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A Conversation with Novelist Claudio Magris and Anne Milano Appel, Translator of *Blindly*

To celebrate the publication in English of Italian novelist **Claudio Magris'** innovative novel, ***Blindly***, translated by **Anne Milano Appel**, we are pleased to present an intimate conversation between author and translator in advance of [Magris' U.S. book tour](#). Hailed as a masterpiece when first published in Italy, the book twists through time and space, recounting the horrors, the hopes, and the revolutions of the last century.

Anne Milano Appel-

Separated as we are by a nine-hour time difference, my conversation with Claudio Magris necessarily had to be conducted long-distance, not in a cozy café sipping a strong espresso or enjoying a glass of wine. Instead, here we are in the no-time-zone of the internet that renders irrelevant the fact that I am in San Francisco and he is in Trieste.

When I first read Claudio Magris' *Blindly* (*Alla cieca*, Garzanti, 2005), I was reminded of the third canto of the *Inferno*, where Dante and his guide Virgil, having passed through the gates of hell, come upon a wretched group that has been left for all eternity in the vestibule, not even worthy of entering that infernal realm: "Let us not / Speak of them: look and pass on (Inf. III: 49-51, Robert Pinsky, tr.). These abject individuals are the object of particular contempt because they led a "cieca vita", a blind life. They are the disinterested, those who chose not to act, not to see. Virgil's succinct dismissal of them is a fitting response to individuals who move through life "alla cieca" as so many do, preferring to close their eyes to the disquieting things around them, to look through the spyglass untroubled, blindfold securely in place - as Magris tells us Nelson did so as not to see the white flag of surrender before firing on Copenhagen - to turn a deaf ear and a blind eye to the world's injustices. *Alla cieca*, it would seem, is Claudio Magris' attempt to clear our vision, to rip off the blindfold and expose those injustices. It's one of the things I asked him about.

Anne Milano Appel: In Dante's *Divina Commedia*, we find the words "guarda e passa" (*Inferno* III, 34-51) which is what so many of us in today's society do: look and move on. It is a form of the *occhio bendato*, of unwillingness to see. Is Blindly your way of breaking the pall of silence, of unshrouding the truth by bearing witness and attesting to it? Is writing for you a way of vindicating injustices, of applying the hand of tenderness and compassion even while waiting for a cease fire order that never comes?

Claudio Magris: The title of the novel and the anecdote about Nelson - I'm not sure if it's historically verified, but in any case reported - are meant to show how often we don't see violence and evil, we don't want to see violence and evil, we try to hide the truth even from ourselves. A person can also love blindly, or walk along blindly, perhaps falling into an abyss. Certainly I believe that writing to some extent means avenging injustice, at least battling the oblivion that seeks to destroy victims a second time by obliterating their memory. Yes, I recognize myself in your beautiful definition of the hand of tenderness and compassion that reaches out, knowing that the cease-fire will never come, yet continually trying to stop the wrongs.

AMA: In your keynote presentation at the European Identities Conference held in October 2010 at the University of Guelph, you spoke about *Blindly* and the ways in which moral and political writing seek to both establish and break down barriers between history and time. And among the many reasons one writes, you've cited that of obedience to a categorical moral imperative. What do you mean by that? How do you define moral writing?

CM: A difficult question to answer. To begin with, fundamental duties and moral values - and therefore political values as well, if by political we mean *Polis*, communal life in relation to others - these values concern everyone, whether they are writers or not, and no one is exempt from them in his life and in his actions. On the other hand, literature in and of itself has no moral duty, it's not a father who has to raise and educate a child, but rather a rebellious offspring trying to find his way in the world, without any qualms or restraints. Literature is not a school teacher; it can only play an important educational role if it does not do so explicitly, in which case it destroys itself. Literature certainly shouldn't tell us how we ought to behave, but can distinctly show us and make us feel what it means to behave in a certain way - cruel or generous, base or humane - in life. Conrad's *Lord Jim* certainly isn't meant to suggest that we join a lifesaving corps to rescue those who are drowning. But it can directly make us feel what it means, at a decisive moment in our lives, to have behaved one way or another, to have helped someone or let him die, and so on. In this sense, and in this sense only, can literature be said to be moral; for that matter, even morality itself is never very effective when it preaches.

