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Claudio Magris' most recent works, *Alla cieca* (Garzanti, 2005) and *Lei dunque capirà* (Garzanti, 2006),(1) could not be more different, formalistically, yet they share a fundamental thematic kinship. A reading of the two works as closely correlated texts reveals a progression from the experiential vortex of *Alla cieca* to a closing of accounts that concludes with *Lei dunque capirà*.

In reading Claudio Magris' *Alla cieca* (Garzanti, 2005), I was reminded of the third canto of the *Inferno*, where Dante and his guide Virgil, having passed through the gates of hell, come upon a wretched group that has been left for all eternity in the vestibule, not even worthy of entering that infernal realm:

Fama di loro il mondo esser non lassa;
misericordia e giustizia li sdegna:
non ragioniam di lor, ma guarda e passa. (Inf. III: 49-51)

To all memory of them, the world is deaf.
Mercy and justice disdain them. Let us not
Speak of them: look and pass on. (Robert Pinsky, tr.)

These abject individuals are the object of particular contempt because they led a "cieca vita", a blind life. They are the "neutrals", you might say, the disinterested who lived without reaping infamy or praise, *coloro / che visser senza 'nfamia e senza lodo*, those who sought their own safety first and chose not to act, not to see. Those who were not willing to take a risk when life requires risks: *la vita, che è tua solo se... sei pronto a giocartela e a perderla*, one of the voices in Magris' book points out. Virgil's succinct dismissal of these souls is indicative of the disdain in which they are held: *non ragioniam di lor, ma guarda e passa*, let us not speak of them, but rather look and move on. It is a fitting response to those who moved through life "alla cieca", blindly.

La nostra è una società in cui vogliamo essere disturbati il meno possibile, ours is a society in which we wish to be disturbed as little as possible, an Italian literature professor of mine used to chide us. We prefer to close our eyes to the disquieting things around us, to look through the spyglass untroubled, blindfold securely in place – as Magris tells us Nelson did so as not to see the white flag of surrender before firing on Copenhagen – to turn a deaf ear and a blind eye to the world's injustices. *Alla cieca* is Claudio Magris' attempt to clear our vision, to rip off the blindfold and expose those injustices.

The injustices that concern Magris and that are exposed in the course of the narrative are multiple and intertwining, spanning geography and history, space and time. The "protagonist" may be two, three or ten persons, but functions as a composite, a single compound "I" bearing different names for different "selves" that live in different countries and in different historical periods. On the face of it, the narrator is a patient in a mental health center (or is it a rest home for the aged? or perhaps even the hereafter?), telling his story at the behest of his psychiatrist. In a sense he is "everyman", every anarchist or rebel, every mutineer, every man who has taken part in all the revolutions of the world and been imprisoned in all the lagers of the world. For this is a charnel house of good and bad intentions, of proper and misguided principles, of true and false starts, of all the wrongs that man has suffered and inflicted. And so the stories – in which political principles and the events of history are played out in men's lives – are many: there are the Comrades sent to Goli Otok, the barren island in the northern Atlantic that housed Tito's gulag: a prison where militant revolutionaries were tortured for being Stalinist supporters (completing an arc that encompasses Fascist prisons and Nazi lagers); the account of Jorgen Jorgensen, the Danish seaman and adventurer (1780-1841) who founded a settlement in Tasmania, was briefly "king" of Iceland, and then ended up as an outcast, labeled a traitor; the extermination of the Tasmanian aborigines following white settlement of the territory then known as Van

Diemen's Land, representative of so many other indigenous eradications; and there is the myth of Jason, who with his men sailed to Colchis in search of the Golden Fleece, paradoxically bringing with them both Greek culture and violence, civilization and barbarism. Ambi-valence. Thesis and antithesis.

