

THE PRESENCE OF MYTH IN CLAUDIO MAGRIS'S POSTMILLENNIAL NARRATIVE

SANDRA PARMEGIANI

Summary: This article addresses Magris's appropriation of classical myth in his postmillennial narrative. Since his early works of literary criticism Magris explored the world of myth and the mythopoeic power of literature, but only in his postmillennial texts has he undertaken the writing of what John J. White defines as "mythological" narratives, in which he engages with the reuse and not the creation of myths. This article focuses on three works: *La mostra* (2001), *Alla cieca* (2005), and *Lei dunque capirà* (2006). It evaluates them as a cycle of closely connected mythological texts, built upon the intertextualization of: the myth of Alcestis, the myth of Jason and the Argonauts, and the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Magris's postmodern investigation of individual and collective histories unveils their traumatic relationship to memory and the impossibility of their unequivocal and coherent representation. The monologue *Lei dunque capirà* is Magris's most focused and comprehensive reworking of a classical myth in which a modern Eurydice retells from her standpoint the story of Orpheus' descent to the underworld. The text is an investigation of myth from a feminist perspective and at the same time an exploration of the theme of love voiced with the mixture of judgment and understanding that only conjugal love allows.

Claudio Magris's connection to myth and to the mythopoeic power of literature dates back to the days of his work on his undergraduate dissertation at the University of Turin. *Il mito asburgico nella letteratura austriaca moderna*, the book that stemmed from that research (published in 1963), soon became a defining work that brought to the attention of a wide European readership a new critical voice and a new subject of literary enquiry: modern Austrian literature's relation with the Habsburg world, which was, at the time, for the most part ignored and forgotten. As Magris points out in the preface to the third edition of the book (published over thirty years after its first edition),

Mi proponevo soprattutto di descrivere la morfologia ma anche di seguire la storia di questo mito, la sua genesi, il suo sviluppo, le sue motivazioni e funzioni politiche, il rapporto che, di volta in volta, la sua formulazione poetica e la sua sovrastruttura ideologica intrattengono con la realtà sociale. [...]

La storia del mito asburgico è la storia di una cultura che vive con particolare intensità, nelle sue forme peculiari, la crisi e la trasformazione epocale di tutta una civiltà, non certo soltanto austriaca; è la storia di una civiltà che, in nome del suo amore per l'ordine, scopre il disordine del mondo ("Trent'anni dopo," 4).

[I wanted to describe the morphology of this myth and to follow its history, its origin and development, its political motivations and functions, the relationship that its poetic formulation and its ideological superstructure establish with social reality [...] The history of the Habsburg myth is the history of a culture that experiences with particular intensity, in its peculiar forms, the crisis and the transformation of an age and of its civilization, not only Austrian. It is the history of a civilization that in the name of order unveils the chaos of the world.]¹

Austrian literature becomes—says Magris—"un'odissea tra i frantumi della totalità" [an odyssey among the fragments of totality], an attempt to see if it is still possible for the individual to maintain a sense of unity of the self, "o se invece questo viaggio sia una progressiva disgregazione e una continua perdita" [or if this voyage is instead a process of progressive disintegration and loss] ("Trent'anni dopo," 8). Other works of literary criticism followed *Il mito asburgico* and in most of them (*Itaca e oltre* and, especially, *L'anello di Clarisse*) the writer continued his investigation of European literature and *fin de siècle* nihilism. *Danube*, published in 1986, is Magris's best-seller travelogue through that very middle Europe that he had explored in his works of literary criticism and represents the narrative counterpart to his previous investigation of the Hapsburg myth. It is a post-68 and a pre-89 book in which the Danubian region, a geographical entity that was—and still is—the testing ground of old and new European allegiances and identities, emerges as a totality tenuously held together by the power of persuasion of that very myth that Magris had described over twenty years earlier. Magris's first novel, *Illazioni su una sciabola* (1984), looks again at the impossible myth of national identity, a subject he addressed in several editorials in the Italian daily *Il Corriere della Sera* and a narrative theme to which he returned in his most recent novel *Alla cieca* (*Blindly*, Penguin 2011).

Northrop Frye maintains that "every poet has his private mythology, his own spectroscopic band or peculiar formation of symbols of much of

¹ All translation from "Trent'anni dopo," Magris's introduction to the 1996 Italian edition of *Il mito asburgico nella letteratura austriaca moderna*, are my own.

which he is quite unconscious" (Frye, "The Archetypes of Literature," 106). The statement applies to Magris the essayist, novelist and playwright, who has used mythopoeic images and metaphors at large in his works of literary criticism and in his early narrative texts. The presence of myth has however emerged with new intelligibility and a strong sense of urgency in his post-millennial² narrative, in which he has resorted to a handful of classical myths, reworking them along the lines of Lyotard's concept of 'anamnesis' (un-forgetting), analyzing and reflecting in a non-systematic yet productive way on the post-modern condition of the individual and of society. This article looks at Magris's postmillennial texts and to their substantial intertextualization of classical mythology; it deliberately does not take into account his premillennial works, in which Magris mainly identifies and investigates the modern making of powerful political and social myths. It examines—to borrow John J. White's definition—Magris's "mythological" narratives, characterized by a well-defined presence of "mythological motifs," where mythological is clearly distinct from mythical and indicates the use and not the creation of myths (White, 7). In order to be designated as mythological, a novel has to possess—according to White—three specific characteristics: a) "the mythological parallel is suggested as an analogy or contrast to the contemporary world in which the main events of the novel occur"; b) "the analogy has to be well defined, clearly indicated to the reader and presented at significant points in the development of the narrative"; and c) "the parallel is an extended one and could be described as a motif" (White, 7, 11).

Magris's latest works—*Alla cieca* (2005) and *Lei dunque capirà* (2006)—fully encompass this treatment of a mythological parallel. Their main mythological motifs are, respectively, the myth of Jason and the Argonauts, with at its centre the tragedy of Medea and Jason, and the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice; while a connecting role is played by the myth of Alcestis. Before taking a closer look at these two works, it is important to examine the way in which in the last decade myth has progressively come to play a dominant role in Magris's narrative. The immediate precursors of his major mythological motifs can be traced in two texts: *Microcosmi* (1997) and *La mostra* (2001). A chapter of *Microcosmi*, Magris's greatly acclaimed novel that won the Strega prize in 1997, is entitled "Assirtidi:" it focuses on the islands of Cherso and Lussino, in the northern Adriatic, and their archipelago, in a mix of personal memories, anthropological and naturalistic descriptions, and historical reflections. The elusive narrative

² The term is here used in its purely chronological, not eschatological, meaning.

voice provides the reader with the etymology of the islands and we come to know that

Cherso e Lussino, con il loro arcipelago, si chiamavano anche Absirtides o Apsirtides, dal nome del fratello di Medea che la maga, per amore di Giasone, aveva attirato in un tranello mortale su queste acque; dal suo corpo gettato a pezzi in mare nacquero le isole. Gli argonauti, in fuga dalla Colchide col Vello d'oro rubato, avevano risalito il Danubio, la Sava e altri fiumi, caricandosi la nave sulle spalle nei tragitti da uno all'altro, sino a raggiungere l'Adriatico nel golfo del Quarnero, dove li attendeva la flotta dei colchi mandata a inseguirli e guidata da Absirto, ucciso poi a tradimento a Ossero, Apsirtos, Apsaros. (*Microcosmi*, 166)

