

# Q&A with Annamaria Pagliaro: From Italy to Australia and Back

Annamaria Pagliaro, Samuele Grassi

**Abstract:** This essay-interview traces Annamaria Pagliaro's contribution to cultural relationships, cultural and educational exchanges between Australia and Italy, particularly based on her work as Director of the Monash University Prato Centre (2005-2008).

**Keywords:** Australia, Educational Exchanges, Italy, Research Trajectories, University

In her 30-year career, Annamaria Pagliaro has worked on 19th and early 20th century Italian literature and theatre. She is the author of *The Novels of Federico De Roberto: From Naturalism to Modernism* (2011) and has edited, among others, special issues on naturalism (2007) and theatre (2011 and 2016) for the journal *Spunti e Ricerche*, which she edits.

I first met Annamaria as a Doctoral student, in the early 2010s. While I was waiting for the viva discussion of my PhD thesis a mutual friend – who also contributed to this volume – put us in touch for sessional classes to deliver within the Italian language and culture program Annamaria was then coordinating. As our initial working relationship developed into a friendship, my increasing involvement with Monash University Prato Centre also came to hold the promise of revitalising inter-institutional and international collaboration between the University of Florence and Monash University, where the relations between the two institutions had come to a standstill – paying homage to the presence of Australian studies within the Department of Languages, Literature and Intercultural Studies of the University.

With the following questions, I tried to capture the complexities of undertaking intercultural and international work, as well as the radical potential of building relationships across institutional barriers, mandates, and disciplinary boundaries.

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*SG: I would like to start this conversation by recounting your experience as Academic Director of the Monash University Prato Centre (2005-2008). But before then, you had also been involved in the Centre's establishment as a member of the founding committee. Can you tell us more about how the idea of starting up an Australian university Centre in Prato came about?*

AP: Yes, it is true. I was a founding member of the Monash University Prato Centre. Now the background to this is really rather complicated and it goes beyond the establishment or the actual founding of the Monash University Prato Centre. I think it goes back, perhaps, around 1993-1995 when we had as Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor, Professor Chubb. Professor Chubb was very interested in creating for Australian students something like what Europe had done; a sort of Erasmus program. He assigned very generous scholarships for students of languages to go and travel overseas to the country of the language they were studying.

And so really, my input starts from there because I worked to establish study abroad memorandums of understanding with the University of Florence, the University of Bologna, and the University for Foreigners of Perugia. The one that was, in fact, the most successful, was the University of Florence: the initial MOU with the University of Florence. I was able to get the thing going reasonably easily because of two very important people I knew from the University of Florence who also wanted this. One of them was our mutual colleague, Christine Hubert, who unfortunately has passed away. The other, very influential, was Prof. Margherita Ciacci from the Faculty of Economics, and in effect, I think Monash has been remiss in recognising the essential input of Margherita Ciacci towards the establishment of the Centre. Without the support of Margherita there would have been no Prato Centre. She was a close friend and I introduced her to Bill Kent. Margherita, as delegate in charge for international relations for the University of Florence, was able to connect us with the Tuscan Region and help me in much of the background work while I was in Italy during my OSP and also once back in Melbourne. We worked very closely and eventually located what is now the Prato Centre. Bill Kent liaised with the Vice Chancellor's team at Monash and passed on these negotiations. Bill Kent did an enormous amount of work in Melbourne to network with the Vice Chancellor at the time and with Monash University, to try to convince them of the desirability and prestige of such a Centre for the university. Actually, a centre in Italy was very much a very special wish of Bill Kent's. In fact, he had tried a few years earlier to establish such a Centre with the sponsorship of the Boyd Foundation, but it hadn't gone anywhere. This project had remained dormant for a few years until by chance I saw this piece of paper that was passed on to me by a colleague of Italian and I immediately saw the great potential of such a venture. I contacted Bill and asked if he was still interested in trying. This is when he showed me boxes of files from his previous attempt. It was right at the moment when I was involved with Margherita Ciacci and Christine to create cultural exchanges, between Florence and Monash University. With Margherita we had done this fantastic project, called PRUA, which, through the Italian Chamber of Commerce

and the Tuscan Region, organised for small groups of students from Florence to come and study at Monash and do an internship in industries in Victoria while our Monash students did the same at Florence. The project ran for a couple of years and then it petered out.

Contemporaneously with Christine Hubert, particularly for the Arts Faculty, we had students coming from the University of Florence to come and study Australian Literature at Monash and our students instead would go over to Florence to do Italian Studies.

This was what was going on at Monash, and out of these connections, I felt we had enough contacts to try to develop the Centre that Bill had tried to establish previously. An initial working group was established and Bill and I worked assiduously together to get it going. Cecilia Hewlett found herself in Florence at the time, or actually rather near Siena, and once Palazzo Vaj was rented, she started working very closely with Bill, paid by the hour initially, to set up all the infrastructure, a fantastic infrastructure and program that then I inherited when I came for my 4 years term as Director.

