

Ten Thomas Bernhard, Italo Calvino,
Elena Ferrante, and Claudio
Magris: From Postmodernism to
Anti-Semitism

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La penna è una vanga, scopre fosse, scava e stana scheletri e segreti oppure li copre con palate di parole più pesanti della terra. Affonda nel letame e, a seconda, sistema le spoglie a buio o in piena luce, fra gli applausi generali.

The pen is a spade, it exposes graves, digs and reveals skeletons and secrets, or it covers them up with shovelfuls of words heavier than earth. It bores into the dirt and, depending, lays out the remains in darkness or in broad daylight, to general applause.

—Claudio Magris, *Non luogo a procedere* (Blameless)

In 1967, Italo Calvino wrote a letter about the “molto interessante e strano” (very interesting and strange) writings of Thomas Bernhard, recommending that the important publishing house Einaudi translate his works (*Frost, Verstörung, Amras, and Prosa*).¹ In 1977, Claudio Magris held one of the first international conferences for the Austrian writer in Trieste.² In 2014, the conference “Il più grande scrittore europeo? Omaggio a Thomas Bernhard” (The Greatest European Author? Homage to

1 Italo Calvino, *Lettere: 1940–1985* (Milan: Mondadori, 2001), 1051.

2 See Luigi Quattrocchi, “Thomas Bernhard in Italia,” *Cultura e scuola* 26, no. 103 (1987): 48; and Eugenio Bernardi, “Bernhard in Italien,” in *Literarisches Kolloquium Linz 1984: Thomas Bernhard*, ed. Alfred Pittertschatscher and Johann Lachinger (Linz: Adalbert Stifter-Institut, 1985), 175–80. Both Quattrocchi and Bernardi describe the conference in their discussions of Bernhard’s early Italian reception.

Thomas Bernhard), whose title reveals the author's significant presence in contemporary Italy, included contributions by Micaela Latini, Michele Sisto, and Anita Raja, who some claim is the person behind the pen name Elena Ferrante.³

Building on these three moments of Bernhard's remarkable Italian appreciation, I examine how Bernhard can shed light on the works of Italo Calvino (1923–85), Claudio Magris (born 1939), and Elena Ferrante (birthdate unknown, but after Magris). First I outline Calvino's discovery of Bernhard, before moving to a comparison of Ferrante's and Bernhard's critiques of institutional structures and societies. The potential identification of Raja as Ferrante would add an extratextual link between Ferrante and Bernhard, but their works themselves manifest intriguing similarities, including their harsh critiques of society through a character's intense (and at times disturbing) reflections.⁴ I end with Magris and what his relationship with Bernhard reveals about Austro-Italian connections, as well as about Magris's own work. Although Magris was born in the 1930s, like Bernhard, his novel *Non luogo a procedere* (*Blameless*, 2015) is the most recent work discussed in this chapter.⁵ While these three authors reveal diverse aspects of Bernhard in Italy, including his significance for postmodernism, for critiquing society, and for reevaluating Austrian history, they all suggest Bernhard's significance for considering the role of the author after the Shoah.

Although Italian translations of *Frost*, *Verstörung*, and *Amras* that Calvino recommended to Einaudi in 1967 were not published until the eighties, Calvino continued to promote Bernhard. In 1977 he commented that the Austrian author should be better known and listed him

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- 3 The conference is available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NaKp-TY0cOkQ>. At the conference, Luigi Reitani states that when Bernhard talks about Austria, he is discussing all of Europe, and cites Bernhard's admiration of Cesare Pavese as a sign of Bernhard's European nature. His reference to Pavese reveals how Italian critics have also been interested in Bernhard because of how Italian authors inspired the Austrian author.
 - 4 For an overview of why Ferrante has been identified as Raja, as well as the numerous problems with the identification, see Alexandra Schwartz, "The 'Unmasking' of Elena Ferrante," *The New Yorker*, October 3, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-unmasking-of-elena-ferrante>.
 - 5 At the 2014 conference Raja examined the metaphorical functions of Bernhard's title in a discussion of the difficulties of translating Bernhard into Italian. The title of Magris's novel also functions on multiple levels, with the English translation obscuring some of the elements of the Italian. "Non luogo a procedere" is a legal term that means there is not enough evidence to proceed to trial, "no indictment" or "acquittal," rather than "blameless." The title is also reflected in the last words of the novel.

as someone who deserved the Nobel Prize.⁶ In 1978 Calvino declared Bernhard the best living author in the world.⁷ As the critic Luigi Quattrocchi explains, although it is surprising that Bernhard's Italian translations came so late (relatively), equally impressive is how quickly many of the Austrian's works were then published in Italian.⁸ Calvino's vocal admiration of Bernhard helped give the author a standing in Italian culture, before most of his works had been published in Italian.⁹

Adelphi ultimately became the Italian press that published the largest number of Bernhard's works. Revealing the publishing house's dedication to Bernhard, Adelphi has issued eighteen of Bernhard's works, from "È una commedia? È una tragedia" (originally "Ist es eine Komödie? Ist es eine Tragödie?" and in English "Is it a comedy? Is it a tragedy?") in 1971 to *Camminare* (originally *Gehen* and in English *Walking*) in 2018.¹⁰ Bernhard's "Is it a Tragedy? Is it a Comedy?" immediately precedes Calvino's "Dall'opaco" ("On the opaque") in the *Adelphiana 1971* collection, which is organized into sections. Both works narrate a walk, during which the ambulators contemplate the relationship between literary art and life. The two pieces offer musings on perception that have been read as significant for understanding the authors' points of view throughout their oeuvres. In Bernhard's story, a man considers going to the theater, but then instead takes a walk with a stranger, who offers his thoughts on the theater. It turns out the stranger

6 Calvino, *Lettere*, 1339.

7 Italo Alighiero Chiusano, *Literatur: Scrittori e libri tedeschi* (Milan: Rusconi, 1984), 616. Calvino read Bernhard in French and English translations.

8 Quattrocchi, "Thomas Bernhard in Italia," 46.

9 Two other significant contributors to Bernhard's pretranslation presence in Italy are Claudio Magris, discussed in this chapter, and Isabella Berthier Verondini, "Trilogia dell'intellettuale: *Frost, Verstörung, das Kalkwerk* di Thomas Bernhard," *Studi Germanici* 12, no. 1 (February 1974): 69–97.

10 Adelphi has published the following translations of Bernhard (with the Italian publication title and date following the German): "Ist es eine Komödie? Ist es eine Tragödie?" ("È una commedia? È una tragedia?") in *Adelphiana* (1971), *Verstörung* (*Perturbamento*, 1981), *Die Ursache* (*L'origine*, 1982), *Der Keller* (*La cantina*, 1984), *Der Untergeher* (*Il soccombente*, 1985), *Der Stimmenimitator* (*L'imitatore di voci*, 1987), *Der Atem* (*Il respiro*, 1989), *Wittgensteins Neffe* (*Il nipote di Wittgenstein*, 1989), *Holzfällen. Eine Erregung* (*Il colpo d'ascia. Una irritazione*, 1990), *Die Kälte* (*Il freddo*, 1991), *Alte Meister* (*Antichi Maestri*, 1992; rereleased in a new edition 2019), *Ein Kind* (*Un bambino*, 1994), *Auslöschung: ein Zerfall* (*Estinzione: uno sfacelo*, 1996), *Billigesser* (*I mangia a poco*, 2000), *Meine Preise* (*I miei premi*, 2009), collection of five autobiographical works (*Autobiografia*, 2011), *Goethe schtirbt* (*Goethe muore*, 2013), and *Gehen* (*Camminare*, 2018). Haas discusses the special place Bernhard, as a living Austrian author, has in Adelphi's publications; see Franz Haas, "In Italien," in *Blick von Aussen: Österreichische Literatur im internationalen Kontext*, eds. Franz Haas, Hermann Schlösser, and Klaus Zeyringer (Innsbruck: Haymon, 2003), 147.

killed his wife and is wearing her clothes. The ties between these clothes and the theater potentially reveal speech as script, "emblematic of the more general process of performative identity production in Bernhard's writing."¹¹ Ultimately, in answer to the questions, "Is it a comedy? Is it a tragedy?" the murderer suggests nothing in the theater can be as tragic as life and that therefore all art can be considered comedic.

