VINTAGE

# MICROCOSMS

CLAUDIO MAGRIS

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

In his acclaimed work *Danube*, Claudio Magris painted a vast canvas stretching from the source of the river to the Black Sea. Now he focuses on the tiny borderlands of Istria and Italy where he was born and where he has lived most intensely. From the forests of Monte Nevoso, to the hidden valleys of the Tyrol, to a Trieste café, *Microcosms* pieces together a mosaic of stories – comic, tragic, picaresque, nostalgic – from life's minor characters. Their worlds might be small, but they are far from minimalist: in them flashes the great, the meaningful, the unrepeatable significance of every existence.

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

CLAUDIO MAGRIS, scholar and critic, was born in Trieste in 1939. After graduating from the University of Turin, he lectured there in German Language and Literature from 1970 to 1978. He holds a chair in Germanic Studies in the University of Trieste, and was for a period a member of the Italian parliament. He is the author of works of literary criticism and plays and has translated works by Ibsen, Kleist and Schnitzler. He won international acclaim for his remarkable study of middle Europe, *Danube*. His novel *A Different Sea* is also published by Harvill.

IAIN HALLIDAY took a degree in American Studies at the University of Manchester and worked in Italy and London before returning to Sicily where he now teaches at the University of Catania. His translations include *Una Peccatrice* by the verist writer Giovanni Verga (1840–1922).

*Also by Claudio Magris in English translation*

DANUBE

Fiction

A DIFFERENT SEA

INFERENCES FROM A SABRE

*To Marisa*

*Claudio Magris*

# MICROCOSMS

*Translated from the Italian by*
*Iain Halliday*

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Even though all the World by now is known, many being the books brought before us which furnish general descriptions of it, when dealing with a single Province a dutiful description is not easily found …

**AMEDEO GROSSI,**

Architect, Geometer, and Surveyor, 1791

A man determines upon the task of portraying the world. As the years pass he peoples a space with pictures of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, dwellings, instruments, stars, horses and people. Shortly before he dies he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his own face.

**JORGE LUIS BORGES**

# Caffè San Marco

The masks are up on high, above the black inlaid wood counter that comes from the renowned Cante workshop – at least it was renowned once. But prestigious signs and fame last a bit longer at the Caffè San Marco, even the fame of those whose only qualification for being remembered is the simple, but not inconsiderable, fact of having spent years at those little marble tables with their cast-iron legs that flow into a pedestal sitting on lion's paws, and of having given forth every now and then on the correct pressure of the beer and on the universe.

The San Marco is a Noah's Ark, where there's room for everyone – no one takes precedence, no one is excluded – for every couple seeking shelter in a downpour and even for the partnerless. By the way, I've never understood that story about the Flood, observed Mr Schönhut, *shammes* at the Israelite Temple next door, so someone recalls. The rain was beating against the window-panes and in the Public Garden at the end of Via Battisti, immediately to the left as one leaves the café, the big trees were crashing, soaked heavy in the wind under an iron sky. If it was for the sins of the world, said Mr Schönhut, He might as well have finished it off for once and all, why destroy and then start again? It's not as if things have gone better since; in fact there's been no end to blood and cruelty, and yet never another Flood … nay, there was even the promise not to eradicate life on earth.

Why so much pity for the murderers who came after and none for those before, all drowned like rats? He should

have known that together with every being – man or beast – evil entered the Ark. Those He felt compassion for carried within themselves the germs of every epidemic of hatred and pain that was destined to break out right up to the end of time. And Mr Schönhut drank his beer, confident that the thing went no further, because he could say whatever he liked about the God of Israel, he could really let rip, because it all remained in the family. But for others to say these things would have been indelicate and even, at certain times, strictly below the belt.

Your hair's a mess, go to the washroom and sort yourself out, that's what the old lady said to him, severely, on that occasion. To reach the washroom whoever is in the room where the bar is has to pass under the masks, beneath those eyes that peep out avid and frightened. The background behind those faces is black, a darkness in which Carnival lights up scarlet lips and cheeks; a nose projects lewd and curving, the very hook for grabbing someone standing below and dragging him or her into that dark party. It seems that those faces, or some of them, are the work of Pietro Lucano – the attribution is uncertain, despite the work of scholars who devote as much patience to the San Marco as to an ancient temple. In the church of the Sacred Heart – not too far from the café, just across the Public Garden or back up Via Marconi which runs alongside the park – this painter was responsible for the two angels in the apse that hold up two circles of fire: two acrobats of eternity whose skirts the artist was obliged by the Jesuit fathers to lengthen almost to their ankles, so as not to leave their androgynous legs in view.

