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The Self That Writes

It is not easy to talk of oneself, of the self that writes. Every time I find myself in this position I feel like Scipio Slataper, a Triestine writer who at the beginning of this century, in 1912, in some way invented, created, the literary landscape of Trieste. Trieste, a city at the eastern border of Italy, now bordering on Slovenia. An Italian city which belonged for a long time to the Hapsburg Empire, a multinational Empire that included Germans, Italians, Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, Ruthenians, Hungarians, Croats, and Rumanians. Trieste also has a Slovenian minority, resident for centuries, other communities like the Greek and the Serbians, and during its commercial boom in the eighteenth and nineteenth century assimilated many people from different countries of Central Europe. In most cases they became Italians and often passionate Italian patriots with German, Slavic, Greek, Armenian family names. Before the First World War the Italian “irridentisti” in Trieste wanted Trieste to be part of Italy. In 1912 Trieste still belonged to the Austrian Empire.

I feel like Scipio Slataper, with his book *Il mio Carso*, whose first three sentences begin “I should like to tell you”. “I should like to tell you I was born on the Carso” - the Carso is the fascinating rocky slavic territory surrounding Trieste – “I should like to tell you I was born in Moravia, I should like to tell you I was born in Croatia ...” naturally, it isn't true, he was born in Trieste, but he is expressing his desire to speak to the others, to the Italians; but he, too, is an Italian; shortly after this he will die in the war, for the cause of the Italianity of Trieste. Slataper gives one the feeling that in order to speak of his own condition, of being Italian but not absolutely, similar to but not identical with his compatriots, he must do what the Greeks said poets do - i.e. lie. But lies, that is, certain metaphors, are often the only way to tell certain truths, to try to say what one is, and what is one's real destiny. Each one of us finds himself in that splendid parable of Borges' about a painter who paints landscapes, seas, rivers, trees only to realise in the end that he has painted his own self-portrait, because his identity is precisely his own way of seeing things.

Our identity is our way of looking at things. If I were asked to speak about myself, I would instinctively begin to speak about other people - my parents, my wife, my sons, people I love, friends of both sexes, teachers, landscapes, perhaps even animals - but certainly not about myself. I would relate stories of what has happened to others, but which are in some way integrated with my own. And through the way I spoke about other things and other people,

one could perhaps understand something of my ability or inability to love, my courage, my fears, my obsessions, my beliefs, my disillusionments.

I shall try to tell you something not about my books, but of how and why my books were born. It is not by chance that Borges' parable was chosen as the epigraph to one of my books, *Microcosms*, which like Danube has much to do with borders.

Let us start from Trieste itself, and an experience which for me was fundamental even before I was conscious of it: the experience of the border.

When I was a small boy - I was born in '39 - the border, which was very close, was not just any old border, but one which divided the world into two. It was the Iron Curtain. I saw that border on the Carso, when I went up there to play. And behind that border lay a world that was unknown, vast, threatening, the world of the East under the dominion of Stalin, a world one could not enter because the border was impassable. Every country has its East to repel. In Central Europe every nation tends to reject its own Eastern neighbour, considered as less civilized, underdeveloped. At the same time, behind the border lay a world I knew extremely well, the lands which had once formed part of Italy but which Yugoslavia had annexed at the end of the Second World War, lands I had been in when I was a very small child.

So in some way I felt that behind the border there was something both known and unknown, and I believe that this is fundamental to literature, which is a journey from the known to the unknown, but also from the unknown to the known, to an unknown which we appropriate.

Also by passing from one room to another in one's own house, it can happen that something that was familiar up until that moment will show itself strange or disquieting. And very often something or someone that we considered distant and different turns out, instead, to be close and alike. And this identity of known/unknown has, I believe, been basic for me. I felt that in order to grow up, I would have to cross that border, not simply with a passport but also spiritually, to make mine that world which was already mine. So that border has remained for me the symbol of all the borders that fence us in.

And Trieste, itself, was a place at that time totally forgotten, a kind of cul-de-sac in the Adriatic; one felt oneself right on the periphery both of history and life, and yet at the same time this periphery was the centre of the world because it was the line where East met West. It was from this that I realised that the feeling of being on the periphery of life and history is the concern not solely of those who live in a border city, but also of those who live at the world's centre, a centre which today no longer exists.

Then, too, Trieste was a world of whose future one had no clear idea - were it even to have a future - nor to what State it would belong (which meant, at the time of the Cold War, belonging to the West or to the Communist system). It was a world which many had to leave in order to find work; one experienced a sense of extreme precariousness. I believe it was from this that I derived my sensitivity towards the themes of exile, exodus, uprootedness, of borders lost and restored, planted anew - themes that recur again and again in what I have written. Many of my books are concerned, in different ways, with borders of all kinds - national, political, psychological, social, as well as borders within ourselves, between the different components of our Self, each of which frequently has no desire to know anything of the other. Danube, for instance, is above all a journey through the contemporary Babel, with its traps and chances, and through the hidden meanderings of the depths.

Expulsion, exodus, exile, borders lost and redrawn - all this formed and continues to form part of a Triestine's experience. I think, after the Second World War, of the 300,000 Italians who had to leave Istria, Fiume and other lands that had become Yugoslavian in order to escape an intolerable situation. For after the violence they had suffered at the hands of the Italians, the Slavs were enjoying the hour of their resurgence and also their revenge which, like all revenge, was indiscriminate. The Italian refugees left everything behind and lost it all. They also underwent for years the life of the refugee camp, finding themselves foreigners in their own land, looked upon with suspicion by other Italians like themselves in the cities where they sought to reconstruct their lives. Borders were lost, sometimes redrawn, also in their own hearts in this difficult situation which made them feel alone, isolated, prisoners of an understandable and bitter resentment, even though there were many who learnt a great lesson out of this painful experience, and realised how, particularly in those mixed, composite lands of the Upper Adriatic - as in every mixed and composite borderland - only dialogue and meeting between different cultures and peoples can make a free and civilised life possible.

Sometimes the experience of the border leads to the discovery that one is also from the other side. Such is the case, for example, of the companion of my life, Marisa Madieri, who in her *Verde acqua* has told the story of her family and childhood. Recounting how as a child, together with her family, she left her native city of Fiume and lived for years the difficult, outcaste existence of a refugee camp, Marisa Madieri discovers that the origins of her family - an Italian family at that moment persecuted by the Slavs inasmuch as it was Italian - are partly Slav and Hungarian. So she discovers that she is also from the other side, that she belongs, albeit partially, to the world that is threatening her. Thereby she discovers a sense of plural identity, of being

Italian but, so to speak, a cut above. Others, with the same experience, came to different conclusions, felt constrained to close themselves off in their own particularity, in a bitter, lager-like isolation, a feeling of being misunderstood by everyone. This feeling matched the reality and the injustice they underwent, but in some way it came to pinion them, to lock them into memories and fantasies of the past.

Trieste also had other significant elements. One was the short circuit between its decline and a cultural flourishing, which meant one couldn't be sure whether life was about to finish or to begin. Then its two dimensions: on the one hand the vast dimension of the sea - for me the sea is inseparable from life's most basic experiences. City of the sea, Trieste with its once so important port was open to contacts with the furthestmost countries of the earth, of which the sailors - many at that time - brought back home news, stories. And, on the other hand, the wild, poetic landscape of the Carso, and behind that the hinterland, the continental world, Central European, where begins not the epic of the sea with its freedom and abandon, but rather the great Middle European culture of anxiety, of defence. The two professions most characteristic of Trieste - both represented also in my own family - reflected this twofold spirit: the profession of sailor, the life spent aboard ships upon the sea, and a job with the great insurance companies, like Generali, which had as one of its employees in its Prague office a certain Franz Kafka.

But in '57 I left Trieste for Turin. Turin was the great culture of Gobetti, of Gramsci, the culture of history as opposed to the culture of the unease of history, of engagement as opposed to malaise, the culture of antifascism. Turin in those years was still "the modern city of the peninsula", as Gramsci had called it many years before. Experiencing to the full the social changes sweeping across Italy and their politico-cultural significance, it compelled one to keep a sharp lookout on reality.

