

## **Modernism in Trieste: The Habsburg Mediterranean and the Literary Invention of Europe, 1870–1945**

**by Salvatore Pappalardo, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021, 280 pp., £85.50 (hardback), ISBN 9781501369964**

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The main theme of Pappalardo's monograph is the literary invention of a Phoenician origin of Europe, which sought to promote a multi-ethnic and multicultural alternative to the dominant nationalist characterisation of the European continent. In highlighting the contrast between a literary interpretation of the 'multiethnic Danube region as a Europe behind the nations' and a historical approach focused on the 'hegemonic presence of the German Austrian elite', the author sheds light on the ability of literature not so much to produce a utopian world but to 'provide an alternative paradigm to the monolithic and monolingual nation', in an autonomous and structurally different way from historiography. Rather than offering the best possible reconstruction of the past, literature thus seeks to provide a mythography capable of legitimising and proposing a future project. This well-documented study could, then, be placed in a broader diachronic perspective, when the myth of origins was a recurring theme in historiographical exercises that were structurally mixed with rhetoric. This perspective can also frame the political and ideological stance underlying the convincing historiographical and comparative approach developed in Pappalardo's book, which traces references or allusions to a Phoenician mythography in the literary and non-fictional production of modernist writers linked to and inspired by the multi-ethnic environment of Habsburg Trieste – the Adriatic outpost for a Mediterranean projection of the Mitteleuropean empire. The book's main thesis is further illustrated through a systematic, though by no means unprecedented, downplaying of the irredentist vocation of the Austro-Italian subjects.

The book opens with a long introduction where the author clarifies the link between modernism and Europe. The first chapter explains the spread at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of a perception and representation of the Adriatic as a Phoenician sea, crossed and civilised since antiquity by a Semitic people who had represented a model of economic, political and cultural development that was alternative and competitive to the Greco-Roman one, up to the head-on clash of the Punic Wars. In a boldly concise description that ranges from the Phaeacians of the *Odyssey* via Plautus' *Poenulus* to Virgil's Dido (not forgetting the Platonic proverbial prejudices about the unreliability of the Phoenician Tales), the author offers the reader a background against which to situate both the attention to the Phoenician world that flourished in nineteenth-century Orientalism (in the works of Flaubert and Renan, for example) and the proliferation of assumptions about Trieste's alleged Phoenician origins in the pro-Austrian press, contrary to an (irredentist) insistence on the city's Roman roots, which aimed instead to enhance the antiquity and the stability of its relationship with the Italian nation. Pappalardo situates the elaboration of a Phoenician mythology by Freud – who considered the Carthaginian Hannibal a combative Semitic model and an alternative to the passive Jewish victimhood that his father had transmitted to him – against the same background. Less convincing is the claim that there was a connection

between this Phoenician fantasy and a youthful stay in Trieste, which is presented as ‘a formative rite of passage’.

Theodor Däubler’s poetic experience, marked by bilingualism, presents one of the book’s leitmotifs, namely the revisitation of the myth of the Rape of Europa, which lends itself to the exploitation of ‘a Semitic Hellenism’, due to the kidnapped maiden’s Phoenician origin. The theme will reappear in the Balkan version of the legend of Lepa Vida (rewritten by the Slovenian from Trieste, Srečko Kosovel) and in Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*.

Apart from a section devoted to the Viennese Adria-Ausstellung of summer 1913, the second chapter focuses on Robert Musil’s transcultural Europeanism, which reflected his politics of ‘non-national loyalty’ and took shape in Habsburg Trieste. It is not surprising that Musil, as a wartime journalist for the *Soldaten-Zeitung*, applauded the Habsburg loyalty of the majority of Austro-Italian subjects, while in the postwar years he retrieved Nietzsche’s ‘Good Europeanism’ and proposed a *Völkerdurchdringung* and an ‘überstaatlich and possibly unstaatlich’ European unification, without ever indulging in a nostalgic idealisation of *Die Welt von Gestern*. Pieces of the same ideological mosaic can be found in *The Man Without Qualities*, which Pappalardo analyses in depth.

