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Rethinking Europe: Overcoming National Confines in Twentieth-Century Literature

CHRISTOPH PARRY

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the relationship between national and supranational literary contexts drawing on Pascale Casanova's idea of a "World Republic of Letters" with its give and take between centre and periphery. James Joyce and Joseph Roth are then discussed as cosmopolitan authors who for different reasons moved out of their national contexts in the first half of the twentieth century. Finally, attention is turned to the impact of migrant writers on European literatures today and the challenge presented by enhanced global mobility to traditional conceptions of what comprises European cultural identity.

I

Literature has often been recruited both for the projects of individual nation-building and in the name of a common European heritage.[1] Today the increasing cultural and ethnic diversity of Europe as reflected in literary production challenges both the concept of national literature and traditional ideas of what is actually European. In this paper I shall discuss some of the complexities of the relationship between national and supranational literary contexts in the early decades of the twentieth century, using as examples the experiences of two very different writers: the voluntary exile James Joyce and the displaced cosmopolitan Joseph Roth. Both in their own way contribute to the emergence of a cosmopolitan nomadic tradition to which today's multi-ethnic European literature can relate.

It is now generally accepted that the nation, like any other effective social organisation, is socially constructed. To claim the allegiance of its members, national identity has to become part of what Charles Taylor terms the "social imaginary."[2] That is to say that it may initially start as an idea, but with increasing familiarity it becomes integrated into social practice, becoming more real, the more it is shared. Insofar as the development of the modern nation was linked to the spread of literacy and the development of the various vernaculars into standardised national languages, national theatre movements and literary circles played an essential part in transforming the idea of national community into the real social activity of civic society. This in turn accelerated the modernisation process by which existing states that had evolved through the accidents of dynastic interests became nations, while other territorially-based ethnic, religious, or linguistically defined social formations began to see themselves as nations waiting to become states. But even as the nation starts to become a reality, an imaginary element remains in the myths that are invoked. As Ernest Gellner points out, "nationalism is *not* the awakening of an old, latent, dormant force, though that is how it does indeed present itself" (48). The imaginary element is essential for modern societies to retain a sense of community (Anderson 6).

But while the nation was the dominant paradigm in the imagining of collective identities in nineteenth-century Europe, this did not prevent other, often overlapping, concepts from inspiring the

imagination. "Western civilisation," "Empire," even "Europe" itself vied for attention, and in all cases literature, in particular the novel with its capacity for envisaging all kind of identity formation, played a considerable part in the imagining process. Even at the height of the nation-building process in Europe, literary life retained an international dimension. Strengthening national awareness within civic debate by no means prevented literary exchange on the European level, nor did the attribution of a work to an emergent national canon preclude its acceptance elsewhere. Far from being radically opposed to one another, national and transnational developments remained interdependent. Indeed, at the same time as literary debate started to engage with the question of national identity, a countertendency to uphold a broader European heritage continued to exist. Just as the first generation of German Romantics were beginning to propagate the idea of a modern nation-state on the basis of what they perceived as their national culture, Goethe already famously proclaimed the impending age of "World Literature." Drawing on Goethe's reading practice for support, David Damrosch claims that "world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and reading" (4). Despite popular notions of folk culture and inherent national genius current in the Romantic movement, emergent literatures and national theatre movements sought legitimation by trying to meet standards that had been set elsewhere.[3] International recognition remained a prerequisite for the emancipation of national literature. Pascale Casanova's study *The World Republic of Letters* examines some of the mechanisms involved in this interdependent system. Her book is best known for its division of world literary space into centres and peripheries. While not explicitly positing Paris as the exclusive centre, but speaking instead for example of a "Greenwich Meridian" of literary space, her work has been much criticised for oversimplifying and being Franco-centric.[4] Indeed, she does tend to reduce world literature to a

1. See Parry 2015.
2. For a definition of the term see Taylor 23.
3. Typically the endeavours of German Dramatists in the eighteenth century to establish a national theatre of quality were accompanied by theoretical discussions as to which foreign models were more suitable to follow.
4. See for instance Theo D'haen 104–11.

compact corpus of canonised works and takes her most potent examples from works that have achieved international success through the mediation of the Paris literary scene. But historically, when understood in relative rather than absolute terms, and with regard to the advance of modernism in European literatures of the early twentieth century, her differentiations between the centre and the periphery and between older and younger literatures undeniably have some explanatory force.