Turin was a fundamental experience; certainly I couldn't have grown up without it. In Turin I learnt freedom, I learnt to think, I also learnt to have an intense yet free relationship with Trieste. I truly think that, without the Turin experience, I wouldn't have written. Turin in those years was somewhat the opposite of Trieste. Trieste was declining; Turin during the 50's and 60's doubled its population, became the throbbing centre, for better or worse, of what was happening in the life of the country. It was a city that forced one to keep pace with history; it provided a corrective to the disenchantment and sleepy, gypsy freedom of Trieste. Nostalgically, I began to read about Trieste, to reflect on certain things, becoming aware of the small realities I had lived but not considered: libraries in the houses of certain of my schoolfellows where there were German books, and not simply Italian; the Carso, which was not merely the place to go for walks but also the meeting-point with Slav

civilisation; Jewish culture, which in Trieste was of special significance. And out of this was born my first book, *The Hapsburg Myth*, a book which I wrote - I was 24 when I published it - without really knowing what it was I wanted to write. This always happens to me, even now, whatever the text. Only when I have written a third of it, sometimes half, do I know what book I am writing, what the explicit theme is a metaphor for, and thus what its real theme is - just as a poem about a tree, for example, and the enveloping light, might be the only way, at that particular moment, to express one's love for a person.

I felt as if I had to take possession of a pre-natal past: to understand my world I had to come to terms with what lay behind it and therefore with that Hapsburg world which Trieste had belonged to and which had become part of Triestine reality. I believe it was my good fortune to approach that Hapsburg world as it then was - little studied, little known. It seemed a twilight world; history often plays such tricks, something which seems bygone suddenly, twenty years later, reappears as new, while what seemed modern at first now appears passe. And these time-shifts, I think, have had much to do with what I have written, because writing is also an undoing of historical time as we find it, an undoing of the web of Penelope to remake it anew. And it was my good fortune that I approached that Hapsburg world not through the nostalgic tales of those who mourned for it but of those who, like Marin for example, had fought to destroy it, fifty years earlier - and had discovered its greatness only after having rejected it. This, too, is fundamental, because I believe that nostalgia ought always to be filtered through detachment, through criticism. Joseph Roth, one of the greatest of those nostalgic for the empire, maintained: "Only because when I was a young man I rebelled against Franz-Joseph do I have the right to weep for him and weep for that world which reared my fidelity through rebellion." In short, every promised land is repossessed by retraversing the track through the desert.

That world interested me for more than one reason, but principally I was trying to discover why it had left so strong a sense of nostalgia and regret. First of all the nostalgia and the regret went to the multinational component, to the Mitteleuropa of the many peoples. That world had been the symbol of order, of wholeness, of a harmonious life, its passing to be regretted inasmuch as it was a world in which everything had its precise measure; but that world had also produced a culture which, contrariwise, had denounced the vacuum, the crisis of civilisation. It was that world of which one of its greatest writers, Musil, speaks, in his novel *The Man Without Qualities*, when he recounts that when the Committee for Parallel Action is looking for the prime foundation upon which that civilisation is based, discovers that there is no such foundation, that reality is utterly groundless. Or Hermann Broch speaks of the "empty box", because in every theatre - symbolic of that empire, the social life of that world - there was a box reserved for the possible arrival of the

emperor who, naturally enough, not having the gift of ubiquity, didn't appear, and so the symbol of that world was an empty space. The Hapsburg world had been regretted as a last totality, namely a world that despite everything was united, an image of a life that contains the sense of its unity, that connects all fragments; and so an epic world, a wholeness of life and its representation, a world whose end had thus been experienced as a parable of the life of not just one, but of tradition, of the possibility itself of living and representing life as a totality. And my book reflected this feeling in its structure.

This all-absorbing, epic quality constitutes at once the meaning and inevitably the limit of *The Hapsburg Myth*, and can arouse objections in the reader and in the author himself, who is by now also a reader. The attempt to contain a whole, vast chapter of cultural history in a complete and coherent discourse compels one at times to renounce uncertainty, to take up the axe and thin out the wood of phenomena so as not to get lost in its labyrinth, to sacrifice certain authors or certain aspects of them, to enclose characters and movements within a certain framework or exclude them from it - peremptorily, but unavoidably so.

The epic nature of the book was also born of the desire to defend, for one last time, the sense of the totality of the world and history against the inclination to break up all systems and fragment reality, latent also in the author. From this point of view *The Hapsburg Myth* belongs to the eve of a '68 then yet to come. Some years afterwards, the great spread of Austrian culture and, in particular, Austrian literature in the West coincided with the growing popularity of the Frankfurt school of negative thought, which placed the emphasis on everything that progress leaves unresolved and distorted or cast aside. Austrian literature appeared as one of the great voices of that malaise with History which, from the end of the 60's on, swept over the cultural landscape, endangering those grand, all-absorbing systems that had imposed a reassuring, unifying order upon reality's contradictions. Austrian literature appeared as the expression of a negativity that was perceived as the only true position in thought and art: a voice given to the division within the individual, broken up into the Musilian "delirium of the many", and to the failure of language; an art of subtraction, which pointed to the incompatibility between intelligence and social roles; the diagnosis of a reality constituted only by Parallel Action, parallel, however, to others that do not exist, by sham substitutions for the true life which, in its turn, does not exist either.

From these themes were then born other books of mine - *Clarisse's Ring*, *Ithaca and Beyond*. The title of the latter indicates the two possible journeys; it poses the question whether at the end of the journey - the journey of life, naturally, since from the *Odyssey* on, the journey has been the symbol par

excellence for life - the protagonist, like the Ulysses of both Homer and Joyce, returns home changed by the experiences acquired on the road but confirmed in his own identity, having reasserted the meaning and unity of existence, or whether instead, as in Musil, the experience of life's journey has become that of a rectilinear journey in which one goes ever onward, gradually losing one's way, losing parts of oneself, never being able to return home and undergoing all the incoherence and senselessness of the world.

Even before writing, travelling has been an essential element in my life, which for many years has been a continual departing - departing in order to return, bringing the world back home in order to then set out again, always carrying everything at one's back; departing also in order to overcome the dark fear of leaving the womb to venture forth into reality and history, the child's desire to pull the blanket over his head and close his eyes. Perhaps this is why I so much like the Yiddish writers who tell of the exit from the shtetl, the small Eastern-Jewish village, and the ensuing encounter with the chaos of the world where, so writes Malamud, "it snows History".

These themes, which in *Danube* and *Microcosms* become both the subject and the form of the narrative, appear persistently in numerous Germanic essays and studies. In fact, they permeate modern western culture in general, but particularly the German. I have acquired a profound sense of the theme from its thorough working-out in classical-romantic German culture, in particular as expressed in the *Bildungsroman*, the "formation novel". This confronts the great question posed by modern society concerning the division of labour: whether the individual should form his own personality by immersing himself in the "prosaic world" of social exigencies, sacrificing the greater part of his own needs and possibilities, and unilaterally developing himself in a single direction to become thereby a useful cog in the machinery of reality, or whether the individual can and must develop in all directions, without relinquishing any dream, without accepting bourgeois dullness, but staking all on the "poetry of the heart", as Novalis wishes in his *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, in flat contrast to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*.

This Germany of the classical-romantic age and that of the great historiography and culture of the early twentieth century (with Simmel and, in particular, the young Lukacs, whose influence on me was all-important) were and are great models to teach one to come to grips with political and social reality, however ephemeral, but in order, thereby, to pose oneself basic, radical questions as to the meaning of history, being, life. It is the pathos of *Kultur*, as Antoni called it, namely the pathos inherent in the attempt to search for the force which holds the world together by going to seek it even in the simplest and most fragmentary of life's details, those that seemingly no totality, in particular no metaphysical totality, can accommodate.

It is within this context that the majority of my essays on German literature were born, concentrating particularly on the classical-romantic age, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and on the fin de siècle. The more specifically Germanic studies - such as those, to give but one example, dedicated to Heine and especially to Hoffmann, to his magnificent portrayal of the rending of the Self and the shattering of its unity, and to his elaboration of another form of reason to include the unconscious and its variety - are extended to European subjects and authors in general. Such is the case in Clarisse's Ring, which is an inquiry - via writers of different literatures - into nihilism and how it relates to the possibility or impossibility of narrating, the dialectic between expression and the inexpressible - present also in the short articles which make up another book, Behind Words.

