

**Jan Morris.** *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001. 208 pp, \$23.00 (cloth). ISBN: 0743201280.

Reading travel books, we want to trust the author. And, as we are not reading a guide, but a traveling poet's musings, to question mere details is to misread. But Trieste is Slovenia's lost Jerusalem, when Klagenfurt is not. Although Trst is not *naš* (ours) the way we hoped it would be when, as children, we went marching in those sincere, albeit Tito-ordered, parades in the early 1950s, it is *naš* enough for us to be suspicious of Jan Morris. Given his baggage, however, the quasi-Slovenian reviewer, flaunting his arcana, cannot be entirely trusted. The following may be too personal—but, even for a quasi-Slovenian, Trieste is personal. Read this review warily.

Joseph Cary in *A Ghost in Trieste*<sup>1</sup> thought *good-bye* in Slovenian was “do vidjenja” (175) and the Karst, “krč” (15). Before I become partisan about Morris's *Trieste*, let us examine a neutral sentence. Gauge a travel writer's reliability when she is off guard. The big points she is bound to get sort of correct; check the minutiae. Here is a sentence from page 112, a page you will alas become intimate with: “The orchestra that played Smareglia's *Nozze Istriani* ... included violinists named Ivevic and Leszczynski, a cellist called Iztpk Kodric, Neri Noferini a horn player and an oboist named Giuseppi Mis Cipolat.” The opera is *Nozze Istriane*, and, as the Teatro Verdi site<sup>2</sup> would readily have told her, the violinist is Ivicevic; Kodric is Izt ok; Cipolat, Giusepp e. A sentence demonstrating Trieste's diversity should have the names right. But, as my students say to this sort of attention, “You know what I meant.” Whereupon I quote Nabokov:

In art as in science there is no delight without the detail, and it is on details that I have tried to fix the reader's attention ... unless these are thoroughly understood and remembered, all “general ideas” (so easily acquired, so profitably resold) must necessarily remain but worn passports allowing their bearers short cuts from one area of ignorance to another.<sup>3</sup>

Am I just perversely complaining about typographical errors? Typos in thin books matter, but are these typos? Yes, Morris knows there is no “Molo San Barlo” (80), but her Slavs are such exotics perhaps she really thinks someone could be named *Iztpk*. A relative of Joe Btfsplk in *Li'l Abner*? True, later on she does get the ending right on the Smareglia opera. And yet, the *putto* of the Ponterosso, “Giovannin(o) del Ponterosso” is, in her hands, *putti*: “Giovanninj del Ponterosso” (67, 125). The bell-ringers above City Hall are first “Michez and Jachez” (37) and then “Michel and Japhez” (186). *Google* confirms the (is it?)

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Cary, *A Ghost in Trieste* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> “La Fondazione: L'orchestra.” *Fondazione Teatro Lirico Giuseppe Verdi*, 22 June 2002. Available at: <http://www.teatroverdi-trieste.com/verdi2001-2/Fondazione/Orchestra.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, translator's introduction, *Eugene Onegin*, by Alexandr Pushkin, Bollingen Series 72, 4 vols. (New York: Pantheon, 1964) 1: 8.

Austrian spelling of Mikez and Jakez. Moors, with Slovenian names. For her, my favorite hotel is the “Ducha” d’Aosta (31): a touching beginner’s-Italian mistake. Despite her Italian, she invents Triestine words. The immigrants from southern Italy cause “caosmismo” (71). Our Italian department says a neologism from *caos* has to be *caosismo*. But she’s been there recently, and have they? We can applaud her brave attempt at the Slovenian name for Opicina: “Obcina” (102), a linguistically interesting mistake. One of her Istrian itineraries goes from “Roš to Vhr” and on to “Cerovlje and Sovinsko Polje” (163). Batting .500 in a Slavic language is excellent. Fine, she needn’t know Slovenian, but Italian would be useful, or just some sensitivity to languages. She is “encouraged by a graffito ... in the Old City,” which “simply said .... FUK NATIONS” (133). Given the “FUK,” Jan, what was the author’s native language?