As those familiar with Magris' body of works know, the sea is fundamental to his aesthetic imagination. In *Alla cieca* it is all-encompassing, all-embracing: qualcosa di grande in cui tutto si tiene e che sa sempre ciò che bisogna fare.... The all-inclusive sea has the value of a saving grace. When it retreats, however, as though sucked up by a giant sponge, it leaves vessels grounded on the shoals amid mud and slime: porcherie e fanghiglia raggrumata e tutte le barche in secca. When that happens the way home is lost and the void looms large: Come si fa a tornare a casa, se il mare è stato risucchiato dal grande scolatoio che si è aperto sotto di lui e lo scarica chissà dove, nel vuoto? Not surprisingly, given Magris' obsession – love affair? – with the sea, the icon that becomes the central metaphor for the task of exposing injustices that the author sets himself is the polena, the carved full- or half-length figure or bust often found built into the prow of a sailing ship. The carving was placed in the bow so that its eyes could find the way and further the purpose of the journey. The practice dates back to ancient Chinese and Egyptian civilizations whose seafarers painted oculi, eyes, on the bows of their vessels, and the eye motif was also used by the Phoenicians and the Greeks.

A figurehead dominates the book's cover, front and back. The face is wooden, impassive, the eyes unseeing. Is Magris' figurehead a negative or a positive symbol? Does it show the way or is it symbolic of the events of history, of men's actions, that go along "alla cieca", indifferently? Some critics have viewed it as decidedly negative: the *Redazione Virtuale* (Milan, June 10, 2005) suggests that Magris has given us the only possible, terrifying depiction of the contemporary world as an irrational, sanguinary cesspool: Magris ci ha dato l'unica possibile terrificante rappresentazione del mondo contemporaneo: un'ebete e sanguinaria cloaca. At the other end of the spectrum, Corrado Stajano (speaking in Milan, at the Osteria del Treno, on May 19, 2005) sees the positive aspects as a vindication of injustices and a celebration of life: Claudio Magris, con questo libro unico, di dramma e di dolore, ma anche di desiderio di vita, ha pagato tanti debiti del mondo. Ha fatto un po' di giustizia.

But Magris' world – his sea – does not lend itself to binary distinctions: 0/1, on/off, yes/no, black/white, positive/negative. The answer, like the sea, like life itself, is ambiguous, or rather ambivalent, multi-valent. In a context that embraces the coexistence of opposites, of a multiplicity of values and meanings, the figurehead is both positive and negative, and more. In one sense it represents those who turn a blind eye, who look and move on: "guarda e passa". Or it is the image of a humanity that has lost its way, yet plows ahead sightlessly, gropingly through life's seas: an act of faith. Living is believing, one of the book's narrators tells us; it is faith that makes life what it is: Vivere è credere; è la fede che fa la vita. Sometimes a blindfold is necessary, so as not to see one's fear and be able to go forward: Un occhio bendato, anche lui, ma bendato in modo giusto: per non vedere la propria paura e andare avanti. Generally the figurehead's dilated eyes are fixed on the sea and its horizon, from which come catastrophies that men cannot see. Elsewhere, the ship having run aground, the figurehead looks away from the sea toward the shore, her astonished, staring eyes focused on land instead of on the sea, and perhaps this was fitting, since no horrors can compete with those on land: forse non era sbagliato che la figura di prua fosse rivolta... da quella parte... nessuno disastro marino poteva competere con... gli orrori che ci sono solo sulla terra. How do these catastrophes occur? A deficiency of sight, a misunderstanding, a helmsman who fails to see the rocky reef because he is looking elsewhere, a one-eyed pirate who shouts his orders blindly: un difetto di vista, un equivoco, il timoniere che non vede lo scoglio perché guarda da un'altra parte; la morte è un vecchio pirata guercio, non vede davanti a sé e grida I suoi ordini alla cieca.

