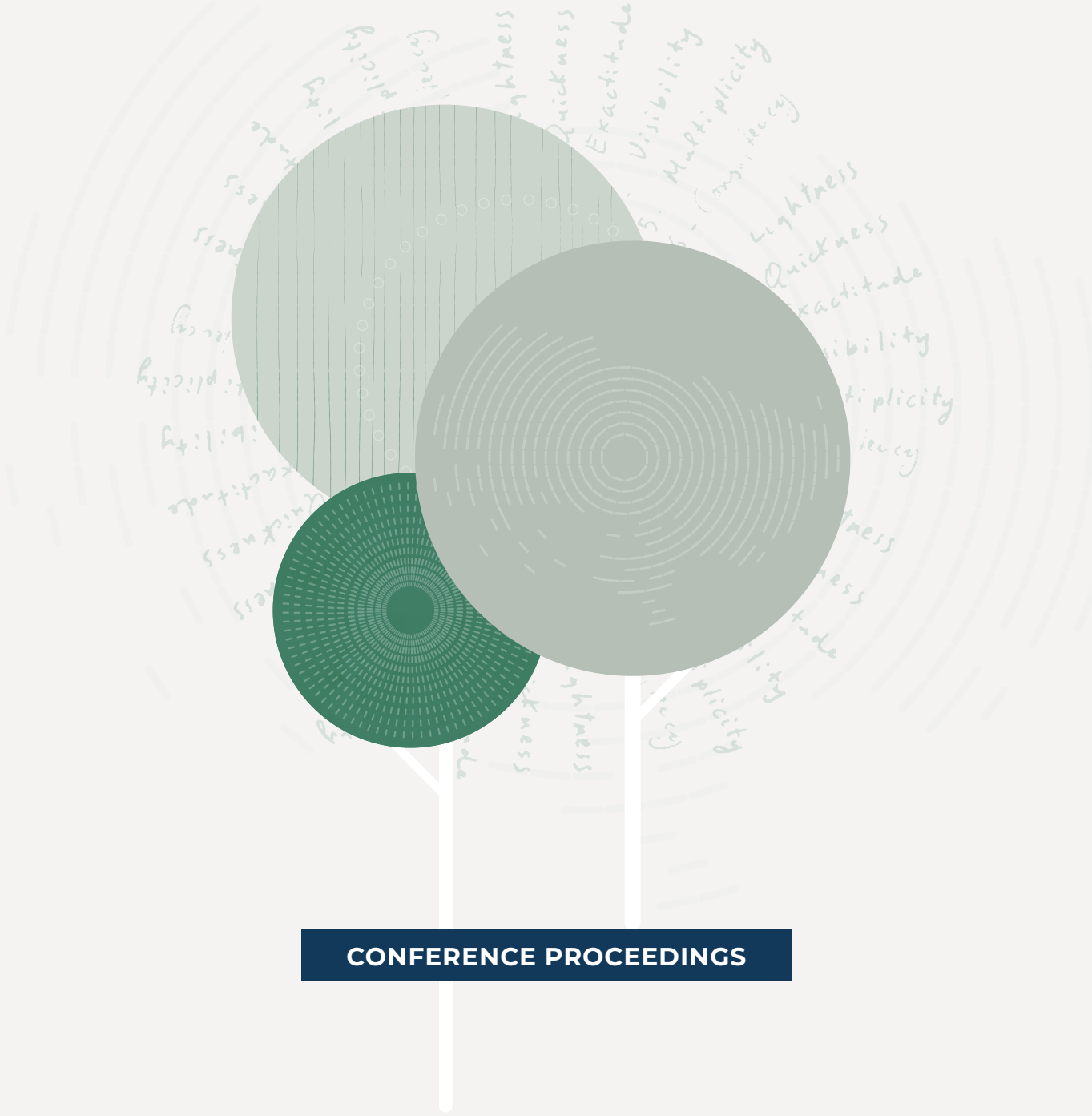
Florence University of the Arts

2023 - 12TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE

GARDENS OF CULTURE

ITALO CALVINO'S MEMOS FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM



CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

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Preface

Italo Calvino is an author who accompanies readers through various stages of their cultural and intellectual growth: from school days, when the many characters inhabiting his stories and fairy tales are discovered with wonder, to the sweet memories of summer vacations during the transition from elementary to middle school, where readers are captivated by the extraordinary adventures of the remarkable protagonists of the *Our Ancestors* trilogy. This journey continues into adulthood, for which Calvino provides an inexhaustible reservoir of stories and images, advice and instructions, refined reflections, and original insights.

The reader is subtly drawn into a distant voyage among dozens of fantastic cities, encouraged to reflect on the qualities necessary for creating future literature, the multifaceted ability of nature and human-made objects to take on infinite forms, dimensions, colors, and scents, and on the distortions and paradoxes of war, experienced by both young and old, and mimicked in the games of children. Calvino's work was the first in Italy to address ecological issues, a full half-century ahead of the fervent contemporary debates on the subject.

This and much more will remain available for readers to explore in Calvino's work for many years to come.

The 2023 conference set the ambitious goal of evaluating Calvino's humanistic and artistic impact on the cultural production of the millennium for which he wrote the *Six Memos*, which is, of course, the one we live in today. The influence of his work can be found in contemporary literature, art, theater, and cinema, as well as, importantly, in discussions about environmental themes and nature conservation—issues Calvino addressed with the expertise of a scientist, the delicacy of a writer, and the sensitivity of an artist.

The choice of the title was a long and considered process, but this does not contradict one of his core lessons, that of Quickness, which advocates not for haste but for decisiveness and avoiding sterile digressions in favor of the concrete substance of thought. However, I must

say that the lesson that most inspired the title choice was Visibility: the garden—a fundamental and evocative image—is a recurring theme in Calvino's literature as well as his personal life.

The garden of Calvino's home on the slopes of Sanremo, scientifically tended by the intellect of his parents and the gardener Libereso (himself the subject of some of Calvino's pages), served as the primary source of inspiration for his deep sensitivity to nature, especially the plant kingdom. Plants, trees, insects, and flowers populate countless Calvino writings. More specifically, the garden serves as an emblematic space of emotions, sensations, developmental milestones, and the experiences of the characters in *The Watcher and Other Stories*. It is a *hortus conclusus* where the protagonists become secondary to the dreamlike dimension that absorbs them, hypnotized by events until they find their way back to the much more mundane reality. Thus, the image of the garden, or gardens, seemed perfect for evoking a space that unfolds before our eyes, presenting a cultural dimension: *Gardens of Culture*.

The second part of the title continues reflecting on the *Six Memos*. A fundamental and archetypal question, which I have often used for teaching, is how *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, addressed to the very era we live in, has inspired literature, the visual and performing arts. Which lessons have resonated most deeply in contemporary society, and why?