One of Casanova's central precepts is that strong national literatures are not overtly nationalist. It is rather the case that the older and more established the literature or the literary field of a country is, the more autonomous it becomes, and a literature that pursues an overt nationalist or, for that matter, any other political agenda, is not autonomous. To achieve more autonomy within their own literary fields, progressive writers from the periphery may need to seek legitimation or, using Pierre Bourdieu's term, "consecration" (230) from the centre.[5] Casanova cites the example of August Strindberg who established his reputation by coming from Sweden to Paris or James Joyce whose *Ulysses* put Ireland on the map of modernist literature decades before the book became available in Ireland itself. As Casanova puts it:

> In reality, the great heroes of literature invariably emerge only in association with the specific power of autonomous literary capital. The case of James Joyce—rejected in Dublin, ignored in London, banned in New York, lionised in Paris—is undoubtedly the best example. (109)

II

The case of Joyce is exemplary in that it shows how an author can produce a work that is in its own way uniquely Irish and at the same time holds an established place in the international canon of modernism. His writing is undeniably about Ireland. But to create it, Joyce felt the necessity to work outside the constraints of the Irish literary field. Joyce's present status as *the* canonised Irish author, institutionalised among other things by the annual "Bloomsday" held in Dublin, is thus highly ironic in view of Joyce's own life choices.[6]

The problem for Irish writers of the time began with the language of public discourse. After centuries of English rule and subjugation of the Irish population, the issue of constructing a distinct national identity was pressing and this was not made easier by sharing the language of the oppressor. James Joyce makes this problem explicit in a much quoted passage in his quasi-autobiographical *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, when Stephen Dedalus, the protagonist, becomes aware of the linguistic disproportion between his own use of English and that of his English tutor:

> The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home*, *Christ*, *ale*, *master* on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (189)

Different writers sought different solutions to the dilemma of having been brought up in the English language but wanting to produce a literature that was demonstratively not English. One prominent but unpopular option was the adoption of Gaelic.[7] Combined with the somewhat transparent "invention" of national mythology and heritage, the insistence on Gaelic as a national language threatened to push the country even more to the European periphery than it already was.

In fact, the pressure of the various national movements contributed to the desire of some writers to opt out of the whole national issue. Samuel Beckett, another voluntary emigrant from Ireland, solved the problem of how not to contribute to "English literature" by writing in

5. Casanova specifically names translation as a form of consecration (135).
6. The unique status of the novel in the life of Dublin forms the starting point for Declan Kiberd's study *Ulysses and Us* (4–5).
7. The fate of Gaelic revivalism differs from the contemporaneous national movement in Finland where a Swedish-speaking elite successfully promoted the transformation of the language of the peasants, Finnish, into a viable national language.

French. Joyce took a different approach by developing an idiom of his own. This is neatly summed up by Gary Day as follows:

> The invention of new words, the multi-lingual punning, the chopping up of sentences, the abandonment of the conventional plot and a host of other features characteristic of *Ulysses* and of *Finnegan's Wake* are not only declarations of war on the English tongue, they are also an attempt to create a specifically Irish literary language. (104)

It may seem somewhat paradoxical that such an enterprise should succeed better in self-chosen exile than in Ireland itself, but only the physical distance from Dublin and its literary circles provided the degree of autonomy needed for an unrestrained development of Joyce's subversive writing. Together with his nomadic lifestyle this kind of writing conforms to a pattern that can be described in terms of the "deterritorialisation" that Deleuze and Guattari claim to be a feature of minor literatures in major languages (29). At the same time, it appropriates the literary autonomy that small or younger literatures in Casanova's view tend to lack.

The quasi-autobiographical *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* ends with the protagonist Stephen Dedalus emigrating from Ireland after having rejected both a career in the church and the demands of literary colleagues, that he should engage in the nationalist project: "When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets" (203). This reflects Joyce's own position, which, as Day points out, "is that the Irish are not just oppressed by the British or by the Catholic Church but also by themselves" (103). Joyce rebelled both against English hegemony and against the claims of an emergent nation and the way its traditions were being perceptibly invented. In *Ulysses* the juxtaposition of Irish legend and Homeric mythology effectively becomes a parody of both.

