

## Bratislava as a cultural borderland in the Danubian narratives of Patrick Leigh Fermor and Claudio Magris

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Although the twentieth-century history of Central Europe is one of constantly changing borders, the “Iron Curtain” between the capitalist West and the communist East seemed immutably fixed by the Orwellian spring of 1984, when Milan Kundera questioned the Cold War political order in his essay “A Kidnapped West” (also known as “The Tragedy of Central Europe”). Kundera’s metaphor of Central Europe as a region “kidnapped” by Soviet imperialism was influential in reasserting the Western cultural heritage of the region, provoking an international debate over Europe’s cultural boundaries (Sabatos 2011, 20–21). Yet in his first novel, *Žert* (1967; *The Joke*, 1969), Kundera suggests that his native Moravia is naturally linked to the East, since its rivers (unlike those of neighboring Bohemia like the Elbe, which go north into Germany) flow into the Danube. Foreshadowing his later preoccupation with the unrepeatability of history, Kundera links the passing of time to the flow of a river carrying away a garland of flowers in a Moravian folk tradition:

I could just see the flowers floating and the brook passing them onto the stream, the stream to the tributary, the tributary to the Danube, and the Danube to the sea. I saw the garland go, never to return. No return. That was what brought it home to me. The basic situations in life brook no return. Any man worth his salt must come to grips with the fact of no return. Drink it to the dregs (1984, 128).

The flowers floating down the Morava River to the Danube, through the Balkans to the Black Sea, provide a different framework for Czech literature, one not dominated by Russia nor part of Western Europe, but linked to the multinational history of the Danubian region.

At the same time in the mid-1980s that Kundera was promoting the concept of Central Europe, the Danube was reimagined as an autonomous literary space by a scholar of Germanic literatures from the former Austrian seaport of Trieste. In *Danubio* (1986; *Danube*, 1989), Claudio Magris describes the river as the quintessential symbol of Europe’s multilingual identity, in opposition to the Rhine, which represents German cultural purity: “È il fiume di Vienna, di Bratislava, di Budapest, di Belgrado, della Dacia, il nastro che attraversa e cinge [...] l’Austria asburgica della quale il mito e l’ideologia hanno fatto il simbolo di una *koinè* plurima e sovranazionale” (1986, 28). Patrick Creagh’s English translation replaces the Greek term *koinè* (a language created from a mixing of dialects) with the more general “culture”: “It is

the river of Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest, Belgrade and of Dacia, the river which [...] embraces the Austria of the Habsburgs, the myth and ideology of which have been symbolized by a multiple, supranational culture" (1989, 29). According to Nikola Petković, *Danube* clearly reflects the rebirth of the term Central Europe: "both the methods and results of Magris's literary journey speak to postmodern and anti-essentialist perspectives, questioning the West's traditional metaphors just as Kundera questioned the role of intellectuals' emotions in the presence of tanks that came to Central Europe from the East" (2003, 93). Magris's *Danube* was translated into Croatian in 1988 and into other languages of the region soon after the fall of Communism, including a 1992 Czech edition which the Prague weekly *Respekt* reviewed with some ambivalence: "In Magris's pages about Slovakia, we can most easily realize the possibilities and limits of his style, in which the deep erudition of a Germanist is connected with the sovereign superficiality of a postmodernist scholar, who, however, does not stop being a shrewd, sometimes clairvoyant observer" (1992).

Another significant Danubian narrative was published in the same year that Magris's book first appeared: the second volume in Patrick Leigh Fermor's trilogy recounting his experience of crossing Europe on foot in the 1930s: *A Time of Gifts* (1977), *Between the Woods and the Water* (1986), and *The Broken Road* (which appeared posthumously in 2013). Although his route was not restricted to the Danube, the borders marked by the river form an important framing device in the series: the first volume ends on a bridge between Slovakia and Hungary at Esztergom, while the second ends as he is crossing from Romania into Bulgaria. What makes Leigh Fermor's memoir unique is his interpretation of the history and culture he discovered along his journey, as well as his astonishing memory, although as Michael O'Sullivan notes, "The suspension of disbelief often proves a useful aid to enjoying great travel writing. In reading Leigh Fermor it sometimes becomes a *sine qua non*" (2018, 237). Leigh Fermor himself in the final volume (which was actually the first to be written, during the 1960s) addresses the "two main problems [that] beset the very curious and enjoyable task of compiling this private archaeology". He describes the first one as "a sudden blur, when exact memory conks out", and the second as an "overwhelming" excess of recollection: "while piecing together fragments which have lain undisturbed for two decades and more, all at once a detail will surface which acts as potently as the taste of madeleine which made the whole of Proust's childhood unfurl" (2013, 153–154). While Leigh Fermor's work is hardly postmodern, he uses his autobiographical narrator in fictionalized ways, so his Danubian travelogues may be better classified as "autofiction", to use the term created by Proustian scholar Serge Doubrovsky in the 1970s in reaction to Philippe Lejeune's "autobiographical pact" of implied truthfulness between author and reader. Gérard Genette has described the "intentional contradictory pact" of autofiction: "I, the author, am going to tell you a story of which I am the hero but which never happened to me" (1993, 76).

Both Patrick Leigh Fermor's trilogy and Claudio Magris's *Danube* combine elements of autobiography and travelogue to create portraits of the great Central European river that have captivated readers, but despite their common setting, these works have rarely been discussed together in detail. Leigh Fermor's memoir is wide-

ly considered a masterpiece of British travel writing but is not usually included as part of discussions of Central European identity. Magris, as a specialist of the former Habsburg realms, was almost immediately included as an authority in the debate over Central Europe, but his narrative did not fit smoothly within the boundaries of the travel genre. Yet as Richard Flanagan suggests, Magris also relies on autofiction: his “journey from headwaters to delta [...] finally amounts to a world that Magris has invented for the reader to lead them to certain truths” (2016).