The other crucial fact, of course, which needs to be remembered, is that Monash University agreed, because of the enormously generous contribution of Rino and Diana Grollo's Foundation. This Foundation gave generously for the establishment of the Centre, which in fact constituted the initial funding for it to open up and get going.

*SG: Was there ever a stated intention to exploit the presence of Monash University to commit to the promotion of the literatures and the languages of/in Australia?*

AP: Well, the initial plan was to actually involve as many Faculties of Monash University as possible into Prato project so that the Monash community would feel connected to it. Prato was going to be like a showcase in Europe for Monash University and also a research meeting place for connecting more easily Monash academics with Europe and the US.

Obviously, each Faculty had in mind how to represent itself and each participating Faculty took a while to get people on board. As far as Australian literature, there was an initial interest to connect with various centres of Australian Studies in Italian universities, like the one in Florence with Christine Hubert, of course. During my mandate, we even went to Copenhagen to connect with Australian Studies there and do something in Prato. Yes, the idea was a cultural and research exchange, basically. It was not an enterprise to prioritise Australian culture as such, but rather to allow Australian culture to meet and to exchange with other educational and cultural backgrounds, via a series of conferences, research groups, cohort programs, that sort of thing.

*SG: Which is always really interesting, because even from within the field of Anglophone Studies here in Italy, somehow Australia is always the 'far' place, as opposed to English culture (as spoken) and referring to the UK. And also, in comparison with the US, Australia, even within Anglophone Literary Studies, is always the furthest place away.*

AP: And I think that sense of “the tyranny of distance”, a concept coined long ago by the historian Geoffrey Blainey, was exactly a driving force behind what we wanted to do at the Centre, to actually connect and create strong synergies with Europe. Europe and the US and, of course, the UK. Now in a Brexit climate, we have to place it separately on the list.

*SG: At the time, you also coordinated and taught the Italian Studies Programme for the Faculty of Arts. Have you reflected on whether the field of study abroad has progressed since then? If so, how?*

AP: Well yes, that’s a very delicate question, and I don’t think it is because of the Centre. I’m not suggesting that at all. It is not because we’ve got this protected niche where our students come. But, I think that what has happened in Italian Studies programs, not only at Monash, but in an Anglophone context more broadly, is that students progressively did less and less contact hours and as a consequence less content. Italian Studies as a discipline focused more and more on contemporary literature, popular culture, film, while many of the other classical areas barely survived. I think economic rationality has impacted on the sort of language and cultural proficiency that our students have today.

There is an enormous difference in the cultural knowledge and language proficiency between our students who first went as exchange students to the University of Florence, to the ones that graduate now in Italian Studies. I don’t think we can talk of a progression, I think it’s a regrettable regression.

*SG: Your experience as Academic Director of the Centre provided the ground to establish long-lasting collaborations and networks with scholars based in the Florence area and across the EU more broadly. Here, I am thinking of, among others, Christine Hubert and Gaetano Prampolini, who worked on Australian literatures and cultures at the University of Florence. How did you get in touch with them? How did you attempt to create bridges between Italy and Australia?*

AP: Well, in fact, my job as Director did take me in a different direction. I tried a few conferences and certainly Professor Prampolini helped in the teaching of what we established for Italian Studies at the Centre, but in order to make sure that the Prato Centre was going to survive into posterity, and it properly represented the university, we had to involve other Faculties, all the other Faculties, and make them feel that they owned the place as much as the Arts Faculty.

In fact, my attention went towards conferences we had with Medicine, for instance, where the University of Florence participated very strongly. We had nursing practitioners, working with people in Physiology from the University of Florence. We did a lot with the Faculty of Medicine at Florence, and we did a lot also with the Faculty of Law. Judd Epstein had set up an incredible program, whereby he got together professors from the University of Florence to create courses within our law program, as well as many other universities. I think in the end there were about eleven participating universities. And each year the type of

course changed according to what was being offered, and each individual unit offered was an area of specialisation by the person who delivered the unit. It also contained a very global cohort of students because students from the participating universities could choose and pick what they wanted to do. It was really an excellent exchange for Law, and in fact, a very well-received educational model.

A very similar program was put in place by Art and Design. Engineering also had very complex research groups that organised conferences with many other European universities. We tried to establish a base for MUARC in order to collaborate with Florence and other European universities.

So, basically by the end of my Directorship, in one form or another, whether it was through teaching programs or research groups, all of the ten Faculties of the university were participating and that was a great achievement. In addition to that, we also had created very good networks within the Tuscan region, who frequented our centre, used our centre, and so on.

*SG: It's interesting also to note that, for example, the Law program is still improving and developing links with other foreign universities. There's at least a couple of partnerships that are still running, I'm thinking about La Sorbonne ...*

AP: It was there then, La Sorbonne. What was absolutely fantastic was to see the different educational contexts and modes of learning that were brought together, how our own Australian students were challenged and stimulated by the different international backgrounds with which they came in contact. It wasn't just a matter of exchanging principles of law, it was actually also a way of exchanging ways of learning.

