therefore a familiar, known, world.

To a certain extent I felt that on the other side of the frontier there was something known and ignored, and I believe that this is fundamental for literature, which often consists of a journey from what is known to what is unknown, but also from what is unknown to

what is known, an unknown territory that we appropriate. It can always happen that something until then familiar appears strange and disturbing, or that something or someone, a culture that we believed distanced and different, is, on the contrary, close and similar.

Trieste itself was at that time a forgotten place, a kind of cul-de-sac in the Adriatic; there we felt ourselves on the periphery of history and life, and at the same time this periphery was the centre of the world, because it was the line on which the East and the West met.

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Trieste was a world whose future was quite unknown, whether it would have a future, what its national destiny would be (which involved, at the time of the Cold War, belonging to the West or to the Stalinist system); a world that many had to leave to find a job; there was a feeling of extreme precariousness there.

Exiles, exoduses, lost and later reconstructed frontiers formed part and continue to form part of the experience of a Triestian. I am thinking of the three hundred thousand Italians who at the end of the Second World War had to leave Istria, Fiume and other territories that had been incorporated into Yugoslavia, in order to escape an unbearable situation at a moment when, after the acts of violence inflicted by the Italians, the Slavs were experiencing the time of the reconquest and also of their vengeance which, like all vengeances, was indiscriminate. The Italian fugitives were leaving all behind and losing everything, even suffering the experience of the refugee camps for years, having become foreigners in their own land, regarded with mistrust by the others, Italians like them, in the towns where they tried to rebuild a life. Some, in their pain, in their understandable

but regressive resentment, again raised up new frontiers of solitude, of isolation, of rancour in their hearts, feeling themselves like foreigners to all – to the compatriots who had remained in their lands, to the Slavs, the Italians who were their neighbours in the towns where they had gone to live. Some others, in contrast, opened themselves to understand that, above all, in those mixed and complex regions of the High Adriatic – as in any land in which frontiers merge and intertwine – only dialogue and the meeting between diverse cultures and peoples can allow a free and civilised life.

The frontier is dual, ambiguous; sometimes it serves as a bridge to find the other, other times as a large wall to maintain the other at a distance

Sometimes the experience of the frontier led to the discovery that one belonged to “the other part”: this is the case, for instance, of Marisa Madieri, who in *Verde acqua* (1987) narrated the history of her family and her childhood. When explaining how as a girl she left Fiume, her native town, with her relatives and experienced the difficult marginalised existence of a refugee camp for years, Marisa Madieri discovers the also partly Slav and Hungarian – and forgotten – origins of her family, an Italian family persecuted then as Italian by the Slavs. In this way she discovers that she also belongs to the other side: that, partially at least, she forms part of the world that threatens her. She therefore discovers the meaning of a plural identity; that she is Italian but an Italian with, so to speak, an additional gear. This stimulating and dramatic frontier situation has created a rich literature, as Italian as it is Slovenian or Croatian.

The frontier is dual, ambiguous; sometimes it serves as a bridge to find the other, other times as a large wall to maintain the other at a distance. Frequently, it is the obsession to locate

something or someone from the other side; literature, among many things, is also a journey in the attempt to free oneself from this “myth of the other side”, to understand that we are all sometimes here and sometimes there, that we are all the Other. Literature is therefore the capacity to place oneself on the other side of the frontier; in some novels of the Triestian frontier, for instance, there are characters who are considered Italian by the Slavs and Slavs by the Italians.

Another experience of lost frontier, to which I have referred on other occasions and in different ways, is the history of the around two thousand Italian workers from Monfalcone, a small town very close to Trieste, communist militants who had known the fascist prisons, and in many cases the Spanish war and the Nazi *lager*, and who, driven by their communist faith, immediately after the Second World War voluntarily moved to Tito’s Yugoslavia, in order to contribute, in the geographically closest country, to the construction of socialism. Thus they cross paths, in a kind of inverted exodus, with the three thousand fleeing the regime of real socialism to take refuge in Italy. These two thousand workers participate with enthusiasm and self-denial in the construction of the new Yugoslavia but, in 1948, when Tito – with a gesture for which world history will always be grateful – breaks with Stalin, they protest against Tito, because in their eyes Stalin represents the cause of revolution and world liberation, and Tito becomes, in their eyes, a traitor. Moreover, Tito and his regime, fearing a Stalinist coup d’état, deport them to two small, delightful and terrible islands of the High Adriatic, Goli Otok (the bare, bald island) and Sveti Grgur (San Gregorio), where they set up gulags which have not much to envy the ferocity of the Stalinist gulags and the Nazi *lager*. In those gulags these men are submitted to all kinds of persecutions, tortures and cruelties, to violence and to death. They resist in



Joyce statue, Trieste (F. Scianna/Magnum/Contacto).

the name of Stalin who, if he had won, would have turned the whole world into a gulag, in order to try to tame free and courageous men like them.

