

MARGINAL NOTES À PROPOS MAGRIS' DANUBIO AND MORSELLI'S CONTRO-PASSATO PROSSIMO

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Sommario

Nella trattazione degli aspetti salienti dei romanzi di Magris e Morselli viene usata come Leitmotif la canzone Wien, du Stadt meiner Träume. Vengono identificati tre temi: la presenza del passato, il preservare tale presenza tramite la rappresentazione e la convenzione; la relazione tra superficie e il suo rovescio represso.

I

Published in 1916, sung by Richard Tauber and many others, to some perhaps only known in a kitsch English version, our point of departure is a little song by one Rudolf Siczýnski: *Wien, du Stadt meiner Träume*.

City of my dreams: ideal, best of all possible cities, object of desire. Ideal, therefore: unique, exclusive: "Mein Herz und mein Sinn schwärmt stets nur für Wien..." Her charm is irresistible to all who come to know her true self. She receives me, accommodates me, "bei Tag und noch mehr bei der Nacht..." City of my dreams, in which I especially find a home towards the time of dreams.

If I were to be separated from her, it would inspire *Sehnsucht* without end. Though predictable, the choice of word here is richly resonant. *Sehnsucht*: longing, nostalgia, absence; intense desire for something which lacks in the present; yearning to be elsewhere. This is not the morbid, oppressive sadness of Schubert's *Winterreise*, but a lightweight *tristesse*, almost pleasurable. The song speaks of infinite *Sehnsucht*, yet avoids the heaviness of hyperbole by adding a slight question mark: "nähm' meine Sehnsucht kein End?" A question mark which touches the surface, without the penetrative thrust of critical questioning or deep reflection.

This leads into the refrain, which offers consolation and confirmation: from afar, "aus weiter Ferne", from a somewhere as far removed from the "I" of the song as he is from the city of his dreams, a song entices, crosses the divide between here and there. The voice of the song is a generic "I" whose anonymity turns him into a kind of spokesperson expressing universally accepted sentiments. Echoing the "mein Herz und mein Sinn schwärmt stets nur für Wien" of the first stanza, he affirms Vienna as unique and exclusive object of desire: "Wien, Wien, nur du allein..." The attributes associated with the distant city are presented in terms which make them seem quite banal: "Dort wo die alten Häuser stehn, dort wo die lieblichen Mädchen gehn." Such vague genericity is quite deliberate: the city of my dreams cannot, should not be pinpointed, precisely defined, reduced to exact particulars. It is a condition, a *stato d'animo*; the *locus* of the generic "I"'s being-at-homeness, a Utopia for everyman. This is suggested, rather than stated as a quasi-factual claim; a suggestion meant to entice, without being offered for critical examination. Vienna is appropriated, embraced as a *there* "wo ich glücklich und selig bin", balancing a *there* of absence and celebration, leading to the climax and, literally, the highest point in the song: "ist Wien, ist Wien, mein Wien!"

The second stanza sets a slightly darker tone. Against the possibility of separation from Vienna, suggested in the first stanza, it sets the inevitability of departure from this world. Inevitable, “Weil alles, wie’s kommt, auch vergeht”, yet almost frivolously viewed as being separated from “Liebe und Wein”. Fatalistic resignation to mortality is expressed briefly, casually, glossed over. Separation now offers the consolation of ascending into Heaven. Dying — which, of course, is not called by its name — is not a journey into the Great Unknown, but a reunion with the familiar, the intimately known: “Dort setz’ ich mich hin, schau runter auf Wien, De steffel, der grüsst ja herauf.” Distance becomes an affirmation of closeness.