[Cherso and Lussino, with their archipelago, were also called Absyrtides or Apsyrtides, from the name of Medea's brother whom the sorceress, out of love for Jason, had lured into a fatal trap in these waters; the islands were born of the pieces of his body that were thrown into the sea. The Argonauts, fleeing from Colchis with the purloined Golden Fleece, had made their way up the Danube, the Sava and other rivers, carrying the vessel on their shoulders until they reached the Adriatic in the Gulf of Quarnaro, where the fleet sent by Colchis to chase them was waiting. It was led by Apsyrtus, subsequently killed in treachery at Ossero ... Apsirtos ... Apsaros. (*Microcosms*, 168)]

Jason is portrayed as the “great seducer,” the man who knows how to stage the heroic feat of the myth that is at the same time a cheap “self-advertisement” (*Microcosms*, 168), and who, in order to shine, needs his female victims, first and foremost Medea. The present and the past mingle, inextricably entwined, in the narrative, and a present-day old lady from Lubenizze, a minuscule settlement, almost deserted, perched on a cliff above the sea—who “sparisce sotto un portico sgretolato” [disappears under a tumbledown portico] is then also a “Medea solitaria e antica, irraggiungibile nel muto dolore e nell'estraneità cui da secoli la condanna la protervia maschile di Giasone” (*Microcosmi*, 184) [solitary, ancient Medea, unreachable in the mute pain and alienation to which she has been condemned for centuries by Jason's masculine arrogance” (*Microcosms*, 186)].

The surfacing of myth in *Microcosmi* is, on the whole, occasional and the book can not be considered a mythological novel. The ‘Assirtidi’ passage could therefore be archived as an erudite and poetic page—one of the many which abound in Magris's narrative—except that the myth of the Argonauts in search of the Golden Fleece and the story of Medea and Jason constitute, ten years later, the main mythical motif of Magris's *Alla cieca*, his most daring novel to date, which blends myth, history, individual and

collective memories, in a whirlwind narrative of epic proportions. After *Microcosmi* and before *Alla cieca*, however, Magris wrote *La mostra*, an opera libretto/play and a seminal text, in which he inaugurates his use of myth as “literary anamnesis” that “with the source, announces genealogies, traditions” and “is at the same time a device that serves to encode and to decode [...] in a manner ambiguously circular” (Loriggio, 242, 233). *La Mostra* portrays the descent into madness of the Triestine painter Vito Timmel. From the asylum in which he is interned at the end of his life, Timmel engages in a posthumous dialogue with real and imaginary characters through broken recollections, hallucinatory associations and a tragicomic, self-denigrating analysis of his doomed life. The play belongs to that category of texts that Magris defines as ‘nocturnal’:

In the night-time writing the author has to reckon with something that suddenly emerges from within himself and which perhaps he did not know he possessed: feelings, disquieting drives (even horrible truths, so says Sábato) that astound us, appal [sic] us, confront us with a face we did not know we had. It is writing that tells us what we could be, what we fear and hope to be, what by sheer chance we have not been. (“The Self that Writes,” 26)

In Timmel’s disjointed and episodic memories, his first wife, Maria, represents the true object of his love and his only hope of emotional and artistic salvation. Her disease and death are the final blow to his shattered self and in his recollections she becomes Alcestis, the heroin of Euripides’ eponymous tragedy, who chooses to die in place of her husband Admetus:

Lei si ammalò e io ne ebbi sollievo, perché quel dolore nobile e grande, per la sua morte che si avvicinava, spiegava, nobilitava, riscattava tutto ... non ero più un niente, una merda su cui calar l’acqua, ma un uomo che soffriva, compianto e aiutato da tutti, un artista nobile come quel dolore che assolveva tutto, autorizzava ogni impotenza, fallimento, aridità, nobile cuore di marito e padre straziato ... abietto fango del rispetto e della misericordia estorte con posa blasfema — sì, ero anche sincero, soffrivo succhiando la vita da quel seno che si spolpava e sfasciava, ma felice, ignobilmente felice di aggrapparmi ad esso come a un legno in mare per tenermi a galla, incurante se afferrandolo lo straziavo ancora di più — unghie nere, sporche ... [...] E la invocavo, la mia Alceste, declamavo supplicando che mi prendesse con lei, come se ... (*La mostra*, 52)

[She was taken ill and I was relieved, because that noble and deep sorrow for her approaching death was going to explain, to ennoble, and to redeem everything ... I could finally cease to be a nonentity, an excrement to be flushed away, I was instead a suffering man, pitied and aided by everyone, an artist as noble as that sorrow that redeemed it all, that

justified all impotence, all failure, all lack of feeling, noble heart of a torn husband and father ... abject mud of respect and mercy extorted with a blasphemous pose—yes, I was sincere, I suffered while I was sucking life from that breast that was growing thin and collapsing, but I was happy, obscenely happy to cling onto it as onto a piece of wood that could support me adrift in the ocean, indifferent to the fact that by clinging on to it I was tearing it apart—black dirty nails ... [...] I used to cry for her, my Alcestis, and to beg her to take me with her, as if]³

The analogy between Timmel and Admetus is in this case clearly identifiable and fully functional, furthermore illustrated in the clinical assessment of Timmel's psyche by the director of the psychiatric institution (who, at the same time, is also the director of the play on Timmel's life that is being set up for the stage):

È sintomatico che l'artista, contrariamente a tante proiezioni mitopoietiche così frequenti nella cultura di quegli anni, non s'identifichi con Orfeo, che cerca e perde la sua Euridice, ma con Admeto, il sovrano strappato alla morte dal sacrificio della sua sposa Alceste, che muore per lui. (*La mostra*, 51)

[It is symptomatic that the artist, contrary to the many mythopoeic projections that abound in the cultural milieu of those years, does not identify himself with Orpheus, who seeks and loses his Eurydice, but with Admetus, the king who avoids death thanks to the sacrifice of his wife Alcestis, who dies in his place.]

The analogy's "activation" is here built upon preceding latent prefigurations and is made manifest only towards the end of the play; in this way, the prefiguration's potential is maximized.⁴ The term prefiguration, which White borrows from biblical hermeneutics, is used to describe the relationship between myth and modernist novels. Prefiguration suggests "coming before"—says White—and offers "a comparison with a whole configuration of actions or figures" (White, 12). The mythological motif is therefore a *secularized* prefiguration, which "serves [...] to highlight its [the myth's] role as an analogical system of comment" (White, 14). In his post-millennial works Magris increasingly uses myth as a reversed prefiguration.

³ All translation of *La mostra* are my own.

⁴ Francesco Loriggio states that "To be operative, the parallel of the mythological novel must be systematic and visibly anchored to the logic of the text [...] the analogy must be properly activated" (Loriggio, 242). White, on the other hand, observes how "a prefiguration achieves most effect if put in an ambiguous position and then gradually clarified" (White, 120).

