



# A DIFFERENT SEA

BY THE AUTHOR OF *Danube*



"This shrewd and deeply intelligent novelist . . .  
deserves to be read again and again"  
PAUL BAILEY, *Daily Telegraph*

*Claudio Magris*



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## About the Author

CLAUDIO MAGRIS is the author of *Danube*, a work described as a masterpiece by a great number of critics, and which has been translated into most major languages. He previously taught German at the University of Turin. He has translated the works of Ibsen, Kleist and Schnitzler and currently lectures in the Faculty of Literature and Philosophy at Trieste University.

*Also by Claudio Magris*

DANUBE

INFERENCES FROM A SABRE

# **A DIFFERENT SEA**

Claudio Magris

Translated from the Italian by M S Spurr



THE HARVILL PRESS  
LONDON

To Francesco and Paolo

Ἀρετὴ τιμὴν φέρει, virtue brings honour. Or rather, and with greater philological precision, *Tugend bringt Ehre*. Konrad Nussbaumer their teacher, who had been top of his class in his own day, expected the German version. It was only natural in the dingy classrooms of the old Royal Imperial Staatsgymnasium of Gorizia; only natural among those orderly rows of desks as identical as the leaves of the wall calendar that rustled as they disappeared day by day beneath the janitor's hand; and natural too within those walls, whose greyness may simply have been the faded trace of some earlier lost colour.

Perhaps it had begun there when he had entered those classrooms and felt that something was missing. The inkwell on the desk was the deep, dark eye of a cyclops, while the reflected blue of the ink's wavy lines on the glass recalled the distant sea – or even simply the mountains of the Collio, so easy to reach after school. The longing to immerse himself in that blue emptied lessons of meaning. And, as he waited impatiently for them to finish, how painful, how futile the present seemed. Why was it not already over and done with?

Now, all around him is the sea, nothing but sea. No longer the Adriatic of Pirano and Salvore, where a few months before everything had happened, nor even the Mediterranean, subject to the ancient authority of the aorist and the sequence of tenses, more familiar to him than Italian or even German, but instead the ocean, monotonous and without limit. Big waves in the darkness, a spray of white foam, the wing of a bird plunging into the shadows –

standing motionless for hours on deck, he never tires of the unchanging scene. The bow of the ship slices the water without ever seeming to touch it as it falls into the void of the trough opening beneath; the muffled sound of the wave breaks further back against the ship's side.

It is now night, and nothing is visible. But even before, with his eyes half-closed against the relentless sun, with dark red blotches appearing beneath his eyelids, the deep blue of sea and sky had seemed black. After all, the universe itself is dark, and only the eye, like some pedantic philologist, is obsessed with the translation of invisible wavelengths into light and colour. Nothing is really visible, not even in the noon sun's blinding reflection on the shimmering sea. A magical time, when gods appear.

Whether this voyage of escape marks the beginning or end of his life is uncertain. His curriculum vitae reads: Enrico Mreule, born Rubbia 1st June 1886; son of Gregorio (deceased) and Giulia Venier; home address since 1898, Flat 1, no. 3 Via Petrarca, Gorizia; final school examinations taken at the Royal Imperial Gymnasium. And so on. A list of incontrovertible facts, which, perhaps, he can no longer readily list in their entirety – not because he wants to cover his tracks or put anyone off his trail, but because, rising up from that dark, forever resounding sea, comes an overwhelming sense of the utter triviality of all such personal detail. He feels pride, but anonymously. It is not his personal virtue, although in some way it brings him honour, as Nussbaumer liked to put it in their translation classes.

Enrico left for Argentina on 28th November 1909, boarding ship at Trieste. He informed almost no one of his real purpose and told his mother that he needed some money for travel in Greece, to set the seal on his degree in philology at the Universities of Innsbruck and Graz. His father had died many years before, but his family had been able to maintain a certain modest affluence, thanks to some



mills in the vicinity of Gorizia. And anyway, money was all his mother was capable of providing to help him on his way.

His younger brother is their mother's favourite. Yet it is not easy for either of them, any more than for their sister, to kiss her bitter, unmaternal face. Enrico feels pity for that mouth, twisted and hardened by the mysterious pain common to all hearts that have difficulty in loving. But his pity is devoid of compassion. There on deck, as he watches the ship's wake being swallowed by the night, Enrico determines to think no more of his mother's face, of their mutual and unpaid debt, of the misunderstandings that have entangled them both. That thought loses itself among the ship's masts and the darkness, loses itself for ever. It is strange how easily and painlessly one can free oneself. And a moment later even his sense of surprise disappears, together with any lingering feelings of remorse. Now he feels merely listless, deafened by the night wind and the sound of the sea.

Only Nino had gone to see him off at Trieste. In the ship's navigation room there must surely be a sextant to chart their position by the height of the stars from the horizon, stars which sink imperceptibly as one travels south. Enrico tries to imagine the sextant and the other navigational instruments that prevent them from getting lost, that confirm their position, indeed their identity, on this vast and uniform expanse of water. His life, he muses, whatever happens to him – on either side of the ocean – will always be directed by the trigonometry of that attic room, where each day the three of them – Carlo, he and Nino – used to meet.

When they first got to know each other, at school, Carlo was still listed in the class register as Karl Michelstædter. He immediately became, as Enrico had written to him shortly before sailing, "the friend who would fill all space and embody the world I was searching for". They derived enormous pleasure and a sense of wonderment from their shared view of the world. Up in Nino's attic in Gorizia they