In this context, the refrain acquires greater intensity. The song to which it refers reappears, sounding from that “weiter Ferne” which is emblematic of all separation from the city of everyman’s dreams. Like the familiar sights of Vienna, viewed from Heaven, the familiarity of the song underlines that final departure from this world brings the “I” closer still to the beloved city. While, in the first stanza, the *Sehnsucht* caused by separation leads into the refrain, here, it is preceded by relaxed closeness to the familiar, with which the song sounding from afar blends harmoniously. The “I” of the stanzas and the generic “I” of the refrain become more closely identified. Departed from this world, one remains close to Vienna. The city of everyman’s dreams remains untouched by mortality. It becomes a symbol of the immutable, of reassuring stability, of the “goldene Zeitalter der Sicherheit”.¹ It is the heart of Austria, and “*Austriae est imperare urbi universo*”.²

Yet, perhaps all of this is merely an illusion, as the statement of Austria’s supremacy is the “calembour di una superbia

¹ Stefan Zweig: *Die Welt von Gestern*, Stockholm, Bermann-Fischer Verlag, 1947:16.

² Guido Morselli: *Contro-passato prossimo*, Milano, Adelphi, 1987:16.

tramontata” (Morselli: 16). We are enchanted by the surface of Siczynski’s song, without being taken in by the substance.

II

In dreamtime, only the present remains. The city of everyman’s dreams is ever present. It embodies the denial of strangeness and loss. In a world falling apart, without absolutes, it is the “sostituto parziale”³ which consoles. Against the nostalgia, the desire to recuperate the past, inspired by a sense of loss and an awareness of becoming and mortality, it is the pretext for “un vagheggiamento fantastico, nel quale non si ama l’altro, ma il proprio vagheggiare” (Magris: 202). Siczynski’s song is part of that “cultura sentimentale” which replaces “l’esprit de géométrie” with “un’innocente e spontanea effusione dei palpiti del desiderio” (Magris: 203). It is a culture of vagueness, in which generic “alten Häuser” and “lieblichen Mädchen” create an illusion of “virtù e schiettezza” (Magris: 203). Rigorous truth and critical reflection make way for an illusion of changeless well-being; a *stato d’animo* inspired by, identified with, inseparable from the city of everyman’s dreams.

In the centre of the city, symbol of stability and representative of the denial of mortality: the Emperor, Franz Joseph, whose very title “war für uns der Inbegriff aller Macht, allen Reichtums gewesen, das Symbol von Österreichs Dauer;” (Zweig: 326) “inspiegabile relitto di Sadowa e Custoza”, (Morselli: 259) he creates an illusion of centredness against the forces of fragmentation and centrifugality which threaten the status quo. His nickname, “Mummia” (Morselli: 259) suggests the desire to arrest decay, to confirm the past as eternally present. Yet underlying this is the “certezza di vivere morendo, da cui

³ Claudio Magris: *Danubio*, Milano, Garzanti, 1998:202.

proviene la ricerca del passato, l'archeologia sentimentale" (Morselli: 258). The movement of recuperating the past is veiled by the illusion that it is ever present. More than a decisive movement, perhaps, it is endless prevarication, exemplified by Musil's *Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, by the Viennese bureaucracy's culture of muddling through, by the Emperor's indecisiveness.

Thus, the city of everyman's dreams drifts into, is pulled into a war, ostensibly triggered by a single decisive act, yet without any clear objective or rational explanation, in which Austria participated "a puro scopo suicida" (Morselli: 258). The war is the death of an ideal, of an illusion; the past as ever present becomes a monument, represented by the Hofburg, "in attesa di diventare un museo. O un albergo? O la sede centrale dei sindaci?" (Morselli: 259).

The relics of the past lose their symbolic value, reduced to the merely utilitarian; or survive as curiosities from a lost world. Transformed into a museum, the former symbol of the old order signals a past irremediably beyond recuperation. Once the context through which it acquired the power to symbolise has been destroyed its preservation is justified through the commodification of the past. Not the city of everyman's dreams as such, but the objects by which she is remembered become objects of desire. Or, in a double distancing process, the objects representing those objects: postcards, replicas, reproductions.

