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## The Emergence of Austro-Italian Literary Studies

Salvatore Pappalardo and Saskia Elizabeth Ziolkowski

The publication of Claudio Magris's *Il mito asburgico nella letteratura austriaca moderna* in 1963—followed, three years later, by its German translation *Der habsburgische Mythos in der modernen österreichischen Literatur*—was soon recognized as a turning point in the study of modern Austrian literature and the Habsburg legacy. Crucial to the development of his groundbreaking monograph, Magris later explained, were his upbringing and education in the former Habsburg port city of Trieste, his hometown that later came to occupy a more central position in his scholarship. Published in 1982 with the historian Angelo Ara, *Trieste: Un'identità di frontiera*, a volume translated into German some years later with the revealing title *Triest: Eine literarische Hauptstadt in Mitteleuropa*, emphasized the Central European character of Trieste but also argued that the city's literature and culture were unmistakably Italian and decidedly neither German nor Austrian. At the time, this critical framework made sense as it coherently reflected disciplinary categorizations. Critics understood that Triestine authors writing in Italian, which was considered a “historical language” in the polyglot Habsburg state, did so to inscribe themselves within the prestigious literary tradition of Italy. After all, before and especially after 1918, the literary culture of Italian-speaking Austrians had been absorbed by an Italian national tradition.

In part because of this nation-based formation of disciplines, literary scholars kept Austrian and Italian aesthetic expressions separate. Since then, the coordinates of scholarly debates in Austrian and Habsburg Studies have shifted. Although the postcolonial expansion of Habsburg Studies' scope of inquiry to non-German parts of the empire focuses more on Slavic, Balkanic,

and Hungarian areas, the work of historians such as Pamela Ballinger, Marina Cattaruzza, Lois Dubin, Maura Hametz, Dominique Kirchner Reill, and Glenda Sluga has provided insights into the processes of ethnic, cultural, and national identity formation in the Italian-speaking territories of the empire. Building on the work of these historians, the scholarship in English about an Italian-inflected Habsburg literary culture has developed into a new disciplinary direction, one that fills what was a lacuna in Austrian Studies. In the wake of earlier monographs by Thomas Harrison, Katia Pizzi, and Elizabeth Schächter, recent scholarship has engaged the Italian authors of *Mittleuropa* and their distinctive Habsburg Italianness. The writings of Mimmo Cangiano, Elena Coda, Sandra Parmegiani, and Nicoletta Pireddu, as well as our own work, intersect with studies about the Mediterranean, world literature, language philosophy, and European identities. Read together, this research shows how the category of Austro-Italian literature contributes to our understanding of transcultural, transnational, and global histories of Austria and Italy.

The aim of this short article is to chart the emergence of Austro-Italian Literary Studies with a focus on the tensions, complexities, and nuances that such a categorization entails. The works referenced offer only brief snapshots of larger fields and therefore cannot do justice to all of the scholarship involved. Our overview identifies the geography and chronology of Austro-Italian terminology and authorship in order to call attention to its existence in English, illustrate its contribution to Austrian and Italian Studies, and invite further study.

### **Habsburg Italian and Austro-Italian Literature**

The profound transformations and shifting borders in Central Europe and the northern Adriatic region in the first half of the twentieth century require distinctions in the nomenclature of partially overlapping literary chronologies. With the expression “Habsburg Italian,” we refer to the literary production of Italian-speaking authors in Cisleithania, the northern Adriatic seaboard and its hinterlands, and Italo-phone Transleithania with Fiume/Rijeka, stretching from roughly the early nineteenth century to the end of the First World War. The hyphenated term “Austro-Italian,” while subsuming the former in terms of cultural geography, designates the literary expressions that originate after the dissolution of the Dual Monarchy. The aesthetic expressions of a

Habsburg Italian literary culture and an Austro-Italian literature obviously develop in different political contexts and according to their own specific historical processes. A continued reflection upon the legacy of the multicultural empire, however, inscribes both periods within a shared Central European mental cartography that survives long after the *finis Austriae* and still informs contemporary literature in both Italy and Austria.

Reading across these divides exposes the tensions and challenges within the politics of literary linguistics. Historians of the Habsburg Empire and Mitteleuropa are often trained in a variety of Central European languages. Yet, in the context of literary studies, such disciplinary multilingualism has traditionally been less common. Even though literature's boundaries do not precisely map onto national ones, the disciplinary shape of literary studies was often determined by twentieth-century political borders. Conducting research in Austrian literature by reading authors who write in Italian counters the linguistic essentialism of nation-based literary histories. Studies in Austro-Italian literary history, following the above-mentioned Habsburg historiography, have emphasized that the use of a particular language does not neatly translate into indications of straightforward or unproblematic ethnic or national allegiances. This decoupling of literary language from national identities has led to politically more nuanced readings of Austro-Italian authors and the manifold taxonomies of regional and supranational forms of patriotism that underlie their aesthetic projects.

