

From Guns to Games:
Tracing the Political Trajectory in the Works of Italo Calvino
by
Isaac Schankler

A thesis presented for the B. A. degree
with Honors in
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Acknowledgements

There are several people without whom this thesis would not exist in its current form. When I was faced with a choice between a relatively simple path and a more difficult one, Professor David Thomas encouraged me to take the hard road, and I thank him for that. This project has been far more rewarding for me than it would have been otherwise, I believe. I would also like to thank my advisor, Professor Tobin Siebers. His acute perceptions and immaculate attention to detail have been immensely valuable to me.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the relationship between literature and politics in the essays and fiction of Italo Calvino. It addresses the criticisms that contend that Calvino's work ignores political, social, and moral issues by demonstrating that these influences are in fact pervasive in his writing. At the same time, Calvino sees these influences as obstacles and attempts to overcome or think beyond them. Three contentious concepts are useful in examining this conflict: aesthetic autonomy, beauty, and transcendence. Calvino's attitudes toward these concepts change over time, dividing his career into three distinct periods.

In the first period, his fiction is unabashedly motivated by politics. This era is exemplified by the neorealist novel *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*. Elements of fantasy in Calvino's subsequent novels and short stories, however, anticipate the direction his work takes next. *Invisible Cities*, a quintessential work from the middle of Calvino's career, evokes a sense of distance between the worlds of art and politics. In this period, Calvino rejects the idea that literature can wield political influence. Finally, toward the end of his life, Calvino's position becomes more complex and conflicted. *If on a winter's night a traveler* contains intricate musings on aesthetic autonomy, while *Mr. Palomar* delves into confusion about beauty. These two novels reflect his anxiety and indecision about the tangled interrelations of politics and art.

By examining similarities and points of convergence between the ideas of the young Calvino and the old Calvino, this thesis provides a more complete picture of his attitudes about literature and politics. This picture reveals an aesthetic and ethical system of beliefs that seamlessly integrates the political into a literary framework, but at a cost. In the process, Calvino transforms politics into something almost, but not quite, unrecognizable.

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Short Titles

Baron: Calvino, Italo. *The Baron in the Trees*. Trans. William Weaver. San Diego: Harcourt, 1959.

Cities: Calvino, Italo. *Invisible Cities*. Trans. William Weaver. San Diego: Harcourt, 1974.

If: Calvino, Italo. *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Trans. William Weaver. San Diego: Harcourt, 1981.

Knight: Calvino, Italo. *The Nonexistent Knight and the Cloven Viscount*. Trans. Archibald Colquhoun. San Diego: Harcourt, 1962.

Memos: Calvino, Italo. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. Trans. Patrick Creagh. New York: Random, 1988.

Numbers: Calvino, Italo. *Numbers in the Dark*. Trans. Tim Parks. New York: Random, 1995.

Palomar: Calvino, Italo. *Mr. Palomar*. Trans. William Weaver. San Diego: Harcourt, 1985.

Path: Calvino, Italo. *Path to the Spiders' Nests, The*. Trans. Archibald Colquhoun. Rev. Martin McLaughlin. New York: Harper, 1998.

Uses: Calvino, Italo. *The Uses of Literature*. Trans. Patrick Creagh. San Diego: Harcourt, 1986.

Figures

Figure 1. Johannes Vermeer, *Officer and a Laughing Girl*, 46

So Pin decides that he will keep the pistol himself and not give it to anyone or tell anyone that he has it. He'll just hint that he possesses a terrible power, and everyone will obey him. Whoever owns a real pistol must be able to play wonderful games, games which no other boy has ever played. But Pin is a boy who does not know how to play games, and cannot take part in the games either of children or grown-ups. So he will go off now, away from everyone, and play . . . all on his own, games that no one else knows and no one else can ever learn.

Italo Calvino, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*

Why, finally, should we bother with a Calvino, a word-juggler, a fantasist? What does it mean to write about nonexistent knights, or the formation of the moon, or how a reader reads, while the neutron bomb gets the go-ahead in Washington, and plans are made to station germ-warfare weaponry in Europe? Not escapism, because although the reader of Italo Calvino will be taken further out of himself than most readers, he will also discover that the experience is not a flight from, but an enrichment of himself. No, the reason why Calvino is such an indispensable writer is precisely that he tells us, joyfully, wickedly, that there are things in the world worth loving as well as hating; and that such things exist in people, too. I can think of no finer writer to have beside me while Italy explodes, while Britain burns, while the world ends.

Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*

I. Introduction

"In recent years . . . it has often occurred to me to worry about how things are going in politics and how things are going in literature, but when I think about politics I think about politics, and when I think about literature I think about literature" (*Uses* 90). This statement, part of a paper read in a symposium on European politics in 1976, comes well after the midpoint of Calvino's literary career (his first novel was published in 1947), but also well before his death in 1986. Calvino never stopped writing in his lifetime, once he had started; it is clear that he was dedicated to it as both an act and an art. His commitment to politics is less clear -- if we measure his life by the documents most apparent to us, that is, his works of fiction, then certainly it seems he nursed an increasing aversion to the political as he grew older. But statements like the one above cast shadows on this idea, and belie a more complex position, intimating that Calvino did not really abandon the politics of his youth, that he merely sought to create a distance between the two realms of politics and literature. This attitude becomes more visible after a close examination of his essays, lectures, letters, and of course his fiction. Even his archetypically apolitical later works can be shown to contain traces of the political, though the way in which the political is presented is radically transformed.

This is the central paradox in much of Calvino's work -- that more often than not, in order to distance and separate his writing from politics, he feels obligated to acknowledge its presence. In any study of these conflicting instincts, the looming question is whether or not this separation is valid, or indeed even possible. To address this question, it is first necessary to trace Calvino's political path throughout the years, in both life and literature. Once this

trajectory is determined, it is then possible to examine Calvino's vision of the role of politics and the validity of that perception.

Calvino began writing his first short stories in 1941, at the age of 17. However, Calvino himself subtracts these first efforts, most of them unpublished, from his own bibliography. Interestingly, he chooses to count the beginning of his literary life from the beginning of his political life, or rather, from the end of the first phase of his political life -- "immediately after the Liberation of Italy" (McLaughlin 1). Before the second world war, Calvino writes, he was little more than an "armchair" anti-fascist, and it took being "thrust into the midst of partisan violence" to inform his own thoughts on violence (*Path* 22). In other words, in his mind, joining the Italian Resistance and facing the "real trauma" of war (22) was the point of his creative genesis, the point at which he first had "so many things to say" (28).

Calvino's literary career can be divided into three periods. In the first period, which stretches from that point in 1947 to roughly 1964, he was extremely politically involved, and the literature from that time reflects this. Even within this period, however, there are elements of his fiction that contradict the political climate of the time and anticipate the period that followed. In this second period, which lasted until the mid-1970's, Calvino became more or less estranged from politics. It is during this period that he refined the style based in fantasy, fable and mathematical configurations that he is most known for. In the last period, from the late 1970's until his death in 1985, Calvino continued to write mostly in this style, but his work from that time expresses uncertainties and doubts that are markedly different from the generally optimistic tone of his earlier writing. While these works do not represent a return to the polemics of his youth, they do address political and social issues, however obliquely,

demonstrating that Calvino could no longer keep the worlds of politics and literature completely separate.

In my discussion of these periods I will first focus on *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*, and the trilogy of novels that followed it, as representative works from the first period and points of origin for the rarified style that became Calvino's trademark. I will then skip forward and look at two of Calvino's later works, *If on a winter's night a traveler* and *Mr. Palomar*, which deal with political and social issues in a complicated and problematic manner. Finally, I will turn to the intermediate stage of his career, focusing almost exclusively on *Invisible Cities*, the novel that contained Calvino's highest aspirations and also drew his critics' most fervent disapproval. Calvino's essays and lectures will aid my discussion throughout, informing and illuminating whatever is not clear. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, in particular, has elements of a credo that makes Calvino's intentions and system of values far more apparent. The elucidation of the workings of this system is, of course, my project here.

II. Putting Calvino Into Context

To ascertain Calvino's opinions about the relationship between politics and literature, it is first necessary to discern what opinions he unequivocally rejects. One of the most extreme views of this relationship is that of a literature in service of politics, of literature as the arbiter of a fixed set of values. While this attitude is not currently prevalent, it is still quite common, especially among Marxist theorists and critics. Terry Eagleton states that Marxist criticism has a "significant . . . role to play in the transformation of human societies" (Eagleton viii) and stresses that it "is a part of a larger body of theoretical analysis which aims to understand *ideologies*" (viii). (Although it is true that this Eagleton is discussing criticism and not literature, his use of criticism places very clear value judgments on literature, based on how well it conforms to Marxist principles and ideals, and therefore he implies a fixed set of values for literature as well as criticism.)

Calvino is, to say the least, skeptical of this restricted way of perceiving literature. His cautionary dispute of this point of view is two-fold:

To claim that literature should voice a truth already possessed by politics, to believe that the sum of political values is the primary thing . . . implies a notion of literature as ornamental and superfluous, but it also implies a notion of politics as fixed and self-confident: an idea that would be catastrophic. (*Uses* 97)

Eagleton (to his credit) does believe that "certain . . . ideas, values and feelings are available to us only in literature" (viii), but they are still ultimately in service of ideologies, and Calvino is clearly not satisfied with this niche, arguing that literature as "a pedagogical function for politics could only be imagined at the level of bad literature and bad politics"

(*Uses* 97). By telling us what he believes literature and politics are *not*, Calvino indirectly reveals what he thinks they are. For him, politics involves constant change, while writers hope that their work will endure and persist. The implication is clear – in order to accomplish this, the writer must, on some level, shun politics. If this is the case, then the separation of politics and literature in Calvino's thoughts is not the effect of any sort of ignorance about politics; instead, it is the natural result of an acute and specific awareness.