There are those who maintain that some of the masks are by Timmel, who was perhaps responsible for a mask (female) in another room. The hypothesis barely holds up: undoubtedly at that time, towards the end of the Thirties, this "favourite of the road", as the roving painter loved to define himself – he was born in Vienna and came to Trieste

to achieve his self-destruction – undoubtedly contrived some bearable evenings in the cafés to provide himself an hour or two's distraction from the impossibility of living. He would make a gift of some little masterpiece to one or other of the rich Trieste merchants, patrons for whom an artist was a dancing bear and could be tripped up, in exchange for generous drinking sessions that allowed him to get through an evening and which gradually sent him to the bottom altogether.

Timmel reinvented his own childhood. The meningitis he'd had as a child, he recounted, was a base lie invented by his parents out of their hatred for him, and while his mind and his memory were unravelling he was writing the *Magic Notebook*, a mixture of striking lyrical epiphanies and verbal sob-stuff verging on aphasia and rendered crazed by amnesia, which he called nostalgia – the desire to cancel out all the names and signs that enmesh the individual in the world. The wayfaring rebel, fated to end his days in the madhouse, was trying even before reaching that utmost refuge, to escape from the tentacles of reality by closeting himself in an empty, dizzy inertia, "sitting to one side idle and uninterested", arms crossed, immobile and content just to feel himself rotating together with the planet in its vacuum. He sought passivity and welcomed Fascism, which liberated him from the weight of responsibility and spared him the frustration of pursuing liberty without being able to find it, rather it thrust him back into the submission of infancy: "To achieve beatitude requires absolute dependence."

The route through the café and its L-shaped structure, even if only to satisfy what Principal Lunardis could never bring himself to define as anything other than an impulsion, is not straight. Chessplayers love the café – it resembles a chessboard and one moves between its tables like a knight, making a series of right angles and often finding oneself, as in a game of snakes and ladders, back at square one …

back at that table where one had studied for the German literature exam and now, many years later, one wrote or responded to yet another interview about Trieste, its *Mitteleuropa* culture and its decline, while not far away one son is correcting his degree dissertation and another, in the end-room, is playing cards.

People come and go from the café and behind them the doors continue to swing; a slight breath of air makes the stagnant smoke waver. The swinging loses some of its strength each time, a shorter heartbeat. Strips of luminous dust float in the smoke, serpentine coils that unroll slowly, feeble garlands round the necks of the shipwrecked holding on to their tables. The smoke envelops things in a soft and opaque blanket, a cocoon in which the chrysalis would like to shut itself up indefinitely, sparing itself the pain of being a butterfly. But the scribbling pen bursts the cocoon and frees the butterfly, which flutters its wings in fear.

Above the French windows the fruit bowls and the bottles of champagne gleam. A red marbled lampshade is an iridescent jellyfish. Up high the chandeliers glow and sway like moons in water. History states that the San Marco opened on 3 January, 1914 – despite resistance put up by a consortium of Trieste café-owners, who in an attempt to obstruct it turned in vain to the Royal Imperial authorities – and immediately it became a meeting place for irredentist youth and a workshop for the production of false passports for anti-Austrian patriots who wanted to escape to Italy. “Those youngsters had an easy time,” grumbled Mr Pichler, ex-Oberleutnant on the Galicia front during the 1916 massacres. “They had great fun with that traffic in cutting and pasting photographs, it was like taking down one of those masks and putting it on, without thinking that those masks can pull you into the darkness and make you disappear, as then happened to many of them and us, in Galicia or on the Carso…. and don’t let’s exaggerate with the famous destruction of the café on 23

May, 1915 by the Austrian pigs … yes, the pigs, that's the right name for those desk officers and the scum that came after them – of course it was a terrible business, such a beautiful café all smashed up and broken … but Austria, on the whole, was a civilized country. De Frieskene, the governor, even apologised during the war to an irredentist like Silvio Benco for having to keep him under special surveillance, on orders from above. If the Empire existed today everything would still be the same, the world would still be a Caffè San Marco, and don't you think that's something, if you take a look out there?"

