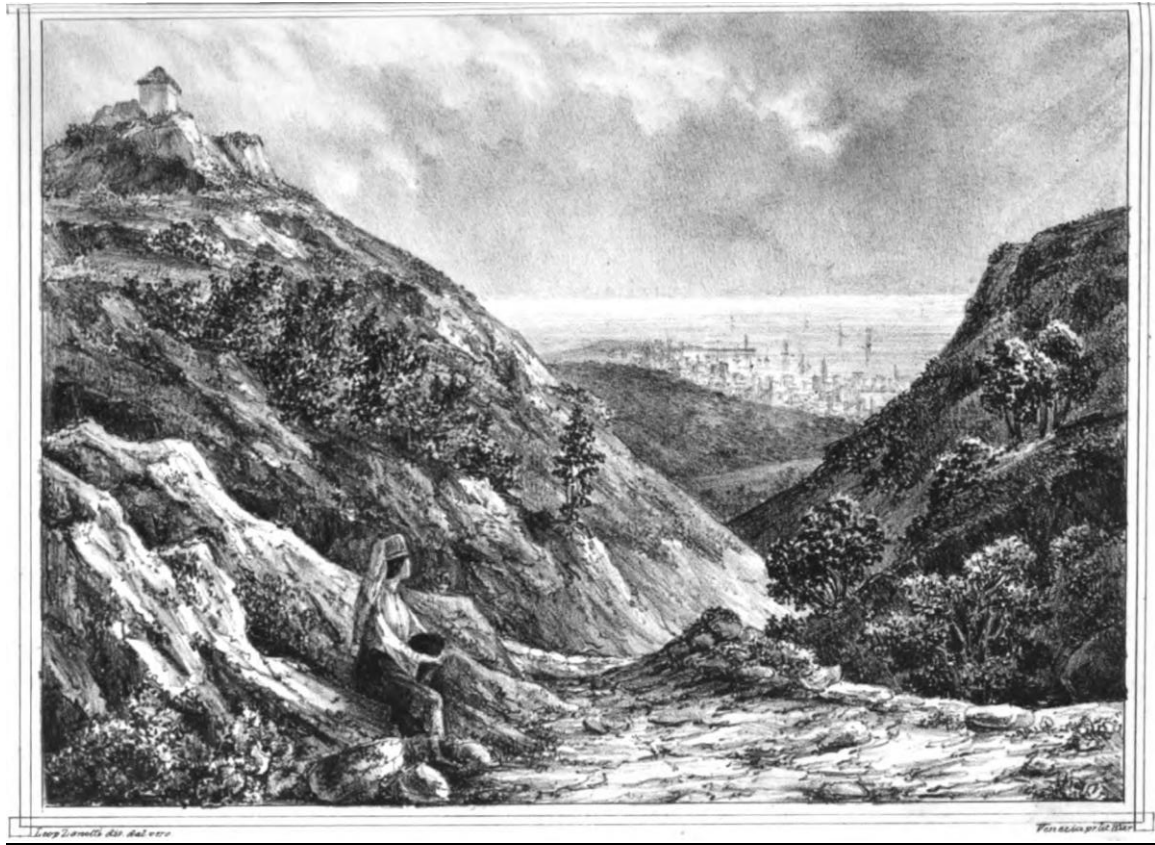


Elena Russo, *A Wind Across Borders: Reconstructing Regional Identity Through Sensory Experience in Dall'Ongaro's Ballad "L'Origine della Bora"*, in: Daniela Hacke, Luc Wodzicki (Hrsg.), *NEMoS – Network of Early Modern Senses* (10.02.2025). URL: <https://nemos.hypotheses.org/2618>.



An opening between two peaks reveals the Adriatic Sea in between a mountainous scenery of barren Karst rocks, with only a few trees adorning the mountain crest. The water in the distance is dotted with blurred ships that seem to float on the glassy surface. A woman dressed in traditional clothes sits on a rock, gazing at the sea as if waiting for someone beneath a cloudy sky. This is the painting that opens the section 'L'origine della Bora' in the 1844 edition of the poetry collection *Le Memorie* by Francesco Dall'Ongaro (1808–1873). The poem poetically reinterprets the myth of the origins of the Bora, a distinctive wind of the northwestern Adriatic region. One scene from the poem is depicted in the picture above: a woman transformed into a magical fairy to fly over the Adriatic Sea in search of her brothers who left for war. Her flight creates the Bora wind over the region. By starting the poem with this image, the author establishes an immediate connection between the poetry collection and the sensory experience of the Adriatic landscape. In this article, I argue this retelling of a popular legend served to present a reimagined past for the region, a past rooted in a shared sense of belonging to the Adriatic that goes beyond the confines of individual national identities. Dall'Ongaro blends the sensory experience of the Adriatic space with local legends to deepen the connection between the 19th-century Adriatic audience and the myth that he narrates. I will begin by introducing the figure of Dall'Ongaro and his connection with the intellectual group defined as 'Adriatic multinationalism'. Then, I will analyse the sensory details featured in 'L'origine della Bora'.