The canonisation of *Ulysses* in Ireland is arguably as much the work of the modern tourist industry as of the institutions of the literary field. But it has posthumously given Joyce the recognition in Ireland that was

denied him in his lifetime. If the novel is now regarded by many as an Irish "national" epic, even *the* national epic,[8] this accords with the fact that Joyce engages with the discourse of nationalism, but it also distorts the challenge to the national ideology that his life and work as a whole represent. Having described in *Portrait* the "nets" from which his alter ego Stephen Dedalus chooses to escape, Joyce selects with Leopold Bloom an outsider of Jewish descent as his "epic hero" in *Ulysses*. This choice implies a rejection of fixed identities of things, styles, and people, and gives expression to the fundamental cosmopolitanism of Joyce's attitude.[9]

With his experience of living in Pola and Trieste on the fringes of the disintegrating Austro-Hungarian Empire, Joyce will have been acutely aware that the nationalist upheaval was a phenomenon of European dimensions. But while the cosmopolitanism of Leopold Bloom remains within a European horizon, the experience of the emergent Irish nation at the beginning of the twentieth century is not dissimilar to that in the overseas colonies of Britain and France a generation later and can be described in terms of postcolonial theory, as Declan Kiberd (1995) has convincingly demonstrated. Just as Frantz Fanon pointed out in the case of Algeria (197–8), also in Ireland there could be no return to the pristine innocence of the pre-colonial situation, no matter how much effort was put into inventing national traditions. If the way back is blocked then there is only the way forward, toward a modernism transcending national borders. However, Ireland did not only suffer under English colonial rule, but, as part of the British economy, it also partook in the European imperial enterprise. Thus, according to Kiberd, "what characterizes Joycean modernism is its awareness of the need to write both of these narratives *simultaneously*" (34). Edward Said, too, sees the literature of modernism as an ironic reaction to the dominant assumptions of imperialism. In *Culture and Imperialism* he cites *Ulysses*

8. Andras Ungar attempts to decode *Ulysses* as a kind of translation of the narrative of Irish history.
9. Damrosch claims Joyce to be "far more cosmopolitan … than Proust or Woolf" and attributes this to the freedom of the "provincial writer" from inherited tradition (13). This is not far removed from the concept of "minor literature" of Deleuze and Guattari.

as the most "ingenious example" of what he sees as the characteristic modernist juxtaposition of incompatibles (229). For him,

> … the hallmark of modernist form is the strange juxtaposition of comic and tragic, of high and low, commonplace and exotic, familiar and alien whose most ingenious resolution is James Joyce's fusing of the *Odyssey* with the wandering Jew, advertising and Virgil (or Dante), perfect symmetry and the salesman's catalogue. (299)

Said goes on to say that the irony "is of a form that draws attention to itself as substituting art and its creations for the once possible synthesis of the world empires" (299). Thus in Said's view, modernism in general and Joyce in particular stake a claim for artistic autonomy. It may even be that the residue of empires, with their multinational and multicultural composition, generally offers a more fruitful ground for modernism than the homogenising pressure of the individual nation. And here, approaching the matter from a completely different angle, Said comes close to the position adopted by Casanova as regards literary autonomy. It is perhaps no coincidence that both authors draw on Joyce to give weight to their argument.

At this point it is worth returning to the figure of Leopold Bloom and Joyce's often noted elective affinity with cosmopolitan European Jews.[10] Bloom, as Said suggests, is Odysseus and the Wandering Jew, and his trajectory through Dublin in the course of the novel transforms the city into a microcosm, universal, but at the same time unmistakably Irish. In effect, the novel provides early evidence of "glocalisation," a treatment of the universal issues of modern life as focussed in a distinct locality.