The San Marco is a real café – the outskirts of History stamped with the conservative loyalty and the liberal pluralism of its patrons. Those places where just one tribe sets up camp are pseudocafés – never mind whether they are frequented by respectable people, youth most-likely-to, alternative lifestyles or à la page intellectuals. All endogamies are suffocating; colleges too, and university campuses, exclusive clubs, master classes, political meetings and cultural symposia, they are all a negation of life, which is a sea port.

Variety triumphs, vital and florid, at the San Marco. Old long-haul captains, students revising for exams and planning amorous manoeuvres, chessplayers oblivious to what goes on around them, German tourists curious about the small plaques commemorating small and large literary triumphs whose begetters used to frequent those tables, silent newspaper readers, joyous groups predisposed towards Bavarian beer or *verduzzo* wine, spirited old men inveighing against the iniquity of the times, know-it-all commentators, misunderstood geniuses, the odd imbecile yuppie, corks that pop like a military salute, especially when Doctor Bradaschia, already under suspicion because of miscellaneous vaunted credits – including his degree –

and in trouble with the law, brazenly offers drinks to all within reach, peremptorily instructing the waiter to put it on his account.

“Basically, I was in love with her, but I didn’t like her, while she liked me, but she wasn’t in love with me,” says Mr Palich, born in Lussino, summing up a tormented marital romance. The café is a buzz of voices, a disconnected and uniform choir, apart from a few exclamations at a table of chessplayers, or, in the evening, Mr Plinio’s piano – sometimes rock, more often popular music from the years between the wars, *Love is the sweetest thing …* fate advances stepping to a danceable kitsch.

But what do you mean “for the money”? As if someone like old Weber would let himself be ripped off. In fact she was the one with the money, not he and she knew well enough that he had almost nothing to leave her. For the likes of you and me maybe a little apartment in New York would be a fortune, but for someone like her it wouldn’t even register. He wanted to marry her – his cousin Ettore said so too. They hadn’t been speaking for almost fifty years because of that business over the family tomb in Gorizia, and anyway when Ettore heard that the old man, who in fact was two years younger than him, had only a few months left to live, he got on the plane and went to see him in New York. Almost before inviting Ettore to sit down he told him there was big news, that he was getting married the following week – yes, because, he said, he’d done almost everything in life except get married, and he didn’t want to make his exit without having tried marriage as well. He emphasized marriage, a proper marriage, it was impossible to die without having been married; everyone’s capable of living together, even you, which is saying a lot, he added, giving his cousin a glass of Luxardo maraschino. And so, explained Ettore, having crossed the ocean I had to sample that maraschino which used to turn my stomach

when I was a young man, in Zara. Anyway, he died peacefully – now that I've filled in the last box in the questionnaire, as he put it – and I have to admit that he wasn't a trial to anybody, not even during the last days, and here was a man who had always been a royal pain … marriage evidently did him good.

Voices rise, they blend, they fade, one hears them at one's shoulder, moving down to the end of the room, the noise of the undertow. The sound waves drift away like circles of smoke, but somewhere continue in existence. They are always there, the world is full of voices, a new Marconi might be able to invent a device capable of picking them all up, an infinite chatter over which death has no dominion; immortal and immaterial souls are stray ultrasounds in the universe. That's according to Juan Octavio Prenz, who listened to the murmuring at those tables and turned it into a novel in his *Fable of Innocent Honest, the Beheaded*, a grotesque and surreal story that is ravelled and unravelled by voices that are crossed, are superimposed, are separated and are lost.

Prenz was born in Buenos Aires but his roots were in the hinterland of Croatian Istria. He taught in Italian and wrote in Spanish. He taught and wandered in the most diverse countries this side and that side of the ocean. Perhaps he settled in Trieste because the city reminded him of the cemetery of boats and figureheads at Ensenada de Barragán, between Buenos Aires and La Plata, which only lives on now in a slender volume of his poems. He sits in the Caffè San Marco still feeling the gaze of the figureheads on him – worn by wind and water, and dumbstruck at the approach of catastrophes that no one else can see yet. He leafs through the translation of one of his collections. There is a poem dedicated to Diana Teruggi, who was his assistant at the University of Buenos Aires. One day, in the time of the generals, the girl disappeared for ever. Once again poetry speaks of absence, of

something or someone who is not here any more. It’s not much, a poem. A little card left in an empty place. Poets know this and don’t give it too much weight, but they give even less weight to the world that celebrates or ignores them. Prenz pulls his pipe from a pocket, smiles at his two daughters sitting at another table, chats with a Senegalese who’s going round the tables selling junk, buys a cigarette lighter from him. Chatting is better than writing. The Senegalese moves on, Prenz sucks on his pipe and makes a start.