I am strongly aware of the difference between writing for ethical-political reasons (I write many such commentaries in the *Corriere della sera* and other newspapers) and literary writing. When I take a position on a given subject - when I protest, defend,

criticize or attack - the style becomes urgent, paratactic; moral judgment is essential, the awareness of the complexity of each situation does not prohibit me from "yes, yes no, no." When one is writing about the life of a man, on the other hand, moral values become mixed up with his natural instincts and impulses, the chance fortuitousness of existence and chaos. Everything becomes much more ambiguous, so the style itself becomes sinuous, hypotactic; every precise affirmation is immediately accompanied and revised by one that calls it into question, one that disproves it. If we recount how an injustice, even a horrible crime, is committed by a man, we must describe the contradictions in his character, in which good is mixed with evil. The greatest example is perhaps that of Dostoevsky in his *Crime and Punishment*, in which he fully reveals the atrocity and also the stupidity of the crime committed by Raskolnikov - believing himself to be one of the "extraordinary" people who do not need to follow the moral codes - while also showing us all the vulnerable tenderness and longing there is in Raskolnikov's soul. Though he remains a murderer, and therefore must be punished, he's not just a murderer but, first and foremost, a man.

AMA: You've used the terms "nocturnal" and "diurnal" writing originally owed to the Argentinean writer Ernesto Sábato. Presumably there are parts of *Blindly* that constitute "diurnal" writing and other parts that are "nocturnal". Can you give us some examples of each? And what you mean by those terms?

CM: In diurnal writing a writer, even when he invents, expresses a world in which he recognizes himself; he conveys his values, the things he believes in, his way of being. But Ernesto Sábato himself, in one of his diurnal books in which he recounts his life and his ethical-political commitment, says that the most profound truth of his essence is not to be found in that same book, but that it is found instead in the hidden truths expressed in his nocturnal narrative, truths that are sometimes loathsome, as he says, that have often betrayed him or rather that have betrayed his moral convictions.

In nocturnal writing the writer comes to terms with something that suddenly emerges in him and that he didn't know he had: disturbing and even horrible feelings and instincts that surprise us, that appall us, that make us see a face we didn't know we had, that tell us what we could be, what we fear and hope to be, what by pure chance we haven't become. We find ourselves face to face with the Medusa of life and at that moment you can't send her to the hairdresser to arrange her head of snakes and make her look presentable. When a writer meets his doppelganger, he might prefer that his other self say things other than what he's hearing, but if he's honest with himself he must attest to that unpalatable truth and leave his pen to nocturnal writing.

Of course, those "horrible truths" that emerge from the depths cannot be transformed into a negative ideology, they do not contradict the values in which he believes. Just as in the novels of Joseph Conrad the obscure impulses leading to desertion, betrayal, sometimes even infamy do not renounce the great values of loyalty, order, remaining at one's post, as his captains do waging the good fight until the last. Works in which nocturnal writing has emerged with the greatest violence are

perhaps plays, in which this writing rises up from the depths like a voice that one may not recognize; theatrical texts such as *La mostra (The Exhibition)* or *Le voci (Voices)*. In *Blindly* I tried, unconsciously, to merge the two types of writing, the two worlds: the diurnal world of responsibility, ethics, values, and the nocturnal world of nightmares, horror and breakdown.

AMA: Are you always consciously thinking about or looking for themes to write about? Do you keep a notebook or a folder of ideas waiting for the right moment to mature?