They experience their terrible odyssey ignored by all. When, some years later, the survivors are liberated and return to Italy, some find their houses in Monfalcone assigned to the exiles of Istria and Fiume who had left Yugoslavia and had lost everything: a bitter and terrible symbol of a cross exodus, of a doubly tragic destiny. Moreover, these men will be maltreated by the Italian police for being communists who return from the East and harassed by the Italian Communist Party as inconvenient witnesses of the Stalinist policy of the Italian Communist Party itself, which it wanted forgotten. They are men who found themselves on the other side, on the wrong side

and moment: who also fought for the wrong cause and believed in a lie, in Stalin, but with an immense moral strength, with a heroic capacity for sacrifice and self-denial, with the aim of sacrificing themselves in the struggle for the liberation of the whole of humanity, virtues that constitute an enormous spiritual legacy, which we should make our own. I could tell other stories, minor or great, of frontier exiles and exoduses; the story of Goli Otok is in my book *A Different Sea*, in *Microcosms* and in other works; it is a great story, to which I am stubbornly loyal and which is the substance of my latest novel, *Alla cieca*.

I believe that from all this comes my sensitivity for the issues of exile, exodus, uprooting, the disappeared and reconstructed frontiers raised up again: so many things that repeatedly emerge throughout my literary work. Many of

my books deal, in different ways, with all kinds of frontiers: national, political, psychological, social; also with the frontiers that are within us, separating the diverse components of our self, which often do not want to know anything of each other. *Danube*, for instance, is above all a journey through contemporary Babel, with its chances and its dangers, and through the meanders hidden deep inside.

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It is not by chance that my first book, *Il mito asburgico nella letteratura austriaca moderna*, dealt with a world that, like the multi-national Austro-Hungarian Empire, was constituted, made up of frontiers. I wrote this book in Turin, the great cultural capital of the Italy of some years ago, “the modern town of the Peninsula”, as Gramsci defined it some time ago, who had a profound experience of the social transformations that characterised Italy and its political and cultural meaning. I would not have written the book without Turin, where I learnt to grow up and think, but of course neither would I have written it without Trieste, without the Triestian education in the context of frontier seen as a condition of indefinable belonging or of distressed lack of belonging in which, nevertheless, a true identity can be found.

I learnt the importance of the Habsburg world not from the nostalgia of the old *austriacanti*,³ but rather from the old Italian irredentists who had fought and discovered it after having contributed to its destruction. One of them was Biagio Marin, a poet and a friend of mine, who, in a memoir written in 1968 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the

First World War and the return of Trieste to Italy, evokes again – describing his passionate personality of the time based on the knowledge of what happened in the fifty years spent afterwards – a tumultuous day at the University of Vienna, in the spring of 1915, when the First World War had already been unleashed and Italy had not yet entered it, although it would soon do so.

In this evocation Marin explains how, after the fights in the Viennese university between the students of the different nationalities – he was one of the leaders of the Italian group – he is called by the dean of the University of Vienna who, when entering his office greets him in German and asks him what his intentions are: “*Jünger Mann. Was wollen Sie?*” Marin responds, also in German and with all the verve of his youth, that he wants the war against Austria and the incorporation of Trieste into Italy. The dean invites him to take a seat and tells him, beginning to talk in perfect Italian, that he has studied in Italy, that he loves Italy and knows it well, but that a war, even if it ended in victory, could be dangerous for the social and political structures of the Italian state. Marin is disconcerted for a while, as if for a moment he vaguely sees the destiny that in fact is awaiting Italy and Europe after the First World War. Next, his young arrogance – which fifty years later he would describe so well – makes him suddenly recover control over himself and he stands up, saying, this time in German: “Your Excellency, we will defeat Austria.” Then the dean gets up and, showing him the door, tells him, also in German: “Young man, I wish you and your country all that is good.” Some weeks later, Marin illegally crosses the frontier and enrolls as a volunteer in the Italian army, which meanwhile had entered into war against Austria. During the first manoeuvres, an officer

3. Supporters of the Austrian presence in Italy.

coarsely insults the young volunteers. Marin breaks rank and tells him: “My Captain, you should be ashamed. We Austrians are used to another style.”