It’s not bad, filling up sheets of paper under the sniggering masks and amidst the indifference of the people sitting around. That good-natured indifference balances the latent delirium of omnipotence that exists in writing – purporting to sort out the world with a few pieces of paper and to hold forth on life and death. Thus the pen is dipped, willingly or otherwise, into ink diluted with humility and irony. The café is a place for writing. One is alone, with paper and pen and at most two or three books, hanging onto the table like a shipwreck survivor tossed by the waves. A few centimetres of wood separate the sailor from the abyss that might swallow him up, the tiniest flaw and the huge black waters break ruinously, pulling him down. The pen is a lance that wounds and heals; it pierces the floating wood and leaves it to the mercy of the waves, but it also plugs the wood and renders it capable of sailing once again and keeping to a course.

Keep a hold on the wood, fear not – a shipwreck can also be salvation. How does the old story go? Fear knocks at the door, faith opens; there’s no one there. But who teaches you to go and open? For some time you’ve done nothing but close doors, it’s become a habit; for a while you hold your breath, but then anxiety grabs your heart again and the instinct is to bolt everything, even the windows, without realizing that this way there’s no air and as you suffocate,

the migraine batters your temples; eventually all you hear is the sound of your own headache.

Scribble, free the demons, bridle them, often simply presume to ape them. In the San Marco the demons have been relegated up on high, overturning the traditional scenario, because the café, with its floral decor and its Viennese Secessionist style reminds us that it can be alright down here: a waiting room in which it's pleasant to wait, to put off leaving. The manager, Mr Gino, and the waiters, who come to the table with one glass after another – sometimes off their own bat offering, but not to everyone, salmon canapés with a special *prosecco* – are angels of a lower order, but they are trustworthy, enough at any rate to keep an eye on things so that these exiles from the earthly paradise feel at home in this clandestine Eden and no snake tries to tempt them away with false promises.

The café is a Platonic academy, said Hermann Bahr at the beginning of the century – the man who also said that he liked being in Trieste because here he had the impression of being nowhere. Nothing is taught in this academy, but sociability and how to break spells are learned. One may chat, tell stories, but preaching, making political speeches, giving lessons are against the rules. All, at their respective tables, are close to and distant from the person next to them. Love your neighbour as you love yourself, or bear your neighbour's mania for biting his nails just as he endures some habit of yours that is even more unpleasant. At these tables it is not possible to found a school, draw up ranks, mobilize followers and emulators, recruit disciples. In this the place of disenchantment – in which how the show ends is common knowledge but where no one tires of watching nor chafes at the actors' blunders – there is no room for false prophets who seduce those vaguely anxious for a facile and instant redemption, misleading them with empty promises.

Out there, the false Messiahs have an easy time of it, as they drag their followers blinded by mirages of salvation down roads they cannot travel and thus setting them off towards destruction. The prophets of drugs, men who can control their own habit without being overborne by it, seduce helpless disciples into following them on the road along which they will destroy themselves. Someone, in a drawing room, proclaims that revolutions are made with rifles, knowing well that this is an innocuous metaphor while leaving other simple souls to take them literally and end up having to pay the penalty. Among the newspapers on their long sticks an illustrated magazine displays the face of Edie Sedgwick, the beautiful and vulnerable American model who believed in the testament of disorder preached with order and method by that tribal guru Andy Warhol. She let herself be convinced to seek not pleasure, but an indefinable sense of life in those feverish sexual transgressions, those ingenuous group rites and those drugs that led her, with painful banality, to unhappiness and death.

In the San Marco no one has any illusions that the original sin was never committed and that life is virginal and innocent; for this reason it’s difficult to pass off anything phoney on its patrons, any ticket to the Promised Land. To write is to know that one is not in the Promised Land and that one will never reach it, but it also means continuing doggedly in that direction, through the wilderness. Sitting in the café, you’re on a journey; as in a train, a hotel, on the road, you’ve got very little with you and you cannot in your vanity grace that nothing with your personal mark, you are nobody. In that familiar anonymity you can dissimulate, rid yourself of the ego as if it were a shell. The world is a cavity of uncertainty into which writing penetrates in obstinate bewilderment. To write, take a break, chat, play at cards; laughter at the next table, a woman’s profile, as incontrovertible as Fate, the wine in

the glass, time the colour of gold. The hours flow … amiable, carefree, almost happy.