Calvino writes that literature is “like an ear that can hear things beyond the understanding of the language of politics; it is like an eye that can see beyond the color spectrum perceived by politics” (*Uses* 98). Does he then see literature as a voice complementary to politics, filling in the gaps where political discourse rings hollow? Calvino speaks generally of political language becoming “flaccid and abstract” and experiencing a “tacit demand for a different language, more direct and personal” (*Uses* 94-95) – a feeling that echoes the sentiments of many liberal critics, among them Martha Nussbaum, who laments “an excessive reliance on technical ways of modeling human behavior” in politics and contends that without “the participation of the literary imagination,” political arguments become “grotesque and eccentric” (xiii). While at first it appears as if Calvino would be inclined to agree with this assessment, it is in fact another version of literary value that he specifically rejects. It is a mistake, he says, to view literature as “an assortment of eternal human sentiments, as the truth of a human language that politics tends to overlook” (*Uses* 97). According to Calvino, this perspective, while apparently more gracious toward literature, relegates it to “the task of confirming what is already known” (97). Furthermore, it promotes “the notion of a set of established values that literature is responsible for preserving” (97). And, indeed, Nussbaum seeks “the best fit between our considered moral

and political judgments and the insights offered by our reading” and focuses on the “realist Anglo-American novel” as a model for all literature (10).

Calvino’s two-pronged criticism of the liberal mindset is remarkably similar, it seems, to his criticism of Marxist theory. To put it succinctly: first, liberal psychology devalues literature; second, it promotes a set of fixed values. Here, however, it is literature, not politics, that is endangered by constancy. We arrive at an apparent contradiction: for literature to endure, it must change, or at least be free to change. We are introduced to a value that Calvino sees and sees again in literature: novelty. And it is here that he makes an exception, a special case for the conjunction of politics and literature: “Literature is necessary to politics above all when it gives a voice to whatever is without a voice, when it gives a name to what as yet has no name, especially to what the language of politics excludes or attempts to exclude” (*Uses* 98). In other words, when literature speaks what is as yet unsaid – when it says something entirely new – then it is allowed to be political, but only in a “very indirect, undeliberate, and fortuitous” sense (98). Is he referring literature’s ability to speak for oppressed minorities or ethnicities? This would seem to be more deliberate than what Calvino is describing. His subsequent clarification – “I mean aspects, situations, and languages both of the outer and of the inner world, the tendencies repressed both in individuals and in society” – seems to obfuscate further rather than enlighten (98). This is perhaps the way he likes it; after all, if he believes that literature’s relation to politics should be oblique rather than overt, then there is not much reason for him to be perfectly clear. He does, however, offer some clues: “Simply because of the solitary individualism of his work, the writer may happen to explore areas that no one explored before, within himself or outside, and to make discoveries that sooner or later turn out to be vital areas of collective awareness”

(98). Here Calvino touches on a couple of provocative concepts: the idea of the writer as iconoclast, and the writer as unwitting prophet. The writer can use literature to foreshadow the politics of the future but not to participate in the politics of the present. It is easy to see how others might interpret this as a downright rejection of political involvement.

A few concepts are now important to mention because of their relation to the rejection of politics in literature: aesthetic autonomy, beauty, and transcendence. The attacks on all three of these concepts are rather similar, contending that they distract from or ignore problems of cultural, historical, social, or political import. Defenses for each, however, differ greatly, and it is important to make this distinction. While they are related concepts that often overlap, they are not the same, and a supporter of one might even be a detractor of another. The idea of aesthetic autonomy – that is, the idea that art should be kept separate and independent from other practices and disciplines – is frequently connected to transcendence in art via the assertion that, by separating art from all possible historical, cultural and political influences, it becomes independent and therefore “transcends” its time and place. Stanley Fish is one of many who disputes the possibility of transcendence, saying, “all actions, physical and verbal, are produced in relation to historical circumstances, and it is from those circumstances and not from any eternal or transcendental structures that they receive their meaning” (Fish 128). But this same respect for the boundaries created by historical circumstance leads him to defend the boundaries created between art and other disciplines: “Objects, including texts, do not have an identity apart from some discursive practice, and persons do not have an integrated essence that will emerge if they will only break free of disciplinary constraints” (136). For Fish, it is the boundaries between disciplines that lend context and meaning to human activity. Thinking outside of the boundaries is not only

impossible, but even making the attempt results in a loss of meaning. In this way, Fish disputes transcendence but supports autonomy.

Others, like Herbert Marcuse, find different reasons to defend the autonomy of art. Marcuse, once a Marxist critic, insists that the potential to be “revolutionary” in art is not a product of its politics but a product of its independence from the political: “art is ‘art for art’s sake’ inasmuch as the aesthetic form reveals tabooed and repressed dimensions of reality: aspects of liberation” (19). Marcuse’s definition of autonomy, unlike Fish’s, allows for “the permanence of certain qualities of art,” including but not limited to “transcendence, estrangement, aesthetic order, manifestations of the beautiful” (16). For Marcuse, autonomy, beauty and transcendence are, if not synonymous, then at least intrinsically and unbreakably linked.

Calvino is someone who, like Marcuse, began his career writing with overtly political goals, goals that he deliberately distanced himself from, as he grew older. Marcuse is a contemporary of Calvino, having written his critique of Marxist aesthetics, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, in 1977, only a year after Calvino gave his speech “Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature” in a symposium on European politics (*Uses* 89). Are Marcuse’s potentially liberating “repressed dimensions,” then, the same as Calvino’s voiceless “tendencies repressed”?

The answer is more complicated than one might expect. Calvino does not discuss autonomy directly in his writing (perhaps he finds the term, and the language that accompanies it, too jargony) and there are signs that he wishes to distance himself from it. In fact, Calvino emphatically encourages the very kind of interdisciplinarity that Fish derides, particularly with respect to the disciplines of philosophy and science:

Science is faced with problems not too dissimilar from those of literature. It makes patterns of the world that are immediately called in question, it swings between the inductive and the deductive methods, and it must always be on its guard lest it mistake its own linguistic conventions for objective laws. We will not have a culture equal to the challenge until we compare against one another the basic problematics of science, philosophy, and literature, in order to call them all into question. (*Uses* 45-46)

The issue at hand is not, therefore, why Calvino might choose to excise all outside influences from his writing. He does not do this. Instead, he chooses specifically to exclude politics, or rather, he dismisses a certain type of political writing, while he not only allows influences from other areas of study but finds them imperative to create a literature that is “valid . . . for tomorrow” (45).

Part of this, as I have mentioned, may be a result of Calvino’s tendency to view politics as evolving and transient and art as something that, at least ideally, is more lasting. The particular fields in which he finds harmony with literature – philosophy and science – support this idea of permanence. Philosophy is often a pursuit of what is persistent in both life and literature, a search for absolutes, and according to Calvino, it is philosophers who “see through the opaqueness of the world, eliminate the flesh of it” (*Uses* 39). Science, meanwhile, “tends toward a purely formal and mathematical language based on an abstract logic indifferent to its content” (37). In other words, science tends toward the objective, in which Calvino seems to seek some kind of escape, some solace from the subjective humanity that pollutes literature and makes it susceptible to a myriad of cultural and political influences, not to mention criticism.

In Calvino's estimation, by accepting scientific and philosophical influences, literature becomes more autonomous with respect to politics. Literature, by incorporating the impartial elements of philosophy, has "walled itself up in a philosophical fortress that can hold out with perfect self-sufficiency" (*Uses* 45). Calvino's vision may be compatible with Marcuse's after all (though it certainly clashes with the system of beliefs Fish sets up). Marxism is, among other things, a philosophy, and Calvino sounds uncannily like Marcuse when he says that Marxist criticism causes literature to "lose the real revolutionary value of a philosophy, which consists in its being all snags and thorns, in this power to upset common sense and sentiments and to outrage every 'natural' manner of thinking" (43).

I began this piece of writing by talking about rejection of politics in a general sense; I then divided this rejection into multiple justifications based on autonomy, beauty, and transcendence. Now we see the concept of autonomy become multiple, with Fish's socially constructed boundaries as separate and distinct from Marcuse's repressed revolutionary tendencies, which purportedly overturn such boundaries. Similarly, Marcuse proposes a new direction in Marxist aesthetics, while Calvino rejects a politically driven aesthetic altogether. But their proposed methods are quite similar: they both support a version of aesthetic autonomy that is persistent and ideologically sound. They are both uncomfortable with a literature that has overt moral and ethical implications. For Marcuse, "the more immediately political the work of art, the more it reduces the power of estrangement and the radical, transcendent goals of change" (xiii). And even though Calvino attempts to strengthen literature with external influences, he brings in these influences to address problems of language, not problems of ethics. It is not a moral deficiency in literature that he wishes to correct but a purely verbal one. In fact, Calvino contends that ethical issues merely distract

from the creatively vital conflict between philosophy and literature: “Ethics has always provided an excuse for philosophy and literature not to look each other directly in the face, being certain and confident of being able to reach easy agreement about their task of teaching virtue to mankind. This has been the sad literary fate of all practical philosophies” (*Uses* 43). Instead, Calvino argues for a “philosophy internal to the act of writing” (45). Similarly, he remarks that the mathematical language of science “can save the writer from the disrepair that words and images have fallen into as a result of being misused” (37). Clearly, Calvino feels compelled to include scientific and philosophical elements for their potential relevance and practical value, a value very different from any moral values or judgments that can be imposed on literature by culture or politics.

Some people have criticized Calvino for what they perceived as a certain kind of amorality, or at least a willful refusal to acknowledge problems of morality in literature. It is true that his propensity for mathematical forms often obscures or even overrides the human content in his writing. Is he dedicated to the beauty of these forms for their own sake? Elaine Scarry writes that “the banishing of beauty from the humanities in the last two decades has been carried out by a set of political complaints against it” (57). But Scarry is a defender of beauty, insisting that the arguments against it are “incoherent” and that “beauty assists us in our attention to justice” (86). Calvino might also be seen as a defender of beauty, in his devotion to mathematical forms and pleasing images. He describes a second justifiable political use for literature, “the creation . . . of a model of values that is at the same time aesthetic and ethical, essential to any plan of action, especially in political life” (*Uses* 99). But what does he mean by this? What can aesthetics and ethics possibly have to do with each other? How can forms or visual images alone have moral implications or instill in us a sense

of justice? How can persistence or transcendence in art be reconciled with the undeniably transient conditions that engender it? Since my questions have turned from “whys” into “hows,” I will now turn away from Calvino’s essays for the time being and look at his stories and novels to see how the principles he describes are put into action.

