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The Danube as an artistic image in European modern literature (based on the material of the book “Danube” by Claudio Magris)

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Abstract: Claudio Magris is an Italian writer, journalist, essayist; laureate of many awards, including “Erasmus” (2001) and the Charles Veyonne Award (2009). His book “Danube”, which was written in 1986, won the Bagutta prize and is devoted to Central Europe, the history and culture of countries along the entire river flow of the Danube, the most important artery in Europe, – in the most expressive forms and will be the subject of scientific and journalistic conversation. The idea that the peaceful coexistence of different peoples, the combination and fusion of different elements is the key to a prosperous, happy life, runs through the entire book. At the same time, Magris emphasizes that not only peoples, but also each person is the result of mixing different traditions and cultures. Getting to know the “Danube” is really enriching: the author not only sincerely shares his knowledge, but also teaches to see the events and characters differently, in fact, teaches to think differently. Today this book acquires modern sound and understanding.

Keywords: artistic space; memory; personal aspect; human life; multicultural region

Introduction

According to one source, the etymological name of the Danube River means “fast water”. Some scholars also observe a connection between the river’s name and the Celtic word “*Danuvius*” since the stem “*danu*” signifies “swift”, and the stem “*vius*” means “water”. Additionally, another version exists regarding the origin of the river’s name. Certain etymological sources suggest that the name of the river originates from the Scythian-Sarmatian word “*danu*”, which translates to “water” or “river”.

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The element or natural phenomenon of *water* is often interpreted as a symbol of feminine energy, purity, and vitality. It can also symbolize the transient and illusory nature of the world. Since ancient times, *water* has been regarded as the fundamental essence of all things. *Pure water* has been personified as honesty and truthfulness (“To bring to clean water” (“To bring to light”). On the other hand, *murky* or *dirty water* has been associated with deceit and trickery (“To fish in troubled waters”). *The flowing of water* has been metaphorically linked to the passage of time (“Years flow like water” (“Time flies like the wind”).

The river is a symbol of the irreversible flow of time, representing loss and oblivion. It is often seen as the pathway to the land of the dead. Furthermore, *the river* serves as a symbol of the barrier that separates two worlds, embodying constant change: “You cannot step into the same river twice” (a debatable question, but we can explore it another time!).

The water of the river is considered sacred. It is used for baptism at birth, as it washes away sins and purifies the body and soul. It also serves as a source of relief from physical and mental fatigue (the waters of the River Lethe, which symbolize oblivion). *The river* is the pathway that leads to the vast sea or ocean, and it is from *the river* that the sea or ocean originates. Additionally, *the river* provides fertility and serves as a life-giving source for settled cultures. It symbolizes and ensures well-being (8).

It should be added that the multinational and multicultural population of Europe also refers to the Danube as an international river or a “river of friendship”. This is because the river flows through numerous countries, including Bulgaria, Germany, Slovakia, Austria, Hungary, Romania, and, of course, Ukraine. The Danube is a source of pride for Ukraine.

The history of the great international “river of friendship” was intertwined with the historical past of Europe. Figures such as Alexander the Great, Persian king Darius, Batu Khan, and Roman emperors dispatched their military forces to the Danube. Crusader troops also traversed its path. For three centuries, the Ottoman Empire held dominion over the Middle and Lower Danube. In more recent history, the Russian Empire, France, England, Germany, and Austria vied for control over these territories. Today, it can be said that the river holds global significance as it unites the countries of Europe through its waterways, facilitating various forms of communication.

Claudio Magris is an Italian writer, journalist, essayist, and researcher of Austrian and German culture. He has been the recipient of numerous awards, including the Erasmus Prize (2001) and the Charles Veyonne Award (2009). His book “Danube”, written in 1986, which focuses on Central Europe, its history, and the culture of the countries along the entire course of the Danube, the most significant waterway in Europe, stretching from the Bavarian Alps to the Black Sea, was the winner of the Bagutta Prize (Aversa, 2004, p. 14).