What unites Leigh Fermor and Magris even more than their ambiguous relationship to strictly truthful autobiography is their geographical perspective. For most western readers, Czechoslovakia was represented by Prague, above all due to Franz Kafka, but also because of Milan Kundera, Václav Havel, and other prominent Czech writers, while the existence of a separate Slovak literature was almost unknown. Even the specialized academic discourse regarding Central European identity in the late 1980s was dominated by Czech, Polish and Hungarian writers and Slovakia was rarely discussed. Approaching via the Danube, however, Bratislava takes on a greater importance as the “gateway” to the unfamiliar Slavic or Communist world, while in both cases Prague is marginalized as a thematic or literal detour away from the main eastward flow of the Danube, and the narrative. While their image of the Slovak capital is both exoticized and idealized, both Leigh Fermor and Magris use its cultural history as an example not only of European culture, but of modern existence. Their works show a distinct nostalgia for the tradition of Habsburg multiculturalism, just like Kundera’s essays.

Svetlana Boym has proposed two types of nostalgia: while restorative nostalgia “attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home,” reflective nostalgia “dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity.” Restorative nostalgia (tied to *nostos*, the home) seeks to re-establish the past, which is considered an “absolute truth”, while reflective nostalgia (connected to *algia*, longing) aims to mediate the past and “calls it into doubt”. In general, restorative nostalgia contains more nationalistic tendencies, whereas reflective nostalgia has a more personal nature (2001, 41). Joseph Allen has suggested a third type, “refractive” nostalgia, whose “intent is neither to restore nor to reflect but to use these memories, as reified in recovered objects, to cast light (focused in its refraction) on contemporary conditions of displacement” (2012, 191). The Danube region is a powerful site of reflective nostalgia for both Patrick Leigh Fermor and Claudio Magris, who reflect their own intellectual and scholarly experience upon the history of the region. As George Prochnik has suggested, Leigh Fermor “conjured the restoration of Byzantium itself through language – literally seeking the future in the past” (2014, 176). However, their texts are also closely tied to the refractive nostalgia for a multicultural Central Europe that emerged in the debate over identity in which Kundera engaged with such writers as György Konrád, Danilo Kiš, and Magris himself (Neumann 1999, 149). Magris was canonized as a Central European writer when he became the 2009 recipient of Slovenia’s Vilenica International Literary Prize, following such previous laureates as Milan Kundera, Péter Esterházy, and Pavel Vilikovský (Sabatos 2020, 241). Although Leigh Fermor’s work has not been widely

translated in Central Europe (his first volume was not published in Czech, for example, until 2018), his trilogy can best be appreciated as a part of Danubian nostalgia in relation to Magris's work.

### THEORIZING THE LITERARY SPACE OF THE DANUBE

It is interesting to note that among their vast array of literary and historical allusions, neither Leigh Fermor nor Magris include the brief references to the river by Longinus, who first described the concept of the sublime (although Leigh Fermor carried with him a volume of Horace with a reference to "the far-off Danube"), and Edmund Burke, who redefined the sublime on the basis of Enlightenment philosophy. In his essay "On the Sublime", Longinus describes how "our imaginations often pass beyond the bounds of space," offering the example that "by a sort of natural impulse, we admire not the small streams, useful and pellucid though they be, but the Nile, the Danube, or the Rhine, and still more the Ocean" (Roberts 1907, 135). Like Magris, Longinus brings together the Danube and the Rhine, but rather than contrasting them, he sees them both as natural wonders surpassing our physical senses.

Centuries later, Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) examines the effect of words by proposing a hypothetical passage:

Suppose we were to read a passage to this effect: "The river Danube rises in a moist and mountainous soil in the heart of Germany, where, winding to and fro, it waters several principalities, until, turning into Austria, and laving the walls of Vienna, it passes into Hungary; there with a vast flood, augmented by the Save and the Drave, it quits Christendom, and rolling through the barbarous countries which border on Tartary, it enters by many mouths in the Black Sea" (McLaughlin, and Boulton 1997, 312).

Burke's argument here is not related to the Danube, but to the impossibility of simultaneously perceiving words and the concepts they represent. Like both Leigh Fermor and Magris, he marks the Austrian border (at that time, in Hungary rather than in present-day Slovakia) as a breaking point between West and East, in his case between Christian Europe and the "barbarous" Orient.

Marijeta Bozovic and Matthew D. Miller's collection *Watersheds: Poetics and Politics of the Danube River* takes Magris's work as the basis for its interdisciplinary approach: "Intersecting civilization and nature, physical and imaginary spaces, and connecting cultures seemingly incomprehensible to one another, the Danube demands poly-perspectival treatment – not least due to the river's long-standing role as a conduit of multi-directional migration" (2016, xx). While they acknowledge Magris's "assiduous attention to the multiplicity and indeterminacy of Danubian identities," they nonetheless criticize him for being "unable to relinquish the Germano-centric imprint of his orientation," claiming that his "study illustrates the need for a collaborative and decentered approach to the multifaceted river" (xxiv-xxvi). Later in the same volume, Tomislav Longinović calls for an "East-Central European imaginary I propose to call ex-centric," which "[rejects] poetics centered on nationalist mythologies of hearth, pure landscape, and covert antihumanism," and rath-