The Mediterranean port city of Trieste, under Habsburg rule from 1382 to 1918, is the capital of the Habsburg Italian modernism that informs much of the comparative, transnational, and multicultural dimensions of Austro-Italian Literary Studies. Together with other Italian-speaking communities in Istria, Dalmatia, and Tyrol, the "little Vienna on the Adriatic Sea" during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the stage of shifting identity politics. As in other Habsburg territories, an exclusionary model of the nation had to compete with a sense of community based upon ethnic, religious, and linguistic plurality. The national indifference and indeterminacy of many modern Triestine intellectuals originated in the manifold collection of social and political allegiances that include the commercial transnationalism of the mercantile elite, a municipal multicultural patriotism rooted in the local traditions of linguistically and culturally heterogeneous areas in the empire, and the dynastic loyalty to the House of Habsburg.<sup>1</sup> The Italian nationalist minority notwithstanding, the cultivation of Italian culture within

this Habsburg context was often not the means for the secessionism of Italian irredentists but a strategy to guarantee larger political autonomy for local elite (see Millo).

In Habsburg Trieste, the literary landscape in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is densely populated by multilingual authors who inscribe themselves in a myriad of both parallel and intersecting contexts that include German, Austrian, Slovene, Croat, and Jewish (and, with James Joyce, even Irish) cultures and traditions (see Klopp and Pizzi). Space limitations do not allow us to discuss Trieste's rich literary production in Slovene, the poetry in Hebrew, or German-language authors such as the Expressionist poet Theodor Däubler and nature writer Julius Kugy. For our current purposes, we will mention the literary corpus of Austro-Italian authors writing in Italian who have begun to be considered part of a broadly defined Habsburg literary canon. These authors include, among others, Italo Svevo, literary pseudonym of Aron Hector Schmitz; writer and essayist Scipio Slataper; the poet Umberto Saba; the brothers Carlo and Giani Stuparich; Giuseppina Martinuzzi; Carlo Michelstaedter; Roberto (Bobi) Bazlen; Virgilio Giotti, pseudonym of Virgilio Schönbeck; and Ferruccio Fölkel. Although national literary categorizations assign these writers to an Italian tradition, such allocation is neither straightforward nor exclusive. Even irredentist writers such as Ida Finzi, alias Haydée; Pia Rimini; and Fortuna Morpurgo, alias Willy Dias; or those who survived the Great War such as Elody Oblath and Anita Pittoni cannot be extricated from the Habsburg heritage that shaped their intellectual trajectories.

Whether they regarded Austria as the constitutive otherness of their national identity, translated German classics, blurred linguistic boundaries in their prose, introduced Freudian psychoanalysis into Italy, or indulged in imperial nostalgia in the postwar period, these authors and intellectuals are best understood when studied under the rubric of Austro-Italian Literary Studies. This is not to suggest that their role in Italian cultural history should be discounted. On the contrary, this subfield integrates rather than replaces critical frameworks, rewriting the cultural and intellectual histories not only of Trieste but also of Austria and Italy and offering a more nuanced vision of competing political imaginaries and aesthetic traditions that eschew inadequate national literary categories. Austro-Italian Literary Studies is a key contributor to the growing transnational emphasis in Italian Studies.

Austro-Italian Literary Studies also encompasses Habsburg authors who

explore and are inspired by Italian locations beyond Trieste and who write not just in Italian but also German, Czech, Yiddish, Slovene, Hungarian, and other Habsburg languages. Focusing on authors writing in German, for reasons of space and balance, the representations of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Franz Kafka, Robert Musil, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Joseph Roth reflect in various ways their Italian travels—for pleasure, because of war, or due to politics. While the Italian peninsula has long been a site of discovery for international travelers, Habsburg authors often came to Italian spaces (Trieste, Brescia) that were part of their own geopolitical landscape and key sites of conflict for their governing body. Later authors, such as Thomas Bernhard and Ingeborg Bachmann, engaged this Austrian tradition of depicting Habsburg Italian places while also drawing on their own Italian experiences. These literary works were, in turn, of special interest to Italian readers. From Franz Kafka's *Gli aeroplani a Brescia: Diari di viaggio 1909–1912* (*The Airplanes of Brescia: Travel Diaries, 1909–1912*) to Thomas Bernhard's *L'italiano* (*The Italian*), Italian publications often provide their collections with titles differing from those in English translation or German, emphasizing these authors' relationships with Italy.

