

# The Art of Writing from the Border: Narrative Decentralisation and Pluricultural Identity Construction in Tomizza's Franziska (1996)

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Article abstract

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THE ART OF WRITING FROM THE BORDER: NARRATIVE  
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CONSTRUCTION IN TOMIZZA'S *FRANZISKA* (1996)

TORUNN HAALAND

*Abstract:* This article examines one of Tomizza's unjustifiably understudied texts within two primary contexts: one formed around the historical, political and social background of early 20th-Century Trieste, the other around the author's recurrent concern with hybrid characters and geopolitical, cultural and linguistic borderlands. At the surface, these contexts are dramatised to revisit a political and ethnic conflict from the viewpoint of one of its most invisible victims. To uncover the novel's more deep-running operations, however, this study takes a narratological approach and applies perspectives associated with imagology and linguistic hybridity as well as theories of border writing and border-crossing. Whereas the narrative fusion of historical reconstruction, self-reflexive commentaries, epistolary testimonies and mythical fictionalisations creates a discourse of literary fragmentation and deterritorialisation, the protagonist's biographical background and socio-culturally embedded experiences are interlaced to represent a liminal character formed by dual perspectives, plurilingual enunciations and incompatible loyalties. Franziska exists between history and myth and as she increasingly acquires different cultural codes, she also comes to linger, irreconcilably, between different and conflicting cultural civilisations. Just as the multidimensional text questions norms of literary unity, so does this fluid character expose stereotypical conceptions of ethnic identities. As an amalgamated device, the self-referential narrator and the border crosser he constructs expose not only ideals of linguistic and cultural purity but also totalitarian conceptions of geographical and cultural borders. Ultimately, this experimental literary operation implicates the reader in a democratic literacy of multiple perspectives that questions normative notions of identities, belonging, culture and nationhood.

When notions of a ‘Trieste letteraria’ emerged during the first decades of the 20th-Century, it was as a search of a language, a style and a constellation of images apt to convey experiences with contested geopolitical and socio-cultural borderlands. While the idea originally was conceptualised among Italian authors such as Giosuè Carducci and Gabriele D’Annunzio who looked towards Trieste as an Italian city to be redeemed, Triestine authors such as Italo Svevo, Scipio Slataper, Umberto Saba and Carlo Michelstaedter re-appropriated the literary geography as an emblem of differentiation vis-à-vis Italy as well as the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Pizzi 38). The sources these authors engaged included Russian and Scandinavian realism, the romanticist sensitivity of Heine and Holderling and the thought of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Freud and Darwin, as well as French fin-de-siècle writers and Trieste’s own Hebraic traditions (Pellegrini 13–24). More fundamentally, however, the search of a distinctly Mitteleuropean sensitivity reflected an existential sense of difference based on ambivalent inclinations towards activity and stasis; ineptitude and creation; introspection and integration (Pellegrini 13–24).<sup>1</sup> Visions of this dialectic rejected not merely nostalgic discourses concerning the city’s imperial past, but also certain local writers who would adopt Italian literary models to represent Trieste’s mercantile bourgeoisie. At the level of expression, Triestine authors distinguished themselves by a stylistic and thematic concreteness that, at the time, was generally dismissed as a matter of ‘antiletterarietà’ (Ara and Magris 69–71). Critics more attuned both to a city Saba described as neurotic (814) and to the writers’ sense of doublings and irreconcilable contradictions have, however, accentuated the psychological dimension embedded in this heterogeneous mode of differentiation and dissent. The resistance towards formal paradigms aims, according to Angelo Ara and Claudio Magris, at aligning literature with life and at engaging readers in more sincere modes of expression (49–52).

The idea of a regionally and existentially defined literary specificity usefully contextualises the case of *Fulvio Tomizza*. Having reached Trieste in 1955 as an Italian-Slavic exile from the then Yugoslavian administered Istria, Tomizza emerged in the 1960s as a writer marked by his bicultural background and multi-lingual knowledge of Croatian, Italian and Istro-Venetian dialects (Tomizza, *Alle spalle di Trieste* 65). This enabled the author to capture not only a city that historically

<sup>1</sup> Marianna Deganutti (“Lo sguardo” 234) observes, appropriately, that although Trieste also has seen a considerable literary production in Slovene, the idea of a ‘Trieste letteraria’ has exclusively been equated with authors writing in Italian. Miran Košuta makes a related argument, suggesting that the definition of “letteratura triestina” only referred to Triestine literature written in Italian (196).

has been divided between Austrian economy, Italian culture and Italian as well as Slavic identities (Ara and Magris 49–52), but also the linguistic coexistence and amalgamations that emerged from this cultural and structural interactivity (Deganutti, *Fulvio Tomizza* 3). As we shall see, Tomizza distinguished himself by a multidimensional and pluri-linguistic mode that initially awoke perplexity among critics who could neither define nor classify what they considered “anti-literary” writing according to prevalent trends in Italian literature (Deganutti, *Fulvio Tomizza* 147–49). Some, however, spoke more perceptively of a “letteratura di frontiera,” (Tomizza, *Alle spalle di Trieste* 67) in effect anticipating major narrative and stylistic characteristics of the author’s career. Any search for a point of gravitation in his vast corpus of fiction, reportages, essays and scripts will inevitably identify a constant interest in the ambivalent capacity borders have, as Magris observes, to bridge and to block movements and dialogues (56, 62). While Tomizza articulated a very concrete vision of the border as “quel territorio sempre conteso, e in definitiva sempre estraneo ai contendenti, che alla sommità dell’Adriatico si insinua tra Italia, Austria e Jugoslavia ...” (*Alle spalle di Trieste* 194), his literary elaboration of this geopolitical situation also reflected the existential nomadism (Aliberti 19) involved in belonging as much to Trieste as to Istria without identifying either as Italian or Yugoslavian (Tomizza, *Destino di frontiera* 37). Being both Italian and Slavic implied, for the author, to be neither but rather to embody the very notions of difference and hybridisation (Tomizza, *Alle spalle di Trieste* 65). As objects of artistic elaboration, the interest in encounters and confrontations surrounding the Northern Adriatic Sea and the experience of dual selfhood created a focus on identities and relations associated with contested territories and pluricultural ambiances. Considering the central position such thematics occupy in contemporary discourses around migration, multiculturalism, and transnationality, Tomizza’s historically and culturally defined writing is universally applicable in ways critics have not always acknowledged. The geopolitical circumstances and sociocultural realities at the centre of his fiction extend, as will become clear, into widely recognisable representations of persecution, exile, and stigmatisation as well as of exchanges, hybridisations and multidimensional perspectives.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Tomizza initially developed the theme and thought of the border in the *Trilogia istriana* (1960–1966), which reevokes the author’s own geographical and cultural origins, and in the tetralogy about Stefano Marcovich, which comprehends *La quinta stagione*, *L’albero dei sogni*, *La città di Miriam* and *Dove tornare* (1965–1974). Borderlands and hybrid characters are further explored in historical novels such as *La finzione di Maria* (1981), *Il male viene dal Nord* (1984),