er surprisingly claims Magris to be on the side of these nationalist poetics (2016, 212). He refers to one of the river's darker literary legacies, Heidegger's wartime lectures on Hölderlin's "Ister", in relation to two traumatic memories: the drowning of a childhood classmate in the Danube in Belgrade, and his great-uncle's internment in the Mauthausen concentration camp during World War II (2016, 218–219). Criticizing *Danube* as an "epically obtuse catalogue novel", he accuses Magris of "[longing] for the power of imaginary geography that has been the mainstay of postmodernism, at the expense of those whose voices make up that uncanny clamor from the woods I happened to overhear in Hölderlin's sonorous verse" (2016, 222). Although his poetic approach "overlaps with these ex-centric visions of Europe as a chronotope," the Italian author's "narrative is somewhat limited by a nostalgic affect tied to the legacy of empires and a historical form of cosmopolitanism they were nurturing from the position of dominance and power" (2016, 223).

In their four-volume *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe*, which is in some sense the scholarly apotheosis of Kundera's argument, Marcel Cornis-Pope (together with Nikola Petković) and John Neubauer devote an extensive section to "The Literary Cultures of the Danubian Corridor". Cornis-Pope and Petković point out that although Magris contrasts "the cultural mosaic along the Danube" with the Germanic "coherence and purity" of the Rhine, "elements of the Germanic model, whether nationalist (Prussian) or multicultural (Austrian), continue to reflect in the Danubian world" (2006, 219). Neubauer criticizes Magris's focus on the East-West axis of European culture: "East-Central Europe's post-medieval history was shaped as much by North-South conflicts. [...] With the exception of Budapest, this book pays little attention to the North-South section of the Danube and becomes increasingly derivative and arbitrary in its choices when it gets to the lower Danube, beyond Belgrade" (2006, 226). As Neubauer notes, one of the first literary responses to "Magris's Danube discourse" was Péter Esterházy's *Hahn-Hahn grófnő pillantása: lefelé a Dunán* (1991; *The Glance of Countess Hahn-Hahn [Down the Danube]*, 1999), whose "narrator detects a certain 'haughty elevation' and the smooth intonation of a tourist guide" in Magris's "Central European rhetoric" (2006, 227). This is epitomized in a scene when Esterházy's narrator meets Magris himself in Budapest and asks the Italian author, "who seemed to bear the burden of a Danube book with such ease, how it was possible to bring such a book to a close. [...] Magris smiled and said: 'You have to pump all the water out of the Danube.' And he grinned gleefully, like a child. The present writer remained sad and silent" (1999, 237). As Guido Snel explains, Esterházy's novel could be designated as "faction (a fusion of fact and fiction), autofiction, or, highlighting the autobiographical moment, even autofaction. [...] It satirizes not only the idea of Central Europe, but also fictionalized autobiographies and their alleged regional specificity" (2004, 387, 396).

In a more recent co-edited volume on comparative literature, César Domínguez, Haun Saussy, and Darío Villanueva credit Cornis-Pope and Neubauer with the concept of "marginocentric" cities: "These are [cities that] 'have rewritten the national cultural paradigm from the margin, ascribing to it a dialogic dimension, both internally (in dialogue with other ethnic traditions) and externally (in dialogue with larg-

er geocultural paradigms).” They illustrate this by using Magris’s opening reflections about Bratislava’s pharmacy museum, describing a book written in four languages as an example of the city’s past diversity: “In accordance with Cornis-Pope and Neubauer’s concept of marginocentric city, Magris makes visible to the reader how a pharmacology manual [...] can pinpoint a ‘hidden’ story (hidden at least for national literary history), the story of a multicultural and plurilingual city, a hub which encloses a network within itself” (2015, 100–101). This allusion to Bratislava as “marginocentric” (which as Domínguez and his co-authors note, was not included by Cornis-Pope and Neubauer in their original definition) is perhaps a nod to the Slovak theorist Dionýz Ďurišin and his concept of “interliterary communities”, which Domínguez has described elsewhere as an important impetus for contemporary theories of world literature. In one of his theoretical works, Ďurišin offers “the Danube region, or the most recently formulated conception of the literatures of eastern Europe” as examples of the “intermediate degrees” between national literatures and world literature, without which “no understanding of world literature is possible either” (1984, 274–275, 287–288). While he does not mention meeting Ďurišin in Bratislava, Magris’s summaries of Slovak literary history follow his “interliterary” approach, such as his description of Ján Kollár as “the great Slovak intellectual assimilated by the Czechs,” whose support “for the use of Czech as a written language even in Slovakia” was opposed by other Slovaks, “who saw [it] as meaning the end of their identity, and demanded the independence of their language” (1989, 222–223).

Other Slovak and Czech scholars have followed Ďurišin’s “interliterary” model in discussing the Central European contexts of Magris’s *Danube*. Pavol Koprda notes that Magris seems to follow “Ďurišin’s idea that the meaning of the history of literature is to give a complete, non-narrowing image of literary processes. [...] What Magris wrote about Slovakia is a mixed genre, a special travelogue” (2004, 74). Miloš Zelenka has included Magris’s *Danube* in his study of the Central European interliterary community: “Although in relation to the Habsburg myth the Danube motif expresses certain nostalgia for a multinational empire and a higher Central European identity, there are different opinions concerning the question of to what extent Central-Europeanism was reflected in the Monarchy’s very centre – Austria.” He suggests that “the decisive factor was the selection of language as a determining distinctive code” (2013, 20). Perhaps the most extensive Slovak study on this theme is Lucia Satinská’s doctoral thesis on Danubian writers, which she begins with an observation taken from the memoir *Chlapci z Dunajskej ulice* (Boys from Danube Street, 2002) by her father, the humorist Július Satinský: “Only a few streets in Bratislava have never changed their names. Dunajská has been called Dunajská (or Donaugasse or Duna utca) for centuries” (2011, 7). Satinská relates her project to Magris’s *Danube*, seeing herself as connected to his work “by the desire to understand my own cultural standpoint.” She points out that “Magris draws a parallel between the term Danube and the term Central Europe,” although the latter term “is equally difficult to define,” and criticizes his work for the fact that “the Danube is only an outline, in fact he deals with broader topics that are only very loosely related to [it]” (2011, 11–12). None of these theorists (Central European or otherwise) mention Patrick Leigh Fermor,



but he includes many insightful descriptions of post-Habsburg cultural identity, including what is probably the most vivid description in English of interwar Bratislava as a “marginocentric” city.