Through commodification, the city of everyman's dreams becomes a cliché; Siczynski's song, a rhetorical gesture, a memento of the "cultura sentimentale" to which it belongs. As a result of the loss of innocence caused by the war, schmaltz makes way for kitsch; the *stato d'animo* of perennial at-homeness celebrated by Siczynski is placed between quotation marks. In the context of opportunistic capitalism, the song is read as a sign of itself, it refers back to itself as published in the lost world of 1916. Appropriated by the secular

religion of the marketplace, the city of everyman's dreams continues to exist as representation, even as parody. This is illustrated, not without a touch of bitterness, by Ingeborg Bachmann's short story "Besichtigung einer alten Stadt".⁴ Here, the mementoes of the past, the signs recalling the lost city are offered for touristic consumption, a stream of images without context, registered but not understood.

Opportunistic capitalism only lives in and for the present, yet feeds parasitically on the lost city of everyman's dreams. It is kept alive by a perennial sense of lack and insufficiency, it trades in pre-packaged sensations. Thus, what is known of the city as commodity is nothing more than a parodistic collage, presented in Bachmann's story in a tone of ironic detachment, disillusionment; the city she knows becomes a stranger to itself. "Endlich stellt sich heraus, dass nur der Fahrer wirklich eine prächtige Stimme hat, und alle wollen, dass er etwas allein singt...Wien, Wien, nur du allein!" (Bachmann: 280).

Performed for tourist consumption, the song is set between quotation marks, the sentiments by which it was inspired are performed, not experienced, part of an attractive package which can be endlessly reproduced and sold. Vienna has become "la città del post-moderno, nella quale la realtà cede alla propria rappresentazione e all'apparenza, le categorie forti si allontanano, l'universale s'invera nel trascendente, o si dissolve nell'effimero e i meccanismi dei bisogni risucchiano i valori" (Magris: 220).

III

⁴ Ingeborg Bachmann: *Werke, zweiter Band: Erzählungen*, München, Piper Verlag:277-282.

The representation of the city of everyman's dreams points to a now defunct presence. It creates forms which continue to enchant even though the outside to which they pretend to refer does not exist any more. Perhaps the city was never wholly distinct from its representation.

The "manichino di Peter Altenberg" (Magris: 195) recalls the presence of the deceased poet, which itself was part of an existence in which he was both actor and spectator. The self-reflective awareness of being inside the theatre of existence corresponds to the ironical stance, which unmasks representation as such, without being able to uncover the truth behind the mask. The ironist is incapable of unconditional participation, because he is always at least partly on the outside. He is the counterpart of the propagandist, who manipulates representation in the service of an abstraction, for whom the spectacle of representation is a means of self-perpetuation.

Von Allmen denounces the "processione del Corpus Domini che avrebbe dovuto esaltare il corpo mistico dello Stato" as "una rissa di esibizionismi, un pigia-pigia da fiera zootecnica" (Morselli: 14). Yet his is not a position of cynical denial; it is not the self-satisfied affirmation of the death of truth, as in the case of the "verbosi teorici dell'insignificanza" (Magris: 197). It is tinged with regret, with nostalgia for what he sees as underlying the spectacle: "là oltre le balastrate, una tradizione viveva e era fedele a se stessa" (Morselli: 15). Here, tradition is a series of conventionalised actions, presumed to be justified as such by a truthful ideal or abstraction. Von Allmen is unable to decide whether the participants' belief in this tradition is itself a mere convention. Certainly, they seem to be wholly on the inside of the spectacle. For the ironist, only the representation of the real can be known; for the participants in the procession, the spectacle *is* the real. Fixed in "superstizioni mai smentite" (Morselli: 16), the Emperor and the other participants only exist as actors in an endlessly repeated script. They repeat

pre-determined gestures, move in pre-determined patterns. "...il suo Imperatore. Adesso si inginocchiava, e gli sembrò che pregasse. Muoveva le labbra. Era capace di pregare davvero, o compitava puerilmente A.E.I.O.U., calembour di una superbia tramontata, *Austriae est imperare orbi universo?*" (Morselli: 16). It does not really matter whether the Emperor's movements signify actual prayer, or represent an empty convention; nor whether the acronym "A.E.I.O.U." still refers to a factual situation or living ideal. The ritual is its own justification, perpetuating the idea that "Alles in unserer fast tausendjährigen österreichischen Monarchie schien auf Dauer gegründet und der Staat selbst der oberste Garant dieser Beständigkeit" (Zweig: *loc. cit.*), the image of "Wien, Wien, nur du allein" as ever present centre of perennial well-being.

