

# Dark to Meet Light. Claudio Magris's *Blameless* and the Struggle against Oblivion

Sara Fruner

New York University  
(sf153@nyu.edu)

## 1.

New York City can be generous in unexpected ways.

In April 2017, Italian master writer and maître à penser Claudio Magris was invited at the Italian Cultural Institute to launch *Blameless*, the English translation of his 2015 novel *Non luogo a procedere*.

No nobody introduced Magris that evening. Romanian major writer Norman Manea, both an admirer and a dear friend of the Italian author, was there to moderate the conversation and to bring his own perspective to the novel and to his work. Having Romania's and Italy's most likely candidates for the next Nobel Prize in Literature in the same room, talking about their art and life, is a gift that fills one with the utmost delight.

Claudio Magris is among Italy's foremost writers and thinkers. A former senator; professor emeritus of modern German literature at the University of Trieste; a recipient of prestigious literary awards, including the Erasmus Prize, the Franz Kafka Prize, the Strega Prize, and the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade; a scholar of authors such as Philip Roth, Henrik Ibsen, Robert Musil, Hermann Hesse, and Jorge Luis Borges; a translator of Ibsen, Heinrich von Kleist, Arthur Schnitzler, Georg Büchner, and Franz Grillparzer. After Umberto Eco passed away in 2016, Magris is undeniably the last Italian man of letters alive, one of the highest and brightest minds of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Saying "Italian" sounds, however, quiet reductive, given his European "expanded" belongingness. Magris considers himself a "Mitteleuropean": he has been standing in the middle of Central Europe's multi-voiced cultural debate since 1963 when he authored *The Hapsburg Myth in Modern Austrian Literature*, a seminal volume. Born in crossroad Trieste, and still a citizen there, he has handled issues pertaining to different European nations, not just Italy, since the beginning of his career.

Located in the far northeast of the country, Trieste has had a troubled past. After thriving in the eighteenth century when the Austro-Hungarian empress Maria Theresa turned it into the haven of the Hapsburg Empire, the city was briefly occupied by Tito's partisans in 1945 and was crossed

by Churchill's Iron Curtain in 1946. After the war, Trieste polarized Central Europe's unrest: the Italian side of the border got cleaned of its Slovenian past, and the Yugoslav side of its Italian past. With Slovenia and Croatia at a stone's throw from the city centre, Trieste has become a hotbed of contested identities —Italian, Slovenian, Friulian, German, Yugoslav— and ideologies — imperialism, nationalism, fascism, communism, and Titoism.

It has also embodied intellectual vibrancy and intercultural exchange: for some time, authors such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Italo Svevo, Umberto Saba, and James Joyce held Trieste as their home. Joyce actually started writing *Ulysses* there, paving the way for modernism in literature.

"Plural" identity and Trieste are both crucial in *Blameless*, a fragmentary novel that takes the form of a collection of anecdotes inspired by Diego de Henriquez, who, in Magris's words, was "a brilliant, uncompromising Triestine of vast culture and fierce passion, who dedicated his entire life (1909–1974) to collecting weapons and military materiel of all types to build an original, overflowing War Museum that might, by displaying those instruments of death, lead to peace." (Magris 2017: 339-40).

Magris's nameless protagonist similarly amasses spears, ancient weapons, U-boats, uniforms, film footage, and stacks of military documents. Unfortunately, he does not live to see his dream come true: fire erupts in the hangar where he keeps his collections, destroying many of them and taking his life.

The surrender of Trieste to the Allies in May 1945 is the key historical context of the novel. After the Italian armistice in September 1943, the Germans occupied the parts of Italy not yet taken by the Allies. This included Trieste, just outside of which the Germans opened the only Italy-based concentration camp with a crematorium, which was within the Risiera di San Sabba, a brick complex that had functioned as a rice-husking factory.