The symbiosis between Trieste and Turin has also been significant for my Germanic work. Turin, birthplace of Italian Germanic studies and “the modern city of the peninsula” - has been for Italy the heart of modernity and modernity's radical transformation of man and the world, with all that this signifies as regards the journey to the Promised Land or the dissolving of its vision, the search for and the exile from the true life. To be Germanists at Turin meant coming to terms with modernity understood as destiny, with that Germany which had been the cradle of Marxism and his historical and ideological background to the strength and weakness of his utopia. The dream of a Marx who reads Hölderlin - as Thomas Mann said - namely, the reconciliation between the prose of the world, freed from alienation, and the poetry of the heart, is a cornerstone of modern German literature, and this dream was experienced to the full by the culture of Turin.

Fundamental to my initiation into Germany and its civilisation was also, indubitably, Trieste. Even indirectly - for example, by way of those schoolfellows in whose homes there were other classics and, in particular, another style, and who, in the lively arguments of adolescence, indirectly afforded me a glimpse of the great and learned Germany of the Holy Roman Empire, that incoherent, phantasmal totality, a dream amid the fragments of the world. This would help me understand, later, what Thomas Mann wanted to express with his phrase “desperately German”, that divorce between appearance and inwardness, that tangle of contorted inwardness, passion for order and disposition towards chaos which interweaves, in its greatness and its meanness, so much of German history. But perhaps the real beginning was the contact at school, the middle school, with a teacher of German - present in Danube, albeit under a different name - who, with his totally heterodox readings and original comments, introduced us to an otherwise inaccessible German culture. In short, thanks to him, we were able to grasp, already at

twelve or thirteen years of age, what later I would rediscover, by reading Doktor Faustus, in the description of Kaisersaschern. This, too, is an aspect of the “border identity” which characterises, or characterised, Trieste - as is stated by the title of a book I wrote years ago together with Angelo Ara.

These years of apprenticeship, of traineeship in Germanic studies, first in Trieste and later in Turin, were continued with a period spent in the third city in my life, Freiburg in Breisgau in the Black Forest and, more precisely, in the inn Der Goldene Anker which I consider, equally with Munich, one of my academic alma maters.

However, it must be said that if my culture is particularly German, the reading - especially fiction - which contributed decisively to forming my sense of the world and of life is not at all German. French, Russian, English - to say nothing of Italian - have counted much more. Of the ten famous books I would take with me to the desert island very few indeed would be German. There were also the literatures outside Europe, poetry from the Tang period in China, the Indian Ramayana and Mahabharata and Tagore. There is perhaps in me something paradoxical, which one can also find in other writers of the Triestine border. If my conceptual and philosophical baggage is in good part German, my way of articulating it in language, of finding its form, of looking at the world and recounting it, is incorrigibly Italian. As a writer I am absolutely Italian. I consider my country to be the Italian language; the way I am when in the presence of people and things is indissolubly tied to it, to its syntax and its vocabulary and all that they mean on the level of sensibility, imagination, perceptive and emotional make-up. One could say that I think according to German categories, but that I live, look, feel, desire and narrate in Italian.

Ithaca and Beyond and Clarisse's Ring constitute a kind of intermediary genre between my Germanistic studies, expanded to include European literature (particularly in Clarisse's Ring), and a looser kind of essay-writing, which is partly connected with my journalistic work for the Corriere della Sera, and is both literary and historico-scientifically oriented, something that is also reflected in its tone and style. Both books range freely through very different literatures.

Ithaca and Beyond (1982), made up of shorter essays, also takes in non-European literatures. The short essays are constructed like chapters in a regular “essay-novel in progress”. These are linked to recurring themes, to the unity of certain leitmotifs such as the great theme of the journey, the problematic, fragmentary nature of identity, of every identity, combined with the ironical, nostalgic search for unity, the metamorphosis of the individual. By investigating great authors - from Svevo to Musil, Ibsen to Flaubert, Mann

to Walser, Singer to Borges to Black Elk - the book relives the disintegration of a harmonious idea of the world, together with the good and ill it brought, the new roads it opened and the landmines it laid. The central theme of the book is the absence, or rather the disappearance, of foundations, of any central ground capable of gathering the scattered details of the world and imposing unity upon them. It deals with a process which has collided head-on with contemporary western culture, involving both loss and liberation, decadence and progress. The argument in the essays meanders ironically and nostalgically among the fragments of a broken whole, its style mingling passion and disenchantment, carefully setting limits to the void and intent on evoking a full and epic sense of life. The great tension between living and writing is once more examined by following the itinerary of some of the greatest writers to have lived and suffered and given it voice, and is intertwined with the tension between the life and life, between the search for an essence that gives meaning to existence and the longing to reach a free and natural existence, untrammelled by the search for meaning. Literary criticism becomes a pretext for a journey towards an irrecoverable absolute, a road on which the individual is revealed as a nomad on the periphery of reality, a stowaway in history.

This itinerary amid the depths of contemporary life and its unreality, disillusioned yet obstinately in need of a value, tries out routes so widely differing as to be at times contradictory: those that aim at the reconstruction of unity and those that advance into fragmentariness. The dialogue with the main themes of contemporary thought - in particular with nihilism in its various formulations - draws up alongside to confront the historical condition; literary interpretation alternates with autobiographical testimony and ethico-political participation; the observation-post of the detached moralist unites with personal commitment to the great ideal tensions of the present. The ambiguity and secretiveness of literature - necessary virtues or vices that it cannot do without except by betraying itself - are intertwined with ethical clarity, no less necessary to living. Awareness of the negative wrests from crisis and the culture of crisis moments of humour and joie de vivre. It is an essay constructed in the oblique manner of the type of essay that speaks of something mainly in order to speak of something else, and so chooses the indirect approach in order to dissimulate but also mainly to tell of the irreducible need for a provisional truth - with all the uncertainty and discretion imposed by the historical situation, but also by ethical obligation.

Clarisse's Ring (1984) resumes and develops these themes in a far more thoroughgoing and analytic way, transferring the insights of *Ithaca* and *Beyond* onto a much larger scale of inquiry, supported by the whole critico-philosophical apparatus. The book takes its title from an episode in Musil's *Man without Qualities* in which Clarisse, the female character who is a kind of

Nietzschean stand-in, speaks of her ring, namely of something that has no centre but exists only in its boundaries, thereby rendering it a metaphor for the historical, cultural and existential condition. There is no centre to Hapsburg Austria, where Musil's novel saw the light; there is no centre or point of reference to *Parallel Action*, which seeks in vain the foundation upon which to base the edifice of its world, mirror of the whole western world; there is neither centre nor unity even to the individual Self, which becomes aware that it is only an "anarchy of atoms" - as Nietzsche and Musil said, following Bourget - a disconnected, contradictory plurality, a "man without qualities", or a series of qualities without the man.

Clarisse's Ring is a book dealing with nihilism, however understood, involving both life and its representation - the modes, the forms, the possibility and impossibility of narrating it according to whether one perceives a meaning in it or not. Organised into various chapters devoted to various authors - Nietzsche, Hofmannsthal, Jacobsen, Ibsen, Blei, Hamsun, Walser, Rilke, Svevo, Musil, Canetti, Doderer, Sperber, Singer and others - the book analyses how European literature went through the experience of the crisis or dissolution of the subject (which implies that of language) and the experience of nihilism. A point of departure, a defining perspective angle, is Nietzsche's famous diagnosis - which he picks up from Bourget and which Musil will in turn pick up in the *Diaries*, making it the theme, the poetic, the structure itself of his unfinished and interminable *Man Without Qualities* - which states that life no longer resides in the whole, in an organic and complete All. Reality, speech, the very self, as Nietzsche says in a passage from *The Wagner Case*, turn into an "anarchy of atoms" that upsets every hierarchy, restores "the liberty of the individual", the "vibrancy and exuberance of life" when released from meanings and values. In the teeming chaos of life, every particular acquires a savage autonomy, "equal rights for all".