Allowing critical self-reflection would open the door to indeterminacy, to an awareness "che le cose vanno così anche e soprattutto per caso, e che potrebbero benissimo andare altrimenti" (Magris: 197); to that sense of possibility which Musil defines as "die Fähigkeit...alles, was ebensogut sein könnte, zu denken und das, was ist, nicht wichtiger zu nehmen als das, was nicht ist."⁵ By indefinitely deferring the move to the outside of the spectacle, the participants aim to perpetuate the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, and its heart, Vienna, "Wien, Wien, nur du allein", centre and symbol of an ideal *stato d'animo*. By contrast, the prevarication of the arch-ironist, the Man without Qualities, Ulrich, is the result of a sense of limitless possibilities and the rejection of absolutes. Von Allmen chooses a middle road: for him, the world is made what it is "da ciò che avviene in noi uomini, o in qualcuno di noi" (Morselli: *loc. cit.*). Rather than indefinite deferral, he chooses intervention.

⁵ Robert Musil: *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, Reinbek, Rowohlt Verlag, 1999, I:16.

Von Allmen's intervention follows the channels dictated by the Vienna of the time, "Città più funzionaria che burocratica, militare cerimonialmente" (Morselli: 22), through successive layers of hierarchy, until he reaches the highest military authority, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. The proposal which constitutes his intervention has to meet certain requirements, expressed in the formula: "Non più di una cartella a macchina, non meno di mezza" (Morselli: 23). The encounter with the Archduke is restricted to formulaic interchanges, without entering into the substance of the proposal: "Solo qualche battuta di dialogo, obbligata, poveramente formale" (Morselli: 42). The Archduke expresses no opinion on the proposal, takes no decision on further action, but merely indicates the formally correct route to follow: "Comunque, l'elaborazione non spetta a Lei. È allo studio degli organi competenti" (Morselli: 42). As a representative of the status quo and adherent of stability and order, the Archduke is primarily concerned with enforcing the rules of the game. In this respect, he resembles the "Mummy," with his predilection for ritual.

The master narrative associated with the conventions perpetuated by the Emperor, the Archduke and others has no effect on the outcome of von Allmen's intervention. That is decided by other narratives, with a different logic, such as the narrative constructed around Rathenau, the architect of a victorious Germany. In retrospect, "Il suo incontro col Ka-é-ha era stato inutile" (Morselli: 258), the intervention was useless, inasmuch as it failed to vindicate the master narrative of the supremacy of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, of Vienna as universal object of desire. Disillusioned, von Allmen rejects the "cultura sentimentale" and nostalgia for the past, and decides to live fully in and for the present.

Despite his critical stance towards the rituals of the old order, von Allmen finds that he has been shaped by it. The loss of the presence of a stable, changeless order creates a sense of lack.

The mementoes of the past remain, seemingly unchanged, creating the painful illusion that they still refer to a presence: “L’aspetto della strada, I passanti, I palazzi dalle facciate grevi, malinconiche, non erano cambiati” (Morselli: 258). Even though he rejects nostalgia and sentimentality, these signifiers of an unrecuperably lost world leave him without consolation: “Invece non riesco a togliermi l’*habitus* di cittadino di una grande capitale. Sapere che oggi l’Austria termina a sessantotto chilometri dalla Hofburg mi provoca un certo senso di angustia fisica, come un colletto stretto” (Morselli: 258-259).