Marin, an Italian and a patriot, feels himself Italian in Vienna and Austrian in Italy; the frontier, on which he lives, creates in him the feeling of being other in relation to himself but in an open and creative way. The frontier teaches him to deny any rigidly defined identity; to oppose, if necessary, the power that seeks to represent identity. Such behaviour frees from any fetishist idolatry, from any obsession with ethnic purity. In other cases, in contrast, very soon the frontier is not a bridge but a wall of hatred and resentment, which separates men and isolates them in fear and aggressiveness. The Triestian frontier has also been very rich in these regressions, in these forms of violence and in these phobias.

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When writing *Il mito asburgico nella letteratura austriaca moderna* I found another frontier culture, the Judeo-Eastern culture; from it came the book *Lontano da dove* from the great interest in Roth, but above all in Singer, who I personally met, one of the great meetings of my life. The book mainly grew out of a Judeo-Eastern story, the story of two Jews in a small town in Eastern Europe in the early 20th century. One meets the other with lots of suitcases at the railway station and asks him: “Where are you going?” and the other says: “I’m going to Argentina.” And the first: “You’re going far!”, and the other: “Far from where?” This is a Talmudic response, in the sense that he answers with a question; he wants to say on the one hand that the Jew of the Diaspora, as he lives in exile, is always far from everything, because he has no patria, he

lives precisely in exile, and on the other that, as he has a patria not in space but in time, in the Book, in tradition, in Law, he is never far from anything. This culture interested me and still interests me greatly. It is a culture that has suffered uprooting, exile, persecution, the threat of annihilation of identity with enormous violence, but which has its counterweight in an extraordinary individual resistance. This issue of dispersion, exile, the loss of the self, linked to that of its incredible resistance, has always interested me, obsessed me if you will.

This Jewish culture without frontiers has, however, possessed a strong awareness of the need for moral frontiers. It is said that one of the most important rabbis, Rabbi Meir, profoundly orthodox (insofar as it is possible to speak of orthodoxy and heresy in Judaism), was a disciple of a great heretic master, Elisha ben Abiyuh, known as Akher. One day the two were enthusiastically arguing, as often happened, and each one of them tried, always with the greatest mutual respect, to convince the other of the validity of his ideas. The disciple exhorted the master not to go beyond the limits of the Law and its prescriptions, the master exhorted the disciple to open up his thought to broader perspectives. In the heat of the discussion, they were approaching the limit of one mile that an orthodox Jew cannot exceed on a Saturday. Rabbi Meir, carried away by the heat of his argumentation, was about to exceed the limit without realising it, but the master who, until one second before, had exhorted him not to remain a prisoner of orthodoxy, blocked his way, telling him: “Stop! You have reached your frontier.”

My first tale or short novel *Inferences from a Sabre* was born from one experience of lost and rediscovered frontier, which I had kept within me for many years. I spent the winter of 1944-45, the last year of the war, in Udine with my mother. My father was ill in hospital and Udine had been occupied by the Germans

and Krasnov's Cossacks, a group partly formed by those the Nazis had made prisoners during the attack on the Soviet Union and partly by the white émigrés who had left Russia with the Revolution. The Germans had promised them a Cossack state, a *Kosakenland*, which according to the original project should have been located in the Soviet Union. But as the Germans and their allies withdrew, that patria was increasingly pushed to the West, until for some months a phantasmagorical Cossack state was created in Italy, in Friuli, in Carnia. Thus, part of Friuli, from where my grandfather had come as a child to work in Trieste, had suddenly become Cossack. In a small hotel of a tiny hamlet, Villa di Versegnes, Krasnov – the Cossack Ataman that the Germans had rescued from oblivion and put at the head of this army – had set up a small Cossack court among poor farmhouses.

An extremely complex situation, because it showed how a legitimate desire – the desire for a patria, for roots – had been perverted, through the alliance with the Nazi evil, into its opposite: in the first place, the Cossacks came to steal a patria from others and, moreover, this desire for authenticity became false and artificial, because nothing can be more artificial than a Cossack patria in the surroundings of Udine.

Since then I have always been fascinated by the search for authenticity and the danger that this could lead us – if we are deprived of the ironic awareness of our limitations, which do not allow us to cling to the absolute and even less to absolute purity – to the most skilful deformations and falsifications.