To illustrate more concretely this literary voice of border cultures and conflicting identities we will turn to *Franziska*—a text that has generated surprisingly scarce criticism despite it being an epitome of Tomizza’s thematic concerns and mode of discourse.<sup>3</sup> The novel is based on epistolary writings from the early 1920s and follows a Slovenian woman who immigrates to Trieste in 1918. By reconstructing, inferring, hypothesising and inventing this woman’s experiences within the historical context of war, liberation and nationalist revindications, Tomizza constructs a complex character drawn between patriotic loyalty and hopes of integration and acceptance. Social and intimate relations align Franziska with her host culture and as the ethnic conflict intensifies, she can neither identify with her nationalist compatriots nor fully reject anti-Slavic Italians who politicise her perceived inferiority. This in-between situation epitomises the essence of transnationality in that it reflects movements and interactions that breach national borders and question normative conceptions of identity and community (Robinson 136). More specifically, the way in which Franziska circumvents absolute distinctions between Self and Other and citizen and non-citizen, projects a duality that, as Emily Hicks shows with reference to Latin American literature, personifies the border. Such characters are decentred from national territories and cultures as an effect of inhabiting a border culture and a reality that is “bilingual, bicultural and biconceptual” (Hicks xxiii, xv). Border crossers tend, precisely, to view the world and its objects with different “referential codes” and texts representing their experiences do, accordingly, present a “multidimensional perception” and “a fragmentation in cultural, linguistic and political deterritorialization” (Hicks xxiv). This notion of an intrinsically experimental mode of writing engages the thought of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and their understanding, more specifically, of “minor literature” as characterised by a deterritorialised language, a politicisation of individual experiences and a collectivised enunciation (Hicks xxx). In addition, Hicks specifies, border writing deterritorialises conceptions of the subject, of spatiotemporal dimensions and of everyday life—as such, it sutures the reader into a conceptual border crossing (xxiv, xxxi). The critical potential of this practice resides, as such, in its call for a democratic literacy open to multiple perspectives

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and *Gli sposi di via Rossetti* (1987) as well as in the psychoanalytically inspired *I rapporti colpevoli* (1993) and the posthumous *La visitatrice* (2000). For a detailed description and subdivision of Tomizza’s *oeuvre*, see Moretto 3.

<sup>3</sup> To my knowledge, *Franziska* has only been examined in Guagnini, “Lettura di *Franziska*” and “Cultura in regione” 1113; Moretto 88–203; Deganutti, *Fulvio Tomizza* 141–47.

(Hicks xxxi). To what extent texts that think and speak from the border may integrate both heterogenous literary strategies and decentralised subjectivities may be illustrated with reference to *Franziska*. Against norms of narrative and generic unity, the novel merges narratorial commentaries and historical reconstruction with epistolary testimonies and mythical fictionalisations. The result is a hybridised composition adopted to frame a character of dual vision, plurilingual enunciations and incompatible loyalties. While this reconstruction of private and historical events most evidently seeks to revisit a political and ethnic conflict from the viewpoint of its invisible victims, the conveyed critique of centralising structures and totalising borders presents a more universal and increasingly relevant call for inclusive conceptions of identities, belonging, culture and nationhood.

*Franziska* starts with memories from Gorizia where the narrator recalls having attended boarding school. Some years before, he visited this town of his adolescence and happened to overhear two employees at the train station converse in Slovene. While this sensory experience evoked fond memories from a nearby Slovene trattoria he used to visit in Gorizia, the women's Slavic voices also surprised the narrator since, he reflects, in "Trieste, dove la minoranza slovena era più sparsa ma anche più numerosa, mai in luogo pubblico si sarebbe fatto uso della lingua tanto avversata..."<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding its immediately bewildering effect, this introduction serves, we will discover, clearly ideated purposes. The first-person evocation of remote and recent recollections establishes both the narrator's self-reflexive presence in the text and his direct experience with the interethnic realities it will represent. The personal relevance of the Italian-Slovene dynamics is emphasised by the description of his mother as "né slava né italiana come tutti noi" (*F* 11). Similar anticipations of the story to be told are embedded in the setting of Gorizia, which may be perceived as either "l'inizio o il termine della Mitteleuropa" (*F* 9), and of the train station, which in this cultural and linguistic crossroad constitutes a point of mediation. By way of analogy, these liminal spaces foreshadow the figure of a woman who crosses the Slovene-Italian border and remains in-between two cultural and linguistic worlds. To relate the conceptualisation of this character, the narrator presents another anecdote involving a Slovene schoolteacher in Trieste. Some time back, the teacher had given him some letters, suggesting, in Triestine dialect, "che le xe, che ghe xe ... no so ... dela poesia" (*F* 11). This supposed poetic quality did, however, escape the narrator since the

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<sup>4</sup> Tomizza, *Franziska* 10. All further references to *Franziska* will be indicated with *F* and page number.

senders—two Italian officers in a recently liberated Trieste—were respectively irritatingly elaborate and brusque in their expression. The epistolary documents were, therefore, shelved somewhere in the narrator’s chaotic office. What intrigued him, on the other hand, was the image that emerged of their female interlocutor, Franziska. Like the Slovene women in Gorizia, she appeared to have worked at the railway station: “C’era dunque un tempo,” the narrator reflects “nel quale anche a Trieste una ragazza slovena poteva svolgere servizio presso un ente pubblico di primaria rilevanza” (*F* 12). This was, however, at a time when Trieste still constituted Austro-Hungarian territory and Slovene girls, even in the Empire’s most irredentist city, found protection under the “metaphysical” power of the recently deceased Franz Joseph I.