Claudio Magris, with his encyclopedic knowledge and boundless curiosity as a philologist, embarks on a journey visiting the cities along the course of the Danube River. Along the way, he delves into the works of numerous European writers, philosophers, musicians, painters, and politicians, thereby creating a comprehensive textbook on the history of culture and literature of the peoples residing in the Upper and Lower Danube countries: *“It [the Danube] is the river of Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest, Belgrade and of Dacia, the river which – as Ocean encircled the world of the Greeks – embraces the Austria of the Hapsburgs, the myth and ideology of which have been symbolized by a multiple, supranational culture. It embraces the Empire in which the sovereign addressed himself to “my peoples” and the national anthem was sung in eleven different tongues”* (Magris, 2016, p. 8).

“Danube” by Claudio Magris has been translated into more than thirty languages: *“The Danube is German-Magyar-Slavic-Romanic-Jewish Mittel Europe”* (See: Mittel Europe (from the German: Mitteleuropa – Middle or Central Europe)) – a term with multiple meanings that has gained widespread usage since the 19th century. Geographically, Mittel Europe does not have clear boundaries and refers to the area stretching from the North Sea and the Baltic to the Adriatic Sea and the Danube basin; the term is widely employed in geopolitics to denote political and economic unions, often dominated by German-speaking countries; it is also customary to discuss a distinct Middle European culture, which emerged during the decline of the multinational Habsburg Empire (the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, the work of Arnold Schoenberg, Oskar Kokoschka, Robert Musil, Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Kafka and many others) (Magris, 2016, p. 177).

Therefore, the primary emotion conveyed in Claudio Magris’s book is melancholy: *“the immortal past forcing us to treat today’s reality with tenderness while enveloping it with a ghostly halo”* (Lubrani, 2001, p. 56). The author recounts his journey along the Danube, accompanied by friends, possibly imaginary ones. The book includes fewer descriptions of sights but delves into numerous conversations about historical events, the world order, culture, and literature. The artistic nature of

the text mirrors the protagonist, the mighty river itself: Danube-Proteus flows, breaks, eludes the grasps, and the history of the peoples residing on its illustrious banks follows a similar path.: *“The river, which Ovid called “bisnominis” or double-named, draws German culture, with its dream of an Odyssey of the spirit, towards the east, mingling it with other cultures in countless hybrid metamorphoses in which it finds its fulfilment and its fall”* (Magris, 2016, p. 2).

Indeed, the real, “physical”, aspect of the Danube is not the central focus of the book, although Magris does describe the color of its waters, the birdlife along its shores, and mentions the ships that traverse its currents. The book does not extensively cover the practical utilization of the river, such as shipping or military operations on its waters. The river serves as the core of the world that the writer vividly recreates before our eyes: *“...the river is an old Taoist master, and along its banks it gives lessons on the great Wheel and the gaps between its spokes. In every journey there is at least a smattering of the South, with hours of relaxation, of idleness. Heedless of the orphans on its banks the Danube flows down towards the sea, towards the supreme conviction”* (Magris, 2016, p. 3).

The river takes on metaphysical qualities, particularly in the exploration of its source, which is connected to Magris’s unique attitude towards German culture: this culture, philosophy, literature, and the German language itself provide the writer with the necessary tools for such analysis, encouraging him to go beyond specific facts and seek manifestations of some general law universal laws. Magris turns to universal plots and delves into timeless themes, as seen in chapter “Mitteleuropa: Hinternational or All-German?”, where he turns to the teachings of Johann Gottfried Herder, a German writer, linguist, and philosopher who was a prominent figure in German classicism: *“Maybe we shall never be really safe until we learn to feel, in an almost physical sense, that every nation is destined to have its day, and that there are not, in any absolute sense, greater of lesser civilizations... Living and reading mean thinking about that “history of the human spirit” at all times and in all countries which Herder wanted to trace through the events of world literature, without sacrificing to any one single model the idea of the perennial universality of this spirit, but also without sacrificing any of the varied forms which have embodied it. He loved the perfection of Greek form, but this did not make him underestimate the song of the Latvian folk-festival.*