Calvino was also aware of the disenchanting position of the modern writer. His "On the opaque" ends:

dal fondo dell'opaco io scrivo, ricostruendo la mappa d'un aprico che è solo un inverificabile assioma per i calcoli della memoria, il luogo geometrico dell'io, di un me stesso di cui il me stesso ha bisogno per sapersi me stesso, l'io che serve solo perché il mondo riceva continuamente notizie dell'esistenza del mondo, un congegno di cui il mondo dispone per sapere se c'è.¹²

(From the opaque, from the depths of the opaque I write, reconstructing the map of a sunniness that is only an unverifiable postulate for the computations of the memory, the geometrical location of the ego, of a self which the self needs to know that it is itself, the ego whose only function is that the world may continually receive news of the existence of the world, a contrivance at the service of the world for knowing if it exists.)¹³]

Calvino dwells on the important relationship between writing and life, suggesting that to promote this relationship as a positive one requires a mendacious leap of faith that is impossible in modern times. In this piece, Calvino experiments with an abstract, fluid narrative style that attempts to reflect the difficulty of writing after the discovery of the breakdown between the world and representing the world.

Similar to Bernhard's narrator, Calvino's observer dwells on the world as theater and human beings' role as interpreters. "On the Opaque" begins:

Se allora mi avessero domandato che forma ha il mondo avrei detto che è in pendenza, con dislivelli irregolari, con sporgenze e rientranze, per cui mi trovo sempre in qualche modo come su

11 Andrew Webber, "Costume Drama: Performance and Identity in Bernhard," in *A Companion to the Works of Thomas Bernhard*, ed. Matthias Konzett (Rochester: Camden House, 2002), 156.

12 Italo Calvino, *La strada di San Giovanni*, ed. Cesare Garboli (Milan: Oscar Mondadori, 2011), 91.

13 Italo Calvino, *The Road to San Giovanni*, trans. Tim Parks (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1995), 150.

un balcone, affacciato a un balaustra, e vedo ciò che il mondo contiene disporsi alla desta e alla sinistra a diverse distanze, su altri balconi o palchi di teatro soprastanti e sottostanti, d'un teatro il cui proscenio s'apre sul vuoto, sulla striscia di mare alta contro il cielo attraversato dai venti e dalle nuvole.¹⁴

(If they had asked then what shape the world is, I would have said it is a slope, with irregular shifts in height, with protrusions and hollows, so that somehow it's as if I were always on a balcony, looking out over the balustrade, whence I see the contents of the world ranged to the right and to the left at various distances, on other balconies or theatre boxes above or below, a theatre whose stage opens on the void, on the high strip of sea against the sky crossed by winds and clouds.)¹⁵

Although the world as a stage is an old trope, Bernhard and Calvino engage the idea as it functions in a modern, insecure, and violent world. Not only this, but both authors write from a place where this insecurity and violence are accepted. There is no hope of returning, or turning, to a time when art played, or could play, a more idealistic role in society. Calvino's opening sentence positions the narrator not on stage, but from a peripheral position of observation. The stage and void are describable, but not alterable. While Calvino and Bernhard's pessimistic outlooks are often read as based on autobiographical experiences, Calvino's war experiences and Bernhard's childhood, the two authors formulate their negative views as inherently part of contemporary society.

In 1981, when asked about his feelings on novels, as expressed in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (*If on a winter's night a traveler*, 1979), Calvino replied that it was difficult to believe in them anymore:

Vivo sempre nella speranza d'incontrare un romanziere che sia semplice, naïf, e che dica qualcosa di veramente nuovo. Ma non ne incontro fra i contemporanei. Anche nel caso di un autore che è autentico e magnifico narratore come l'austriaco Thomas Bernhard ci si accorge che i suoi testi narrativi sono molto costruiti e intellettuali.¹⁶

(I live with the hope of encountering a novelist who is simple, naïve, and says something really new. But I do not see this among my contemporaries. Even in the case of an authentic and magnificent author, like the Austrian Thomas Bernhard,

14 Calvino, *La strada*, 79.

15 Calvino, *The Road*, 129.

16 Italo Calvino, *Sono nato in America: Interviste 1951–1985*, eds. Luca Baranelli and Mario Barenghi (Milan: Mondadori, 2012), 436–37.

one realizes that his narrative texts are very fabricated and intellectual.)

For Calvino, all contemporary authors are too self-conscious and their literature expresses this abstraction from life. The sentences he had been asked about from *If on a winter's night a traveler* reflect on Calvino's own artistry and make clear that Calvino includes himself in this category of contemporary authors: "proprio ora che cominciavi a interessarti davvero, ecco che l'autore si crede in dovere di sfoggiare uno dei soliti virtuosismi letterari moderni, ripetere un capoverso tal quale. Un capoverso, dici? Ma è una pagina intera, puoi fare il confronto, non cambia nemmeno una virgola"¹⁷ (just when you were beginning to grow truly interested, at this very point the author feels called upon to display one of those virtuoso tricks so customary in modern writing, repeating a paragraph word for word. Did you say paragraph? Why, it's a whole page; you make the comparison, he hasn't changed even a comma).¹⁸ While Calvino is in part commenting on reading practices, book production, and his own writing in *If on a winter's night a traveler*, this description also suggests why Calvino viewed Bernhard as an author whose artifice was often apparent. Bernhard's repetition identifies his unique, powerful style, but for Calvino this quality also marks it as constructed, modern writing.

Calvino's view of artifice of course did not mean he believed contemporary literature was meaningless. In his posthumously published *Lezioni americane (Six Memos for the Next Millennium)* Calvino states: "My confidence in the future of literature consists in the knowledge that there are things that only literature can give us, by means specific to it."¹⁹ Bernhard and Calvino were both prolific writers, for whom literature potentially did bear a significant relationship to the world and how the world is shaped. Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* makes clear how with his experimental works, he did not mean to divide literature from the world. As Alan Tinkler has summarized, "Calvino realized that in order for literature to probe epistemological as well as ontological concerns, literary experimentation was necessary."²⁰

17 Italo Calvino, *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002), 24.

18 Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveler*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1981), 25.

19 Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. Patrick Creagh (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 1. These essays were originally prepared for the Charles Eliot Norton lectures Calvino was supposed to give at Harvard, but he died before being able to deliver them. When criticism by Italian authors has been published in English, I have provided just that.

20 Alan Tinkler, "Italo Calvino," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 59.

In a 1977 interview, William H. Gass identified Calvino and Bernhard as especially significant living authors: "Lots of European writers are overblown, especially some of the French experimentalists, but Italo Calvino is wonderful. Thomas Bernhard's *The Lime Works* is impressive."²¹ Calvino and Bernhard were doing more than just providing examples of a new style of writing.

