

Essayism along borders Perspectival mobility in Claudio Magris' *Danubio*

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As a Germanist and literary critic, Claudio Magris has published several volumes of essays dedicated to Central European literature and culture. The same applies for his first narrative works, which explore both Trieste and the backyard of his youth, the former Habsburg territories of Central Europe, revealing the author's vast and multicultural, intellectual background. However, as a native of Trieste, Magris is only a Central European citizen of the periphery, well versed in Germanic culture though born, bred and still living in Italy. This balancing between proximity and distance eventually gave rise to the author's need to add a sense of unity or totality to his experience of fragmentation, which might possibly counterbalance the chaotic and galloping flow of life and modern history. By virtue of this poetic totality and the specific modalities it assumes in his narrative works, Magris performs a monumental operation of literary and cultural re-mapping of the Mitteleuropean area.

Magris' cultural wanderings into Central Europe started with *Il mito absburgico nella letteratura austriaca moderna* (1963), his first collection of essays, based on the Master's thesis he defended at the University of Turin, which made a major contribution to the diffusion of Central European literature and culture throughout Italy. According to the author, this pre-1968 collection, dedicated to the Habsburg myth, was generated by his desire to defend, one last time, the idea of a totality of the world:

Alcuni anni dopo, la grande diffusione della cultura e soprattutto della letteratura austriaca in Occidente ha coinciso con l'affermarsi del pensiero negativo, della scuola di Francoforte, che ha posto l'accento su tutto ciò che il progresso lascia irrisolto e sfigurato o oppresso ai suoi margini. La letteratura austriaca è apparsa una grande voce di quel disagio nei confronti della Storia che, a partire dalla fine degli anni Sessanta, ha invaso il paesaggio culturale, mettendo in crisi i grandi sistemi totalizzanti, che avevano imposto un rassicurante ordine unitario alle contraddizioni del reale.¹

Magris' narrative work, by contrast, delves into fragmentation. In *Danubio*,² for instance, the concrete presence and reality of the Central European borders coexists with the narrator's sense of a lack of confines and, following from this, his longing for circumscription and delimitations. Nevertheless, besides this urgent need of self-delimitation, *Danubio* also finds its *raison d'être* in the desire to transcend the very limits of the Self and in the search for a form of unity. Notwithstanding this underlying tension, the ethical-existential agenda of *Danubio* clearly includes the possibility of an

¹ C. Magris, *Il mito absburgico nella letteratura austriaca moderna*, Torino, Einaudi, 1996, p. 8.

² C. Magris, *Danubio*, Milano, Garzanti, 1986.

authentic relation with reality. This engagement with reality is present within the narrative through a combination of cognitive and discursive strategies, which open a myriad of perspectives on the relation between totality and fragmentation.

Scholarly work and literary criticism have paid ample attention to the concept of the frontier in Magris' work, thus dwelling especially on his decade-long experience with the presence, however unstable, of the Triestine frontier. Yet, existing studies have focussed primarily on the semantic implications that can be inferred from the notion of the frontier, neglecting the more specifically discursive modalities that determine the cognitive and existential features of frontiers.³ The present analysis of *Danubio* therefore explores the discursive dimension conditioned by the frontier in Magris' work or, in other words, the way in which the latter manifests itself at a discursive level.⁴

Essayism: beyond the question of genres

The most significant discursive dividing line, at the macro-structural level, of *Danubio* is undoubtedly the one between narrative and essay. In her analysis of the international reception of *Danubio*, Ernestina Pellegrini establishes that many reviewers have noticed the hybrid nature of the work, which constantly shifts between essay and novel. Yet Pellegrini observes that 'la definizione oscillerebbe [...] nelle interpretazioni più convincenti e articolate, lungo un diagramma che va dal saggio romanizzato al romanzo saggistico, quasi si volesse racchiudere in formule di semplificata alchimia letteraria (e tenendo presente un'idea pura di 'saggio' e di 'romanzo' cara ormai soltanto ai lettori più ingenui) un testo di grande fascino'.⁵ Conversely, in the case of *Danubio* it is necessary to analyse the dynamics that develop between the abovementioned discursive genres, and to define the scriptural praxis that arises from the interaction between literary genres and not strictly literary ones.