As the aforementioned lists of Italian and Austrian writers indicate, Austro-Italian connections contributed to the shape of Austrian and Italian modernism, which were also influenced by multilingualism, Jewishness, and Catholicism, the dominant religion of both Italy and Austria-Hungary. The Italian Marxist readings of many Austro-Hungarian authors (thanks in part to Lukács) then influenced Italian literary Marxism and interpretations of these German-language authors (see Bevilacqua; Haas; Lunzer). Earlier literary works, like those of Kafka, also contributed to later movements in Italy, including its postmodernism. Because of the complexity of Trieste, its literature has at times been reduced to its historical significance, but as the development of Italian postmodernism suggests, Austro-Italian literary history engages but is distinct from Austro-Italian history. Authors' writings find moments of greater reception in different periods, with for instance Joseph Roth's notable Italian audience of the 1970s (see Schneider-Paccanelli). The dissolution of Austria-Hungary, the German annexations of the Second World War, and individual literary works return to the collective imaginary in a way that does not perfectly align with the development of social history.

Italians, like Austrians, tended to avoid analyzing their complicity in the Shoah. Postwar twentieth-century Italian works often positively differentiated

Austrians from Germans, as evidenced by the only “good” German—in fact an Austrian—in *Rome, Open City* (1945) and the raw description of the roundup of the Jews in Giacomo Debenedetti’s *October 16th, 1943*: “in this raid there will be kindhearted SS men. These two, for example. The tale that formed about them subsequently in the Ghetto has it that they were Austrian” (43). Robert Dassanowsky has argued that a range of important Austrians in films, including the Austrian of *Rome, Open City*, in fact represented Italian fascists, in a sublimation of Italy’s own complex role in the Second World War. Austrian works exploring the legacies of the Shoah have held particular appeal in Italy.

### The Development of Austro-Italian Literary Studies

Despite the long tradition of Austrian and Italian cultural cross-pollinations, for most of the twentieth century scholars tended to overlook them. Studies of Triestine literature often separated the authors, locating them “nowhere” or as distinct, rather than as Austro-Italian. Before 1945, minimizing Austrian and Italian interrelationships could be attributed to continuing processes of nationalization and a need for Italy to distinguish itself from former occupiers. After the Second World War, the reasons could be ascribed, among other causes, to a desire to avoid German-Austrian-Italian associations after the Axis alliance and the need to forge a new national self-consciousness that did not emphasize the persecution of Jews and fascist violence in the Adriatic border region. With, for instance, the founding of the journal *Studi austriaci* (*Austrian Studies*), the 1990s marked a key moment of scholarly recognition of Austrian literature’s significance for Italy: the publications of two significant volumes, Paolo Chiarini and Herbert Zeman’s *Italia-Austria: Alla ricerca del passato comune* (*Italy-Austria: In Search of a Shared Past*) and Alida Fliri’s *Miti e Contromiti: Cent’anni di relazioni culturali italo-austriache* (*Myths and Countermyths: One-Hundred Years of Italo-Austrian Cultural Relations*), brought together a range of scholarship on Austro-Italian cultural, historical, and literary connections, building on earlier scholarship, such as Giuseppe Antonio Camerino’s analyses of Italo Svevo, that had generally focused on a single author’s relationship to *Mitteleuropa* (see also Gargani; Ricaldone; Schneider-Paccanelli).

Anglophone scholarship, meanwhile, continued to generally neglect Austro-Italian literary intersections. *Global Austria: Austria’s Place in Europe*

*and the World* (2011) includes Austrian Studies in Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, China, and Japan in the section, “The Globalization of Austrian Studies” (Bischof et al.), indicating how field formations are partly determined by geopolitical power rather than historical connections, continuing a tradition that began after the Second World War, when national traditions from places with diminished geopolitical influence (the defeated Austria and Italy) were more likely to be compared to countries with clearer roles in modern power dynamics. The hegemony of anglophone perspectives has contributed to minimizing the significance of Austro-Italian work. Many Austro-Italian works have not been published in English, from twentieth-century Italian scholarship (such as Magris’s *Il mito asburgico* and the works of the 1990s just mentioned) to contemporary German fiction (such as Veit Heinichen and Günter Neuwirth’s popular crime novels set in Trieste).