Within the Italian context, Calvino's later works, including *If on a winter's night a traveler*, have been critiqued for moving away from his neo-realism of the past, for moving away from committed literature.²² While Bernhard and Calvino both employ repetition in their fiction and could be considered postmodernist writers in part because of their geometric and self-referential writing styles, Bernhard's work also clearly critiques society. Although postmodernism, like modernism, remains a debated term, that it expresses the problems of being without values comes to the fore in Italian considerations of the category. The term points to authors who explore what it means to live in the world without ideology. Whereas "modernism" had a negligible role in the Italian intellectual landscape of the twentieth century, "postmodernism" had a larger presence. Bernhard was attractive to Italians in part because of his critique of society, a critique that often suggests that the desire for an alternative to the existing social order will remain unrealized.²³

Stefano Tani divides Italian postmodern or "young narrative" works of the 1980s into the "watchers," narrators who both describe the world from a somewhat alien, emotionally detached point of view and thematize the act of looking (Calvino, De Carlo, Del Giudice), and the "storytellers," narrators who describe history as "weighing down" the present and returning (Eco, Manfredi, Elkann).²⁴ Bernhard fits both

21 William H. Gass, "The Art of Fiction 16," interviewed by Thomas LeClair, *Paris Review* 70 (Summer 1977): 92.

22 See, for instance, Alessia Ricciardi's critique of Calvino, Alessia Ricciardi, *After La Dolce Vita: A Cultural Prehistory of Berlusconi's Italy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012) and the response by Lucia Re, "Pasolini vs. Calvino, One More Time: The Debate on the Role of Intellectuals and Postmodernism in Italy Today," *MLN* 129, no. 1 (2014): 99–117.

23 "[T]he search for authenticity, truth and subjectivity, so crucial in the modernist novel, is abandoned in postmodern literature. To authors like Alain Robbe-Grillet, Umberto Eco, Thomas Pynchon or Thomas Bernhard, the entire problem of values seems meaningless because the longing for an alternative to the existing social order appears to them as utopian in the original sense of the word: as aiming at a reality that does not exist (and cannot exist)" (Peter V. Zima, *Modern/Postmodern: Society, Philosophy, Literature* [London; New York: Continuum, 2010] 194).

24 Stefano Tani, "La Giovane Narrativa: Emerging Italian Novelists in the Eighties," in *Postmodern Fiction in Europe and the Americas*, eds. Theo D'Haen and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988), 162–72.

descriptions. Bernhard's lookers are often concerned with the past and how it intersects and problematizes the very act of looking. In *Alte Meister (Old Masters)*, the past, personal and historical, disrupt Reger's gaze. Partially because of the fluidity with which Bernhard's narrators, like the observer of Reger, the man in the museum, move from the personal to social to national critiques and back, Bernhard is often characterized as an intensely critical and candid author.

The adjectives candid, intense, blunt, cruel, searing, angry, honest, and merciless, have all been used to describe not only Bernhard's work but also Ferrante's novels. Although it may seem unusual to compare an author at times described as a misogynist to one frequently considered to be engaged in a feminist critique, critics and journalists have characterized the two authors using similar terms for several reasons, including their portrayals of communities and institutional structures. Both represent families unsentimentally, with an emphasis on how the family unit oppresses its individual members. For instance, in *Old Masters*, parents prevent Reger from living: "Die Eltern mußten tot sein, damit ich leben konnte, als die Eltern starben, lebte ich auf"²⁵ (My parents had to be dead for me to be able to live, when my parents died I revived).²⁶ The works of Ferrante, from her first novel *L'amore molesto (Troubling Love)*, 1992) to her Neapolitan tetralogy (2011–2014), reveal how families oppress individuals, especially women, often making it nearly impossible for them to establish their own identities and live life freely.

In *Troubling Love*, Delia describes the imposition of her mother's visits. Delia lives in Rome, and her mother comes up from Naples, invading her space: "Si svegliava all'alba e, secondo le sue abitudini, lustrava da cima a fondo la cucina e il soggiorno. Cercavo di riaddormentarmi ma non ci riuscivo: irrigidita tra le lenzuola, avevo l'impressione che sfaccendando mi trasformasse il corpo in quello di una bambina con le rughe"²⁷ (She woke at dawn and, as was her habit, cleaned the kitchen and the living room from top to bottom. I tried to get back to sleep, but couldn't: rigid between the sheets, I had the impression that as she busied about she transformed my body into that of a wizened child).²⁸ The presence of her mother forces Delia back into childhood, framed as a negative space of imprisonment. She feels oppressed in her own home. After her mother leaves, Delia rearranges the items her mother touched.

25 Thomas Bernhard, *Alte Meister: Komödie*, eds. Martin Huber and Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), 67.

26 Thomas Bernhard, *Old Masters: A Comedy*, trans. by Ewald Osers (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 52.

27 Elena Ferrante, *L'amore molesto* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 1992), 7–8.

28 Elena Ferrante, *Troubling Love*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2006), 11.

Even her mother's smell leaves a disturbing trace: "Anche l'odore della sua presenza—un profumo che lasciava in casa un senso d'inquietudine—dopo un po' passava come d'estate l'odore d'una pioggia di breve durata"²⁹ (And in a little while the odor of her presence—a scent that left in the house a sense of restlessness—faded, like the smell of a passing shower in the summer).³⁰ This scent, however slight, affects Delia's psychological state, and she needs time to recover from it.

In Bernhard's *Concrete* the narrator feels an even stronger oppression when his sister visits. As in Delia's case, he has no control over when his family member will appear, and her disruptive presence keeps him from committing to his writing. In *Concrete* and *Troubling Love*, the solidity of the family members irritates the narrators. The intrusive habits of Delia's mother and Rudolf's sister reflect their seemingly stable identities, which unsettle the narrators. Similar to Delia's experience of her mother, the sister's different life view destroys Rudolf's concentration. As with Delia's mother, the smell of family continues to bother the narrator after his sister is gone: "Und obwohl ich schon, wie gesagt, dreimal gelüftet hatte, war noch immer der Geruch meiner Schwester im Zimmer, tatsächlich war ihr Geruch noch immer im ganzen Haus, mich ekelte vor diesem Geruch"³¹ (And although I'd opened all the windows, as I've already said, my sister's smell was still in the room. In fact it permeated the house and made me feel sick).³² The German emphasizes even more than the English how the repeated attempts to air out the house cannot remove the sister's smell. Even the lingering, invisible trace of a relation is disturbing, because it reflects the memory of the family member.

At the end of *Troubling Love*, Delia alters her identity papers to make her photo look more like her mother's image. This moment has been read both positively and negatively in terms of Delia's development, but in both cases it is not triumphant or restorative. Neither Ferrante nor Bernhard offers the hope of transcendence, which contributes to why both authors are described as brutal. Ferrante reflected on how uncomfortable this move away from transcendence makes some readers: "I'm always surprised when someone points out as a flaw the fact that my stories contain no possibility of transcendence."³³ Both authors portray

29 Ferrante, *L'amore molesto*, 8.

30 Ferrante, *Troubling*, 12.

31 Thomas Bernhard, *Beton*, eds. Martin Huber and Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), 12.

32 Thomas Bernhard, *Concrete*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Vintage, 2010), 11.

33 Elena Ferrante, *Frantumaglia: A Writer's Journey*, translated by Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2016), 373.

the significance of art that does not offer transcendence. Many of Bernhard's works critique even the hope for transcendence. Stephen Dowden examines this in *Old Masters: "Tintoretto's Man with a White Beard* embodies for Reger all that is false and treacherous in great art: the utopian promise of transcendence, of human nobility, of perfection."³⁴ Ferrante says she clings to stories that "arise from a profound crisis of all our illusions."³⁵ Bernhard's works fit this description well.