For instance, in Pellegrini's observations about the question of the genre of *Danubio*, any reference to the main hypotext⁶ of Magris' work – Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities* – is missing. Yet Musil's theory of essayism offers the possibility to account for the cognitive and discursive modalities generated by the dynamics between the different genres employed in *Danubio*. Magris, in fact, locates his writing within the German tradition of the presence of an 'essayistic spirit' inside the very novel, a tradition that dates back to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years* and that was continued by Broch, Mann, Musil et al.⁷ In *Danubio* a cognitive and existential attitude, inspired by the theory of essayism and applied in *The Man without Qualities*,⁸ is clearly standing out. Defining the essayistic character of Musil's work, Dieter Bachmann distinguishes between two types of essayistic elements inside the novel: a partial presence, and a presence that relates to the entire novel.⁹ In Musil as in Magris, the dynamics between the narrative and the essayistic components have two dimensions: a discursive one, in the sense that large parts of the book contain

³ See for instance A. Ciccarelli, 'Crossing Borders: Claudio Magris and the Aesthetic of the Other Side', in: *Journal of European Studies*, 42, 4 (2012), pp. 342-361; M.W. Epstein, 'Magris, Symbolic Spaces and European Identity', in: *Journal of European Studies*, 42, 4 (2012), pp. 362-374; E. Pellegrini, *Epica sull'acqua: l'opera letteraria di Claudio Magris*, Bergamo, Moretti & Vitali, 1997; N. Pireddu, *The Works of Claudio Magris. Temporary Homes, Mobile Identities, European Borders*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

⁴ For a more complete analysis of the concept of the frontier in Magris' work, see N. Dupré, *Per un'epica del quotidiano. La frontiera in Danubio di Claudio Magris*, Firenze, Cesati, 2009.

⁵ Pellegrini, *Epica sull'acqua*, cit., p. 49.

⁶ G. Genette, *Palimpsestes: la littérature au second degré*, Paris, Seuil, 1982, p. 11.

⁷ R.M. Chadbourne, 'A Puzzling Literary Genre: Comparative Views of the Essay', in: *Comparative Literature Studies*, 20, 2 (1983), pp. 141-142.

⁸ R. Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, London, Picador, 1997.

⁹ D. Bachmann, *Essay und Essayismus*, Stuttgart-Berlin-Köln-Mainz, W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1969, p. 180.

reflections of a general character, and a cognitive one, which relates to the author's basic attitude towards reality. The latter sets 'the possible' against the negative experience of the real, thereby implying a broadening of the very concept of reality.

The dynamic relation between the essayistic and the narrative components, where the latter loses ground to the former, should lead us not only to question the novel as a literary genre, but also to view it as a sign of a more general, cognitive and existential crisis of the subject that, in turn, involves the foundations and the tools of narrative writing.¹⁰ In his article on the interdiscursivity in *The Man without Qualities*, Walter Moser – with René Thom and Edgar Morin – prefers redefining the concept of crisis as a 'process of demolition and reorganization',¹¹ in contrast to those who consider a crisis as a state of illness and malfunctioning. The same ambiguity of the concept of crisis arises in Marie-Louise Roth's definition of Musilian essayism, which implies an aesthetic and ethic experimentalism.¹² Magris – like Musil – opposes to his negative experience of the real, and to his sense of nothingness, a 'sense of possibility' (versus 'sense of reality'). In sum, an attitude no longer fixed, nor reduced, to the real:

To pass freely through open doors, it is necessary to respect the fact that they have solid frames. This principle, by which the old professor had always lived, is simply a requisite of the sense of reality. But if there is a sense of reality, and no one will doubt that it has its justification, then there must also be something we can call a sense of possibility. Whoever has it does not say, for instance: Here this or that has happened, will happen, must happen; but he invents: Here this or that might, could, or ought to happen. If he is told that something is the way it is, he will think: Well, it could probably just as well be otherwise. So the sense of possibility could be defined outright as the ability to conceive of everything there might be just as well, and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not.¹³

Essayism, in Magris' work, becomes a cognitive, existential and discursive attitude aiming at motion, mental openness and sensitivity to the precariousness and the variability of the real. The essayistic complexity exemplifies the complexity of the real the author wants to relate to. In particular, it reassembles the singular aspects and contrasting elements of the real, disclosing the relations that unite or oppose them. Moreover, by seizing the connections between details, on the one hand, and the processes and regularities (or irregularities) that transcend the very dimension of the particular, on the other hand, the essayist surpasses his own subjectivity and actively takes part in reality. The role of the intellectual, according to Magris, is neither to create new realities (fictional or less), nor to make selections or restrictions within this reality; it consists in revealing the stratified plurality of the real and transcending it in the search for its meaning.