While scholars of Danubian writing have placed a far greater emphasis on Magris, practitioners of the genre (particularly British travel writers) give more credit to Leigh Fermor as a literary inspiration. This group has grown rapidly over the past decade, beginning with Andrew Eames’s *Blue River, Black Sea: A Journey Along the Danube Into the Heart of the New Europe* (2010), a straightforward travelogue directly inspired by Leigh Fermor. It was followed by no less than three related volumes in under two years: Nick Thorpe’s *The Danube: A Journey Upriver from the Black Sea to the Black Forest* (2013), which follows the river against the current with a focus on environmental issues, Simon Winder’s *Danubia: A Personal History of Habsburg Europe* (2014), essentially an updated and “lighter” version of Magris, and Nick Hunt, *Walking the Woods and the Water: In Patrick Leigh Fermor’s Footsteps from the Hook of Holland to the Golden Horn* (2014), which as the subtitle suggests, is a direct homage to Leigh Fermor and replicates his exact route. As the Bulgarian critic Dimitar Kenarov states in his review of Eames, “So many writers have traveled the Danube that their tributary ink, if channeled into a single stream, would turn the water black.” Kenarov considers Leigh Fermor “the best of the lot”, adding that what makes his writing “so fascinating is not documentary accuracy [...] but his idiosyncratic, highly stylized approach.” Kenarov has a deep background knowledge of his native region; he admires Magris’s Danube as “a current of ideas incessantly shaping the intellectual landscape of the continent: geography is intimately connected to history, and the movement through space is also a movement through time,” but he concludes that “his journey remains more cerebral than visceral [...] A drink from the fountain of knowledge is a good thing, but it rarely satisfies the reader’s thirst” (2010). None of the recent writers, however, approaches either Leigh Fermor or Magris in erudition or originality.

### LEIGH FERMOR AT “THE EDGE OF THE SLAV WORLD”

In December 1933, Patrick (“Paddy”) Leigh Fermor set off from London with the goal of crossing Europe on foot from Holland to Istanbul, a youthful adventure he recalled decades later in his trilogy that began with *A Time of Gifts*. The catalyst for this literary saga occurred in 1965, when Leigh Fermor revisited the region three decades after his first adventurous journey, to write an article for the popular travel magazine *Holiday*. As Artemis Cooper describes in her biography, the Danube itself reflected the stark Cold War divisions between Europe’s western and eastern halves:

The long article Paddy wrote about the Danube reflects the progress of the river: clear and brilliantly coloured as far as Vienna, its tone becomes more sombre in Bratislava. Paddy remembered it as a thriving town ringing to a babble of different dialects, with a large Jewish community; now it was grey, peeling, neglected [...]. Budapest is happier: people tell jokes there and they are real people, not just figures in the landscape. In Rumania the river again takes centre stage, as it thunders through narrow chasms and plunges over submerged cataracts that only the bravest and most skilful pilots can handle. But the build-

ding of the great dam that was to tame the Danube had begun the year before, and he knew he was gazing on this scene for the last time. Not only was the Turkish island of Ada Kaleh going to be submerged, but the whole valley for a hundred kilometres upstream (2012, 329–330).

After serving heroically in World War II, Leigh Fermor settled in a remote area of Greece, the setting for one of his earlier travel books, *Mani* (1958). In Mark Cocker's view, this "narrative abolishes the divisions of time and space which inevitably separate reader from author, and then the author himself from the travel experiences he describes. [...] These described flights of fancy are the great set-pieces of Leigh Fermor's Greek books. In the context of the travel genre they are the equivalent of Joyce's interior monologue" (1992, 198).

In *A Time of Gifts*, which takes Leigh Fermor across Holland, Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia, he makes an early part of his journey along the Rhine, and first encounters the Danube in Ulm, where he describes his first sight of it as "a tremendous vision" (1977, 81). He rejoins the main course of the river in Austria, where he reflects, "The Danube, particularly in this deep gorge, seemed far wilder than the Rhine and much lonelier. How scarce was the river traffic by comparison!" (140). He is enchanted by the landscape of the Wachau valley which for him evokes English legends: "If any landscape is the meeting place of chivalrous romance and fairy tales, it is this. The stream winds into distances where Camelot or Avalon might lie, the woods suggest mythical fauna, the songs of Minnesingers and the sound of horns just out of earshot" (159). After spending three weeks in Vienna, he finally continues east to the Austrian border, and in the chapter "The Edge of the Slav World", he crosses a bridge that brings him into "the old city of Pressburg, re-baptized with the Slav name of Bratislava when it became part of the new Czechoslovak Republic" (212).

