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*GRAVEYARDS OF MEMORY AT THE NORTHEASTERN BORDERS OF ITALY*

Both the *foibe* and the St. Sabba's *Risiera* are symbolic sites burdened with loss, disappearance and extermination. *Foibe* are cavernous geological formations typical of the rugged mountainous Karst area surrounding Trieste. At the end of the Second World War they aroused general interest and censure after being used as open-air cemeteries. St. Sabba's *Risiera*, located in Trieste, was not merely the only concentration camp in Italy, but also the only camp erected within the walls of a city. Ideologically appropriated at various times by different groups, loaded with an uncomfortable, violent, and tragically ambiguous set of meanings, both the *foibe* and the *Risiera* stand as powerful if contended *lieux de memoire*. Discourses of absence have been invoked with reference to both sites. Their silence is, however, eloquent, pointing to the uncertain, disconnected, and displaced cultural identity prevailing in this border area. Through an analysis of Enrico Morovich's novel *Il baratro* (1964), addressing indirectly but no less incisively the traumatic practices connected with the *foibe* and the *Risiera*, the present article discusses these two sites in the light of a paradigm of absence characterizing the northeastern borders of Italy.

The demise of the Fascist Regime in the autumn of 1943 and the long-drawn ending of the Second World War left a trail of civil war, reprisal and violent struggle throughout Italy. The contended northeastern borders experienced even more acutely than mainland Italy this widespread violence, which coagulated there in traumatic events and practises eventually associated with specific sites. Arguably the two most memorable and most tragically renowned sites were the *foibe* and the St. Sabba's *Risiera*.

*Foibe* are deep, intricate, and interconnected underground pits or caverns. They are common features in the geological make-up of the mountainous Karst area, rugged through water erosion of brittle soil. Deriving from the Latin *fovea* (= ditch, cave, empty room), the noun *foiba* is now common currency in modern Italian, together with its derivatives, such as the verb *infoibare* (=forcibly pushing someone down a *foiba*) and the noun *infoibamento* (=the act/the result of pushing someone down a *foiba*). In 1943 and 1945 these pits witnessed a number of summary executions carried out mainly, though not exclusively, by Yugoslav partisans, at the expense of Italian military and civilian victims who were usually handcuffed together with barbed wire, shot or machine-gunned, and,

whether dead or alive, thrown in a train down these chasms.<sup>1</sup> *Risiera di San Sabba* is a different, if equally harrowing, site. The name points to the original function of this building, originally employed to husking and polishing rice. During the Nazi occupation of Trieste and the whole *Adriatisches Küstenland* area from 1943 to 1945, however, the *Risiera* operated as a concentration camp and, while serving mainly as a detention site and temporary residence for prisoners in transit to larger and better equipped *Lagers*, it also witnessed on-site gassings and torture. Uniquely, the *Risiera* is not merely the only concentration camp located in Italy, but also at the very heart an urban and densely populated area.