The owners and the ex-owners of the café – almost a list of the sovereigns of ancient dynasties. Marco Lovrinovich of Fontane d'Orsera near Parenzo, who started restaurants and wine houses much as others write poems or paint landscapes, opened the café on 3 January, 1914 on the site where The Trifolium Central Dairy had once stood, complete with cowshed. Officially Lovrinovich said he had named it San Marco in his own honour, but he took every opportunity to repeat the image of the Venetian lion, the irredentist Italian symbol even in the decoration on the chairs. Perhaps he was convinced, deep down, that the winged lion was indeed a tribute to his Christian name. You don't reach the age of ninety-four, as he did, without being intimately convinced that the world revolves around you.

And yet some died young and alone among his tables, devastated by the imbalance between their spirit and the world, which was definitely not tailor-made for them: for example that youngster who was always a bit sweaty, the one who went round like a hunted animal; his eyes forever spoke his awareness of being already caught between the tiger's jaws. He used to come every afternoon with so many sheets of paper which he filled one after another and always carried with him, until one day he came no more; he'd thrown himself into the courtyard the previous evening.

The cafés are also a sort of hospice for those whose hearts suffer need and café-owners like Lovrinovich are benefactors too, offering a temporary refuge from the elements, like the founders of shelters for the homeless. And why shouldn't they earn something on the side, even patriotic glory as Lovrinovich did following the devastation of the San Marco and his detention in the Austrian

punishment camp in Liebenau, near Graz, where the Austrians sent him because he'd infected both eyes with trachoma to avoid being sent to fight against Italy.

Among the various owners the Stock sisters stand out, minute and relentless. And then there are also memories of a seasoned barwoman with lank blonde hair; they still talk about the occasion when an enormous drunk, to whom she'd denied one final whisky, threatened her with a little demonstration, lifting up the coffee machine – a massive weight – from the bar as if it were a twig, then dropping it with an almighty clang. Meanwhile the nearest regulars, among them one intently writing at his usual table, alas all too close to the bar, looked around in fright, hoping that someone else might nobly step forward to prevent the slaughter of the woman. Finally the enraged giant lunged at her just as she pulled a hatchet from a drawer and jumped at him, ready to plant the thing in his neck and the dutiful customer, who had stood up from his paper-strewn table and had been moving as slowly as possible towards the furious colossus, was only too glad to tackle the barwoman, firmly seizing and twisting the wrist that brandished the hatchet, and thus saving the impulsive youngster's life.

It might be one of the few places in Trieste where there are plenty of young people to be seen, but the San Marco suggests a rejuvenated existence, it seems to imprint on the faces of its habitués the same seasoned and decorous robustness that a little restoration periodically confers on the decor. The Triestine Mephistopheles is a prudent, bourgeois demon; his rejuvenation of the friezes when they are about to crumble away and of the walls cracked like a wrinkled face, provides a noble, vigorous middle age – not the tempestuous and improvident youth of a Faust that spells Marguerite's ruin, but the charm of the teacher who in bed concludes the seduction of the pupil begun austerely

in the classroom, a little misunderstanding soon to be dissipated.

So far as the structure is concerned, the rejuvenative function tends to be carried out by the Generali insurance company, which restores to the cafés and public buildings of Trieste the ordered and mysterious beauty of the florid bourgeois city it once was. The portrait of the writer who spends much of his life at the San Marco, receiving mail and visitors who ask him about that flourishing, lost city that once was – a city which he only knows about second-hand, through other people's gossip and nostalgia – the portrait, by Valerio Cugia, hangs on the lefthand wall as one enters, in front of the board with the plaques dedicated to the illustrious patrons. The portrait could justifiably be replaced by the old nineteenth-century portrait of Masino Levi, insurance director, which hangs in the foyer of the Politeama Rossetti theatre, next to the Public Garden: waistcoat, paper in one hand, goose quill in the other, a discreet and elusive Jewish smile on his lips. A Mephistopheles insurer of lives and guarantor, with a policy to boot, of a healthy middle age for which it's worth signing and handing over one's soul.