The figurehead is also a lifesaver, literally and figuratively. A shipwrecked seaman can grab onto her wooden skirts and float to safety: In alto mare, quando s'incontra l'Olandese Volante e arriva l'inevitabile naufragio, la tradizione vuole che il marinaio, per salvarsi, si aggrappi alla polena. In this guise she is Maria, Mariza, Mangawana, Norah, the woman who has the power to save. She is the figurehead at the prow of his ship, la polena in prora alla mia nave, the woman who shields him from life: la donna è il nostro grande

scudo o lo abbiamo frapposto fra noi e la vita. With her, he is safe, sheltered, saved: se c'è Maria non mi può succedere nulla. She is Beatrice, albeit a physical one in whose breasts he finds refuge: fra quei due seni... mi sento al riparo. And she is Gretel who takes Hansel by the hand and helps him slip away from the wicked witch: Maria era... Gretel che mi dava la mano e io tenendo quella mano non avevo più paura di alcuna strega. Similarly, the figurehead of the old Dalmatian seaman takes him by the hand and guides him to an enchanted realm beneath the sea, lei lo ha preso per mano e trascinato in un regno fatato in fondo al mare, just as Maria takes the narrator by the hand and leads him to a happy place: mi ha preso per mano e portato in un paese felice, dove siamo finalmente insieme.

In this multi-valent world there is no question of either/or. It is not a matter of aut aut, but rather vel vel, if you recall your Latin, the narrator says: nessun aut aut, piuttosto vel vel, se ricordi il tuo latino. This is not the perspective of the aborigines, hunted down by the Roving Parties to protect the colonists: those indigenous souls don't know how to lie because for them there is reality and that's that: Sì, questi neri hanno proprio difficoltà a mentire. C'è la realtà e basta. On the contrary, there is room for everything and everyone in this sea, even contradiction: Se mi contraddico? Sul mare c'è posto per tutti e per tutto. Certainly Cicero's pronouncement that every statement is either true or false, omne enuntiatum aut verum aut falsum est (De Fato, 222), has no place here. Everything can be explained, and nothing can be explained: si può sempre spiegare tutto... Niente, invece, si può spiegare. Things can be at once true and false, in contrast or in opposition yet not excluded. Like Hades where the souls concurrently are and are not: tutte le ombre sono insieme e non sono; or like ships moving to and fro in the dark sea, not going backward and not going forward: senza andare né avanti né indietro; or the fleece that has been soiled, yet gleams like gold: il sole... batteva sulla pelle di pecora, facendo brillare d'un bagliore d'oro il suo giallo sporco. Like the revolving glass door at the café Lloyd when Maria (Marie, Mariza, Mangawana) disappeared: were they turning clockwise or counterclockwise? coming or going? volteggiavano in senso orario o antiorario, avanti o indietro? And was Maria ripped from his grasp by savage fangs or did he let her go? Feroci zanne l'hanno strappata dalle mie braccia – no, sono io che l'ho lasciata andare.

Indeed ambi-valence, the paradox of the embracing of opposites, seems to lie at the heart of this work that is characterized by shifting narrative voices, changing viewpoints, and conflicting perspectives. Any rational view of reality is challenged by reality as it exists: the irrational, sanguinary cesspool mentioned earlier. And so we have rationality versus barbarism, reason versus injustice, civilization versus the absurd elements of a society that has gone haywire. The fictional “structure” lends itself to this union of opposites by employing a variety of voices and by spanning time and space. The narrative is a river of words, a flood, a sea – a stream of consciousness and flow of associations that becomes a torrent. At times it seems like a delirious, ranting monologue, shouted from the bottom of a deep pit that may or may not yield up its mysteries: Il pozzo è profondo... cloaca cedevole del mistero. At other times the prose is lyrical, lit with subtle nuances and human tenderness. At all times it is a choral narration, whether group therapy or tavern buddies, terapia di gruppo, combriccola da osteria, whose multiplicity of voices may be multiple personalities, the pseudonyms of those who cannot openly attest to the truth, virtual avatars or even clones (Dolly the sheep is mentioned more than once). As a result, there is an uncertain sense of who is who, of what is real and what isn't, like with computer screen names. Our perceptions flounder and we are diverted, derailed.