A sign of the current emergence of Austro-Italian Studies in the Anglo-American academy is the recent English translation of previously overlooked Austro-Italian works from the past century, including Roberto Bazlen’s *Notes without a Text* (2019), Scipio Slataper’s *My Karst* (2021), and Giani Stuparich’s *One Year of School and The Island* (2021). These Triestine literary publications prompt new scholarship that call attention to Trieste as a transnational, hybrid representative of broader cultural interconnections. The growing corpus is complemented by contemporary novels that explore Austro-Italian cross-pollinations and have also been quickly rendered into English, such as Andrea Molesini’s *Not All Bastards Are from Vienna*, Francesca Melandri’s *Eva Sleeps*, and Hans von Trotha’s *Pollak’s Arm*, which show how far beyond Trieste Austro-Italian connections extend, since none of them are set in the port city.

Italian intellectuals have described Austrian literature, as opposed to its German counterpart, as growing in significance. The Italian author Roberto Calasso characterizes the presence of German-language 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” (110). Calasso, who worked at Adelphi Edizioni starting in 1962, recounts how Italian publications inspired new formats of German editions (see Bernhard’s *In der Höhe* or Kafka’s *Die Zürauer Aphorismen*), revealing how Austro-Italian literary connections influenced editorial histories.<sup>2</sup>

The contributors to *The German Quarterly* of 2016 examined how German Studies is often positioned as the primary point of reference for Austrian Studies. Austro-Italian Literary Studies removes the idea of a “center” with a comparison between two “margins” (Arens). Though the debated German-Austrian overlaps become more complicated with the addition of Italy, which has had so much contact with the two cultures, Austro-Italian as opposed to German-Italian exchanges can be distinguished in multiple ways, including those noted—multilingualism, Catholicism, Austro-Marxism, avoiding the legacies of the Shoah, and Habsburg and transnational representations—which also contributes to understandings of German and Austrian differences.

Austro-Italian encounters offer sites of inquiry that align with other efforts to address what critical formations concealed in the past. Trieste’s place in Austria-Hungary highlights the fictions needed to form a nation, national identity, and ideas of race. In *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere*, Jan Morris stated: “If race is a fraud, as I often think in Trieste, then nationality is a cruel pretence” (122). Austro-Italian Literary Studies reveal the constructed nature of national, and other, identities. While less likely to be formulated as an area of study in the twentieth century, Austro-Italian intersections now contribute to transnational explorations of identity that are ever more central in literary studies, as part of an increased focus on concepts of mobility, including tourism, migration, and colonialism. With globalism as a key concept, analyses of how marginalized spaces interact, not always through a “central” power, have increased.

### Conclusion

We end where we began, with Claudio Magris, who has shaped investigations of Austro-Italian affairs with both his literature and literary criticism. His recent novels such as *Blindly* and *Blameless* turn the historical vicissitudes of the upper Adriatic border lands under former Habsburg rule into a metaphor of global affairs. Scholarship that builds on his novels brings together Austria, Italy, colonial violence, slavery, Jewish deportations, and multidirectional memory (see Pellegrini and Pireddu). The emergence of Austro-Italian Literary Studies owes much to the disciplinary expansions of Habsburg and Austrian Studies, fields that in turn build upon the multicultural, polyglot, and multiethnic heritage of Central Europe. While historians have long been attentive to the political developments between Austria and Italy, including

the role Italians played in the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire, more recently literary scholars have brought the mutual development of the two cultures to the fore, contributing to our understanding of transnational Italy and Global Austria.

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**Saskia Elizabeth Ziolkowski** is associate professor of Romance Studies and core faculty in Jewish Studies at Duke University. She works on Italian literature from a comparative perspective, especially in relation to Austrian authors, such as Bernhard, Musil, Rilke, and Roth. Awarded the Best Book in Literary Studies Prize by the American Association of Italian Studies, *Kafka's Italian Progeny* (University of Toronto Press, 2020) explores Kafka's connections with writers who have shaped Italy's literary landscape. She holds a PhD in Italian and comparative literature and society from Columbia University. Her research interests include world literature, modernism, migration, and identity.

### Notes

1. Historians (Judson, King, Reill, and Zahra) have shown how national indifference and non-national allegiances represented an essential challenge to the rise of nationalism in Habsburg territories and along the shores of the Adriatic Sea.

2. Adelphi has published Altenberg, Bachmann, Bernhard, Polgar, Rilke, and Stifter, among other Austrian authors.

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