The ostensible mystery in which both the *foibe* and the *Risiera* have been shrouded, the negative *aura* that is now overwhelmingly attributed to them, together with the several controversies they continue provoking, reinforce the powerful cultural and symbolic constructs that have been erected around these two sites in the course of various decades.<sup>2</sup> While the specificity of *foibe* and the *Risiera* is now analysed in the appropriate historical context, namely the collapse of the existing structures of power such as the Fascist and Nazi regimes, and while a joint Slovenian and Italian historical Committee has been meeting since 1993 with a view to throwing light over these divisive issues, these sites have nonetheless continued haunting both national and local imaginations, coming prominently to the fore in bouts of collective obsessions or, conversely, remaining neglected in temporary and equally eloquent episodes of collective amnesia.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to emphasize that this practise is not exclusive to Yugoslav partisans even though research in this area is extremely patchy. See also the testimony of a survivor cited in Raoul Pupo and Roberto Spazzali, *Foibe* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2003), pp. 99-100: 'Fummo sospinti verso l'orlo di una foiba, la cui gola si apriva paurosamente nera. [...] La cavità aveva una larghezza di circa 10 metri e una profondità di 15 fino alla superficie dell'acqua che stagnava sul fondo. Cadendo, non toccai fondo, e tornato a galla potei nascondermi sotto una roccia. Subito dopo vidi precipitare altri quattro compagni colpiti da raffiche di mitra [...]. Verso sera riuscii ad arrampicarmi per la parete scoscesa e guadagnare la campagna, dove rimasi per quattro giorni e quattro notti consecutive, celato in una buca' ('We were being pushed towards the edge of a *foiba* whose black throat was gaping frighteningly. [...] The hole was approximately 10 metres wide and 15 metres deep from the surface of a pool of stagnant water lying at the bottom. As a result of falling I didn't hit the bottom of the pit and, floating back to water surface, I managed to hide behind a rock. Soon afterwards I saw four friends of mine fall past me after being machine-gunned into the pit [...]. Later, towards evening, I managed to climb up the slippery wall and make my way towards the countryside where I hid away in a cave for the following four nights and days.') -cf. with Enrico Morovich, *Il baratro* (Turin: Einaudi, 1990), pp. 100-103. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> One example for all is the recent, controversial institution of a 'giornata del ricordo' (=memory day) devoted to the victims of the *foibe* celebrated in patent competition with a 'giornata della memoria' (=memory day) dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust.

Though entirely different by nature and function, and following Glenda Sluga's lead in avoiding their equation on an ideological level,<sup>3</sup> the *foibe* and the *Risiera* can nonetheless powerfully complement each other in drawing a symbolic topography of anxiety, contention and trauma at the northeastern borders of Italy. The two sites can, in short, be equated at the symbolic level, on the strength of their status as empty spaces, holes, wells, pitfalls, *trous*, and black holes.<sup>4</sup> This equation relies as much on their status as iconic *lieux de memoire* as Pierre Nora would have them, as it does on their status of empty and silent spaces resonant, nonetheless, with meaning. The *Foibe* and the *Risiera* are sinister monuments where historiography joins hands with silence: 'silentes loquimur' (= 'we speak by virtue of our silence') is the motto frequently carved on wooden crosses placed on the edges of these *foibe*. Loaded with memories, trauma, loss, disappearance, extermination, *foibe* and the *Risiera* signify a fundamental and final absence, which, in turn, speaks of the alienated identity of the border. Both literal and symbolic, their very *voidness* invites a concentration of memories, uncertainties, desires, neuroses, in short a set of meanings associated with the displaced identity at the northeastern borders of Italy.<sup>5</sup>

The *Risiera* and *foibe* have frequently been featured, explicitly or otherwise, in local literature, from Giani Stuparich's story 'La grotta' (1935) to Carlo Sgorlon's novel *La foiba grande* (1992), from the collection of poems *La Risiera di San Sabba* (1970) by Ketty Daneo to the recent story 'Il reddito della vergogna' by Giuseppe O.Longo.<sup>6</sup> However, narratives that deal with the *foibe* or the *Risiera* indirectly, while purporting to deal with something else, are more profitable in mapping out the paradigm of absence powerfully at work in the construction of a disconnected and displaced identity at the northeastern borders of Italy. These narratives demonstrate how this absence is profoundly embedded in local literature. The novel *Il baratro* (=the abyss, the chasm) by Enrico Morovich (1906-1994), written in 1956 and published in 1964, provides an ideal example. Morovich is renowned in

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<sup>3</sup> See G. Sluga, 'The Risiera di San Sabba: Fascism, anti-Fascism and Italian nationalism', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 1 (3), 401-412.

<sup>4</sup> It is no accident that one of the largest *foibe* is better known, in Friulian dialect, as 'il bus de la lum' (= 'the hole of light' or 'the hole of the moon').