Take Salvatore (Tore) Cippico, for example, one of the narrators of the injustices that are the focus of *Alla cieca*. Is this just one of his names, one of his many identities? Is he also Jorgen Jorgensen? Maybe so. Or maybe not. Is he a patient in a mental sanitarium recording his story to comply with the orders of his psychiatrist, a Doctor Ulcigrai? But then who is the “Caro Cogoi” addressed in the opening line of the book? The mystery is revealed, or not, at the end. Naturally the circumstances – the therapeutic writing of an autobiography as prescribed by a shrink – call to mind *La coscienza di Zeno*. Published in 1923 by Italo Svevo – who, like Magris, is from Trieste – the novel chronicles the efforts of the neurotic Zeno to document his various mental disturbances, though he succeeds only in scheming up ways to rationalize them. His therapy fails because he cannot refrain from lying to his doctor. Though the similarity is a superficial one, Tore-Jorgen's doctor also thinks he is lying, prompting his patient to complain that he is

always being called a liar, a deviationist, a traitor: Perché questa congiura di non voler mai credermi, di darmi del bugiardo, del deviazionista, del traditore? Yet he also admits to having lied, well, not really lied, confessing to Doctor Ulcigrai that his autobiographer embellished things a little: Sì, dottore, ho anche mentito. Insomma, mentito – il mio autobiografo ha un po' abbellito le cose...

Toward the end of the book the confusion grows: whose voice is that on the tape? fast forward, rewind... Whose identity lurks behind the messages that pop up on the computer screens? Everyone's and no one's, strike a key and they are erased, or wiped out by an insidious virus: Ci ha pensato un bel virus... a distruggere i dati. Tabula rasa. It may be that Cogoi and Ulcigrai are reverse identities – the man we thought was the doctor is Cogoi while Ulcigrai is the patient – or perhaps they are one and the same and have always been so: interchangeable, everyman. And in the final line, in perfect symmetry with the first, Cogoi, the primario or chief doctor, greets Ulcigrai with a greeting that mirrors the Caro Cogoi of the opening line: Caro Ulcigrai, come andiamo? Is Cogoi an anagram for gioco, game? Could Ulcigrai be a transposition of giucarli, possibly a dialect variation of giocarli, to play? The ancient gods were playful; our gods have forbidden play, the narrator observes: I nostri dèi, dottore, ci hanno proibito di giocare. There is no joking allowed, either in church or in the health center, where the doctors in white coats are both priests and conjurers, sacerdoti e stregoni, who hold the luminous images of the computers in great reverence.

Is Magris playing games with us? If so, it is a game that is sweepingly far-reaching: because in the final analysis this journey through space and time is a story of senseless actions and wrongs endured and inflicted. Of revolutionaries and those who persecute them. Of victims and oppressors, hunter and prey, like the convicts set against the aborigines: forzati contro neri, dannati contro dannati, noi contro di voi. It is the story of those who have been exiled and sentenced to hard labor in penal colonies, or in Dachau, of prisoners and their warders, of inmates and their white-coated keepers, tutte guardie bianche, of traditi, traditori, the betrayed and their betrayers everywhere. And over it all the pall of silence, of shrouding the truth. By those unwilling to attest to it. Another form of the occhio bendato, of not seeing. Not a word about Goli Otok, it's important to re-establish unity and not give the imperialists ammunition to defame and weaken the Party: bisogna ricucire l'unità operaia e dunque acqua in bocca su tutto ciò che poteva servire agli imperialisti per diffamarla e indebolirla. The Comrades fall, but the Party turns a blind eye: i compagni cadono ma il Partito non lo sa. At the same time, this is the story of ambitious dreams and perhaps equally senseless aspirations: a redemptive dream of changing the world, il grande cambiamento redentore del mondo, and transforming man by bearing witness, as Magris has tried to do, and thereby vindicating injustices. In the end, this is perhaps the real revolution, giving up the need to strike and applying the hand of tenderness: Ecco, forse è questa la rivoluzione, liberare le mani dalla necessità di colpire e restituirle alla tenerezza.... Even while waiting for the cease fire order that never comes: Ora si sentirà l'ordine di cessare il fuoco....