CM: Starting with the first book I wrote, the essay *The Habsburg Myth* (1963), when I write a book I never know at the beginning what it is I want to write. Only when I've written a third, sometimes half of it, do I know what book I'm writing, know what its explicit theme is a metaphor for, and therefore what its real theme is, which doesn't necessarily coincide with the explicit, just as a poem about a tree, or a flower, for instance, can be the only way, at that moment, to express one's love not for a tree or a flower but for the person one loves. Initially there is a strong suggestion, perhaps confused; something (a figure, an event, an intuition, sometimes even a detail of a landscape) turns my head, and unless it dies along the way, it begins to gradually take shape.

During this first phase there is a period of uncertain reflection in which I take notes, not systematic or organized, I write a few pages, very few, in one direction or another that the story is leaning or that I think it's leaning. At a certain point, when things are working, things become more precisely defined inside me and then there's a period of fierce, torrential writing, in which I throw myself into writing without paying much attention to elegance or style, but letting myself be pulled along by the story, by my intuitions, and most of all by the force of the images. It's at this stage that you decide if a book is born or not. If I feel that a book is going to be born, I let it alone for a time at the end of this feverish, stormy writing and later take it up again and revise it with a great deal of rationality, weighing sentence by sentence, word by word, in short, with rational control after the irrational tempest.

I don't keep a real journal about the writing process, but I write many - sometimes very many, as in the case of *Blindly* - pages of notes, factual elements and other information. Place names, colors, names of taverns that have to do with the story and so on. I do this because I'm fascinated by reality, the things that really happened; like Svevo I believe that life is "original" and, like Mark Twain, that "truth is stranger than fiction." It's as if I were writing a mosaic in which every single tile corresponds to a piece of reality, but then using those tiles to compose a design that is completely imaginary.

AMA: You've said that your books are almost always born from a combination of a profound interest in a particular subject and some immediate cause, some circumstance which acts as "midwife". What was the "midwife" in the case of *Blindly*?

CM: Yes, it's always been that way. *Danube* would not have been born without my interest in the world of Mitteleuropa and without the years in which I came to know, study and experience it, but it also wouldn't have been born without a particular moment one September afternoon, on the border between Austria and Czechoslovakia, with a group of friends, a moment of blissful harmony with life's course, watching the Danube flow by, shining so that its glittering waters could not be distinguished from the sparkle of the meadows. At a certain point, an arrow on the road pointed to the "Museum of the Danube." And that word Museum was so strange, as if an amorous couple in a park were to suddenly discover that, without knowing it, they were part of a museum or an exhibition about lovers in public gardens. Then Marisa said: what if we kept meandering on to the Black Sea? That was the moment that triggered the idea, still very confused, about that trip and writing, without knowing what kind of book I would write. I could cite other examples like this. In the case of *Blindly*, of course, my interest in the incredible, appalling account of Goli Otok was fundamental. I had already spoken of it in previous books (*A Different Sea*, *Microcosms*), but only very briefly, and I couldn't seem to turn it into a story. But there were two moments when the midwife's action came into play. The first occurred, unexpectedly, in Antwerp, where I had gone to present the Dutch translation of *Danube* and where I saw several figureheads, those women's faces, eyes open and dilated, as if scanning for imminent catastrophes that were still invisible to others. And the other was when, by chance, I came across the story of Jorgensen, a kind of opposite, contrary alter ego; his Icelandic revolution that was like a grotesque mirror, distorting and revealing the Revolution par excellence, unblocked me.

AMA: *Blindly* was written over the course of many years. How did the initial idea and theme change and evolve during this "gestation" period?

CM: Indeed, the gestation period lasted 18 years, though obviously interrupted by a number of other books that I wrote during that time and by many other things that happened to me, both good and bad. I had started writing the protagonist's story in the form of a traditional, linear novel, but it didn't work because in a novel the "how," that is, the style, has to correspond to the "what," the meaning of the story that's being told. It's not possible to write a story of utter disharmony, of turmoil that shatters everything, in a harmonious, peaceful way. The failed attempt at a linear novel was very useful to me, but only as a quarry for material which was then radically transformed. Then little by little everything began to come together: Jorgen's fate corresponded to that of the protagonist, Salvatore, deported to Goli Otok; the trip to Australia to that of 20th century emigrants; the frightful prisons of Australia and Tasmania to 20th century concentration camps and gulags; the black war that exterminated the Tasmanians to the horrors of the 20th century; and the story itself to the underlying structure of the myth of the Golden Fleece, an interweaving of the archaic and post-modern, a clash of civilizations, myth and marketing campaign.