The book attempts to see how all this is connected with the crisis of the grand style - namely the capacity to reduce the world to essentials and to contain the proliferation of the multifarious in a concise unity of meaning - and to analyse the contradictory position of Nietzsche with regard to the grand style itself. That is to say, on the one hand he celebrates, in an 1888 fragment, the grand style as the will triumphant, a force capable of "controlling and constraining chaos", an extension of the gaze upon "greater multitudes and expanse", namely the hierarchic, methodical, legislative perspective from on high. It is an organising force which does not discover an immanent meaning in life but rather, as Gottfried Benn will later say, following in his footsteps, imposes "a law that is opposed to life", subjects its swarming nature to the imperious will-to-form. On the other hand, in the same fragment Nietzsche exaggerates the grand style for opposite reasons, identifying it with "the refining of the organ so as to perceive countless tiny, fleeting things." The "elation and

power” associated with the grand style, so he says, are identified not with Apollonian control or self control, but with the Dionysian dispersal of the Self in the flux of the perceptible. The perceiving of countless tiny, fleeting things shatters every unity and hierarchy, emancipates parts from every whole, and confers upon each of them, loosened from every nexus, a savage autonomy, the “equal rights for all”.

This entails a dissolution of the subject, both linguistic and psychological. True father of the avant-garde, Nietzsche breaks up the “bias” of the word, hard “as rock”, which benumbs life (Daybreak; Human, All Too Human). There is no longer a coherent subject that can embrace, select and unify multiplicity within a higher perspective and so clasp the world within the unity of the sentence. As long as one thinks in sentences with a full-stop - so Musil will write in the Diaries - certain things cannot be said and the plurality of the real emerges in inexhaustible fragmentariness: “language rarely places plurals at the disposal of the subspecies of feeling”. This in turn entails a radical crisis for the individual, who senses his own discontinuity and plurality. The protagonist of Dostoevsky's Notes from the Underground - whom for this reason Nietzsche considers so similar to his own superman or “beyond-man” - understands and announces that this collapse of his individuality derives, Nietzsche-wise, from the lack of any foundation; he says he does not possess the prime causes upon which to base himself and, as “professional thinker”, searches in vain for an original basis, because each cause refers him to a preceding cause and so on backwards into infinity, a bottomless abyss in which every personal unity is lost. The self appears “unsavable” - so Mach declares, to whom Musil dedicates his doctoral thesis in 1908 - and splits up into the simple elements that constitute it, into the “anarchy of atoms”. On all fronts - as Musil writes in Man Without Qualities - the self loses the sense it had, till then, of being a “sovereign who actually governs”.

Nietzsche himself said that his Superman was close, if not almost identical, to the protagonist of Dostoevsky's Notes from the Underground. Both, in fact, foresee the advent of a new type of man, with a different anthropological make-up - in his way of being and feeling - from the traditional individual. In his Superman, Übermensch, Nietzsche did not see a Superman, an individual of superior capabilities, more gifted than others, but, as I have already said, a “Beyond-man”, a new form of the self, no longer solid and unified but constituted of an anarchy of atoms, a multiplicity of psychic nuclei and compulsions no longer imprisoned in the unyielding cuirass of individuality and conscience. Today our reality - more virtual with every passing day - is the background for this possible mutation of the self.

All this clearly destroys every ideal as to the formation of the individual and every Bildungsroman. Disrupting his own autobiography in an hallucinatory disconnectedness, Strindberg says of himself, speaking in the third person: "He never became himself, never a complete individual." Hamsun, in his 1890 lectures in Cristiania, contrasts the coherent psychology of characters - that "character" already rejected by Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* - to the unconscious life of the soul, "that world of networks and cells and corners and disconcerting depths in which everything lives, moves, changes..." Clarisse's *Ring* analyses the crisis of the word, intimately connected with that of the individual subject. It investigates the connection between nihilism and melancholy, which led so many characters in the great literary works of the nineteenth century - from Jacobsen to Goncharov - to feel a gap between the self and life, whereby the subject feels that his life is no longer his life but rather a territory he fails to penetrate and become part of, an extraneity which does not belong to him and which he does not feel he belongs to, a continuous flight of something which he has never possessed and which therefore is not his, but which he is nostalgic for, as if he had lost it.

European literature affords many examples of this dissociation: for the inhabitants of the village of Oblomovka, in Goncharov's *Oblomov*, life runs alongside them like a river upon whose banks they sit in order to contemplate it. And Niels Lyhne too, the hero of Jacobsen's homonymous novel, realises he neither swims nor otherwise participates in the river of life, but watches it from its banks; he feels himself always on the point of "leaving for the Spanish lands of life" - which obviously means, therefore, that he feels he has not yet entered them. He hears the "money of life" clinking in his pocket without being able to extract it. Oblomov asks himself "When does one live?" just as Rilke wonders, in a letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé, "when is the present?" when one truly lives. And on the other hand Oblomov, tossing and turning in bed in his distress, says "life is closing in on all sides!;" he feels that life is its own hindrance, that the quotidian, plagued by an incessant swarm of cares, distances the individual from its truth. Ibsen warns that to claim or delude oneself that one is living a true life is megalomania, knowing well that this megalomania is necessary. But he knows, too, that only by realising how difficult it is to live a genuine life is it possible to get a little closer to that life. Svevo, too, will say that the light of life is dimmed by the anxiety of living, that existence destroys its own meaning.

Examples could continue at will. The book seeks to wrestle with a great crisis in the novel and the narrative form - exemplified above all in Musil, Svevo and Canetti; and it is inseparable from a far more profound existential crisis that has radically transformed the life of the individual, society and, indeed, our whole cultural climate where nihilism seems to reign supreme in the triumph of indifference and universal interchangeability - the world of

Nashville, with which the book closes. Nihilism embroils life and its portrayal, the possibility of finding a meaning in it and of representing that meaning, of feeling its unity - or not. Nietzsche and Dostoevsky saw in their time and in the future - a future which is in part still ours, but is in part already our present - the advent of this nihilism, the end of values and value-systems, with the difference that for Nietzsche it was a liberation to be celebrated, for Dostoevsky a disease to be combated. In the impending future much will depend on the choice our civilisation makes between these two positions - whether it will combat nihilism or take it to its extremes. And so in Clarisse's Ring the literary analysis, while paying close attention to the technical aspects of the crisis in narrative forms, takes on an existential value, becomes the attempt to venture into an epochal crisis that most certainly does not concern literature alone.

On my road to Mitteleurope I encountered eastern-Jewish civilisation, from which was born the book *Far from Where*, born, indeed, out of a profound interest in Roth, but also Singer, whom I met - one of the great meetings of my life. The book was inspired, in fact, by an epiphany I had while reading an old Jewish story, the story of two Eastern-Jews who live in Poland. The one meets the other laden with luggage at the station and asks him: "Where are you going?" to which the other replies: "I'm going to Argentina." "You're going far!" exclaims the first. But the second: "Far from where?" This is a Talmudic response, where the answer is a question, and signifies on the one hand that the Jew who lives in exile is always far from everything because he has no country, lives, literally, in exile, and on the other hand that having a country not in space but in time, in the book, in tradition, in the Law, he is never far from anything.

This civilisation interested me greatly. It is a civilisation which has suffered, under enormous violence, uprooting, exile, persecution, threat of annihilation of identity, but opposed them with an extraordinary individual resistance; a civilisation which has the charm possessed by children and certain grand old men, free and genuine, sufficient unto themselves.

All this, however, has also another, a distant point of departure, in a story which I carried inside myself for many years: *Inferences from a Sabre*, my first story or short novel. What was it that interested me? Again here an experience, the experience of a border lost and found.

In the winter of '44-'45, the last year of the war, I was in Udine, a city close to Trieste, with my mother because my father was sick in hospital. Udine was occupied by the Germans and by Krasnov's Cossacks, whom the Germans had assembled partly from prisoners taken during the attack on the Soviet Union, partly from those exiled Whites who had left Russia after the Revolution. The

Germans had promised them a Cossack state, a Kosakenland, which according to the original plan should have been in the USSR. But as the Germans and their allies gradually retreated, this land shifted ever further west until, for a few months, it was created in Italy, in the Carnia, a Region of Friuli. So the Friulian villages, whence my grandfather had come as a boy in order to work in Trieste, suddenly acquired Cossack names. In a little hotel in Villa di Verzegnis, Krasnov - the Cossack Ataman whom the Germans had dredged up out of oblivion and set at the head of this army - had established, among the pots and pans, a little Cossack court.