Since I am so avid about her mistakes, let me confess one, too. Reading *Trieste* was so unpleasant that I first read carelessly. Imagine my reading this: “In 1919 ... the newly invented kingdom of Yugoslavia inherited most of [Austria-Hungary’s] Adriatic possessions, but Trieste found itself snatched from its geography, as it were, and appended to the recently united kingdom of Italy, whose easternmost outpost it became .... It was deprived of its own interior” (19–20). “Snatched from its geography” and “deprived of its own interior”? Reading “interior” as the Slovenian lands surrounding Trieste, I first believed that Morris thought that Italy should have been given more hinterland than the Treaty of Rapallo gave it. Then, since I knew the Rapallo border was two-thirds of the way towards Ljubljana, beyond Postojna, that Trieste had been given all of the Karst and more as its interior,<sup>4</sup> I thought Morris was simply uninformed. I could not imagine she knew about the border and wished still more “geography” for Fascist Italy. I had the choice down to Morris the fascistophile or Morris the ignorant. But I was misreading. She was merely saying that Trieste had lost Austria-Hungary as its interior. She was looking at history in a broader way than I, bleating there about Fascism’s victims. After reading more carefully, I am again not entirely convinced that she knows where the Rapallo border was. I do know that she does not appreciate what living under Fascist or democratic Italy has been like for the Slovenian minority.

Let us read more carefully. Let us see, for instance, how she treats the question of the Italianization of Slovenian names. To do so, I must remain for just another moment on that unfortunate page 112.

Beginning in 1926, the Italian government codified what had long been going on: the Italianization of Slovenian place names, first names, family names, and, indeed, grave markers.<sup>5</sup> Morris manages to do

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<sup>4</sup> Zdenko Čepič et al., eds., *Zgodovina Slovencev* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva Založba, 1979) 4.

<sup>5</sup> Janko Jeri, “Nekatere prvine narodnostnega položaja ob naši zahodni meji do Tržaškega sporazuma leta 1954,” 22 June 2002. Available at: <http://anton.lj.zrsss.si/PPS/slo/cankarjevo/2001/Jeri.htm>

worse than not mention these laws specifically. Watch! She knows some name changing has occurred. She says that, “down the generations many Triestini have had their names ethnically adjusted ... as a first step towards genetic reconstruction. A Topico might become a Topič (sic), a Kogut ... a Cogetti” (112). This sounds as pleasant as going to the tailor’s to have your suit taken in because you’ve finally lost those pounds. She does also say that “sometimes a change was made by order of the state, sometimes it was made as an explicitly personal statement” (112). “State” makes the process somewhat less pleasant but, since no state is named, the reader gets the impression that Austria-Hungary, perhaps, wanted the *c* to become a *z*. And since state-sponsored change is paired with “personal[-]statement” change—her illustration: Ettore Schmitz’s becoming Italo Svevo—we can still believe all this changing was rather pleasant. Sorry, a Vodopivec’s being forced to become Bevilacqua was rather different. But let us finally put behind us the infamous page 112. Only once does she name specific re-baptizers; these sound unpleasant indeed: “... when the Yugoslavs arrived in 1945, and wanted to make the city entirely Yugoslav, they ... obliged many Italians to change their names” (115). In this book, it is either some lovely law of nature aided by a benevolent state pleasantly altering phonebooks, or it is the Yugoslavs Slovenianizing Italian names.

Morris is positively Italian in her renaming. Inevitably, she participates in the Triestine habit of refusing to call the Slovenians Slovenians and having them be merely Slavs. How widespread the habit is among the Triestini is evident even in quasi-scholarly publications. Thus Rene Fuchs publishes a dictionary of loan words in Triestino,<sup>6</sup> and sources as varied as German, French, Sanskrit, Gaelic, and Old Scandinavian are given a chapter each, but one grab-bag chapter covers the “Lingue Slave.” “Olandese’s” chapter has one entry, but there is no separate chapter for Slovenian. *Trieste* is similarly Italianate, with Slovenians, hiding under “Slavs.” We hear that “there were [once] entirely Slav quarters of [Trieste]” (114). That Trieste is “enveloped by Slav territories” (17). That “the further you walk out towards the perimeter ..., the more Slav it feels” (116). Morris has surely not been walking on water towards Croatia. She hears of some residual “latent anti-Slav feeling among older citizens” (116). For her, the Hotel Balkan is not the Slovenski Narodni Dom, but “the center of Slavic cultural life” (115). And the Karst “feels like Slavic peasant country” (152).