In terms of vindicating the master narrative of Austrian supremacy, von Allmen’s intervention is a failure, but it can be rewritten and thus, reinterpreted as part of another narrative: as part of a mythological story, relocated into the context of Morselli’s rewriting of history, with von Allmen in the role of “l’Ulisse di quel surrogato di cavallo di Troia” (Morselli: 50). The recurring dreams which reflect his *Angst* over the loss of an ideal, of a consoling ever-presence, are reinterpreted in terms of the new secular religion founded by “Freud, diventato pontefice di una chiesa, o accademia, universale” (Morselli: 260), with Austria and the Emperor cast in the roles of substitutes for the mother and father of whom von Allmen was deprived early in his life. “E perché no, dopotutto? Può darsi. Può darsi anche questo” (Morselli: 261). Once the presence of the old order has been emptied, the signs which recall it can be transposed into other contexts, inscribed into other narratives.

The process of becoming integrated into narratives is part of a search for meaning, for interpretability. Through contextualisation, becoming part of a narrative, individual actions and events acquire the capacity to represent. The tasks performed by the humble municipal worker, *signor* Baumgartner, in the *Zentralfriedhof*, the principal cemetery of Vienna, where he is charged with protecting flowers deposited in memory of the deceased against destruction by rodents, acquire meaning

through being written into a narrative around the theme “L’Austria...era ed è un paese ordinato” (Magris: 214). Constantly reminded by the surroundings that “alles, wie’s kommt, auch vergeht”, living with the irrecoverable loss of a totalising order, *signor* Baumgartner may find consolation in representing the order of functionality and domesticated well-being, preserving something of that desirable city “wo die alten Häuser stehn...wo die lieblichen Mädchen gehn.”

IV

Vienna, the city of Mozart and Johann Strauss, of elegance and harmonious surfaces, symbol of well-being, centre of a cult worship of the arts (Zweig: 28 *et seq.*), universal object of desire, stable ever-presence, was being transformed during the first decade of the 20th century, but gradually, “senza sussulti e senza insulti, *auf gute Art*” (Morselli: 21-22). A non-threatening process of change, which created the impression that the represented order would always remain stably linked to its signs, that the whole and its parts would remain in balance, resisting fragmentation, that the centrifugal forces active in this Babel of a city (Magris: 206), in this heterogeneous Empire, would be counterbalanced indefinitely by symbols of durability.

Yet underlying the elegant veneer of a Strauss waltz, so ingenuous in its celebration of a *schöne blaue Donau* which has never been blue; underlying the Viennese operetta, so seemingly unquestioning in its frivolous enjoyment of the here and now, is, more than a casual acceptance that “alles, wie’s kommt, auch vergeht”, a “gioia che sempre fugge per sempre ritornare ma più tenue e lontano, nostalgica ma scettica di poter vincere la caducità” (Magris: 241). Even more disturbing is the relationship in Mozart between the underlying and the elegant surfaces, made seemingly harmless and reassuring by their perfect composition, their avoidance of exaggerated gestures; here, an abyss of despair and dissolution often hovers around the edges.

The critic, violating the rules of his profession, might ascribe an awareness of these aspects to von Allmen, the amateur painter of allegories (Morselli: 14), of surfaces which point away from them-selves, which have to be penetrated to discover the messages they are meant to convey. For his fellow Viennese, *Doktor* Sigmund Freud, expert in exploring the depths hinted at, yet veiled by the surface, viewing the city of everyman’s dreams

from the place where he is now commemorated as discoverer of the secret of dreams, the “profili curvilinei della città lontana” suggest “una mappa dei mondi interiori, mai esplorati del tutto” (Magris: 240).