The fact that Leigh Fermor first refers to the Slovak capital with its former German name rather than its newly-bestowed Slavic one (less than fifteen years old when he visited) is not entirely coincidental. His guide during his stay is a Viennese friend named Hans, who ran the branch of his family business "in Bratislava – or Pressburg, as he still firmly called it, just as ex-Hungarians stubbornly clung to Pozony [sic] – and felt rather cut off from life" (213). He wanders the old town with Hans, stopping "in a wonderful Biedermeier café called the Konditorei Maier" for cakes, or at various pubs. Perhaps the most intriguing region for him is the "Schlossberg" and the ruins of Bratislava Castle, whose paths were lined with brothels: "It conjured up the abominations in the books of the Prophets and the stews of Babylon and Corinth and scenes from Lucian, Juvenal, Petronius and Villon" (223).

Leigh Fermor perceives interwar Bratislava's multilingualism as vaguely "Oriental": "Perhaps it had something to do with the three names of the city and the trilingual public notices and street names: the juxtaposition of tongues made me feel I had crossed more than a political frontier [...] the Slovak and the occasional Czech in the streets were the first Slav sounds I had ever heard" (214). Bratislava becomes for him (to use Magris's terms) a "*koinè plurima e sovranazionale*" that makes him imagine the arrival of the Slavic tribes in Europe:



As I listened to the muffled vowels of the Slovaks and the traffic-jams of consonants and the explosive spurts of dentals and sibilants, my mind's eye automatically suspended an imaginary backcloth of the Slav heartlands behind the speakers [...]. Then, at the astonishing sound of Magyar – a dactylic canter where the ictus of every initial syllable set off a troop of identical vowels with their accents all swerving one way like wheat-ears in the wind – the scene changed [...]. In the outskirts of the town [...] I caught a first glimpse of Gypsies [...] a swarm of snot-caked half-naked Mowglis who [...] patted and pulled and wheedled in Hungarian and reviled each other in Romany. [...] [In] the many Jewish coffee houses [...] [the] minor hubbub of Magyar and Slovak was outnumbered by voices speaking German, pronounced in the Austrian way or with the invariable Hungarian stress on the initial syllable. But quite often the talk was in Yiddish, and the German strain in the language always made me think that I was going to catch the ghost of a meaning (1977, 216–220).

As Mark Cocker suggests, “[c]onstantly one senses behind the fabric of Leigh Fermor’s prose the idea that language has material properties that can almost be sculptured” (1992, 203–204). His exuberant love of words extends even into languages with which he is unfamiliar.

While Leigh Fermor’s works have received critical attention as outstanding examples of British travel writing, he has received little attention from scholars of Central European culture. One exception is Thomas Ort’s online review of reprinted editions of the first two volumes (before the third was published), which he places in the historical context of Western travel writing on “Eastern” Europe. He appreciates the fact that “Fermor is a person who gets along with almost everyone he meets, and it shows. The result is a deeply sympathetic account of the people he encounters and the places he visits.” However, he is more critical of the fact that when “[entering] Czechoslovakia, Fermor steps back in time – a thousand years! He crosses not just a political but a civilization frontier.” Ort concludes that because Leigh Fermor is “convinced he has entered a whole new world, he goes looking for difference and he downplays similarity,” describing his chapters on Bratislava and Prague as “the weakest in the two books” (2006).

Leigh Fermor’s narrative changes in tone from the preceding sections not only because he is surrounded by an unfamiliar culture, but for more pragmatic reasons: he had faithfully kept journals throughout his original journey, but the first one had been stolen, and he had misplaced the later ones, only to recover them in his postwar visit to Romania. The recovered diary begins with his time in Slovakia, so the middle-aged author must compare his nostalgic memories with the more “factual” writings of his youthful self: “There were some discrepancies of time and place between the diary and what I had already written but they didn’t matter as they could be put right. The trouble was that I had imagined [...] that the contents were better than they were.” Yet as he notes, “I can’t resist using a few passages of this old diary here and there. It begins on the day I set out from Bratislava.” Thus, he includes his entry for March 19th, 1934, in which he had used the city’s German name: “Looking back, I could see all the chimney pots of Pressburg and the grey castle on the mountain and hear the bells over the fields” (1977, 249).

Making a loop north of the Danube, Leigh Fermor stays with Baron “Pips” Schey, who lives near a village called Kövecses (Štrkovec in Slovak) along the Váh, a Danu-

bian tributary. When he arrives at the baron's manor house, he encounters him in his library reading Proust:

"I'm on the last volume," Baron Pips said, lifting up a French paperbound book. It was *Le Temps Retrouvé* and an ivory paper-knife marked the place three quarters of the way through. "I started the first volume in October and I've been reading it all winter. [...] I feel so involved in them all, I don't know what I'll do when I've finished. Have you ever tried it?" [...] I took the first volume to bed that night; but it was too dense a wood. When I tried again in Rumania next year, the wood lightened and turned into a forest whose spell has been growing ever since: so, in spite of this hesitant start, Baron Pips was my true initiator. Perhaps because of this, some perverse process of the subconscious for a long time associated him in my mind's eye with the figure of Swann (1977, 253).

While the Slovak capital is represented (other than the outsider figure of Hans) by peasants and Roma, the provincial hinterland introduces him to the world of the post-imperial aristocracy that will host him for much of his journey across Hungary and Romania, as well as to one of the masterpieces of French modernist fiction (whose elaborate style he evokes in his own prose). Another modernist classic he discovers during his relatively short stay in Czechoslovakia is Jaroslav Hašek's *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války* (1923; *The Good Soldier Švejk*, 1930), which Hans lends to him in Paul Selver's English translation: "Thinking of Czechoslovakia, I was to remember it much later on, when the horrors of occupation from the West were followed by long-drawn-out and still continuing afflictions from the East; both of them still unguessed at then, in spite of the gathering omens" (1977, 224).

