

On translating Magris: 'Closelaboration' with a difference

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the translation of Claudio Magris' novel *Blindly* (*Alla cieca*) into English and the collaboration between author and translator during the course of the project. Magris' willingness to become an active participant in the translation process confirmed his frequent observation that 'the translator is truly a co-author, part accomplice, part rival, part lover.' Specifically, the essay examines the themes, imagery, and stylistic elements employed by Magris to render the multiple, interwoven strands that form the river of the narrative, spanning geography and history, space and time, to describe a story of senseless actions and wrongs endured and inflicted. Of revolutionaries and those who persecute them, victims and oppressors, hunter and prey. Of the betrayed and their betrayers everywhere. And over it all the pall cast by those unwilling to lift the shroud of silence and bear witness to the truth: those who prefer to live 'blindly.'

Keywords

Blindly, Claudio Magris, co-author, collaboration, English translation

Claudio Magris' novel *Alla cieca* (2005) had captured my interest when it was first released in Italy. After publishing an article about the work in *Forum Italicum* (Appel, 2006) and a translated excerpt in the *Journal of Italian Translation* (Magris, 2006), I had occasion to translate an interview with Magris which Ilide Carmignani (2006) wrote and which appeared in *Absinthe: New European Writing* (Carmignani, 2007). It was in this interview that I first became aware of Magris' vision of the translator as a co-author. Recalling his own early experiences as a translator, Magris says: 'Later on, also in the 1970s, I began to be translated myself, and unquestionably, both when one translates and when one is translated, there is a strong sense that the translator is truly a co-author, part accomplice, part

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rival, part lover.’¹ Admittedly, I read this with some scepticism. Time would prove me wrong.

I borrow the term ‘closelaboration’ from Cuban post-modernist writer Cabrera Infante, though its use in relation to my collaboration with Magris must certainly be qualified: closelaboration *with a difference*. While Cabrera Infante coined the term to describe the relationship between author and translator, or more specifically between him and Suzanne Jill Levine² during the translation of *Tres tristes tigres*, the picture that emerges from Levine’s own account (1991) of her collaboration with the Cuban writer appears to be more one of master and apprentice. Another of his translators, Albert Bensoussan, is quoted by Modrea (2005) as describing Cabrera Infante as a ‘tyrannical taskmaster, who . . . was fiercely controlling and possessive of his text,’ and Levine apparently frequently sought the author’s approval. Or did she? Modrea speculates that ‘perhaps it was not Levine who sought his approval, but rather Cabrera Infante who demanded to review and approve all of her work.’ Whatever the case, my ‘closelaboration’ with Claudio Magris bears no resemblance whatsoever to this clearly dysfunctional relationship. Though Magris generously did all he could to be of help, he never insisted on reviewing my work or having a hand in the decision-making process, he listened to my reasoning wherever our views differed, and in most cases allowed me to have the final say.

Themes, imagery, style

What first attracted me to the novel was the range of its thematics: the injustices that concern Magris and that are exposed in the course of the narrative are multiple and intertwined, spanning geography and history, space and time. The pivotal story is that of Goli Otok, the island where Tito set up a prison camp, and where thousands of Italian workers from Monfalcone were deported following the split between Tito and Stalin.³ *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 his students. 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 when he held the spyglass to his blind eye 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. *Blindly* (Magris, 2010, 2012) is Claudio Magris’ attempt to clear our vision, to rip off the blindfold and expose those injustices.

In subsequent readings it was the imagery and the reiteration of certain motifs that gripped me: the sea, for example, which in *Blindly* is all-encompassing, all-embracing: *qualcosa di grande in cui tutto si tiene e che sa sempre ciò che bisogna fare . . .* and has the value of a saving grace. When it retreats, as though sucked up by a giant sponge, it leaves vessels grounded on the shoals and the way home is lost, the void looms large. Another example is the figurehead, placed in the bow so that her eyes could see the way and further the journey’s purpose. Yet the face is wooden, impassive, the eyes unseeing. Does the figurehead show the way or is it symbolic of

the events of history, of men's actions, which go along 'blindly,' indifferently? Magris' world does not lend itself to binary distinctions: the answer, like the sea, like life itself, is ambiguous, or rather ambivalent, multi-valent. In a context that embraces the coexistence of opposites, 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' as Dante says (Aligheri, 1995: *Inferno* III, p. 51). 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? Sometimes a blindfold is necessary, so as not to see one's fear and to be able to go forward. More importantly the figurehead can also be a lifesaver, literally and figuratively: a shipwrecked sailor can grab onto her wooden skirts and float to safety. In this sense she is symbolic of a female figure used by man as a screen to shield him from life's tempests.