Unquestionably, as teaching practice shows, the lesson that most intrigues younger generations is Visibility. In an age dominated by media exposure and the relentless pursuit of ways to stand out, this resonates with many. It is natural for young people to believe that the lesson on Visibility might immediately help them achieve this goal. Yet they soon realize that the teaching appeals to a much deeper level of consciousness. While it might offer a surface-level interpretation useful to aspiring media or marketing managers, it is far from simple to grasp. Visibility, in Calvino, is not a straightforward recipe for gaining views; rather, it teaches how to construct a vision that is certain, effective, and precise, communicated in the right language and evoking an immediate, profound awareness in its audience: "It rained into the high fantasy."

The 2023 conference drew enthusiastic participation from national and international scholars, literary authors, visual artists, and musicians. The contributions enriched the

discussion, offering a multiplicity of perspectives (surely Calvino would have appreciated this, aligning with another of his lessons).

Professor Coletti, an academic from the Accademia della Crusca, expertly illustrated Calvino's linguistic choices, known for opposing the abstraction of language. Professor Bencivenni appropriately focused on the theme of the garden, exploring the author's naturalistic and ecological vision. Professor Albani presented one of the lesser-known aspects of Calvino's work—his connection to the Oulipo group. Professor Dell'Aquila offered a rich contribution filled with literary references and connections between literature, the visual arts, and publishing, linking Calvino to Fausto Melotti and Raymond Queneau.

Author Enzo Fileno Carabba evoked vivid images in illustrating his personal relationship with Calvino, through a recent publication that uses narrative to establish a dialogue between young Italo and the mature writer. Teacher Marta Pensi provided an intriguing perspective on teaching Calvino in middle schools and how his works can also support the teaching of Ariosto. Lecturer and colleague Sofia Galli conducted an analysis of multisensoriality as perceived in the Auschwitz Memorial experience and Calvino's *A King Listens*. Author Elettra Solignani explored themes of eros and love in Calvino's works, highlighting the transformation of the reader's psychic identity into physical identity and vice versa. Visual artist Thomas Germano concluded by illustrating the close relationship between Calvino's works and his own artworks.

The 2023 conference achieved its goal of exploring the breadth of Calvino's influence across a lively variety of disciplines—literary, artistic, and performative. We are convinced that Calvino will continue to provide an inexhaustible wealth of ideas, teachings, examples, and inspirations for students, artists, linguists, writers, musicians, and ordinary citizens. For this reason, we hope that reading his works remains central and recurring in national cultural life and international intellectual debate.

Finally, I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my colleague and friend, Professor Nicoletta Salomon, for sharing this beautiful and unique experience.

Nicoletta Salomon

Florence University of the Arts

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How to Cultivate Gardens of Culture*

Gardens of Culture: Italo Calvino's Memos for the New Millennium aims to honor Italo Calvino's legacy thanks to the interplay of academic voices, voices from the contemporary world of literature and the arts, voices of students led by our faculty, and voices from the public. As a short introduction to this conference, I will focus for a moment on the two words that have been chosen for this title: what kind of image does "gardens of culture" evoke? How can gardens and culture relate to each other?

The word "culture" is rooted in the tradition of farming and gardening, of cultivating the soil. It derives from the same root of the Latin verb *colere*, meaning to tend, to cultivate, and also to live in, to inhabit, to take care of, to respect and honor, to protect and promote.

Gardens are shrines of knowledge and taste, of sense and style, and are shaped by the same traditional as well as creative attitude that is required to nurture and transmit culture. Even though culture is often objectified, it is not an object that can be produced: it is not an object at all. Culture is a way of living, that needs to be cultivated and transmitted. Cultivating culture, like cultivating gardens, requires devotion, humble commitment, technical skills, patience, irony, some playfulness, and faith: it is a serious play.

In this conference, gardens and culture are therefore connected within an eco-critical perspective, which proves to be consistently present (and *ante litteram*) in Calvino's work. Calvino's sensitivity to the changes that impacted the landscape he grew up in, to the transformations of the cities, and to the history and future of the ecosystem inhabited by all living beings is apparent in his body of work.

I believe that our words, the oral and written words that we choose, need to be considered

* This text collects my opening remarks shared at the inauguration of the XII annual FUA-AUF conference held at Palazzo Strozzi, Gabinetto Vieusseux in Florence, on December 1, 2023: it therefore keeps the oral quality of a public speech. The publication years of Italo Calvino's writings refer to the first Italian editions. Translations are mine.

as an integral and crucial part of the ecosystem we live in and are supposed to take care of, that is to say, cultivate. I also believe that we can protect our ecosystem first of all through cultivating our words, the words we choose to describe it, and that we therefore have to cultivate our words as part of it.

I am persuaded that the words we select, and mold, and cast onto our ecosystem shape it, and that we need to cultivate the correct ones, the exact ones, the way devoted gardeners would do, something that costs effort and time: "Words are the painful fruits of long observations," confesses Sister Theodora in *The Nonexistent Knight* (1959).

Calvino's texts are deeply environment-conscious; Calvino is aware of the power of words to shape an ecosystem, with his words he is engaged in cultivating interspecies communication, sometimes preferring silence, or choosing voices over words; Calvino has shaped a language that can not only name and describe nature but contact nature, connect us to nature; the act of shaping words is for Calvino an act of reverence and concern toward the Earth.

As we know, at its core the word "ecology" contains the root of "home" (ancient Greek *oikos*), which implies that the Earth is not just the place we happen to share, it is our home, and it is home not just to humans, but to animals and plants as well. Calvino's writings are home to an impressive variety of animals and plants, speculated with eyes, lenses, glasses, and telescopes, all set in an ontological horizontality, a paratactic ontology in which we all are hosted on the same axis of value (Iovino 121).

I remember myself as a child, then as a young reader and further, highlighting the names of animals and plants with a pencil on my copies of Calvino's books, which I still own and I have perused while preparing for this conference. Here they are, in a random order, with a special (but not exclusive) interest for the smallest animals and herbs, many of them to be found in a garden. Among animals: worms, lice, peas, ants, crickets, cicadas, spiders, serpents, geckos, mice, cats, dogs, hens, chickens, rabbits, hedgehogs, dormice, moles, foxes pigs, sheep, goats, mules, horses, cows, a white gorilla, crabs, jellyfishes, fishes (small and big), eels, frogs, turtles, swans, nightingales, swallows, ravens, blackbirds, magpies, pigeons, bees, wasps, butterflies, bats, and bumblebees: and, among them, the writer as a bumblebee, with his elytra of paper, as

black as ink. In the plants realm, hundreds of both local as well as exotic plants, flowers, and fruits are listed in Calvino's writings, among which I choose today to mention just the everyday life's aromatic and medicinal herbs, that enhance the taste of the traditional Mediterranean food and cure us through decoctions and remedies: just from *The Cloven Viscount* (1952), oregano, sage, basil, mallow, cress, borage, lavender, mint, thyme, rosemary.