III. The Early Works: An Emerging Aesthetic and Ethical Model

The Path to the Spiders' Nests holds a unique place among Calvino's works. Written in the last months of 1946, it is his first published novel, and perhaps his most straightforward stylistically (McLaughlin 20). For Calvino himself, however, the book proved to be extremely problematic. Multiple times, in 1947, 1954, and 1964, he felt the need to revise the manuscript for publication (McLaughlin 149). These three successive editions provide a glimpse of the development of Calvino's style over the years, indicating which parts of his early aesthetic he came to reject and which he continued to accept. One thing is certain: early on he regarded the idea of a kind of literature based on a socio-political agenda with suspicion.

But *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* is a thoroughly socio-political novel. It is the story of Pin, a young boy who falls in with a detachment of the Italian Resistance during World War II. Martin McLaughlin identifies it as a "canonical text of neorealism," a literary movement that was influential for a short time in postwar Italy (19). He cites three qualities that the book has in common with the movement: it embraces "a new realism of content . . . different both from late nineteenth-century realism, and from the . . . literature written under Fascism" as well as "a new realism of style, which implied a more authentic representation of 'natural' Italian," and finally, it contains "a committed socio-political message" (19). By portraying the Resistance movement and occasionally employing Italian dialect, the book fulfills the first two tenets (McLaughlin 19). The political message is apparent in the speech of several of the characters, most notably Mancino the cook, Giacinto the commissar, and Kim, a commissar from another brigade. Mancino's political speech is limited mostly to the shouting of extremist slogans, like "tell 'em it's the bourgeoisie making war for its markets!"

or “Imperialism is caused by over-production!” (127) It is important to note that Mancino is a comic character and is mocked by his fellow partisans. His polemic is balanced by the practical, down-to-earth (but still simplistic) explanations of Giacinto: “I’ve just been to brigade headquarters and seen they have insect powder there. Then I said, ‘Fine communists you are, you don’t send this to our detachment.’ So they said they’d send some. That’s what communism means” (129). Mancino’s and Giacinto’s primitive explanations anticipate the more complex musings of Kim, which fill the greater part of chapter nine. Ideologically speaking, this section is the core of the novel. Kim discusses the differences and similarities between the Fascists and the partisans and combines these thoughts with his own ideas about history and morality: “But then there is also the question of history. The fact is that on our side nothing is lost, not a single gesture, not a shot, though each may be the same as theirs – d’you see what I mean? – they will all serve if not to free us then to free our children, to create a world that is serene, without resentment, a world in which no one has to be bad” (140). This is the “political work” Kim believed he was doing as a partisan (141). As the ideological heart of the book, it is also the political work Calvino hoped to accomplish by writing the novel.

This aspiration is one of many things in the novel that Calvino later found embarrassing. In the preface to the 1964 edition of the book, he admits that “the urge to graft an ideological message on to the story” comes off as “naïve and forced” (12). But this is only one piece of Calvino’s broad self-criticisms. Also naïve and forced, he states, is the “exaggerated emphasis on themes of sex and violence” (12) throughout the novel. We begin to see that politics is only one node of a larger structure in Calvino’s mind.

Calvino did more than just talk about the failures of his first novel. He took measures to attempt to correct them. The omissions and alterations he makes in the later editions of the book confirm what he tells us in the preface. The changes made in the 1954 edition fall into four categories: the “elimination of the more explicit extremist slogans mouthed by . . . Mancino,” the “toning down or total excision of misogynistic sequences concerning [Cousin, another partisan],” the “suppression of violent elements in the narrative,” and the “elimination of passages that contain both sex and violence” (McLaughlin 150). The 1964 edition pares down even more of the misogynist or “antifeminist” passages about Cousin (McLaughlin 151). Calvino thought these elements were too “brutal” or “exaggerated,” even though, by his admission, they “were attributed to the thoughts of other characters, not to me” (McLaughlin 151). (Despite this conscientiousness, Calvino would be haunted by charges of misogyny and antifeminism even late in his career, as we will see in the next chapter.) Deflecting his observation to the second person, Calvino even went so far as to say that “it would be better never to have written your first novel” (*Path* 28).

At the same time, it is significant that Calvino showed the same tendencies to pare down his writing even before the novel was published. Between the typescript and the first published edition in 1947 there are certain omissions along the same lines as the later ones, including a few passages about Cousin’s hatred of women and one vivid battle scene (McLaughlin 149-50). Furthermore, while *The Path to the Spiders’ Nests* is a political novel, it is not a *conventionally* political one. In fact, it is known as much for its defiance of the neorealist model as its adherence to it (McLaughlin 19). The book avoids the “hagiographic approach encouraged by the Communist Party, which favored ‘social realism’ and ‘positive heroes’” (McLaughlin 19). The novel is filtered through the perspective of Pin, a child who is

decidedly amoral or pre-moral. There is a great deal of moral ambiguity, particularly when the commissar Kim states that the spirit of a typical partisan is essentially “the same thing” as the Fascist soldier’s spirit (*Path* 140). This stresses the fact that many people chose sides based on decisions or events that were “often fortuitous rather than the result of political consciousness” (McLaughlin 20). Here the novel clearly goes against the practice, encouraged by neorealism, of depicting the Resistance as a clear “battle of good and evil” (McLaughlin 19-20). Also apparent are fanciful touches, like the spiders’ nests with “tiny round doors that can open and shut,” which anticipate the direction Calvino’s writing was soon to take (*Path* 52).

Now we begin to see that even in the earliest stages of his career, Calvino had non-conformist tendencies that could not be contained by typical socio-political models. He continued to believe that literature could have a direct influence on politics up until 1964 (McLaughlin 162-3), but his writing began to change well before that. His next three novels, *The Cloven Viscount*, *The Baron in the Trees*, and *The Nonexistent Knight*, written in 1951, 1957 and 1959 respectively, reflect this change. Calvino grouped these novels together as a trilogy in 1960, and they share many characteristics, so I will discuss them together, as parts of a cohesive whole.

Each of these novels is held together by a single fantastical element. In *The Cloven Viscount*, Medardo, the title character, is cut in half after a duel but does not die; instead his two halves, one good, one bad, survive and continue to thrive apart from one another. In *The Baron in the Trees*, young Cosimo rebels against his parents by retreating into the treetops, where he spends the rest of his life. The protagonist of *The Nonexistent Knight* is Agilulf, an empty suit of armor who nonetheless walks, talks, and fights for just causes. These works

seem at first like a dramatic departure from *The Path to the Nest of Spiders*, but McLaughlin suggests a simple inversion instead: “if the first novel had been largely realistic but undercut by elements of fable and epic, then [The Cloven Viscount] was broadly fantastic, but with a number of allusions to contemporary reality” (39). McLaughlin brings up the Cold War and its sharply dividing influence as a factor in the creation of the novel (37). Calvino’s trilogy is grounded in other important ways. Each fantastical event in these novels is balanced by a character or event representing reality. At the end of *The Cloven Viscount*, Medardo’s two halves are sewn together, and he becomes a complete person again. In *The Baron and the Trees*, despite being tree-bound, Cosimo still looks after “the family interests” (121) and watches over his dying mother (145). In *The Nonexistent Knight*, Agilulf has an antithesis, the squire Gurduloo, a man who has no concept of self and seems to “wallow in existing” (30). These elements lend a sense of balance to the novels.

There is a corollary to this sense of balance. Calvino’s version of fantasy is not frivolous, haphazard or stream-of-consciousness; instead it manages to be highly organized and seriously motivated. *The Cloven Viscount* has a symmetrical structure (McLaughlin 36), while *The Baron in the Trees* consists of thirty chapters subdivided into three groups of ten (McLaughlin 40). Calvino’s characters are often serious and sober as well – Cosimo’s sense of responsibility I have already mentioned, but he is also a studious reader (*Baron* 88) and a logical thinker (170), among other things. Agilulf as well, while a fantastical construct, is dignified and serious, a “model soldier” (*Knight* 8). Gurduloo, however, who “exists and doesn’t realize he exists,” is portrayed in a downright silly way (28). With his nose touching the earth, he cannot tell the difference between himself and anything else, and the first time we see him, he thinks he is a duck (25). Of course, Agilulf and Cosimo possess comic

elements too. Agilulf's excessively stiff mannerisms and literalness are mocked on occasion, in particular when an impossible love scene occurs between Agilulf and the widow Priscilla: "Naked ladies are advised," declared Agilulf, "that the most sublime of sensual emotions is emotions is embracing a warrior in full armor" (101). Cosimo is also comic when he is in love, shouting nonsensical sentences in several languages to no one in particular: "Yo quiero the most wonderful puellam de toto el mundo!" (Baron 164) But it is always their serious sides that are emphasized, representing an inversion of the usual elemental functions, since Cosimo and Agilulf are creatures of air and Gurduloo and everyone else in Cosimo's world are earth-bound. Air, usually the realm of caprice and whimsy, becomes the dwelling place of serious, reasoned imagination, as well as rebellion, separation, isolation. Earth, usually solid and comprehensible, becomes primal chaos, a place where nothing can be differentiated from anything else. According to Cosimo, "anyone who wants to see the earth properly must keep himself at a necessary distance from it" (144).

These juxtapositions are not just meaningless symbols. Two of Calvino's early short stories, "The Lost Regiment" and "A General in the Library," serve to illustrate their political implications. In the former, a colonel leads a parade of troops through city streets, but on seeing the city, "so quiet and good-natured, minding its own business, the soldiers felt indiscreet somehow, intrusive, the parade suddenly seemed out of place, it struck a wrong note, people could really do without it" (*Numbers* 54). As they go farther into the city, it becomes more populated and their way is impeded by "a tangle of telephone wires, tape measures, stepladders, holes in the road, and well-endowed schoolgirls" (57). The regiment heads up some stairs in search of an exit but this proves to be a false path, too. The colonel, looking down at the city from their new vantage point, radios for help. The story ends.