Indeed that middle age – or post-middle age – offers good possibilities for success, delayed yet sweet. On certain evenings the sun lights up the broad, gilded coffee leaves that surround the medallions on the walls; the light as it moves sinks the mirror behind the table into a lake of shadow enclosed by shining borders, the last rays of a distant sun that gleams and sets over the sea. A nostalgia for marine clarity reflects on the half-submerged faces in the dark waters of the mirror, the insidious call of real life. But one is quick to shut it up, if it is too insistent. When, in a certain period, assiduous regulars who also attend the adjacent synagogue stop coming and disappear one after another from their usual tables, then almost no one, not even those who up until recently loved to chat with the

people who came out of the Temple and into the café for refreshment, almost no one asks indiscreet questions about their absence.

In the café the air is veiled, a protection against remoteness; no gust blows the horizon open and the red of the evening is the wine in one's glass. Mr Crepaz, for example, certainly does not regret his youth; in fact just now he's busy touching it up, like an unsuccessful painting that's not beyond repair. As a young man things never went well for him with women. Oh, nothing dramatic – simply nothing happened, or very little, ever since he was a youngster, since the time when they all used to meet up at the summer cinema in the Public Garden, just a few hundred metres from the San Marco. The girls were kind, pleased if he was there too, but when the dark white-capped sea of the Bounty appeared on the screen, bright spray and black waves, a black as deep as the night so that it seemed blue, and there was freshness and darkness around them and noises among the leaves, the girls' eyes shone and tender laughter in the shadow was the promise of happiness, and he felt that none of this was for him. He felt it in the awkwardness of his body which was a barrier between himself and those tanned arms that, all right, they were flung about his neck at the moment of going home, but it was nothing to compare to what happened with the others, even just the clasp of a hand in the dark.

It had been more or less always that way, at any rate often; those beauties opened up like flowers in water, and in vain he'd passed them by, the art of placing a hand on another's had remained an unknown initiation. Until once, many years later, he had seen Laura again – beautiful in her ageing, which was already clear in the lines in her face and the abundance of her breasts; suddenly she had looked at him differently and everything had loosened up, it had become so easy. "You were so immature," Clara said to him months later, in bed. They used to sit together at school

and then, as now, she would throw her black hair into his face like a wave, although now it had the odd streak of white.

And so his life had changed. Not that he'd become a womanizer, anything but. He was faithful, he was only interested in the women he'd desired in vain in his youth, he wanted to square things up. He was methodical in his research; the girls had left him behind, but he had caught up on more than one of them. Slowly things reverted to a new order, a new balance. He was making up for that day of useless heartbreak at the seaside with Maria, the unbridgeable distance he'd felt then as he gave her his hand to help her up on to the rock. He made revisions to that lunch when Luisa, with that sidelong, teasing glance of hers, had eyes only for Giorgio, while now her soft, plump fingers, so practised in awakening desire, were only for him.

Little by little he retraced his path backwards, back to that little girl in the white socks in the cycling area in the Public Garden, the one who'd ordered him sulkily to sort her wheel our for her and then had shot off without so much as a glance. But now, she was an odalisque, a woman with avid, imperious lips who would have inspired envy in the fine daughter she'd had all those years ago by one of the lucky ones, a rival who in the meantime had been removed from the scene with a divorce.

And then there were the ladies he'd pined for in an even more distant time, his mother's friends and his friends' mothers, elegant and perfumed women who always picked up and cuddled the other children, kissing and stroking them on the cheek or putting a chocolate in their mouths, even pushing it through their lips with a finger, the nail varnished. Indeed there was even a rumour – but it's easy to exaggerate in the café – that he recently had gone to bed with Mrs Tauber, perhaps the doyenne of her line, who some fifty years previously had been a real beauty; even

now she still had the pert little nose that was his by rights. Anyway, gentleman as he was, he said nothing because they all knew her and she sometimes still came to the café with the few surviving friends of her own sex.

Giorgio Voghera has for years sat at a table on the bottom right, as one comes in. He is an acknowledged leader and purported author of *Secret*, a distasteful and charming masterpiece, its subject, renunciation seen in its heartless geometry, a book written against life that serves to highlight all of life's seductive qualities. Next to Voghera sit mild-mannered ladies, cousins who are also writers of some merit, undemanding friends, aspiring writers who cling to past literary glory, journalists who every two or three months come up with the same questions on Trieste, students looking for dissertation topics, the odd scholar from far away perhaps sniffing out a future banquet of unpublished works. Piero Kern, expert in oral literature and a protected specimen of the grand Triestine cosmopolitan bourgeoisie now in danger of extinction, if it ever existed, tells of a robbery in a Rio de Janeiro travel agency; he is highly critical of the robbers' lack of professionalism, but even more so of the unseemly behaviour of a fat American, a fellow victim.