Leigh Fermor's experience in the "marginocentric" Slovak capital echoes as far as his second volume, *Between the Woods and the Water*, when he meets a Jewish family in Romania and eagerly shares his enthusiasm for Hebrew: "I showed them some of the words I had copied down in Bratislava from shops and Jewish newspapers in cafés, and the meanings, which I had forgotten, made them laugh; those biblical symbols recommended a stall for repairing umbrellas, or 'Daniel Kisch, Koscher Würste und Salami'" (1986, 198). Later in that volume he reaches what he calls "The End of Middle Europe", an island on the Danube known as Ada-Kaleh that remained a small exclave of Turkish-speakers until it was destroyed by Romania in 1970 due to the construction of a power station. Leigh Fermor finds its inhabitants culturally and physically exotic, not unlike his first encounter with Slavic culture in Bratislava: "Something about the line of brow, the swoop of nose and the jut of the ears made them indefinably different from any of the people I had seen on my journey so far." Their antiquated dialect is his first exposure to the Turkish language: "astonishing strings of agglutinated syllables with a follow-through of identical vowels [...] like a long-marooned English community still talking the language of Chaucer" (1986, 228–229). By the time he wrote his account, Ada-Kaleh had disappeared underwater and its residents were dispersed: "myths, lost voices, history and hearsay have all been put to rout, leaving nothing but this valley of the shadow" (1986, 242). Passing the same spot, Claudio Magris notes that "Ada Kaleh has vanished, submerged by the river, and dwells in the slow, enchanted times of underwater things

like the mythical Vineta in the Baltic” (1989, 333). Like Bratislava, the sunken Turkish island becomes a fitting symbol for their literary odysseys in search of lost time, an expression of refractive nostalgia for the post-imperial cultural twilight that disappeared with the rise of the Nazi and Communist regimes.

### MAGRIS AMONG “CASTLES AND DREVENICE”

Loredana Polezzi has examined issues of genre and translation in the international reception of Claudio Magris’s *Danube*, such as the reviews on the dust jacket of the British edition, which “stress the travel affiliation, as well as richness of details, erudition, historical, geographical, and touristic interest.” She also points out that “the Triestine ex-centricity of the author, constantly stressed in Italy, is completely absent here: from the hegemonic centre of the English literary system an Italian book and author were possibly perceived as close enough to Mitteleuropa and also marginal enough to understand it” (1998, 682). Polezzi’s analysis draws upon Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of “deterritorialization”:

It is at least a striking coincidence that Deleuze and Guattari should formulate their theory of minor literatures thinking of the example of the Jewish Kafka writing in the deterritorialized German of Mitteleuropean Prague, and that Kafka should be one of the favourite subjects of Claudio Magris the scholar, as well as one of the main presences in *Danubio*, a book that takes its initial move from the contrast between the pure, German Rhine and the multiethnic, deterritorialized Danube. [...] [Or] that his Triestine (multiple) identity should be so influential in the reception of *Danubio*, a book itself perceived as ambiguous (thus deterritorialized from the canon) and possibly belonging to a marginal, minor genre such as Italian travel writing (1998, 685–686).

Linking Magris to both Laurence Sterne and Italo Svevo, she suggests that “the British reception of *Danube* and of its Sternian affiliation is thus tied up with a whole narrative made of translations and border crossings (national borders, genre borders), which moves along the margins, the ex-centric texts, the minor masterpieces of two traditions” (1998, 690).

Although Magris does not describe his visit to Slovakia in as much detail as does Leigh Fermor, it played a major role in the origin of his narrative. In an interview with Afrodita Cionchin, Magris mentions that the inspiration for *Danube* came from a 1982 trip to Slovakia:

I remember we were between Vienna and Bratislava, near the border with the East which, at that time, was “another” Europe [...] we were on the bank of the Danube, we saw the water flowing, sparkling in the rays of the sun that enveloped everything... in unparalleled splendor. You couldn’t distinguish where the river started and where it ended, if it was the Danube there or not. We experienced a magic moment of harmony and communion, one of those rare instants of perfect harmony with the flow of existence. [...] This is how the Danubian project took shape and thus began the four years of peregrinations along the Danube (2007, 76–77).

Magris gave this same explanation on his first visit to post-Communist Slovakia in October 1990, when he presented *Danube* at Bratislava’s Pálffy Palace (known as the Mozart House) as a guest of the Slovak PEN Club. The title of his interview

with Michaela Jurovská and Adam Bžoch on this occasion, “Koiné stredoeurópskej budúcnosti” (“The *koiné* of the Central European future”) makes an explicit connection between the polyglossic Danube and the discourse on Central Europe. In response to Bžoch’s request for a definition, he states that the term “Central Europe” can be interpreted “in connection with German hegemony,” but that Italians perceive it “in the opposite way – it indicates a multinational and ‘hinternational’ world” (taking the pun from the Prague-German writer Johannes Urzidil). He connects the latter meaning with “the supranational or Urzidilian hinternational *koiné*, that is a culture that is mostly articulated by means of the German language but cannot be called German, because its outlines differ sharply from German national culture” (Jurovská and Bžoch 1990, 6).