The fundamental problem was precisely the writing. Writers in the 19th century were

able to utilize the same writing for their creative inventions and for their ethical-political works; Victor Hugo could use more or less the same language to write *Les Misérables* and his political texts against Napoleon III. From the 20th century on, this has no longer been possible: Kafka could not have written a political text or one on social commitment using the same writing as in his *Metamorphosis*. At some point my block dissolved and the novel was born the way it is, a whirlpool of a monologue, in which the protagonist, a veteran of numerous 20th century battles and a survivor of Goli Otok, recounts his life, talking to a doctor or perhaps only to himself, weaving many other voices in with his own voice, identifying with others from time to time, losing and finding himself in other destinies, in a strange vortex of words that is like a snake suffocating the Self, but the snake is the Self itself, it's our story, which at times is too much for us, so we feel like Atlases too weak to support a world on our shoulders, a terrible, heavy world that crushes us. It was this voice, this monologue, that swept me along like a river, gathering up all the things I had thought, written and put together in those years, dragging them who knows where.

AMA: One of your recurring themes, besides the sea and travel, has been borders: borders lost and found, borders between the known and unknown, borders within the Self, political, psychological and social borders, and so on. Which borders feature most prominently in *Blindly*?

CM: Yes, the border has been a fundamental theme in me, since I was a boy, when shortly after World War II, I would go to the Carso, the rocky area surrounding Trieste, and I would see, close up, the border that wasn't just any border but an Iron Curtain, which split the world in two. Behind it lay a universe at once disturbing and unknown - because you couldn't go there - but also familiar, since it was land that had been Italian until the end of the war when Yugoslavia had occupied it, and that I knew well. I think this overlapping of the known and unknown has been fundamental in general for my literary vocation.

In *Blindly* there are many borders, even aside from the historical and geographical boundaries created and erased by time and the sea. The tragic, vital border line between utopia, the dream of creating a world that, if not perfect, is at least better, and disenchantment, namely, realizing the failure of that attempt; the boundary between surrendering to a sense of emptiness, after discovering this fracture, and resolutely continuing to want to change and improve the world instead. The border, upheld or trampled, between the great hopes of the 20th century, the great liberties won in the 20th century, and the horrors of that same century that denied them. Maybe above all the very boundary of individuality, of the Self. Salvatore on the one hand has an extremely strong, distinct personality, with very specific loves and ideals; on the other hand, his voice is interwoven with many others, listening to the tape recorder he sometimes doesn't distinguish his responses from the questions asked by the doctor, he identifies from time to time with other people and their experiences. In one way, he's a mentally disturbed Self, who did not hold up well under the numerous things that happened to him, that came crashing down on him, and is therefore a split Self, even in a clinical sense, these voices that speak may all be his own, or maybe that of the doctor and the torturers who interrogated him

throughout his life.

But perhaps his voice is also a choral voice, since each of us is always a chorus. Falling in love, growing up, growing old, getting sick, finding faith or losing it, dying, these are facts that are unmistakably and uniquely ours, but not only ours, that make each of us resemble the Unknown Soldier, who is everyone and no one. It has been said that protagonist of *Blindly* embodies all the fugitives in the world, the illegal aliens, those who are persecuted.

AMA: You once wrote that you consider your country to be the Italian language and all that it means to you in terms of sensibility, perception, vision - in short, your way of being. Given that, how does it feel to read your own words translated into another language? It must be a jolt!