Lei dunque capirà (Garzanti, 2006), the streamlined novella that follows the expansive, densely written *Alla cieca*, could not be more different in terms of form. Indeed a comparative metaphor may be taken from one of the narrative voices in *Alla cieca* who composes inscriptions to be carved on headstones. The character explains that the story to be written on the tombstone must be concise yet provide all the essentials: gravestones are concentrated novels. Or better yet, novels are expanded gravestones: Le lapidi sono romanzi concentrati. O meglio, I romanzi sono lapidi dilatate. If *Alla cieca* can be said to be an expanded commemorative stone, a lapide dilatata, the novella *Lei dunque capirà* is indeed lapidary by contrast: a few brief lines carved simply and incisively on the marble.

To be sure, there are similarities between the two works. The female protagonist of *Lei dunque capirà* shares an identity with the donna-polena (figurehead) and the donna-scudo (shield) of the earlier book; the mysterious, closed setting of the convalescence home recalls that of the mental sanitarium; and each book recasts an ancient myth: Jason and the Argonauts in one, Eurydice and Orpheus in the other. Still, at first glance the formal differences are the most strikingly apparent. Unlike the collective "I" that narrates in *Alla cieca*, the novella takes the form of a monologue, the single voice of a self-styled Muse who in life – now

she is in the afterlife – inspired her poet-husband to greatness. Whereas *Alla cieca* is an intense maelstrom, a veritable vortex of voices that is almost impenetrable, *Lei dunque capirà* is spare, essential, minimalist. The simplicity, of course, is deceiving: the work is lean, not barren.

Beyond considerations of form and style, there is a bond between the two works in their elegiac appeal to classical mythology. But Magris is postmodern, and in his hands the stories of Jason and the Argonauts, Eurydice and Orpheus become myths overturned, archetypal narratives turned on their head. In *Alla cieca*, Jason and his crew bring Greek culture but also violence, civilization and barbarism, when they go in search of the Golden Fleece; and though the fleece has been soiled, it paradoxically gleams like gold: *il sole... batteva sulla pelle di pecora, facendo brillare d'un bagliore d'oro il suo giallo sporco*. Similarly the “Eurydice” of *Lei dunque capirà* is an anti-heroine... or rather an ambivalent one. Like the ship’s figurehead of *Alla cieca* with whom she is associated, she encapsulates both noble qualities and less noble ones. She is the woman who saves but also the woman who can lead to ruin. Both the polena and the poet’s wife are figures that resonate in a variety of ways. The anti-hero as a literary trope is, of course, prevalent in modern and postmodern literature, and the female protagonist of *Lei dunque capirà* embodies a number of characteristics that are antithetical to those of the traditional hero: her seemingly selfless devotion to her poet-husband may be deemed “heroic” on the face of it, though her motives are questionable and her intentions may not be heroic; her idealism is spent, darkened by disillusionment; she has a tendency to question authority; and her pride in her own role in her husband’s success reflects a flawed character. On the other hand, she does display a certain courage, is resolute and determined, appears to be guided by her own moral compass, and cannot be termed ineffectual and hapless. Rather than being a “pure” anti-heroine, her contradictory impulses and attitudes suggest thesis and antithesis: a figure layered with various ambiguous possibilities.

The premise of the novella is straightforward: the woman speaking has crossed over to the hereafter, depicted here as a peculiar *Casa di Riposo* (read: eternal resting place), but has obtained a special concession from the Director of the Rest Home to allow her husband to come and take her away from there. At the last moment she decides not to go, and the resulting monologue is her explanation to the Director – the “you”, *Lei*, of the title – of her reasons for not returning with her husband. The narrative takes the form of a monologue because the Director is invisible, possibly because of the dim lighting, and does not respond. The woman complains that she cannot hear or see him well. In the semi-darkness, she gropes along blindly, “*alla cieca*”, not knowing where he is or where to turn to look for him: *Non La vedo, signor Presidente, non so dove Lei sia*. Her tone can be cutting at times: almost mockingly she likens him to the great anonymous poets of ancient times, whose names remain unknown: *Ma lei, Presidente, dev’essere certo un poeta, nascosto e grande, anonimo, come quei grandi poeti antichi, che non si sa chi erano...* She admits to being surprised that she has never seen him. She can understand why he doesn’t allow himself to be seen in the outside world, after all everyone would crowd around him for favors. But why not show himself to those inside, at least to reassure them of his presence: *Ma qui dentro, nella Casa, la Sua faccia potrebbe anche mostrarcela – così, giusto per rassicurarci, ecco, sono qui, tranquilli*. Yet he remains unreachable, no one there has ever seen him: *qui dentro, chi L’ha mai vista*. The darkness inside the *Casa* is in contrast to the light of the living outside and makes the woman yearn for sunlight: though she has renounced the chance to return to the outside world, she says she would have loved to go out into the light, in *quella luce d’estate*, at least for one summer. Even without her husband.