Finally, I will trace connections between the sensory elements in this poetry and Dall'Ongaro's political ideas, adding a perspective on sensory history¹ to debates on Adriatic multinationalism.

Francesco Dall'Ongaro was an intellectual living in Habsburg Trieste when he published *Le Memorie*; the social-political environment he lived in influenced his works. After spending his formative years in the Venetian region,² he settled in Trieste in 1837 working as a journalist. At that time, Trieste was a thriving and cosmopolitan city, attracting people from across Europe as the primary port of the Habsburg Empire.³ A travel guide published in 1821 described Trieste inhabitants as people with "different religions, languages, manners, and habits influence all the individuals [living in Trieste]. . . . How could it be possible for one national character . . . to dominate when this people is composed of Italians, Germans, Greeks, Slavs, Levantini [Ottomans], Arabs, Africans, etc.?"⁴ Dall'Ongaro was immersed in this multilingual, multi-ethnic and multi-religious environment, and his writing gradually started to embody this world. Immersed in the political and literary debates of 19th-century Trieste, Dall'Ongaro dealt with questions of belonging, nationalism, and imperial power in his writing. He engaged with intellectuals across Habsburg Adriatic shores who were questioning the role that the multinational Adriatic region played in emerging debates about nation-states.⁵ Although having different positions, they generally interpreted the Adriatic as a space where multiple nations could coexist and develop together. This concept is now referred to as Adriatic multinationalism by the scholar Dominique Kirchner Reill.⁶

¹ Publication on Sensory History: Veit Erlmann, *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality*, First paperback edition. (New York: Zone Books, 2014). David Howes, *Senses and Sensation: Critical and Primary Sources* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018). Mark M. Smith, *A Sensory History Manifesto*, Perspectives on Sensory History 4 (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2021).

² Margherita Trabaudi Foscarini, *Francesco dall'Ongaro: note di critica letteraria*. (Firenze: F. Le Monnier, 1925), 8–9. To learn about how his childhood shaped his literary interests, read: Francesco Dall'Ongaro, *Rime e prose varie* (La Libreria Antiquaria Gagliardi, 1911).

³ Giulio Cervani, *Stato e Società a Trieste Nel Secolo XIX: Problemi e Documenti*, 4 (Del Bianco, 1983); Anna Millo, 'Trieste, 1830–70: From Cosmopolitanism to the Nation', in *Different Paths to the Nation: Regional and National Identities in Central Europe and Italy, 1830–70*, ed. Laurence Cole (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2007), 60–81, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230801424_4; Ugo Cova, *Commercio e navigazione a Trieste e nella monarchia asburgica da Maria Teresa al 1915*, *Civiltà del Risorgimento* 45 (Udine: Del Bianco, 1992); Ugo Cova, *Trieste e la libera navigazione sul mare fra il XVI e il XIX secolo nelle carte governative dell'Archivio di Stato di Trieste*, *Fonti e studi per la storia della Venezia Giulia*. Serie seconda, Studi ; v. 21 (Trieste: Deputazione di Storia Patria per la Venezia Giulia, 2014).

⁴ Giuseppe de Brodmann, *Memorie politico-economiche della città e territorio di Trieste della penisola d'Istria della Dalmazia fu veneta di Ragusi e dell'Albania ora congiunti all'austriaco impero di G. d. B-n* (dalla tipografia di Alvisopoli, 1821), 13–14.

⁵ Dominique Kirchner Reill, "Away or Homeward Bound? The Slippery Case of Mediterranean Place in the Era Before Nation-states," in Maurizio Isabella and Konstantina Zanou, *Mediterranean Diasporas: Politics and Ideas in the Long 19th Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016). 133-152.

⁶ Dominique Kirchner Reill, *Nationalists Who Feared the Nation: Adriatic Multi-Nationalism in Habsburg Dalmatia, Trieste, and Venice* (Redwood City, UNITED STATES: Stanford University Press, 2012).