At this point in the narrative, readers will have noticed that the man who starts by sharing personal recollections acts explicitly as a writer and that his story includes the ideation and composition of a second story about Franziska. This dual conceptualisation of the novel gravitates around the encounter with the teacher. Indeed, although the narrator-author does not retrieve the letters until after he has already related Franziska’s childhood and first years in Trieste, it is the epistolary rediscovery and the teacher’s suggestion that mediate between the self-referential and the reconstructive levels of narration. What convinces the narrator to embark on the story with an aptitude he himself finds surprising—“Non mi facevo tanto, sono sorpreso di me stesso” (*F* 17)—is, especially, the information that the Slovene woman was born in the village of Štanjel (San Daniele del Carso) on January 1, 1900. From documented descriptions and plausible inferences regarding the celebrations this epochal date inspired in the multi-ethnic Trieste and the isolated village, the narrative proceeds to suggestive but highly fantastic suppositions regarding Franziska’s exceptional birth. Like every child of the Empire born during the first hours of the new century, she would have received a personal patronage and a monetary award from the aging and childless Franz Joseph I. An illusion would, accordingly, have been born about Franziska Jožefa as having a future at the court in Vienna, in preparation for which she would, at the age of twelve, have been entrusted to a Styrian Baroness in a nearby village. The description of this woman as reclusive and mysterious, on the one hand, and as a transmitter of humanistic learning, on the other, is pivotal for our understanding of Franziska whose mythical and scholastic background are both associated with the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A widow of an imperial naval officer who spent her youth at the Austrian court, the Baroness would have passed on—the narrator imagines—vast knowledge as well as political sentiments to Franziska who, for two years,

would have been secluded within the opaque windows and unbreachable walls of the Baroness' residence. Massive, isolated and hidden behind dark conifers foliage, the Riffenberg Castle<sup>5</sup> presents a crepuscular atmosphere that resonates in the Baroness' dismal moods. At night, as Franziska happens to discover, the infinitely mourning widow retreats to an inhabited part of the castle and lights candles in front of her late husband's uniform which she embraces. The morose rite and the ambiance in which it unfolds are invested with a gothic iconography that recalls Franziska birth.<sup>6</sup> This event is imagined to have unfolded as a battle against time, as the midwife would mercilessly have delayed Franziska's arrival and silenced her first cries until the church bells announced the magic midnight hour. That Franziska's mother, as the narrator suggests, would have died a few days later, seems supported by two details about Franziska's letters: firstly, the absence of references to any maternal figure except her aunt and, secondly, the dark vision she articulates regarding her birth: "sono nata sfortunata, non sarò mai felice" (*F* 33). This awareness of an innate misfortune alludes not merely to an irremediable human loss but, according to the narrator, also to an original offence—a sin of *hubris* related to an avaricious fraud of time (Moretto 78)—that, as we shall see, unchained later instances of deprivation and injustice.

The anchorage of Franziska's origins to the turn of the century and to the myth of the Austro-Hungarian Empire outlines the parameters of a narrative that will unfold in the intersection between history and destiny, and testimony and legend. Whereas the historical focus is a premise for a representation of geopolitical transformations and interethnic relations in the Northern Adriatic Sea, the narrative's legendary dimension allows both to elaborate the rather insipid epistolary source and to invest the humble and, as anticipated, unfortunate female protagonist with a sense of honour and dignity. As mediating agents between the two perspectives we identify both the narrator-author, who positions himself in history and draws attention to the novel's fiction, and Franziska, whose story exemplifies the crepuscular decline of the Empire and the conflicts that emerged from this time of transformation. The historical significance of this character is

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<sup>5</sup> The castle is located in the "valle del torrente Branica" (*F* 43) and is modelled on the Medieval and recently restored Grad Branik/Castello di Branik, also known as the Castello di Rifembergo, in the town of Nova Gorica.

<sup>6</sup> There runs a gothic vein through Tomizza's fiction, as Moretto (3, 24) emphasises. Set in juxtaposition to the author's constant search for historical and cultural specificity, this stylised mode of representation points to his works' essentially experimental nature.



introduced in relation to the outbreak of World War II, when she returns home with a humanistic culture and the knowledge of German and starts to work at an Austrian field hospital. Whereas the direct contact with imperial soldiers offers valuable interpersonal and linguistic exchanges, the interactions and challenges are far less welcome when her village is invaded by adversary forces who convey their complaints and commands in incomprehensible Italian dialects. Nino, who one day approaches Franziska with a request, is an exceptionally friendly representative of the enemy. Despite his benevolent smile and efforts to speak in German, however, she rejects the exchange: in this officer from Cremona, she recognises only “il nemico, il diverso, la persona che avrebbe piegato il suo volere soltanto per costrizione” (F 70). Franziska’s ways of insisting to the last on the falling empire’s honour reveals the influence not only of the Baroness’ Mitteleuropean sensibilities and anti-Italian resentment, but also of a social milieu that is just as cohesive and monolithic as the surrounding Karst Plateau. Something in the rejected exchange with Nino suggests, however, that the Slovene woman’s Habsburgian integrity may be altered under different circumstances and influences. While she ignores Nino’s curiosity to know her name, someone else discloses this on her behalf and in apprehending and repeating the appellation so uncannily close to his own—Francesco—he purifies its non-Italian sounds. By this act of linguistic appropriation, the Emperor’s goddaughter is re-baptised as Francesca.