Bernhard and Ferrante may be as famous for their publication choices as for their literature. Bernhard's will forbade his work's publication, performances, and sale in Austria. Ferrante continues to conceal her identity. Since the publication of *Troubling Love*, Ferrante has rejected banquets, awards, lectures, and other events that would require her appearance to promote her works. Bernhard's uncomfortable, critical descriptions of these experiences seem to validate Ferrante's decision. Their choices have been held up as critiques of how their contemporary societies function. At the same time, Bernhard and Ferrante's authorial decisions have both been called ploys, ostensible self-erasures that ultimately call more attention to the author's presence.

In their own writing, Ferrante and Bernhard's characters often operate around an absence, one that reveals the characters' inability to forget. In *Troubling Love*, Delia creates a dialogue with her dead mother. The work centers around the obsessive process of remembering in part due to an inability to fully function. In *L'amica geniale (My Brilliant Friend, 2011)*, the missing friend prompts a four-volume work that insists on remembering and recreating the presence of someone who would like to disappear. This work, like many of Bernhard's, reveals how another person's phrases become part of oneself. Many of the authors' works raise questions about the problems of speaking for others, but also how others become part of oneself, often against one's desires. They also suggest the power of literature to recreate what has been forgotten or to suggest what people have tried to forget.

Bernhard and Ferrante examine the suffering of an individual in society and offer detailed descriptions of a specific society (Austrian, often Vienna; Italian, often Naples), that then leads to a reconsideration of European and Western society more generally. The international recognition of Bernhard's work helped to counterbalance the *The Sound of Music* idea of Austria; Ferrante's fame has offered a sharp counterpoint

34 Stephen Dowden, *Understanding Thomas Bernhard* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 63.

35 Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, 373.

to the common *Room without a View* idea of Italy.³⁶ The local and specific nature of both authors' works is part of their appeal for reconsidering global issues. The precision of the authors' descriptions of their Austrian and Italian societies, especially in terms of the emotions these societies produce, have often caused readers not only to have intense reactions to their works, but to have viewed them as reflections of the authors' own lives as well.

Despite Ferrante's anonymity, her novels are frequently framed as autobiographical, with the assumption that such a detailed, honest portrayal of Neapolitan female experience must correspond to the author's own reality. Mark M. Anderson's description of Bernhard's work as "deeply personal" can help resituate Ferrante, in order to avoid the autobiographical-fictional bind: "Whether 'autobiographical' or 'fictional,' however, these texts are deeply personal and deeply performative."³⁷ Ferrante herself sees the need to firmly divide literary fiction from nonfiction as problematic and uses Virginia Woolf to clarify her position: "Because writing is innately artificial, its every use involves some form of fiction. The dividing line is rather, as Virginia Woolf said, how much truth the fiction inherent in writing is able to capture."³⁸ While Bernhard mocks the idea of an Austrian Woolf in *Holzfüllen* (*Woodcutters*), the English author is an important figure in both his and Ferrante's literary genealogies. She contributes not only stylistically, in terms of their extensive portrayals of thought, but also in terms of suggesting how literature can capture truth through fiction.

Critics often situate Bernhard's reflections on crisis and truth in a longer Austrian tradition, especially the "Sprachkrise" (language crisis). Hermann Bahr's "das unrettbare Ich," Ernst Mach's "Das Ich ist unrettbar," Hugo von Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos who declared, "Est ist mir völlig die Fähigkeit abhanden gekommen, über irgend

36 The works *Under the Tuscan Sun* and *Eat, Pray, Love* also frequently come up in considerations of Italy, a place where foreigners discover themselves and their passion. As significant as these three literary works for this sense of Italy are their film adaptations.

37 Mark M. Anderson, "Fragments of a Deluge: The Theater of Thomas Bernhard's Prose," in *A Companion to the Works of Thomas Bernhard*, edited by Matthias Konzett (Rochester: Camden House, 2002), 120.

38 Elena Ferrante, "I'm tired of fiction, I no longer see a reason to go hunting for anecdotes," in *The Guardian*, trans. by Ann Goldstein (February 17, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/feb/17/elena-ferrante-im-tired-of-fiction-i-no-longer-see-a-reason-to-go-hunting-for-anecdotes>. Numerous opinion pieces by Ferrante were first published in *The Guardian* in English, but have now been collected and published in the original; see Elena Ferrante, *L'invenzione occasionale* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2019), 18. The Woolf reference has been removed.

etwas zusammenhängend zu denken oder zu sprechen" (I have completely lost the ability to think or speak coherently about anything at all),³⁹ and Ludwig Wittgenstein's lion suggest the complex richness of this Austrian heritage. The inability to express oneself raises the question of the instability of one's place in the world, a significant element of fin de siècle Austrian modernism. The Sprachkrise and crises of identity, which are both especially prominent in Austrian literature and thought, are inseparable.

Ferrante's work also interrogates language's ability to adequately express reality. Her much discussed term "smarginatura," which has become a defining term through which to understand her recent work, is understood as the blurring of boundaries.⁴⁰ While discussions of smarginatura often focus on the term's significance for understanding the female experience, of being at the margins, the term can also be understood as developing from and related to the language crisis, since it offers another way to discuss an experience that seems to lie beyond language. In *My Brilliant Friend*, Lila experiences her first episode of smarginatura: "Diceva che in quelle occasioni si dissolvevano all'improvviso i margini delle persone e delle cose. Quando quella notte, in cima al terrazzo dove stavamo festeggiando l'arrivo del 1959, fu investita bruscamente da un sensazione di quel tipo, si spaventò e si tenne la cosa per sé, ancora incapace di nominarla."⁴¹ (She said that on those occasions the outlines of people and things suddenly dissolved, disappeared. That night, on the terrace where we were celebrating the arrival of 1959, when she was abruptly struck by that sensation, she was frightened and kept it to herself, still unable to name it.⁴²) Lila's sense of not being firmly rooted in the world relates both to her position as a poor woman in Naples and to the inability to label or name her feeling of blurred boundaries. She faces an unavoidable disintegration that causes her to feel outside of society and without identity. In Bernhard the inability to truly express oneself is associated with the inability to truly live, a common feeling for many of his characters.

39 Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *The Lord Chandos Letter and Other Writings*, trans. Joel Rotenberg (New York: New York Review of Books, 2005), 121.

40 For a discussion of this term that examines it especially in terms of gender, see "Smarginatura: Motherhood and Female Friendship" (Part III), in *The Works of Elena Ferrante: Reconfiguring the Margins*, eds. Grace Russo Bullaro and Stephanie V. Love (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). Tiziana de Rogatis provides a clear examination of the term and its significance in Tiziana De Rogatis, *Elena Ferrante. Parole Chiave* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2018), 87–91.

41 Elena Ferrante, *L'amica geniale* (Rome: Edizioni e/o, 2011), 85.

42 Elena Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2012), 89.

In a discussion of how Bernhard's works relates to those of Musil, Wittgenstein, Kafka, and Bachmann, the Italian intellectual Aldo Giorgio Gargani places Bernhard's relationship to language and reality in this aforementioned Austrian heritage: "Bernhard starts off writing that the main fact of our existence is not an existence which we describe and which is always a lie, rather the impossibility of saying what it is like. There is no truth to be hooked onto in spite of our will to tell the truth."⁴³ Calling attention to a connection between two of the reasons for Bernhard's Italian reception, Gargani's work bridges Italy's focus on Austrian culture and its attention to Bernhard's postmodernism. He was responsible both for a number of important works on Bernhard that placed him in an Austrian context, including *La frase infinita: Thomas Bernhard e la cultura austriaca* (*The Infinite Phrase: Thomas Bernhard and Austrian Culture*, 1990), and for the earlier edited volume *La crisi della ragione* (*The Crisis of Reason*, 1979), which contributed to the appreciation of postmodernism in Italy.⁴⁴ During the period in which postmodern literature was developed, there was a "boom" of Mitteleuropean works in Italy.⁴⁵ Franz Haas has described how in the sixties and seventies Arthur Schnitzler, Joseph Roth, and Alexander Lernet-Holenia were more popular in Italy than they were in their homeland.⁴⁶ As revealed in the previous case of Calvino, Austrian literature, including Bernhard's, played a role in shaping the Italian development of postmodernism.