It is important to note two points when discussing Adriatic multinationalism. Firstly, despite the active debate between those intellectuals, they did not formulate a shared conclusion on what form the Adriatic communities should look like; there was no single common understanding of this Adriatic shared identity. Secondly, Dall'Ongaro, along with other intellectuals advocating for a multinational Adriatic, was well aware of the divisions among Adriatic nations, and each intellectual had their own position within the discussion. Even the poem *L'origine della Bora* acknowledges the existence of an imbalanced sea, with Venetians or Austrians dominating others. However, it seeks to illustrate a different vision of a shared world. Although this article cannot delve fully into the complexities of these divisions, I encourage readers to

Dall'Ongaro disseminated these ideas through his writing, notably as editor of the literary newspaper *Favilla*, but also through other forms such as plays and poetry. He believed that literature was not merely a form of "art for art's sake" but a powerful tool for engaging in political debate. His *Le Memorie*, with its poem *L'origine della Bora*, serves as a compelling example of literature serving his political agenda.⁷ *Le Memorie* is a collection of six romantic ballads set in the Adriatic territories.⁸ Ballads are lengthy poetic compositions, usually divided into distinct sections, that emphasize a strong narrative element, making them suitable for telling stories and legends.⁹ It is a collection of poems Slavic in content (drawing from stories of Slavic tradition) but Italian in form, as they are written in Italian and follow Italian poetic conventions.¹⁰ Through these texts, Dall'Ongaro aimed to create a shared Adriatic mythical past. In the introduction to *Le Memorie*, he wrote: "People without traditions, without monuments, without a history to reflect on are an immature community".¹¹ The Adriatic region lacked a cohesive written history that did not divide different nations. Yet, in Trieste, Dall'Ongaro experienced a different Adriatic: one where people from various ethnic groups coexisted. In this work, he aims to create a shared Adriatic past, a collection of legends that could be part of a new Adriatic tradition. His revised past aimed to serve as the foundation for a reimagined future.¹²

Moreover, what distinguished *Le Memorie* is its use of sensorial descriptions; this fusion of sensory realism and folklore is exemplified in the poem *L'origine della Bora*, which is divided into three sections and narrates the legendary origin of the Bora, a distinctive wind of the northwestern Adriatic. The Bora blows from the mountains to the sea for approximately nine days before calming down. In the first section, the Usocchi, a historical population from Dalmatia, prepare to fight against the Venetian and Habsburg navies. Nine brothers are leaving home to go to war when their tenth sibling, the only sister, stops them, insisting on joining them. Despite her insistent prayers, the brothers deny her request, because she is too inexperienced, and the section ends with the sister bidding farewell to her brothers as they set sail: "Farewell! Pray that the breeze and the wave are favourable to them, and from our shore disperse the traitors".¹³ In the second section, the sister climbs a mountain to see if she can spot her brothers at sea. There, she encounters a Vila, a magical figure in Slavic folklore. Similar to nymphs, the Vilas are part of nature, creatures of the air, often appearing to humans as women. In the poem, the Vila finds the sister wandering in the mountains and approaches her, asking whom she is searching for, perhaps a lover? The sister replies that she is looking for her siblings: "I await nine brothers for many moons. They have been fighting on the Adriatic Sea. They have been

explore the literature on this topic. It is worth noting that not all intellectuals of the time had an unproblematic view, with some maintaining discriminatory attitudes, particularly toward Slavic people.

⁷ Andrew Wyatt, 'Drafting Spaces: Four Literary Visions of the Northern Adriatic' (ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 2023), 28, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2803841992?pq-origsite=primo>.

⁸ Scholars that discuss poems from 'Le Memorie': Reill, *Nationalists Who Feared the Nation*, 100; Cristiana Brunelli, *La ballata romantica italiana* (Le Càriti, 2011), 151–65; Wyatt, 'Drafting Spaces', 26–82.

⁹ Brunelli, *La ballata romantica italiana*, 13.

¹⁰ Reill, *Nationalists Who Feared the Nation*, 100.

¹¹ Dall'Ongaro, IX. Original text: "Un popolo che non ha tradizioni, che non ha monumenti, che non ha storia su cui meditare, è un popolo infante."

¹² Wyatt, 'Drafting Spaces', 28–29.