Finally, as I began to think about translating this expansive, intricately written work, I began to be more concerned with its stylistic elements. Because besides having a story to tell, Magris is also a stylist. Consequently, my focus shifted beyond the images and themes recurring in those pages, or the semantic elements used to express them, to the way in which the words were presented and why they were written that way. The fictional structure lends itself to an all-inclusive 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, seething monologue, shouted from the bottom of a deep pit that may or may not yield up its mysteries. At other times the prose is lyrical, lit with subtle nuances and human tenderness. At all times it is a choral narration, group therapy, or tavern rant, whose multiplicity of voices may be multiple personalities, the pseudonyms of those who cannot openly attest to the truth, virtual avatars, or even clones. Our perceptions flounder in this oceanic maelstrom, this veritable vortex of voices that is almost impenetrable, and we are diverted, derailed. When that happens, the recurring themes become a kind of lifesaver, something to hold onto, like beads on a rosary, as we grope our way along.

Collaboration, phase one: Letter to his translators

Unlike the reader, the translator had yet another lifesaver to keep her afloat and that is Magris' willingness to become an active participant in the translation process. Translating Magris became a form of 'closeslaboration' because the author seemingly anticipated every question, every uncertainty, every curiosity that the translator might experience. He did this in a 48-page letter which he sent to each of the translators of *Alla cieca*, ranging in scope from a general account of how he came to write the book to explanations of very specific details, references to citations and sources, and so on. Along the way he offered his translators some very clear guidelines, chief among them:

As always where there is some difficulty, whether regarding general structure or individual sentences, I, as you know, believe that translation should not explain, facilitate,

or blunt the difficulties of the original text, which for that matter are . . . the difficulties of comprehension that each of us quite frequently has. For this reason, it's best to run the risk of not being understood than to assume the tone of a Ciceronian guide . . . who benevolently takes the reader by the hand and explains things to him, smoothing the way.⁴

Explicit directives in the letter are copious. For example, the phrase attributed to Nelson ('I'm damned if I see it') appears in English in the Italian edition and we are told that it is to remain so in every translation. The description of the fire in the royal palace of Copenhagen, we are advised, is to be rendered with the same wording each time it appears; indeed Magris even goes so far as to provide us with the original English passage about the fire from Jorgensen's autobiography.⁵ For the ballad of William Kidd, the author provides two English versions, and suggests how they might be combined to best effect. The words regarding Master Christ, spoken by the native king Pomare, supposedly converted by the missionaries, are to remain in English in every translation, he tells us, though their 'foreignness' must somehow be conveyed in the English translation.⁶ The Latin phrase *Vidimus seditionis horribilem daemonem omnia abruere*, which is the actual text of a poem describing Jorgensen as a tyrant and insurrectionist at the end of his three-week reign in Iceland, is to be left in Latin.⁷ For the standard phrase recited for burial at sea, we are directed to find the equivalent expression in the target language.⁸ And the story of the seal-woman, which recurs with variations, should be told with the same words and phrases so as to be recognizable to the reader when it reappears.⁹ And so on.

In addition to this type of explicit instruction, Magris tells his translators when an apparent quotation is a quasi-quotation, when he has paraphrased it freely or added to it, and when we may follow his lead. For example, with regard to the proclamation issued by Jorgensen, he tells us that he paraphrased it and mingled in other things; moreover he transcribes the complete English text and refers to an Icelandic version for a possible translation in that language.¹⁰ Elsewhere he tells us that a certain passage, 'that my sad but instructive vicissitudes might descend unwept into the darkness of a long, silent night,'¹¹ paraphrases a citation from Jorgensen's autobiography, and provides us with the exact words: 'the sad but instructive vicissitudes of his fate to pass by unwept and unrecorded . . . wrapped up in the darkness of a long and silent night – illacrymabiles.' When he returns to the description of the fire at the royal palace of Christiansborg, a recurring motif in the novel, he tells us that it is his own invention, except for a passage intentionally paraphrased from the account written by the Danish poet Adam Oehlenschläger, who was an eye witness to the event. He specifies that the passage in question begins with the words 'The great tower is still there' and that the actual quotation ends with the words ' . . . in the midst of the fire,' though only the Danish translator need concern himself with this; the rest of us could simply translate the author's paraphrasing.¹²

Finally, there are the notes included purely as a matter of curiosity, which from the standpoint of the book have no importance whatsoever but which Magris expansively includes, almost in a conversational vein. One interesting example relates to