In the original title of his chapter, “Castelli e drevenice”, Magris mixes Italian and Slovak (1986, 255); this nuance is lost in the English version, which translates it as “Castles and Huts” (1989, 217). This phrase is inspired by Vladimír Mináč’s essay “Kde sú naše hrady?” (Where are our castles?, 1968) which he discusses in the second section of the chapter. This multilingualism (alluding in spirit to the *koiné* of his first chapter) is also reflected in the opening section mentioned by Domínguez, Saussy, and Villanueva, in which Magris describes the “marginocentric city” of Bratislava as “one of the ‘hearts’ of Mitteleuropa, with layer upon layer of centuries forever present, unresolved conflicts and lacerations, unhealed wounds and unreconciled contradictions” (1989, 220). Seeing the quadrilingual manual (in Latin, Slovak, Hungarian and German) at the “Red Prawn” museum evokes a memory from his schooldays (it should be noted that the misspellings of “Pressburg” and “Pozsony” below are due to the translator, not Magris):

my friends and I used to discuss the city’s name, which ones we liked best: Bratislava, the Slovak name, Pressberg [sic], the German one, or Poszony [sic], the Hungarian name derived from Posonium, the ancient Roman outpost on the Danube. The fascination of those three names bestowed a special glamour on a composite, multinational history, and someone’s preference for one or the other was, in a childish way, a basic stance taken toward the Weltgeist (220).

This “stance” is a recurrent theme through the chapter, a choice “between the instinctive celebration of great, powerful cultures such as the German, [...] or our romantic admiration for the exploits of rebellious, chivalrous, and adventurous peoples such as the Magyars, or else our fellow-feeling [...] for the small peoples such as the Slovaks, [...] a humble, fertile soil waiting centuries for the moment of its flowering” (220). The Bratislava Magris observes, however, has lost the vibrant multilingualism that was still visible in Leigh Fermor’s time.

In the following section, Magris summarizes Mináč’s essay on “castles and *drevenice*”:

Slovakia is strewn with castles [...]. But what Mináč seems to say is that these castles are somewhere else, in another history that was not created by the Slovaks. Most of the gentlemen who resided in these mansions were Hungarian. The dwellings of the Slovak peasants were the drevenice, wooden huts held together with straw and dried dung. [...] The Slovaks have for centuries been a downtrodden people, the obscure substratum of their coun-

try, not unlike the straw and dried dung which hold their huts together. We have no history, writes Mináč, if this is made up solely of kings, emperors, dukes, princes, victories, conquests, violence and pillage (221–222).

Magris later draws upon the more familiar example of Franz Kafka in his description of the Slovaks as one of the “minor nations” that “have long been forced to put all their efforts into the determination and defense of their own identity [and] tend to prolong this attitude even when it is no longer necessary [...] thereby shrinking the horizons of their experience, of lacking magnanimity in their dealings with the world.” Although he alludes to Kafka’s statements on “the literature of small peoples,” rather than citing Deleuze and Guattari’s “deterritorialization,” he refers to the Italian scholar Giuliano Baioni, who has concluded that “such a writer creates a void around himself, provokes schisms and imperils the compactness of the little community” (1989, 224–225). Magris concludes this section by reflecting on the paradoxical legacy of the Prague Spring: “Ever since the events of 1968 the splendid city of Prague has given an impression of being under the spell of neglect and death, while Bratislava, in spite of everything, is sanguine and cheerful, a vital world in an expansive phase, looking not to the melancholy of the past, but to growth and the future” (1989, 226).

The chapter’s most interesting autobiographical moment occurs on Gondova ulica, a street along the Danube with an impeccably socialist name (taken from a martyred hero of the Slovak National Uprising) but which in the interwar period was named after a famous polyglot traveler, the Hungarian-Jewish Orientalist and Turkologist Ármin Vámbéry. In what seems like a charming Freudian slip, Magris turns “Gondova” into the Venetian-sounding “Gondola Ulica” (1986, 268), while the English translation compounds the error as “Gondola Ilica” (1989, 228). The Art Nouveau building of Comenius University’s “Philosophy Faculty” (Faculty of Arts) brings back the memory of a former German teacher he calls “Trani”, who had been a lecturer in Central Europe before returning to work in Trieste. While some students disliked Trani due to his capricious behavior, Magris feels that “I owe [to him] not only my discovery of Central European culture, but also one of the most important and unusual lessons in morality [...] the sense of what is right and contempt for what is wrong.” He recalls when a classmate was bullied by a fellow student named Sandrin, who broke his fountain pen: “When the teacher asked him why he had done that, Sandrin answered, ‘I felt nervous... and when I’m nervous I can’t control myself... I’m just made like that, it’s my nature.’” The pupils are amazed when Trani replies: “I understand [...] it’s just life, that’s all...” and continues his lesson. Fifteen minutes later, Trani pretends to lose control of himself, breaking and tearing Sandrin’s pens and papers: “Then, affecting to grow calm, he said to Sandrin: ‘I’m so sorry, dear boy, I had a fit of nerves. I’m made like that, it’s my nature. There’s nothing I can do about it, it’s just life...’” Magris returns to the present by recalling what he had learned that day about the arbitrary and changeable nature of strength and weakness: “Bratislava, the bustling capital of a small people long trodden underfoot, brings to mind memories and thoughts such as this, including that lesson in justice from the distant past” (1989, 229–230).

Since Magris is largely unfamiliar with Slovak literature, his reflections on such writers (primarily poets) as Ladislav Novomeský and Milan Rúfus are based on information from his contacts in Bratislava, particularly the literary historian Stanislav Šmatlák. It is apparently his conversations with Šmatlák that lead Magris to the observation: “One gets the impression – no more than an impression, in view of the reticence which is *de rigueur* on this subject – that people in Bratislava were more easily reconciled to the restoration carried out by the Soviets in 1968.” The political changes since that time “have increased the importance of Slovakia within the state and have given the Slovaks some measure of satisfaction and compensation, in comparison with the desert created among the Czechs and in Czech literature.” While Czech writers have been driven into exile or into hiding like “Kafka’s animal which digs itself underground tunnels, Slovak literature today has its own effective organic unity [...] a political and social function of collaboration rather than of opposition” (1989, 232).