The latter story is a vignette about the fictional nation of Panduria, which is under a military regime. The regime decides that all books in the library must be inspected for “opinions hostile to military prestige,” and General Fedina is sent to head the enquiry (*Numbers* 64). Of course, the officers assigned to the task slowly become persuaded by the ideas in the books, as they are provided by Signor Crispino, the amenable librarian. Slowly the books get passed down to the soldiers, and when Fedina finally gives his report to the Chief of Staff, he attacks all the ideas “considered beyond discussion by the right-minded folk of Panduria” (68). Fedina and his lieutenants are pensioned off and become library-visiting civilians.

Some time after I read these two stories for the first time, they must have started to blend together in my mind, so that eventually I recalled a composite version of the two: a military leader marches his brigade into a library, where they become lost among the stacks. Upon rereading, I was surprised to discover that my hybrid story did not exist, but I think my mistake was not entirely worthless, because these two stories are essentially the same. In one, the soldiers become lost in a physical labyrinth, while in the other, the soldiers become lost in a labyrinth of thoughts. Both tales seem somewhat improbable and miraculous, and exalt the mundane over the self-important, or, polemically speaking, the proletariat over the bourgeoisie.

Perhaps most importantly, though, they employ many images and symbols uncannily similar to those used in Calvino’s trilogy of fabulist novels. When the colonel looks out over the city one cannot help but be reminded of Cosimo’s vantage point in the trees. Also, Fedina is initially described as “squat” – close to the earth – and while Crispino is short as well, he also moves “silently on soft slippers,” as if he were hovering or floating on a cushion of air

(*Numbers* 65-66). Both stories possess that sudden, strange feeling of a weight being lifted off something, that unexpected feeling of freedom when a surprising solution presents itself. *The Baron in the Trees* ends when the dying Cosimo grabs hold of a passing hot air balloon and disappears somewhere over the ocean. In *The Nonexistent Knight*, Agilulf simply disappears, leaving behind only his empty suit of armor – really empty this time – for a fellow knight. It is as if Cosimo and Agilulf have transubstantiated into another realm. Similar things happen in the two short stories, when the military men find themselves transported from their familiar realm into a place where their thoughts and ideas do not function the way they expect them to.

All these aspects might be seen as reflections or emanations of a principle Calvino called “lightness.” In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, he proposes that there are “two opposite tendencies” in literature: one that “tries to give language the weight, density, and concreteness of things, bodies, and sensations” and one that “tries to make language into a weightless element that hovers above things like a cloud or better, perhaps, the finest dust or, better still, a field of magnetic impulses” (15). This is “lightness” as he defines it. He goes on to delineate three ways in which “lightness” manifests itself: one, it is manifested as “a lightening of language whereby meaning is conveyed through a verbal texture that seems weightless, until the meaning itself takes on the same rarefied consistency” (16). Two, it can appear as a “narration or train of thought in which subtle and imperceptible elements are at work, or any kind of description that involves a high degree of abstraction” (17). Three, there is a “visual image of lightness that acquires emblematic value” (17). Most of the examples I have cited fall into this last category, but it is not difficult to find examples of all three in Calvino’s works. Cosimo’s memorial plaque, which has the feel of an Emily Dickinson

poem, is a good demonstration of the first type of “lightness”: “Lived in trees – Always loved earth – Went into sky” (*Baron* 216). A manifestation of the second variety can be found in a description of the city folk in “The Lost Regiment”: “they looked on with the air of people who would like to be interested and maybe even take pleasure in the deployment of so much energy, but are troubled by a feeling they don’t really understand, a vague sense of alarm” (56). Passages like these are everywhere in Calvino’s work.

These examples provide a pretty good idea of how “lightness” informed Calvino’s aesthetics. But it is still incomplete. Each aspect of “lightness,” taken individually, makes sense, but as a whole it does not seem to cohere as a single concept. Is “lightness” really an aesthetic model?

Yes and no. “Lightness” is an aesthetic and ethical model, and it is the ethics that elucidates the aesthetics and fills in the gaps left by it. Calvino stresses that it is a “lightness of thoughtfulness” and not frivolity he wishes to embrace (*Memos* 10). Cosimo, for instance, initially goes up into the trees because he does not want to eat snails for dinner (*Baron* 12). An aesthetic decision, it at first seems. But we soon realize that it is much more than that, that Cosimo’s rebellion is part of the way he looks at the world and not merely a whim. The narrator of the story, Cosimo’s brother, confirms that Cosimo’s stubbornness “hid something much deeper” (5). Cosimo’s desire to be distant from the earth in order to keep it in proper perspective is equivalent to Calvino’s desire for literature to be distant from politics. It is significant that this statement of desire appears well before Calvino publicly abandoned the idea that literature could do important political work.

Equally significant is the fact that Calvino complicates his preference for “lightness” with a respect for weight. He quickly lets us know, in the beginning of *Six Memos*, that he

“does not . . . consider the virtues of weight any less compelling,” that he has simply “more to say” about lightness (3). Calvino’s respect for weight leads him to put in certain story elements, like Gurduloo in *The Nonexistent Knight*, that balance his narratives structurally as well as conceptually. It can also account for the fates of different characters – Agilulf, for instance, runs out of will power, essentially committing suicide, because he is too extreme a version of lightness, unable to integrate into himself the earthy element represented by Gurduloo. Cosimo, however, retains a sense of responsibility for his family and his town, and lives a long and fulfilling life. Even in *The Path to the Spiders’ Nests* “lightness” is at work, in the character of Kim the commissar. Like Cosimo and Agilulf, he is a logical thinker who breaks down a problem “into its component parts; ‘a, b, c’” (*Path* 133), but he is also aware of “a dark area where collective motives become individual motives, forming monstrous deviations and unexpected combinations” (133). Because he is able to contain both the thoughtful lightness and the darker weightiness, Kim is the only complete character in the novel, which is otherwise filled with caricatures, as Calvino himself admitted (*Path* 13-14).

Kim is an idealistic vision, however, and it seems that Calvino himself had considerably more difficulty coming to terms with his “darker” sensibilities. This struggle is sharply reflected in Calvino’s later works, as we shall see.

IV. *If on a winter's night a traveler* and *Mr. Palomar*:

Subversions of Autonomy and Beauty

If on a winter's night a traveler contains valuable insights into Calvino's views about aesthetic autonomy. It has been called, among other things, a work of "metafiction," a "hypernovel" (McLaughlin 116), and a "paracritical" text (de Lauretis 132). But what does this mean? Essentially, it is a book that comments on both itself and the act of writing in general. This self-reflexiveness might be seen as an embrace of autonomy and a rejection of social and political drives. But Calvino does not use this format to create distance or evoke a transcendent state; instead he attempts to make some statements about literature and its relationship to transcendence, and the diverse effects of that relationship on authors, readers, and critics.

Indeed, the book is heavy with the presences of both readers and authors. Chapter eight is subtitled "From the diary of Silas Flannery," who, we learn, is an Irish author of detective novels. Silas is Calvino's most apparent alter ego in the book: at the end of chapter eight Silas plans to write a novel in which "the protagonist [is] a Reader who is continually interrupted" (197). This is, of course, a description of *If on a winter's night* itself. Silas also suffers from writer's block, calling attention to Calvino's admission in chapter one that he -- Calvino, that is -- "hadn't published for several years" (4).

It is clear from these parallels that Silas's attitudes about autonomy are important in order to grasp fully Calvino's critical position. Silas, in fact, reacts unfavorably to any and every external reading -- indeed, any outside force at all -- that has an impact on his writing. He meets a group of boys who believe that "inhabitants of other planets want to use him for communication" (183). He fears that "these young people will be disappointed," and this

causes him to “feel a certain sorrow” (184). He encounters a woman named Lotaria who analyzes his works using a computer. Silas bemoans this, too: “The idea that Lotaria reads my books in this way creates some problems for me. Now, every time I write a word, I see it spun around by the electronic brain” (188). He sums up the demands on him in one passage:

Strange people circulate in this valley; literary agents awaiting my new novel, for which they have already collected advances from publishers all over the world; advertising agents who want my characters to wear certain articles of clothing and drink certain fruit juices; electronic technicians who insist on finishing my unfinished novels with a computer. I try to go out as little as possible; I avoid the village; if I want to take a walk, I choose the mountain trails. (183)

The cumulative effect of the outside world on Silas is paralysis; he cannot write. The only thing that heartens him is the image of a woman reading, whom he sees through his spyglass. This is Ludmilla, the “good” sister of Lotaria and the Other Reader whose presence complements that of the male Reader, but to Silas she is “the operation of reading turned into a natural process” (169). Because their communication is one-way, she imposes no particular reading on his books. She is passive and therefore allows Silas to keep his precious distance, his cherished autonomy.

But isn’t Calvino relinquishing his distance by putting a character like himself in his novel? Perhaps, but what Calvino has said elsewhere confirms that he is, at least in part, in agreement with his alter ego. To return an idea I discussed in the last chapter, it is “lightness” that compels and assists his writing here, and he discusses how the former, “weighty” element hindered him in the early stages of his career: “I became aware that between the facts of life

that should have been my raw materials and the quick light touch I wanted for my writing, there was a gulf that cost me increasing effort to cross” (*Memos* 4). He invokes the image of Perseus, the Gorgon-slayer, who “supports himself on the very lightest of things” (4). He then describes how to overcome weight: “Whenever humanity seems condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly like Perseus into a different space. I don’t mean escaping into dreams or the irrational. . . . The images of lightness I seek should not fade away like dreams dissolved by the realities of present or future” (7). What Calvino is describing is a kind of personal ritual to preserve his creative process. He finds solace in the permanence of images undimmed by reality – that is, the idea of autonomy brings him comfort. This reveals an important distinction: even if aesthetic autonomy is invalid from a critical standpoint, it may still be viable, even vital, from a writer’s perspective, or for anyone else deeply involved with or indebted to creative processes. This is exactly why Silas Flannery, an extreme version of Calvino, feels the need to retreat from the world.

This justification for autonomy may be somewhat recursive, because it affirms Calvino’s method of writing but says nothing about the value of his output. One possible source of value for *If on a winter’s night* is that it comments on its own autonomy, instead of simply attempting to be an autonomous text. Since the possibility of transcendence is a debatable and relevant issue both inside and outside of art, the novel loses its recursiveness and becomes a relevant part of the discourse. This stance is supported by the ways in which Calvino complicates his version of autonomy from the simpler version I have given above.