Before the racial laws were put into effect in 1938, Trieste's Jewish community was the third largest among Europe's cities. In addition, during the war the city became home to both Slovenes and Italians who belonged to dissident political camps, such as partisans, communists, and republicans, all of them persecuted by the Black Shirts. Placing a concentration camp in that area must have seemed a strategically flawless decision to the Nazis. It was one of those moments in history when a place becomes a jungle: everyone hunted, imprisoned and murdered everyone else. The Risiera in particular, was a wretched site for such a *bolgia*; a black hole in which Jewish, antifascist and partisan victims fell.

But the murderers, the generals and privates, rebels and informers, as well as the names of those killed at the Risiera, they all disappeared from the city and from memory — a mass obliteration. Nobody knows how many profited from the war, or which of them turned a blind eye and collaborated: once the conflict was over, the city's leaders celebrated the liberation and moved on, unpunished. *Blameless*. Or what the law defines as "non luogo a procedere," the Italian title of the novel, an expression meaning no sufficient ground to take legal action, no cause to indict. To put it with the narrator, "general amnesty, absolution before trial, the decision not to prosecute", "a dress rehearsal for hell, the cast of executioners got their golden handshake and that's all." (Magris 2017: 312).

Despite Magris's affection for his home-city, should we expect some mercy towards Trieste, we would be disappointed. The main features of the city the author highlights in the novel are corruption, cheating, betrayal, opportunism, exploitation — attitudes to be found in the behavior of men who had been living there during and after those wild years of war. His ability to look at his city with unbiased eyes, to deny any leniency and shed light on its misdeeds speaks for the author's integrity and clear-headedness.

In an in-depth interview with Anne Milano Appel, the translator of the book into English, Magris tells about the genesis of the novel, and about Trieste.

In 2009, in my speech of thanks for the Peace Prize conferred on me in Frankfurt, I began by recalling that eccentric Triestine who had dedicated his life to the building of his vast, bizarre War Museum. At the end of my speech, [...] I decided that I would write a novel with this man as a starting point but expanded to include many other things. [...] I saw that those objects, those weapons in the Museum, would be transformed into the story of the individuals who had held them, who had killed with them or been killed by them. Also impelling me to write was the strange, disquieting oblivion with which Trieste, my city, had for so long shrouded, in its desire to forget, the appalling story of the Risiera di San Sabba [...]. A collective oblivion, a scraping away of the collective memory, an amputation of the city's hippocampus, and the nation's. (Milano Appel 2017)

To fight back collective removal, the tendency of men to close their eyes before evil and to hide the truth from themselves, Magris chooses to have faith in an activist kind of literature, which exhumes the past and tears the veil of secrecy and apathy apart. He believes that «writing to some extent means avenging injustice, at least battling the oblivion that seeks to destroy victims a second time by obliterating their memory.» (Milano Appel 2017) His literary word clears away smokescreens. It says the unsaid.

As for the collector, he undergoes an evolution in our eyes: at first he may appear as a ranting weirdo possessed by a mania —if not an obsessive compulsive disorder— which pushes him to see the brutalities of war everywhere, and to expose them through the objects he finds. A form of war-related paranoia infecting every aspect of his life.

Yet, somehow, this compulsive mania leads him to search for the highest value of life —truth. He looks for the names written by the death-condemned prisoners on the walls of the Risiera, the names of executioners' potential accomplices: people of well-off Triestine society who came to visit the Nazi torturers and did not mind shaking hands with them. The main character makes it a point in his life to retrieve those names from the whitewashed walls of the Risiera and bring them back, down on paper, in his notebooks. The fact that those notebooks get presumably destroyed in the fire, belongs to the realm of fate and its bitter irony, but shall not impinge on the collector's intentions. We come to understand that his is a quest for truth and justice, not just some crazy fetish.

After the collector's death, the task of bringing his project to an end and organizing the museum falls upon Luisa Brooks, a local museum curator who had briefly met him.

Luisa is important not just in her relation to the man. Magris confessed that she is indeed the novel's main character. «Luisa is the true protagonist of the story. A figure totally invented, daughter

of a Triestine Jewess, victim of the Shoah but also embroiled in family guilt, and of an Afro-American sergeant who arrived in Trieste with the Allied troops in May of 1945.» (Milano Appel 2017).