A complex and contradictory situation. First of all the Cossacks came to acquire a homeland by robbing others of theirs, but then this desire for authenticity became something false, something bogus, for there was nothing more bogus than a Cossack homeland between Trieste and Udine. It is an episode that exemplifies how the desire for authenticity easily becomes perverted through the alliance with fascism, and transformed, without one's being aware, into its opposite, the counterfeit. Then, too, I was also interested in the story of Krasnov. He, an old man, after having already once fought and lost his battle, his fighting against the reds in the years of the Russian Revolution, after having written, even, novels in which he had in some way understood or seemed to have understood the truth in outline, then turns to repeat a life already lived, cherishing the illusion of a great adventure, great military campaigns, all the while being used for the meaner and more odious operations of war.

The Cossacks surrendered to the English on the promise that they would not be handed over to the Soviets; but they were and some Cossacks, with their families, drowned themselves in the Drava, while others were tried and executed in Russia. As I said, I carried this story inside me for a long time. It struck me how one wanted to believe that Krasnov had died while fleeing, disguised as a simple soldier, whereas we know that Krasnov was handed over to the Soviets and hanged, in '47, in Moscow. But even when the historical truth was re-established, one still wanted to believe that Krasnov was that unknown dead soldier. I too, in an article in the *Corriere* had presented the facts with some stylistic bias, some adverb, as if to say: "... I have to record this - but who knows, perhaps Krasnov was the unknown dead soldier ..." and I wondered what poetic truth lay behind this desire to believe in a version historically false. As a story it is highly Borgesian, and I told it to Borges himself in Venice. I wanted to give him this plot, as a gift. But he said to me: "This is the story of your life. Write it." World literature lost a masterpiece, but I wrote my first novel. And perhaps it is a key to many things I wrote later. Its protagonist is not Krasnov but rather an old priest who relives and relates the event, thereby changing, through this reliving and relating, his own life.

Why tell stories, I ask myself every so often. I don't know exactly; perhaps, growing old, one realises that it is ever more difficult to interpret, to classify, to judge - but one can tell stories. Moreover some experiences demand the story for their telling. I believe that our every experience is born inextricably linked to its own stylistic form ... thus, when I wrote the play *Stadelmann*, I did not want to write a theatrical piece; that story was born within me exactly as if I had seen the bodies, heard the voices, as if I had not to interpret life but show it. As Chekhov said. "Literature interprets life, the theatre shows it." Everything is born linked to its own form. This story of a contentious, worn-out man, continually stumbling and cutting himself on the blades of existence, face to face with nothing, of necessity required a language broken and fragmentary, a voice inseparable from the physicality of body and gesture - namely, theatre.

The other books, too, were born in a manner similar to that of *Inferences*, almost always from a combination of a profound interest in a particular subject - a motive, a character, a story - and an immediate cause, some circumstance which acts as a midwife and brings to light the objects and figures of that same profound interest.

And so *Danube* was born. Again, as with *The Hapsburg Myth*, initially I had no clear idea as to what I wanted to do. I remember when, in '82, with Marisa, my wife, and some friends, we had begun a journey into Slovakia, and how, looking around us, near that border between the west and the "other" Europe (I believe that much of what I have written was also born of the desire to remove this adjective "other, to make people realise that that, too, is Europe), we saw the beautiful glittering of the waters, "The meadows of the Danube;" one could not distinguish between grass and water. One could not say where or what the Danube was. It was an enchanting September afternoon, full of light, and we experienced one of those rare moments of harmony, friendship, choral joy, in which we felt in unison with life and its flow. Then there was a sign: "Danube Museum": This word, "museum", was so strange amid the enchantment of nature at that moment. As if a pair of lovers on a park bench discovered they were forming part - without their knowing it - of an exhibition about love, as if we ourselves were figures and objects in a museum. I am not sure whether it was me or Marisa, who observed: "What would happen if we went onwards on foot, walking to the mouth of the Danube?" Thus began those four years of travelling, writing, rewriting, wandering, where the Danube is indubitably once again the symbol of the border, since the Danube is a river which crosses so many borders as to be the symbol of the need to cross borders, borders not only national, political, social but also psychological, cultural, religious. Also the borders within us, those which are

among the parts of our self which do not wish to know of one another; so the journey is also a journey into our own Hell and in that Babel of the world of today that certainly finds its particular symbol in Central Europe, but is a Babel of the whole world and its turbulent transformations - now devastating, now redeeming, but always disquieting - which seems to transform man himself and his awareness of life and history. Danube - as critics have observed-is a post-modern Odyssey, a journey in space and time, through the misunderstandings, tragedies, and enchantments of life and history. Sternian sentimental journey and half-hidden novel, quixotic epos and self-parody, Danube is a Central European Decameron that gathers together countless bizarre, comic, tragic stories of innumerable characters - the greater, the lesser, and the least - stories swept away by the river's current or stranded on its bank. These, as has been noted, arrange themselves in such a way that they eventually form the face and destiny of the traveller, the portrait of the individual of an epoch-making mutation. A fresco which creates its own narrative genre, ironical and passionate, dramatic and light, grotesque and poignant like the weird reality it recounts, with its grace, its horrors and its soap bubbles.

The Danube flows into the sea. The journey towards the sea which is Danube is also the symbol of freedom from defensive anxiety; a journey from things penultimate towards those ultimate. The sea is a constant dimension for me - there is much water in what I write. There are many seas in my life, starting from the sea of Trieste, Barcola, of course...the Riviera of Trieste, where my mother brought me since when I was a very small child, is tied to my very first memories, it's the place of my first adventures, then later it has been the place of the first love enchantments. Then the sea of Rovigno, the sea of Salvore, most of all the sea of Cherso, the sea of Miholascica, San Michele.

This sea is obviously part of the sentimental education of a person from Trieste, in almost each family from Trieste, in mine too, there is someone that spent his life on the sea. And the sea means a lot of things: there is the sea of challenge, of proof, the symbol of the great adventure of life, of the dangers you have to face; one of the greatest stories ever written, the Odyssey, which tells about the story of a journey through life, never could have existed without the sea. What I feel, though, maybe more than this 'erected position' sea, let's say, more than the sea of challenge, is the 'stretched position' sea, the sea of abandon, the sea we are made of, I think the human body is 70% water. We come from the sea as species, as individuals too, in the first weeks of life we learn to swim before we can even walk. This relaxed sea imparts a sense of life as a vast unity, whatever might happen; it imparts a sense of the global breath of life. That is why I think the sea is close to the Epic, to life, to the story of life that derives its meaning from it. So this sense of the epic

continuity of existence - which when in anguish, at night, in the dark, the fracture, I often feel I lose - is every time restored to me by the sea.

The sea is strictly bound to love for me. This relaxed sea gives the sense of life as a huge unity, no matter what; it gives a sense of a global breath of life. That's why I think the sea is near Epics, to life, to the story of life that gets its meaning from it. So this sense of epic continuity of existence - that I often feel I lose in anguish, in the night, in the darkness, in the fracture - is given back to me each time by the sea. My tale *Conde*, too, is a story all of water. The sea is inseparable from the image of eros, of abandon, of harmony. If you like, an "epic" image. Also *Blindly* is strongly marked by the presence of the sea. So the novel *A Different Sea* was born of the longing for the sea seen as the symbol of "persuasion". Persuasion, according to the philosopher Michelstaedter, in his masterpiece *La Persuasione e la Rettorica*, means the present life, the capacity for living each moment without sacrificing it to tomorrow, which we do when as all too often we find ourselves hoping that time will pass quickly inasmuch as we are waiting for the doctor's report, the holidays, the first reviews of a book; so we burn life up, we want already to have lived, and so in some way to be a little closer to death. I have the impression, the physical sensation, that the world has increased the speed with which it tears away the present; it is like having a rug continually pulled from under one's feet, taking the present from living, the only life which truly is. Children do not programme themselves; if they run it is not to reach something; they run in order to run, only because they like to run. The sea is the symbol of this present: when one looks at the sea and listens to the surf one wants nothing else; one wants exactly what one is doing at that moment; no one can add anything. There is a terrible sentence of Ibsen's which I recall in the book. Ibsen said: "Professing to live, to live the true life, is megalomania." He knew that without such megalomania we cannot live, but that living is extremely difficult. In *A Different Sea* I tell the story of a man who tried to live a pure, absolute life, stripping it of all that life has that is not authentic, not absolute, and up to a certain point this enriches life; but this life, from which everything superfluous has been subtracted, ends up by being reduced to an essence so pure, so evanescent, as to become perilously akin to nothingness. *A Different Sea* is one of those stories I'm continually telling - every writer tells, in various forms, the same story - that is the violence, both destructive and self-destructive, which is in those who seek to live the absolute within history. This man, in search of the authentic life, ends by destroying his own life and those of others. Not because his desire was not legitimate, it is legitimate, moving indeed, but if taken to an extreme renders one incapable of that humility, that irony - of that sense of being small and accepting oneself as small and imperfect in the face of life - which for me is strictly connected with writing itself.