I know the argument that the Italians’ calling the Slovenians Slavs is a compliment to this vanguard of the Slavs. I don’t buy it. The misnaming is part of an old, tired program of muddling facts and figures. Morris correctly tells us Austro-Hungarian Trieste was predominantly Italian, but that “thousands of Slovenes and Croats” (46) then moved in. This, about a city where, in 1910, the population was 25% Slovenian and

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<sup>6</sup> Rene Fuchs, *Mismqs. Parole straniere nel dialetto triestino* (Trieste: LINT, 1997).

1% Croatian.<sup>7</sup> Underlining the sub-dividable Slavness is, of course, very useful, given that, at that census, there were already half as many local Slovenians as Italians.<sup>8</sup> Morris is clearly borrowing from nationalist Italian sources. She also tells us that in those days “Albanians, Turks, earringed fisher-people from the Venetian lagoons, giant Montenegrins, Greeks with baggy trousers and Byronic headgear ... worked in the docks ... [and] ran the stalls of the city markets” (63). For the sake of the poor Triestines, I hope there was also some produce being sold by the Slovenian farmers who surrounded the city. No wonder the reviewer of Morris’s book in the *Taipei Times* reports that Trieste’s “polyglot inhabitants [were] Serbs, Italians, Austrians, and many more.”<sup>9</sup>

Am I being overly sensitive? Perhaps! However, the chapter on the Risiera di San Sabba, Trieste’s Nazi extermination camp, is more seriously problematic (105–10). Curiously, this chapter, in a book emphasizing Trieste’s variety, talks exclusively about the Risiera’s Jewish victims. As the Germans were efficient in destroying records, nobody can say for certain how many were killed in the Risiera and who they were. There is, however, strong evidence from Jewish sources that most Jewish victims were merely processed there and then sent on to Auschwitz or other camps.<sup>10</sup> Even Italian sources would have told Morris that “tra le 3–5 mila ... vittime” were “triestini, sloveni, croati, friulani, istriani ed ebrei.”<sup>11</sup> If her accounting of the Risiera’s victims is careless, it is unconscionable that in this book, in which the whole Mediterranean is Trieste’s hinterland, across which Morris poetically or disorganizedly roams, there is no mention of the Italian camp of Gonars. Only some 30 km distant, it is part of Trieste’s geography. Of course, the convenient fiction is that there were no Italian extermination camps. Gonars was merely a concentration camp and those children, women, and men who died there died accidentally and were a mere 410, at any rate.<sup>12</sup> If bigger numbers impress her, why not mention Rab, the Italian extermination camp a little farther down the Adriatic. The list of victims in Jezernik<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Silvano Benvenuti, “Če naj ima zgodovina smisel,” trans. Marjuša Cenda, *Ednina, Dvojina, Večina*, eds. Marko Kravos and Ivan Verš (Trieste: Založništvo Tržaškega Tiska, 1987): 18–57. (Translation of “Le ragioni della storia, *Il territorio*, 16 Dec. 1986) 32.

<sup>8</sup> Benvenuti 32.

<sup>9</sup> Bradley Winterton, “Review of *Trieste and the meaning of nowhere*” *The Taipei Times on the Web*, 30 December 2001. Available at: <http://taipeitimes.com/news/2001/12/30/story/0000117961>

<sup>10</sup> Ferruccio Fölkel. *Rišarna: Vrata v smrt* (Trieste: Založništvo Tržaškega Tiska, 1990). (Translation of *La risiera di San Sabba*, Milano: Mondadori, 1979) 124–25.