<sup>5</sup> With reference to the *foibe*, Pamela Ballinger invokes Bakhtinian *chronotopes*: see 'The Politics of Submersion: History, Collective Memory, and Ethnic Group Boundaries in Trieste', unpublished draft article, [n.p.]: 'offering a "primary means for materializing time in space" [...] the foibe reveal the organisation and production of various group histories'. Their ambivalent, 'shifting status' inevitably 'reflects larger political alignments'. The image of the ravine acquires wider significance during and after the war, with incidents of a similar nature occurring elsewhere, such as the execution of Jews and Communist partisans at the Babi Yar ravine in Nazi occupied USSR in 1941, the mass grave pits in Bulgaria, the mass execution at the Fosse Ardeatine in Rome, etc.

both Italy and France for having contributed to the prestigious literary journal *Solaria* and as an author associated with the genre of the *fantastic*. The influential critic Gianfranco Contini included him in the anthology *Italie magique* (1946) alongside other magical realist authors such as Bontempelli, Palazzeschi, Moravia, Landolfi and Zavattini. Originally from Rjeka (or Fiume as it was at the time of the author's residence), exiled to Pisa, Naples and eventually Genoa, Morovich published fiction that is consistently haunted by the borderland, evoked with great nostalgia for the perceived loss of a *Mitteleuropa*. Morovich portrays the border as a zero-point, a wasteland, or no-man's land, whose very liminality encourages regressive fantasies. Typically, these take the shape of haunting childhood memories, such as bedtime readings of narratives associated with the Italian Unification, namely Alessandro Manzoni's *I promessi Sposi* (1840) and Edmondo De Amicis's *Cuore* (1886), and including a number of personal revisitings, disconcerting in their candid honesty, of the personality cult of the *Duce* Benito Mussolini.

Morovich's magical realist style is also applied in *Il baratro*. The novel features a number of phantoms and ghosts. The protagonist is a dog, or rather a dog's ghost, who acts as the first person narrator in the first part of the narrative. Many readers continue regarding it as a ghost story. Style and tone are intentionally disengaged, as if to exorcise controversial narratives and discourses erected around the border. The border is in fact portrayed here as a flimsy and inconsistent line, a mere human superstructure happily ignored by ghosts who are swept along by any light touch of wind. While human agency is clearly delimited by the confines of barbed wire political borders, ghosts are, on the other hand, allowed to float in a supernatural dimension of their own which shuns the return of 'all flesh' to its centre of gravity. No mention is made here to historical events, no specific locations or sites are cited, nor does the narrative expose any anxiety or trauma. And yet this text emerges, at close reading, as not at all disengaged, particularly when seen in the light of contemporary historical developments. In 1954, while Morovich was in the course of drafting this manuscript, the protracted uncertainty over Trieste's national future was officially 'resolved' after talks officialised by the London Memorandum of Understanding: Trieste and much of its hinterland were assigned to Italy, while most of the Istrian peninsula was handed over to Yugoslavia. This resolution put a historical and juridical end to the endemic shifting back and forth of this borderline, aspiring to normalise the periodical re-

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<sup>6</sup> The latter is in the collection *Il futuro nel sangue: 19 fantapologhi sul potere*, ed. by Vittorio Catani ([n. p.]:

definitions of ownership and identity prompted by each move. Furthermore, consequent to this border re-definition and equally contemporary to this narrative, was a large wave of Italian emigration, the so-called *esodo* (=exodus) whereby thousands of Italian nationals, including Morovich himself and with his family, left their native lands, relatives, jobs, and properties and moved to other parts of the world. When read in this light, *Il baratro*'s silence appears to expose even more forcefully than any official account the collective memories related to trauma, exile, and divided loyalties and identities at the northeastern borders of Italy.

A tension between living and dead, between human and de-humanised, is exposed and visited again and again in this novel. Its pervasive, frozen stillness renders it unique in the context of Morovich's *oeuvre*. The borderline is portrayed here not merely as erasing physical identities, reducing human beings to numbers. Human life itself is consistently erased: the first person narrator is, as mentioned above, the dog Pascià or Fanaletto, who is dead for much of the novel. New characters are introduced all the time, but only to quickly disappear and be revealed as having encountered a mysterious death. Most characters, including the dog, tend to resurface at a later stage as disembodied entities, or *revenants*. Though no real threat emanates from Morovich's *revenants*, whose benevolent domesticity belongs to the realm of the fairy-tale rather than the XIX century ghost story, still the emphasis is powerfully placed on their previous 'mysterious disappearance'. In fact, periodical *sparizioni* (=disappearances) punctuate and sustain the narrative, almost as a recurring rhythmic device. It is no accident that discourses of sudden, unexplained or mysterious disappearances recur in mnemonic constructs erected around *Risiera* and the *foibe*. These *sparizioni* are, in fact, eventually and almost nonchalantly revealed as acts of elimination, following unseen torture or *infoibamento*, even though the latter word is never used.