In his review of the French translation of *Danube* (before the release of the Czech version), Peter Brabenec describes Magris’s impression as “downright outrageous”:

To claim that the given situation is the result of the will of the Slovak nation means to passively accept the communist demagoguery about the people’s government. The author of *Danube* was probably influenced by the views of the oldest generation [...]. They cannot be expected to publicly acknowledge [...] that they have lived in error for more than forty years. However, a foreigner must be aware of this, especially if he is a writer who was able to appreciate a substantially different evaluation of life on the previous pages. (1991, 179)

As in Longinović’s article on the “ex-centric imaginary”, Brabenec accuses Magris of complicity with nationalist forces: of sympathizing with the Sandrins of the world, rather than its Tranis.

In recent Slovak fiction, Michal Hvorecký’s novel *Dunaj v Amerike* (Danube in America, 2010), which takes place on a river cruise for American tourists, is perhaps intended as an homage to Magris’s narrative. While it is aimed at a mainstream audience and is not as densely allusive as either Leigh Fermor or Magris, the novel does include an intertextual reference that Lucia Satinská has pointed out: “the main hero Martin Roy [...] is at the same time the translator of Magris’s novel into Slovak. Magris’s *Danube* has never been translated into Slovak, so this fictitious moment interestingly plays with the Slovak literary scene” (2011, 17–18). While Hvorecký’s novel has been translated into English, that translation has not been published, so it remains outside the international current of Danubian literature.

Hvorecký’s epigraph for *Dunaj v Amerike* comes from Pavel Vilikovský’s autobiographical (or perhaps autofictional) essay, “Moja Bratislava” (My Bratislava, 2004), in which his memory of swimming in the Danube in the 1960s becomes a transcendental experience connecting him to his native city: “I don’t like Bratislava. [...] But maybe it is my Bratislava after all: When I dipped my head beneath the surface of the Danube and felt how the current carried me, I heard a quiet wheezing at the bottom: the stones and sifting sand were singing. [...] I knew that when I emerged, I would see the city on the other side, bathed in sunlight and far away” (2005, 773). Although Vilikovský’s work epitomizes the “Central European” spirit, he satirizes the obsession with multilingualism in *Večne je zelený...* (1989; *Ever Green is...*, 2002), where he refers to both



“Pressburg, which for lack of a better name is sometimes also referred to as Bratislava,” and “Bratislava, which in Hungarian is actually called Pozsony” (2002, 74). For his narrator, the “glory and greatness” of Austria had become just “an optical illusion, a rainbow of sweet colors, which in a little summer shower can be glimpsed across the Danube from the top of Kobyla Hill” (2002, 74, 78).

Patrick Leigh Fermor ends *A Time of Gifts* on the Mária Valéria bridge between Parkan (now Štúrovo) and Esztergom (a border crossing that was destroyed in 1945 and not rebuilt until 2001). An old Hungarian shepherd also stopping in the middle of the river points up to “a thick white line of crowding storks [that] stretched from one side of the heavens to the other [which had] entered Europe over the Bosphorus. Then, persevering along the Black Sea shore to the delta of the Danube, they had steered their flight along that shining highway [...]. We gazed at them in wonder” (1977, 278–279). This sublime image, reminding him of his ultimate goal of Istanbul, leaves him reluctant to cross into Hungary: “not out of fear but because, within arm’s reach and still intact, this future seemed, and still seems, so full of promised marvels. The river below, meanwhile, was carrying the immediate past downstream and I was hung poised in mid-air between the two” (282). This momentary pause on the Czechoslovak-Hungarian border lasted nine years until the publication of his second volume (and the wait for the third and final book took three times as long). Claudio Magris ends his journey in Romania near the Danube Delta, where it then flowed along Soviet territory, by representing the river not as the “perfect harmony with the flow of existence” that he had seen near Bratislava, but as a threat: “The frontier reeks of insecurity, fear of being touched, [...] an obscure terror of the Other. [...] It may be that Danubian culture, which seems so open and cosmopolitan, also creates these feelings of anxiety and shutting things out” (1989, 389). In the insecure and anxious world that has reemerged more than 30 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the “marginocentric” history of cities such as Bratislava and the “multiple, supranational *koiné*” of the “interliterary” Danube remain as powerful symbols of resistance against the forces of nationalism and intolerance.

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## Bratislava as a cultural borderland in the Danubian narratives of Patrick Leigh Fermor and Claudio Magris

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Patrick Leigh Fermor. Claudio Magris. Autofiction. Bratislava in literature. Danube in literature.

This article examines the Danube as a site of cultural memory and exploration, focusing on the descriptions of Bratislava as seen by British travel writer Patrick Leigh Fermor in *A Time of Gifts* (1977) and Italian literary scholar Claudio Magris in *Danubio* (1986; *Danube*, 1989). For both Leigh Fermor, who saw it in the 1930s, and Magris, who visited the city in the 1980s, Bratislava serves as a border between the familiar West and the exotic East, and as a site of nostalgia for what Magris describes as "a multiple and supranational culture [*koiné*]". When seen in relation to the debate over Central European identity in the 1980s, both narratives look to the Slovak capital's multilingual past as a sign of its "marginocentric" history, but Leigh Fermor's trilogy has largely been overlooked by theorists of Danubian culture, while Magris has been accused of complicity with the forces of oppression (from Habsburg to Communist) described in his work.

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