Like all the writers of the Sturm und Drang, Herder loved rivers, the youthful, impetuous torrents rushing downwards with their fecund vitality. Looking now at this slender, newborn Danube I wonder whether, as I follow it all the way to the

delta, among different peoples and nations, I shall pass through an arena of bloody battles or else among the chorus of a human race united, despite everything, in the variety of its languages and its cultures” (Magris, 2016, p. 8). Or the theme of love, intimate relationships between men and women in the world of literature and art, – personal relationships between Zuleika and Goethe, Marie Louise Fleisser and Brecht (Magris, 2016, pp. 39-40, 55).

“Danube” by Claudio Magris is an artistic narrative about the civilization of Mittel Europe, which finds its cohesion and unity in this Germanic element.

It is worth noting that Claudio Magris is not only a great writer but also an exceptional scholar of German studies: he writes about subjects that he is deeply familiar with and that shape his own life experiences.

The category of memory plays a significant role in the artistic realm of the book “Danube”. It is a space where not only losses are preserved but also a sense of stability. The entirety of Mittel-Europe appears as a nostalgic corner, evoking both the sadness and the vivid memories of simple joys from the past: *“in the reconstruction of an older-days pastry-shop, the knobs on the drawers are exactly the same as those in use in Fiume and Trieste forty years ago: the tiniest indications of a domestic Mitteleuropa, mysterious treasures of childhood, the distant feel of home”* (Magris, 2016, p. 116).

It is the images of home and family that resist the tragic ongoing chaos and at the same time ensure a healthy course of history. In this context, the more valuable for Claudio Magris is not the family as a kind, but the family as a choice, as something that a person has created himself. He examines the myth of Kriemhilda, who married Attila (it is this marriage that symbolizes for Magris the flow of the Danube to the east, from Austria to Hungary) so that he would take revenge on her brothers for the murder of her first husband. Thus, Kriemhilda prefers the family she created herself to the family for which she is not responsible.

In his unique perspective, Claudio Magris draws a parallel between the personality of Franz Kafka and the new incarnation of Kriemhilda. This intriguing connection is explored in detail when Magris, or rather his lyrical traveling hero, visits a sanatorium in the Danube town of Kirling, where Kafka passed away. According to the author of “Danube”, it was during Kafka’s final days that he truly found himself, as he encountered a woman, Dora Diamant, with whom he not only fell in love but was also willing to marry. This choice, the readiness to create a new family of his own, simultaneously brings Kafka closer to his roots, to his people – not by the blind

force of birth, but by his own free will: “*In his diaries Kafka records the fact that his Hebrew name was Amshel – a name which expressed the human identity which was denied him, the warmth of life, and love, and the family. He had put aside all this so as to exist “solely as Franz Kafka”, to be a writer. What happened to him in the last extremity of his life, when his love for Dora reconciled him to Judaism and the adventure of a shared life, is no part of the story of Kafka the writer, but “concerns only the man whose Hebrew name is Amshel”* (Magris, 2016, p. 70).

A truly unique and paradoxical story was shared with Magris by his colleague, Hungarian literary critic Miklós Szabolcsi (1921 – 2000). It revolves around one of the prominent figures of the Hungarian literary avant-garde, the poet Reiter Robert, and his mysterious disappearance after the 1930s. There is no evidence of his death, and he was still young at the time, nor have any subsequent publications been attributed to him. The resolution to this disappearance turned out to be both a detective story and a tale of transformation, for it involved a real-life metamorphosis: “*he [Szabolcsi] learnt that Reiter Robert was alive, that he lived in Timișoara in Rumania, that he was now called Franz Liebhard, and that he wrote somewhat traditional poems in German, sonnets and pieces rhyming a b a b... He had changed his name, nationality and literary style, and now he was honoured as the patriarch of the German-speaking writers of the Banat; belonging, that is, to the German minority living in Rumania. In August 1984 his eighty-fifth birthday had been celebrated*”. The cultural paradox – the ethnic German Robert Reiter became a Hungarian poet, adopting the Hungarian practice of placing the surname before the given name. He took on the pseudonym **Franz Liebhard** in honor of a fallen friend and settled in a city in western Romania, in Banat, near the channel of the Bega River, which connects Timisoara with the Danube. Furthermore, Reiter-Liebhard, playing with surnames, transitioned not just from avant-garde to classics but to the archaic as well – the Banat Germans speak the Swabian dialect from the 18th century, which their ancestors brought when they migrated to the region of modern-day Romania: “*In 1865 Ferdinand Kiirnberger, who in Vienna was the master of the Feuilleton, was expecting those remote, intact eastern provinces of the Hapsburg Empire to produce a fresh, brand-new literature, German in language but nourished by all the cultures of that Austro-Rumanian-Jewish-Russian-Ruthenian melting-pot*” (Magris, 2016, p. 126).