the saying in Triestine dialect, ‘caro Cogoi, semo cagai,’ which literally means ‘siamo cagati,’ ‘we’re in deep shit,’ ‘we’re fucked.’ The expression is generally used to indicate a hopeless situation, one with no way out, and is usually pronounced in an affable, good-natured way. Reminiscing about an incident that occurred while out on a boat whose motor died, Magris recalls a friend using the expression when their eccentric boatman took the engine apart: as evening came on and a storm approached, the pieces rolled around in the boat and they were clearly in big trouble.¹³ Soon afterward Magris reminisces once more, again only as a point of curiosity and in his own words irrelevant to the translation: with regard to the protagonist’s remembrance of an earlier time (‘the world around us was young, a verdant, dewy-eyed dawn, still it was already a prison’) and the phrase ‘So I only wrote the first sentence in front of that question mark, rather than my entire life,’ Magris recalls that it goes back to the aversion he felt when a friend confided that her mother, a strict and fanatically repressive guardian of her virtue, told her that she wanted to give her to her future husband pure as a flower.¹⁴ Elsewhere, just for curiosity, he tells us that the book of recipes mentioned in regard to the governor’s cook Bessie is *The Australian Convict Recipe Book, Featuring Ex-Convict Bessie Baldwin Cook to Sir John and Lady Franklin at Government House 1842–1849*. That it occurred to him later that the line ‘vanish forever from the rolls of all the Admiralties’¹⁵ is perhaps an echo of a passage by Conrad in *Lord Jim*. That the names mentioned in connection with Alvise-Alvižo, ‘all those Obradoviches Chrescoviches Dobiscoviches Vidobinoviches Steffiloviches Francinoviches Nicoliches Gozdineviches Riboboviches,’ are actual names of real people, taken from a chronicle. And so forth.

Collaboration, phase two: ‘Closelaboration’

Above and beyond anticipating his translator’s needs in his letter to them, Magris becomes an active participant in the translation process. His readiness to share in the process is announced in the opening lines of his letter:

As many of you know, I have always taken care to provide anyone about to translate one of my books as much information and as many explanations and references as possible, to at least alleviate the material effort of the task, the search for phrases or titles in their original expression, or for sources, citations and so forth. I feel it is the least I can do to help, within the limits of my ability, the person who brings my text to life in another language, allowing it to essentially live on and in some ways becoming its co-author.¹⁶

As the work proceeded, Magris was indeed true to his word, repeatedly offering to read and clarify any passages that might prove abstruse or otherwise perplexing. Early on we exchanged correspondence on a number of specific textual issues, potential title alternatives, a possible glossary or other back matter, and so on. When I finally felt ready to send him the first 10 chapters of the translation, he responded with obvious pleasure and enthusiasm, generous as always with his praise,

acknowledging the difficulty of the task,¹⁷ sensitive, courteous and unassuming in offering suggestions. At times we agreed, at other times we didn't, but his input was always insightful and helpful, and the choice was always left up to me as the translator.

One example where we disagreed was how to render the seemingly nonsensical words 'salmoiraghi' and 'rhodiatoce':

Revolution is a word as senseless as the ones children make up and repeat over and over until even things around you become as nonsensical as that word. I for example used to recite salmoiraghirhodiatoce rhodiatocesalmoiraghi, I must have seen them in some ad. I think they were two different ads but it doesn't matter, salmoiraghirhodiatoce rhodiatocesalmoiraghi, after a while the whole world became a meaningless babble, things melted, heaving and surging, a thick, amorphous chocolate. And now revolutionrevolutionrevolution.

The words come from actual ads for eyeglasses and nylon respectively: Salmoiraghi & Viganò and Nailon Rhodiatoce. Conflicted, Magris wondered whether we should find equivalent ads in English, and at first I considered using 'alittledab'ldoya' and 'plopplopfizzfizz,' from the shaving cream and Alka-Seltzer jingles. In the end, though, Magris preferred my solution to leave the words as is: it seemed more logical to leave them in the Italian since the protagonist is recalling them from a time when he was a child in Italy. To substitute English variants, I reasoned, would be like translating Faulkner into Italian, keeping the setting in the American South, yet having the protagonist supposedly recall the words of Italian jingles he or she couldn't possibly have heard during a Mississippi childhood.

Another example of a term which Magris questioned concerns the word 'simulated:' 'Matrix revolutions, simulated turmoil that doesn't happen to anyone, those slaves in irons whom you broke your back to liberate don't exist, avatars of avatars of nobody in a video game.' Why simulated? he asked. Here I had to confess that I had added (or rather substituted) a word, translating 'grande sconquasso' as 'simulated turmoil' instead of 'great turmoil' to echo 'matrix revolutions,' which are a form of virtual reality, simulated reality. This reasoning convinced him, as did my motive for adding the acronym 'URL' in a passage concerning the word 'site:' 'Naturally all of you will then capture it in your net and transcribe it however you want on those small screens of yours, in fact I thank you for this URL that you assigned me. I don't really know what that acronym means, but I like the word site.' What does it mean, Magris asked. Is it possible to maintain the play on words surrounding the word site, which refers to both the internet and a geographic place? I explained that a URL (Universal Resource Locator) is the address of an internet site and that it seemed to fit the context which specifically mentions a *sigla*, acronym.