Though most of the time the woman’s words are addressed to the unseen Director, using the formal *Lei*, occasionally, when her memories carry her back to the time she and her husband were together, to the happiness they shared, she addresses her man directly, though he is not present, using the informal *tu*. As a result of these shifts, the register alternates between lightness and gravity, and the tone is constantly changing: for the most part polite and reverential to the Director – though sometimes familiar and impudent toward him as well – colloquial and chatty with a healthy dose of self-irony at other times. The woman’s voice is remarkably direct, leaving no doubt about her high regard for herself and her ambivalent feelings toward her spouse. She is at once tender and merciless, loving yet ruthlessly honest in her dispassionate

analysis of her poet-husband and their life together. A happy life, to be sure, yet not without its share of the piques and irritations of day to day living. The man's greatness as well as his shortcomings are revealed in equal measure, his deficiencies and weaknesses unhesitatingly paraded in an account that is at once pitiless and poignant. It is a kind of love song, but one that has no illusions. On the contrary, it is almost cynical at times. Despite her spirited style, we sense the woman's dismay and consternation when faced with the appalling mysteries of life and death.

The poet's wife is an extraordinary figure, and like her penetrating words, can be read with a certain ambivalence. Is she victim or abuser? Sufferer or savior? Did her husband take advantage of her, or was she selfless in her giving? Has her life been one of sacrifice and renunciation, or was she the one pulling the strings? She portrays herself as the force behind the poet, and a strong force at that. Moreover, she is a woman of considerable pride. To hear her tell it, she taught her husband everything he knows: Sì, gli ho insegnato io tutto. That is why she is not bothered by his dalliances with other women, no other woman could match up to her. She proudly tells the story of their love, so intense as to spill into every aspect of their life together, including the creative process. She is the great man's shield against the world, his donna-scudo – an identity she shares with the donna-polena (ship's figurehead) of *Alla cieca*.

Further linking the two works are the numerous references to Eurydice in *Alla cieca*, always in connection with the ship's figurehead and always in connection with abandonment and loss, deliverance and salvation: Quante Euridici, fra le polene. There are the Eurydices who return to the shadows when the ship goes under, quelle Euridici che rientrano nelle tenebre, sinking into the depths with their enigmatic smile: the Eurydice who vanishes, non c'era, Euridice sparisce. There is the beautiful Eurydice wiping her tears with the edge of the mantle that envelops her: guardi che bella, questa Euridice che si asciuga le lacrime con un lembo del mantello che l'avvolge, the mantle that is the dark water, the night, the bottom of the sea, the mantle he will pull over his head, the Eurydice-life buoy he will cling to. There is the figurehead with its eyes wide open, staring at the impending catastrophe that cannot be avoided, like Eurydice who sees Orpheus abandoning her forever: gli occhi spalancati, polena che scorge l'inderogabile catastrofe, Euridice che vede Orfeo voltarsi e abbandonarla per sempre al nulla... Flight and abandonment, a Eurydice in whose eyes the looming shipwreck can be read: Eurydice con quegli occhi alzati in cui si legge il naufragio... It is unclear who is fleeing and who is being abandoned. At sea, after a ship has sunk, a sailor can grab onto the figurehead's wooden skirts and be carried to safety, but Eurydice does not turn to look at him, she floats along, astonished and indifferent, staring at the emptiness of sky and sea, not at the Orpheus clinging to her skirts: Euridice non si volta, galleggia nelle acque in tempesta fissando attonita e beffarda il vuoto del cielo, del mare, non l'Orfeo afferrato alle sue sottane.