Austrian literature has continued to have a notable presence in Italian critical writing and publishing. In 1992 the journal *Studi austriaci* (*Austrian Studies*) was founded and has featured numerous articles on Bernhard. The Italian author Roberto Calasso describes the continued significance of Austrian, as opposed to German, literature as follows: "Today is a difficult moment for that culture: the Frankfurt School, after the death of Adorno, survives only as a parody of itself, and the rare recent surprises in narrative have come from Austrian writers such as Thomas Bernhard, heirs of a tradition that is in many respects incompatible with Germany."⁴⁷ There are numerous attestations to Bernhard's

43 Aldo Giorgio Gargani, "'Thomas Bernhard's Infinite Phrase': A Summary," *Argumentation* 6 (1993): 447.

44 For a reading of Bernhard's postmodernism in terms of his Austrian heritage, see Elrud Ibsch, "From Hypothesis to *Korrektur*: Refutation as a Component of Postmodernist Discourse," in *Approaching Postmodernism*, eds. Douwe Fokkema and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1986), 119–34.

45 "überraschenden Boom von allen möglichen 'mitteleuropäischen' Werken in den sechziger und siebziger Jahren" (Haas, "In Italien," 146).

46 Haas, "In Italien," 147.

47 Roberto Calasso, *The Art of the Publisher*, trans. Richard Dixon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 110.

enduring significance in Italy. From new editions, to performances of his plays, to conferences, Bernhard continues to be a subject of attention.⁴⁸ In May 2019 Franz Haas moderated a conference about Thomas Bernhard, "Tributo a Thomas Bernhard: Dialoghi 1989–2019" (Tribute to Thomas Bernhard: Dialogues 1989–2019), that brought together translators (Samir Thabet), directors (Monica Giovinazzi), and scholars (Micaela Latini, Stefano Apostolo, and Paolo Massari) to discuss Bernhard's role in the arts and Italy.

The reasons for the Austrian-Italian connections are multiple, including historical and cultural connections, travel between the two places, and political formations. The Catholic Austro-Hungarian Empire's control of large portions of now Italian territory and the Italian Marxist readings of many Austro-Hungarian authors (thanks in part to Lukács) are important contributing elements. Bernhard's depictions of Italy can be situated in this complex and rich tradition of Austro-Italian cross-pollinations. For instance, Bernhard's "Wahre Liebe" ("True Love") follows Kafka's "Der Jäger Gracchus" ("The Hunter Gracchus"), which was inspired by Kafka's Italian travels.⁴⁹ The Italian of "True Love" owns a villa on Riva on Lake Garda, where Kafka's "The Hunter Gracchus" is set. While "The Hunter Gracchus" describes a living corpse on a boat, in "True Love" the Italian rides the lake with his love, a mannequin, which draws on and parodies the uncanny of Kafka's story.⁵⁰ Bernhard's piece describes how a letter about the odd relationship appears in the newspaper of Desencano (Desenzano), another Italian location Kafka visited. With "True Love," Bernhard builds on an Austrian tradition of portraying Italy.

Italian people, places, and works appear repeatedly in Thomas Bernhard's oeuvre. Bernhard's "Pisa und Venedig" ("Pisa and Venice") offers a funny commentary on tourism, politics, and sanity. In the one-paragraph story, the mayors of the Italian cities are institutionalized, because they planned to put the leaning tower of Pisa in place of the Venetian campanile, and vice versa.⁵¹ In *Beton (Concrete)*, Rudolf speaks of having "viel gesehen" (seen a great deal of the world), listing Italy first and naming Taormina, Palermo, Agrigento, Calabria, Rome,

48 Ubulibri published a four-volume collection of Bernhard's plays, recently reissued by Einaudi. The publisher SE has published several of his works. In 1992 and again in 2007, the Eliseo theater in Rome staged Patrick Guinand's adaptation of *Wittgenstein's Nephew*.

49 Kafka and Bernhard have often been connected.

50 Thomas Bernhard, *Erzählungen: Kurzprosa*, eds. Hans Höller, Martin Huber, and Manfred Mittermayer (Salzburg: Suhrkamp, 2003), 307. Thomas Bernhard, *The Voice Imitator*, trans. Kenneth J. Northcott (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 67.

51 Bernhard, *Erzählungen: Kurzprosa*, 240. Bernhard, *The Voice Imitator*, 6.

Naples, Trieste, and Abbazia, a longer list than he provides for any of the other countries he mentions.⁵² In *Auslöschung* (*Extinction*), Rome at times seems the positive counterbalance to the narrator's Austrian home of Wolfsegg.

Like London, Italy in Bernhard's work is often ultimately revealed as positive only in its distance from Austria, representing not an escape, but a place where Bernhard's characters can consider the idea of escape.⁵³ In "Der Italiener" ("The Italian"), a precursor to *Extinction*, the eponymous title character intimates that his country may be a place where one could flee the "darkness" and historical violence the Austrian narrator describes: "als der Italiener, der mich, nach kurzer Zeit schon, zu sich nach Florenz eingeladen hatte, nachdem wir über der Brücke waren, sagte: 'Die Finsternis, die hier herrscht ...', und dann schwieg"⁵⁴ (the Italian had invited me to visit him in Florence; after we were over the bridge, he said 'The darkness which prevails here ...,' and then trailed off into silence).⁵⁵ Although the Italian suggests Florence may be a happier place, he concludes that there is "kein Mittel, sich selbst zu entfliehen"⁵⁶ (no means of escaping oneself).⁵⁷ Bernhard's "In Rom" ("In Rome"), which draws on Ingeborg Bachmann's life, states even more clearly how inescapable "Austria" is.⁵⁸ In this short piece, the narrator reflects on his friend's death by fire:

Die an den Selbstmord der Dichterin glauben, sagen immer wieder, sie sei an sich selbst zerbrochen, während sie in Wirklichkeit naturgemäß nur an ihrer Umwelt und im Grunde an der Gemeinheit ihrer Heimat zerbrochen ist, von welcher sie auch im Ausland auf Schritt und Tritt verfolgt worden war wie so viele.⁵⁹

(Those who believe in the poet's suicide keep saying that she was broken by herself, whereas in reality and in the nature of things she was broken by her environment and, at bottom, by the

52 Bernhard, *Beton*, 51. Bernhard, *Concrete*, 57.

53 Ferry Radax adapted "The Italian" from Bernhard's screenplay of the same name. Suhrkamp has published it and the story "Der Italiener" together in a collection called *Der Italiener* (which is different from *An der Baumgrenze*).

54 Thomas Bernhard, *Erzählungen*, eds. Martin Huber and Wendelin Schmid-Dengler (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), 1:258.

55 Thomas Bernhard, "The Italian," in *Relationships: An Anthology of Contemporary Austrian Prose*, ed. Donald G. Daviau and trans. Eric Williams (Riverside, CA: Ariadne Press, 1991), 75.

56 Bernhard, *Erzählungen*, 1:258.

57 Bernhard, "The Italian," 75.

58 One of the Italian's previous statements had already revealed that Italy does not in fact provide a refuge from the problems of Europe or of the world.