CM: No, it wasn't a jolt or, if it was, it was so in a positive sense, because a *sobbalzo*, a jolt as you say, can also be a revealing awakening. Translation - I'm talking now about the ones I am able to read and understand - is first and foremost an initial form of literary criticism, because you can't fool the translator and a translation immediately catches any possible weak points in a text. But above all translation reveals new aspects, sometimes even to the author himself; I'm referring first of all to the rhythm, the music, which must somehow be analogous to the original, yet analogous independently, within its own language. So reading one's own book in translation is fascinating, like meeting someone you know quite well, who reveals some other aspect about himself: it doesn't negate the idea we've formed of him, but alters or expands it. Even having others read our books can reveal new aspects to whoever wrote them. This happened to me with your translation of *Blindly*, where I both found and discovered myself, and it's also happened in several other translations of my books.

AMA: I seem to recall reading somewhere that you learned English in order to work with your early English translators. Is that true or did I dream it up?

CM: It's not exactly so, but almost. When *Danube* began to be translated in various countries, I started going around to promote it, and in England and in America but also in other countries - aside from Germany, France and Spain - I wanted to try to get along a little better with English, at least with spoken English. And it was pretty funny, because I even went to school, for example, Regent School in London, where I was admitted to the advanced course in a class in which there were seven of us. I was 49 years old, the next oldest after me was 27, and the youngest, an Argentinean boy, was 18. I did my assignments, among others a composition on "The Likes and Dislikes of the Milkman's Job," which received many red marks from our teacher, Carol, and which I later published in the *Corriere della Sera* ... I also took an intensive, eight-hours-per-day course of individual instruction at Oxford, and one time, between one lesson and another, I was so exhausted that as I was trying to make a call to Germany, it was suddenly as if my German - which I actually speak very well - had disappeared! After a moment of sheer terror at the thought of going

home having lost the one essential element of my work - given that I taught German literature - I started laughing, and with the laughter the German came back to me...

AMA: For you personally, how does the translation process change for a book of yours that's being translated into a language that you read and understand, as opposed to being translated into a language where your knowledge is limited or non-existent?

CM: Naturally there is an enormous difference, because obviously if I pick up the Chinese translation of *Danube* or the Vietnamese version of *Utopia and Disenchantment* I can't understand a thing. But the real experience in this case takes place earlier, in the contact that I almost always have with my translators, to whom I devote a great deal of time, discussions, letters (hundreds and hundreds of pages ...). It is very interesting to see how the translators approach the text; I can tell from their questions, from the issues that arise. Sometimes it also has to do with intercultural translation, because conveying one of my books into Korean or Portuguese are two different things, so it's fascinating to see all the problems, such as transcultural translation issues, that arise (for example, in one language or better yet in one culture, a certain color may signify mourning, while in another culture the same color can mean something very different or even something totally opposite). I always tell the translators that they shouldn't try to simplify, to "explain" the text, because the writer isn't a guide leading the reader by the hand to make him admire how good he, the writer, is. Each reading is a cooperative dialogue between the writer and the reader and, in the case of translation, with the mediation of an essential third party, the translator. What's vital is the rhythm, the music; that's where the excellence or failure of a translation is at stake.

AMA: When I was recently interviewed myself, I was asked about what the interviewer called your "provocative" quote about a translator being "a co-author, part accomplice, part rival, part lover..." I gave her my take on what I thought you meant by "accomplice", "rival", "lover" (i.e., that among other things it had to do with being *affiatati*, on the same wave length, empathetic), but I'm wondering if you'd like to expand on your words.

CM: Of course, *l'affiatamento*, empathy, as you say, is fundamental; syntony, consonance in the strongest sense, feeling in tune. In short, if the author says blue, the translator must somehow sense which blue he's talking about and what that blue means to him, nostalgia, absence or anything else. The translator is a co-author because the translation is not a calque, a copy of the text, but her own recreation. It's a little like when the mythographers faithfully recorded the same myth, like the rhapsodists who recited the stories and poems of Homer, not arbitrarily inventing but finding the right words, creative and not just informative; or, more simply, like when we tell a story that has impressed and fascinated us, that we return to and repeat faithfully yet always adding something, giving it another meaning just by our tone of voice, the things we choose to stress more or less, and so on. As in every close partnership, complicity and rivalry coexist.