The garden, as a miniature oasis of life, is an archetypal form for Calvino, who grew up in a cultivated garden of rare and exotic plants, a form that gives way to a series of variations in his writing:

– Gardens of fusion: primeval, Edenic, almost erotic, gardens cared for by a naïve gardener like Libereso in *Last Comes the Raven* (1949): here a fusion between humans and nature is enjoyed;

– Gardens of separation: excruciate urban gardens and the "insecure yet generous solidarity" they share with deprived humans like Marcovaldo: nature, animals, and humans are both subdued and survivors of capitalistic exploitation, wild urbanization, uncontrolled scientific research, and ecological crisis, of which Calvino is well aware from the early Fifties, as shown in *The Argentinian Ant* (1952), in *A Plunge into Real Estate* (1957), and *Marcovaldo or the seasons in the city* (1963).

– Gardens as poems: Japanese gardens, pure works of art, can nurture artistic dialogues between nature and culture, through being observed, analyzed, and finally contemplated from a distance that brings humans and nature together as a whole again, in a new way though, a poetic way. This perspective pervades a few essays in *Collection of Sand* (1984) and *Palomar* (1983). Calvino sees Japanese gardens as calligrams, as visual poems – decipherable or indecipherable –, where elements are put together according to aesthetic criteria that coincide with criteria of meaning: the elements of the Japanese gardens are defined by Calvino as "parole vegetali" [vegetal words], as Japanese gardens are shaped by an architect-poet, who plans gardens-poems, a word choice that showcases a mutual ontological belonging between nature and culture: the garden becomes here a way of writing (Dellacasa, *passim*).

Therefore, which words must be cultivated to cultivate our ecosystem? Words that have eyes for differences, words that can open our blind eyes and can make us see our environment, as "to see is to perceive differences" ("The old woman" 164). According to Calvino, the words that respect the environment handling it ecologically are visual words, image-like words, and therefore exact words, words that can draw differences and put them in front of us (*Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988), especially "Visibility" and "Exactitude"). For Calvino, words are visual facts, and writers are visual artists: in *The Nonexistent Knight* (1959), Sister Theodora shares that she draws her writings: "I am drawing a straight line, here and there broken at the edges, and this is Agilulf's pathway" (88); "I am now drawing a city surrounded by its walls" (89); "I am now sketching a wood" (*Ibid*.); and she finds herself wishing for the white page to become a 3D low relief of the scenes she narrates, molded and even wounded by her attempt of writing as sculpting.

We can cultivate the world ecologically if we choose an ecological stance in shaping our words: we can respectfully observe the world, trying to utter the differences we observe with a devoted and humble eye, happy to cultivate gardens of words.

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Vittorio Coletti

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The Precise Italian of Italo Calvino: Language and Style*

Italian literature has long been troubled by the so-called "language question." I use "question" not only to refer to the intellectual debate on language, which, as is known, has been constant and intense from Dante to Manzoni to Pasolini. As Gramsci noted, this debate has been so significant that it has even become politically emblematic.

Here, however, I refer to the "language question" as a writer's challenge to develop a style, a distinctive stylistic personality, and decide how to write. In other words, I am thinking about the private aspect, about the concrete interpretation in the heat of a centuries-old work and abstract public debate surrounding language, which lasted for centuries in Italy. Perhaps due to the endemic uncertainty of a common language, Italian writers have often chosen to enhance and thicken their personal style, so much so that a literary line from Dante to Gadda has been described (by Gianfranco Contini) as characterized by density, multilingualism, and linguistic expressiveness. There has also been an opposite tendency to purify and refine the language, to praise it, pursued by equally great authors such as Petrarch and Leopardi. To quote Calvino from his "American Lesson" on Lightness:

> Two opposing vocations have contended in literature through the centuries: one seeks to make language a weightless element that hovers above things like a cloud, or better, a fine dust, or better yet, a field of magnetic impulses; the other seeks to imbue language with the weight, depth, and concreteness of things, bodies, sensations (S 642).

While admiring both paths and admitting that a good writer should follow both, Calvino primarily selected the first path—the one of transparency and lightness, which, for him, is

* The text, originally in Italian, has been translated by the curator, Fabio Binarelli.
The quotations from Calvino's literary works are taken from *Calvino 1991-1994*, three volumes here cited respectively as RR1, RR2, and RR3, followed by the page number. The quotations from his essays are taken from *Calvino 1995*, cited as S and the page number. The titles of the individual works, when not fully spelled out, are abbreviated as follows: AD = *Gli amori difficili*; BR = *Il barone rampante*; C = *Le cosmicomiche*; CAV = *Il cavaliere inesistente*; CI = *Le città invisibili*; CVN = *Cosmicomiche vecchie e nuove*; GS = *La giornata di uno scrutatore*; Pal = *Palomar*; SNR = *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*; SNIV = *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*; SS = *Sotto il sole giaguaro*; TZ = *Ti con zero.*

associated with "precision." Nevertheless, he occasionally aimed to reproduce the opaque density of the world or at least convey its sense through denser writing. The variety of historical, social, and geographical nuances, synchronously present in Italian, has provided writers with the necessary material to intensify and highlight their language, showcasing its richness or marked skinning. Thus, there are authors who have proudly displayed their language, often magnificently, exploiting all its possibilities to make it highly visible and palpable, either through excess or calculated sparseness, to their glory and in the image of Italy's complex linguistic reality. In the 20th century, this centuries-old tendency to focus on language became even stronger than before, because the writer, in the past century, had at their disposal an even wider linguistic repertoire in Italian than in the past.

The significant social expansion of spoken language following Italy's unification increased the geographical variability of the national language, putting pressure on traditional dialects and presenting new sociolinguistic and political challenges, as well as new opportunities for individual styles. By the mid-20th century, Italian novels had engaged with this sociological and regional language plurality, using it as a powerful and sometimes excessive tool for representing Italy's complex reality—its suffering poverty (neorealism), the persistent verbal barriers between different social classes (Pasolini), or to depict a distorted, grotesque image that challenged it more radically (Gadda). Italo Calvino, although fully aware of these social problems and stylistic opportunities, chose a different path. The sociopolitical complexity of Italian did not become, for him, a stylistic asset.

Instead, he saw it as a flaw or limitation to be avoided, if not corrected through writing. Even in his early works, in which he acknowledged (as in the famous preface to the 1964 reissue of The Path to the Nest of Spiders) that he had approached the explosive sociolinguistic problem (language or dialect) in a "naive" way, Calvino never leaned toward multilingualism or an overt use of dialect. He saw the cultural and political limits of dialect as well as its stylistic possibilities.

Already in the aforementioned preface, he hastened to clarify that if, at the beginning, he had tinted his language with "patches" of dialectal influences (which, moreover, scholars

have long recognized as minimal and well-concealed), later on he "will try to absorb it all into the language, like a vital but hidden plasma," until, if not losing it, using it more and more sparingly. It should be clarified, for those who are not very familiar with it, that 20th century Italian literature, especially the novel, for several decades was both attracted to and repelled by dialects, which were sometimes seen as a place of linguistic authenticity and at other times as a place of cultural confinement for ordinary people. Thus, dialects became tools for mimicking popular speech, distorting and mocking bourgeois speech, or critiquing it. Calvino, shrewdly perceiving that these were two sides of the same coin, avoided both approaches early on. He explained this in 1955 in his remarkable essay *The Lion's Marrow*, noting that "a language nourished by popular contributions" serves two different and seemingly opposite poetics: one that expresses "the happy ignorance" of the popular world and another that exploits its language for a "stylistic pastiche... a dense and heavy vocabulary."