Voghera listens good-humouredly, patient and distrait, letting his own words and others' slide into the great indifference of the universe. Those watery sky-blue eyes have seen the other side of life, its underside, and their glance roves meekly among the tables. "Basically, I'm optimistic," he loves to repeat, "because things always end up working out worse than my gloomy predictions." He's been through historic catastrophes and personal hells, skirted abysses into which he cannot have found it easy to avoid being swallowed, especially as a young man.

It’s not easy being in the desert, outside of and far away from the Promised Land. It’s not just the big sand storms in the desert, the strong wind that stuns and sweeps one away; there are even more venomous dangers – the grains that stick everywhere and take the air away from one’s skin, the dryness that desiccates the body and dries up the soul’s sap. Perhaps as a young man, before he reached this state of indulgence for his own and others’ shortcomings, Voghera must have been fairly unbearable – an irritable teacher who found life slapdash and in need of correction and failed it. But his syntax is clear and smooth, doggedly honest, like Ariadne’s Thread running through the labyrinth without getting tangled and implacably weaving the image of a random, painful, grotesque reality.

In this prose Voghera writes out his kaleidoscope, celebrating the useless virtues of a white-collar universe – methodical precision and assiduous effort dedicated to nothing. He describes the process of ethical reverse selection that inevitably brings the worst onto the bridge of society and history. He reviews the sciences that venture into the meanders of the soul, those like psychoanalysis that reveal tortuous truths that soon become banalities, cruel misunderstandings in the comedy of existence. He re-evokes the years of exile and the war in Palestine, a war that for him was above all a solemn labour of patience. He gazes with disenchantment and compassion on the world, as though viewing it from another planet; the contemplation of chaos does away with trust and illusion but not with good manners, a pure style and that melancholy nineteenth-century respect that is one manifestation of goodness.

“I know, I know that everyone has so much to do in this world,” Voghera murmurs, as though he himself does not belong to it. Often, despite the aches and pains and the years, and there are many of them by now, he goes to visit a venerable and despotic authoress, forgotten by everyone;

she keeps him for hours, hassling him and tearing him apart because he's the only victim she has left. "Well, what am I to say?" he explains, almost apologetically, "I know what loneliness is, to be alone and forgotten … and then she was kind to my parents, once, although in truth … well, it doesn't matter. But above all it's because if I don't call on her she phones me up and bends my ear relentlessly, which is much more tiring." Every now and then, at night, in the Jewish rest home where he lives, an addled old woman from a neighbouring room makes a mistake, comes in and sits on his bed, for hours sometimes. "Even if it had happened fifty years ago," he says, "it wouldn't have made any difference …"

God continues to inflict sores on Job and Voghera keeps the record. *Our Lady Death*, a questionable but unforgettable book, is the diary of the bereavements he's been through: his father, his mother, Aunt Letizia, Uncle Giuseppe, Aunt Olga, his friend Paolo, his cousin Cecilia. Jewish Trieste, to which he bears witness and of which he is perhaps the last chronicler, exits from the stage. One by one the bit players disappear, in the final hours of his many characters, whose agony also includes the bureaucratic processes to be gone through, the emergency hospital admissions, the vesical haemorrhages, the smells of old age and illness, the red tape for hospital in-patients, the arteriosclerosis, the tyrannical manias of the ill and the egoism of their carers, the wiles, the pains and the great detachment of those who suffer and die.

The archivist of the end neglects no detail of the disintegration, nor of the squalor that accompanies it – the vomit choking the breath, and the rude arrogance of the switchboard operator at the emergency unit. He's like a beast of burden, beneath his pack and the blows – he absorbs it all, patient and helpless, but he lifts his eyes and repeats: "Now mind, because I'm noting it all down." Those hospital admissions and those deaths pursuing one another

from chapter to chapter produce in the end an involuntarily comic result, just like any exaggerated sequence of tragedies that initially awakes compassion but then, beyond a certain point, provokes hilarity in the observer. This irresistible comic quality of tribulations brings out the extreme weakness of the human condition, which under an overload of misery is robbed even of its decorum, exposed to ridicule and reduced to waste and refuse.