The instinctive and apparently innocent way of Italianising a Slavic name points to certain dynamics that, as Franziska will discover, consolidated the Italian hegemony in imperial Trieste.<sup>7</sup> To reconstruct her experience with immigration,

<sup>7</sup> Trieste knew a rapid expansion after Emperor Karl VI proclaimed its status as *porto franco* in 1719. Whereas, at that time, the city constituted an anonymous village of some 5000 inhabitants, a century later it was already one of the Empire’s major and most diverse commercial and cultural centres (Tomizza, *Destino di frontiera* 30–31). Immigration from neighbouring hinterlands and from the larger sphere of the Empire created a “colourful and cosmopolitan dynamism” (Pizzi 27) that, however, never challenged the perceived supremacy of Italian Triestines nor, indeed, their reluctance to grant Slavic inhabitants ownership in the city (Tomizza, *Destino di frontiera* 31). To illustrate the hegemony Italian culture enjoyed long before the intensification of irredentist sentiments in the early 1900s, the narrator emphasises all the Slavic and, less commonly, Austro-German inhabitants who out of fear, need, doubts, or convenience would Italianise their names, thus anticipating measures that fascist policies of nationalisation would mandate. No Italian names were ever altered, not even when Trieste later was occupied by Yugoslavia (1945–1953) and originally non-Italian names were re-established (F 74–6). In the 1910s, when the pre-war climate of economic and political instability accentuated century-long divisions, linguistically perceived inequalities were reinforced by contrasting sentiments,

the narrator starts by evoking the maritime ambiance into which she would have arrived. Franziska had never been near the sea and the view of the Adriatic city's overwhelming gulf leaves her "incantata, scossa nel profondo, quasi umiliata" (*F* 73). This sense of intimidation diametrically opposes the perceptions of many Italian Triestines who, at the time, looked to the sea with a sense of pride and identity. For them, the narrator explains, to be Italian implied first and foremost a distinction from the Slavs and Franziska's reaction would, in their view, have confirmed her lack of refinement as a Slavic newcomer. What a symbolic value the sea had for patriotic and irredentist Triestines appears some months later when Trieste is liberated: rather than pursuing an inland route which would have expedited their triumph, the Italian forces purposefully enter into the scenic gulf. This emphasis on contrasting attitudes towards an apparently neutral natural element alludes to a tendency within the majority culture to equate Italian with the sea and Slavic with inland territories. The implication is an ethnic binarism of urban sophistication and rustic ignorance that, at the time, "rimarcava scioltezza da una parte e goffaggine dall'altra, disinibizione scettica e impaccio rassegnato, ma alludeva ad altro" (*F* 73). Behind this sense of exclusive identification with the sea there was, the narrator concludes, the thought of Italian landscapes and cultural traditions beyond the horizon; a prestigious well of beauty and knowledge Triestines longed to be part of and that they evoked to demonstrate an ideal belonging in front of both Austrian occupiers and Slavic newcomers.

What the eighteen-year old Franziska encounters is, in her perception, an intimidatingly extensive and threatening city. Here, the war she has sought to flee manifests itself in the form of extreme poverty and social unrest as well as convictions regarding the city's need of a redemption both from imperial powers and Slavic influences. In this climate, the host culture's mental images of Self and Other—in imagological terms, its "autoimages" and "heteroimages" (Leersen 27)—are encapsulated by perceptions of Slavic languages and speech patterns as signs of cultural inferiority. To avoid being stigmatised as "S'cia-vi" or hear other insults denouncing Slavic voices in the streets, Franziska distinguishes between safe and unsafe spaces (*F* 82). At the Slovenian high-school she initially attends, she is free not merely to speak the refined Slovenian acquired under the Baroness,

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from cultural self-preservation and nationalism nurtured by anti-Slavic hatred, to separatist and imperialist visions directed towards the Balkans. Under such circumstances, to insist on one's linguistic identity became a political act and a source of further conflict. See Negrelli 356–57 and Ara and Magris 108, 102.

but also to merge Slovene and Venetian-Triestine dialect into colloquial exclamations such as “Orka maštela! Sam se vzdigla e via mi! Boš vèdeu, merlo!”<sup>8</sup> Beyond the protective walls of the school and the Slovene community, she speaks only if someone addresses her directly and only in standard Italian. Perfectly aware of the tendency language has to betray otherwise unnoticeable ethnic identities, Franziska also knows that, in her mouth, the local dialect would acquire “lievi ma inequivocabili sfumature” guaranteed to provoke “un disconoscimento brusco [...] un perfido o ringhioso motteggio” in her Triestine interlocutors (*F* 82). Nonetheless, the day when Trieste is liberated, she forgets all self-censoring precautions. Seeing ecstatic patriots stream to the port to honour the Italian forces, Franziska also ventures into the streets and acts as an ambivalent spectator drawn between feverous enthusiasm and nostalgia for all she has left behind. When a girl hands out a tricoloured handkerchief for her to tie around her wrist, nothing distinguishes the Slovene inlander from the rest. So immersed is her tearful face in the collective celebration that a nosy Triestine woman takes hold of her and asks: “Povera cocola, non te vedi anca ti l’ora di abrazar el tuo bel soldà?” (*F* 93). The unwelcome intrusiveness disorients Franziska who, in the moment of emotional turmoil, replies in similar dialectal terms: “No, si pol aspetar ...” The woman instantly loosens her suffocating grip and scrutinises Franziska’s face while affirming “Lei no la xe triestina” (*F* 93). What betrayed Franziska in this case is not only her Slavic intonation, but also the use of “si” instead of “se,” which is characteristic of the Triestine dialect. Franziska, who has neither the words nor the confidence to respond, is abandoned to the silent shame of othering and can only seek protection in her physical anonymity and the undiscerning crowd. At this point, she is still unaware of the extent to which this offense will resonate in future interactions and become a motivating force of linguistic assimilation.