Throughout the process Magris' ability to focus on the most minute detail was extraordinary and his contribution invaluable. One of many examples I could cite was the seemingly simple phrase 'un mare più mare' which I initially translated as

‘a sea more sea-like’ than the others. Magris pointed out that he wasn’t trying to say that that sea was *more similar* to other seas but that it was a sea that was more a sea, almost more genuine than the others.¹⁸ Since the complete original sentence referred to an absence of memory (‘Un mare più mare degli altri, perché non ha alcuna memoria’), I then suggested ‘A sea deeper than the others . . .’ or ‘A sea more unfathomable than the others . . .’ because it has no memory, its memory is lost in the depths, in the abysses. This was clearly not an improvement, but Magris politely limited himself to saying that he still had a ‘slight doubt’ concerning that ‘mare più mare.’ In the end I chose to say ‘A sea more a sea than the others’ which seemed better suited to the original.

Elsewhere, Magris wondered why I had chosen to use the word ‘grotto’ instead of the usual English word for ‘grotta’ (presumably he was thinking of cave or cavern). I told him that ‘grotto’ for me evoked an underwater cavern, a sea cavern such as the Blue Grotto, whereas ‘cave’ and ‘cavern’ do not necessarily recall the sea and are generally found underground (for example, Carlsbad Caverns) or on the earth’s surface. My explanation convinced him. Another instance of a seemingly small, but not insignificant, detail concerned the phrase about living life fully ‘anche se ti capita il due di picche.’ I first translated it literally, ‘even if you happen to draw the two of spades,’ but Magris questioned whether the two of spades has the same meaning as the Italian ‘due di picche,’ namely, the least important card in the game. Not being a card player, I said I wasn’t sure, but that I thought it depended on the particular card game. I suggested we avoid the question by saying ‘even if you happen to draw the losing card’ and Magris readily agreed with this solution. One further example had to do with an adjective that turned into a verb. The original reads ‘La sera era grande, in quel giardino’ and I initially translated it as ‘Evening was majestic, in that garden.’ Magris wasn’t entirely convinced by that ‘majestic’ because what he meant by ‘grande’ here was not something of regal splendor, but something that opens out, unfolds, almost as if enveloping us (*qualcosa* che si apre, quasi che ci avvolge’). My ultimate solution, which pleased him, was ‘Evening enveloped us.’

Stylistic features

As mentioned earlier, besides having a story to tell, Magris is also a consummate stylist. Some of the most striking stylistic features to note in the text are the recurring images, the intentionally repeated language, the deliberately long sentences, a sustained ambiguity, and a tendency to paraphrase.

Recurring images, such as the fire in the royal palace, act as leitmotifs throughout the work and the author was quite clear about the fact that they should be described with the same words and expressions each time, creating a kind of linguistic refrain. The interaction of the words, their relationships to one another, and their rhythmic pattern was important to maintain, since the configuration often reveals subliminal meanings operating below the semantic level and contributes to a certain emotional mood. Somewhat like the chord progression in Pachelbel’s Canon, each repetition

offers a slight variation on the previous one, and the recurrences of the major themes and images (the fire, the figurehead, Nelson's blind eye, and so on) serve to heighten the intended effect. The carefully orchestrated sentences and persistent imagery signal a precise organization, a systematic organic structure, with key images and phrasing establishing patent links between recurring analogous passages.

Intentionally repeated language is another stylistic feature. A word or phrase will very often be repeated in the same sentence or paragraph. These reiterations are primarily intentional and at times function as a kind of mantra, the repetition of words being also a replication of their sound and cadence.

Deliberately long sentences that run on and on, with a level of subordinate clauses that defies generally accepted English syntax, are intentional and contribute to the tumultuous rhythm of the text. At the same time they are a syntactical expression of the protagonist's turbulence and confused state of mind. Series without commas also contribute to the rhythm of the text, somewhat like a crescendo building and swelling. The reader feels the intensity of the speaker's sensations and may also be disoriented, derailed. In this way, the reader comes to share the speaker's confusion and state of agitation. In some cases these sentences are like nested-dolls, with clauses snugly nestled one inside the other, a labyrinthine maze through which the reader can arrive at different interpretations depending on how his mind moves among the various elements. Then too, there is no reason why a long sentence can't be both clear and elegant at the same time. In Magris' sentences, complex though they might be, no word ever seems randomly placed, rather each word seems to have a precise function. If the sentence expands and swells it's because the experience it expresses expands and opens out.

Sustained ambiguity is another stylistic choice intentionally embraced by Magris, perhaps because of the interest it creates by resisting the reader's expectations. One area in which ambiguity operates is in reference to the names of individuals. As in Borges' bibliographies, Magris chose to maintain a certain degree of uncertainty and doubt as to which names refer to actual historical figures and which are fictional. The opening sentence itself plunges us into confusion: 'My dear Cogoi, to tell the truth I'm not so sure that no one is able to write a man's life as well as he can, even though I was the one who wrote that.' The name itself recalls the abovementioned Triestine saying, 'caro Cogoi, semo cagai,' and the reader has no way of knowing for sure that the words, initially paraphrased and later quoted, are actually drawn from Jorgen Jorgensen's autobiography, printed in the *Hobart Town Almanack* (Jorgensen, 1835, 1838). Add to that the fact that all language is intrinsically ambiguous, that the speaker (or speakers) rarely orients the reader, and that there is no reliable timeline of events (though I attempted to create one for my own use during the translation process) so that settings and events must be inferred. The ambiguity ultimately extends to the identity of the speaker and other characters in the novel. The protagonist's multi-reality, which crosses time and space boundaries, means that the narrator's voice is in a sense duplicitous: the 'I' is problematic narratively speaking since it is more than one. Moreover the speaker himself struggles to distinguish between

memory, reality, fantasy, lies, and truth, consequently it is unclear which events are 'real' and which occur in the landscape of his mind.