The prefigurative motif serves to build not simply a contrastive analogy, but a reversed one, because in establishing the “familiar analogy” (White, 23) of the myth, Magris reverses the set of expectations put in place by it, either in the modern actualization of the myth or in the renewed signification to be found within myth itself, thus dismantling its meaning and revealing the flawed epistemological ground on which it was constructed. This becomes most evident in Magris’s latest novels—*Alla cieca*—and in the novella/play *Lei certo capirà*. *Alla cieca* is a book permeated by the presence of myth through numberless mythological allusions, but the one motif that runs through the entire novel and constitutes a constant commentary upon modern and contemporary life is the myth of Jason and the Argonauts. It is extremely hard to summarize the novel’s plot, which is developed through endless variations on the theme with—at every return—progressive additions layered in a circular manner. The reader is transported from the Napoleonic wars to the post-WWII period, and to an unidentified present. The narrative voice is located, once more, in a liminal space—probably an asylum—and its recollections are broken splinters of a life that has traversed the twentieth century, has experienced the Spanish Civil War, the tragedy of Dachau, the faith in the Communist regeneration of the world, Tito’s Gulag for political dissidents, and finally emigration to Australia. Like most of Magris’s works of fiction *Alla cieca* is inspired by historical events. The book is not what we would define as a historical novel, however, but rather belongs—to use Linda Hutcheon’s definition—to the category of historiographic metafiction. In the process of narrating the past, it questions the very possibility of relating any historical truth and engages in what Hutcheon defines as a “problematized inscribing of subjectivity into history” (Hutcheon, 841).

Salvatore (Tore) Cippico,⁵ the narrative voice and the main character of *Alla cieca*, is not only a figure moving on the margins of history, but a man whom ‘official history’ would gladly discard and forget. He inhabits and narrates a ‘parallel history,’ dystopic in nature, that mirrors in a tragically ironic reflection the ‘progressive’ history of the more authoritative and dependable accounts. Cippico provides the doctor of the asylum in which he is interned with an account of his life; the therapeutic value of his personal story echoes Svevo’s *La coscienza di Zeno*, but the light, all-pervasive irony of that early Freudian critique is here replaced by a more cynical, tragic disenchantment with the very possibility for a meaningful transla-

⁵ This is the name in its Italianized Fascist version, which also appears in the novel in its original Slavic form as Cipiko or Čipiko.

tion of memory as an account of life. The location of the asylum is uncertain: it is either Australia, or Italy (Trieste). This unstable narrative self, who already in his name displays the impossibility of a cohesive, defined identity, cannot provide the reader with a definitive place in which to locate his authorial voice. From the perspective of 'official history,' however, Salvatore Cippico is a character stemming from a tragic page of Europe's geo-political reconfiguration in the aftermath of WWII. Here are, briefly, the facts. In 1947 about 2000 Italian communist workers from a ship-yard in Monfalcone, near Trieste, decided to leave Italy and to move to Tito's Yugoslavia, a country where they thought they could contribute to building a socialist state, fulfilling in this way their dream of an equal, free, and transnational society. Shortly after their arrival in June 1948 Yugoslavia broke its ties with Stalin's Russia and the country was expelled from the Communist Information Bureau, or Cominform.⁶ Because the Italian workers, committed to the orthodoxy of Stalinist Communism, considered Tito a traitor, they became overnight political enemies. Tito interned most of them in his concentration camp for political dissidents on the island of Goli Otok. Those who made it back to Italy were looked upon with suspicion as communist sympathizers in a country that was rebuilding itself by eagerly embracing Catholic and democratic values.

History's relentless deceptions leave Cippico stranded, over and over again, on the 'wrong side.' Life progressively loses its unity and the process of fragmentation (or is it mental degeneration?) cannot be stopped. Time is forever out of joint and it is only through scattered fragments that the reader can paste together the pieces of Salvatore Cippico's internment in the gulag of Goli Otok, his escape plotted and carried out by his beloved Marja, their forced separation on the two sides of the Italian-Yugoslavian border, and their reunion years later as political refugees in Australia. The axe of history turns the narrative voice into a wreckage of visionary fragments, each one illuminating a disconnected section of an 'impossible' life. Why impossible? Because, as the reader soon learns, the subject that allegedly recounts his life is not only an unstable narrative voice, but a voice that merges more than one life in the same autobiographical account. In "The Self That Writes" Magris observes how

The character, who bears the thousand names of illegal immigrants, partisans, revolutionaries, fugitives, identifies himself with many "doubles," but with one in particular, Jorgen Jorgensen, an adventurer of the early

⁶ Magris first recounted these events in *Microcosmi's* chapter "Apsirtidi," which constitutes, in embryonic form, the main thematic source for the novel.

nineteenth century who has crossed all the oceans as far as the antipodes, where he finds a city in which he ends up condemned to hard labour in penitentiaries as terrible as the camps and gulags of the twentieth century. ("The Self That Writes," 27-28)

Like Cippico, Jorgensen is a naïve revolutionary doomed to fail due to a complete lack of political cunning. He is, nonetheless, immensely resourceful and resilient; thanks to these qualities he is able to reinvent himself in an astounding series of political and social transformations and can endure life's most unbearable hardships. The myth of Jason and the Argonauts provides the mythological parallel to this narrative and, to use Pound's definition, a "scaffold" onto which a sustained analogy can be build and carried forward (cited in White, 114): "The protagonist's journey through the oceans and shipwrecks of history resembles that of the Argonauts in search of the—ever bloodstained—Golden Fleece, allegory of the banners that move to great enterprises and woeful crimes, of which love, too, is the victim" ("The Self That Writes," 28).

While the reader is asked to interpret the mythological analogy, s/he is, at the same time, required to untangle the endlessly intersecting narrative levels, voices, and timeframes, which cast light on the intricate web of history and its relatability.

T. S. Eliot, in his 1948 essay on "Ulysses, Order and Myth," argues that the use of myth is "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (cited in White, 114). Having proved the sheer impossibility of ordering the world of contemporary history, Magris attempts to—and succeeds in—giving it a protean shape and significance, while at the same time demystifying myth itself. The red flag of the socialist revolution is indeed the Golden Fleece, but a Fleece reduced to a rag; Jason is the hero of the "quest-myth" (Frye, "The Archetypes of Literature," 116), but he is also the harbinger of death, of a civilization that brings with it the seeds of destruction and the fratricidal shedding of blood.

In *Il mito asburgico* Magris observes how "Mito è un termine ambivalente, che indica qualcosa di più o di meno della realtà; può significare sia un'essenza, un valore superiore alle oscillazioni del tempo, sia una verace e positiva idea-forza, sia una costruzione o una falsificazione ideologica" [Myth is an ambivalent word, that can denote something more or something less with respect to reality; it may signify an essence, a value untouched by the fluctuation of time, a positive and forceful idea, an ideological construct or an ideological falsification] (*Trent'anni dopo*, 4). In

that book Magris tilted the balance in favour of an attempt “di difendere un’ultima volta—contro le propensioni alla disgregazione di ogni sistema e alla frammentarietà del reale, latenti pure nell’autore—il senso della totalità del mondo e della storia” [to defend one last time—against the propensity, latent also in the author, towards the disintegration of all systems and towards the fragmentation of reality—the sense of unity of the world and of history] (*Trent’anni dopo*, 8). The reversed prefiguration of the myth in *Alla cieca* serves as a preferred pathway for the demystification of all ideologies and alleged superior values, in whose name death, blood, and betrayal can be justified. Like history, myth assumes here its ultimate value of ideological construct.