¹³ Dall'Ongaro, 9. Original text: "Addio! La Brezza e l'onda/ Prega propizia a lor,/ E dalla nostra sponda/ Dispera i traditor!"

fighting for their homeland".¹⁴ The Vila reveals that she saw her brothers fighting and brings tragic news: they all died in battle. "Compose another song, poor sister: I saw them fall, one by one".¹⁵ The sister is devastated by the news, and moved by the sister's feelings, the Vila transforms her into a magical creature like herself, enabling her to fly on the winds to protect her homeland and search for her brothers: "Be the defender of your fatherland, No longer a woman, but an immortal spirit. I release you from your earthly veil, Mighty Vila, messenger of the heavens: Dwell in the air that is your domain, and fly upon the wings of the Boreal breath".¹⁶ In these two sections, sight is the primary sense employed. The visual description is strengthened by verbs that move this scene, as the author frequently uses synonyms of the verb 'to look' (guardare, mirare). However, what emerges from these lyrics is not only something to be seen but also something to be heard. Sounds are vividly present in these sections: canzone (songs), prieghi (prayers), and lamenti (moans). Feelings are expressed through sound.

While the first two sections primarily narrate the legend, the third section is a sensory description of the wind. The sister, now transformed into a Vila, flies as the wind over the Adriatic for nine days, searching for her siblings. Failing to find them, she returns to rest, beginning a cycle that will repeat endlessly until she finds her brothers. The poem opens with the sister on top of a mountain, grieving as she looks at the sea: "Her ebony hair loosened by the blowing of the wind, her expression serious, her gaze sorrowful and slow, she stares on the sea below and bows her face to her chest".¹⁷ Nothing brings her joy. "She takes no pleasure in the balm of flowers, nor in the gentle breezes that kiss the slopes of the most radiant hills".¹⁸ The sister rides the cold wind from the mountain to the sea: "With incessant supplications, she implores the cold gust, and surrendered to the fury of the indomitable Bora, she anxiously seeks the place where the Usocchi perished".¹⁹ She cries and calls for her brothers through the wind. Her lament is carried and echoed by the Adriatic Sea. Nature merges into a dance of grief: "And meanwhile, moved by her lament, the waves of the Adriatic Sea roars and whistles, and the incessant wind breaks the white foam against the rock, and cries".²⁰ "Here, in solitude, the Vila performs her rites for nine days, and celebrates the deeds of the heroes, with songs and praises that no human ear can hear".²¹ The poem concludes as the winds stop and dusk approaches: a pink sunset lightens the Adriatic: "And softening her stern appearance, a rosy veil covers the

¹⁴ Dall'Ongaro, 12. Original text: "*- Nove fratelli aspetto, e da più lune / Vanno pugnando sull'adriaco mar. / Vanno pugnando per la patria terra, / E m'han commesso una canzon di guerra*".

¹⁵ Dall'Ongaro, 12. Original text: "*-Altra canzon, povera suora, intuona: / Ad uno ad uno li mirai sporar*".

¹⁶ Dall'Ongaro, 14-15. Original text: "*Sii tu difesa alla paterna terra, / Non donna più, ma spirito immortal. / Ecco io ti sciolgo dal terrestre velo, / Wila possente, io messenger del cielo: / Abita l'aria ch'è tua sede, e vola / Sopra l'ali del soffio boreal*".

¹⁷ Dall'Ongaro, 18. Original text: "*Sciolte le chiome d'ebano / All'agitar del vento, / Grave la fronte, e il ciglio / Addolorata e lento, / Affisa il mar soggetto, / E china il volto al petto*".

¹⁸ Dall'Ongaro, 18. Original text: "*Non la diletta il balsamo / Dei fior, e l'aure molli / Che baciano il declivio / De' più ridenti colli*".

¹⁹ Dall'Ongaro, 19. Original text: "*Con incessanti suppliche / Il freddo soffio implora, / E, abbandonata all'impeto / Dell'indomabil Bora, / Cerca ansiosa il loco / Ove peria l'Uscoco*".

²⁰ Dall'Ongaro, 20. Original text: "*E mugge intanto e sibila / Comossa al suo lamento, / L'onda del mare adriaco, / E l'incessabil vento, / Che contro a' scogli infrange / Le bianche spume e piange*".

²¹ Dall'Ongaro, 21. Original text: "*Quivi solinga compie / La Wila i riti suoi / Per nove giorni, e celebra / Le geste degli eroi, / Di cantici e di lode / Che orecchio uman non ode*".

mountains, and tempers sky's wound: the sea calms, and the wave seems to kiss the shore".²² This section is also characterised by sights or sounds, but it differs from the beginning of the poem. Now, the sister becomes part of nature, and to mark this transformation, a new sense is introduced: smell. The sister flies over the landscape, and the scents of nature are released.