In the discursive system, the literary essay occupies a position halfway between science (objective thought) and life and art. As a genre it moves at the border between ideas and life, between mental order and existential ambiguity.¹⁴ These pairs meet in a discursive form which, through its mobility of perspective and semantic polysemy, represents, and therefore orders, reality without reducing it to fixed concepts:

¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 192.

¹¹ W. Moser, 'Diskursexperimente im Romantext zu Musils *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*', in: U. Baur & E. Castex (eds.), *Robert Musil: Untersuchungen*, Königstein, Athenäum, 1980, p. 190. My translation.

¹² M.-L. Roth, 'Essay und Essayismus bei Robert Musil', in: B. Bennett, A. Kals & W.J. Lillynsen (eds.), *Probleme der Moderne: Studien zur deutschen Literatur von Nietzsche bis Brecht: Festschrift für Walter Sokel*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1983, p. 117.

¹³ Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, cit., pp. 10-11. The cited passage is from the chapter entitled 'If there is a sense of reality, there must also be a sense of possibility'.

¹⁴ Roth, 'Essay und Essayismus bei Robert Musil', cit., p. 118.

It was more or less in the way an essay, in the sequence of its paragraphs, explores a thing from many sides without wholly encompassing it – for a thing wholly encompassed suddenly loses its scope and melts down to a concept – that he believed he could most rightly survey and handle the world and his own life. The value of an action or a quality, and indeed its meaning and nature, seemed to him to depend on its surrounding circumstances, on the aims it served; in short, on the whole – constituted now one way, now another – to which it belonged.¹⁵

In addition to its intertextual purpose, the mobility of perspective in *Danubio* also activates another function of literary discourse. Both Musil and Magris appeal to the interdiscursive literary function that matches the peculiarity of their professional biographies:¹⁶ the formation and/or professional activity, balanced between different discursive formations (science, journalism, criticism and literary writing).¹⁷ The literary privilege to move at the confines of different discursive entities, in turn, voices more general doubts about the communication praxis. The free transfer of non-literary discourses to a literary discourse, and the process of relegating the respective discursive praxes – rigidified in their original context of wording – to a state of crisis, are symptomatic of a crisis within the literary text, which originates in its impotence to influence reality beyond its own confines.

If Musil, like other exponents of the modernist novel, keeps proclaiming his trust in the uncontested potentiality of literary discourse, Magris, in *Danubio*, rather tends to emphasise the impotence of literature: the tormented incapacity of literary writing to influence non-literary discourse. Ironically, though, his alertness to literary impotence does not obliterate the value of writing. For Magris, literature voices the awareness of what is missing, the consciousness of its own impotence towards reality, as it is not a compensation or a solution for discomfort. The very quest for significance produces fictions and compensations that distract from life, even though they paradoxically constitute an integral part of the search for the sense of life. Hence the essay as a discursive form is necessarily unsystematic, fundamentally open and unlimited.¹⁸

The third position

In *Danubio* Magris projects the encounter between Europe and the Ottoman Empire in the unity of what he calls an ‘epic fresco’. For this fresco, Magris has recourse to the essayism that, already with Musil, stood out as ‘unendliche verwobene Fläche’,¹⁹ his writing being characterised by a certain reluctance to reproduce linearity²⁰ and a progressive and systematic movement of narrative story lines. To these he opposes the jumps and vaults of an essayism that is as multilevelled and incomplete as reality. Yet, the essayistic parts in *Danubio* are firmly anchored in the story of the journey performed and narrated by the first-person narrator. The reflections and digressions

¹⁵ Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, cit., p. 270.

¹⁶ Moser, ‘Diskursexperimente im Romantext’, cit.

¹⁷ M. Foucault, *L’archéologie du savoir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1969; M. Foucault, *L’ordre du discours*, Paris, Gallimard, 1971.

¹⁸ In the chapter ‘The earth too, but especially Ulrich, pays homage to the utopia of essayism’ from *The Man without Qualities*, Musil specifies the nature of the asystematicity, so typical of the essay: ‘The accepted translation of “essay” as “attempt” contains only vaguely the essential allusion to the literary model, for an essay is not a provisional or incidental expression of a conviction capable of being elevated to a truth under more favourable circumstances or of being exposed as an error (the only ones of that kind are those articles or treatises, chips from the scholar’s workbench, with which the learned entertain their special public); an essay is rather the unique and unalterable form assumed by a man’s inner life in a decisive thought’ (Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, cit., p. 273).