Franziska’s attempt to adjust to ethnically different contexts by selecting, excluding and integrating Slovene, Italian and Triestine dialect illustrates a plurilingual mode of expression that, as Marianna Deganutti has shown, characterises Tomizza’s works in two particular ways. Firstly, it conveys the mental and social life of characters who are shaped by hybrid identities, experiences with exile and interactions within multicultural and multilingual communities (*Fulvio Tomizza* 6–8). Secondly, the author’s plurilinguistic practice creates an “Un-literariness”

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<sup>8</sup> The narrator’s footnote explains and translates this as: “Tipiche contaminazioni, oggi in maggiore diffusione, tra lingua slovena e dialetto veneto-triestino: ‘Orca mastella! Mi sono alzata e via di corsa! Lo vedrai, merlo!’” (*F* 82)

Deganutti considers in positive terms for its ability to reflect collisions between two or more linguistic backgrounds and expand the text by the means of “hybridity and linguistic creativity” (8). Seen from the viewpoint of border writing, the contamination of the literary Italian by foreign languages and dialectal influences reinforces the different narrative modes adopted to evade norms of unity and coherence. These decentralising strategies convey the cross-cultural influences that always question categorical distinctions between adjacent cultures as well as the perceptions of those who stand between two cultural worlds. The first indicators to the multidimensional look Franziska gradually acquires are, precisely, certain plurilingual experiences she intuited before she even crossed the border. Within the multicultural ambiance of the field hospital, she was introduced to all the Slavic languages in addition to standard and dialectal Italian and she could converse in German with such ease that she refused, disdainfully, to respond to Nino’s flawed greeting. As an undesired immigrant within the majority culture, she discovers that the tables are turned and learns, accordingly, to distinguish between the dominating dialect and standard Italian, as well as between Slovene as a premise either for compatriotic solidarity or for discrimination. The extent and significance of this linguistic negotiation is elaborated in relation to Franziska’s increased contact with Italians when she starts to work. The narrator hypothesises that thanks to her legendary birth and Habsburg education, influential contacts within the *Narodni dom*—the Slovenian community centre<sup>9</sup>—procure her a position at the railways station shortly before the city and its public sector become a domain of the new Italian administration.

The first indicator Franziska notices of this post-war transition is the arrival at her workplace of some military engineers charged with overseeing the reconstruction of the railway networks. As a sign, it would seem, of her destiny, Nino reappears on her path and whereas he remembers her very well, she has a clear recollection of their confrontation but not of him. She has, therefore, no prejudice against Nino and since she finds herself in his territory and no longer has any imperial honour to defend, she is far more receptive to his limited German:

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<sup>9</sup> *Narodni dom* was constructed in the early 1900s as the home of the Slovene community in Trieste. Its destruction in 1920 at the hands of fascist squads indicated the cohesiveness and national pride with which the financial and cultural centre resented “quel gruppo nazionale in prepotente ascesa” (Vinci 453). The arson attack is, not incidentally, amply treated in the works of the Slovene writer Boris Pahor (1959).

“Ich bin von Görz daeben gekommen für meine Freundin Francesca zu sehen”

[...] La giovane impiegata gli sorrise e replicò: “Può parlare vostro italiano. Io capisco italiano come voi parla tedesco.”

“Meglio, molto meglio” si complimentò l’ufficiale. (*F*98)

In reality, the officer is not anywhere as impressed by the Slovene woman’s Italian as he is by the gracefully blond appearance and the good manners most of her colleagues know to appreciate. Against those who purposefully state their anti-Slavic attitudes in Franziska’s presence, Nino expresses unambiguous dissent and, as their professional relationship develops into romance and unofficial engagement, he can also imagine what a virtuous wife she would be. The prospect of introducing Franziska to his upper-middle-class ambiance in Cremona does, however, cause Nino some concern. Twenty years her senior and suffering—we will learn later—from tuberculosis, he would actually have a few reasons to hesitate in committing to this almost ideal woman, but the major obstacle he sees is “la diversità etnica, da lui chiamata razziale, che si trascinava dietro tutto un corollario non proprio positivo: gli umili e ignoti natali, il ruolo presente aggravato dalla vistosa difficoltà d’espressione” (*F* 108). The association Nino establishes between Franziska’s mode of expression and what he considers negative ethnic and socio-cultural traits evokes, as we have seen, common stereotypes about the Slavs’ perceived unsophistication. Notwithstanding the openness he may profess under the influence of Franziska’s grace and the transient optimism brought about by the liberation, Nino would not risk his reputation over an intolerance he intellectually may reject. He determines, accordingly, to eliminate disagreeable manifestations of Franziska’s otherness, starting with her linguistic errors. For Franziska, who in the idea of marrying Nino discerns the domestic bliss and social inclusion she dreams of, the challenge involved in learning Italian represents an investment for the future and she never defends herself against Nino’s increasingly impatient corrections. The inequality in their relation is documented by their letters and Franziska’s submissiveness in front of Nino’s humiliations makes the narrator wonder whether she had any pride and dignity at all. Towards the end of the narrative, he seeks to revindicate her honour by accentuating how, in her last letter to Nino, she transcribes what he expressed in German when they first met, conceivably finding some satisfaction in reviewing his errors. This occurs, however, a good decade after that day in Štanjel, when Franziska has not only

improved her Italian but also acknowledged the futility of her dreams and the inescapability of her misfortune.