<sup>11</sup> “I campi italiani: Risiera di San Sabba.” *Storia XXI Secolo*. Available at: <http://www.romacivica.net/anpiroma/deportazione/deportazionecampi5.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Božidar Jezernik, *Italijanska koncentracijska taborišča za Slovence med 2. Svetovno vojno* (Ljubljana: Borec, 1997) 285.

<sup>13</sup> Jezernik 379–409.

requires no special linguistic skill. There were doubtless Triestini among those victims. She may even call it Arbe, for all I care.

Though she must acknowledge the hatred that has occasionally been present in Trieste, Morris is surprisingly sunny. She devotes a chapter to the question of racial hatred—using “racial” where “ethnic” might be better—and the Slovenian reader, one of the “Sciavi,” finds himself checking to make sure he is in fact reading about Trieste. For, says she, throughout history, “there appears to have been little purely ethnic bigotry” (114) in Trieste. She can say that “for half a century now Trieste has been politically relaxed and the vicious racism of the twentieth century has faded ...” (116–17). In this Trieste, “the question of race seems to have lost most of its bitter force” (115). Indeed, Trieste is “as close to a decent city as you can find at the start of the twenty-first century” (196). Things are so wonderful that—though this book was probably handed in to the publishers before the law for the safeguarding of the Slovenians was finally passed in February 2001, after five decades of sabotage—Morris reports that “the Slovene language has official parity, making this a formally bilingual city” (115–16). The Trieste Slovenians will be glad to hear this.

When racial intolerance is acknowledged, Morris is shockingly even-handed. Thus a sentence about Italy in 1919 “[banning] Slovene schools and [turning] a blind eye on violence against Slavs” is followed immediately by that already partly cited bizarre sentence about the Yugoslavs in 1945 “[opening] Slovene schools again and [obliging] many Italians to change their names” (115). And the 1950s? “There were violent race riots ... when nobody knew whether Trieste was to be Italian, Yugoslav or a free city; [when] the world’s ... image of the place was of furious mobs, flying one banner or another ... shouting ethnic slogans” (115). Since no side is named, both are equally guilty. Once this chapter defines the evil of racial thinking and evenly apportions blame, making the brief Yugoslav occupation the equivalent of twenty-five years of Fascism, then Morris presents what, at first glance, seems a reading of history favorable to the Slovenians: “If racial logic had prevailed, Trieste would not now be an Italian city ... but the port of Slovenia—Trst. The natural ethnic frontier ... ran well to the west, half-way to Venice” (117). Forget that “halfway to Venice” from our creative geographer; notice, however, that Trst would be Slovenian only “if racial logic had prevailed.” And suddenly the Slovenians are the bad guys again, their desires based on “racial logic.”

Is there not a whiff of racism in how Morris imagines a Slovenian Trieste? “At ... twilight moments I find it easy to imagine a Trieste handed over to the authority of some now defunct People’s republic, as it nearly was in 1945, to be re-created swart, suspicious and smelling of sausages” (33). Morris was in Trieste with the British at the end of WWII. Seeing her curious reading of history and geography, one wonders what happened then to turn her. But then the Allies, rivals of Tito, were natural Italianophiles. Still, why so much feeling for the Italian losses? Why such geographical precision only on their behalf?

“Even the names of the peninsula have foresworn all Trieste affinities. Today Abbazia is Opatija, Pola is Pula, Pirano is Piran ... Capodistria is Koper” (165). Yet, though she is aware there are Slavs on the Karst, she does not know the local names of Aurisina, San Dorligo della Valle, and Rupingrande. She might enjoy knowing that the Timavo at its source is simply “Reka”; her San Dorligo del Valle (155, 156, 171), simply “Dolina.” Of course, she does not even know the Italian names. The Italian name for Dolina is, of course, San Dorligo *della Valle*. *Valle* is as feminine as *dolina*.