Like the donna-polena and the Eurydices who both save and abandon, the donna-scudo has a tradition of ambivalence that recalls Dante's "screen lady" in the *Vita Nuova*. The woman who sat between the young poet and Beatrice in the church thought his attentions were directed toward her. Dante seemingly used her to conceal his love for Beatrice, writing poems to the lady to divert attention from the real object of his affection. But was the donna-schermo merely a device to hide his true intentions? When she later moved away from the city, Dante was left without his "screen" but also with feelings of loss and sadness. If the lady had never been the serious object of his devotion, why was he sad? He eventually left Florence and traveled toward the city where the screen lady now lived. He was sad and pensive, so he says, because his journey took him ever farther from Beatrice. Yet in his imagination he was joined by Amor, who informed him that the screen lady would not return, and brought him that part of his heart that he had given her, so that he might more appropriately give it to another Florentine lady who might then serve as a replacement for the screen lady. At best his sentiments appear undecided, ambivalent.

If in *Alla cieca* the figurehead-Eurydice can sometimes be a lifesaver, literally and figuratively, the poet's wife in *Lei dunque capirà* is the figurehead at the prow of her husband's ship, the woman who has the power to save. With her, he is safe, sheltered from life's slings and arrows. Indeed she sees clearly that he came to that place not to rescue her but to be saved by her; she was the sap that enabled him to bloom, his lifeblood:

No, non era venuto per salvarmi, ma per essere salvato... Ero io...la linfa della sua fioritura, della sua vita. He came to be protected from the savage blows of life that she had always parried, the poisonous arrows meant for him that her breast – tender to his touch, yet strong as a shield – had deflected: E anche per essere di nuovo protetto da quei colpi feroci che arrivano da ogni parte e che io avevo sempre parato per lui, le frecce velenose destinate a lui che incontravano invece il mio seno, tenero nella sua mano ma forte come uno scudo rotondo a ricevere e a fermare quelle frecce....

So why does this latter-day Eurydice decide not to follow the man she has always loved? The motivation for her renunciation becomes clear only at the end, and represents yet another act of selflessness, though – in keeping with the ambivalence – with a measure of self-defense. Recalling her husband's obsession about knowing the Truth, his constant questions concerning "final things" – who are we, where did we come from, where are we going? – his wanting to penetrate the mysteries and not being able to, she decides to spare herself from his neverending questions while at the same time saving him from knowledge of the horrendous void. His song had to tell the Truth at all costs, he used to tell her: Il mio canto deve dire le cose, la verità, ciò che tiene unito o disgrega il mondo, costi quello che costi... Cantare il segreto della vita e della morte, diceva, chi siamo donde veniamo dove andiamo.... How could she tell him that even now that she had crossed over into the hereafter, she knew no more than he did? That the afterlife was no different than before? It would destroy him. And so the shield that once protected him from life now defends against his unavoidable questions and consequent disillusionment, against the certified impossibility of seeing beyond the void, of penetrating the unknowable, the immense labyrinth of before and after: quest'immenso labirinto del prima e del dopo. The metaphor of the tender breast, il mio seno, tenero, suggests a protective maternalism, while at the same time alluding to the woman's sensuality that elsewhere is expressed more explicitly.