When Cippico, in an intermittent, fragmentary way, tells his ‘other’ story, that of Jorgen Jorgensen, he borrows from Jorgensen’s highly fictionalised account of his own life. Cippico alternatively claims to have written and read that book, which raises the understandable suspicion of the asylum doctor. Salvatore is baffled: “come se non si potesse scrivere e poi leggere lo stesso libro” (*Alla cieca*, 20) [as though you couldn’t write and then read the same book (*Blindly*, 14)]. If history is a matter of truth, then having witnessed an event should bring the narrator and the reader closer to that truth. Magris challenges the very notion of history as the ‘telling of a factual story,’ making the history of one’s life the most precarious and deceiving of all. As soon as the autobiography is written, it dis-appropriates its own author, and it is then possible to write and to read the same book, but as two different *personae*, like—for example—Salvatore Cippico and Jorgen Jorgensen. This post-modern subject establishes a narrative voice and then undermines it, destroying—as Foucault points out—“the unity of man’s being, through which it was thought that he could extend his sovereignty to the events of the past” (Foucault, 153). In *Alla cieca* myth thus becomes for Magris “the only possible language of *concern*” (Frye, “Literature and Myth,” 255). The Marxist mythology, powerfully mirrored in the Argonauts’ quest, operates at the same time as the realm of utopia and that of the infernal. Within this opposition Magris locates the myth of the Argonauts, validating Frye’s claim that “the real meaning of a myth emerges from its historical development and not from any guess about its original form” (Frye, “Literature and Myth,” 255).

European history itself becomes in Magris’s novel a dystopic ‘space’. The ‘utopian spirit,’ endemic—according to Zygmunt Bauman—to European identity and its history, that made Europe “a site of continuous experimentation and adventure” (Bauman, 36) undergoes in Magris a dystopic turn and becomes a spirit of annihilation, betrayal and deceit. It

operates in the name of supposed ‘good causes,’ which lead to the unrecorded suffering of anonymous portions of humanity. The reoccurring image of Admiral Nelson who looks at the white flag hoisted during the battle of Copenhagen in 1801 with his patched eye and continues to bomb the Danish fleet is a wonderful allegory of history, of its instability and discontinuity, of its unavoidable blindness. It is Jorgen Jorgenson who recounts the event:

Un anno prima, la flotta inglese, comandata dall’ammiraglio Parker e, quale vice, da Nelson, ha bombardato Copenaghen, per costringere la Danimarca a ritirarsi dalla lega dei paesi neutrali, manovrata da Napoleone. Milleduecento cannoni inglesi contro seicentoventi danesi. I danesi sfiniti chiedono la resa, ma Nelson accosta il cannocchiale all’occhio bendato, I’m damned if I see it, non vede nessuna bandiera bianca. La strage continua fino alle due e poi si fa solennemente e felicemente la pace. Inghilterra e Danimarca sono sorelle [...] La storia è un cannocchiale accostato all’occhio bendato. (*Alla cieca*, 85-86)

[A year earlier, the British fleet, commanded by Admiral Parker and by Nelson, as vice-admiral, shelled Copenhagen to force Denmark to withdraw from the league of neutral countries, controlled by Napoleon. Twelve hundred British guns against six hundred and twenty Danes. Beaten, the Danes try to surrender, but Nelson brings the spyglass to his blindfolded eye, I’m damned if I see it, he doesn’t see any white flag. The carnage continues until two and then peace is solemnly and cheerfully made. England and Denmark are sisters [...] History is a spyglass held up to a blindfolded eye. (*Blindly*, 87-88)]

The history of Europe is a history of catastrophes that happened and continue to happen because of “un difetto di vista” (*Alla cieca*, 331) [a defect of vision (*Blindly*, 362)]. In this myopic world, every utopia is short-lived, like Cippico’s utopian dream of the creation of a true Communist society in post-WWII Yugoslavia in the name of transnational socio-political solidarity. His revolutionary dream is shattered by one of those deceptions of history that baffle the unaware citizen, who finds himself victimized and persecuted without apparent explanation. Similarly, Jorgen Joegenson’s utopian Icelandic revolution is thwarted after only three weeks. In his essay on “Varieties of Literary Utopias” Northrop Frye observes that “utopia is a *speculative* myth; it is designed to contain or provide a vision for one’s social ideas.”

In Utopian stories a frequent device is for someone, generally a first-person narrator, to enter the Utopia and be shown around it by a sort of Intourist guide. The story is made up largely of a Socratic dialogue

between guide and narrator in which the narrator asks questions or thinks up objections and the guide answers them. ["Varieties of Literary Utopias," 192]

In the dystopic version of the utopian ritual, the guide in *Alla Cieca* is comrade Blasich, a local Communist party officer who sends Cippico to Yugoslavia and provides the rational explanation for his mission:

Tornerai contento dalla tua missione, vedrai, Tore, mi diceva il compagno Blasich, ti mandiamo fra i barbari colchici slavi, ai confini del mondo ma tu ritornerai a missione compiuta, pace fra i popoli e fra i compagni, la bandiera rossa illuminata dal sole che tramonta sul mare splende come un vello d'oro.

In fondo, andavo solo a Fiume, settanta chilometri da Trieste. Perché il viaggio di ritorno è stato così lungo? [...]

Nessun viaggio è troppo lungo e pericoloso, se riporta a casa. Ma esistono ancora case dove tornare, sono mai esistite? (*Alla cieca*, 64-65)

[You'll return from your mission satisfied, you'll see, Tore, Comrade Blasich told me, we're sending you among the barbarian Slavs of Colchis, at the ends of the earth, but you will return upon completion of your mission, peace among peoples and among comrades, the red flag illuminated by the sun setting over the sea resplendent like a golden fleece.

In reality, I was only going to Fiume, seventy kilometres from Trieste. Why was the return journey so long? [...]