Two poetics that resemble each other in their shared "pleasure in the primitive," in the attitude of the intellectual who "bends toward the popular world as something opposed and foreign, precisely by accepting it as a suggestive spectacle, by taking pleasure in its harsh and vibrant hues, and by seeking out its hidden refinements," (S 17).

For Calvino, a highly refined intellectual, there was a risk of intellectualism in the artistic thickening of Italian literature, leading to mannerism in the outcome. His critical view of literary language also extended to non-literary communication. Pasolini believed it was threatened by a technological uniformity that eroded the ancient richness and diversity of regional dialects and the Italian spoken by the people, expressing a sense of frustration over the loss of linguistic authenticity resulting from the standardization of the common language. Calvino shared concerns about inauthenticity but attributed it not to technological precision and uniformity (which he found salutary), but to the vagueness of bureaucracy, which he saw as the greatest threat to a healthy common language. He famously stated:

> My ideal language is one that is as concrete and precise as possible. The enemy to defeat is the tendency of Italians to use abstract and generic expressions (S 153).

For Calvino, linguistic modernity was never an enemy of authenticity (unlike for Pasolini)

but an opportunity, even a stylistic one, as homogeneity and clarity are literary qualities. They are "style," in his words:

> The more language shapes itself around practical activities, the more homogeneous it becomes in all respects, and it even acquires "style".

Let us keep in mind these values of precision and concreteness suggested by technology, and of homogeneity, following them in the formidable, extreme *Lezioni americane*. Starting with the one dedicated to *Accuracy*. The values of precision are those that Calvino recognizes and admires in Leopardi, who conveys the feeling of the vague, the indeterminate in poetry with an extremely precise and meticulous attention. in the composition of each image, in the detailed definition of objects, lighting, atmosphere, and in prose, he indicated:

> The way forward (in the Operette morali) was to achieve maximum effects with minimal means (S 680).

This poetic need stemmed, for Calvino, from an ethic of rigor and authenticity perhaps inherited from his extraordinary scientist parents and an innate desire for a language as precise as possible in its lexicon and in conveying the nuances of thought and imagination and an aversion to language. used in an approximate, casual, careless way. Sometimes it seems to me that a plague has struck humanity in its most defining faculty, the use of words, manifesting as a loss of cognitive power and immediacy, an automatism that levels expression to the most generic, anonymous, abstract formulas. Perhaps the inconsistency is not only in the language but in the world. The plague affects people's lives and nations' histories, making all stories shapeless, casual, confused, without a beginning or end. Feeling threatened and surrounded by approximation, Calvino countered it with writing that repeatedly revised and rethought itself to achieve acceptable precision:

> My discomfort stems from the loss of form I perceive in life, to which I try to oppose the only defense I can conceive of: an idea of literature.

A motivation that is not only ethical but also political underlies Calvino's poetics. His language carries out operations of cleansing and sincerity, which he also hopes for in society. For this reason, he is not a writer with a dense, murky style, self-consciously multilingual,

but one who works through subtraction and approximation towards accuracy, essentiality. He does not flaunt his language; rather, he almost hides the operations to purify it, making it transparent and honest, rich but not opulent, varied but sober. This, of course, does not imply that, for Calvino, there were no cognitive and moral values even in the opposite path towards a multilayered style, as shown in his lesson on Multiplicity, where he expresses admiration for an author who is almost his opposite, Carlo Emilio Gadda, the engineer and stylistically bulimic narrator. For Gadda, as science has taught us through the principle of uncertainty, "to know is to insert something into reality; it is, therefore, to distort reality."

Calvino pursued and chose another path, I would say a more international one, that of an Italian not caught up in the thousand threads of his long history and, he hoped, more capable of engaging with the world, also through translations. He multiplies language not to hinder its approach to reality, but to hasten it, as he writes in the lecture on Quickness:

> My work as a writer has always aimed to chase the lightning path of mental circuits that capture and connect distant points in space and time.

Rapidity, again, means essentiality, precision, and the patient pursuit of the 'mot juste', of the sentence where every word is irreplaceable. the search (in prose as in poetry) for an expression that is necessary, unique, dense, concise, memorable, where density, theoretically opposed to rapidity, aligns with conciseness and necessity, not dilution. It represents semantic richness, not the plurality of meanings or allusions, and does not mean overloading a sentence with too many intentions, winks, grimaces, colors, veils, blends, flourishes. Rapidity stems from stylistic agility, which takes time for the author but saves the reader time by allowing them to reach the result more quickly.

As much as, I repeat, Calvino does not ignore nor underestimate opposing values — which, to some extent, cannot be absent in good literature — for himself, for his style, he chooses Lightness, Quickness, Exactitude, values his writing attains through the honest, slow effort of continual revision and perpetual dissatisfaction. To these principles, Calvino remained faithful throughout his extensive body of work, albeit with varying degrees, from the young man who viewed the drama of a divided world through the dreamy eyes of the child Pin, to

the mature writer who tries to master the chaos of a shifting world with the stubborn scientific rationality of Mr. Palomar.

His language was always inspired by principles of essentiality and precision—not to be confused with minimalist poverty, but rejecting ostentatious exuberance, both in vocabulary and syntax. Let's consider his lexicon, which I recently re-examined in Coletti 2023.

How one should act in the choice and distribution of words, Calvino had already written about as a young man, in 1958, to Elsa De' Giorgi (Corti 1998: 305), expressing his irritation with a language that was "predictable and insipid" and his desire for "a rigorous stylistic unity," thus distancing himself from expressionistic multilingualism. He reiterated this in his final years in an interview with Maria Corti (S 2922-3), demanding for prose "an investment of all […] verbal resources, just like poetry: swiftness and precision in the choice of words, economy, conciseness, and inventiveness in their distribution."

Scatto, meaning a language that immediately gets to the essential, and *precisione*, meaning no vagueness, no filler words; their distribution on the page follows principles of economy and conciseness. For this reason, Calvino favored a cultivated yet moderate lexicon, rarely overly specialized or excessively personal, always accessible — or at least not inaccessible — to an Italian of reasonable education. Even in *Cosmicomics*, "the technical-scientific lexicon […] does not exceed a certain average threshold of specialization, that is, of intelligibility," and moreover, it is "subject to the countershocks, or we might say antidotes," produced by the "systematically sought clash […] between technical terms and colloquial language, with effects of mutual irony" (Mengaldo 1991: 286). Certainly, some more daring and neologistic compounds can be found here, such as *egg-shell*, *blood-sea*, or *diamond-mountain*. But "it is all too clear that this luxuriance […] is part of the general process of technicalization to which […] the writer subjects language, particularly here (in *Cosmicomics*) by making it a vehicle for a continuous hybrid exchange between the 'natural' perception and the 'scientific' classification of reality," (Mengaldo 1991: 250). This process is, unsurprisingly, further developed in the more desperately rationalistic final work, *Palomar*.