Undoubtedly, it is precisely this distinct literature that captures the greatest interest of Claudio Magris as a Germanic philologist. However, he emphasizes that by the

end of the 20th century, it had nearly depleted itself due to the weight of historical tragedies.

One of the last proponents of such literature is Paul Celan (*Paul Antschel*, 1920 – 1970, the pseudonym is an anagram of the last name), a Jewish poet by origin and partly by worldview, a German and French poet by language, a Romanian poet by birth, a Ukrainian poet and even say, Soviet through the post-war distribution of territories. Literary critics regard Paul Celan as one of the most exceptional Austrian poets of the 20th century, and he stands as one of the finest European lyric poets of the post-war era: *“That world has vanished, and its greatest spokesman, Paul Celan, expressed the ultimate truth about that disappearance, that death and sudden speechlessness. Celan ... sought for this “bottom non-bottom”, as we read in one of his very last poems. Born at Czernowitz in 1920, Celan committed suicide in Paris in 1970. He experienced the holocaust of the Jews, in which his parents perished, as night in the most absolute sense, which annihilates any possibility of history or of real life, and later on he had to face the impossibility of putting down roots in Western civilization. It has been said that in himself he sums up a century of European poetry, born from that cleavage between reality and the individual, while also expressing those dreams of redeeming the world and destroying himself in this depiction of his own martyrdom”* (Magris, 2016, p. 139).

The fate of another Jewish German-language writer, the novelist Robert Flinker, whose life is connected with Bukovina, is similar to the fate of Paul Celan. He survived the war by hiding but tragically took his own life soon after its conclusion, when the tension seemed to have subsided. While an unhappy love affair was the immediate cause of his suicide, Claudio Magris suggests that Flinker subconsciously orchestrated his own unbearable personal circumstances as a means to facilitate his death. The author of “Danube” writes: *“I had been fascinated by this man’s fate. I imagined someone who could stand up to the very imminence of death, but eventually finds himself unaccustomed to freedom and the end of the nightmare, or else someone who could endure Nazism as Evil, but not Stalinism as the smiling face of Liberation; one who, faced with the notion that the alternative to Hitler was Stalin, takes his life. Unable to come to the point at once, and kill himself because freedom was identified with Stalin, Flinker may have required some intermediary, and for this reason taken a girl at random, but one able to give him that little extra shove that was all he needed”* (Magris, 2016, p. 140).

One of the prominent symbols of the Danube civilization, representing its losses and nostalgic melancholy in Claudio Magris’s interpretation, is the Jewish violinist or