The foregrounding of senses was not a purely artistic choice, but it had precise purposes. The sound of the wind blowing, a pink sunset, and the smell of the sea are all sensory aspects evoked by this poem and are familiar to the 19th-century audience living across the Adriatic. Having a poem that the audience could relate to was a critical first step toward achieving a deeper connection between the meaning of the poetry and the people reading it. The readers would then find Dall'Ongaro's retelling of a shared Adriatic legendary past more reliable, furthering his aim to spread the concept of Adriatic multinationalism. To be more credible, the scenery described in the poem is deeply rooted in the author's lived experience. In the preface, dated 1st December 1844, Dall'Ongaro explained that the inspiration for these ballads arose during his walks along the seashores near Trieste: "In the pleasant conversations held while strolling along the shore from Barcola to its Grignano, much of the poetry in this collection came to mind".²³ Thus, these poems are tightly intertwined with Dall'Ongaro's personal life. He recounts legends he heard, paints landscapes he saw, and describes the smells and sounds he heard. This is not merely an Adriatic story, but it is *his* Adriatic story. As he wrote, the poems 'touch upon places that partly belong to you'.²⁴ Therefore, *Le Memorie* is a highly vivid narrative that highlights sensory lived experiences to describe a multinational Adriatic world—a shared past among people living along these shores. Dall'Ongaro's work is a clear example of engaging the senses to serve a political purpose through poetry.

²² Dall'Ongaro, 22. Original text: "E serenar del rigido / Sembante, un roseo velo / Ricopre i monti, e tempera / La ferità del cielo: / Il mar s'appiana, e l'onda / Sembra baciare la sponda".

²³ Francesco dall'Ongaro, *La Memoria. Nuove ballate di F. Dall'Ongaro, con note storiche*, 1844, V. Original text: "Nel giocondo conversare che si fece costeggiando la spiaggia da Barcole al suo Grignano, mi nacquero nella mente gran parte delle poesie raccolte".

²⁴ Dall'Ongaro, 6. Original text: "toccano a luoghi che in parte le appartengono". When Dall'Ongaro writes 'that belong to you' he refers to the friends he used to walk with along the seaside.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brodmann, Giuseppe : de. Memorie politico-economiche della citta' e territorio di Trieste della penisola d'Istria della Dalmazia fu veneta di Ragusi e dell'Albania ora congiunti all'austriaco impero di G. d. B-n. dalla tipografia di Alvisopoli, 1821.
- Brunelli, Cristiana. La ballata romantica italiana. Le Càriti, 2011.
- Cervani, Giulio. Stato e Società a Trieste Nel Secolo XIX: Problemi e Documenti. 4. Del Bianco, 1983.
- Cova, Ugo. Commercio e navigazione a Trieste e nella monarchia asburgica da Maria Teresa al 1915. Civiltà del Risorgimento 45. Udine: Del Bianco, 1992.
- Cova, Ugo. Trieste e la libera navigazione sul mare fra il XVI e il XIX secolo nelle carte governative dell'Archivio di Stato di Trieste. Fonti e studi per la storia della Venezia Giulia. Serie seconda, Studi ; v. 21. Trieste: Deputazione di Storia Patria per la Venezia Giulia, 2014.
- Dall'Ongaro, Francesco. Rime e prose varie. La Libreria Antiquaria Gagliardi, 1911.
- Erlmann, Veit. Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality. First paperback edition. New York: Zone Books, 2014.
- Howes, David. Senses and Sensation: Critical and Primary Sources. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.
- Isabella, Maurizio, and Konstantina Zanou. Mediterranean Diasporas: Politics and Ideas in the Long 19th Century. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- Millo, Anna. 'Trieste, 1830-70: From Cosmopolitanism to the Nation'. In *Different Paths to the Nation: Regional and National Identities in Central Europe and Italy, 1830-70*, edited by Laurence Cole, 60-81. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2007. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230801424_4.
- Dall'Ongaro, Francesco. La Memoria. Nuove ballate di F. Dall'Ongaro, con note storiche, 1844.
- Reill, Dominique Kirchner. Nationalists Who Feared the Nation: Adriatic Multi-Nationalism in Habsburg Dalmatia, Trieste, and Venice. Redwood City, UNITED STATES: Stanford University Press, 2012. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=811342>.
- Smith, Mark M. A Sensory History Manifesto. Perspectives on Sensory History 4. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780271092737>.
- Trabaudi Foscari, Margherita. Francesco dall'Ongaro: note di critica letteraria. Firenze: F. Le Monnier, 1925.
- Wyatt, Andrew. 'Drafting Spaces: Four Literary Visions of the Northern Adriatic'. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 2023. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2803841992?pq-origsite=primo>.