We appraise that *Blameless* does not feature one or two protagonists, but more.

This is also, in my intention particularly, not simply the story of the collector, or indeed of Luisa, but that of the characters connected with the weapons which he has gathered. Another example is the story of a character whom perhaps I love most of all: Luisa de Navarrete, a 16th-century black woman. Free and married to a white man, she was kidnapped by the Indians and spent five years as the wife or slave of the chief, perhaps participating in their attacks against the Spaniards; after she escaped and returned home, she was subjected to a trial by the Inquisition and saved herself by means of her incredible intelligence. I have seen the minutes of that interrogation, almost obliterated because time had already erased so many words when they were microfilmed. Seeing those lines was like seeing the outlines of a face which begged to be reconstructed, to reappear. (Milano Appel 2017)

An educated broad-minded reader won't fail to spot underground affinities with slave Marie Ursule, a powerfully charismatic character brought to life by Dionne Brand's imagination in *At the Full and Change of the Moon*. By organizing a mass suicide on a Trinidadian plantation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and sparing the one life of her child Bola, Marie Ursule starts out, metaphorically, the black diaspora in the world. Luisa de Navarrete owns that kind of stamina, resilience, endurance. And vision<sup>1</sup>.

As for Luisa Brooks, she is not an automaton executing the collector's will. She does not passively receive, nor unconditionally approve, his memorabilia and writings. Luisa questions his words, as well as the goals of the War Museum. She wonders what exactly she is going to communicate through that building, what she can make out of all the grim paraphernalia he has gathered. Luisa is a thinking, re-thinking, mind.

Her considerations alternate to the man's notes and the reader is confronted with their dissimilar positions. She meditates on the best approach to tackle her task as curator, she mulls over past and over history. «History [...] is a DNA bank, a valley of Jehoshaphat awaiting the resurrection of all the billions of beings who lived or live, since no atom of life is extinguished [...]; hunters and usurpers try to defend themselves, to scrape their forefathers' blood from their knives, but that blood is alive, ready to seethe in the veins of bodies *resurrecturi* in the memory and conscience of the world.» (Magris, 2017: 152-3).

Though harsh, this view of history shimmers with hope: "the blood is alive" and is to be remembered in the "conscience of the world" (*Ibidem*) — oblivion can be opposed by awareness and memory.

Conversely, while recollecting the final *homo-homini-lupus* days of war, the nameless narrator defines history in very different terms. «History is an electroshock; that's why we've all become

---

<sup>1</sup> Poet, novelist, and essayist, Dionne Brand is one of the most prominent poets, writers and thinkers of the contemporary Canadian scenario, whose work addresses — powerfully, beautifully — issues of race, gender and social justice.

crazed, even the insurgents. Everyone against everyone” and “There it is, History; dead, still, unmoving, a stone, a geode.» (Magris 2017: 227-9).

With specific regard to the atrocities happened at the Risiera, he further comments, «All of human history is a wiping away of consciousness, above all the consciousness of what disappears, of what has disappeared. If someone or something is missing, it hurts, and so, after getting rid of it —in some cases wasting no time, like at the Risiera— you get rid of the consciousness and the recollection of having done so well. History, society, societies are masters of neurosurgery and are making rapid progress.» (Magris 2017: 300)

Luisa’s character also allows Magris to outline a story-within-a-story, which expands the novel to include an allegedly unprecedented thematic pair: black slavery and Jewish deportation. «She is the product of two exiles, the Jewish and the black —two peoples who have had to cross the desert and the sea» (Milano Appel), said Magris about Luisa to Milano Appel.