With the exception of a certain initial indulgence (in *The Path to the Nest of Spiders*

and the stories in *Last Comes the Raven* for some regionalisms or dialectal expressions), Calvino's vocabulary is as rich and precise as it is never non-standard or fanciful. If it exceeds the average, it is only in striving to be as technical as possible. Even his abundance is never a show of virtuosity, but driven by an anxiety for precision, so that the "extended enumeration," which is often one of his stylistic traits, does not accumulate lexical material for expressionistic or illusionistic purposes, but to define objects and sensations more accurately. One need only observe his descriptive use of technical terms to reproduce on the page what Mr. Palomar sees From the Terrace:

> Roofs, old and new tiles, pantiles and roof shingles, thin or stubby chimneys, reed pergolas and undulating asbestos roof coverings, railings, balustrades, columns supporting pots, tin water tanks, dormer windows, glass skylights (Pal RR2 919).

Or in his portrayal of damage to an object:

> The armor... is now... dotted with dents, bumps, scratches, slits (Cav RR1 1058); each segment marked by scratches, notches, cuts, squiggles (CI RR2 364).

Or in his use of conceptual synonyms to make the abstract clear and tangible:

> Gaps of emptiness, absences, silences, gaps, missing connections, snags in the fabric of time (CVN RR2 1265); it is a city made only of exceptions, exclusions, contradictions, incongruences, paradoxes (CI RR2 415).

The sobriety and analytical functionality of Calvino's vocabulary are also evident in the rarity of words that deviate sharply from the norm, unlike those favored by the more experimental writers of the twentieth century. Apart from a few justified exceptions — such as nouns ending in *-io* that pertain to the semantic field of sounds and voices: *"uno sbuffio, uno scatarrio, un imprechio,"* (BR RR1 666), and onomatopoeic and phonosymbolic terms like *"Bum! Bum!"* (BR RR1 739), *"Deng! Deng!"* (BR RR1 632), *"Aurrrch! [.] Gggherr!"* (BR RR1 624), *"Buaf"* (BR RR1 624), *"Fff [.] fff fece il gatto,"* (BR RR1 599) — Calvino's vocabulary stays within the bounds of standard usage, albeit with a strong leaning toward cultivated language. Therefore, there is richness and variety in his lexicon, but within a fundamental uniformity of register, and always serving precision rather than dispersion, completeness rather than excess.

Calvino's quest for precision also manifests in repeated correction procedures, reformulating concepts, expressions, or words through introductory alternatives like that is, or rather, in other words:

> Men fight, all of them, with the same fury in them, or rather not the same, each with his own fury (SNR RR1 104); oh dead one, you have what I never had nor will have: this carcass. Or rather, you do not have it: you are this carcass (Cav RR1 998); so far, I have kept time and space separate to make myself better understood by you, or rather to better understand myself (TZ RR1 277); I began to walk in the dark […] I say: walk, meaning a way of moving across a surface (C RR2 102).

The duty of precision is also entrusted to a rigorous selection of adjectives, which in Italian literature are often used excessively for purely rhetorical or rhythmic purposes. In contrast, the adjectives chosen by Calvino are always essential and, so to speak, necessary, because "precise and, when needed, rich adjectivization is […] what allows him to achieve the greatest analytical clarity with the least dispersion of linguistic energy," (Mengaldo 1991: 278). For this reason, he avoids "too obvious or useless adjectives," and selects with great restraint those that are suitable for specifying the thing or concept. Even the typical (in Italian) synonymy in adjective sequences is not superfluous, merely ornamental or rhythmic, or redundant; it also contributes to a better definition and description of the noun, which is followed or surrounded by a rich range of qualifiers. One need only note the adjectives he uses to describe the scene in *The Cloven Viscount*, where he gets out of the carriage with an "angular and convulsive" effort, observed by the goats "with their fixed and expressionless gaze," or those he uses for the various types of cheeses in the famous *Shop* (Pal RR2 934): "dry, buttery, creamy, veiny, compact."

The moral duty of precision, of integrative or corrective reformulation, is also an indication of the permanent doubt that characterizes Calvino's intelligence, an intellectual who is the epitome of anti-ideology, more perplexed than persuaded, more doubtful than certain. This is revealed in his lexicon by the frequent presence of the adverb *forse* (perhaps), which shows a preference for a mode of narration and thought that is not closed, but open and questioning:

> One day, perhaps, I will no longer understand these things, Kim thinks, everything will be calm in me, and I will understand people in a completely different, perhaps fairer, way. Why perhaps? Because: perhaps? Well, then, I will no longer say perhaps; there will be no more perhaps in me (SNR RR1 109).

Calvino never reached a point where he could dispense with perhaps, demonstrating his constant readiness to affirm and negate ideas, as he told Ferdinando Camon:

> I can never think of one thing at a time; I always think of something and its opposite (S 2789).

The syntax of Calvino's stories and novels reflects this mode of thinking of the intellectual Calvino. The concurrent duplicity of his thought, the simultaneity of opposites, is also realized through the almost synchronous adoption of opposing syntactical procedures. On one hand, there is a flat, horizontal syntax, with linear sentences and a paratactic structure, such as the beautiful opening of *The Nonexistent Knight*:

> Beneath the red walls of Paris stood the French army. Charlemagne was about to review his paladins. They had already been there for over three hours; it was hot; it was an early summer afternoon, a bit overcast, cloudy; inside the armor, it was like boiling in a pot over a low flame (RR1 955).

On the other hand, he also uses more complex syntax, featuring informal spoken structures like anacoluthons:

> The boyfriends and husbands, now, woe betide if their girlfriends or wives glanced at a tree (BR RR1 691); then, according to you, those books that the reader devours with such passion, would they be novels by Vandervelde? (SNIV RR2 707).

Or sentences with an extensive, hierarchical structure filled with subordinate clauses, as in passages of *The Cloven Viscount*, where, as Testa (2023: 153) notes, there is a sentence extending over two pages, or in this passage from *Baron in the Trees*:

> We, though neighbors, knew nothing of the Marquises of Ondariva and the Nobles of Ombrosa because they had enjoyed certain feudal rights for generations, over which our father claimed rights. This mutual hostility divided the two families, just as a high

> wall that resembled the tower of a fortress divided our villas—a wall built either by our father or the Marquis, I do not know (RR1 561).