A tendency to paraphrase is evident in the quotations, direct and indirect, which tend toward rephrasing, re-elaboration, reinterpretation, and the creative addition of new elements. Sometimes these passages are indicated by quotation marks, sometimes not. Again, the ambiguity is intentional. I found these fascinating to trace, not unlike a hunt for hidden treasure. For example, the passage cited above – 'that my sad but instructive vicissitudes might descend unwept into the darkness of a long, silent night . . . illacrymabiles' – harks back to Horace (2002: 9): 'Vixere fortes ante Agamemnona / Multi: sed omnes illacrimabiles / Urgentur, ignotique longa / Nocte, carent quia vate sacro': Many brave men lived before Agamemnon, but all are unknown and unwept, lost in a long night, because they lack a sacred poet to chronicle their deeds.

Sometimes the paraphrasing takes the form of retold tales. The tale about the old woman and the lost shoe, for instance, is a retelling of the myth in which Jason loses a sandal while helping a beggar woman, the goddess Hera in disguise, across a stream; the bundle the old woman is carrying is the golden fleece. Elsewhere we find a retelling of the incident at the Symplegades, also known as the Clashing Rocks. A pair of rocks at the Bosphorus that clashed together randomly, they were defeated by Jason and the Argonauts, who would have been killed by them had it not been for Phineas' advice to let a dove fly between the rocks. Jason does so and the bird loses only its tail feathers, and the Argonauts row mightily to get through losing only part of the stern ornament. While in the *Argonautics of Apollonios Rhodios* the dove flies away unscathed, in Magris' version it plunges to its death.

At times instead of paraphrase there is allusion, the echo of a larger passage. For example, the words 'Marie is behind the door, but I don't open it' echo a passage from Franz Kafka's (1990) letters to Milena Jenenska:

Sometimes I have the feeling that we're in one room with two opposite doors and each of us holds the handle of one door, one of us flicks an eyelash and the other is already behind the door, and now the first one has but to utter a word and immediately the second one has closed his door behind him and can no longer be seen. He is sure to open the door again, for it is a room which perhaps one cannot leave. If only the first one were not precisely like the second, if he were calm, if he would slowly set the room in order as though the room were like any other; but instead he does exactly the same as the other at his door. Sometimes even both are behind the door and the beautiful room is empty.

Other examples of allusion include the expression 'noble simplicity and quiet grandeur,' which evokes Winckelmann's well-known definition of classic Greek sculpture, 'edle Einfalt und stille Größe.' Or the phrase 'Sing the sword, wield the sword,' which recalls the Scandinavian poet Snorri Sturluson, who wrote the *Edda Snorra* or *Edda Minore*, epic works of Scandinavian mythology; though he celebrated courage in war, he was said to be a coward, able to sing but not wield the sword.

The fact that paraphrased quotations are sometimes indicated by quotation marks, sometimes not, was a feature which I called to the attention of my editor, concerned that wording which was actually a concealed quote might be changed during the editing process. No sources were cited in the Italian text, which to my mind raised a red flag, and I wondered whether the question of permissions would be an issue. This too was called to the editor's attention. As I progressed through the translation I credited the source wherever possible by citing it in what I originally conceived as an Acknowledgments and Guide for the Reader and which eventually evolved into a Translator's Afterword. Whereas a Guide would be too much like taking the reader by the hand and acting as his Cicerone, an Afterword could act as an extension of the text, recounting a number of things that might be of interest to the reader thereby enhancing his/her experience. Not as explanatory references or footnotes, but as a kind of supplementary text contributed by the translator.

Menardian choices

In my translation I strove to reflect the strategies of the original work by respecting the author's intentional stylistic choices. Specifically I strove to avoid: explanation and clarification of the text; any embellishment or notes to 'correct' ambiguity; the introduction of any new metaphors or images; any expansion of the text that would interrupt its flow (for example, explanatory phrases in apposition); obscuring connections between passages by altering the author's word choice. Respecting the author's precise wishes, it was plain that the insertion of any clarifying text would undermine the intended ambiguity. And 'ambiguity is richness,' as the narrator of Borges' story about Pierre Menard tells us.¹⁹ I therefore resisted the urge to explicate, spell out, explain, or interpret.