I also believe that my existential and literary passion for travel was born in some way out of the frontier. The title of one of my travel books, *Itaca e oltre e Trieste. Un'identità di frontiera*, indicates the two possible journeys. It poses the question of whether after completing the journey – the journey of life, of course, given that since the *Odyssey* the journey has been the symbol par excellence of life – the main

character, like Homer's and Joyce's Ulysses, returns home changed by the experiences he had had along the way but confirmed in his own identity, having reaffirmed the meaning and unity of existence; or whether, in contrast, as happens in Musil, the experience of the journey of life has become a straightforward journey in which one always continues ahead, until losing oneself along the way, leaving behind parts of oneself, without being able to ever return home and experiencing the foolishness and the incoherence of the world.

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Incoherence of the world that means incoherence of the self: it is not by chance, once again, that the *Mitteleuropean* literature has explored with special intensity the centrifugal plurality of the self, which shows that it is not one but many or, as Musil writes, “a delirium of many”; a man without qualities: that is, a set of qualities without a subject conferring an organic unity on them. In the 1920s and 1930s *Mitteleuropean* literature was at the forefront of this great journey to the interior of the plural self, between the new frontiers of the subject.

The Vienna of Musil and Canetti becomes the setting of this process, landscape and metropolitan mirror of the centrifugal Self, as is said in one passage from *The Man without Qualities*: “We must not pay special tribute to the simple name of the city. Like any metropolis, it was subject to risks and contingences, to progresses, advances and withdrawals, to immense lethargies, to a collision of things and matters, to great rhythmic movements and to the eternal imbalance and dislocation of any rhythm, and resembled a bubble boiling in a container with buildings, laws, decrees and his-

torical traditions.” The highest world literature experiences this crisis-metamorphosis: in *Pedro Páramo*, for instance, Rulfo eliminates the narrating subject, a disturbing absence that can recall that of Canetti’s *Auto-Da-Fé*. This anthropological mutation is often reflected in the representations of the metropolis, as already happened in Döblin or Dos Passos.

When Nietzsche stated that his *Übermensch* was no other than Dostoyevsky’s underground man, he said the same as some of his interpreters would later say, that *Übermensch* does not mean *superman*, it is not a super-individual, a traditional individual who has multiplied his capacities, but “Ultraman”, an *Oltreuomo*, as Gianni Vattimo has affirmed, a stage of human evolution projected beyond the traditional limits of identity: plural identity, which resists unitary consciousness. Dostoyevsky’s underground man speaks of consciousness as an illness and affirms that he has no “character”, because the character is conceived as a restraining cuirass, a kind of straitjacket.

The Danube is the symbol of the need and the difficulty of crossing frontiers, not only national, political and social but also psychological, cultural and religious

Almost all 20th century literature, from Pirandello to Pessoa, revolves around this issue. All this can be experienced, and has been experienced, sometimes with anguish and sometimes as liberation. On some occasions even the same writer can make it be perceived in both ways, which would correspond to two moments of existential testimony. In Hoffmann’s *The Devil’s Elixir*, for example, the main character, Bruder Medardus, lives in anguish over the loss of his identity; he would like to have one, to have a precise identity, and when he loses it he experiences everything as a terrible threat. Another character, Schöenfeld/Belcampo, in contrast has the same experience as a liberation,

and states that consciousness – that is, identity – is a customs officer sitting above and who does not allow many things that otherwise life would bring us, or it is an army on parade, forced to march together; while the real self – the fool – would be a carnival, a party, a crowd that goes through the street however they see fit.

The crisis and/or liberation of the self, the fragility, the resistance of the self, are issues that I feel profoundly. I believe that *Danube* and *Microcosms*, for instance, are an attempt to explain the story of a self that rarely exists, which is always about to disappear, like a drop of water placed in another drop of water, but which in some way continues to preserve an individuality. In two of my most recent books, *La mostra* and *Alla cieca*, this linguistic and psychological fragmentation of the Self, this agitation of all the frontiers, is taken to the limit.

Danube is also a frontier book, conceived without a prior purpose. At first, as in the case of *Il mito asburgico nella letteratura austriaca moderna*, I did not know what I wanted to do. In 1982 we travelled to Slovakia. I remember that we were between Vienna and Bratislava, on that Eastern frontier with what was still called “the other” Europe (I believe that most of my writings were born from the desire to end this adjective “other”, to make it understood that it is also Europe). We saw the Danube flow, we saw it shine; a splendour indistinguishable from the grass on the prairies; we could not determine where the river started and where it ended, what was the river and what was not. We were experiencing a happy moment of harmony, of joy, one of those rare moments of conformity with the flow of existence. Soon we saw a sign: “Danube Museum”. This word, museum, sounded very strange, amidst the enchantment of the nature of that moment; it was as if the doubt emerged as to whether we would form part, unaware, of some already established museum, suddenly creating an unexpected ques-