III

European Jews were the object of both envy and discrimination. Both the Jewish contribution to European intellectual life at the beginning of the twentieth century and the fact of diaspora contributed to a sometimes idealised view of Jewish cosmopolitanism. As Vincent J. Cheng suggests,

> In a world haunted by a sense of millennial inauthenticity and by a pervasive anxiety about identity, Jewishness can function simultaneously as a trope of modernist alienation and rootlessness, and—for non-Jews—as a very concrete and specific cultural otherness to be envied. (107)

But against the background of aggressive nationalism and with the collapse of the imperial systems of Russia and Austria, the Jews of the Eastern European diaspora found themselves on the move once more. Jews were persecuted, not least because, as a minority spread across several countries, it was generally felt that their allegiance to the nations in which they lived could not be counted on. This was a misconception that Jewish citizens all over Europe were often overeager to disprove. Sometimes the duress of migration was alleviated by a corresponding cosmopolitan attitude, but this was by no means always the case.

The second writer to be discussed here, Joseph Roth, was a convinced cosmopolitan.[11] As a German-educated middle-class Jew who had grown up in the multicultural city of Brody in Galicia amongst speakers of Polish, German, and Yiddish, he had little sympathy with the ethnically homogenous nationalisms which challenged the Habsburg Empire. After studying for a while in Lemberg (Lwiw) and Vienna, he joined the multi-ethnic Austrian Army in 1916. Although he never became an officer as he sometimes claimed,[12] his army experience helped provide him with some of the milieu for his best-known novel *Radetzkymarsch*.

After the collapse of the Austro–Hungarian Empire, Roth's allegiance became divided between the traditional Jewish life of Galicia, a socialist outlook, and a retrospective idea of a multicultural Austria as it might have been, had it not been destroyed in the

10. Ira B. Nadel devotes a whole book (*Joyce and the Jews*) to the topic.
11. Roth's cosmopolitan, even hybrid, identity was much emphasised both by his friends and, subsequently, by scholars. See Parry, "Joseph Roth."
12. Described by his biographer David Bronsen as a "Mythomaniac" (13), Roth enjoyed decorating his life story with small fictions.
13. William Johnston goes so far as to claim "No one benefited as much from the variety inherent in Danubian society as the Jews who, more than any other group of individuals, created the Gay Apocalypse." (29)

nationalist orgy of the Great War. Unlike the Polish majority, the Jews of Galicia had nothing to gain from the dissolution of an empire that had tolerated them reasonably well.[13] Factually deterritorialised, Roth, too, rejected the nationalism of the successor states to the Habsburg Empire in which he had grown up. After the war Roth worked for a time as a critical journalist in Vienna before moving on to Berlin. In the 1930s he lived in exile, mostly in France where he died in 1939, well-known but destitute.

Joseph Roth was no innovative modernist like Joyce, but is valued as author of novels and short stories reflecting the life of the Jewish *shtetl* and the last years of Habsburg rule. Although these works are conventional in style and in some ways backward-looking, even compared to his own writing as a journalist, they share the same critical awareness. His particular stance on the lost worlds of the *shtetl* and the Habsburg Empire reveals a fundamental respect for humanity in its weakness and impurity. Roth's seemingly nostalgic writing, whether about the vanishing culture of Eastern European Jewry or about the sunken world of Habsburg rule, is, however, not the expression of some romantic yearning for roots. On the contrary, the messy *laissez-faire* of the pre-war world of the Austro–Hungarian and Russian empires with their mixtures of peoples, religions, and languages stood for him in marked opposition to the all-pervading discourse of racial purity that already in the 1920s paved the way for Nazi rule.[14] On the other hand he was less deluded than his friend Stefan Zweig, who no less nostalgically than Roth, makes Habsburg Vienna appear in his memoirs as a haven of racial harmony, open-mindedly accepting all newcomers and educating all its citizens to transnational cosmopolitanism (23).[15]

Roth had much understanding for the Jewish condition, but little religious conviction. His loyalty towards the culture of the traditional Jewish communities of Eastern Europe is evidenced in short stories, the novel *Hiob* and in the major journalistic survey *Juden auf Wanderschaft* (1927), in which he gathers many observations about how Jewish migrants, especially the so-called Eastern Jews, assimilate to life in Vienna, Berlin, and Paris as well as the United States and the Soviet Union. Roth was also sensitive to the hierarchy among Jews themselves and was highly critical of the disdain with which middle-class Jews

after a few generations of assimilation tended to look down upon the poorer newcomers from the Eastern *shtetl*. Already in 1927 Roth noted that in Berlin in particular there was no joy for the Jewish immigrants (*Werke 2*, 872).

