Putrefaction of the Spirit
A maze-like novel about lives marred by the metaphysical and moral horrors of war. Allan Massie reviews “Blameless” by Claudio Magris.

By Allan Massie
June 16, 2017 5:40 p.m. ET

Confusion reigns in Trieste in April 1945. The Germans are still there and, on the 20th, Hitler’s birthday is celebrated, with defiant and unreal bravado in the Castle of Miramare, built by the Austrian Archduke Maximilian before he accepted the grotesque and fatal invitation to become the Emperor of Mexico. The palace is being shelled but “the luncheon is served” and, thinks the High Commissioner of the Reich, “it’s nice to sit at the table; eating and drinking together makes you feel more like friends. Germans, Italians, Cossacks, Serbs, Croats, Slovenes. The new Europe of peoples,” all of whom have been attached or have attached themselves, for the time being anyway, to the cause of the Führer which is now doomed, though no one can say so.

After the luncheon, “Cavalier Righetti, who organizes the sorting of goods looted from the homes of those deported, puts his hand in the pants of his driver . . ., a handsome young man and skillful driver, though it’s hard to tell if he’s
enthusiastic about it or not. However, skirt or pants makes little difference, with things crumbling more and more each day. Even the sea carries the odor of putrefaction”—putrefaction of the spirit as well as of the body. That’s how it is when regimes crumble but go on shooting and men and women change sides, so that everywhere there is corruption, bodies sold or condemned to slaughter.

Readers of Claudio Magris’s “Danube,” a marvelous travel book and meditation on the culture and history of Central and Southeast Europe, know that he is a discursive, demanding but richly enjoyable writer. The same qualities are evident in “Blameless,” ably translated from the Italian by Anne Milano Appel. “Blameless” is a novel, but in no way a conventional one, for there is no plot as such, no coherent narrative, and innumerable digressions. Characters flit in and out, and only the main ones are fictional. It’s set mostly in Trieste, Mr. Magris’s home city.

Trieste was once part of the Republic of Venice, then of the Habsburg Empire of Austria-Hungary, then (from 1866) of the new Kingdom of Italy, and in 1945 was disputed between Italy and Yugoslavia before finally (perhaps) becoming Italian again. The seed for the novel was planted in Mr. Magris’s mind by a Triestine professor who devoted his life to collecting weapons and all sorts of military
material in order to build a War Museum, in the hope that exhibiting these “instruments of death” could lead the way to peace. The unnamed principal character of “Blameless” has the same idea, but he is a half-crazy and disreputable collector of just about everything, scribbling notes and instructions on stray pieces of paper.

Only toward the end of his life does he become more than an eccentric magpie. The transformation is the result of his investigation of the “Risiera,” a disused rice factory where the Nazi Occupiers in the last years of the war imprisoned Jews (and other undesirables), torturing and murdering some, dispatching others north to death camps in what is now Poland. The collector searches for names written on the prison walls: not the names of the victims, for these were documented by the mad bureaucracy, but of those who had betrayed or informed on the doomed prisoners. In the early pages of the book we learn of this collector’s death—he was sleeping in a coffin in the hangar where he stored his finds and was killed when a fire consumed it—but much of the novel comes to us in his words, relating his memories and rambling thoughts.

The other main character is a young woman, Luisa, charged with the organization of the Museum and faced with the onerous, near-impossible task of ordering and displaying the collector’s “documents, the disconnected notes, the letters or fragments of letters.” Luisa, daughter of a Triestine Jewish mother and a Black American sergeant who served in the post-war Allied Military Government of the disputed city, is aware of her own family’s history of persecution and of slavery. Long passages of the novel track the confused and disturbing story of her father’s ancestors and her equally distressing uncertainty about just what her mother had known or suspected—about what her own mother had done, or might have done—in the last terrible year. Had she perhaps been a “despicable informer” too?

If the theme of the novel is the horror of war, a horror which is metaphysical as well as fleshly—the horror of reeking flesh and desperate lust—it’s also the case that even the collector senses that his museum will alter nothing, no matter with what skill and devotion Luisa sets it in order. Who’s right, who’s wrong, in Trieste in 1945—well, later there will be a time for forgetting. “The Resistance is a complex business and those who resisted multiply all the more as the years go by.” That’s how it is in war, and in post-war. Truth is slippery as mercury.

“Blameless,” as the title suggests, is slippery too, slippery because it searches for truth, and the truth depends first on the angle from which you approach it and won’t in any case stay still. It’s hard to get a grip on this complex novel, and this
is how it must be, because understanding depends on perspective, and perspective is as hard to keep steady as the waves that break on the harbor wall. The prose gallops but demands that you read it slowly and thoughtfully, the author’s intelligence being resistant to summary. Reading “Blameless” is worth the effort, but it would be foolish to pretend that the effort demanded is not considerable, or that the reader won’t sometimes feel trapped in a maze, where the center can’t be reached and the way out is choked.

—Mr. Massie’s most recent book is the novel “End Games in Bordeaux.”