59 Bernhard, *Erzählungen: Kurzprosa*, 341.

meanness of her homeland, which persecuted her at every turn even when she was abroad, just as it does so many others.)⁶⁰

The significant Italian presence in Bernhard's work is partially due to the author's travels in the peninsula, including ones with Bachmann, who had moved to Rome in 1953. While Bernhard mostly describes his contempt for the Ministry of Culture and Art in "The Austrian State Prize for Literature," he mentions being grateful for the grants from the Ministry that covered a couple of his trips to Italy.

Bernhard's visits contributed to his notable role in the Italian intellectual landscape, since Italians were then invested in Bernhard's depictions of their country and several of the Italians he met circulated his work.⁶¹ The earliest Italian publications of Bernhard are testaments to these two elements of his reception. In 1981 the first freestanding Italian editions of Bernhard's works were published: Guanda's *L'italiano* (*An der Baumgrenze*) and Adelphi's *Perturbamento* (*Verstörung*). The change from the German's title of "On the tree-line" to "The Italian" in Guanda's edition stressed the stories' connections with Italy.⁶² Bernhard's personal interactions with the author and editor Roberto Calasso helped cement the significant relationship between Adelphi and the Austrian author.

Calasso first met Bernhard in Rome in the 1970s, along with Bachmann, whose role in Bernhard's Italian fortunes has been noted.⁶³ Bernhard memorably talked all night about "The Irish, cemeteries, sleeping pills, farmers."⁶⁴ Calasso later saw him in Vienna: "Several years later, in Vienna, I delivered to him a volume of his autobiography that had just been published. He leafed through it, looked carefully at the print, and seemed pleased. Then he said the paper was good."⁶⁵ Calasso recounts how Bernhard's admiration for this Italian edition of his work then altered the format of the German edition of *In der Höhe*, with paper and a cover more similar to Adelphi editions than previous *Residenz*

60 Bernhard, *The Voice Imitator*, 90.

61 For instance, the author and artist Monica Sarsini met Bernhard, whom she later described as "her hero," "in 1982, when he came to Florence to accept the Premio Prato"; see Minna Zallman Proctor, *Landslide: True Stories* (New York: Catapult, 2017), 42.

62 This emphasis on Bernhard's Italian connections can also be seen with the inclusion of photos of Bernhard in Italy in Italian discussions of the Austrian author. For instance, the information from the Trent conference "Homage to Thomas Bernhard" ("Omaggio a Thomas Bernhard," 2000) reproduces several photographs, including one of Bernhard in Sicily from 1977.

63 Chiusano, *Literatur*, 616.

64 Calasso, *The Art of the Publisher*, 30.

65 Calasso, *The Art of the Publisher*, 30.

editions. Bernhard's Italian experiences and reception influenced Bernhard's German-language legacy.

In 1977 the Austrian author traveled to Trieste for the conference Magris organized on him.⁶⁶ Magris, an author and Germanist from the formerly Austro-Hungarian city of Trieste, is a key figure for the Austrian presence in Italy. His fictional and scholarly examinations of culture, history, and literature both shaped the international concept of Austrian literature and drew Italian attention to the historical connections between their country and Austria. Bernhard's first novel *Frost* and Magris's *Il mito asburgico nella letteratura austriaca moderna* (*The Habsburg Myth in Modern Austrian Literature*), based on his dissertation, both came out in 1963.⁶⁷ Magris's monograph, translated into German in 1966 (and still not translated into English), is often credited with exploding the idea of Austro-Hungarian nostalgia. Magris later commented that his *Il mito asburgico* may have even contributed to the myth itself, a myth much of Bernhard's work aimed to deconstruct. Magris's characterization of his first monograph illustrates how personal the question of Austria-Hungary is to the Trieste author:

E per questo credo che il mio libro *Il mito asburgico* esprima un giudizio negativo su quel mondo, ma attraverso il quale passa anche una fortissimo corrente di fascinazione. E alla fine sì, anche senza volerlo, è un libro autobiografico, poiché quello che ho riconosciuto nell'Impero asburgico in qualche misura è un processo, un tentativo di tenere insieme unità e frammentazione. Un problema che riguarda anche la mia stessa esistenza.⁶⁸

(And because of this I think that my book *Il mito asburgico* (*The Habsburg Myth*) expresses a negative judgment on that world, but through it there also flows an incredibly strong sense of fascination. And in the end, yes, even without wanting it, it is also an autobiographical book, since what I identified in the Habsburg Empire is in some ways a process, an attempt to keep together unity and fragmentation. A problem that also concerns my own existence.)

66 Bernhard's editor Siegfried Unseld and the critic Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler also attended the conference.

67 The title of Magris's book spells Habsburg "asburgico," but in referencing the work publishers sometimes alter the title to their preferred spelling of "asburgico." I have kept it as is in all the texts, which leads to some variety.

68 Magris, *Se non siamo innocenti: Marco Alloni dialoga con Claudio Magris* (Rome: Aliberti editore, 2011), 47.

Both born in the thirties, Magris and Bernhard grappled with many of the same issues in their works, including how Austria itself reflects and relates to personal struggles to navigate between deceptive unity and destructive fragmentation.

In 1972, Magris published an essay on Bernhard entitled, "Beckett su Danubio" ("Beckett on the Danube").⁶⁹ The following year, in a volume dedicated to the prominent Germanist Ladislao Mittner, Magris and other scholars wrote essays on the best German novels of the century, starting with Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*. In the penultimate entry, which is dedicated to Bernhard's *Verstörung* (*Perturbazione*, later translated as *Perturbamento*, published in English as *Gargoyles*), Magris examines how Bernhard's obsessive prose of decomposition reveals the author's attraction to inescapable, horrible order, not chaos.

Magris mentions Bernhard in his esteemed literary work *Danubio* (*Danube*, 1986): "Debitrice della nuova estraniante letteratura di villaggio fiorita in Austria con Bernhard, Handke o Innerhofer, Herta Müller ne prosegue originalmente la sensitiva e cupa radicalità"⁷⁰ (Owing much to the new, alienating, "village literature" flourishing in Austria with Bernhard, Handke or Innerhofer, Herta Müller explores its dark, sensitive roots in an original manner).⁷¹ This concept of "village literature," and even of "national literature," contributes to why critics do not often put Magris and Bernhard in conversation with each other, even though much of Magris's work resists these divisions and indicates some of the problems with them. Although the authors are invested in and investigated what being Austrian means, they are divided in terms of their linguistic and national identities. One English subtitle of *Danube*, *A Sentimental Journey from the Source to the Black Sea*, reveals another reason why Magris, despite his numerous connections with Bernhard, is rarely paired with the Austrian author.⁷² While Magris's works are, like Bernhard's, often obsessive and focus on the return of the past, they are frequently described as nostalgic, sentimental,

69 Originally printed in *Il mondo*, August 10, 1972, the article was renamed and reprinted; see Claudio Magris, "Tenebra e geometria," in *Dietro le parole* (Milan: Garzanti, 2002), 285–90. *Danubio* (*Danube*) would later provide the title for Magris's famous literary work about the culture and history along the river.

70 Claudio Magris, *Danubio* (Milan: Garzanti, 2003), 361.

71 Claudio Magris, *Danube*, trans. Patrick Creagh (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 306.

72 For a notable exception, see Elena Morachielli, "Il triangolo dell'assoluto nei romanzi *Un altro mare* di Claudio Magris e *Il soccombente* di Thomas Bernhard," *Nuova antologia* 572 (January–March 1994): 480–500. Morachielli notes two elements that are also significant in my discussion (although examining different works by both authors): their presentation of history and the construction of a triangular narrative pattern.

or even romantic, not searing like those of Bernhard. Magris's more recent work, however, explores more directly the violent legacies of history, especially in Trieste.