As for syntax, although the sentence structure involved a level of subordination which English does not tolerate (at times even straining the level of subordination that is acceptable in Italian), I felt that maintaining the shape of the sentence was essential to the rhythm of the prose and therefore refrained from splitting or otherwise altering a sentence to make it more compliant with English usage. In addition to contributing to the turbulent rhythm and the protagonist's state of confusion, the lengthy sentences may be viewed as an expression of a basic difference between English and Italian: whereas in English we tend to think of them as unnecessarily inflated and complex, full of superfluous things and constructed around the principle of 'more is better,' this is not the case in Italian. Indeed the ability of the Italian language (though it is not the only one) to express itself in intricate, compound sentences which may be construed in various ways is a wonderful resource for the writer. Skilled writers know how to use this feature to full advantage to express the nuances of their thought, gaining the possibility of describing reality in multifaceted, subtle ways that allow for fine distinctions.²⁰

I was also concerned about sound, and whether the emotional effect of certain vowels or consonants in the source language would produce the same reaction in the

target language. For example, in one passage the protagonist is sitting in front of the TV, which the clinic inmates are allowed, or indeed forced, to watch in the evening for relaxation, and he becomes disturbed. The television image breaks up, just like the voice on the disks they make him listen to, which may or may not be his own voice, and the harsh sounds of ‘stride,’ ‘raschiare,’ ‘grattare,’ and ‘fischiare,’ which I attempted to recreate with ‘screeches,’ ‘rasping,’ ‘scratching,’ and ‘grating,’ reflect his turmoil: ‘the disk is a broken record, the needle screeches and keeps rasping the same word, the same syllable, it’s no longer a story, certainly not mine in any case, only scratching grating ricocheting . . .’²¹

In another passage the speaker, who is at sea, recounts being blown off course by a terrible wind, and in a single sentence contrasts the storm at sea with a happier time when he was a boy in Copenhagen. The gloomy, repeated sound of the ‘u’ in ‘lunghe,’ ‘pendule,’ ‘eucalipti,’ and ‘oscurano,’ echoed in ‘pendulous,’ ‘eucalyptus,’ and ‘obscure,’ are like a series of dull thuds, blunt and obscuring like the rain, while the descendent ‘s’ sound in ‘immensa,’ ‘sera,’ ‘scende’ has the sound of closure and finality as does ‘immense nightfall that descends.’ Both are in notable contrast with the feel of the fresh, breezy morning in the second part of the sentence, a bright, shiny time from his childhood:

Now the rain conceals everything, streams of water dense as a palisade and long pendulous eucalyptus leaves obscure the view toward the sea, but the sea is there behind it, boundless, an immense nightfall that descends over things – by contrast, as a boy in Copenhagen, when I went to see the ships at Nyhavn, the wind in the rigging making the flags flap, the smell of the sea and that luminous blue sky were like a fresh, breezy morning, calling you to run away from home.²²

The fire in the Royal Palace, for example, is portrayed with words meant to invoke an emotionality that involves both fear (*urlando* / screaming) and excitement (*affascinato* / fascinated):

Shadows flare and peter out, someone rolls on the ground screaming, ensnared by a flaming drape that fell on him. That red is in no hurry, confident of its eventual victory. I remember how fascinated I was by that composure, by that slow regal pace.²³

Here I was concerned with sound as well as word choice; I wanted the reader to ‘hear’ the *crepitio*, crackling, as the paintings of the Danish noblemen and kings are stripped from the walls by the sizzling flames:

Christiansborg burns, for three days and three nights the Royal Palace burns, the ceiling of the solemn Hall of Knights crashes down with a roar, the tongues of flame streak toward the grand portraits of Danish noblemen and kings, wrap them in their coils, twist around the iron breastplates and ermine cloaks, the paintings peel away from the walls with a crackling sound, the figures writhe and curl up among the flames.²⁴

Naturally, as Borges' fictional Pierre Menard comes to realize, there are no perfect solutions for the translator, but rather a spectrum of possible choices, with compromise always part of the process. Indeed the impossibility of Menard's task, deliberately attempting to recreate what in Cervantes was a spontaneous process, is clear from the outset. Given the considerations described above, I was particularly concerned about what the editing process might do to the carefully thought-out choices. The word that flashed alarmingly through my mind was 'undo.' My anxiety reached new heights when the text was assigned to the publisher's copyeditor. Having imagined the worst, my relief was great when I realized that he had managed to improve the manuscript without affecting the author's style, flow, or rhythm and without altering the meaning of the text. His suggestions were helpful and beneficial, and I appreciated his sensitive, hands-off approach and his eye for detail and consistency. All in all, what could have been a harrowing experience became a satisfying one. I knew the text was in good hands when the copyeditor commented: 'So much of the pleasure of this novel is in just getting carried along by the voice and rhythm.'