¹⁹ Roth, ‘Essay und Essayismus bei Robert Musil’, cit., p. 123.

²⁰ Musil speaks about ‘Faden der Erzählung’ versus ‘unendliche verwobene Fläche’.

of the traveller arise from concrete visual and sensory impressions, and from an enunciative situation that changes as the journey proceeds. What is more, the narrative frame of the journey becomes a principle of spatial and temporal dislocation to which essayism as a discursive form and cognitive-existential attitude must respond by means of perspectival mobility.

The fundamental tool of Magris' essayism is what I call the 'discursive turning', which contributes to forming complex and nuanced judgements. The narrator actually considers a particular entity under a partial angle of vision, and thereupon completes his limited judgement with other partial judgements that relativise it. This type of 'perspectival mobility' opens the narrator's eyes to the possibility of a momentary enchantment and to the concept of open totality, which takes the form of a non-totalising synthesis that respects the concreteness of the details composing it.²¹ The incomplete judgements of the narrator form bridges between the multiple realities and the overall view, whereby the judgements constitute possible answers to the author's questions. What is more, Magris often treats the partial judgements of his delegated narrator ironically, as in the following sequence, where the latter assumes the viewpoint of the self-inflicting Thrän, architect and author of a guide on the Cathedral of Ulm, and affirms: '*Tragedie e scocciature vengono poste sullo stesso piano, perché la vera tragedia della vita è che essa è tutta e soltanto una scocciatura*'.²²

The splitting of the narrative instance, however, is not always evident. Whenever the author speaks, the dynamics between author and delegated narrator are brought to a stand, and may resume even within the same sentence, marking the essayistic passages (versus the narrative ones) in particular. Additionally, the same dynamics become apparent under the guise of minute semantic slips that undercut any attempts to confer a sense to the world, and even the possibility to understand reality. In this way, Magris' sense of the frontier creates a split perspective, or 'third position', from which looking at the Self and the Other acts as a counterweight to the desire of circumscription and identity. What is more, both the narrator and the other characters experience a certain dis-individualisation. It is not so much the fixed and essential characteristics that constitute the particularity of the narrator, but the nature of his relation with reality. The narrator's individual consistency tends to reduce itself in the representation that he makes of reality. This representation nevertheless arises at a precise moment, and therefore in a particular situation of enunciation: 'an essay is rather the unique and unalterable form assumed by a man's inner life in a decisive thought'.²³ Magris does not abstain from resisting this dis-individualisation, and he in fact affirms the value of the individual: his Turin formation has left traces of Piero Gobetti's moralism and a strong sense of the universal human. Although he is scarcely individual and traversed by a multiplicity of discourses belonging to as many discursive formations, the narrator himself nonetheless experiments with new discursive combinations and new situations of enunciation. The notion of crisis thus contains new potentialities for literary writing, notwithstanding the sense of impotence towards reality. Apart from being fundamentally ethical, Magris' essayism is utopian in the sense of 'possibility', therefore resisting the normal meaning of utopia (i.e. 'an imagined place or state of things in which everything is perfect')²⁴: for Magris the 'possible' and, consequently, the correction of social and existential discomfort is owed to reality.

²¹ Musil often speaks of a 'sum of partial solutions'.

²² Magris, *Danubio*, cit., p. 87. My italics.

²³ Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, cit., p. 273.

²⁴ 'Utopia', Oxford Dictionaries, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/utopia> (20 June 2018).

Irony and the Austrian intertext

Continuing another Central European tradition, one that goes back to Thomas Mann and Robert Musil, Magris opposes his sense of irony, which he describes as 'sterniana, cioè affettuosa' and as 'un modo d'amare',²⁵ to the late twentieth-century sensation of epistemic and intellectual impotence. Indeed, the irony of the narrator in *Danubio* must not be considered as a rhetorical figure (i.e. as 'discursive irony') effective at a superficial level of the text, but as 'generative irony [...] which determines the very modalities of thought and through them imposes itself as constituting thematic and formal choices'.²⁶ Franco Musarra remarks that the 'co-presence of opposites', as the constitutive nucleus of irony, should not be understood as 'the denial of one meaning, but as the interaction of two meanings represented by a single significant'. Starting from the premise that irony always implies a relation between three instances (i.e. the issuer, the victim and the accomplice), Musarra identifies seven modalities of irony, including that of the author targeting the narrator while the implicit reader acts as an accomplice, and in particular, an internal form of this type of irony. Through this kind of irony the author makes the narrator speak in a way that becomes ironic because the reader knows certain facts.²⁷ Apart from being used on a semantic level, the signs that allow the reader to grasp the irony in *Danubio* appear primarily at the cognitive level of the text, as the irony arises from contrasts between viewpoints, judgements and affirmations, and their demystification. Gravitating around the opposition between certitude and uncertainty, irony in *Danubio* gives rise to a self-reflection that questions the epistemic potentialities of the modern Self as well as the very possibility of literary writing as a tool of knowledge.