Another prominent and recurring feature which is equally resonant of such tragic historical practices is the abundance of *sacchi* (=sacks) and *pacchi* (=packs/parcels) bulging with bones and human remains that recur in Morovich's narrative. Similar *sacchi* were being extracted from the *foibe* or dumped in the proximity of the *Risiera*, as featured in official reports dwelling on 'sacchi di cemento' (=cement sacks) thrown out to sea opposite the *Risiera* site and containing human remains after torture and cremation. Morovich makes

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R&D, 2003).

haunting reference here to sacks/packs/parcels discharged inside this *baratro* by the evil Natale (or Dalo) Mei.<sup>7</sup> For reasons that the author never clarifies nor confronts, Dalo Mei amasses corpses of relatives, friends, animals, and enemies previously tortured, murdered and cut into pieces, at the bottom of this pit, which more and more resembles a voracious common grave.

The central pages of this novel, though still implicitly and most chillingly, address this particular feature. Cipriano, a friend of yet another one of Mei's victims, lowers himself into the chasm, and the terrifying spectacle awaiting him at the bottom is described in similar terms used by speleologists and officers employed to report to the authorities after exploring the *foibe*. All the more horrific for being consigned to paper in a bureaucratic and factual register, a style described by Contini as 'tele sobrie, secche, prive di colori, di sfumature, di commenti' ('a sober, dry, and colourless style, devoid of nuances and commentary'),<sup>8</sup> Morovich's circumstantial description, listing the equipment used (the electric torch, the lamp, the rope), the physical environment (the stream of water running at the bottom, the spiky and slippery rocks, the dampness of the pit) down to the emotive response elicited of the explorers, eloquently re-echoes the rhetoric of many of these reports. Most resonant here is the report compiled between 16 and 25 October 1943, after exploring the 'Foiba di Vines' (aka 'foiba dei colombi' =foiba of the doves), the site that threw up the largest total number of corpses, many of whom were conceivably pushed down inside while still alive.<sup>9</sup>

While in the pit, and without really knowing the reason why, Cipriano is seized by a sudden impulse to throw all torn limbs and remnants of human bones and flesh into the stream flowing at the bottom and to re-emerge as swiftly as possible to see the daylight. The bodies of several characters that populated this narrative at various stages and that progressively and mysteriously disappeared one after the other are all heaped together, protruding from half-torn *sacchi* lying at the bottom of this common grave.<sup>10</sup> This chasm is described as being close to the 'viscere della terra' ('the earth's own entrails'). While a veritable litany of inhumation-exhumation punctuates the narrative therein, the border

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<sup>7</sup> See E. Morovich, pp. 52, 53, 74, 75, 82, 85, 86, 89, 94, 96, 101, 102 etc.

<sup>8</sup> G. Contini, *Italia Magica* (Torino: Einaudi, 1988), p. 241; cit. in E. Morovich, p. 158.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. in particular E. Morovich, p. 102 with R. Pupo and R. Spazzali, pp. 52-58 (the original document is in the archive of the 'Istituto Regionale per la Storia del Movimento di Liberazione nel Friuli Venezia-Giulia' and is reported here entirely). 84 corpses were extracted out of the 'Foiba dei colombi'.

<sup>10</sup> Another recurring metaphor is the *ossuary* –see especially C. Sgorlon (b. 1930).

emerges more and more clearly as a body scarred with cuts, gaping wounds, and stigmata.<sup>11</sup> The episode featuring Cipriano penetrating the earth's entrails stretches across the central five pages of the novel and constitutes its focus: past, present and future, memories and pre-figurations, converge at this juncture and are drawn in, almost sucked into this pit to remain trapped inside it. Past events, traumas, lost objects, human voices are all trapped, muffled inside this sinister *baratro*, a black hole malignantly reluctant to regurgitate its precious content.