Lifting the shroud of silence

Beyond considerations of translation, 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, *dannati contro dannati*. 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, of 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. At the same time, though the book is a journey through every imaginable inferno, through the disillusionment of revolutionary and other ideals, it is nonetheless a book about dogged fidelity: a faithfulness not to any specific flag or allegiance but to the ideals that gave rise to those flags. It is a book of resistance and, despite everything, hope: a hope that has passed through the crucible of despair. And so this story of ambitious dreams and perhaps equally senseless aspirations becomes a redemptive dream of changing the world and transforming humankind 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. Even while waiting for the cease fire order that never comes.

In thinking about translating Claudio Magris, about our 'closelaboration with a difference,' I am reminded of a remark by Keith Jennison (1995): 'The great New York editors worked from the premise that the editor and author worked together to ask more of the book than would ever again be asked by any reader or critic.'²⁵ The collaborative process I experienced, being part of Magris' bold attempt to remove the blindfold and bear witness, prompts me to restate this observation in

new terms: in this case, author and translator worked together to ask more of the book. And perhaps the words credited to George Bernard Shaw came into play:

If you have an apple and I have an apple and we exchange apples then you and I will still each have one apple. But if you have an idea and I have an idea and we exchange these ideas, then each of us will have two ideas.

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Notes

1. 'Sempre negli anni Settanta, poi, ho iniziato a essere tradotto, e certamente, sia quando uno traduce sia quando viene tradotto, acquista forte il senso che il traduttore è veramente un coautore, un po' complice, un po' rivale, un po' innamorato.'
2. 'Cabrera Infante wanted to designate the relationship between author and translator as "closelaboration", a distinctive portmanteau word' (Classe, 2000: 208).
3. Magris has written to his translators: 'The story that I had inside me, and that has appeared, albeit briefly, in other books, is the incredible story of Goli Otok, that beautiful and terrible island in the Northern Adriatic where, following the Second World War, Tito set up a horrendous gulag mainly for the Ustashi and for Yugoslavian Fascists in general and, after 1948, for Stalinists as well, since he had fallen out with Stalin. I was aware that about two thousand Italian workers from Monfalcone, a small town near Trieste, had also ended up on that island: militant communists who had had a taste of Fascist prisons, many of them experiencing Nazi concentration camps and the war in Spain as well. They voluntarily chose to leave Italy at the end of the Second World War and, given their faith in communism, went to Yugoslavia to assist in the construction of communism in that neighboring communist country; after the falling-out between Tito and Stalin, they were deported to that island and subjected to all manner of torture, as in all gulags and lagers. They held out heroically in the name of Stalin, that is, in the name of a man who, had he won, would have turned the entire world into a gulag for people like them, and they lived in that hell unbeknown to everyone. The narrator in my novel, an obviously invented figure, is one of these individuals who lived through history's tempest and ended up on Goli Otok.'
4. 'Come sempre nel caso di difficoltà, sia strutturali generali, sia di singole frasi, io, come sapete, penso che la traduzione non debba spiegare, facilitare, smussare le difficoltà del testo originale, che poi sono . . . le difficoltà che ognuno di noi, molto spesso, ha nel comprendere. Per questo, meglio correre il rischio di non essere capiti che non assumere il tono del Cicerone . . . che prende benevolmente il lettore per mano e gli spiega le cose, spianandogli le asperità.'
5. 'The flames that issued from the immense pile, awful beyond conception as they were, filled my youthful mind with the most lively emotions of delight. I never contemplated for a moment the destruction of property in the striking magnificence of the scene' (Jorgensen, 1835).