The story-within-the-story of Sara, Luisa’s mother, of Sara’s beloved Afro-American husband, and of their ancestors, makes its way through the multiple layers and voices of this palimpsestic, polyphonic framework of a novel. If, at times, we may get lost or feel overwhelmed with lists of hyper-detailed warfare items, or transient characters whose whys and wherefores we are at pains to remember, the fragmented tale of this special family stands out and hooks the reader’s attention. Out of a sea of details, anecdotes, names, weapons, stories and sub-stories, this love is a light the reader is pleased to follow.

*Blameless* cracks open literature with an unexpected perspective: by linking African slavery and Middle Passage mass deportation to the Jewish Holocaust, Magris can deal with dispersion and trauma on a broader global level.

We have read many books about black diaspora and many books about Jewish diaspora. Above-mentioned *At the Full and Change of the Moon* is a sublime allegory of black dispersal, with little Bola running away from a 19<sup>th</sup> century plantation and giving life to generations of black descendants throughout the modern world. As for the Shoah, our mind goes to Anne Michaels’ novel *Fugitive Pieces*, which tells about little Jakob Beer’s flight from Nazi-invaded Poland, and his rescue by Athos Roussos, a geologist who brings him to a new life in Canada.

Trauma is the common ground for both historical tragedies: in the two mentioned novels it can be passed down intergenerationally and be embodied/disembodied in a “phantom” presence the characters are burdened with and mutually bequeath: traumatic knowledge circulates in the texts, in the characters and also in the language used by the writers —Brand especially.

In *Blameless*, trauma gets figuratively shattered into the endless warfare objects amassed by the collector, as if the whole assembly would be an inert-yet-living memento of a pain, which is both collective and individual.

By intertwining two threads of loss, suffering and displacement into one couple of lovers — Luisa’s mother and father— connecting the United States, Africa, Italy and the Caribbean, while tracing back both characters’ ancestry, Magris ventures into an unexplored double-diasporic territory on the chart of identity challenged *loci*.

«Are Jews the blacks of the world, and are blacks in America the Jews in Egypt, persecuted by Pharaoh because he fears them? Maybe they are one and the same, the people chosen because they

were persecuted, only persecution makes a man or a people chosen; people whose land was stolen everywhere, in Africa or in Canaan —the Promised and lost Land, where both expulsion and exile as well as return is tragic», (Magris 2017: 221) wonders Luisa, and adds, «The whole world is a cemetery and that goes for everyone, but even more so for us, for the children of Galuth and Slavery.» (Magris 2017: 249)

Speaking about love and death, the book stages a real tug-of-war between Eros and Thanatos. Items of war, such as guns, axes, tanks and rifles are described in detail as Luisa plans their arrangement in the museum. The collector does not spare gory details and brutal scenes either, especially when he relates about the last violent days of the liberation of Trieste.

However, love and hope flicker through such bleak reported scenarios. After losing her mother in the war, Sara surfaces from her deep depression when she meets her husband. They team together and bond over the oppression their ancestors had endured through the course of generations. Their daringly mixed love is a shelter where they find comfort and protection, a shield bouncing back horror, loss, not to mention discrimination.

If Thanatos is easy to find in the novel, Eros is rarer but does erupt in a deeply sensual scene. It describes —well, chants— a moment of love the narrator spent with Elsa, a woman he used to know when they were children. It is not just a plain intercourse: it is a sort of metaphoric union between past and present, which takes the readers' breath away for its lyricism and poetic-erotic power.

«It is a magnetically charged scene which fires up the book,» commented Magris, encouraged by Manea at the Italian Cultural Institute. «It is as if the life of this man were blocked, and then, suddenly, it got unblocked, and started to flow again.»

As *Blameless*, and at large Magris's entire production, meditates on many challenging issues related to identity, home and homeland(s), in the final Q&A I asked the author which position he takes towards belonging.

My question originated from a contradiction. If on the one hand belonging somewhere might provide the individual with roots —or just the idea of them— a feeling of being safely anchored to a place and its culture/habits/values, on the other, it can trigger dangerous, even sick shifts towards nationalism, or extreme forms of protectionism for what is felt as "one's own."