There is also a third resource (also highlighted by Testa 2023:158), a minority but important one, of an overflowing syntax, "characterized by the intention to weaken both coordinative and subordinative connections […] with the essentially epistemic goal of accounting for realities that escape the net of grammar": a syntax primarily experimented with by the last Calvino in *The Five Senses* (Under the Jaguar Sun), but already present in two autobiographical masterpieces such as *La strada di San Giovanni* (1963), rich in often very long parentheses, or *Dall'opaco* (1971), fifteen pages with a single period, arranged in shifts at the paragraph level like the Ligurian terraces, with white space signaling pauses contradicted by meaning, a "zig-zag" syntax (Tonani 2023:132), which also visually simulates the perplexed, non-peremptory mode of thought, always disposed to doubt, typical of Calvino's thinking. I quote it here, in conclusion, to leave, with one of the most Ligurian of the stories by this great international writer, the floor to him, captured in a moment (rare, but precisely for this reason more emblematic) when he uses it not as clear and univocal, but deliberately complex and tortuous, almost to account for his awareness of the opacity of the world and of man:

> And if starting from that initial position, I consider the subsequent phases of the same self, each step forward can also be a retreat; the line I trace coils more and more into the opaque, and it's pointless to try to remember at which point I entered the shadow—I was already there from the beginning. It's pointless to search in the depths of the opaque for an exit from the opaque. Now I know that the only world that exists is the opaque, and the clear is merely its reverse side, clear which struggles opaquely to multiply itself but only multiplies the reverse of its reverse. 'From the opaque,' from the depths of the opaque I write, reconstructing the map of a clear that is only an unverifiable axiom for the calculations of memory, the geometric locus of the self, of a self needed by the self to know itself as the self, an 'I' that serves only to keep the world informed of the world's existence, a mechanism that the world possesses to know that it exists (RR3 101).

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Mario Bencivenni

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The Garden and Nature as Figures in Calvino's Ecological Prophecy[1]

1. Introduction

I accepted with pleasure the invitation to offer a contribution at the XII FUA annual conference,[2] and before addressing the topic I have chosen, I believe it's necessary to clarify some personal background. I am not a specialist in Calvino, but as a teacher of literary subjects at the L.B. Alberti Art High School in Florence, and through my teaching and research activities in various Italian faculties of architecture, I have had the opportunity to read and reread Calvino over the years.

My interest in Calvino has also been rekindled by my work as a historian of gardens as works of art, focusing on their protection and preservation. In this vast world of nature reproduced by humans, my attention as a scholar and environmental activist has been directed towards the collection of parks/gardens in contemporary cities, classified by urban planning as "urban green" or "urban forest." These elements of the city, in the Anthropocene era, are crucial in counteracting what is threatening the biosphere. The beginning of the millennium of the "global village" (M. McLuhan) and "liquid modernity" (Z. Bauman) is revealing a crisis of epic proportions - systemic, not cyclical. A systemic crisis that finds its diagnosis in the metaphor of the "polyploid horse" (G. Bateson), and the appropriate remedy in the aphorism that postulates for the new millennium "the priority not of beautifying but of saving the world" (H. M. Enzensberger).[3]

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[1] Editor's Note: To preserve original attributions and avoid citation errors, full bibliographic footnotes have been retained instead of converting to parenthetical references. The text, originally in Italian, has been translated by Fabio Binarelli.

[2] I would like to thank Nicoletta Salomon and Fabio Binarelli for inviting me to contribute to the XII FUA's Annual Conference, which inaugurates the new academic year 2023-2024. As I am not an expert on Calvino, I believe this invitation stems from the brief notes on my work as a scholar and citizen, but most importantly, from the recommendation made to the organizers by Professor Leonardo Rombai, an esteemed scholar, mentor, and friend in the field of studies and in the efforts to understand and protect the cultural and environmental heritage of our country.

[3] The figure of the polyploid horse is found in Bateson, G. *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*, Bantam Books, 1979; Italian translation in *Mente e Natura*, Adelphi, 1984. The aphorism by the German writer, friend, and correspondent of Calvino is in Enzensberger, Hans Magnus, *Zig zag*. *Saggi sul tempo, il potere e lo stile*. Einaudi, 1999.

In an era marked by international protocols or agendas to combat climate change and by proclamations calling for urgent "ecological transition" policies centered on the sustainable use of ecosystem services (Nature-Based Solutions), Calvino and his works are experiencing a renewed media interest. Consider, for example, the international conference and the installations of the grand exhibition promoted by the Triennale di Milano in 2002 to mark the thirty-year anniversary of Invisible Cities. Or the numerous editorial, exhibition, and study initiatives for the centenary of the writer's birth, during which the image of Calvino as an "ecologist before his time" frequently emerges.[4] Furthermore, there is the media success documented by the flood of links that appear when searching for "Calvino ecologista" online.

My current interest in Calvino is focused on what I have called his "ecological prophecy," that is, his deep gaze that penetrates things and represents them in visions through his boundless imagination. In the specific field of the complex relationship between humans and artificial nature, and between humans and urban gardens/parks, these elements—either overtly or subtly—are highly relevant today and are present in much of Calvino's works: the widespread illiteracy in the attitude of "Care" and the disappearance of the figure of the gardener/horticulturist as its interpreter; the loss of vision, meaning the ability to look deeply into reality, which for gardens leads to an inability to perceive the spatial and temporal depths that plants are capable of transmitting to those who know how to listen.

In consideration of the audience of the Conference, in addition to the bibliographic references in the notes and the general bibliography, I wanted to provide a visual representation of the Calvino texts I used in the form of a garden of books, inspired by the garden of the Medici Villa of Castello (fig. 1).

[4]Among the many, I would like to highlight the "Calvino Inesauribile" series curated by Laura Guglielmi, which accompanied the "Calvino Cantafavole" exhibition, and in particular, the talk by the renowned scholar and English translator of Calvino, Martin McLaughlin, titled *Italo Calvino: l'ambiente e l'eco-sostenibilità*, held at Palazzo Ducale in Genoa on October 24, 2023. For the recording of the talk: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NtcPEZ8jjw0&t=2839s.