6. *Master Christ he very good.* ‘Queste frasi devono restare in inglese in ogni traduzione. Nella traduzione in inglese, bisognerà far capire, non so bene come, quella loro stranezza, mantenere insomma l’effetto straniante.’
7. ‘Lasciare il latino; questo è il testo reale della composizione fatta, alla fine delle sue tre settimane di regno in Islanda, contro Jorgen.’
8. *E il corpo sarà gettato in mare.* In English, *Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God We therefore commit his body to the Deep.* ‘Questa era la frase, diciamo così, standard per i funerali in mare. Sarà bene trovarla, altrettanto standard, in ogni lingua.’
9. ‘... si riprende, con variazioni, la storia raccontata a p. 85. Bisognerebbe dunque che il lettore se ne accorga, per la somiglianza delle parole e delle frasi.’
10. ‘Qui ho parafrasato il proclama emanato oralmente da Jorgensen, inframezzandolo di altre cose. Trascrivo il testo inglese... *That we, Jorgen Jorgensen, have undertaken the management of public affairs, under the title of PROTECTOR...*’
11. ‘che le mie tristi ma istruttive vicissitudini scendessero illacimate nelle tenebre di una lunga notte silenziosa.’
12. ‘La grande torre è ancora là. Questa è la citazione tratta dalla descrizione di Oehenschläger di cui ho parlato. La citazione esatta arriva fino a “nel mezzo del fuoco” e poi continua con le frasi “crolla con tre paurosi rombi sfondando tutti i piani dell’edificio”. Questa precisazione naturalmente interessa soltanto la traduzione danese, e non le altre che possono procedere traducendo la mia parafrasi.’
13. ‘C’è un detto dialettale a Trieste, ‘caro Cogoi, semo cagai’, letteralmente ‘siamo cagati, siamo nella merda’, per indicare una situazione senza scampo, una situazione tipo ‘siamo fregati, siamo fottuti’. Il tutto detto però... in un modo bonario, calmo... A titolo di curiosità, irrilevante per la traduzione, ricordo che questo detto, già a me ovviamente ben noto, mi è rimasto particolarmente impresso grazie al tono col quale l’ha detto la mia amica... sulla barca del bizzarro barcaiolo Gusar... che, visto che il motore era avariato, lo aveva smontato in cento pezzi che rotolavano nella barca, mentre arrivavano la sera e il maltempo e non potevamo far niente.’
14. *Dunque ho messo davanti a quel punto di domanda soltanto la prima frase, anziché tutta la mia vita, mia, sua, di chissachì.* ‘A titolo di curiosità, irrilevante per la traduzione, ricordo che questa frase risale alla ripugnanza provata quando un’amica mi aveva raccontato che sua madre, severissima custode della sua virtù e fanaticamente repressiva, le aveva detto che voleva consegnarla al futuro ignoto marito come un fiore.’
15. ... *spariscono per sempre dai ruoli di tutti gli Ammiragliati.*
16. ‘Come molti di voi sanno, io mi sono sempre preoccupato di fornire, a chi si accinge a tradurre ogni mio libro, tutte le informazioni, spiegazioni e riferimenti possibili, per alleviare almeno la fatica materiale del lavoro, la ricerca di frasi o titoli nell’espressione originale, o di fonti e citazioni e così via. Mi sembra il minimo che io possa fare per aiutare, nei limiti delle mie possibilità, chi dà vita al mio testo in un’altra lingua, facendolo vivere ulteriormente in misura essenziale e divenendone in qualche modo un co-autore.’
17. ‘come ho già scritto, sono molto, molto felice della traduzione, che mi sembra renda bene (so quanto sia difficile) il ritmo, il tono, il respiro, insomma la poesia del libro, quel suo furore che non concede niente, quell’accavallarsi talora anche difficile e aspro e duro per il lettore. Che si spera continui a leggere il libro, ma al quale non si può e non si deve in nessun modo facilitare la strada, o almeno facilitargliela troppo; anche la relazione fra un libro e un lettore assomiglia, nel bene e nel male, a quella che si instaura tra una coppia di amanti. In questo senso, mi sembra riuscito molto bene. Grazie.’

18. ‘Qui non si dice che è più simile al mare, ma che è un mare ancora più mare, quasi un mare più vero di tutti gli altri’ (personal correspondence).
19. The story’s narrator informs us: ‘The Cervantes text and the Menard text are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer. (More *ambiguous*, his detractors will say, but ambiguity is richness)’ (Borges, 1998: 94).
20. As an aside, a colleague who translates non-fiction from English into Italian remarked that he often feels compelled to combine two or three English sentences into one, because keeping those short sentences in Italian creates a gasping, asthmatic sensation, a continually interrupted stride. A long, flowing, subordinated sentence, on the other hand, is like a breath of air.
21. ‘il disco s’inceppa, la puntina stride e raschia sempre la stessa parola, la stessa sillaba, non è più una storia, comunque non certo la mia, solo un grattare fischiare rimbalzare . . .’
22. ‘Adesso la pioggia nasconde ogni cosa, lance d’acqua fitte come uno steccato e lunghe foglie pendule di eucalipti oscurano il varco verso la vista del mare, ma il mare è là dietro, sconfinato, un’immensa sera che scende sulle cose – invece, da ragazzo, a Copenaghen, quando andavo a vedere le navi a Nyhavn, il vento fra le sartie che faceva sbattere le bandiere, l’odore di salsedine e quel celeste luminoso sembravano un arioso e fresco mattino, che chiamava a scappare di casa.’
23. ‘Ombre balenano e dileguano, qualcuno si rotola a terra urlando, avviluppato da un tendaggio in fiamme che gli è cascato addosso. Quel rosso non ha fretta, sicuro com’è della sua vittoria finale. Ricordo com’ero affascinato da quella tranquillità, da quella regale lentezza.’
24. ‘Christiansborg brucia, sono tre giorni e tre notti che il Palazzo Reale brucia, il soffitto della solenne Sala dei Cavalieri rovina con fragore, le lingue di fiamma strisciano verso i grandi ritratti dei gentiluomini e dei re danesi, li avvolgono nelle loro spire, si attorcigliano intorno alle corazze di ferro e ai manti d’ermellino, i quadri si staccano dalla parete con un crepitio, le figure si contorcono e si accartocciano tra le fiamme.’
25. Jennison, speaking about the editing experience, is quoted by Al Silverman (2008).

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