Cipriano's sense of self is quite clearly altered after descending into Hell. This is obviously a *catabasis* counting numerous literary precursors. Typically, as argued by Bachelard, the descent takes on a dream structure.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, again, to experiences related by speleologists and official explorers, once re-emerged from the pit Cipriano is all too impatient to forget, to put this harrowing experience behind him and move on. Erasing this memory, however, proves to be an impossible task, since inside the *baratro* Cipriano has clearly reached a point of no return. The central isolation of this episode and the character's silent dismay invite readers to empathise, sharing in the tragic intensity of his experience. Here, however, readers are also witnesses to the difficulty on the author's part to reconcile his delusional renouncement of ideology with the powerful archetypal stance of this topic.

After his own disappearance and metamorphosis into a 'palla di fumo' (=smoke ball) resonant of Risiera's gassing and cremating practices, the evil Natale Mei throws himself into the pit in a final, expiating suicide. After this episode, the final descent detailed in the last pages of the novel engages a generic group of *giovani* (=young men and women) who lower themselves in the pit where Natale, Cipriano, the dog and most other characters are by now buried. These young men and women re-experience the *horror vacui* of the descent into Hell described earlier on, together with an ancestral, almost anthropologically rooted, terror of losing their minds:

In fondo al baratro i giovani trovarono l'acqua che Cipriano aveva descritto, ma anche, contro una parete, il corpo sfracellato d'un giovane che ritenevano di aver visto da qualche parte. Fecero scendere una barella e con molta cura lo mandarono su. Era tutto ciò che avevano trovato in fondo alla grotta. Come furono risaliti respirarono e confessarono

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<sup>11</sup> The parallel between the border and a scarred and wounded body is used most notably by Fulvio Tomizza (1935-1999).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. with Gaston Bachelard, 'The Imaginary Fall' in *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement* (Dallas: Dallas Institute, 1988), pp.91-109. Similarly to Morovich, Bachelard describes the 'vertigo' (p.100) and the

candidamente di aver avuto laggiù una paura tremenda. E non sapevano neppure perché: vi si respirava un'aria che suggeriva pensieri tetri, paure sconosciute, come se il cervello, disse uno, andasse da sé.<sup>13</sup>

(At the bottom of the chasm, the young men and women found the water described by Cipriano. They also found, shattered against a wall, the body of a young man whom they remembered having seen before. They lowered a stretcher into the chasm and lifted the body with great care. This was all that they had managed to find in the cave. As soon as they re-emerged, they sighed with relief and quite candidly confessed they had been terrified while down there. They didn't even know why: the air down there breathed dismal thoughts, unknown fears, as if one's brains, said one of them, worked of its own accord.)

To conclude, there is an unspoken and yet close connection between 'the tragic events when many civilians and military victims [...] were killed and flung into communal graves'<sup>14</sup> and Morovich's novel *Il baratro*, as even a cursory comparison with testimonies and official reports reveals. As argued above, *Il baratro* cannot help but testify to the anxiety, contention, trauma, loss and grief that feed so prominently into the historical and cultural make-up of this border area. Monuments such as the *foibe* and the *Risiera* 'speak by virtue of their silence'. Similarly, while remaining ostensibly silent, *Il baratro* is, paradoxically, all the more eloquent a testimony of the alienated, aphasic culture at the northeastern borders of Italy.

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'nausea of descent' (p.101), however, contrary to Morovich, for Bachelard 'the chasm is *deduced* from the fall. The image is *deduced* from the motion.' (p. 95).

<sup>13</sup> E. Morovich, p. 142.

<sup>14</sup> G. Sluga, p. 408. See also K. Pizzi, 'Silentes Loquimur: "Foibe" and Border Anxiety in Postwar Literature from Trieste', *Journal of European Studies*, 28 (1998), 217-229.