In a certain sense Voghera rewrites the Book of Job, but with himself taking the part of Job's first sons and daughters, who, during their father's trials, perish in the ruins of the house, decimated like the flocks by the wind in the desert, and in the happy ending they are replaced just like the flocks and the camels, so that their memory will not disturb Job's late and happy years. Job is protagonist of a terrible story, but one which is set in motion in order to make him stand out; from his point of view, from the perspective of a man to whom the Lord and his Opponent dedicate much attention, it is easier to acknowledge that life, despite its tragedies, has a sense. Nobody wonders, even, whether and how Job's first children, crushed under the rubble, accepted their fate as mere extras brought in to glorify Job. If one identifies with them, with their nameless destiny, it's more difficult to praise the order of things.

Voghera adopts the point of view of those creatures who have been devastated, overlooked, the viewpoint of the stone which the builders rejected, mindful and perhaps mistrustful of the Lord's promise to use it as the cornerstone of His house. His objective and fastidious prose is a great memorial to the vanquished. But something blocks and dilutes, the watery gaze clouds over, the goodness darkens, perhaps becomes polluted. Whether or not he is the author of the splendid *Secret*, it anyway couldn't have been easy to be its protagonist, the bitter hero of a mania and an inhibition, which in stories are transformed into magic, into love's abandonment, but in

real life leave scars that rarely heal – all the more so if the author of that great book was (as he maintains without letting anyone know what it is he really wants us to believe) his father, Guido Voghera, in an improper, almost incestuous profanation of the deep and heartbreaking unhappiness of his son.

His crystalline style and his preferred topics – love's enchantment, life's failure – sometimes seem to come from a page of *Secret*, but often they are weakened and watered down in mere fastidious verbiage; straightforward, charming simplicity slides away into banality, and humility dissolves into a questionable submissiveness. Perhaps anyway Voghera is a plaster saint, a man who had to master the lessons of life's meanness and perhaps did not mind doing so. When his writing is praised he retires shyly and blushes, saying that the true writers in his family are his father, his uncle and his cousin. But in the myopic eyes as they look past his interlocutor, there is perhaps a glint of malice, if he gets the impression you might just end up believing him.

Doctor Velicogna sits near the counter where the newspapers are; he's not interested in reading them because they all say the same things, but he likes to hold them, the stick in his left hand while he leafs through with his right. The world is there, in his hands, threatening disasters with enormous black headlines, but one has the sense of keeping it at bay. Doctor Velicogna has a theory, founded on personal experience, about the best ways of saving a marriage: mine, for example, he blethers in front of his beer – draught, naturally, bottled beer's not for him because pressure and temperature are crucial and the head has to be just right, not that stuff that comes out when you take the cap off, which looks like a syrup shaken before use – mine was saved thanks to that stunt of spending the

whole night out, a couple of times; that way I opened my eyes and I understood. Even the most irreproachable can find himself, without quite knowing how, caught up in some little affair and to begin with it's not even unpleasant. But often, almost from the start, she asks you to stay over at her place for the night and, who knows, maybe it seems more decorous and besides, despite all the complications and the manoeuvres to be set in motion, how do you say no? I at all events always felt surprised and grateful if a woman was attracted to me and it seemed all wrong not to be kind.

It's true that kindness and courtesy pay, continues Doctor Velicogna, still holding the newspaper stick. Thanks to that kindness the whole show soon came apart; soon enough, anyway, before anyone got hurt. Because after a while, in bed, what are you supposed to do? It's not your woman, the one who goes with you through all the business and the strife of living – she's the one you never tire of, never tire of simply being close to her and doing nothing, just feeling her shoulder and her breath.

Now when you're with another woman – she might even be a better woman and warrant all the respect in the world – after a while you're lying there and you don't even have the courage to get up and go and read a book – all right, you can go to the bathroom and stay in there a while, but only once, at the most twice. You can sleep a bit, but even falling asleep too quickly doesn't do, it's not polite. And so I used to lie in bed, hoping she'd fall asleep. When I heard the first trams I was relieved and the Municipal Transport Authority shot up in my esteem as their pre-dawn heralds announced the imminent end of my embarrassment. A couple more hours and leaving would no longer be a discourtesy, indeed it was a duty, a delicate gesture given that they, too, had to go out to work.