Concerning the large intertext that Austrian culture constitutes in *Danubio*, one can also identify a tendency toward aphoristic writing that parodies the discursive form practised so assiduously in the Mitteleuropean area. In general, both irony and parody can be considered as fundamental modalities in the transfer from non-literary to literary discourse. The parodic character in *Danubio* is often achieved by means of adverbs like 'perhaps' and 'probably', which compromise the certainty and general validity of the idea. Furthermore, the aphoristic passages constitute the discursive dimension in which the narrator unites himself with the reader (and the whole of humanity), by using the first person plural. In these moments the author's sense of ethics becomes most evident.²⁸

Magris considers the (ironic) detachment when confronting one's own limits a distinctive feature of Vienna's *fin-de-siècle* culture. Through a critique of the utilitarian derailment of rational emancipation, this detachment served to rethink the unconditional belief in the power of human ratio, science and its applications. Magris claims kinship with Wittgenstein, Broch, Musil and, particularly, with the latter's binary concept of 'precision and soul', that is, his critique of the utilitarian (ab)use of the rational capacities of man, and man's love for scientific clarity. Schumpeter and Musil vehemently object to the use that has been made of this ratio. Limiting the domain of the rational to the pure reality that 'is', rather than appraising that which 'could be' or 'could have been', impedes the relativisation of the absolute character of reality: 'La storia, dice un suo appunto [di Schumpeter], potrebbe essere scritta in termini di occasioni perdute; il figlio della vecchia Cacania sapeva che, se le cose vanno così,

²⁵ S. Tavano & C. Magris, 'Lungo il Danubio', in: *Iniziativa Isontina*, 88, 29 (1987), p. 32.

²⁶ F. Musarra, 'Un buon osservatore alquanto cieco: alcune considerazioni sull'ironia nella *Coscienza di Zeno* e dintorni', in: N. Cacciaglia & L. Fava Guzzetta (a cura di), *Italo Svevo: scrittore europeo. Atti del Convegno Internazionale (Perugia 18-21 marzo 1992)*, Firenze, Olschki, 1994, p. 415. My translation.

²⁷ F. Musarra, 'Sciascia e il problema dell'ironia', in: L. Fava Guzzetta (a cura di), *Nelle regioni dell'intelligenza. Omaggio a Leonardo Sciascia*, Patti (Messina), Pungitopo, 1992, p. 126.

²⁸ The essayism of Musil is also fundamentally ethical (Bachmann, *Essay und Essayismus*, cit., p. 195).

potrebbero anche andare altrimenti'.²⁹ The ways in which Austrian culture has confronted and experienced the limits of ratio have eventually been integrated into Magris' thought and writings, not being able to recognise himself in the pessimism of certain critics of modernity (e.g. the authors of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*). Hence Vienna's *fin-de-siècle* culture may be considered an important intertext within Magris' literary work.

Furthermore, the author's interest in Austrian culture and, in particular, the Musilian sense of possibility, must be viewed in the light of the antiphenomenological conception of reality that appears in the very first pages of the book:

Quell'acqua che sgorga nel terreno del dottor Öhrlein è dunque la sorgente del Danubio o invece soltanto si sa (si pensa, si crede, si pretende) che essa sia la sorgente del Danubio? Amedeo, evidentemente, ha voluto tornare alle cose stesse, al loro manifestarsi originario nella coscienza. È partito dunque da Furtwangen deciso a descrivere le sorgenti del Danubio così come esse si danno all'osservazione, a cogliere la loro pura forma, la loro essenza, dopo aver sospeso e posto fra parentesi ogni teoria preconcepita.³⁰