The last part of this chapter puts *Blameless* in conversation with Bernhard's work in order to discuss the novel's formal experimentation, how it reveals Italian ties to Austrian culture, its indictment of society after the Second World War, and issues of suppressed memory.⁷³ Magris was inspired to write *Blameless* in part because of how Italian collective memory often ignores the death camp, Risiera San Sabba, located in Trieste. Bernhard's *Heldenplatz* provides one of the most powerful examples of how art can prompt a nation to revisit its relationship to its past. Bernhard's depictions of Austria, its Nazi past, and its anti-Semitism offer a productive model for Magris's depiction of Italy, its Fascist past, and its anti-Semitism. Both authors produce works that in part ask if art—plays, paintings, novels, and museums—can change a nation's relationship to its historical past. Their works contribute to a revisiting of their nation's identities and understandings of themselves. Both works suggest that silence can be a form of violence.

Like several of Bernhard's works, *Blameless* operates around a gap, a death, and missing papers. While the narrative covers a vast swath of history and numerous characters, it is primarily organized around two figures, a Triestine proponent of a museum dedicated to showcasing objects of war and a Triestine woman named Luisa. After the death of the proponent of the museum (henceforth referred to as "the man"), Luisa, who had worked with the man, is charged with organizing the remaining objects and papers in preparation for the museum's construction. While the man remains unnamed in the novel, in the note following the work Magris mentions the name of the historical figure that helped inspire the story, Diego de Henriquez. The "Museo della guerra per la pace Diego de Henriquez" (Museum of War for Peace Diego de Henriquez) now exists in Trieste. Much of *Blameless* revolves around real mysteries and ambiguities, like the mysterious death of Diego de Henriquez, who died in a fire. The novel suggests that in addition to this human loss, the fire consumed important papers that included information about Nazi perpetrators and the Triestine contribution to the deaths at Risiera San Sabba. Through their burning, the novel links the disappearance of the man, the victims of the Risiera death camp,

73 For a great analysis of the novel, see Sandra Parmegiani, "Remembering War: Memory and History in Claudio Magris's *Blameless*," in *Transmissions of Memory: Echoes, Traumas, and Nostalgia in Post-World War II Italian Culture*, ed. Patrizia Sambuco (Vancouver/Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2018), 91–107. She places the novel in the context of Magris's other works and analyzes how history and memory function in the work.

and the papers on which the man recorded the victims' names. The absence of these papers indicates that Triestines, years after the events, are invested in hiding the traces of their roles in the Shoah.⁷⁴ Magris's work is part of a current move in Italy to discuss how Italians contributed to the tragedies of the Second World War.

Fascist Italy has often been contrasted with Nazi Germany, putting Fascist rule in a comparatively positive light and at times framing Mussolini as having been merely misled by Hitler. The myth of "Italiani brava gente," the idea that Italians are fundamentally good people and therefore did not really contribute to the violence of the Second World War, has been hard to disrupt.⁷⁵ More recent works, like Simon Levis Sullam's *The Italian Executioners*, concentrate on the role of Italian perpetrators. Literature like Magris's contributes to this slow process of reshaping national self-awareness. *Heldenplatz* dwells on how Austria has not properly dealt with its relationship to the Holocaust. Bernhard's famous critiques of Austria, given many names, such as "Osterreichbeschimpfung," "Beleidigung des österreichischen Volkes," and "Nestbeschmutzung," present a picture of an Austria that numerous Austrians resisted. Part of the picture certain Austrian citizens held onto was possible because they were not Germans. As Rebecca S. Thomas has argued, authors like Bernhard "see the official denial of Austrian complicity in the machinations of the Third Reich as the primary repression upon which an entire edifice of false national self-consciousness rests."⁷⁶ Italy has similarly faced a difficult process in terms of its national self-consciousness, with many refusing to acknowledge its country's role in the Shoah.

While Bernhard repeatedly indicated that neither Austria nor Europe can distance itself from the atrocities of the Second World War, Magris suggests more overtly that violence connects people and that no society is innocent. Weapons and perpetrators travel. The man thinks that perhaps exhibiting all weapons will put an end to war, but one problem is perhaps nothing would then remain outside of the museum, since

74 Parmegiani has discussed how the novel raises "questions of local Triestine personalities as supporters or informers of the Germans, people instrumental to the efficient daily running of the concentration camp and of its load of human suffering" (Parmegiani, "Remembering War," 92).

75 In the last two decades, an increasing amount of work has been done to deconstruct the myth of "Italiani brava gente." For one article that clearly relates the myth to persecution of the Jews, see Davide Rodogni, "Italiani brava gente? Fascist Italy's Policy toward the Jews in the Balkans, April 1941–July 1943," *European History Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2005): 213–40.

76 Rebecca S. Thomas, "Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Liebhaberinnen*: On the (Re)-Production Line," in *Modern Austrian Prose: Interpretations and Insights*, ed. Paul F. Dvorak (Riverside, CA: Ariadne, 2001), 76.

even a scarf can be a weapon. Another problem is no one wanted to listen to the man when he was alive. No one wanted the museum. Luisa's preparation of the papers and museum objects potentially suggest that Trieste, and the world more broadly, may be ready to consider the museum's existence. Works like Bernhard's are one reason for this shift. Bernhard's angry, shocking prose and theater made it less possible to ignore Austria's, and other European countries', role in the Shoah.

Bernhard's work often suggests that history not discussed will repeat, that the anti-Semitism of Austria is in part due to the country's failure to recognize its role in the Shoah: "Bernhard demands that spectators understand how the tenets of National Socialism remain indigenously to Germany and Austria."⁷⁷ *Blameless* similarly draws attention to how Italy has not dealt with its role in the Shoah, and therefore, anti-Semitism continues to be an issue. In the 2010s *Stolpersteine* (stumbling stones) have been dug up in the streets of Rome and swastikas have appeared on buildings. While Bernhard's works often argue that Nazi Germany was not an aberration, *Blameless* makes even clearer how embedded destructive prejudice is in human societies by referencing a larger geographical area and historical period. Italy's belated discussions of its anti-Semitism coincide with its belated discussions of its colonialism and racism. Magris's novel connects anti-Semitism and racism in order to draw attention to the tangles of hatred in society and the importance of dwelling on both of these issues, in Italy and beyond.

While the man and Luisa are located in Trieste and the sections are steeped in Trieste's specific history, the novel also includes discussions of the Chamacoco (indigenous people who dwelled primarily in what is now Paraguay), the slave trade, Otto Schimek (an Austrian buried in Poland who may or may not have refused to participate in a firing squad), and Su Tzu (a fifth-century BCE Chinese military strategist), among other figures and places. Luisa's background itself connects disparate histories of oppression and pain. Her father was an African American soldier stationed in Trieste, and her mother a Triestine Jew who had hidden in order to survive the Second World War. In part through her attempts to understand her parents, the issues of contemporary racism and anti-Semitism are interwoven and made personal. Certain images, like exodus, are used to consider both the slave trade and Jewish persecution. The pain of those who have survived oppression connects them: "Non che avesse importanza; tutta la terra è un cimitero e questo vale per tutti, ma ancora di più per noi, per i figli

77 Gene A. Plunka, *Holocaust Drama: The Theater of Atrocity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 49.

del Galuth e della Tratta"⁷⁸ (Not that it mattered; the whole world is a cemetery and that goes for everyone, but even more so for us, for the children of Galuth and Slavery).⁷⁹ At the same time, the novel details the very different experiences Luisa's black father had from her Jewish Italian mother. Her father's reticence to talk about his past is framed in terms of her mother's having survived the Shoah: "Doveva aver avuto imbarazzo a parlare di oltraggi razziali a chi era passato attraverso la Shoah"⁸⁰ (He must have been embarrassed to talk about racial insults to someone who had endured the Holocaust).⁸¹ Magris's novel, unlike the man's ideas for a museum that it describes, does not offer potential resolutions to the tangle of violence and hate we have created. Sometimes all that we can do is write and read, knowing, as Bernhard often argued, that neither will necessarily change anything but may lead to awareness.