By 1934 the position of all Jews in Germany had already deteriorated to an extent that the assimilated Jews had no cause to feel in any way privileged. With a short text in the Prague journal *Die Wahrheit* entitled "*Der Segen des Ewigen Juden*" ["The Blessing of the Eternal Jew"] in that year Roth opened a discussion on assimilation and nationalism in general and reprimanded the Jews of Central Europe in no unclear terms for their feeble attempts at assimilation with the national majorities in the countries where they lived. All too often, Roth claimed, Jews had tried to prove their loyalty to so-called fatherlands, which had readily accepted their willingness to sacrifice their lives but given them nothing in return. In this connection he grudgingly showed some understanding for Zionism, for a Jewish nation-state that could at least be called their own. But generally, in his view, Jews had no cause to meddle with nationalisms of any sort. He saw the diaspora with its concomitant cosmopolitanism rather as a positive alternative for which he even found a theological justification: For the Jewish people, being much older than the modern concept of nationhood, a state of their own would stand in contradiction to the Jewish mission of "giving God to the world" (*Werke 3*, 531). Roth closed his article with an unashamed plea for cosmopolitanism and mobility. After all, people are not trees, they have legs instead of roots (532).

In his final years Roth increasingly emphasised the Austrian component of his identity and his feeling of attachment towards the former empire increased, the further it sank into history. While rump Austria itself none too reluctantly slipped into the clutches of Nazi Germany, Roth in his West European exile became ever more nostalgically patriotic, upholding the transnational Habsburg Empire as distinct from the Alpine republic that had replaced it. In his last

14. Ute Gerhard reveals a subversive quality in Roth's writing against the background of 1920s politics of migration restriction and interest in eugenics (Gerhard).
15. Astonishingly, Zweig is describing the very years when Adolf Hitler was being initiated into anti-Semitism as an art student in Vienna.

years he demonstrated his eccentricity by supporting the monarchists and claiming adherence to Catholicism as a gesture of respect for the traditional religious role of the House of Habsburg.[16] This was a grotesque parody of assimilation by a writer highly critical of subordination to any kind of externally ordained identity. Underlying his nostalgia for the old empire was the idea that its very existence implied, at least in theory and in retrospect, a cosmopolitan denial of nationalism.[17] Roth's itinerant lifestyle made him into a European, and there is in his work a strong sense of the need for European unity, although he remained understandably pessimistic about its realisation. In the foreword to a new edition of his *Juden auf Wanderschaft*, written ten years after the original publication by which time the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany had become omnipresent, he pleads for a new international order based on the joint responsibility of the European nations for what goes on among their neighbours and permitting foreign intervention (902). Despite his insight, not even Roth could envision in 1937 the fate the Nazis had in store for the Jews, a fate he probably would not have escaped had he lived longer.

IV

Of the two authors discussed here, Roth's international reputation is certainly smaller and he hardly fits the mould proposed by Casanova, but he is also, in view of modern mass migration, the less exceptional of the two. Unlike Joyce, who strove to free himself from the demands of an emergent nation, Roth's nomadism was dictated by circumstance, by the dissolution of the empire which had linked his origins to Austria. And where Joyce used his exile to emancipate an Irish literary idiom from the dictates of metropolitan English, Roth remained bound to the German language in default of any nation with which he could identify. But for all their differences in background, interests, and ambition, both were cosmopolitan in outlook and lifestyle. It was, however, a cosmopolitanism that was, typically for the interwar years, still very much focussed on Europe, with Paris as a fairly obvious centre. With the end of Europe's overseas empires and the influx of migration from outside Europe in recent decades, cosmopolitanism has, in the words of

Elleke Boehmer "gone global" (232), and become a feature of everyday life. The issue of assimilation or non-assimilation that worried Joseph Roth has become multidimensional. It is no longer simply a question of the minority adapting to the ways of the majority as it was for the Jewish communities in Europe before the Second World War. In many European cities no single group actually constitutes a "majority" any more. This creates the dilemma of deciding whom the newcomer should try to assimilate to. The community itself takes on a cosmopolitan aspect. Its continued imagining in nationalist terms becomes anachronistic, without, however, losing its appeal to disorientated sections of society.