The first part of Amedeo's report is 'attenta e persuasiva',³¹ and at the outset the narrator seems to be interested in the methodology outlined by his sedimentologist friend:³² 'La fenomenologia ha ragione, il puro apparire delle cose è buono e vero, la superficie del mondo è più reale delle gelatinose cavità interiori'.³³ For the author, however, reality surpasses by far 'il puro apparire delle cose', as it is stratified and solidified by the forces of memory as well as by the sensitivity to the possibilities inherent in an ever imperfect and incomplete reality. Magris views absence as a peculiarity of the real that in part 'is', in part no longer – or not yet – is; it is therefore never complete. The same goes for the Self whose incompleteness and imperfection appear as empty spaces, which, however, are also spaces of the possible, of identity, and sometimes even of salvation, if 'la salvezza è frutto della debolezza'.³⁴

Towards the beyond

The frame of the journey and the principle of displacement in *Danubio* serve the great and paradoxical 'spedizione di salvataggio',³⁵ which in fact every journey is, particularly one on the Danube. But still, 'il dolore c'è e nessuna teca lo tiene lontano'.³⁶ Travelling is, for Magris, 'forse sempre un cammino verso quelle lontananze che splendono rosse e viola nel cielo della sera'.³⁷ On one side, standing on the border becomes a truly cognitive and existential predisposition that allows the traveller to preserve a sense of the beyond; the author's view heads towards the beyond, and not beyond it. On the other side, as the cultural references – mostly obtained through indirect sources – in the second part of the journey become scarce, the narrator is conscious of the limits of his operation. He experiences difficulty in keeping his philosophical and cultural hinterland, his inclination to clarity and totality, at a distance: 'ogni grande scrittore è insidiato dai demoni ch'egli mette a nudo, li conosce perché li ha in se stesso, denuncia la loro Potenza in quanto anch'egli rischia di

²⁹ Magris, *Danubio*, cit., p. 195.

³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 20.

³¹ *Ivi*, p. 22.

³² It is another example of the split between the author and the narrator, in which the author is being ironic about the narrator.

³³ *Ivi*, p. 21.

³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 191.

³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 305.

³⁶ *Ivi*, p. 306.

³⁷ *Ivi*, p. 97. My italics.

soggiacervi'.³⁸ The irony also fades in the final parts of the book, in which the call of the sea increasingly voices the feeling of a too human desire to compensate for the imperfections of the world, as it evokes 'l'abbandono al nuovo e all'ignoto' and 'variazioni senza fine'.³⁹ In other words, freedom and eternity. The sense of limits, however, neither tempers the desire to overcome them, nor does it remove the hope that 'l'ironia possa sopperire alla mancanza di realtà'.⁴⁰ At the same time, the metaphor of the river turns into a comparison, an explicit confrontation with the end. The dubious sources of the river wither in the face of the awareness of a river flowing into the sea, and the certainty of death setting the perennial questioning of man about origins and identity in another light. The marine metaphor reveals itself as ambiguous: the longing for the sea, the nostalgia of marine happiness and the total abandonment may 'perhaps' coincide with death.

For Magris the epic is not given in reality; transcending the immediate, from the moment one conceives of unity beyond fragmentation, the epos 'va ricostruito con la cultura'.⁴¹ Yet, what eventually remains is the awareness of the distance that separates the Self from life, and the detachment between the one who gives meaning to reality, and reality itself. In other words, the epic needs to surpass reality by thinking about its unity, in that meaning arises precisely from the difficulty of making the imagined conception of the Self coincide with the reality to which it relates. In this sense, Magris accomplishes with *Danubio* an extreme attempt to achieve self-transcendence, in order to compensate – in some way – the irrevocable difference between the ideas exposed and the concreteness of his Danubian gestae.

Parole chiave

Claudio Magris, *Danubio*, border, essayism, perspectival mobility

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³⁸ *Ivi*, p. 421.

³⁹ *Ivi*, pp. 158, 181.

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, p. 187.

⁴¹ *Ivi*, p. 315.

RIASSUNTO

Saggismo lungo le frontiere

Mobilità prospettica in *Danubio* di Claudio Magris

Alla frontiera in Magris la critica ha dato ampio rilievo, soffermandosi soprattutto sull'esperienza delle frontiere triestine nel corso dei decenni. Questi studi gravitano però prevalentemente sulle implicazioni semantiche derivate dalla frontiera e tendono a trascurare le modalità più specificamente discorsive collegate ai costituenti cognitivi ed esistenziali della frontiera in senso più ampio. Attraverso un'analisi intertestuale della questione del genere e dell'ironia, lo scopo di quest'articolo è di esplorare la dimensione discorsiva e testuale della frontiera in *Danubio*.