In confiding her reasons to the Director, the woman plainly refutes the rumors that envious gossips have circulated as to why her husband turned around to look at her – something he had been forbidden, like Orpheus, to do – just when they were almost through the doors. What the wagging tongues are saying isn't true, the reason he turned around wasn't out of love, out of his eagerness to be with her: No, non è come hanno detto, che si è girato per troppo amore, incapace di pazienza e di attesa... Nor was it because he would not have been able to sing of the pain of lost love had she returned to life with him: a more cynical interpretation to be sure. No, the reason he turned around was because she called out to him, to save him from impending disillusionment – and to spare herself from his incessant questioning – tempting him with her voice and knowing he would be unable to resist. You will therefore understand, she concludes her explanation to the Director: 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... Her note of self-satisfied pride in what she has done is unmistakable. It was she who determined his action. She called out to him and as he turned to her she felt herself being sucked back, lighter and lighter, a paper doll in the wind, a shadow lengthening and merging with the other shadows of the evening: 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....

As anticipated Magris' novella ends up turning the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice on its end. The Orpheus of the Greek myth was passionately devoted to Eurydice – our Eurydice suggests differently, insinuating that her man is more in love with himself and with the sorrow that feeds and nourishes his verse. Orpheus' voice had the power to move stones and enchant the underworld; it was the power of his music that induced Hades and Persephone to allow him to lead Eurydice back to the world of the living – our Orpheus is a narcissistic hack whose music has no power: the power resides in his wife. As he led Eurydice from the underworld, Orpheus, lovingly impatient, turned to assure himself that she was following him and so lost her forever – our Orpheus looks back because his wife calls him: again, the power resides in her. Orpheus repelled the advances of the women of Thrace, who did their best to win him – our poet is more susceptible to female charms and expects to be forgiven for submitting to them. Orpheus' final act of love is a tragic moment:

Eurydice vanishes and he remains in the emptiness of a dream, desperately reaching out to her in vain – our Orpheus' final act is a trite one, and when his Eurydice is sucked into the shadows, unexpectedly metamorphosed into a paper doll wafting in the wind, he remains safe and sound, and goes home to sleep peacefully in his bed.

In summing up the task Magris has set himself, a reference to the Red Queen's practice of believing in the impossible comes to mind.(2) In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, the Red Queen reprimands Alice for asserting that one cannot believe in impossible things, by countering: I daresay you haven't had much practice. When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast. In his attempt to strip away the blindfold and open our eyes, we might say that Magris has taken up the Red Queen's practice. Although the two works considered here are diverse in terms of form and expression, conceptually and creatively they form a unified whole, concerned as they are with common themes and purpose. The global wrongs endured and inflicted in *Alla cieca* are resumed in the more personal wrongs suffered and imposed in *Lei dunque capirà*. The poet's wife is no less victim and oppressor than the victims and oppressors – the revolutionaries and those who persecute them – of *Alla cieca*. Sharing similar metaphors and representing a conceptual progression from the oceanic maelstrom of *Alla cieca* to the distant horizon of *Lei dunque capirà*, in the end both texts represent an act of love... and of faith. A bold attempt to remove the blindfold of senseless actions. To expose injustices and abolish indifference. To bear witness. To plow ahead through life's seas, even sightlessly, gropingly, trusting in faith: *è la fede che fa la vita*.

(1) Claudio Magris, one of the foremost writers working in Italy today, was born in Trieste, Italy, in 1939. A versatile and prolific writer, his work includes essays, novels, plays and travelogues that defy facile classification, in which the genres are often blended. Among his works published by Garzanti are: *Dietro le parole* (1978), *Itaca e oltre* (1982), *Illazioni su una sciabola* (1984), *Danubio* (1986; published in the United States as *Danube* in 1989), *Stadelmann* (1988), *Un altro mare* (1991), *Microcosmi* (1997, for which he received the Premio Strega and which appeared in English in 2001 as *Microcosms*), and *La mostra* (2001). His most recent works are the novel *Alla cieca* (2005) and the novella *Lei dunque capirà* (2006). Described by its critics as the novel of the new millennium, *Alla cieca* was awarded the Premio Letterario Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa 2005. A professor of German Literature at the University of Trieste, Magris is a regular contributor to the Italian daily, *Corriere della Sera*. He lives in Trieste.

(2) Cited by Rebecca Solnitt in a recent article about the impossible world we live in: *Remake the world*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 14, 2006.

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