To better perceive of the growth Franziska undergoes, we may compare the hint of *schadenfreude* with which she retrospectively judges Nino to the submissiveness she showed a decade earlier when her inadequate knowledge of the majority culture's language put her at a clear disadvantage. If upon re-encountering Nino in Trieste Franziska had accepted his invitation to speak in German, their relation would likely have assumed a different dynamics without necessarily reaching a different outcome. Instead, Franziska yields rather ingenuously to her own vulnerability and to the dominant culture, which associates her otherness and perceived inferiority with her Slavic speech patterns. That her mode of expression would betray her ethnic origins was, as we saw, a lesson Franziska learned as an inexperienced immigrant and her defensive reaction became to speak as little as possible. The dilemma she runs into is, however, that self-censorship is no less harmful than being muted, especially when this implies to ignore increasingly frequent and disparaging comments. At the same time, when the exigency to speak up gets too strong, there is no space of articulation outside the language of discrimination. Consequently, when Franziska tries to voice her protests against certain xenophobic co-workers, the staggering denunciation she intends to articulate will inadvertently only reinforce their prejudice: "Gente come è lui ammazasse noi come è niente. Ma no che possono ancora. E allora voliono sciaciare via noi, marsch, tornare in vostro Carsol!" (F 103). At stake in this upsettingly failed attempt at claiming her right to a city where the liberation has only intensified divisions between worthy and unworthy inhabitants, we identify the implications of bell hook's notion that "language is also a place of struggle" (145). To fight oppression and "come to a voice" that the majority cannot silence requires either to adhere with the language of domination or to make the margin the basis for resistance (150). Franziska intuitively adopted the latter strategy when she dismissed Nino's friendly approach with the scorn of patriotic pride. In that moment, she looked to her village and her cultural background as a sphere of protest against unwelcome Italian authorities. In Trieste, however, the margin that hook identifies as a "difficult yet necessary" premise for counter-hegemonic discourses is not available to Franziska (150). In contrast to her rebellious compatriots who join forces in the "space of radical openness" (hooks 150) of the Narodni dom and who intensify their dissent as anti-Slavic hatred escalates, Franziska, envisioning her future with a representative of the Italian army, has compromised her ability to

turn marginalisation into a force of opposition. However, while she has distanced herself from the minority to which she belongs, she is not accepted within the majority culture either and she appears, therefore, to be equally decentralised from the margin and the centre. Although she suffers from the increasing denigration of her people as fascist sentiments and actions spread throughout North-East Italy, the harmful comments she faces only reinforce her determination to master the host culture's language and make herself a worthy candidate for its exclusive social circles.

From the goal she sets for her assiduous study of Italian, we sense that the resilience Franziska shows is motivated by something more than dreams of marital happiness. Her highest aspiration, it appears, is not to please Nino, but to one day be able to converse on equal terms with the pompously eloquent Captain Santachiara, Nino's superior. During their conversations at the railway station, the patriotic Santachiara predicts that Trieste will become the haven of multicultural inclusion it never was as an imperial city. To Franziska's disappointment, however, he will embrace D'Annunzio's notorious expedition to Fiume some months later and subsequently also join the Fascist party. Franziska also realises that, although the captain publicly appraises her grace and pretends to ignore her errors, his eyes express severe judgement and a reminder that her speech discloses all that which excludes her from his world of cultural privilege and purity. To document both the "long and frustrating struggle" Franziska undergoes, as Deganutti writes, to acquire Italian (144) and the dynamics of her interactions with Nino and Santachiara, the narrator refers to and cites extensively from the men's letters to Franziska as well as the drafts she had preserved of her replies. Both relations take an epistolary turn in 1919 when Santachiara is transferred to the South and Nino returns to Cremona due to complications from tuberculosis. As the narrator relates the exchanges and deduces the unspoken sentiments and motivations of the three interlocutors, he elaborates on Franziska's sense of conceptual and socio-cultural decentralisation. In addition to the explicit or tacit critique and humiliation she faces, what evidences the twofold vision she acquires are her increasingly incompatible loyalties towards the Slovene community and the majority culture. Although this duality develops as a result of her relation with Nino and of her hopes to be accepted as his fiancée, her being torn between two adversary groups is already present when Trieste celebrates its liberation. Had the war not driven Franziska into the majority culture's territory, she would have conceivably felt her affiliation—both as a political citizen and as a mythical inheritor—to the fallen Austro-Hungarian empire much more strongly and would have reacted to Italian culture with the

type of resistance she manifested when she met Nino in her village. Instead, as the news of the Italian victory draws everyone, including Franziska's Slovene colleagues, into the streets, she submerges herself in the improvised celebration as a melancholy observer. While the occasion accentuates her physical and mental distance from the traditional mentality and the landscape of her village, she is also saddened by the impossibility of fully sharing the crowd's joy. This ambivalent vision indexes an inner transformation that is not a mere question of adjustment to a given historical reality and socio-cultural climate, although Franziska reacts in such pragmatic ways to the practical implications of administrative transitions. Rather, her search for a familiar community and, at the same time, of a new life leads her slowly to adopt opposed cultural codes: without rejecting the values of a multi-ethnic, monarchic world or those, more specifically, of Slavic unity and dignity, she starts to understand the patriots' ideals of national belonging and sovereignty. Her participation in the city's collective celebration seems, in fact, to indicate an unarticulated sensibility towards the Triestines' claim to freedom as not being so different from her own. However, since this tentative alignment with her host culture's perceptions does not lead either to assimilation nor certainly to inclusion, Franziska remains in-between, unable both to return to what she came from and to step definitively into the new world.

As political tensions and ethnic confrontations increase around Franziska, the margin ceases to be a space of resistance, affection and attachment. The basis for this process of cultural decentralisation was laid following her decision to leave the shielding and reclusive spaces of the Slovene high school for a job that involved daily contact with Italians as well as other Slavs. The multicultural ambience at the train station nurtures in Franziska visions of a peaceful integration that are reinforced when she reencounters Nino. In him, she recognises not only her most severe critic but also a social gatekeeper in that an approval within his ambience would constitute a first step towards inclusion into his national community. Franziska's project of acculturation appears relatively unproblematic until situations arise in which the loyalty towards her own stigmatised people is challenged by the desire for unconditional love and freedom from prejudice. In front of the very culture that defeated the empire and demonstrates all its disdain for Slavic newcomers, Franziska's compatriots tend not to adopt an ambivalent view of the world but develop a one-dimensional perspective of opposition. We recognise this attitude in a former classmate of Franziska who, during a chance encounter with Franziska and Nino, openly conveys her disapproval of their relationship. Inevitably, Franziska predicts, the girl "racconterà in cerchio io cattiva slovena e