No voyage is too long and perilous if it brings you back home. But do houses to return to still exist, did they ever exist? (*Blindly*, 64-65)]

Comrade Blasich, with his degree in Classics, represents a parody of Gramsci's organic intellectual. It is he who brings Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica* into Salvatore's life: at his desk at the Communist headquarters in Trieste he reads and annotates his copy of the book, and with the peculiar sneer that characterizes him, hands over a copy to the modern Jason whom he then sends on a dangerous mission. Comrade Blasich is thus instrumental to the narrative prefiguration of the myth, while Salvatore's monologue progressively unfolds as the actualization of the myth-motif. Salvatore is ultimately Jason,⁷ the traitor of the woman he loved, the hero of a futile quest, who ends up crushed by the figurehead of

⁷ "Dunque mi chiamo Salvatore — come Giasone, diceva beffardo il compagno Blasich, guaritore, colui che salva, medico che conosce i farmaci di vita e di morte" (*Alla cieca*, 26) [So then, my name is Salvatore — like Jason, Comrade Blasich said mockingly, a healer, one who saves, a physician familiar with the drugs of life and death (*Blindly*, 21)].

a ship (perhaps his very Argos), but he is at the same time also Admetus, the man who sacrifices his wife to save his own life, and, in this modern rendition of the myth, is consumed by guilt. Jason/Admetus is one of Salvatore's/Jorgen's doubles, and in this proliferation and conflation of narrative levels resides the ambiguity, the evocative power and the persuasive strength of the text.

Magris's actualization of myth puts into question its natural, a-historical, status. Manfred Pfister reminds us that myths always "portray as natural (beyond history), what are the workings of history and culture," and they operate, in this sense, as a powerful and compelling ideology, thus transforming—as Barthes points out—"history into nature" (Pfister, 23). Magris's demystification of myth reverses this trajectory and re-transforms nature (i.e. myth with its ideological yet naturalized connotations) into history. Thus this historiographic metafiction, which in the process of narrating the past questions the very possibility of relating any historical truth, on the one hand powerfully moulds classical myth as a prefiguration of twentieth-century ideologies; on the other hand, the demystification of modern ideologies and of their "seamless coherence and transparent plausibility" (Pfister, 23) exposes the flaws and inadequacies of their ancient figura: myth itself. In this undermined identity, myth "may provide a form of alternative discourse when other epistemologies have proved insufficient or inadequate, especially at moments of particularly intense crisis" (Littlejohns and Soncini, 18).

The myths of Jason and the Argonauts, Medea and Alcestis are ultimately instrumental to the structural cohesion of Magris's text: "conjured up in fragments but always carrying, synecdochically, the whole with them," (Loriggio, 243) they produce endless reverberations of meaning and dialectic movement within the narrative. It is thus only through the fragments, gaps and misrepresentations of his private and at the same time hypertrophic history that Cippico's existence acquires a meaning. This impossibility of representation could easily epitomize the unavoidable defeat of the modern subject, leading Magris to scepticism and to a form of cultural relativism in assessing the extremely controversial socio-political issues that are at the core of this narrative. Instead, the defeat of the individual occurs in Magris on the historical level, not on the metaphysical level. *Alla cieca* is a dystopic tale of modern history that reassesses the cognitive value of the relative, the discontinuous, the transient, the fragmentary, that which will never be grasped in its unity. The very fact that the account of marginalized lives can and ought to be told (even on the most unstable of grounds) in what Magris defines as "a dogged attempt to

escape from the place of existence to find a direction, or at least a final escape route" ("The Self That Writes," 28), evokes the nostalgia for this lost unity, for this non-existing possibility. It is in this postmodern 'dialectic of desire' that one can locate and evaluate Magris's narrative.

One year after the publication of *Alla cieca*, Magris—who throughout his literary career has consistently alternated among the writing of novels, short stories and plays—published the monologue *Lei dunque capirà* (*You will therefore understand*) that was shortly after produced for the theatre and in 2011 has been adapted to the screen under the direction of Giorgio Pressburger. In what is so far his most comprehensive reworking of a classical myth, Magris has a modern Eurydice retelling from her standpoint the story of Orpheus' descent to the underworld. Its connection to Magris's first post-millennial text *La mostra* brings to a close in a circular fashion this phase of the writer's mythological narratives: Timmel, the modern Admetus, had expressed his wish to descend to the underworld like Orpheus and to rescue his wife Alcestis, whom he had sacrificed because of fear, of his need for self-preservation and his ultimate egotism.⁸ Magris's modern Orpheus completes his feat again, and, like his mythical ancestor, is destined to fail. The circularity of these narratives resides not so much in the dynamics of the trip to the underworld (wished upon or successfully enacted) in search of a lost love, but rather in Admetus' and Orpheus' remarkable likeness in Magris's treatment of this mythological theme.⁹

Lei dunque capirà, with its overt engagement with the long tradition and reception of the Orpheus myth, "betrays a self-conscious intertextual-

⁸ In Euripides' text Admetus expresses the very same wish: "Had I the lips of Orpheus and his melody / to charm the maiden daughter of Demeter and / her lord, and by my singing win you back from death, / I would have gone beneath the earth, and not the hound / of Pluto could have stayed me, not the ferrymen / of ghosts, Charon at his oar. I would have brought you back / to life ..." (*Alcestis*, vv. 357-362). The wish sounds hollow and ironic, firstly because Admetus does not possess Orpheus' gift of music and, secondly, because Orpheus failed in his attempt to bring back his wife from the underworld. It is indeed possible that Euripides had in mind a version of the myth in which Orpheus successfully rescued his wife and brought her back to life (*The Reception of Myth and Mythology*, 480), but this possibility does not play a role in Magris's reuse of the myth.

⁹ This likeness can be first located in Plato's *Symposium*, where Orpheus is dismissed as 'only a harp-player' and is not spared a series of sarcastic remarks for his catabasis in a human body, in opposition to the noble act of Alcestis, ready to die for her husband (131).

ity which is characteristic of the post-modern aesthetic” (Zayko and Leonard, 2). Because of Eurydice’s agency in the retelling of the myth, *Lei dunque capirà* can also be considered a text deeply aware of and concerned with the feminist “desire [...] to make visible and fill the ‘lacunae’ of the tradition” (Zayko and Leonard, 2). In *Alla cieca* as well as in *La mostra* the female protagonists in their endless protean reincarnations—Maria, Mariza, Norah, Medea, Alecstis—although subject to the deceptions of history and of the men they love, emerge somehow intact from the wreckage of that world, yet they do not have a voice through which to express their agency. Magris’s female characters are always first and foremost victims, even when—like Medea—they perpetrate an atrocious crime. They are the target of man’s blind and egotistical self and always end up towering above their male counterparts. Magris’s Eurydice is the latest of this progeny of female characters, but—unlike her predecessors—she does have a voice. As such, Magris’s Eurydice is a companion to other contemporary rewritings of the Orpheus myth, such as Mary Zimmerman’s *Metamorphoses*, Sara Ruhl’s *Eurydice*, and Rinde Eckert’s *Orpheus X*.¹⁰ Sara Ruhl’s play, in particular, bears significant parallels with *Lei dunque capirà*: the ambiance of the afterlife, Eurydice’s newly found fulfillment in death, and the strikingly similar resolution of the play.