But let me add that this novel would not have been born had I not looked for, as its protagonist, a man who really lived and died; had I not seen the places where he had lived and disappeared; had I not opened an old trunk closed for many years - his trunk, which he had taken to Patagonia and from Patagonia back to Europe; had I not taken out of that trunk a whip, a saddle, some books; that is to say, had I not also had that tangible contact with his life, the kind of contact which, for me, is essential.

Already in *Danube* and in other short stories and essays I dealt with a central point of contemporary life and culture, which has been felt as a particular obsession by Mitteleuropean literature: the feeling of the great threat in contemporary life, the feeling of life itself as threat, which induces one to elaborate defensive mechanisms and, in the end, to reduce all life to a defence that's to say to absorb and destroy it in this defence. Defence is good, but if one only defends oneself in the face of life, one doesn't live, one dies, like somebody who fearing to be poisoned refuses to eat. This obsession with defence is the guilt of which Kafka speaks. There is a marvellous parable of Canetti's, which often haunts me. Canetti speaks of the Wall of China constructed to defend the Empire from threat, however, since the anxiety is great, people are afraid that the wall is not sufficient and so make it thicker and thicker, but it never seems thick enough, until it finishes by covering the entire Empire, thereby destroying the very life it was designed to protect.

I'm often fascinated by obscure existences, by characters who want to disappear, not to exist or at least to exist less, to identify themselves with the dark, anonymous flow of life, to immerse themselves in this flow and drown. Characters like Wakefield in Hawthorne, characters who answer every question of life with these words of *Bartleby*: I prefer not. A way through the no! the negation; cancelling one's own identity and personality, disappearing in nothingness - as if only in this darkness were it possible to defend an authentic light of living. Defence has to do with fear.

There is also the fear that natural, spontaneous life will disappear - as in *Danube* the story of the tap from which the Danube flows and could be turned off. Sometimes even the obsessive search for true, authentic life can become self destroying, as in *A Different Sea*. A few years ago I wrote a play, in which the search for the authentic life takes the form of a man in search of the pure voice. This search for the genuine can be madly turned into its opposite, the most grotesquely artificial. This theatrical text, too, entitled *The Voices*, was born of a deep obsession with this subject and a chance occurrence. I once phoned a friend of mine in Munich; she wasn't at home and it was the answer-phone that replied in a beautiful voice, deep and velvety, saying that she was

not at home and inviting one to call her later. After two hours I did so; she had just got back, and her reply was tired and slovenly: “helloooo” - and then I told her that I would have paid court to her recorded voice as being far more seductive. It was this episode that gave me the idea for the monologue.

In this play, a monologue whose title is *The Voices*, a man falls in love with the voices of women recorded on the answerphone and so calls them but only when the real women are not at home - he speaks with recorded voices, the women become pure numbers ... His fixation increases to manic proportions; his delirium is alternately tender, violent, desperate, repelling, moving, and also the language overflows, in his wild monologue, like a river in flood. In his mania there are a real longing for love and a real suffering and fear, but it rebounds on itself; he is simultaneously aggressor and victim.

If Danube embraces a vast geographical and historical area, *Microcosms* is the discovery of places ever smaller, ever more circumscribed. The microcosms are little worlds, sometimes tiny, but the very opposite of any kind of undifferentiating minimalism, since in them there flashes the great, the meaningful, the unrepeatable significance of every existence. They have nothing in common with the resentful particularism of “little homelands”, one of the most regressive phenomena of recent years, because they are the concrete form in which the great world appears and presents itself.

Microcosms is the story of a man as he journeys through life, through the places - real and symbolic - of his existence. The anonymous protagonist - I like nameless characters, also the protagonist of *Il Conde* has no name - never says “I”, goes through the places, events, adventures of his life - places which are stops and stays of his wandering on the earth. We know very little about this character, who hardly ever says “I”, but at the end perhaps we know a lot. It is as if one saw footprints on the sand and tried to make out - by looking around, observing the landscape and the people, listening to the stories about those places - who it was that passed by there, with what feelings and what destiny, and what the meaning of his life was. I am reminded of a story of Jack London's, in which the pursuit and fight between the wolves and the elk are told through the marks the various phases of the hunt leave in the snow.

The book is divided into nine chapters - or better, into eight plus one, given that the final chapter constitutes a radical turning point. Each of them is self-contained and at the same time a moment in the story of the protagonist. At the beginning he finds himself in the Caffè San Marco in Trieste, the Noah's Ark of Central Europe. He then leaves and sets out towards a church, going through the Public Gardens - Paradise, Hades and Limbo - and mentally revisiting the places of his life. As he leaves the Gardens, he dies of a stroke, so his walk within the interior of the church, described with the same precision

and fidelity to reality as the other places, takes on a visionary dimension. As in a dying man's delirium, it is the final look at his life, at love, at the fear of death and, perhaps, at the conquest of it, a leap into death and maybe beyond.

The various places are described and recounted in a manner faithful to their reality and to the stories of what happened there, since like Svevo I am convinced that it is life that is "original", frequently more unpredictable than our inventions. As Melville said, truth is stranger than fiction. The assembling of these pieces of the mosaic of the world becomes an imaginative construction. The places, like the people, are knots of buried time which the narrative disinters and unravels; each has its own music, style and rhythm, which constitute the polyphony of the protagonist's story. Of this character almost nothing is said explicitly; my problem was precisely that of trying to eliminate as far as possible words like "I" and "we", (naturally I didn't always succeed: language is tyrannical). I simply wanted the reader to see, hear, fear, love, think what the character sees, hears, fears, loves or thinks; only in this way, perhaps, could one understand in the end who this character was. The reader should believe at the beginning that he is reading descriptions of landscapes and become aware, at a certain point, that instead he is reading the story of the life and death of a man.

The story of this nameless man is composed of the choral plurality of the destinies that meet and flow into his own; the self is interwoven with these events, these stories and figures, which form the substance of his life. The self is a look, a feeling, a shell in which there echoes the murmur of the world; it multiplies, it divides, but it is an individual with its own unique passions, fears, dreams and delusions. *Microcosms* is a mosaic of innumerable stories - comic, tragic, picaresque, nostalgic. Little stories about minor characters and great historical events, wars, exiles, failed revolutions, borders changed and lost; the protagonists are men, but also animals, the stones and the waves, the bear of Monte Nevoso or a game of cards, the inflexion of a voice, a beloved presence which runs throughout the book, now half-hidden, now appearing.

The wandering, fluctuating narrative lives in the commingling of present and past, epiphany of the moment and memory; fugitive hours and far-off centuries coexist like the rings of a tree-trunk. Various guiding threads weave the warp of the book: the relation between landscape and the sense of time, identity and its uncertainty, love, the continual crossing of borders of all kinds, friendship, the shadow of death, sensuality, laughter, irony, failure and the ability to accept it. Surfacing into the present is myth, such as that of Medea and the Argonauts. People speak of my hydrophilia, and there is in the book, as in everything I write, a great deal of water: not solely the great waters of the sea and the river, but also that muddy water of the lagoon, and the pond where children play - and into which they also pee - but building out of

that mud sandcastles that possess all the enchantment and promise of childhood. It is a book distinctly familiar with the clay out of which the old Adam was fashioned, with mortality, with the allure and the sacredness of the flesh. There is the love for the humble, fragile flesh of life and the itinerary of the protagonist is slow, it pays attention to every life, lives and enjoys or suffers the present. It is a book of irony and of humility - humus means earth, closeness to the earth, a perspective from underneath.