Morris is in a confused, forgiving mood. She can excuse everything. Thus “Trieste has never been ideologically inspired ...” (173). And “irredentism was no more than nationalism” (173). This is meant to make irredentism sound less evil, and yet she herself has earlier condemned nationalism as “patriotism gone feral” (130). The excuses grow more fabulous and we finally hear that in Trieste, “Fascism, popular though it was, seems to have been more a fashion than a conviction” (173). This reader was always rewriting. Trieste, bulwark against the barbarians, has lived on ideology. Irredentism was proto-fascism. Fascism was Trieste’s dream come true. And when the Nazis took over, it was a local boy made good who ran the Risiera. She doesn’t get the victims right. Does she also not know about Globocnik?<sup>14</sup>

My Slovenian reaction to her book is all too predictable. Morris’s culminating hymn is clearly not meant to make us laugh. Yet, get a load of this:

There are people everywhere who form a Fourth World, or a diaspora of their own. They are the lordly ones! They come in all colours. They can be Christian or Hindus or Muslims or Jews or pagans or atheists. They can be young or old, men or women, soldiers or pacifists, rich or poor. They may be patriots, but they are never chauvinists. They share with each other, across all nations, common values of humour and understanding. When you are among them you know you will not be mocked or resented, because they will not care about your race, your faith, your sex or your nationality, and they suffer fools if not gladly, at least sympathetically. They laugh easily. They are easily grateful. They are never mean. They are not inhibited by fashion, public opinion or political correctness. They are exiles in their own communities, because they are always in a minority, but they form a mighty nation, if they only knew it. It is the nation of nowhere, and I have come to think that its natural capital is Trieste.

Parody calls—it is the nation of scorn and its natural capital is Trieste—but no, the proper response to poetry is poetry—Dorothy Parker’s:

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<sup>14</sup> Fölkel 68–82.

O life is a glorious cycle of song,  
A medley of extemporanea;  
And love is a thing that can never go wrong;  
And I am Marie of Rumania.

A Slovenian reading this book must feel like a denizen of that joke club where it was no longer necessary to tell the stories, you just stood up and said Joke No. 45 and everyone was on the floor. You'd say, "Trieste, the capital of decency" and they would be in the aisles. Morris, with the best of intentions, of course brings out that old saw of John Berger's about the Fascist doctor who, when asked how he would treat a Slovenian patient who could not describe symptoms to him in Italian, replied that that would not be a problem because a cow couldn't explain its symptoms to a vet, either (129–30). I know I am supposed to be shocked at the Fascist and feeling for the Slovenians, but all I can do is guffaw at the idea that a local Slovenian would not know Italian.

If I cannot keep a straight face at such a solemn moment, clearly Slovenian sources are not to be trusted to set against her version. Which is what sent me elsewhere. Here is what *Shalom*, a newspaper of the Italian-Jewish community, reports under the headline, "Nuovo sindaco, antichi fasti" (New Mayor, Old Pomp):<sup>15</sup> It seems that Roberto Dipiazza the present mayor, in a Trieste ruled by an alliance of Forza Italia and the post-neo-Fascist Alleanza Nazionale, as his first official act, has restored to the civic portrait gallery, the portrait of Cesare Pagnini, the podesta of Trieste at the time of the Risiera. A guardia instituted by Pagnini made sure the people processed at the Risiera but bound for other camps made their trains. One fascist-friendly act by a duly elected official does not a city make, but I wouldn't ignore it the way Morris all too easily could. This seems more representative of the real Trieste than Morris's fairy tales.