Globalisation and increased mobility have also changed the structure of the literary field.[18] Neither writers' origins nor their place of residence necessarily link them to a particular field. Nothing prevents for example German writers from living in Paris or Rome and still primarily participating in the German literary field.[19] On the other hand, that same field is increasingly enriched by writers of foreign origin, who have chosen to live and work in Germany. In fact, the last vestige of the "national" in the concept of "national literatures" is fast disappearing, with writers from very different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds living in major European cities and confidently writing in their adopted languages.

Catastrophic events like the collapse of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, which placed nationalism back on the European political agenda, actually contribute to the nomadisation of Europe. The disintegration of a multinational state in the centre of Europe repeated the fate of the Austrian Empire on a smaller scale, but no less traumatically, and led

16. How genuine this conversion was, is a matter of debate. See Bronsen 488–9.
17. See also Claudio Magris, who cites Roth as one of the main proponents of what he calls the "Habsburg myth" (especially 260–3).
18. Casanova warns that the autonomy of literary fields is threatened by interests of a globalised publishing business (171). Symptomatic of this is the promotion of so-called "world fiction." The phenomenon may, however, be not so new (see also Damrosch 14).
19. Peter Handke has lived for decades outside Paris. Rome has traditionally been popular with German artists and writers, and since the World War II been a temporary or permanent home among others to Ingeborg Bachmann, Uwe Timm, and F. C. Delius. W. G. Sebald built up his literary career through German institutions while living and working in England.

to an inflation of nationalities, minorities, and enclaves. The resurgence of national sentiment artificially generated an atmosphere of hostility towards former compatriots and led to an exodus of intellectuals.[20] Any literature trying to comply with the parochial demands of nationalist ideology today is bound to be even further from social reality than it was a hundred years ago. The same "nets" that were flung at Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *Portrait* and drove his author out of Ireland are flung at the writers of new national formations today.

But national literatures cannot thrive in isolation and have never done so. Migration and mobility have left their mark on European literature for centuries, if not to the extent that they do today. Europe not only has a tradition of literature that contributes to imagining of national identity but also a parallel one that registers mobility and displacement. Joyce and Roth belong to this tradition, but it goes back much further. And it is this tradition that Salman Rushdie invokes when he describes the situation of Indian writers in England:

> Let me suggest that Indian writers in England have access to a second tradition, quite apart from their own racial history. It is the culture and political history of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group. We can quite legitimately claim as our ancestors the Huguenots, the Irish, the Jews; the past to which we belong is an English past, the history of immigrant Britain. Swift, Conrad, Marx are as much our literary forebears as Tagore or Ram Mohan Roy. (20)

This does not only apply to England. Other European literatures, too, have had their share of Huguenots, Jews, and other migrants, and the same potential for connecting to or reviving traditions of mobility is open to immigrant writers throughout Europe, whether they have migrated from the Balkans, Asia, Africa, or the Middle East. Once more Europe shares a common experience across all national borders. Literary production across the continent, while seldom pursuing an explicit European agenda, certainly reflects this common experience.

20. See for instance the essays of Croatian exile Dubravka Ugrešić (1998).

At the present time of writing it appears possible that some of the European institutions built up over the decades following World War II are endangered under the strain of the migration crisis. Political regression is possible. Culturally, however, there is no road back to the Europe of homogenous nations.

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BIOGRAPHY

Christoph Parry (1951) studied German and Russian in Edinburgh and Marburg, where he presented his doctoral thesis on Paul Celan and Osip Mandelstam in 1978. Since then he has lectured at the Universities of Turku and Jyväskylä, Finland, and has been professor of German and Comparative literature at the University of Vaasa since 1996. He has held guest professorships in New Mexico and Graz. His main research interests are reflected in numerous publications on contemporary German and Austrian literature as well as issues of intercultural literary circulation and reception.