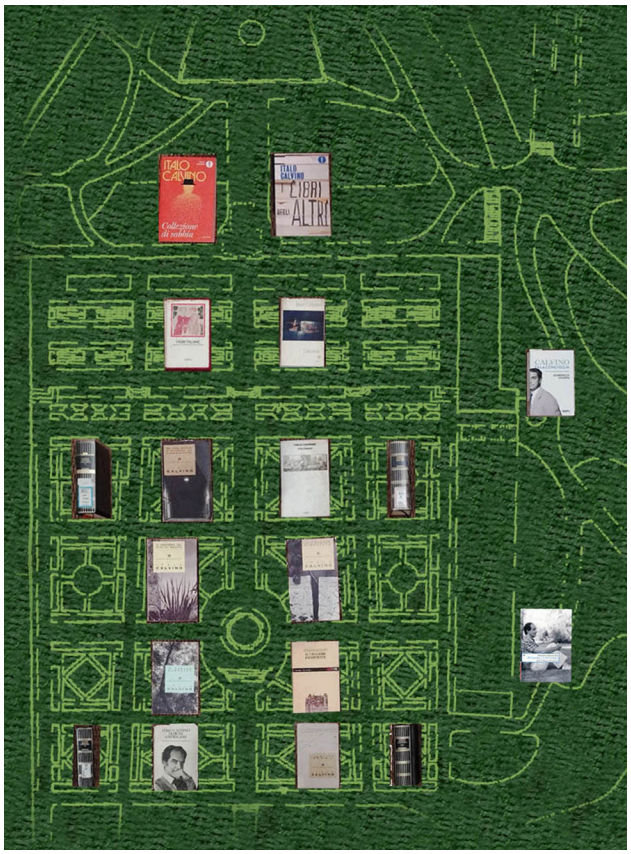

Fig. 1. The Garden of Calvino's Books - Bibliography in the Form of a Garden.
Graphic elaboration by Mario Bencivenni inspired by the garden of the Medici Villa of Castello.
Caption: At the four cardinal points that orient the central geometric score, the four volumes of the "Meridiani" series by Mondadori stand out, which constitute the critical edition of his works and private correspondence; in the central boxes, single volumes of the works most significant to me regarding Calvino's idea of nature and garden in his ecological prophecy are arranged: Italian Fairy Tales, Stories, Palomar, Invisible Cities, and American Lectures. On the upper terrace connecting the formal garden to the wild, Collection of Sand and The Books of Others; finally, in the modern extension of the landscape park, the two recent contributions by Domenico Scarpa and Massimo Bucciantini. The garden of the Villa of Castello, a true incunabulum of the Renaissance and Mannerist garden, has had multiple developments and expansions in other parts of the world. Thus, this bibliography in the form of a garden, besides documenting the works I have used, serves as a compass for those wishing to venture into the ocean of Calvino's bibliography.

2. Living dreams and reality with open eyes

In a 1984 interview with the New York Times Book Review, Calvino, when asked which literary character of all time he would like to be, justified his choice of Mercutio from Romeo and Juliet in this way:

> Of his qualities, I admire above all his lightness, in a world full of brutality, his dreamlike imagination — as the poet of Queen Mab — and at the same time his wisdom, the voice of reason amidst the fanatical hatred between the Capulets and Montagues. He adheres to the old code of chivalry, even at the cost of his life, perhaps only for reasons of style, and yet he is a modern man, sceptical and ironic: a Don Quixote who knows perfectly well what dreams are and what reality is, and lives both with open eyes.[5]

[5] Calvino, Italo. *Lettere 1940-1985*, Mondadori, 2000, p. XI. The emphasis is mine.

Vision and reason, dream and reality are the principal ingredients consistently found in Calvino's writings and justify the "ecological prophecy" as one of the recurring themes that runs through his work. The climate and energy crisis and its global consequences have made it increasingly urgent to implement "ecological transition" policies focused on the sustainable use of ecosystem services (Nature-Based Solutions). It is therefore surprising that Calvino is now also presented as an ecologist *ante litteram* based on what he narrates in his intense and varied output, spanning from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s: from the trilogy of long stories (The Cloud of Smog, A Plunge into Real Estate, and The Argentine Ant), to The Baron in the Trees and Invisible Cities.

Speaking of this much-cited work, I would like to point out an important coincidence: it was published in the same year (1972) that Einaudi released The Ecological Hoax by Dario Paccino, a book that, in my opinion, remains essential today for a no-washing approach to ecology. In the years when ecology became a highly topical and widespread discipline, Paccino, countering the preaching of a new ecological morality that was said to be necessary to save the world, instead denounced the ideological value of ecology, emphasizing the priority of natural history over human history not only as a one-time antecedent but also as an enduring reality: human society can be changed, but nature will remain the process it has always been.[6]

This general perspective forms the backdrop of Calvino's "ecological prophecy," which runs through his entire body of work, both before and after the cosmicomic turn of 1963, within which I will focus only on a few exemplary works. Alongside A Plunge into Real Estate, The Argentine Ant, and The Baron in the Trees, The Cloud of Smog holds a prominent place. This 1958 story meticulously describes the air pollution of an industrial metropolis, its true causes, and, above all, its inhabitants' inability to see it. A tragic story that, in its conclusion, allows us to glimpse beyond the cloud of smog in the "city of imperfection" the colourful glimmer of the

[6] Paccino, Dario. *L'imbroglio ecologico. L'ideologia della natura*. Einaudi, 1971. Even though Calvino never cites this work or its author, Paccino was an intellectual closely aligned with Calvino in terms of political commitment, as well as being an essayist (he collaborated with Mario Lodi on three science books for middle schools). Another connection can be found in Paccino's recovery of nature through historical materialism, following the Leopardi-Engels axis, as evidenced by Calvino's correspondence with Sebastiano Timpanaro Jr. (Bucciantini, op. cit., pp. 153-157, and Scarpa, op. cit., pp. 415-418 and 428-29).

perfect city in the suburb of Barca Bertulla, the city of laundresses who revive the colours of clothes greyed by the smog.[7] And following the methods of fairy tales, the story ends with this marvellous epiphany:

> I had already seen it, and I had nothing to say or to poke my nose into. I turned back. [.] Among the meadows, the hedges, and the poplars, I kept following with my eyes the streams, [.] the fields where the women, as if they were harvesting grapes, passed by with baskets, taking down the dry laundry from the lines, and the countryside in the sun was giving off its green, among that white, and the water flowed away, swollen with bluish bubbles. It wasn't much, but for me, who was only looking for images to keep in my eyes, it might have been enough.

Images of a possible utopia that constantly reappear, regardless of the form or genre of the text, in much of Calvino's work, and that find an axiomatic definition in the final parable of Invisible Cities, where once again the "vision" of the hell "inhabited" by earthlings is a necessary condition for recognizing it, not accepting it, and seeking what is not hell.

At the same time, Calvino clarifies his idea of the relationship between humans and nature in the contemporary metropolis with the Marcovaldo stories, summarizing it in this way in the anonymous flap note of the first edition in volume:

> Amidst the concrete and asphalt of the city, Marcovaldo goes in search of Nature. But does Nature still exist? The Nature he finds is a mischievous, counterfeit Nature, compromised by artificial life. A funny and melancholic character, Marcovaldo is the protagonist of a series of modern fables [that…] remain faithful to a classic narrative structure: that of the short, vignette-style stories found in children's comics.

3. "Making visible the non-visible": in the garden and in nature

I would like to touch on one of the most discussed aspects of Calvino's biography: his relationship with his parents, Mario and Eva Mameli, and Calvino's perceived betrayal of

[7] Niccolai, Simona. "L'ultima città dell'imperfezione. *La nuvola di smog* di Italo Calvino (1958)." *Moderna*, vol. XII, no. 2, 2010, pp. 173-180. In my opinion, this is the most interesting essay recently published on this important story, to which I refer both for its hidden allegory and for the intellectual and political crisis experienced by Calvino in 1957-58.

the family's scientific tradition. In 1925, after significant professional experiences in Mexico and Cuba, they returned to Italy and settled in Sanremo, where they established the "Orazio Raimondo" Experimental Floriculture Station at Villa Meridiana. This project, conceived on the eve of the Great War, aimed to revive the depressed agricultural economy of Liguria. The intensive work in flower hybridization and cultivation conducted here by Eva Mameli helped establish an important industrial nursery district for flowers in Sanremo and its surroundings. The magazine Il Giardino fiorito, founded in 1931 (Fig. 2) by the Calvinos, introduced the innovative floriculture and gardening experiences carried out in Sanremo, as well as the products of the local industrial nurseries, to all of Italy.