putana" (*F* 116) and she blames Nino for still wearing a uniform after the war is fought and won since his pretentious appearance can only provoke anti-Italian sentiments. The conclusion she finally draws from the unfortunate disclosure of her perceived treacherous behaviour is, however, that "l'amore di patria, la difesa civile, non possono occupare sempre ed esclusivamente il cuore di una donna" (*F* 121). What complicates this romantic view is not, finally, evil tongues, but squadristic violence. The first, unarticulated and non-officialised emergence of fascism found, as Ara and Magris observe, a particularly fertile ground in Trieste where irredentist aspirations only increased after World War I (Ara and Magris 120–23). A series of nationalist attacks organised in the region reach a peak of atrociousness in 1920 when the fascists set fire to Narodni dom in response to a Slavic counter-attack following an initial Italian suppression of civilian protesters. Like many of her compatriots, Franziska observes the harrowing scene, but she stands alone and is reminded both of the majority culture's injustices and the guilt she carries towards her suppressed people. No less outraged than them but—she knows—not quite the Slovene girl she used to be, she is not entitled either to suffer over the national sorrow nor to request the Lord's justifications for it.

Franziska may have the ability to engage adversarial cultural codes but since she is equally isolated from the respective codifying universes, all she can do when interethnic tensions transform into bellicose conflict is to retreat "nel suo dolore monco" and affirm the tendency life and history have to go against her (*F* 149). The quiet resignation to forces of a conflict that allows no synthesis or ambiguities suggests the indignation, remorse and dual pain she carries and, incidentally, anticipates the advice Nino will offer a few days later. Writing from his comfortable nest in Cremona, he recommends she go to the beach, that she avoids thinking and expressing what she thinks and that she shows no sentiments either for Slavs or for Italians. What he conceives of as practical precaution is, however, just another manifestation of the silencing Franziska has experienced all along, which now accentuates her precarious position in the historical conflict. Seeing the symbol of national pride and community demolished by fascist flames, she reacts with silence and immobility, but to stop thinking and escape in leisurely distractions is as foreign to her as is the rebellion practiced by some of her compatriots. Her inability to come to a voice is not a matter of linguistic impediment or of being intimidated by insensitive critique but, rather, of the isolation she suffers in the absence of individuals who may comfort her and of a community of resistance. To express her need of empathy in this moment, Franziska does not write to Nino, as one would have expected, but to Santachiara, despite what she knows about his

linguistic bravura and nationalistic convictions. The narrator explains the puzzling choice with reference to the type of approval she would be seeking in this critical moment. Whereas, in relation to Nino, Franziska hopes to be valued as a woman, what the captain might offer is an affirmation of her worth as an individual and a citizen. It would therefore be, the narrator posits, “per dibattere, se non per chiarire, l'ossessivo tema della propria pochezza” that Franziska appeals to Santachiara (*F* 157). Contrary to her intentions to challenge him and to convey a burning defence of her people, however, her letter presents “un piagnisteo vittimistico, un reclamo esaltato e disarmato che cedeva non pochi punti allo scaltrito interlocutore” (*F* 150). In his reply the clever interlocutor knows, in fact, to paraphrase the insecure woman's accusations into a pompous endorsement of the generous Italians' right to revenge unjust offences from stubborn and violent Slavs. The linguistic and discursive defeat could not have been more resounding and while Santachiara's ambiguous affection and pretentious appraisal of Franziska's many qualities might restore pieces of her shattered self-esteem, he offers none of the empathy and affirmation she needed.

The incompatible loyalties and desires Franziska develops reflect her multi-lingual and bicultural identity and would, to some extent, be a common experience among border subjects. Her dilemma is, however, aggravated by conflicts and totalising mentalities that define her either as an undesired inlander or a traitor. Under different circumstances, the command of contrasting cultural and linguistic codes could conceivably have enabled her to project a radical voice, whether to resist discrimination and exclusion or to mediate between the adversary groups. Instead, Franziska is left in a state of dual affiliation and alienation in which the individual she was and the one she aspired to become are both denied. The decentralising processes that have brought her into this irresolvable in-between position affect both her civic status and her relations: dismissed, like her fellow Slovene employees, from the railway station, she has no network or contacts of protection. At the same time, just after Mussolini claims power in 1922, Nino stops writing and she is, consequently, also deprived of amorous affection and the few hopes she had for the future. The only personal contact she maintains is to Santachiara who returns to Trieste and who, as a fascist with humanist sensitivities, welcomes Francesca into his family home. Whereas the exclusion from public employment anticipates policies that would be extended and brought to their extreme consequences towards the last years before and during World War II, Nino's abandonment reflects no ideological convictions. Rather, when he ignores Franziska's repeated pleas for an explanation to his silence, he acts on a general and

conformist indifference that, at the time, brought many to anaesthetise counterforces of solidarity and resistance with the indirect effect of promoting the formation of the totalitarian state. In this representation of a more overarching sign of moral loss, we recognise one of the novel's most intriguing aspects and another motivation for the narrator's choice to privilege the interpersonal dimension of historical realities. As a border character, Franziska may most immediately serve to illuminate interethnic and ideological dynamics in one of fascist Italy's most multicultural cities. A major potential of this character resides, precisely, in her ability to expose nationalist attitudes and totalitarian policies from the viewpoint of their most vulnerable victims. However, she also offers an occasion to represent a set of historically and politically defined interpersonal relations in order to examine the motivations of those who betrayed commitments and affections in the interest of appearance, respectability and social order.