The afterlife into which Magris’s Eurydice has descended and from which she narrates her story bears all the characteristics of a rest home, in which shadows move slowly and people whisper often incomprehensible words. Torn between the desire to follow her poet husband who broke the unwritten laws of Hell and descended to her rescue (not thanks to the power of his poetry, but by complying to what appears as a sphinx-inspired riddle of bureaucratic procedures) and her reluctance to do so, in her monologue Eurydice addresses an invisible ‘President,’ a God-like figure, who

¹⁰ Zimmerman’s *Metamorphoses* was first produced in 1998 by Lookingglass Theatre Company in Chicago, and Sarah Ruhl’s *Eurydice* was produced in 2003 in Madison, Wisconsin, by Madison Repertory Theatre. In her dramatization of the character of Eurydice Zimmerman reworks Ovid’s “Farewell” line (the sole word she utters in Ovid’s account), and portions of Rilke’s poem “Orpheus, Hermes, Eurydice.” Both plays are available in print: Zimmerman, Mary. *Metamorphoses*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2002; Ruhl, Sarah. *Eurydice*. New York, Hollywood, London, Toronto: Samuel French, 2008. In 2006, Rinde Eckert wrote the music and text for *Orpheus X*, an Opera / New Music Theater, commissioned and produced by American Repertory Theatre, in which once again Eurydice boldly takes the stage. Both Ruhl’s and Eckert’s plays were respectively 2005 and 2007 Pulitzer Prize finalists in Drama.

silently presides over the nursing home. The ambiguity of the prefiguration is protracted and only after a while does the reader realize the identity of the voice speaking from yet another liminal world (the rest home). This ambiguity is already present at a semantic level in the title *Lei dunque capirà*, where the personal pronoun ‘Lei’ is a formal third person that in Italian can mean “you” or “she.” The title’s meaning is fully revealed only at the end of the monologue, together with the moment of *anagnorisis* that makes this text an unforgettable tale of Eurydice’s agency. The monologue is also quite ironic: it indulges in a continuous interplay with the myth’s reception and with allusions to the writer’s biography and literary endeavours. In his reconstruction of the Orpheus myth Magris primarily follows Ovid’s classic account, with the “rhetorical and legal plea” to Hades and Persephone (*The Reception of Myth*, 479),¹¹ the dark fog that enshrines the underworld, the lack of complaint on the part of Eurydice to her husband for turning and looking at her (unlike Virgil’s account),¹² the mention (which Eurydice lightly dismisses) of Orpheus as the initiator of homosexual love.¹³

Virgil’s and Ovid’s versions of the myth highlight the fear and madness that seized Orpheus the moment before he turned back and looked at his

¹¹ “Great god and goddess, appointed to govern in Hades, / into which every living creature relapses, / if it is rightful for me, if I am permitted / to shun all evasions, speaking the truth to you plainly, / know that I have not come down here to your kingdom / just for the view, or to chain up the three-headed Cerberus, / that monstrous child of Medusa, bristling with serpents; / my wife is the cause of my journey” (*Metamorphoses*, 26-33).

¹² In Virgil’s *Georgics*, Eurydice partakes of the imminent reunion’s demise: “What wild fury ruins us, / My pitiable self, and you, my Orpheus? / See, once again the cruel fates call me back / And once more sleep seals closed my swimming eyes. / Farewell: prodigious darkness bears me off, / Still reaching out to you these helpless hands / That you may never claim.” (*Georgics*, X.493-499) Ovid’s account is almost devoid of emotion: “And she now, who must die a second death, / Did not find fault with him, for what indeed / would he be faulted for, but his constancy? / “Farewell,” she cried out to him one last time, / and he had scarcely heard her cry before / she took her place again among the dead.” (*Metamorphoses*, X.83-88)

¹³ “Three times the Sun had finished out the year / in Pisces of the waters. Orpheus / had fled completely from the love of women, / either because it hadn’t worked for him / or else because the pledge that he had given / to his Eurydice was permanent; / no matter: women burned to have the bard, / and many suffered greatly from rejection. / Among the Thracians, he originated / the practice of transferring the affections / to youthful males, plucking the first flower / in the brief springtime of their early manhood.” (*Metamorphoses*, X.111-

wife, only to lose her a second time. In *Lei dunque capirà* that madness or frenzy that is traditionally equated with the desire to see is turned into a metaphysical form of seeing: the desire of the poet-husband to know the mystery of the afterlife—through Eurydice, back among the living—and to be able to relate it to men in his poetry. It is this madness, which Eurydice detects as one of the motivations (maybe the main one) behind her husband's perilous trip—and which plays with the tradition of Orpheus as the founder of religious mysteries, a seer and sorcerer—that induces Eurydice to call him with a firm voice that she knows will force him to turn:

Lei dunque capirà, signor Presidente, perché, quando eravamo ormai prossimi alle porte, l'ho chiamato con voce forte e sicura, la voce di quando ero giovane, dall'altra parte, e lui — sapevo che non avrebbe resistito — si è voltato, mentre io mi sentivo risucchiare indietro, leggera, sempre più leggera, una figurina di carta nel vento, un'ombra che si allunga si ritira e si confonde con le altre ombre della sera, e lui mi guardava impietrito ma saldo e sicuro e io svanivo felice al suo sguardo, perché già lo vedevo ritornare straziato ma forte alla vita, ignaro del nulla, ancora capace di serenità, forse anche di felicità. (*Lei dunque capirà*, 54-55)

[You will therefore understand, Director, why, when by then we were almost at the doors, I called to him in a strong, firm voice, the voice from when I was young, on the other side, and he—I knew he would not be able to resist—he turned around, as I felt myself being sucked back, lighter and lighter, a paper doll in the wind, a shadow that lengthens retreats and merges with the other shadows of the evening, and he

-122) In Ovid, homosexual love occurs after the second loss of Eurydice, in Magris's text Eurydice claims that rumours of homosexuality spread after her earthly death, but were unfounded, ironically reducing a whole mythical tradition to mere gossip: "È una calunnia di colleghi invidiosi che vogliono fargli perdere il favore del pubblico, magari gli stessi che hanno diffuso pure quelle voci sui bei ragazzi con i quali si sarebbe consolato della mia lontananza, mandando su tutte le furie quelle sue adoranti ammiratrici, capaci per gelosia di cavargli gli occhi" (*Lei dunque capirà*, 53) [That's a false accusation spread by envious colleagues who want to depict him as a narcissistic egotist to make him lose favour with the public, maybe the same ones who spread those rumours about the pretty boys whom he supposedly consoled himself with in my absence, infuriating all those adoring female admirers of his, jealous enough to scratch his eyes out.]

All translations from *Lei dunque capirà* are by Anne Milano Appel from the version in this volume.

watched me, petrified, but safe and sound, and I vanished joyfully from his view, because I could already see him returning to life tormented but strong, unaware of the void, still capable of serenity, perhaps even of happiness.])

In a postmodern perspective this desire to know is equally deserving of punishment, not from the gods, but from a world that declares it as an improper and absurd claim. Modernity is destined not to know and, like the Argonauts and Jason, cannot look back, but only ahead, like the figureheads that stare into the void, open to the possibilities (or the doom) of an enigmatic and nihilistic future.¹⁴

Steered by a different motive (she decides to remain with her dead father in the underworld), but prompted by a similar sudden impulse, Ruhl's Eurydice also calls out to Orpheus and forces him to turn.¹⁵ While in Ruhl's *Eurydice* Orpheus is still the musician of classical tradition egotistically in love with his music but also unconditionally devoted to his wife, in *Lei dunque capirà* the hint—in truth more than a hint—that Orpheus' descent into Hell might not, after all, be completely selfless, speaks again of a tragic deception perpetrated in the name of love. In the end Magris brings his at times petulant Eurydice to a moral ground unmatched by her male counterpart. Her decision to spare him the unbearable truth that the afterlife is very much like life on earth, only duller and more hushed, and that there is no ultimate truth to be disclosed or attained, epistemologically indicates that the whirlwind void that swallows Eurydice is an ironic realm of absence, but her love is an ethical reality. Yet, like all of Magris's characters who gain strength by the knowledge of their limits and flaws, Eurydice is too human to be cast in the role of a mythical heroine: her noble act is also an act of self-preservation, love is mixed with a disenchanted view of the other.