Viewed from the outside, the surfaces of the Vienna “di allora” reflect “Una città accorta e riposata, non percorsa da paure e perplessità presaghe” (Morselli: 21), yet cracks appear, through which a darker side becomes visible. At Mayerling, in “un paesaggio lindo e sereno, una campagna austriaca da villeggiatura familiare” (Magris: 203), the country counterpart of the city’s “alten Häuser” and “lieblichen Mädchen”, the crown prince, Ferdinand, and his lover die mysteriously, an event which is covered up to protect the illusion of a “totalità perfetta”, of “unità armoniosa e compiuta” (Magris: 198), to preserve the *stato d’animo* of perennial well-being. A state of mind alien to the Empress Elizabeth, for whom Vienna does not represent an ever-present wholeness, but a “tiepido vuoto” (Magris: 244), undefined nostalgia, without consolation. In a way, the *schöne blaue Donau* symbolises the duality of the city, its enchanting surface in places flowing into the repulsive “schiuma della biancheria messa in lavatrice” (Magris: 204).

This duality, and especially a chronic unwillingness and inability to come to terms with its less savoury aspects, possibly contains the first seeds of decay. In Joseph Roth’s *Radetzkmarsch*, both the changeless rhythms of everyday life and the “tristezza...da caserma” (Magris: 227) are the result of being trapped in an unrepeatably past, of which the glory is founded upon an illusion. An undercurrent of fatality, of slow inexorable decline, of imminent destruction flows through the narrative. The Trotta family, Vienna, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, live “in un epilogo prolungato, nell’intervallo tra il tramonto e la fine, nel congedo protratto e differito” (Magris: 227). The precarious relationship between a surface which suggests wholeness and well-being and an underside which

exhibits the first signs of decay is held in place by “l’arte di vivere sull’orlo del nulla come se tutto fosse a posto” (Magris: 227). This casts a bitterly ironic reflection on the consolatory ever-presence of “Wien, Wien, nur du allein...”

Marginalised, repressed, the forces of centrifugality, of fragmentation, of destruction irrupt into the surface of a fragile harmony. The Empress Elizabeth, who secretly projects her own inner disharmony into poetry of dubious quality, dies at Geneva “per mano dell’anarchista italiano Lucchini” (Magris: 244), prefiguring the act which provoked Austria to a suicidal war. Von Allmen notes the surfacing of destructive forces in his *Tagebuch de fine Austriae*: “Quando qualcuno m’informò [...] che un incendio aveva distrutto la bella chiesa di Röschenen...ci vidi un presagio per l’Austria. Quel giorno cominciai questo diario” (Morselli: 255).

Some of these forces insidiously drift along in the flow of gradual decline, ripening in the conditions following the death of the Empire. At the time when he started his diary, von Allmen met an obscure fellow painter, Adolf Hitler, one of the poor and marginalised figures existing below the opulent surface of the Empire. *Herr* Hitler describes von Allmen as “un rappresentante della cultura, [...] un esponente della Razza”, adding, “lo dimostra alla sua alta statura, la sua pelle, dico il colore della sua pelle, e il resto” (Morselli: 255). Von Allmen rejects this contemptuously: “Lei mi applica dei criteri zootecnici. Suppongo che a Braunau i mercanti di bestiame parlino allo stesso modo” (Morselli: 255); branding *Herr* Hitler’s views as a way of thinking worthy perhaps of the vulgar margins, but unthinkable in the city of everyman’s dreams, civilised heart of the Empire.

Von Allmen’s riposte to the provincial painter echoes his description of the “processione del Corpus Domini che avrebbe dovuto esaltare il corpo mistico dello Stato” as “Materialmente, un pigia-pigia da fiera zootecnica” (Morselli: 14). The possibility suggests itself that some of the distasteful and unmentionable

debris which civilised Vienna would rather not think about is beginning to rise to the surface; that the heart of the Empire, symbol of stability and perennial well-being, centre of drama and music, is already contaminated, even poisoned. *Horribile dictu*, the poisonous debris may not be wholly alien to the elegant surface, may not be a completely foreign substance. Perhaps, the vulgar little provincial from Braunau is, somehow, both the polar opposite of the patriarchal “Mummy” and his low-life alter ego. Possibly, Braunau is both part of an alien world outside the civilised heart, and mystically linked to its shady underside, to that “brutalità mascherata di bonomia” which made of Vienna “anche un basso ventre della storia, una ‘stazione meteorologica della fine del mondo...” (Magris: 205).