Morris has a ready-made way out: "Trieste is a hallucinatory city, where fantasy easily brushes fact, and a lot of what I have written about it has come from my own mind" (201). Indeed, the epigraph is from that historian of nowhere, Wallace Stevens: "I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw/Or heard or felt came not but from myself." So is everything I have said an insensitive reading of a poem, which cannot be judged by my petty standards? Sorry! Her errors are a wound to its heart it cannot survive. Did you hear the one about the Slovenians rebaptizing Italians? Am I judging poetry by the rules of time-tables? Tell me, if, in the middle of "Dover Beach," Arnold, instead of saying, "Sophocles long ago heard it on the Aegean," had said, "Sophocles long ago heard it on Lake Massawippi," could you continue reading with a straight face? This book is its own parody because Morris does not know enough about Trieste. And not knowing enough, she covers herself by saying she is merely writing fantasy. Hemingway—that I

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<sup>15</sup> Claudio Vercelli, "Nuovo sindaco, antichi fasti." (*Shalom*, August 2001). Available at: <http://www.shalom.it/8.01/G.html>

should quote him to a Jan Morris!—has said everything that needs saying about that dodge:

If a man writes clearly enough anyone can see if he fakes. If he mystifies to avoid a straight statement ... the writer takes a long time to be known as a fake and other writers who are afflicted by the same necessity will praise him in their own defence. True mysticism should not be confused with incompetence in writing which seeks to mystify where there is no mystery but is really only the necessity to fake to cover lack of knowledge ....<sup>16</sup>

The book has certainly not been read as a joke. It has been received the way you expect a book by Jan Morris, one which she has announced will be her last ever, will be received. Her Trieste will become definitive. Besides, much of it is beautiful. Look at this:

Sometimes, even on spring days, there used to be a crust of snow on those passing trucks, and this seemed pathetically metaphorical to me. Snow from where, I used to wonder. Snow from Carpathia, from Bohemia, from the Vienna woods. By the time it reached Trieste it was broken and grubby at the edges, mouldering at the heart, and struck me as sad stuff. It was like snow sent into exile, banished from its bright cold uplands, wherever they were, to drip into oblivion in this grey enclave by the sea (87–88).

And now the same snow done twenty years ago:

It is a shining morning, and across the water down the coast the romantic little castle of Miramare is already caught in the sunlight. But below us along the quayside a long, long freight train is laboriously moving among the parked cars, its engine out of sight along the waterfront and all its wagons are crusted with snow. Snow! Snow from Vienna? Snow from Carpathia? Snow from some distant steppe or forest of Asia? Trieste snow: momentary snow: snow passing by.<sup>17</sup>

I find the earlier passage more beautiful, but I would love to be the author of either one! It makes us forget the silly bits: Trieste, the capital of the good and the true. Who could not be moved by her closing words?

As for me, when my clock moves on for the last time, the angel having returned to heaven, the angler having packed it in for the night and gone to the pub, I shall happily haunt the two places that have haunted me. Most of the aftertime I shall be wondering with my beloved along the banks of the Dwyfor; but now and then you may find me in a boat below

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<sup>16</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966) 54–55.

<sup>17</sup> Jan Morris, "Trieste: What Became of Waring?" (*Destinations: Essays from Rolling Stone*, New York: Oxford, 1980) 204.

the walls of Miramar, watching the nightingales swarm  
(203).

I want to ask what the name for the Dwyfor is in civilized English, but how can anyone stay annoyed with someone who writes like that? I do remain annoyed at her ignorant readers. “Her research and knowledge ... is thorough,”<sup>18</sup> says *The Guardian* ungrammatically, but typically, and I am reminded of what Nabokov said about admirers of smooth but bad translations:

I have been always amused by the stereotyped compliment ... a reviewer pays the author of a “new translation.” He says: “It reads smoothly.” In other words, the hack who has never read the original and does not know its language praises an imitation as readable because easy platitudes have replaced in it the intricacies of which he is unaware. A schoolboy’s boner mocks the ancient masterpiece less than does its commercial poetisation ....<sup>19</sup>

This book is a bad translation, a poetization of Trieste. And the fawning commentators praise it because they know even less about the original.

In *The World of Venice*, which I love, Morris makes Venice more Venice. In *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere*, she makes Trieste less Trieste. May the book not be her last. Surely we want her to write better books.

*Tom Lozar, Vanier College*

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Clements, “Trieste, full of dolours” (*The Guardian*, 14 October 2001). Available at: <http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/travel/story/0,6000,573457,00.html>

<sup>19</sup> Nabokov, *Onegin* ix.