The fluctuating narrative - in which characters and events break up and scatter, recompose and reappear - stems from a profound sense of a radical transformation of the world and probably of man. Things themselves, the objectivity of the world, seem to dissolve: as has been said, the bits - abstract, immaterial information - seem to substitute the atoms, full-bodied physical reality. Experience, it appears, belongs to everyone and no one, the Self seems broken up into fragments. The virtual substitutes the actual in a process that changes the individual's feelings and perceptions and therefore his nature, his story and the ways of telling it. Perhaps there is coming, far more rapidly than in the preceding millennia and centuries, an anthropological mutation which will produce a new, as yet unknown type of man, of impaired unity, vague and interchangeable, similar to the ancient figures of myth who are and are not individuals, who are everybody and nobody.

In its narrative mode *Microcosms* is a journey into this mutation, a journey which in its structure reckons with the epoch-making transformation we are living through and at the same time strives to resist it. And things, the good, sensible, concrete things thus swallowed up in abstraction, are defended in their singularity and their uniqueness. *Microcosms* seeks to save them as one seeks to save the things one loves from a shipwreck.

It is perhaps a utopia, but - as is proclaimed by the title of another of my books, a collection of essays called *Utopia and Disenchantment* - I believe in utopia precisely as twinned with disenchantment. The utopia one believes to be already realised, and which indicates a precise way of reaching it, is both false and dangerous, violating both reality and man. Disenchantment reminds us that we are not in the Promised Land, that the barber's basin is not, as Don Quixote believes, the enchanted Helm of Mambrino, that Dulcinea is the coarse Aldonza, that the world is not redeemed nor will it be by tomorrow morning. But all this strengthens the journey towards the Promised Land, as it did for Moses who, though he never set foot in it, nevertheless continued to travel towards it. Don Quixote is wrong, but he is also right, since without his need for poetry and meaning, for salvation, reality would be incomplete, as Sancho Panza well knows, he who smells the reek of the stable of Aldonza yet follows the knight, because together with him his own life becomes fuller and richer. Utopia and disenchantment, united, are the awareness that the world

can and must be improved, even if never definitively and on a road strewn with the fallen. The symbiosis of utopia and disenchantment is a way of resisting totalitarianism, of rejecting that false realism which mistakes the façade of reality for its substance and, devoid of any religious sense of the eternal, renders the present absolute in the belief that it cannot change, and considers those who believe they can transform the world to be but naïve utopians. In the summer of '89 these false realists, so numerous among the politicians, would have laughed at any who said that the Berlin Wall could fall.

Why does one write? For so many reasons: out of fidelity, to impose order, because one is afraid, to fight against oblivion, to protest. In the case of this last, one writes unwillingly, yet with the feeling of having to do it, almost in obedience to a categorical moral imperative. It is this engagement which leads me to write politico-ethical articles in the *Corriere della Sera*, which I have been writing for more than forty years. A collection of these articles had appeared in the volume *La storia non è finita*, History has not finished. Every moral action is disagreeable and one would prefer not to be constrained by it. In certain extreme cases one must even risk one's life, but nobody who is not a fanatical rhetorician wishes to do so. Bonhoeffer, the theologian hanged by the Nazis for being their opposite, had no desire to be a martyr or see God so soon, but he did not hesitate to do, albeit unwillingly, what he felt he had to. Even helping a person in the street is disagreeable; we would prefer it if he weren't in difficulty or it were others sacrificing themselves to help him, but we must be ready to do it if there is no alternative. The same thing applies, on a reduced scale, to ethico-political comments in the paper. When, rightly or wrongly, I think I should denounce, defend or challenge someone or something, I try to do so, but I'd rather someone else wrote the article and that his comment exonerated me from making one of my own, so as to enable me instead to write about my wanderings around the Sorbi or the islands of the Adriatic. Only the bombastic preacher loves philippics; morality is like health, and when everything is functioning one does not think of one's teeth or stomach. But if they make you feel bad you can't hold back. I learnt that also from the uninterrupted dialogue I have conducted for many years now with readers, whose abundance of letters, advice, reproof, encouragement - apart from the fixations of maniacs, male and female, also abundant - have contributed so much to my journey.

When writing, one sometimes has the sensation of losing oneself, sometimes of finding oneself. For me writing is, very often, telling true stories about real destinies, because the true story, the person who has really lived, interests me greatly, far more than the creatures of my imagination. I believe that to write is to “transcribe” some thing greater than ourselves.

In a certain way *Microcosms* concludes the journey begun with *Danube*, as it also concludes, perhaps, that type of literary genre which, it has often been said, was invented by - or better, born of - the Danubian adventure. Doubtless there will still be travels and travel books for one such as me, for whom they are almost coincident with life itself. But I do not think that that particular narrative mode, that transformation whereby the journey turns into a novel as one goes along, can be repeated.

Utopia and Disenchantment, though different from preceding essays, to my mind represents a kind of continuity. This certainly changes with time, since the problems to be confronted and the horizons on which they appear also change; nevertheless it remains substantially faithful, even from the stylistic point of view. Within *Utopia and Disenchantment* there is also a "becoming" - which is logical enough, given that the book spans a period of twenty-five years. To give but a few examples: the perspectives widen to include remote, marginal literatures, or more pressingly actual ethical-political debates. As the years go by, one is ever more concentrated on commenting upon the quotidian tragicomedy as evidenced by history or snippets from the daily news, on noting down customs, on annotating the ludicrous, bizarre, bloody carnival of the world, with an increasing reliance on irony, on adopting the upright position, the "good fight" proclaimed by St. Paul. This at the expense of literary criticism proper, even though literature remains life's great alphabet and dictionary. *The Exhibition* belongs on the contrary to the "nocturnal writings". I use this term "nocturnal writing" in the sense given it by the great Argentinian writer Ernesto Sábato whose friend I am (so much so that a few years ago I delivered in Madrid the official speech on the occasion of his 90th birthday). Ernesto Sábato speaks of "diurnal" and "nocturnal" writing. In the former a writer, even when he is inventing, expresses a world he is in tune with. He declares his values, his mode of being, his sense and vision of the world, how he conceives it. In one of his daytime books, *Prima della fine* - which also bears witness to his great politico-ethical task in Argentina, on the side of the desaparecidos against the dictatorship - Sábato says at a certain point: my deepest truths, however are not to be found in this book, but in those other books murky and mysterious. They contain truths that are sometimes horrible, "that have betrayed me". That is to say, they have contradicted the values and ideals he, as a person, profoundly believes in. He is referring to his creative work, in particular the novel *Sopra eroi e tombe*. In the night-time writing the author has to reckon with something that suddenly emerges from within himself and which perhaps he did not know he possessed: feelings, disquieting drives (even horrible truths, so says Sábato) that astound us, appal us, confront us with a face we did not know we had. It is writing that tells us what we could be, what we fear and hope to be, what by

sheer chance we have not been. Such writing places us face to face with the Medusa of life, who at that moment cannot be sent to the hairdresser's to get her serpent head done and so be rendered presentable. It is the writing wherein the writer's Double speaks, and though the writer may well prefer his Double to speak of different things, he cannot do otherwise than pass him the microphone.

In the nocturnal writing, therefore, we find ourselves saying things that do not necessarily correspond to our philosophy of life, to our political, moral or religious convictions, rather we are confronted with epiphanies whose existence we did not know of beforehand, which perhaps we did not want to know, epiphanies that are sometimes enchanting but more often terrible, compelling us to face the underworld. It is as if certain elements of our life and our experience, which we did not use when consciously constructing our personality and view of the world, were to emerge from under the stairs or out of the basement of our personality. The works in which this nocturnal writing issues forth more violently are, not by chance, plays: *Voices*, *The Exhibition*, *To have been*, *You will understand*. There is a connection between nocturnal writing and theatre, in particular a theatrical form I have a preference for, that of the monologue (a form, though, that I also have a preference for in narrative), where the language comes out well-nigh unforeseen and unforeseeable. It pours out from the depths, issues from the physical, carnal density of the body, the mouth, inextricably uniting the spiritual element, that which is consigned to the page, with the directness of the physical.