I have mentioned how Calvino tempers “lightness” with a respect for weight, but there is even a third element at work here. In *If on a winter’s night*, Ermes Marana is the foil that complicates Silas Flannery’s ineffectual autonomy. Ermes is a translator whose mission is to

permeate the world with apocrypha and who has already manufactured countless imitation Flannery books. He is presented in the novel as a nemesis, enemy of both Author and Reader, who makes “whatever he touches, if it isn’t false already, become . . . false” (*If* 152). For Ermes, “artifice,” not art, is truth; Wiley Feinstein calls him “the pessimistic individual who has given up all illusions about a positive side to literature” (Feinstein 149). This portrayal makes him appear nothing like Calvino at first glance. But when one considers the translator’s namesake, the trickster god Hermes, we discover that Ermes personifies another one of Calvino’s favored Greek mythological figures. In his essay on “quickness” (which immediately follows the treatise on “lightness”) Calvino writes:

all of the subjects I have dealt with [in this essay], and perhaps those from [the last one], might indeed be united in that they are all under the sign of an Olympian god whom I particularly honor: Hermes-Mercury, god of communication and mediation . . . inventor of writing . . . with his winged feet, light and airborne, astute, agile, adaptable, free and easy. (*Memos* 51-52)

While Calvino’s physical description of Hermes is similar to that of Perseus, in practice his function is quite different, with respect to autonomy. While “lightness” might be characterized as a search for autonomy, “quickness” is the principle that defeats it, that flees from the transcendent moment as soon as it becomes possible.

This balance of forces manifests itself in *If on a winter’s night* when Calvino casts doubt on his own ideas. Teresa de Lauretis notes that Ludmilla, the woman in Silas Flannery’s spyglass who “positively refuses to have anything to do with writing,” is a manifestation of an impulse to exclude women from the creative act (de Lauretis 141). But, strangely enough, Calvino’s characters speak the same sentiment at points. Ludmilla’s sister

Lotaria is one of these characters. She is the woman who processes Silas Flannery's books via computer, and she represents a kind of critical voice in the novel. She first appears in chapter four at an academic "seminar on the feminist revolution" (73) and resurfaces at points to challenge the viewpoints of the author and reader figures in the novel. In chapter eight Lotaria describes her sister's philosophy as "a passive way of reading, escapist and regressive" (185). This is an indication that, in some sense, de Lauretis's reading is already contained in Calvino's writing. But a large part of Lauretis's issue with the novel is the way Lotaria is portrayed – she is "masculine," "castrating" and generally "the negative image of Woman" (de Lauretis 138-139). Even the introductory physical description of her is rather unflattering: "a girl . . . with a long neck and a bird's face, a steady, bespectacled gaze, a great clump of curly hair" and so on (73). Compare this to the first description of Ludmilla, the "passive" sister: "huge, swift eyes, complexion of good tone and pigment, a richly waved haze of hair" (29).

Does this relatively negative portrayal of Lotaria make her irredeemable, or does it merely establish her status as an antagonist? We have already seen that Calvino empathizes, even identifies with his antagonists, and the insults lobbed at Lotaria in the book are not any worse than those hurled at Ermes Marana, who speaks for Calvino as much as Silas Flannery does. Therefore it makes sense that Lotaria also speaks for Calvino.

Lotaria might best be described as the personification of Calvino's self-doubt. When the love story between the Reader and Ludmilla the Other Reader is consummated, Calvino compares the act of sex to "reading another human being" – a comparison that ostensibly puts man and woman on equal footing and allows the author to draw lofty parallels between love and literature (155). But as de Lauretis observes, when a love scene between the Reader and

Lotaria occurs, it is “clearly a matter of sex – crude, violent and conventionally ‘erotic’ ” (de Lauretis 140). This casts a pall of suspicion over the lofty aspirations of the previous love scene. At the same time Lotaria challenges the interpretation of sex as “just sex” as she throws herself at the stunned Reader: “The body signifies! Communicates! Shouts! Protests! Subverts!” (219) Lotaria also wears a series of disguises that the Reader attempts to disassemble, so that the confusion of multiple meanings coincides with a confusion of multiple identities:

With a frantic hand you unbutton the white smock of Sheila the programmer and you discover the police uniform of Alfonsina; you rip off Alfonsina’s gold buttons away and you find Corinna’s anorak; you pull the zipper of Corinna and you see the chevrons of Ingrid. . . . (218)

De Lauretis reads this scene in its entirety as evidence that Calvino is “unaware that there are women readers . . . who simply have no interest in men or men’s desire” and attributes this to either “narcissism,” “homophobia,” or “a rather shocking cultural naiveté” (de Lauretis 139). But the surreal nature of the scenario tells us without a doubt that it represents a kind of fantasy world. Calvino recognizes a male fantasy when he sees it, and points this out while cleverly shifting blame for the situation to the Reader:

Reader, what are you doing? Aren’t you going to resist? Aren’t you going to escape? Ah, you are participating Ah, you fling yourself into it, too You’re the absolute protagonist of this book, very well; but do you believe that gives you the right to have carnal relations with all the female characters? (219)

While the narrator seems to be chastising the Reader, the “too” betrays something else. Someone else is wrapped up in this scenario . . . Is it Lotaria? Or is Calvino referring to himself? In a way, the questions asked of the Reader all incriminate the author. This is clearly Calvino’s intent – it is no accident. If this scene comes off as ridiculous, it is self-consciously so. It purposely complicates any external reading of the text, because the text is already reading itself in multiple ways.

Ludmilla the Other Reader also steps out of her formulaic role to become a more complicated presence. According to Lotaria, Ludmilla “insists it’s better not to know authors personally” (185-86), but she decides to meet Silas Flannery anyway, seemingly against principle. What happens next is significant. Silas is dismayed by Ludmilla’s attitude toward him; she sees him as an “impersonalized graphic energy, ready to shift from the unexpressed into writing an imaginary world that exists independently” of him (190). This leads Silas to attempt to personalize their relationship, to dismantle the boundaries between reader and author: “‘Communication can be established at various levels,’ I start explaining; I approach her with movements surely a bit hasty, but the visual and tactile images whirling in my mind urge me to eliminate all separation and all delay” (191). Ludmilla refuses his advances on the grounds that “it would have no relevance to the problem we were discussing” (191). But even before this, Silas’s fantasy falls apart. In fact, he is embarrassed while making the advances, “uttering sentences whose complete foolishness [he] recognize[s]” (191). Calvino, like Silas, is aware of the possible foolishness of his own attitudes about gender, and demonstrates this awareness throughout the novel. In this way, by containing many possible readings, Calvino’s novel obscures a definitive reading of itself, just as *Ermes* obscures definitive authors. De Lauretis, even as she criticizes the author’s attitudes, perhaps puts it best:

Calvino's writing "does not simply inscribe received popular wisdom, but actually engages contemporary theories of signification" (de Lauretis 141).

Up until now, I have been refuting or diverting the claims de Lauretis makes about Calvino, but in a sense, all the criticisms she makes are absolutely correct. While the novel certainly contains some of Calvino's cleverest, wittiest writing, it is also, in a sense, his "ugliest" work. Even setting aside for a moment the dubious attitudes toward gender that lie dormant in the work, there is an ugliness that runs deeper than that. Gone are the transcendent reveries that appear in his earlier work; the characters, particularly Silas, struggle with issues of autonomy that they never quite escape; and the whole book, while it carefully eschews realism, seems mired in reality.

There are, however, moments when the book seems to rise above this mire. At certain points revelations or transformations occur, as if the text were struggling to bend toward something more redeeming, something universal. Many of the interrupted stories within the novel contain such a revelation. "I sensed at once that in the perfect order of the universe a breach had opened, an irreparable rent" (67). "Now it seems to me that everything that surrounds me is a part of me, that I have managed to become the whole, finally . . ." (168) But these are the precise moments when the stories are interrupted, almost as if Calvino is embarrassed by what he has written. Or perhaps he feels that it is only the revelations themselves that are important and that what comes after is immaterial. Either way, these transformational instants are always framed by sections of the meta-novel, the Reader's story. Because these moments are contained within a larger structure, the sense of transformation that they invoke seems false; Calvino does not allow them to exist "outside" the frame of the text, and thus, they lose their transcendent qualities.

The frame story of the novel, the Reader's tale, also ends on a strange note. At the end of his journeys, the Reader finds himself, appropriately enough, in a library, where he converses with other readers. When he expresses his frustration at being unable to finish any of the stories he has started to read, one of these readers accosts him:

Do you believe that every story must have a beginning and an end? In ancient times a story could end only in two ways: having passed all the tests, the hero and the heroine married, or else they died. The ultimate meaning to which all stories refer has two faces: the continuity of life, the inevitability of death.

(259)

This conception of literature seems bleak and totalitarian. All stories must have one of two meanings, which are themselves only faces of one meaning. Therefore, why have beginnings or endings, which serve only to pin down stories like dead butterflies? It appears as though Calvino has found a way to step outside and transcend this dreary stasis. By not finishing his stories, he allows them to escape the totality of meaning described here.

Unfortunately, the Reader's story, unlike the others in the book, must end. The narrator addresses him: "You stop for a moment to reflect on these words. Then, in a flash, you decide you want to marry Ludmilla" (259). And he does. In a flash of wit, with a knowing smile, Calvino manages to pen a conclusion to this convoluted tale. But his chosen route seems facile and therefore unsatisfying. Instead of opening up into new spaces, his novel ends with an invocation of a common literary trope, a cliché. After placing such importance on stories without endings, he forfeits this position by giving this story an ending. He does so with a certain amount of irony and deftness, but this is a small consolation. The quick and light movements of Calvino's hand in the act of writing disguise the fact that he

was not sure he could live up to his own expectations. A palpable fear hides behind the writing in *If on a winter's night a traveler*. But what, exactly, is Calvino afraid of? Is he afraid of someone like de Lauretis finally understanding him, reading him all too well? Or is he afraid of being misconstrued?