Già me lo vedevo, straziato smarrito atterrito inviperito impermalito sec-catissimo con me che gli avevo guastato tutto — e poi i giorni e le notti

¹⁴ The role of Eurydice as the repository of metaphysical knowledge, to which Orpheus gives expression, is an integral part of the myth's tradition: "The allegorical distinction between Orpheus as 'voice' and 'eloquence' (*eloquentia*) and Eurydice as 'knowledge' and 'wisdom' (*sapientia*) [...] was pursued through the High Middle Ages and beyond in numerous variations" (*The Reception of Myth*, 482).

¹⁵ James Al-Shamma notes that in Eckert's work, too, "Eurydice acts as the agent that foils Orpheus' plan [...] by ripping off his blindfold at the critical moment" (*Sarah Ruhl*, 16).

insieme, io al suo fianco e lui che mi guarda di traverso, la scassamarroni che gli ha fatto cascare il palco, spaventato che lo spifferassi agli altri, imbarazzato a farsi vedere in giro con me, lui partito come un eroe verso il mondo sconosciuto e tornato con le pive nel sacco. (*Lei dunque capirà*, 51-52)

[I could just see him, harrowed dismayed panicky livid in a huff furious with me for having spoiled it all for him—and then the days and nights together, me at his side and him looking at me crooked, the pain in the ass who brought the curtain down on his stage, scared that I would blab it around to others, embarrassed to be seen with me, he who had departed for the unknown world like a hero and returned empty-handed.]

Like the protagonist of the classical tale, Magris's Eurydice appears tired, but her weakness is not the result, as Ovid reports, of the recent wound that has exhausted her. Her prostration is psychological and is caused by the awareness of the role that she was and would be required to perform in life next to her poet-husband, a role too demanding to be resumed:

Di colpo mi sono sentita stanca, sfinita; ricominciare, cucinare, lavare, fare all'amore, andare a teatro, invitare qualcuno a cena, ringraziare per i fiori, parlare, equivocare e fraintendersi, come sempre, dormire alzarsi rivestirsi ...

No, impossibile, non ce l'avrei fatta, non ce la facevo. Mi sentivo di colpo così stanca. Ma forse avrei stretto i denti e inghiottito la mia stanchezza e avrei tirato avanti. Le donne sanno farlo, lo fanno quasi sempre, anche quando non sanno più perché o per chi. Anche l'idea di averlo di nuovo sempre fra i piedi non è che mi ... ma soprattutto l'idea di dover tacere, cambiar discorso quando lui avrebbe chiesto, avrebbe voluto sapere, lui così sensibile, così fragile ... (*Lei dunque capirà*, 52)

[All of a sudden I felt exhausted, spent; the thought of starting all over again, cooking, washing, making love, going to the theatre, inviting people to dinner, thanking them for the flowers, talking, misunderstanding and misinterpreting one another, as always, sleeping getting up getting dressed ...

No, impossible, I couldn't have done it, I couldn't do it. I felt so tired all of a sudden. Still, perhaps I would have gritted my teeth and swallowed my fatigue and I would have carried on. Women can do that, they do it almost all the time, even when they no longer know why or for whom. Even the idea of having him always underfoot again didn't exactly ... but most of all the idea of having to keep quiet about it, changing the subject whenever he asked, whenever he wanted to know, given how sensitive, how fragile he is ...]

Her authenticity seems then to reside in death, not in life. This is the message that cannot be conveyed to an all-too-unaware Orpheus, whose life will be marked by this second loss of his wife but will still hold the promise of earthly happiness. The shattered happy ending of the myth is turned into a pacified existence of both lovers each on her/his own side of the ultimate threshold. The physical gates of the rest home remain closed to Eurydice, who, in her newly-found, reconciled and gratifying perception of life and death, asserts her own independence. Magris's Eurydice—like Zimmerman's and Ruhl's—is indebted to Rilke's character in "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes;" an image of remote beauty whom death has altered and fulfilled:

She was deep within herself, like a woman heavy
with child, and did not see the man in front
or the path ascending steeply into life.
Deep within herself. Being dead
filled her beyond fulfillment. Like a fruit
suffused with its own mystery and sweetness,
she was filled with her vast death, which was so new,
she could not understand that it had happened.
[...]
She was no longer that woman with blue eyes
who once had echoed through the poet's songs,
no longer the wide couch's scent and island,
and that man's property no longer. (51, 53)

While Ruhl acknowledges Rilke's influence on her female character, whose "fullness comes from her association with her father in the underworld" (Al-Shamma, 19),¹⁶ Rilke's poem operates in a more circuitous way in Magris's text. On the one hand his female character is insatiably talkative, she processes her thoughts at great speed, so much so that at times they seem to mimic the leaps with which she follows her hurrying poet-husband, who impatiently ascends towards the gates of the underworld (this, too, a possible reference to Rilke's Orpheus¹⁷). On the other hand, in sharp contrast to this image, she is happy with her choice of halting the

¹⁶ James Al-Shamma notes how Ruhl in an interview "identifies the poem as the single adaptation of the myth in which Eurydice has 'anything' going on inside her head" and deliberately "follows Rilke's lead in that death has altered Eurydice's perception by the time Orpheus arrives" (*Sarah Ruhl*, 17).

¹⁷ "In large, greedy, unchewed bites his walk / devoured the path;" ("Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes," 49).

ascent after calling out imperiously to him; in her immaterial flight back to the kingdom of shadows, clotted by human artefacts but also irremediably remote from the world of the living, this modern Eurydice is returning to a place of election: “questa luce velata, opaca, mi piace; mi sembra di essere sul fondo del mare, dove tutto è fermo, immobile, anche il tempo” (*Lei dunque capirà*, 21) [I like this veiled, opaque light; it makes me feel like I’m at the bottom of the sea, where everything is fixed, motionless, even time]. Magris’s contemporary rendition of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is, ultimately, an exploration of the theme of love, broader in scope than the depiction of conjugal love, but told with the mixture of judgment and understanding that only conjugal love allows.¹⁸ In it, Magris addresses the love of Orpheus for his poetry, that translates into unavoidable narcissistic egotism; Eurydice’s love of nature, in her memories of the sea and the island where she used to vacation with her husband; love of the other as post-Freudian neurosis: “È bello essere amata da un nevrotico, dà sicurezza” (*Lei dunque capirà*, 19) [It’s nice to be loved by a neurotic, it makes you feel secure]; love as sacrifice, as choosing a place in the shadow in order to allow the other to shine; and sexuality as physical and moral education:

Si, gli ho insegnato io tutto. Non solo l’amore. Anche quello, si capisce, ma pure tutto il resto, il coraggio, la fedeltà, guardare il buio e fregarsene della tremarella ... — un uomo, non uno scribacchino che fa il gradasso con la penna e poi se la squaglia. Entrava in me come una spada, docile e possente, signore e schiavo e compagno e tutto — l’ala di falco squarcia il cielo, odore di umida terra, mio, suo, foglie si arrotolano nel vento. Con quella spada non hai più paura di niente e anche lui, fra le mie braccia e le mie gambe, dimenticava le sue paure, e sì che ne aveva, ma se le buttava dietro le spalle, come faceva con i vestiti quando andavamo a letto. (*Lei dunque capirà*, 22-23)

[Yes, it was I who taught him everything. Not only love. That too, of course, but also everything else, courage, faithfulness, facing the dark and ignoring the shivers ...—a man, not a scribbler who swaggers with his pen and then slinks away. He would enter me like a sword, compliant

¹⁸ This critical balance of judgment and understanding is a viewpoint repeatedly adopted by Magris in his works of fiction. Father Guido, the narrative voice of *Illazioni su una sciabola*, represents the prototype of such a perspective on life and on the human soul and psyche. As a priest he holds the unique privilege to judge and not to condemn. The director of the psychiatric institution in *La mostra*, and the doctor to whom Cippico recounts his story in *Alla cieca*, fulfill the same function.

and powerful, master and slave and companion and all the rest—the hawk's wing pierces the sky, smell of damp earth, mine, his, leaves furl up in the wind. With that sword you're no longer afraid of anything and he too, in my arms and between my legs, forgot his fears, which of course he had, but he tossed them behind him, like he did with his clothes when we went to bed.]

There is then love as artistic cooperation: “ah, quanta zavorra finita grazie a me nel cestino, magari fra la carta straccia mi sarà scappato anche qualcosa di bello, chissà, be', pazienza, così impara” (*Lei dunque capirà*, 15) [oh, the amount of rubbish that ended up in the wastebasket because of me, it could be that among the scrap paper something exceptional might even have been lost, who knows, well, never mind, serves him right]; love that entitles one to irony and even sarcasm:

Ero la sua Musa e a una Musa si obbedisce, no? Un poeta ripete fedelmente quello che lei gli detta e così si guadagna il lauro. Poi lo porta a casa e la sua Musa glielo mette nell'arrosto che gli prepara con tanto amore, perché così viene più saporito. Lui, nella confusione fra un alloro in testa e uno nel piatto, ripeteva anche a casa, a tavola, quello che dicevo io. (*Lei dunque capirà*, 15)

[I was his Muse and a Muse must be obeyed, right? A poet faithfully repeats what she dictates and that's how he achieves the laurel. Then he brings it home and his Muse puts it in the roast that she so lovingly prepares for him, because that way it's more savoury. He, confused between the laurel on his head and the one in his plate, would even repeat what I said at home, at the table.]

And there is the final incarnation of love as renunciation, as a second death to preserve the other, but also oneself, from a life that would be unbearable. As such her choice resembles the sacrifice of martyrs (modern and ancient alike), but Eurydice's sacrifice is at the same time the furthest from martyrdom. Her choice rather acknowledges that behind every great love there is also self-preservation, that love is always mixed with blame, impatience and compromise, and that it is only in this dialectic of self-offering and retrenchment that an informed, consistent choice can be made and an authentic love can be experienced. As Magris himself has poignantly expressed:

Lei dunque capirà is the story of a love total and failed, of a union acute and rejected. The woman who speaks out of a mysterious darkness reveals a strength at once tender and merciless in unveiling the greatness

and the meanness of life, death and love. [...] *Lei dunque capirà* is a work which moves between personal experience and myth, between the will to flight and the intensity of the present, between lightness and tragedy, between the desire to know and questions that cannot be answered. It is the woman, both abuser and abused, who speaks in a disenchanted and touching tribute to femininity. ("The self that writes," 28-29)

UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH

CITED WORKS

- Al-Shamma, James. *Sarah Ruhl: A Critical Study of the Plays*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Europe: An Unfinished Adventure*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004.
- Foucault, Michel. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977.
- Frye, Northrop. "The Archetypes of Literature." *Theories of Myth*. Ed. by Robert A. Segal. New York: Garland Publishing, 1996. 100-18.
- . "Varieties of Literary Utopias." *The Critical Path and Other Writings on Critical Theory 1963-1975*. 191-214.
- The Complete Greek Tragedies, Vol. III: Eurypides*. Eds. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959.
- Hutcheon, Linda. "Historiographic Metafiction." *Theory of the Novel*. Ed. Michael McKeon. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000. 830-850.
- Littlejohns, Richard and Sara Soncini. *Myths of Europe*. Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2007.
- Loriggio, Francesco. "Myth, Mythology and the Novel: Towards a Reappraisal." *Theories of Myth*. Ed. Robert A. Segal. New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1996. 233-252.
- Magris, Claudio. *Il mito asburgico nella letteratura austriaca moderna*. Turin: Einaudi, 1996.
- . "Trent'anni dopo." *Il mito asburgico nella letteratura austriaca moderna*. Turin: Einaudi, 1996. 3-10.
- . *Microcosmi*. Milan: Garzanti, 1997.
- . *Microcosms*. Trans. Iain Halliday. London: The Harvill Press, 1999.
- . *La mostra*. Milan: Garzanti, 2001.
- . *Alla cieca*. Milan: Garzanti, 2005.
- . *Lei dunque capirà*. Milan: Garzanti, 2006.
- . "The Self that Writes." Trans. Nick Carter. *Almost Island Dialogues*. New Delhi, March 2008. Web http://almostisland.com/essay/the_self_that_writes.php, accessed 10 May 2009.
- . *Blindly*. Trans. Anne Milano Appel. Toronto: Hamish Hamilton/Penguin Canada, 2010.

- . “You Will Therefore Understand.” Trans. Anne Milano Appel. *Quaderni d’italianistica* 32:1 (2011): 7-25.
- Moog-Grünewald, Maria, and Duncan Smart. *The Reception of Myth and Mythology*. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2010.
- Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Ed. and Trans. Charles Martin. New York: Norton, 2010.
- Pfister, Manfred. “Europa/Europe: Myths and Muddles.” *Myths of Europe*. Eds. Richard Littlejohns and Sara Soncini. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007. 21-33.
- Plato. “Symposium.” *The Portable Plato*. Ed. Scott Buchanan. New York: Penguin, 1977. 119-187.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*. Ed. and Trans. Stephen Mitchell. New York-Toronto: Random House, 1989.
- Ruhl, Sarah. *Eurydice*. New York, Hollywood, London: Samuel French, 2008.
- Virgil. *Georgics*. Trans. Smith Palmer Bovie. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966.
- White, John J. *Mythology in the Modern Novel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971.
- Zajko, Vanda and Miriam Leonard. *Laughing with Medusa*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.