With *The Exhibition*, which is constructed like a play, we find ourselves in a totally different dimension, probably unimaginable without the great breach in my life that occurred some years ago, and without the painful, swampy darkness traversed in those years, all of which pervades the text. *The Exhibition* is violent, visionary and tragicomic. It stages the tiny destiny of a particular man - the Triestine painter Vito Timmel, deceased in a lunatic asylum - who strives to forget life and deaden the torment of his suffering in splendid, apathetic, anarchic self-destruction. During the hallucinatory preparation of the exhibition his existence is fragmentarily reconstructed through his own words and those of others: friends, gaolers, zealous faith-healers, companions of the tavern and of art, characters both full-blooded and insubstantial, women poignantly loved and cruelly lost, choruses of voices and bits and pieces that recount the insane truth of the world in an incoherent yet simultaneously dialectal and universal Triestine, in which the fragments and detritus of an entire Central European civilisation flow back.

Here, then, is writing which is chopped up, fractured, as if it were a collection of splinters, of objects hacked to pieces with an axe, fragments of existence, feelings, lives, these lives somehow broken. I have the impression that this is a book which I wrote as if after a Flood in some way, as if some beachcomber had assembled pieces of wreckage, beautiful, marvellous things, rubbish, jetsam, yet without that somehow always more pacified perspective, necessary at other times, which is granted precisely when the moment is made relative, placed against the backdrop of history, when the individual is so placed, together with his total suffering, pain, falling in love, betrayal, guilt, but placed precisely in the general context which simply for the fact that it transcends him gives him a meaning and so is different.

A babel of languages (Italian, Triestine dialect, German; scraps of sublime classical verse and songs from the tavern; passages from the high-flown, torn notebook written by the artist in the asylum; nursery rhymes and hiccups) in which everyone speaks to no one; a concentration-camp babel (psychiatric ward, museum room) into which, amid the pangs of suffering, there breaks a wandering, airy happiness, the magic of a free, marvellous world suspended between the wreckage of a finished life and the hints of an elsewhere.

A story of love, of degradation and remorse, of artistic vocation, of spirited rebellion and lethargic torpor, *The Exhibition* is the story of a man who seeks to save himself through forgetfulness, and is confronted with the contradictory need both to kill the past and to make it live, to love life and to extinguish this love which hurts so much, face to face with wild, enchanting, unbearable existence, its swirling unhappiness.

Here the perspective is fundamentally creatural, zeroed, from the bottom. There is no totality, no distance, no harmony to compound the fragments of reality by smoothing their rough edges. *The Exhibition* is constructed of fits and starts, grotesquely painful lumps, the strewn residue of a flood, the splinters that remain after the hatchet-blows have wrought their havoc. Nothing seems overcome, reconciled in a higher synthesis; wounds or regrets speak, cry out - or sing, in a bitter, comic dance routine - from a zero distance. This gaunt, disjointed, occasionally difficult text - which in a way postdates my life, or reveals a chink through which to begin again, with faith, indeed, yet with a radically different tone - was written at the same time as certain chapters of *Utopia* and *Disenchantment*, with their own flowing, enveloping style. Even the writer himself may well be astonished at having such different voices. But perhaps this is yet further proof of the fact that every experience, every story possesses, demands, imposes its own voice. *The Exhibition*, with its dialect, its vulgar-courtly delirium, its songs, its fractures, imposed a language at times bordering on the very limit of immediate comprehension. To comment on the complexity of life or to reveal its naked simplicity requires

different pens. Different languages naturally impose themselves on me. This is true also of the translations I have done, which are almost always of plays (Ibsen, Kleist, Schnitzler, Büchner, Grillparzer) - a task stimulating, I believe, as few others are in the writer's experience.

Microcosms, Stefano Jacomuzzi once said, is a book in the etymological sense "humble", since humble recalls humus, the Latin for earth, closeness to the earth, the worm's-eye view. Man, so runs an Hasidic saying, comes from dust and returns to dust, but in the interval can drink a glass of good wine. I do not know if in my books there prevails gloom or hope, melancholy or laughter, disenchantment or faith, the dark background or the play of colours. Perhaps life's journey is made not simply between those two dusts, but also through that wine.

In general, in my recent books, there is this strong sense of a woman passionately loved but also shamefully used by a man to protect himself, interposed like a shield between the man and the storms of life, so that it is she who is first to bear their brunt, and it is her breast, like a buckler, that the poisoned arrows will penetrate, thereby protecting the man. She resembles the figurehead set in the prow of the ship, the first to receive, as in *Blindly*, the tempestuous blows of history and life. It is the subject in *The Exhibition*, in *Blindly*, in *To have been*, based, in some way, on the archetype of Jason and Medea, used and abused by Jason, victim even when she commits the terrible crime of killing her own children.

As I said; I have been obsessed for many years by the story of the deportees to Goli Otok - communists who, after having been imprisoned in the Nazis' lager are imprisoned in communist gulags. Many years ago, I also started writing a linear novel, which didn't work. I think because in a novel the "what" must become the "how", the subject must become the style. So I wrote *Blindly*, begun in 1988 and published in 2005, defined as a labyrinthine narrative structure, a Jacob's Ladder reversed to descend into the nether regions of history and, in particular, of the twentieth century. In a whirling monologue in which there echo so many other voices, a man recounts (invents, falsifies, hides, screams out) his life, which has passed through the horrors, the hopes, the revolutions of the last century and through widely different lands and seas - from the Italo-Slavo-German territories of the eastern border of Italy to the war in Spain, from the Nazi camp to the Titoist gulags, from the Iceland of a grotesque revolution to the Australia of emigration. The character, who bears the thousand names of illegal immigrants, partisans, revolutionaries, fugitives, identifies himself with many "doubles", but with one in particular, Jorgen Jorgensen, an adventurer of the early nineteenth century who has crossed all the oceans as far as the antipodes, where he founds a city in which he ends up condemned to hard labour in penitentiaries as terrible as the

camps and gulags of the twentieth century. The protagonist's journey through the oceans and shipwrecks of history resembles that of the Argonauts in search of the - ever bloodstained - Golden Fleece, allegory of the banners that move to great enterprises and woeful crimes, of which love, too, is the victim. Medea, whose face flashes behind that of the woman loved, lost and sacrificed by the culpable protagonist, also takes on countless faces and names, in a continuous crumbling and reconstruction of identity, an existential condition wherein one lives blindly, loves, acts and suffers violence blindly. Clinical report, epic and delirium, life continuously erased and rewritten wherein things and events precipitate as in an abyss, Blindly is a dogged attempt to escape from the place of existence to find a direction, or at least a final escape route.

Lei Dunque Capirà, the most recent creative text I have written, is a female monologue. A woman speaks from a mysterious old people's home, probably symbol of the afterlife, of what lies beyond death. She speaks to an equally mysterious head of the institution, indeed of everything, doubtless an allusion to God, and explains why she decided not to leave the home, to return to life, despite having wanted to and despite her beloved companion having come, down there, to fetch her. It is a modern reappraisal of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, but this time - and I believe for the first time in literature - the word is given to the woman, to Eurydice. It is she who explains, she who has decided. Crucial for me in this work was what I would call "the threshold experience". The work, as I said, focuses upon an imaginary old people's home, symbol of the Beyond, the afterlife, death. For some years I was able to go to an old people's home fairly regularly; not for myself, but for an old woman I went to visit. This home was in the centre of Trieste and each time I crossed the threshold, going in or coming out, I found myself in a totally different world. Inside the home time had other dimensions, a different duration, condensing or expanding in another mode. There were other relationships, other hierarchies, other affections and other spites; other codes, other lights, other shades. And each time I asked myself, as I entered or left, where it was that I understood the world and life a bit better: inside or out, in front of the mirror or behind it. Hence the reason, given this state of mind, why the woman, in a supreme sacrifice of love, decides not to leave, not to follow the man she loves: in this way she will spare him the terrifying discovery that even in the afterlife, although so different, we do not understand much more than we do here, in life itself.

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

The woman addresses herself to an unknown President, a God-figure; a God who is unseen, but who seems to be the great constructor and narrator, at times incomprehensible. Landscapes and characters become shades, their words become a sort of whispering, like a wind undoing the shapes of sand, dispelling the fog, stirring the leaves.

Lei Dunque Capirà is a work which moves between personal experience and myth, between the will to flight and the intensity of the present, between lightness and tragedy, between the desire to know and questions that cannot be answered. It is the woman, both abuser and abused, who speaks in a disenchanted and touching tribute to femininity.

This is the text of a talk by Magris at the Almost Island Dialogues:Two, New Delhi, March, 2008

Translated from the Italian by Nick Carter