*SG: I suspect that something like this, along the lines of language learning, could also potentially be very interesting and bring to light a series of peculiar differences.*

AP: I tried (and failed!) to encourage the establishment of compulsory short courses in Italian for students and staff who came to study at the Centre. The idea was to ensure a deeper understanding of the place where they were coming to work. By not knowing the language or knowing not much more than how to ask for an Aperol spritz, you ran the risk of surfacing on the top, of having a sort of voyeuristic approach rather than a real experience. Many of our participants came in as anglophone speakers and left as anglophone speakers. Of course, there were also those who made quite an effort.

*SG: Can you tell us more about how your experience in Italy shaped your research during and after your stay?*

AP: Well, I was in the midst of my research career when I came to Prato. I had already established research fields, and they continued to be those, even when I left.

I don't know if you are familiar with the novel by Pirandello *Il fu Mattia Pascal* where he talks about the mythological figure Tantalus and the Tantalean punishment, I felt very much like that. There were national libraries, archives, professors nearby, but I was so swamped by administrative work and so involved in aiding in the research connections of others that mine were very much put into the drawer. At one stage, it became clear that it was best for me to get back into the Faculty and back to my research. Having said that, there was Enrico Ghidetti in Florence and Carlo Madrignani in Pisa who very sadly passed away while I was in Prato. He was a scholar who worked precisely in my field of studies; Italian 19th century Naturalism, wrote seminal texts on Federico de Roberto, Luigi Capuana and so on. I managed a couple of trips to the archives in Catania, but not much more.

So yes, I was in the midst of my research field, but I did not have the time to perform research as I would have liked. I was engaged in a whole lot of other activities. I was able to get back to my work when I got back to the Faculty, and fortunately, I was granted a one-year sabbatical which set me back in action.

There were major bureaucratic obstacles to setting up a model like the law or the art and design programs for Italian studies students. I remember speaking about it with Professor Ann Caesar on a visit of hers to Monash. The problem was that students from other European universities would have had to pay their own expenses and that is not how Erasmus worked for them.

*SG: Having researched and worked across countries, what are the challenges of doing cross-national work at leadership and at educator/scholar's level? In your view, how does this fit in with broader debates on the neoliberal university and the marketisation of education?*

AP: Hmm, yes, a very tricky question! And I can only speak from an Arts Faculty perspective. I think universities, and particularly Anglophone universities have changed dramatically in the last couple of decades. They talk about corporate culture, they talk about education as an industry, and in fact, this is what it has become. I am afraid that I don't see it as a positive step forward. Research is now very much controlled from the top, in many ways. It is not a liberal, open, public intellectual type of approach. You follow the guidelines that your university and Faculty set and you have to operate within those limits. I think this happens much more in an anglophone context (at least in the Australian context) than it does in the Italian, French or German contexts with which I am a little familiar. We talk of inclusion and multicultural platforms, but in fact we are guided and even mandated, also in disciplines such as Italian studies, French studies and so on, to publish in so called "quality lists" which are very Anglo centric and almost completely exclude non-English speaking publishing venues.

*SG: You have carried out research and supervised in a number of areas within Italian Studies, encompassing 19th and early 20th century literature, literary theory,*

*gender studies and theatre. How has this scholarship evolved, from the perspective of an Italian scholar working and living outside of Italy?*

AP: Let us say that the theoretical Italian background that I initially had was philological, Marxist and then post-Marxist. What I found on the other side was a different set of theoretical approaches which privileged the theory more than the documentary evidence being analysed. I always tried to marry the two approaches. I found that my background helped me to enrich my approach through theoreticians coming from the anglophone world. Areas like gender studies theories, for instance, in Italian critical discourse were a sort of novelty, it happened later.

[...] I think that my interest in Italian naturalism and modernism really was a product of my Australian experience. Most of Italian migration to Australia came from the south and the distinction between the “cultured north” and the “uncultured south” was a prejudice often encountered. It was in Australia that, actually, I abandoned my interest in Tuscan writers and focussed on Sicilian writers. I established literature subjects for my students on Sicilian writers and focused my research in that area. I found a very rich European culture through these writers’ participation in newspaper writing, to key literary debates during post Italian unification, through their philosophical contribution to thought. They captured my imagination and I stayed there ... and I’m still there!

*SG: What directions do you envisage for Italian Studies within a cross-country perspective? What are the key directions you see the discipline as heading towards?*

AP: I think that what is happening to Italian Studies is that the focus has gone more prominently to various forms of contemporary cultural production. I think that there is a shift away from what, not long ago, were considered classical periods of Italian culture, for instance Medieval and Renaissance literature, and integral parts of an Italian Studies program in Australia or the US. I think that for some time now we have been going towards a demolition and reconstruction of the canon, rediscovering women writer of the past, cultural products such as newspapers, magazines, exhibitions and so on, re-reading the construction of national identities. As I said earlier, particularly contemporary popular culture, film studies are and will continue to constitute the areas of studies for the next decade.

The 19th century is being examined through new perspectives on nation-building, through a reopening of the archives, looking at magazines, looking at paraliterature, looking at the medicalisation of culture, all those areas that have been excluded from the canon. These new approaches will actually make research on the 19th century thrive, and I’m very excited that it will be so.