singer-cantor, the man-music, the man-nightingale: “That music is the answer to the battle, to the ring of metal. In one of the novels of Sholem Aleichem, Jossele Solovej – Jossele the Nightingale – takes violin in hand and plays what is missing to the heart. Solovej, Solovej the solo that tells of pain - in one of his poems Israel Bercovici (Romanian pronunciation: [isra'il 'berkovitʃ]); 1921 – 1988) plays with this bewitching Yiddish word, Solovej, nightingale; he divides it into syllables and imagines that the nightingale is a solo voice that speaks of vej, which is melancholy”: *“In a district almost in the outskirts lives Israil Bercovici, the Yiddish poet. Literature, he tells me, is a slot-machine: life and history drop in – or hurl in – a storm of events, the unique light of a certain evening, troubles in love or world wars, but one can never tell what is going to come out, a few meagre coins or a regal fistful of money, a waterfall of poetry. Timid and discreet as a person, Bercovici is a delicate poet; he is swathed in that family gendeness and stubborn pietas that have van-quished centuries of violence and of pogroms. The library in his neat, modest little house is a miniature ark of east European Jewry, and when he reads one of his poems – for example Solovej, the Nightingale – while his wife, just back from the hospital where she works as a doctor, prepares the lunch, we get a better understanding of certain of Singer’s stories, their mystery of marriage and the impassioned epic quality of Jewish family life”* (Magris, 2016, pp. 125, 163).

Claudio Magris also delves into the unique realm of Romanian literature in Yiddish. By the 1980s, almost all Jews had departed from the country, leaving behind only the elderly. This is how they began to create the literature of late debuts, that is, the authors published their first books at the age of 70 – 80 years: *“These lyrics are restrained and subtle, shorn of secondhand feelings, and reveal awareness and mastery of the formal exploits of contemporary poetry. So what does “new poets” mean? The slot-machine of literature has continual surprises in store, and makes fun even of the generation gap”* (Magris, 2016, p. 163).

It is important to note that Claudio Magris’s book was published in 1986, however, even today, it resonates remarkably with its modernity. Engaging with “Danube” is a truly enriching experience as the author not only shares knowledge sincerely but also teaches readers to perceive events and characters differently, essentially fostering a different way of thinking. Given the current tragic military events in Ukraine, where the peaceful coexistence of peoples and cultures is once again endangered, new meanings emerge from the work of this Italian writer. Magris’s reflections on history diverge fundamentally from the typical schematic presentations found in textbooks. He is much more interested in imparting lessons

from history. While battles and generals are mentioned in the book, Magris does not consider them the primary characters of the narrative, despite acknowledging the significance of military successes. When discussing Hitler's Germany, to which Magris unequivocally holds a negative stance, his focus primarily rests on depicting individuals rather than events. He reflects on the nature of good and evil, recounting stories such as those of the courageous siblings, the Scholls, who fought "*with their bare hands*" against the Third Reich, or the account of Field Marshal Rommel's involvement in the failed attempt on Hitler's life (Magris, 2016, pp. 26-27).

The idea that the peaceful coexistence among diverse peoples, the combination and amalgamation of different elements are crucial for a prosperous and fulfilling life permeates the entire book. Claudio Magris also emphasizes that not only nations but every individual is a product of the intermingling of various traditions and cultures. He contemplates this idea right from the start of the book, in the "Noteentiendo" chapter, and consistently revisits the imagery of a melting cauldron or crucible.

In conclusion, I would like to highlight Claudio Magris's reflections on the figure of Charles I, the final monarch of the Habsburg dynasty, by the way, that it was under his reign that Austria-Hungary officially recognized the independence of the Ukrainian People's Republic on January 19, 1918, precisely on his words: "*To end the war... it is necessary not less courage than to untie it*" (Oguy, 2007, p. 111).

Indeed, Claudio Magris's portrayal of the Danube serves as a metaphor for human life. Life, which grows from a timid stream to a powerful river over the course of years. This symbolism becomes evident upon revisiting the final lines of the book: "*Is that all, then? After three thousand kilometres of film we get up and leave the cinema, looking for the popcorn vendor, and absentmindedly wander out at a back exit. There are few people to be seen, and even they are in a hurry to leave, because it's already late and the docks are emptying. But the canal runs on, runs on, calmly and confidently into the sea, and it is no longer a canal [...], but a flowing outwards that opens and abandons itself to all the waters and oceans of the entire globe, and to the creatures living in their depths. Lord let my death – says a line of Marin's – be like the flowing of a river into the great sea*" (Magris, 2016, p. 176).

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