Marginalised by that ideal city, presided over by the patriarchal Emperor, which is the symbol of stability and well-being, and the heart of a cosmopolitan Empire, the little provincial painter desires a return to the pure Germanic womb, an *Anschluss*, a “congiungimento con la grande Madre” (Morselli: 254). In this respect, *Herr* Hitler possibly expressed a desire which for a long time floated around in the recesses of the collective unconscious, unacknowledged, before coming into the open: “nel 1938 dopo l’*Anschluss* soltanto 1953 viennesi votarono contro l’annessione al Terzo Reich” (Magris: 219). When it came into the open, this desire allowed the vulgar provincial to appropriate the surface for his “criteri zootecnici”, opening the door for unimaginable brutality. For certain inhabitants of the best of all possible cities, being driven “fort von dem schönen Ort”, experiencing infinite *Sehnsucht*, became a nightmarish reality; as did going “fort von der Welt”, being separated from more than just “Liebe und Wein”, without the consolatory presence of “Wien, Wien, nur du allein...”

The obscure provincial who once lived on the margins of the capital came to preside over his own “rissa di esibizionismi”, his own “pigia-pigia da fiera zootecnica” (Morselli: 14). The

“processione del Corpus Domini che avrebbe dovuto esaltare il corpo mistico dello Stato” (Morselli: 14), made way for the *Triumph des Willens* of successive rallies, celebrating a concoction of quasi-mystical ideas, the violent birth of a new order from the Germanic womb. The ingenuous sentimentality of *Wien, du Stadt meiner Träume* became a distant memory, replaced by the quasi-religious fervour of *Deutschland über alles*, sung on the same melody as the old Imperial anthem, composed by “Papa” Haydn, the archetype of serene composure and classical purity (Magris: 251-252), the composer *par excellence* of playful inventiveness and elegant surfaces.

Once the centre of the old order is destroyed, the debris floating to the surface occupies the vacuum it has left. A new surface is created, new illusions, new rituals. While von Allmen could console himself that “là oltre le balastrate, una tradizione viveva e era fedele a se stessa” (Morselli: 15), Nazi-Fascist spectacle is founded upon fabrication, counterfeit, pastiche. Like the Evil One, it is incapable of creation, capable only of imitation. The new order is the celebration of death as condition for transfiguration, a cruel parody of the Christian ideal of rebirth and transformation. It offers a grim counterpoint to the lighthearted acknowledgement that “alles, wie’s kommt, auch vergeht.”

Like the old Imperial order, this new order has a dark underside. However, while the old order shied away from its shady alter ego, the dark underside of the new order is controlled from the centre, orchestrated from the surface. Repression, evasion, prevarication in the old order; the bureaucratisation of evil in the new order: mechanisms in the service of an illusory absolute.

V

The debris which for a time occupies the surface is washed away by the flow of history. The city of everyman's dreams remains, its innocence lost forever, while the voices of the exiled and the dead resonates through the little song which the "cultura sentimentale" produced in its honour. Yet the city remains, a "crocevia, luogo di partenze e di ritorni, di persone, famose e oscure, che la storia raccoglie per poi disperdere..." (Magris: 252). It is "un grande caffè, il luogo delle abitudini metodiche e del casuale andare e venire" (Magris: 252). As such, it is a symbol of mortality, because the "uscita definitiva dalla porta del caffè" (Magris: 252) is inevitable. Yet the "manichino di Peter Altenberg" (Magris: 195) tells us that the city-caffè is also a metaphor for the past as ever-presence, that it is the node where the voices of a multitude of witnesses reverberate.

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