Like *Heldenplatz*, *Blameless* makes clear how personal and disturbing the unacknowledged legacies of violence and anti-Semitism can be. Luisa is the granddaughter of Deborah, who was killed in the Risiera. Luisa considers not only the Risiera from an analytical point of view, as she reads the man's papers that describe it, but also from personal perspective, in terms of how it has shaped her family. The reader of *Blameless* discovers only after having encountered Deborah as Luisa's grandmother and a victim of Risiera, that she most likely gave up the names of other Jewish family and friends, leading to their deaths. As in Bernhard, the divide between victim and perpetrator is blurred: "*Heldenplatz* ultimately undermines stark oppositions of victims and perpetrators and instead reveals a problematic relationship between the two."⁸² Both focus on complicated victims, undercutting the idea of "pure" victimhood. In *Heldenplatz*, the Jewish professor is painted as cruel to many of the people around him and especially dismissive of women.

Bernhard and Magris reveal how numerous personal interactions, before and after the Second World War, prevent a clear separation of victim and victimizer. In *Troubling Love* and *Concrete* the smell of family disturbed the narrators by highlighting their inescapable proximity. In *Blameless*, odors suggest the discomfort of remembering victims and the disturbing closeness of victims to their perpetrators: "Nelle celle della Risiera ristagna la puzza delle vittime, e non degli aguzzini. Lerch, in quelle belle serate in Carso, non puzzava; forse in quel momento era più sgradevole l'odore di sua madre, che a vederlo cominciava a

78 Claudio Magris, *Non luogo a procedere* (Milan: Garzanti, 2015), 267.

79 Claudio Magris, *Blameless*, trans. Anne Milano Appel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 249.

80 Magris, *Non luogo a procedere*, 235.

81 Magris, *Blameless*, 219.

82 Fatima Naqvi, "Dialectic at a Standstill: The Discourse of Victimhood in Thomas Bernhard's *Heldenplatz*," *The German Quarterly* 77, no. 4 (Autumn 2002): 408.

sudare"⁸³ (In the cells of the Risiera the stink of the victims, not the perpetrators, hangs heavy. Lerch, on those lovely evenings in the Karst, did not stink; perhaps more unpleasant at the time was her mother's odor, since she would start sweating when she saw him).⁸⁴ Lerch, the former Nazi, attends social gatherings with Luisa's mother Sara, who survived the Shoah. Sara's reaction to the encounter, not Lerch's, recalls the tragedy they were part of, with Sara as persecuted and Lerch as persecutor. *Blameless* reflects on the disturbing fact that hate and prejudice are often felt for one's neighbor: "Non si pesta lo straniero, ma l'indigeno, chi è figlio della tua terra come te ma tu non credi che lo sia come te e lui pensa la stessa cosa di te"⁸⁵ (You don't tread on the foreigner, but on the local, on the one who is a native son of your country just as you are, but you don't think he's like you, and he feels the same about you).⁸⁶ Even the "tread upon" is not absolved from feeling distanced from his or her neighbors. Bernhard similarly draws attention to the disturbing ugliness of how anti-Semitism occurs despite how integrated Jews were and continue to be in Austrian society.

The confusion of perpetrator and victim function on a stylistic level as well as a thematic one. In Bernhard's work, a reader is often unsure of the original source of a quote until the end of a sentence. In *Heldenplatz*, for instance, characters share a thought that ends with "the professor said": "Ich komme mir vor wie in einem Museum/hat der Professor immer gesagt"⁸⁷ (I seem to myself to be in a museum/the Professor always said).⁸⁸ Thomas Cousineau has examined the "triadic patterns" in Bernhard's work that help blur the lines between different characters: "he introduces a first-person narrator who appears to be speaking directly to us, only to shift a moment later to a detail that points, rather, to a triangular narrative situation."⁸⁹ The narratives in *Blameless* are also embedded and in conversation with each other. *Blameless* alternates between chapters taken from the man's remaining notes, Luisa's thoughts about the museum, reflections on Luisa's own story, and other stories related to materials that will potentially be in the museum. At times the reader does not know who narrates a section until partway through the passage. While some of the chapters appear distinct with labels such as "Luisa's Story," the

83 Magris, *Non luogo a procedere*, 267.

84 Magris, *Blameless*, 250.

85 Magris, *Non luogo a procedere*, 236.

86 Magris, *Blameless*, 220.

87 Thomas Bernhard, *Dramen*, eds. Martin Huber and Bernhard Judex (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2012), 6:251.

88 Thomas Bernhard, *Heldenplatz*, trans. by Meredith Oakes and Andrea Tierny (London: Oberon, 2010), 47.

89 Thomas J. Cousineau, *Three-Part Inventions: The Novels of Thomas Bernhard* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 144.

themes and ideas are recurring and interwoven. Voices of victims are woven together with others.

In *Heldenplatz*, as in many other of Bernhard's works, thoughts of one character become part of the perspective of another. Interaction is a form of contamination. In *Blameless*, Luisa spends so much time reading the man's notebooks, trying to organize the museum project he left behind, that his mode of thinking becomes part of hers:

Un bacio, un morso—sto diventando anch'io come lui; furia di leggere le sue carte sino a confondermi con lui e di occuparmi delle sue mitragliatrici e delle sue spade, adesso poi che ho preso l'abitudine di portarmi anche a casa, la era, un po' di quelle carte e di quelle fotografie per studiare come sistamarle finché mi viene sonno, finirò per credere anch'io che tutto sia solo guerra e ogni segno una cicatrice.⁹⁰

(A kiss, a bite—I'm becoming just like him; as a result of reading his papers, of identifying with him and dealing with his machine guns and swords, now that I've gotten into the habit of taking some of those papers and photographs home in the evening so I can ponder how to display them until I fall asleep, I'll end up believing, like him, that everything is war and every mark a scar.)⁹¹

The works reveal the power of whom you spend time with or read. At the same time, neither Magris nor Bernhard propose culture and literature will solve their country's or the world's problems.⁹² Bernhard's works often shed light on the culture and education of the Nazis. *Blameless* reveals the madness of believing a museum can bring about peace. As discussed in terms of Calvino and Bernhard, they write from a more pessimistic place. As discussed in terms of Ferrante and Bernhard, the idea of transcendence is presented as naïve and dangerous. Bernhard's works and Magris's *Blameless* embed doubts about how or if culture can really change anything in works that nevertheless aim to change culture and memory. Bernhard and Magris remind us of the potential significance of writing and reading, even as the world seems to be going up in flames and even if writing and reading will not change this.

90 Magris, *Non luogo a procedere*, 12.

91 Magris, *Blameless*, 6.

92 See, for instance, Plunka's discussion of the *Eve of Retirement*: "Vera and Rudolf appear to be good citizens, albeit Nazis. They appreciate art and music, share a love of nature, are well respected in the community, take care of their handicapped sister, and successfully fight against a poison gas factory being built in their neighborhood" (Plunka, *Holocaust Drama*, 47).