Magris replied by quoting the *sommo poeta*. «Dante knew that his love for Florence, passed down to him by the waters of River Arno, was meant to make him understand that the world is our homeland, just like the sea is fish's... We should always keep in mind the image of Matryoshka nesting dolls. We are not *one* identity. We are multiple identities together. One identity stacked up inside another, and another, and another... I am Triestino, of course. But I am also Italian. I am European. I am Mitteleuropean. We are Matryoshka dolls».

In a time where American walls are being envisioned as solutions to immigration problems, not to mention families being torn apart between Mexico and the US; where most European countries aims at dumping refugees to their EU neighbor states, and at closing borders to prevent their entrance. In a time like this, should we not try to campaign for Magris's idea that we are exactly like Matryoshka dolls? Vessels in which a number of different cultures are embedded, and not mono-culture, mono-value monoliths? That there is no pure heart in the middle, no *one* homeland?

And that we result from the overlapping of the different identitarian layers we pile up during a lifetime, the assembly of all the houses we live in?

Magris had already developed this idea of plurality of home and homelands in his exquisite non-fiction volume *L'infinito viaggiare (Infinite Travelling)*, where he stated, «One can never really possess a home, a space carved out of the universe's infinity, but only stop there for a night or for a whole lifetime, with respect and gratitude.» (Magris 2005: X).

And in his article “Identità ovvero incertezza”, included in *Lettere italiane*, he states, «Identity seems to exist in the very doubt of itself and should always be declined in the plural... because the 'I' is itself a multitude, a fluctuating entity.» (Magris 2003: 522, 520). Multitude is actually the language that *Blameless'* narrator articulates through the mass of objects he rescues from history. In this, we are encouraged to appreciate the diversity of past. Of *pasts*.

*Blameless* is not an easy reading, this needs to be told. Its fragmented structure makes it disconcerting —yet concurrently also fitting for a story that deals with the mayhem of war. The narrative jolts among pages from the narrator's journal, descriptions of items to be displayed in the museum, and Luisa's own story as child of a forerunning mixed marriage. There are strata of stories upon and within stories, personal reflections, and names of victims, spies, informants and thugs involved with perpetrating war crimes.

No, it is no walk-in-the-park reading at all. But if we think of it, the modern novel has been going in that direction since above-mentioned *Ulysses* on. The narrative path is never linear or instantly clear. It is windy. It swings among multiple *margin* stories, which oftentimes challenge the *center* story, and calls for efforts: readers undergo dizziness, the feeling of losing their bearings, ground sliding away under their feet. They have to be ready to face bewildering detours, and to undertake puzzling side narratives or out-of-the-ordinary characters.

Reading this novel is an act of resilience and justice, just like writing it must have been for Magris. It is an invitation to us to re-appropriate historical memory. Italians who are not historians, or not familiar with Trieste and its facts, do not have a clue about the Risiera di San Sabba. Before reading the novel, I didn't either, to my shame. The common thought is that crematoria and their horrors are always elsewhere, never *here*. Lack of knowledge —of interest?— habit of carelessness, www-fuelled distraction are plagues affecting Italy, but also, broadly speaking, our age.

Magris turns our face toward the unknown. This is what great writers, and poets, do. They push us into darkness. They know it is the only way for us to meet light.

## Bibliography

Brand, D., *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, New York, Grove/Atlantic, 1999.

Magris, C., *Non luogo a procedere*, Milan, Garzanti, 2015.

— *Blameless*, London, Yale University Press, 2017.

— *L'infinito viaggiare*, Milan, Mondadori, 2005.

— “Identità ovvero incertezza”, *Lettere italiane*, Florence, Casa Editrice Leo Olschki, 2003, n. 4, vol. 55, 2003, pp. 519-27.

Michaels, A., *Fugitive Pieces*. London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997.

Milano Appel, A., “Writing as Witness: A Conversation with Claudio Magris”, April 13, 2017, <http://blog.yalebooks.com/2017/04/13/writing-as-witness-a-conversation-with-claudio-magris/>