Calvino's fears of being misunderstood are certainly reflected in *Mr. Palomar*. We know precious little about Palomar, but we can piece together a picture from clues scattered throughout the book. He is male; he broods on "the difficulty of speaking to the young" and therefore is not young himself (106). Calvino manages to establish this fact without revealing Palomar's exact age or generation. Mr. Palomar is a bit tired of life – toward the end of the book he decides that "he will act as if he were dead, to see how the world gets along without him" – but this could just as easily be a condition of middle age as of old age (121). All that can be said is that he is "not young."

In a similar fashion, Palomar's occupation is alluded to but not specified. He is "lucky" because "he can say he is working in places and attitudes that would suggest complete repose; or, rather, he suffers this handicap: he feels obligated never to stop working, even when lying under the trees on an August morning" (22). This suggests the attitude of a writer or artist, or at least some kind of thinker. In other words, like Silas Flannery, Palomar the character invites comparisons to Calvino the author. At the same time, Mr. Palomar has an anonymous or generic quality akin to that of the Reader, Calvino's Everyman. Calvino wants us to identify with Palomar (and by proxy with himself), but the author also places us at a careful or ironical distance from the character.

This is in part because Palomar is distanced from *himself*. Calvino called *Mr. Palomar* a series of "exercises in description" or observation (*Memos* 75). It is helpful to

recall that Palomar is also the name of a famous telescope, since in each section of the book Mr. Palomar attempts to perceive something external, something outside himself. This perception is ruined or complicated when Palomar comes to realize that he is himself part of the situation he is trying to observe so impartially. In "The Cheese Museum," Palomar, while shopping, is confronted by a dizzying array of fancy cheeses. For him, the shop becomes "a dictionary; the language is the system of cheeses as a whole" (74). He desires "exhaustive, complete knowledge" of this system and hopes to discover "an absolute choice, the identification of the cheese that is his alone" (72). In the midst of this reverie he reaches the front of the line, and an employee calls to him: "Monsieur! Hoo there! Monsieur!" (74) Palomar panics and ends up ordering the most "obvious" and "banal" cheeses, despite the urge to diversify his knowledge (75). This is just one example of a changing environment upsetting the order of Palomar's mind.

Awareness of his changing surroundings causes Mr. Palomar to continually reevaluate his opinions. His first observational exercise, called "Reading a wave," is to look at the sea and distinguish "one individual wave" from the rest (3). He starts with simple visual observation but soon decides that he "cannot observe a wave without bearing in mind the complex features that concur in shaping it" (4). He then turns his attention to two waves coming into contact with one another and finds that in order to "understand the composition of a wave" he must also consider these "opposing thrusts" (5). Seen from different directions, the overlapping of several waves seems "broken down into sections that rise and vanish" (6). Finally, observing the "reflux of every wave . . . that hinders the oncoming waves" Palomar concludes that "the true movement is the one that begins from the shore and goes out to sea" (7). But instead of being satisfied with making the waves travel backward in his mind, he

leaves “even more unsure about everything” (8). It seems that one of Mr. Palomar’s fundamental qualities is a constant skepticism about his own observations. Or, alternately, we can say that he is in a perpetual state of self-acknowledged error.

Palomar’s behavior in “The Naked Bosom” is no different. This chapter features Mr. Palomar walking “walking along a lonely beach,” observing a “young woman . . . lying on the sand taking the sun, her bosom bared” (9). Since Mr. Palomar’s attitude undergoes a series of revisions and refinements as he attempts to find a proper reaction to this “pleasing” sight, it is a story concerned with errors about beauty (11). Before I progress too far into this story, however, I would like to take a small but significant detour. Another writer I have mentioned also discusses errors about beauty in great depth. Elaine Scarry points to events in Homer’s *Odyssey* as examples of how errors about beauty occur. Surprisingly, she views these errors as positive things. When Odysseus is washed up on a beach in Phaeacia and meets Nausicaa, he is immediately struck by her beauty and commits one such error:

I have never laid eyes on anyone like you,
neither man nor woman . . .
I look at you and a sense of wonder takes me. Wait,
once I saw the like--in Delos, beside Apollo's altar--
the young slip of a palm tree springing into the light. (6.175-9)

The error in this case, according to Scarry, happens because Odysseus at first believes that Nausicaa’s beauty has no precedent, when in fact he finds such a precedent seconds later. On the one hand, Scarry attributes this to the way beauty “fills the mind and breaks all frames” (23). She uses this error to identify the three qualities of beauty that are central to her argument: it is “sacred,” “unprecedented” and “life-saving” (23-24). On the other hand, she

is forced to acknowledge that Odysseus's speech – his "hymn to beauty" – was not spontaneously inspired by beauty alone (26). Odysseus is in fact quite strategic when he wonders which action will result in the best possible response from Nausicaa. His calculated thought process is reflected in a moment's paralysis before he takes action:

Should he fling his arms around her knees, the young beauty,
plead for help, or stand back, plead with a winning word,
beg her to lead him to the town and lend him clothing? (6.156-8)

Scarry insists that this aspect of his character, "endearing, sly and suave," does not detract from the meaning of the speech (6.162). She suggests a reversal of roles: just as Odysseus's "hymn to beauty" can be seen as an element subordinate to the larger frame of his calculation for reentering the human community, so the narrative of calculation can be seen as subordinate to the hymn of beauty" (27). Odysseus's reaction, she contends, "literalizes" the everyday reaction to beauty that we have by emphasizing the care we must take when we encounter it; otherwise we "become cut off from it" and "feel its removal as a retraction of life" (27-28).

Scarry emphasizes Odysseus's words rather than the deliberation that bore them into being; in other words, she emphasizes action over thought. But what about Calvino's Homeric retelling? For this is exactly what "The Naked Bosom" now appears to be: like Odysseus, Palomar stumbles upon a great beauty and becomes caught up in the struggle to find the best way to pay homage to it. And as in the *Odyssey*, Palomar is a man, his object of observation, a woman, and a beach, the location of their meeting. But the focus of "The Naked Bosom" is not action or speech; Palomar never utters a word to the girl during his

passage along the shore. Instead, it is an extrapolation of what takes up three lines in Homer's original, and what Scarry finds inconsequential: that moment of uncertainty.

Palomar, when he first notices the young woman sunbathing, averts his eyes as he passes by. After he has done this, however, he reconsiders his action. He realizes that "not looking presupposes . . . thinking of that nakedness" and decides that this is "an indiscreet and reactionary attitude" (10). He walks past again, this time regarding the woman and the scenery around her with "impartial uniformity" (10). Already Palomar is asking a version of Odysseus's question: should he look at or look away? But he is also dissatisfied with his second answer to the question. To him it means "flattening the human person to the level of things, considering it an object" (10). So, naturally, he walks by again, this time allowing himself a "darting glance" at the woman's bosom as a gesture of appreciation and acknowledgement (11). But even this is not enough, he decides. His glance could be construed to reflect an "attitude of superiority" or an "underestimation" of the woman's beauty (11). The fourth and final time he walks by, he resolves to let his eyes "linger on the breast with special consideration" (11).

This series of reactions seems to demonstrate another quality of beauty identified by Scarry: it "incites deliberation" (Scarry 28). The act of perceiving beauty, Scarry says, has a tendency to encourage "self-correction and self-adjustment" (29). Furthermore, this is a "key element" of beauty because the initial distorted reaction to a beautiful thing leaves such a strong imprint (29). Beauty instantly "fills the perceiver with a sense of conviction about that beauty, a wordless certainty" (29).

But the errors about beauty Palomar makes are not the ones Scarry identifies. As I have noted, the focus of "The Naked Bosom" is *uncertainty*. Palomar is not immediately

convinced of anything; instead his whole train of thought seems an attempt to recover the sense of conviction that Scarry takes for granted. On Palomar's final journey across the beach, he "does an about-face" and walks with "firm steps," and it seems for a moment that he has succeeded in reconstructing this attitude (Palomar 11). But when he reaches this point he is not allowed to act upon his newfound conviction; as he approaches, the woman gets up and covers herself, "shrugging in irritation, as if she were avoiding the tiresome insistence of a satyr" (12). This is an exact inversion of the Odyssean version of events; Odysseus, with his ulterior motives and careful mannerisms, succeeds in endearing himself to Nausicaa, while Palomar, with good intentions but essentially guileless, succeeds only in driving the young beauty away. In this light Palomar's situation seems terribly unfair; with one broad stroke Calvino manages to criticize both the Odyssean approach to perceiving beauty, which rewards cunning and punishes frankness, and a more contemporary viewpoint, which seems to offer no place at all for the admiration of beauty.

The transformational aspect of beauty touted by Scarry is also absent in Calvino's tale. Scarry believes that observers of beauty are themselves beautified by their proximity. And indeed, Homer's Odysseus, after meeting Nausicaa, is given a bath and a flask of oil; Athena herself lavishes "splendor over his head and shoulders" and he emerges from the water "glistening in his glory, breathtaking" (6.260-262). Scarry uses this to demonstrate how those who encounter something beautiful are inspired to be beautiful themselves, or else create something beautiful. And this applies to literature as well: when Dante pines for Beatrice in poetry, "it is as though he has bathed on the Phaeacian shore" (Scarry 77).

Mr. Palomar, however, undergoes no such change. He is left more or less the same as before, although he has attempted transformation. With each successive walk on the beach,

he travels back in time, trying to reach that moment of pure expression that Odysseus finds when he encounters Nausicaa. Finally, Mr. Palomar, on the last iteration of his passage, seems to arrive on the Phaeacian shore, like Dante. He sees the world as if for the first time, expressing his gratitude for “the sun and the sky, for the bent pines and the dune and the beach and the rocks and the clouds and the seaweed, for the cosmos that rotates around those haloed cusps” (11-12). For a moment, the woman’s bosom is the center of the universe, and beauty appears to have all those qualities Scarry ascribes to it – sacred, unprecedented, life-saving. But the young woman has not traveled back in time with him, and she dispels the illusion of time travel with her departure. In the modern world, the world Palomar lives in, beauty unfortunately has none of these qualities.