AMA: Yes, I took "accomplice" to mean a collaborator perhaps, and "part rival", not as an adversary but as a partner in the challenge to recreate the author's work in another language. On another subject, I recently translated an author who wrote in an armchair, with an empty box on her knees as a desk, surrounded by notes scattered all over the floor, drinking tea and smoking endless cigarettes. She used a fine-tip Bic pen on ordinary typing paper folded in two, and she always wrote by hand because she said she needed to feel the emotion throbbing in her pulse. It was a cozy, intimate view of her. Can you share with us how you write?

CM: I write by hand, with a pen that in Italian is called *Tratto Clip*, with a fine point and blue ink, a very common pen that runs out of ink quickly and must then be replaced; in fact I buy three or four at a time. I always write on lined paper with a margin, like the ones I used to write my compositions on when I was in high school. I write by hand because I'm so inept on a typewriter or on a computer that my fingers can only produce single words and not the sweeping music of the sentence. Typing for me is like writing in a language that I don't know very well; it forces me to focus on the individual words, thereby losing the flow of the narration. You don't write words, you write sentences. Of course this is only a habit of mine, legitimate, but without any affectation; I don't like people who think that the computer is something artificial and less genuine, as if my pen were closer to God or to nature than a computer is. It's just a routine practice of mine, legitimate because it's my own but that certainly can't be flaunted pretentiously.

I like to write at the café, not just because there I'm not distracted by so many things at home (starting with the books in my house, which would make me lose my interest in writing and feel like reading them instead ...), but also because I like the solitude in company with others, being surrounded by the hum of voices (a hum that isn't too loud, of course). Besides, when you're writing and constantly seduced by the delirium of omnipotence, it's good for you to see people around you who couldn't care less.

The beginning is always difficult; very often I start the same page over and over, perhaps repeating the same sentence, as if searching for a kind of musical pitch. Naturally there's a big difference between creative, literary writing (modest though the results may be) and expository writing, such as conference texts or lectures. In the latter case I can stop writing and resume the work at any time, I can write even in the midst of confusion, in the few moments of time stolen from other activities. When I write a literary text, however, I need to have a fair amount of time ahead of me, to either take my time or throw myself into writing non-stop, but it's a much more neurotic ritual, which can be easily disturbed or interrupted by external events. Annotations are handwritten and at times make the page so difficult to decipher, sometimes even for me, that I am forced to dictate into a recorder and give it to someone to type up.

AMA: To conclude, Claudio, can you give us a hint of what you're working on now? Are you at the vague, suggestive stage waiting for things to crystallize, for a book to

take shape? Or maybe swept up in the feverish period of intense writing? Perhaps things have even fallen into place and you've reached the post-tempest phase of coherent, lucid discipline?

CM: Well, I've been working on a wide-ranging narrative project for some time now. I've already written quite a bit, but I haven't yet reached the point where the individual streams flow into the ultimate river. I find it hard to talk about, not because I'm superstitious, but because in writing everything happens when you write and, for me at least, it's difficult to talk about it beforehand. It's a little like talking about marriage in a romantic relationship, when any response, yes or no, would be forced. If all goes well, I hope to finish it by next summer. *Unberufen*, as they say in Yiddish, keep your fingers crossed.

AMA: Yes, knock on wood! Thank you for allowing us this glimpse into your life and thoughts, Claudio. For one thing, you've made me think about the difference between the work of the author and that of the translator: while for the author the initial flash of inspiration comes from some compelling, perhaps yet uncertain, external stimulus, for the translator the "midwife" is the original text. As you know, rendering *Blindly* into English was both a pleasure and a gratifying challenge for me, and I can only hope that our readers will find as much satisfaction in reading it as I did in translating it. Perhaps one way the reader might experience it - in keeping with Salvatore's words as he goes about composing epitaphs: "Gravestones are condensed novels. Or rather, novels are expanded gravestones... My autobiography is one of these expanded headstones" - is to think of it as an expanded commemorative stone that rips off the blindfold.