As a critical act of revisitation, *Franziska* is firmly anchored to 1920s Trieste and the reconstruction of the characters' individual and inter-relational experiences is systematically elaborated in relation to the socio-cultural context. The narrator's attention to document the narrative with the support of archival and testimonial sources may be illustrated by his comments regarding the unusually high suicide rates Trieste experienced at the time when Franziska is reported to have suffered both severe depression and physical deterioration. He may also inform readers that Nino lived reclusively as a teacher until he passed away in 1958. Evidently, the illness he never identified but evoked in his letters as a pretext not to formalise his relation to Franziska, proved far less inclement with him than what Trieste eventually did for many of those who, like Franziska, had come in search of peace and modest opportunities. This elaboration of the two lovers' individual lives accentuates suggestive parallels in their destinies: among Franziska's unfulfilled dreams there was also that of becoming a teacher and, like Nino, she never married. Unable to share his complacent stoicism, however, she appears both to have suffered and to have learned much more from the solitude and isolation that he, in effect, chose for them both. The very last letter she writes to Nino, eleven years after they first met, presents no attempt to conceal sentiments that are painfully intact. However, in light of the effects his behaviour had of destroying all her hopes, faith and illusions, she nonetheless assures him that: "se anche tu tornassi da me io non accetterei mai più di diventare tua moglie. Questa certezza è che rende il mio intimo dolore meno amaro" (*F* 196).

In this last effort to assess the outcome of both her devotion and aspirations, Franziska demonstrates not only a considerable command of Italian, but also the

strength to confront Nino with the ramifications of his betrayal. Whereas the linguistic achievement would have provoked some reflections even in her unreceptive interlocutor, assuming that he read her letter, Franziska's strength questions the narrator's initial impression regarding her lack of pride and dignity. The tentative claim to agency after so much adversity may partly be attributed to the relative stability she experiences in the 1930s as the assistant to a Slovenian lawyer. Some years later, when World War II breaks out, Franziska seeks protection for his children and herself by retreating to her childhood home. Reversing the flight from war-ridden territories conducted twenty-five years earlier, Franziska does, to some extent, realise the hope she nurtures to leave a city she loves but that, as she articulates in her last letter, "con la redenzione, come ai miei connazionli, portò anche a me tante amarezze" (*F* 196). The temporary withdrawal from Allied bombings into the familiar Karst milieu and terrain restores, however, neither the unilateral perspective she once had nor, certainly, the optimism with which she first crossed the contested border. Franziska immediately sympathises with and takes risks to assist the young resistance fighters who operate so courageously in her village, but she categorically condemns their assassination of some Italian soldiers. In contrast to the fascist, she argues, the soldiers were just fighting someone else's war. The uneasy duality Franziska conveys clearly evokes the memory of Nino, whose service was motivated by a sense of duty rather than irredentist commitment, but we also recognise the border subject's bicultural perspective and the capacity it provides to recognise something human in the ethnic Other.

Returning, for a while, to the formative years Franziska spent at the Baroness' castle, we may observe how much she cherished the opportunity during her geography lessons to travel unrestrictedly on globes and large maps. Letting her mind explore always vaster cultural and conceptual horizons, she would cross regions, rivers and cities "non incontrando mai confini" (*F* 48). Now, two world wars and three decades of ethnic conflict later, she has direct experience with nations and territories and knows that human movement and actions are rarely unconstrained and unconcerned. These are lessons Franziska did not learn within the impenetrable walls of the Riffenberg castle, nor along the narrow roads and stony landscape of her village. Somehow, the very isolation of these ambiances promoted dreams of infinite and unhindered border crossings. Rather, the fundamental wisdom about lines of human separation was acquired in front of the vast gulf and spacious piazzas that, historically, had made Trieste a centre of multicultural encounters and exchanges. Inherent in this dramatisation of lived experiences with geographical and cultural borders we recognise the potential of

border writing to provide “information about and understanding of the present to the past in terms of possibilities for the future” (Hicks xxxi). Beneath this historically based information and the ability it has to illuminate present geopolitical and intercultural relations as well as to present visions for cultural reform, there lingers, as we have seen, a legendary dimension that runs from the myths associated with Franziska’s birth and education to the conviction she later develops of being inescapably subjected to personal and historical adversities. The idea that her life was fated seems corroborated by the novel’s closing lines which inform us that, at the age of 83, Franziska was fatally hit by a car in the street near the railway station where she and Nino conducted their first walks.

Were we to follow the mythical dimension of Franziska story, we would consider the possibility that her life was not exclusively shaped by political and socio-cultural circumstances. Seen from this perspective, the misfortunes and injustice she suffered would also have reflected her affinity with the 20th-Century, “suo crudele, grande, incommensurabile gemello” (*F* 191). Where the two levels of experience intersect is, most fundamentally, in the in-between position Franziska always occupies, whether between two centuries, two adversary cultures or between reality and myth. The function of her character to intermediate between history and destiny is elaborated and accompanied by the narrative fusion between historical reconstruction, fictional invention and self-reflexive commentary. The text takes form within this encounter between the liminal character and her narrator and it moves into the territory of hybridity in which Tomizza localised most of his works. By rejecting norms of narrative and generic unity and ideals of uniform identities, *Franziska* realises the type of “cultural, linguistic and political deterritorialization” that, according to Hicks, challenges “distinctions between original and alien culture” (xxiv, xxiii). At the end of this self-conscious and intransigent literary operation this border character reclaims neither the love and empathy nor the civil rights of which she was deprived. What she does achieve is a space from which to expose the arbitrary and unjust nature of borders and the ideologies they are built to promote. Marked, as she is, by a fluid identity that evolves around adversary cultural codes and pluri-lingual articulations, Franziska challenges not only the claim a given culture may make to cultural superiority and natural dominance but, more fundamentally, assumptions that ethnic groups are separated by intrinsic human and intellectual qualities. To the extent that borders are outlined in the name of national sovereignty, their function is to exclude external interferences in national affairs and to restrict access to resources. Inevitably and intentionally, however, such borders also protect from undesired cultural

contaminations. What Franziska's story questions is, in conclusion, the very idea of human cultures and identities as pure, fixed and separate. Rather, as products of a multitude of changing influences, cultures and identities are constantly emerging and, if allowed unrestrained expansion, they could lead to the day Tomizza dreamt of, "in cui non si debbano più attraversare confini" (*Destino di frontiera* 34).

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