But can beauty regain these qualities? Scarry would like us to think so. She feels that these qualities have merely been obscured by the recent political climate, which allows beauty to be talked about “only in whispers” (Scarry 57). Palomar seems to agree with her when he thinks bitterly to himself, “The dead weight of an intolerant tradition prevents anyone’s understanding the most enlightened intentions” (12). Palomar’s attitude, of course, as we have seen, hearkens back to an older tradition, or, idealistically speaking, a time before tradition existed. Is Calvino, like Scarry, merely mourning the current state of affairs? Not necessarily. First we must decide: this is Palomar’s hymn to beauty, but is it Calvino’s? Calvino approaches the situation with a certain amount of irony and humor, and at the story’s final twist, the reader is more likely to laugh than to feel let down. Palomar is the butt of this joke, and Calvino would not mock something he utterly believed in. And undeniably, Calvino’s story challenges many of Scarry’s preconceptions of beauty simply by retelling the meeting of Odysseus and Nausicaa in a modern setting. Scarry, for instance, lends no

credence to the idea that noticing beauty “brings harm to the thing noticed” (64). But Palomar’s observation of the woman causes harm in two ways: first, from Palomar’s perspective, it causes the object of beauty to exit his field of vision; and second, from the woman’s point of view, Palomar’s strange behavior is unsettling and irritating. Calvino’s ideas and Scarry’s beliefs are sharply divergent here.

Calvino’s feelings about beauty, when separated from Palomar’s, become more ambivalent and harder to classify. Palomar, as he appears in this story, is perhaps another manifestation of the “shocking cultural naiveté” that de Lauretis identified in *If on a winter’s night a traveler*. His whole attitude, “enlightened” though it attempts to be, is dependent on the woman remaining stationary, an object, and when she moves he is confounded. On the one hand, Calvino is certainly aware of this. While Palomar may be a stand-in for a piece of Calvino, he is not the whole. On the other hand, we cannot completely ignore the rhapsodic moment when beauty becomes the center of Palomar’s universe. He achieves a transitory innocence that attracts us even if it is naïve. Neither perspective tells the whole story. Calvino does not present a definitive answer because he rejects easy answers; he is not able to forsake beauty altogether, nor is he able to simply brush its problematic aspects aside.

Other critics, however, have accused Calvino of trying to avoid addressing difficult problems in his work. *If on a winter’s night a traveler* and *Mr. Palomar*, written toward the end of Calvino’s life, are complicated, problematic novels that give glimpses of the deeply conflicted presence that generated them. *Invisible Cities* is something different, however, and the criticisms applied to that book may serve to reveal a possible explanation for these internal conflicts.

V. Defending *Invisible Cities*:

Inadequacies of Traditional Analysis and Possible Remedies

Alessia Ricciardi writes that in *Invisible Cities*, Calvino focuses “narrowly . . . on the stylistic dimensions of the work of art” and foregoes “more ethically responsible engagement with social realities” (Ricciardi 1062-63). While Ricciardi makes some excellent points in support of this view, her analysis also unintentionally illuminates some of the ways traditional criticism falls apart when applied to an author like Calvino. When I say “traditional” I mean both the practical methods that have been taught and used almost universally in critical writing for centuries, like close reading and the use of present tense, and those tendencies which are more prevalent in recent years, like imposing value judgments on a work based on how well it addresses its own cultural context. These are exactly the kind of criticisms that Ricciardi applies to *Invisible Cities*; she takes issue with what she sees as the internal, self-reflexive dimension of the work, how “what begins as a political argument” is sublimated “into a philosophical and literary diversion” which deflects “the question of the human cost involved in the process of culture” (1066). She zooms in on a chapter about the city of Tamara, where “your gaze scans the streets as if they were written pages” (*Cities* 14), and sees this as evidence that “for Calvino the depiction of the world ultimately describes the process of writing itself” (Ricciardi 1072).

This reading of *Invisible Cities* is shortsighted in a few ways. First of all, to hear Calvino tell it, the book *does* address social realities; in particular, it addresses the problems of urban living in modern Italy. The cities Calvino describes are, of course, not real, and so the reality of the cities in Italy is never explicitly discussed. But the themes and issues

remain, and the social reality is clearly implied, as when Marco Polo is forced to acknowledge Venice as the impetus, the origin, for all his tales of other cities:

“Sire, now I have told you about all the cities I know.”

“There is still one of which you never speak.”

Marco Polo bowed his head.

“Venice,” the Khan said.

Marco smiled. “What else do you believe I have been talking to you about?”

The emperor did not turn a hair. “And yet I have never heard you mention that name.”

And Polo said: “Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice.” (*Cities* 86)

Venice is emblematic for all of Italy and the whole world in this book. Martin McLaughlin notes that it has also been argued that “in every city described resides the San Remo of Calvino’s youth” (106). Calvino himself acknowledges his debt to real cities in his descriptions of imaginary ones:

I think that I have written something that resembles a final, lengthy love poem to the city, just at the time when it is becoming more and more difficult to live in them as cities. Perhaps we are nearing a moment of crisis in urban living, and *Invisible Cities* is a dream which arises out of the heart of uninhabitable cities. . . . My book opens and closes with images of happy cities which continually emerge and disappear, hidden inside unhappy cities. (cited by McLaughlin 108)

In other words, Calvino's dreams of cities spring directly from real cities, though the real cities are absent from the book. In fact, it is the absence of reality that implies the existence of a moral, human message. If Calvino had chosen to include real cities alongside his imaginary ones, no doubt he would be criticized for putting them side by side, for conflating them, for drawing no boundary between the real and the imaginary. He could have focused only on real cities, but it seems ridiculous (not to mention demoralizing) to try to suppress something as fundamental and irrepressible as the human imagination. No, it is the absence of real cities that reminds us of reality, and brings into the light both our real-life fears and our dreams, and the distance between the two. I can only think of this as a humanizing influence, not one of detachment.

Perhaps I am being a bit unfair to Ricciardi, whose characterizations of Calvino as a detached author extend beyond overlooked thematic content. It is true that, at times, Calvino seems to privilege style or form over content, a crime in the eyes of those who wish literature to be first and foremost an instrument of virtue. Ricciardi points out an instance, when Calvino is describing Kublai Khan's growing empire, of a beautiful image seemingly invoked for its own sake: "Caravans of slaves shifting mountains of serpentine marble across the continent" (*Cities* 73). She notes that Calvino conjures up no sense of remorse, no context at all for the concept of slavery. It is "merely one more painterly detail in a decorative landscape to be looked at with serene detachment" (Ricciardi 1067).

It is here that one of the weaknesses in traditional literary criticism comes into the foreground – an underestimation of the visual itself. Ricciardi chooses two words that may be more apt than she realizes: "painterly" and "landscape." Indeed, Calvino conjures up visual images with great effect throughout his career. In the *Six Memos* he devotes an entire lecture

to the concept of “visibility.” McLaughlin notes that, with a few exceptions, “the whole . . . of Calvino’s oeuvre, and in particular *Palomar*, privileges above all other [senses] the sense of sight” (161). In some way, then, a cruel and beautiful landscape, like the one he creates describing the caravans, begs to be interpreted not as a literary critic might traditionally interpret it but as a critic of visual art might view it. In other words, let us look at it not as a sentence or a collection of words, but as an image or a collision of images.

How can an image instill in us a sense of moral justice? How can a wordless picture humanize an abstraction? In Ricciardi’s purely literary estimation, a visual image is not, on its own, capable of these things. But even a cursory search through cultural memory proves otherwise; almost immediately I think of Picasso’s *Guernica*. But a work so baldly and unabashedly political can hardly be compared with the careful evasiveness of Calvino’s writing. More useful would be a visual counterpart for Calvino who shares some of the same stylistic tendencies towards lightness, quickness, and clarity – Johannes Vermeer.

Lawrence Weschler talks about Vermeer in terms of “themes that are saturatingly present but only as *felt absence* -- themes that are being held at bay, but conspicuously so” (Weschler 59). This is directly analogous to how the themes are presented in *Invisible Cities* – urban reality is conspicuously absent from the book, but it is implied so strongly that its absence speaks even louder than a conspicuously obvious theme might. In Vermeer’s paintings, this absence takes the form of war and destruction that seem to hide right behind the canvas:

When soldiers visit young girls in Vermeer's paintings, where does one think they have been off soldiering -- and why, one wonders, does the country need all those civic guards? When pregnant young women are standing still, bathed in the window light, intently reading their letters, where is one invited to imagine the letters are coming from? (Weschler 59)

The figure of the soldier, usually a figure of war, becomes something else in Vermeer when the soldier talks to the young girl. The soldier steps out of his traditional role, out of his type, to become a human being. This is similar to how Calvino paints his caravan of slaves: slavery, usually a symbol of "oppression," becomes something else. We see the image as if through the eyes of the Khan, and for a moment we think we understand both the emperor and his subjects. Weschler notes that "in virtually every . . . one of his paintings Vermeer deploys the conventional iconography precisely so as to upend it" (62). In *Invisible Cities*, instead of employing slavery as a code word for "oppression," engendering a kind of reaction against it in us that is almost automatic, Calvino uses it in an imagistic way that is fresh and new, and allows us to evaluate it without conventional preconceptions. It creates an understanding of how even slavery may generate a beautiful image. It demonstrates that the typical perspective toward the enslaver is no different from the enslaver's perspective towards his slaves: dehumanizing. If this is so, then Calvino's words and images encourage anything but detachment.

I have discussed the details Ricciardi overlooks when analyzing Calvino's words, but it may be that Calvino himself, not a critic like Ricciardi, is his own worst enemy. Ricciardi reveals that, very early in his career, Calvino discussed how he felt about writing:



Figure I. Johannes Vermeer, *Officer and a Laughing Girl*. (1658)

The dangers to myself: to become a very skilled writer, yet one ever more individualistic and analytical, and to feel dying away little by little, along with the enthusiasm writers and the people always share in revolutionary moments, the sharpness of style and historical necessity of a new language. (cited by Ricciardi 1072)

According to Ricciardi, Calvino turned into exactly what he feared. In this way, she pits the younger Calvino against the mature Calvino, and by bringing out this palpable change, undermines the possibility of persistent or transcendent qualities that might exist in his literature.