tion: “What would happen if we continued ahead, wandering until reaching the mouth of the Danube?” This is how those four years of travelling, writing, rewriting and wandering started, in which the Danube would again be the symbol of the frontier, because the Danube is a river that crosses many frontiers; it is therefore the symbol of the need and the difficulty of crossing frontiers, not only national, political and social but also psychological, cultural and religious. The Danubian journey is a journey to the Infernos, in this Babel of today’s world that certainly has a special symbol in *Mitteleuropa*, but which is a Babel of the entire world.

If *Danube* embraced a vast geographical and historical territory, *Microcosms* is the discovery of other places, increasingly smaller, increasingly limited, but in which the greatness of life and the unrepeatable meaning of any existence sparkles, in opposition to any indifferent minimalism. Once again, frontier stories, also minimal, which had changed place and disappeared, on a journey that the nameless leading character undertakes through the – real and symbolic – places of his existence, provisional stages and faithful lingering during his passage through the Earth, constantly surpassing the limits. This anonymous man travels opening up to life like a bottle opened underwater, full, fulfilled, constituted by the things that reach him, by others’ stories that cross over his and become his own, by the landscapes reflected in his look and that become his face.

The frontier is sometimes a bridge to meet the other, and sometimes, more frequently, a wall to reject and ignore him. Milosz explains that in Vilnius, two hundred metres from the café where he used to meet with his friends, there was a café where there were two extraordinary Yiddish poets. But he says that he knew about them and their works only many years later, through French translations; to overcome those two hundred metres a long journey through time and space was necessary.

Frontiers: not only national and cultural, but also between life and death, between the land and the sea, between the search for the “true life” and the destruction of the latter, as happens in *Un altro mare*, between fear and defence which – as in the building of the Great Wall of China, which fear makes increasingly thicker until all it can do is to destroy and oppress instead of defending the land – loses life instead of saving it, as Canetti writes in one of his passages. Frontiers between the utopia – the demand to redeem the world – and the disillusion which, correcting and sometimes undoing any naïve utopian recipe which longs to redeem the world once and for all, strengthens the demand to, always provisionally, correct and improve the world – Sancho Panza, in fact, helping Don Quixote to find the enchanted helmet of Mambrino.

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One of the most important frontiers for writers is the language in which they write. Sometimes the experience of exile – sought or unexpected – leads them to change language, to write in a language which is not their mother tongue and on some occasions not even that in which they speak with their family. Joseph Conrad was a Pole who became one of the greatest English writers, and many other examples could be cited. In some cases, the break takes place within the mother tongue. Paul Celan, the great Jewish German poet, whose parents were murdered in Auschwitz, wrote with some horror in German, his mother tongue which, he said, was that of his mother’s murderers. Sometimes this frontier that unites and divides the self can be perceived as painfully guilty, when we cross it as much as when we omit the duty to cross it: Leon Lalen, a poet from Haiti, originally from Senegal, writes his po-

etry in defence of his land against the French colonisers, but expresses his Senegalese passion in French, in the language of the society against which he fights. Frontiers between literary genres, between the languages and the linguistic and stylistic registers; above all in some of my recent books, such as *La mostra* and *Alla cieca*, in which the Babel of the languages prevails, the tearing-apart breaks any boundary and seems to shatter life with the blows of an axe, but without extinguishing a distressing light. Perhaps the frontier that, in recent years, I have had more in mind is that which separates and/or relates to the two writings that Ernesto Sábato, who I have had the fortune to call my friend, has called “diurnal” and “nocturnal”. The latter deals with the most disconcerting truths, those that we do not dare to openly confess but which the author perhaps makes us recognise, although they frequently

surprise him as they can reveal what he himself is and feels but does not always know; a writing which is sometimes the meeting, the provoker of strangeness, creative, with a double who speaks with another voice and who must be allowed to speak although we would prefer him to say other things. Two of the latest books that I have written, *La mostra* and *Alla cieca*, belong of course to this nocturnal writing.

There is no opposition between what is particular and what is universal, between the love for one’s own frontier and the humanity that does not respect any frontier. Dante used to say that after he spent his whole life drinking the water of the Arno – the river that crosses Florence, his home town, his patria – he had learnt to love Florence profoundly. But, he added, our true patria is a vaster water; our patria, he said, is the world, as the sea is the patria of fish.