The third chapter is dedicated to Italo Svevo, possibly the best embodiment of *Modernism in Trieste*, starting from the pseudonym chosen to highlight the dual nature of his culture, which gave rise to a linguistic configuration intentionally based on contamination – hence not relatable to a purism that was never pursued and occasionally mocked. His postwar pacifist essay, which seems to have anticipated today’s European Union, is juxtaposed with Austria’s prewar federalist aspirations, although in my opinion, the disenchanting point of view of a businessman may also reveal traces of youthful socialist sympathies. Perhaps a discussion of the short story *The Tribe* would have been useful here, also to better understand the third (hidden) pole of Svevian culture, namely the Jewish one, which is central to Pappalardo’s Phoenician characterisation of Zeno. If the readings of Renan by both Svevo and Zeno could have contributed to this critical interpretation, the proverbial falsehood of the Phoenician Tales adds an interesting element to the well-known unreliability of the Svevian narrator.

Finally, the cultural context of Trieste even emerges in the works of James Joyce, who is discussed in the last chapter. From *Ulysses* to *Finnegans Wake*, Habsburg transculturalism is ‘the matrix of the border-crossing and transhistorical intersubjectivity of many of his characters’, and Joyce’s stay in Trieste is said to have activated an ethnolinguistic ‘Hiberno-Punic mythography of origins’ that advanced a political, Europeanist solution to British hegemony. A receiver-oriented approach stresses the role that the audience of his Triestine lectures on Ireland may have played in their conceptual and communicative strategy; the presentation of a Gaelic Phoenicianism – albeit discredited on a scientific level – is thus linked to the widespread myth of Trieste’s Phoenician origins. Personal friendships and cultural exchanges lead Pappalardo to draw a parallel between the Irish author and Svevo, for example in his interpretation of the title of the only Joycean text set in Trieste, *Giacomo Joyce*, in which the linguistic-cultural dualism of Hector Schmitz’s pseudonym resurfaces, whereas Joyce’s reservations about nationalistic instances bring him closer to the other modernist writers discussed in the book. It would have been useful to mention that, in 1926, Svevo had seen *Exiles* – the play in which Ireland’s geopolitical future is evoked – and reviewed it in one of his long letters to Joyce; this could have added a thread not only to the web of relationships between the two writers but also to that woven throughout the book. In this texture, the purple colour of Phoenician memory often stands out in all its shades and this, along with the myth of the abduction of Europa, is another leitmotif of the book. It is

precisely the coherence with which Pappalardo pursues his thesis, through the twists and turns of a winding and at times labyrinthine path, that – despite a few stretches – makes the book remarkable and worth reading.

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## ***Mussolini's Nature: An Environmental History of Italian Fascism***

**by Marco Armiero, Roberta Biasillo and Wilko Graf von Hardenberg, translated by James Sievert, Cambridge, MS and London, The MIT Press, 2022, viii + 251 pp., \$30.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-262-54471-9**

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At a time shaped by our emergence from the Covid-19 pandemic and overshadowed by ever pressing concerns about the climate crisis, including our over-reliance on imported oil from unstable parts of the world, *Mussolini's Nature: An Environmental History of Italian Fascism* is as timely as it is important. The authors, M. Armiero, R. Biasillo and W.G. von Hardenberg, note that today, apologist ideas of Mussolini's Fascism persist – not only did the trains run on time but the protection of the environment was at the forefront of Italian Fascist policy – and one can only presume that such ideas abound following the recent success of the populist right in Italy. Therefore, the authors wish to reject any sense that Mussolini was in any way a champion of environmental causes. However, as they declare, their book is not an assessment of the 'green' credentials of the Fascist regime. Rather, it is an evaluation of Mussolini and the policies of his regime in terms of the prevailing views of nature and the material consequences for the Italian landscape. The book spans the life of Mussolini from a small boy growing up in Emilia Romagna through the years of the Fascist regime, ending with some considerations of his postwar environmental legacy. Ultimately, the authors show how the environment is an integral part of any political endeavour.

The book is organised thematically and is made up of six chapters with a short introduction and conclusion. It begins with an analysis of Mussolini and the development of his relationship with nature from the perspective of two women close to him. Other themes dealt with are the Fascist environmental projects of land reclamation and the Battle for Grain; the drive for autarky, with a focus on dam building and the development of the gasogene engine; conservation policies and in particular the establishment of national parks and the apparent contradictions with Fascist ideas of nature; Italian colonialism in Africa; and finally, the legacy of Fascism's environmental and colonial policies, and how to deal with them in an appropriate way.

This is a fascinating, concise book, carefully researched, very well translated and full of interesting detail. It generally passes quickly through the more familiar details of