But even the way we write essays says something about the permanent qualities we see in art. We write in present tense, as if the dead authors we reference were still alive and speaking to us through the book that is here, now. We write as if they had never died, and furthermore, as if they had never been born, as if the book in front of us had always been here, as if the text were eternal. This disparity (between what we say and how we say it) is especially apparent when the author has, as Calvino has, changed direction once (or many times) in his career. Not only has the author never been born or died, on some level we are not allowed to acknowledge that he ever grew up, that he matured, that he changed over time. When an author creates multiple texts, multiple manifestations of himself, and those manifestations seemingly contradict each other, we must divide the author's lifetime into periods, essentially creating a different author for each period: "young Calvino" and "mature Calvino," for instance, each conflicting with the other but both eternal. We may favor one period over the other, and try to exalt our favored version of the author as persistent or "true," and the other as transient or "false," but the fact that the other ever existed proves that it still

exists, and belies our bias. We may even attempt to find consistencies in the conflicting visions, in an attempt to reconstruct our fragmented author. But the connection between the two periods of the author's life is severed; there is no organic flow from one into the other. It is especially ironic when we see this kind of criticism applied to an author like Calvino, who was so dedicated to transformation, who tried to seamlessly integrate change into the framework of his novels. So how do we reconcile what we preach with what haunts us? How can we make peace between the conflicting visions of "young Calvino" and "mature Calvino"?

Calvino, in his writing, was just as concerned with and interested in this conflict as we are. This is why, in much of his writing, change or transformation is such an important principle. *Invisible Cities* is no exception. Take, for instance, the passage in which Marco Polo suggests that the Khan's subjects only exist because they think about them. Here is the dialogue that follows:

KUBLAI: To tell the truth, I never think them.

POLO: Then they do not exist.

KUBLAI: To me this conjecture does not seem to suit our purposes. Without them we could never remain here swaying, cocooned in our hammocks. (117)

For Ricciardi, this is more evidence that "conjecture" is used by Calvino to "deflect the question of the human cost" (1066), but she forgets how the passage is concluded:

POLO: Then this hypothesis must be rejected. So the other hypothesis is true: they exist and we do not.

KUBLAI: We have proved that if we were here, we would not be.

POLO: And here, in fact, we are. (118)

The solipsism that Polo and Kublai begin discussing is transformed into a kind of stalemate, a codependency between the explorer, the emperor and his subjects, as well as a codependency between existence and non-existence. This transformation is impossible to see unless one takes the entire passage into account. By forcing us to look at the changes that occur in his writing, Calvino not only preserves the organic flow from one moment into the next but also creates a holistic structure that is greater than the sum of its parts. This idea of structure that is both organic and organized reveals the last weakness of traditional analysis when applied to Calvino's writing: close reading. It is effectively impossible to read Calvino the way that Stanley Fish suggests when he devotes an entire lecture to looking at the first three words of Milton's *Lycidas*, "yet once more" (Fish 4-13). It is not that three words of Calvino do not carry the same amount of import as three words of Milton, but that the import in three words of Calvino may not be representative of the whole, and in fact it probably is not. Similarly, the words of "young Calvino" are not representative of Calvino's desires as a whole; they are rather like points on a line. Calvino makes us look at larger structures, and his novels are exercises in perception, another idea that has ethical implications: after all, so many questions of ethics revolve around putting something into "proper perspective" and looking at the "big picture."

I realize that I have, in looking at *Invisible Cities*, been in some ways as guilty as Ricciardi and others of thinking narrowly. Saying that a novel by Calvino, or indeed any novel, is "about" something, automatically subsumes several other layers of "abouts" that could take precedence. So yes, *Invisible Cities* is about real cities, and it is about visual images, and, yes, it is about the written word: it is about all these things, and more. A final

example from *Invisible Cities*, another moment of transformation (during a chess game between Kublai and Polo), makes this apparent:

At checkmate, beneath the foot of the king, knocked aside by the winner's hand, nothingness remains: a black square, or a white one. By disembodiment of his conquests to reduce them to the essential, Kublai had arrived at the extreme operation: the definitive conquest, of which the empire's multiform treasures were only illusory envelopes; it was reduced to a square of planed wood.

Then Marco Polo spoke: "Your chessboard, sire, is inlaid with two woods: ebony and maple. The square on which your enlightened gaze is fixed was cut from the ring of a trunk that grew in a year of drought: you see how its fibers are arranged? Here a barely hinted knot can be made out: a bud tried to burgeon on a premature spring day, but the night's frost forced it to desist."

. . . The quantity of things that could be read in a little piece of smooth and empty wood overwhelmed Kublai; Polo was already talking about ebony forests, about rafts laden with logs that come down the rivers, of docks, of women at the windows. . . . (131-132)

The chessboard changes from signifying nothing to containing all things. We might remember that a book, too, is made from trees. In this way Calvino reminds us of the book's origin, the large and small things that were necessary to bring about its existence. There is no fuller context, or more complete engagement with social realities, than this.

VI. Conclusion

While Calvino did not and perhaps could not continue to write books like *Invisible Cities*, it is important to note that he did not feel remorse about writing it, as he did about writing *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*. Even in 1985, the year of his death, Calvino believed that *Invisible Cities* was the book in which he "managed to say the most" (*Memos* 71). He cites a couple reasons for this: first, it concentrates all his "reflections, experiments and conjectures on a single symbol," and second, it builds up a "many-faceted structure . . . that does not imply logical sequence or hierarchy, but a network in which one can follow multiple routes and draw multiple, ramified conclusions" (71). As we have seen, politics is one facet in this structure. But is this enough? Some, like Ricciardi, do not even detect this undercurrent. Others contend that writing indirect, indefinite things about politics is equivalent to silence.

The Italian writer and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini takes this stance. In 1973, Pasolini wrote a highly critical review of *Invisible Cities* that sparked a confrontational, drawn-out dialogue between the two authors that would continue until Pasolini's death in 1975 (McLaughlin 133). In fact, it is in the magazine *Corriere della sera*, the medium for much of this public debate, that the character of Mr. Palomar first appears (McLaughlin 131). Many of the first Palomar stories were direct responses to articles written by Pasolini. In the 1 August 1975 issue of *Corriere*, Pasolini expresses in a front-page article his "disgust for contemporary Italian youth" (McLaughlin 140). Less than two weeks later, a Calvino story about Palomar appears in the same magazine (McLaughlin 141). This story is included in *Mr. Palomar* as "On getting angry at the young" and seems to be, more than anything else, an attempt to present an antidote to Pasolini's disgust:

No, the difficulty lies in the fact that every time I am about to reproach or criticize or exhort or advise [the young], I think that as a young man I also attracted reproaches, criticism, exhortation, advice of the same sort, and I never listened to any of it. Times were different and as a result there were many differences in behavior, language, customs; but my mental processes then were not very different from theirs today. So I have no authority to speak. (106)

Calvino's choice not to speak in the "most violent decade in Italy's postwar history" frustrated Pasolini to no end (McLaughlin 142). In the 30 October 1975 issue of *Il Mondo*, Pasolini's final open letter to Calvino appears, criticizing both "his silence in the face of . . . outbursts" and "his interest in mere 'descrittività' [description]" (McLaughlin 143). Other critics like Franco Fortini and Enzo Forcella echoed Pasolini's sentiments. Fortini decried the "silent acceptance of reality" in "On getting angry at the young" (McLaughlin 141), while Enzo Forcella denounced the purely descriptive quality of "Reading a wave" as an underestimation of "the importance of human history" (McLaughlin 142). Calvino, in response to this last criticism, connects descriptive observation to human history:

Might it not be that the concentration on a limited and precise field of observation, the attempt to define exactly the complexity of the most banal event that takes place before our eyes every day, might these not constitute a suitable exercise for testing skills . . . which are necessary in many other fields, first and foremost in socio-political activity? (Cited by McLaughlin 142)

In this rhetorical statement, McLaughlin senses a final, "tentative" defense of the kind of political commitment found in Calvino's early fiction (142). But this did little to appease Pasolini or any of the many others who agreed with him. Pasolini's letter contains repeated

urgings for Calvino to break his silence: “But you know full well how you can become informed, if you want to write back to me, to discuss this, to make your response. In fact, I demand that you come clean and do this” (cited by McLaughlin 143). Calvino was not able to answer in time because, in a bizarre turn of events, Pasolini was killed the next night by members of the same young violent generation that he spoke so strongly against (McLaughlin 143). Calvino’s defense comes a few days later:

And it was not even true that I had not replied with my own opinion; it was just that I did so, by channeling my response into other discourses, without ever naming them; he understood perfectly well that I did so in order not to satisfy his craving for personal attacks, but instead of repaying me in kind, he attacked me head-on: that was his temperament. (Cited by McLaughlin 143)

Calvino is reluctant to refer to Pasolini by name, just as he is hesitant to refer to politics by name. He prefers the subtle undercurrent to the head-on attack; this much is clear. In “Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature,” he admits that the “life and death and posthumous life of Pasolini have consecrated the role of writer as provocateur,” but he still favors the “modest and doubtful tones” of writers like Eugenio Montale (95). At times this requires the writer to keep “his voice low, without emphasis of any kind” (95), but speaking softly is not silence, just as lightness is not emptiness. Calvino’s message is available to anyone willing to listen carefully and pay close attention. But will people listen? If Pasolini could not hear Calvino’s responses, is Calvino’s mode of address too oblique and obscure to be effective?

This is a possibility, but if Calvino is right, Pasolini actually did understand his responses; he simply chose to ignore them because of his temperament. If this is so, then

perhaps the greatest concern behind Pasolini's critiques is not about the content of Calvino's writing, but whether or not people are listening to it. For Pasolini, the writer must shout from the rooftops to be heard at all. Calvino's imperative to the writer is the opposite. He insists that Montale's modest and doubtful voice is his strength – it is the “reason that he has made himself heard to many, and his presence has had a great impact on three generations of readers” (95). If Calvino's legacy is to endure, people will need to hear his modest and doubtful voice as well. This is what, in some small way, this project has tried to ensure.

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