IL
GIARDINO
FIORITO

N. 1-2 FEBBRAIO-MARZO 1931

Ai Lettori.
Freesie - *Dott. A. Ragionieri.*
Garofani - *D. Aicardi.*
Malattie della Rosa - *E. Mameli-Calvino.*
Rose di Bengala - *Mary Senni.*
Dahlie.
Fiori annuali.
Iris pumila.
Asparagi - *Dott. G. Rossi.*
Faccende di stagione.

Direttore Prof. Dott. Mario Calvino.

Fig. 2. "The Flowering Garden." Cover of the first issue of the magazine founded and directed by Mario Calvino and Eva Mamiani Calvino.

Beyond Italo's disinterest in botany and horticulture, I believe there were deeper reasons for the writer's estrangement from his parents' world. For instance, there was the prophetic intuition of the possible severe consequences that the industrial transformation of the nursery trade, in which his parents played a significant role, would have not only on the centuries-old tradition of garden and horticultural art but also on the relationship between humans and nature. After describing in A Plunge into Real Estate the loss of the garden at the villa in Sanremo and the harmful effects of the first post-war wave of urban sprawl on the Ligurian agricultural landscape and socio-ethical behaviours, the theme is revisited in the story *The Road to San Giovanni*.[8] Written after his father's death, it serves as an intense recollection of a Freudian separation of the son from an overwhelming father. This detachment is symbolized by the diverging paths from the family residence at Villa Meridiana: the path of the young Italo leading downward towards the city, with its cinemas and beaches; and his father's path, leading in the opposite direction, upward towards the fields of the San Giovanni estate. Now, with the passing of his father and the disappearance of those places, it becomes possible to give shape to and understand the father's anger towards the new industrial flower crops that increasingly threatened the original agricultural landscape of Liguria:

> The valley of San Giovanni, shaded during part of the day, was at that time considered unsuitable for the industrial cultivation of flowers and thus still retained the ancient appearance of the countryside. And so did all the areas traversed by my father's morning route, as if he had deliberately chosen his path to avoid the grey and uniform expanses of carnation fields that now encircled the city from Poggio to Coldirodi, as if he, who dedicated his professional life to floriculture, felt a secret remorse, sensing that this, which he had both encouraged and assisted, was indeed an economic and technical advancement for our backward agriculture, but also a destruction of completeness and harmony, a levelling, a subordination to money. And so he carved out those hours in

[8] Calvino, *Meridiani*, vol. III, pp. 7-26. The story, published in 1962 in *Questo e altro*, no. 1 [1962], and later in *I maestri del racconto italiano*, edited by E. Pagliarani and W. Pedullà, Rizzoli, 1964, was originally conceived as part of a collection of stories, *Passaggi obbligati*, envisioned by Calvino. For more on the story and its genesis, see *Ibidem*, pp. 1204-1205, and D. Scarpa, *op. cit.*, pp. 251-259.

> San Giovanni from his days, trying to set up a modern farm that wasn't enslaved to monoculture, making uncertain investments by multiplying crops, imported varieties, and irrigation systems, all to find another way to propose that would save the spirit of the place while also fostering innovative creativity. It was a relationship with nature that he sought to establish—one of struggle, of domination: to attack it, to modify and force it, but always feeling it alive and whole beneath him.

But there is another passage, very dense and quick, ignored by critics, that constitutes a confession of the son's shared responsibility with the father in contributing to the industrial exploitation of the land: "we should have helped him with everything, to learn how to manage the countryside." Given Calvino's proverbial and meticulous attention to words, I find the use of the verb "governare" (to govern) in 1961, when referring to the countryside, quite astonishing. This verb harks back to the "governance of the garden," a term used by ancient horticulturists for the set of care rules necessary for the creation and preservation of pleasure gardens according to the precepts of the "cultus hortorum."

This story contains a prophetic denunciation of the tragic consequences of an economic paradigm based on profit and financial gain, which seems to characterize the beginning of this third millennium: not only are gardens being destroyed, but also the gardeners, the practitioners of the difficult art of "governing" gardens. Among the causes of these effects, Calvino identifies something deeper and often overlooked: the breakdown of the transmission of the ancient art of "governance" of useful and delightful gardens through family inheritance.

In *Il Giardino fiorito*, the Calvinos had included a section dedicated to gardening questions posed by readers. With simple and precise language, light yet "substantial," surely one of the models for their writer son, Mario and Eva freely shared with amateur gardeners and enthusiasts the seeds of a high-level knowledge that over centuries has defined the foundations of the theory and practice of "governing" nature in the "cultus hortorum." In 1940, this column became a book so that this horticultural correspondence might be useful "to all who cultivate flowers and ornamental plants, helping to overcome difficulties, and contributing to strengthen

the love for their cultivation, a pure enjoyment of the senses and intellect."[9]

If it is easy to see how much of the spirit and essence of Calvino the writer is reflected in these phrases from his parents' introduction to the book, it is equally reasonable to imagine how much the son would have liked to curate a second edition himself at Einaudi.

This has recently come to fruition with Donzelli Publishers. With a new iconographic apparatus of 24 colour plates outside the text, it includes an introduction by Tito Schiva that helps us understand the connection between the work of Calvino's parents and the ecological prophecy of their son:

> In this little book, advice and solutions are offered, sometimes surprisingly relevant today, based on the frugality of resources and respect for the environment in all the balances of life forms, which are now in immense danger from lethal pesticides. In this sense, the collection of *250 questions*. appears to be almost a projection towards that 'biological' future, a term that some now use without exactly knowing what it means, or worse, use to deceive the naive consumer.

4. Conclusion

These are some aspects of the ecological prophecy that Calvino leaves us as a legacy, to identify in the atlas of the infernal condition of our times, as described by Marco Polo in Invisible Cities, what is not hell, so that we may expand it across space and time.

A prophecy that has sown seeds and left a legacy in a representative of the new generation of garden scholars, Marco Martella. With a narrative style very reminiscent of Calvino, Martella, through the voice of Jorn de Précy in a recent text, issues this appeal on the necessity of the garden:

> In the great desert that the world of men has become, we are left with only the garden! It is the most precious and fragile place on earth, the last refuge. What future awaits it? There has never been so much interest in what are often called—with an expression that could not be more frightening — 'green spaces.' In modern neighbourhoods, in the

[9] Mameli Calvino, Eva, and Calvino, Mario. 250 quesiti di giardinaggio risolti. Paravia, 1940; in the new edition (Donzelli, 2011), I would like to highlight the excellent introduction by Tito Schiva, the last director of the Experimental Station founded by the Calvinos until its closure in 2008.

grey and impersonal outskirts of cities, new parks are sprouting up like mushrooms. The number of plants available to us today far exceeds the wildest dreams of past gardeners and continues to grow. (.) In our era, however, the garden remains a stranger or a survivor. In modern society, it has no true place because it embodies everything that Western civilization has left behind: poetry, freedom, deep and simple happiness in existence. (.) Thus, being too old to believe in revolutions, never having had a taste for political manifestos, I recommend only one form of rebellion: gardening. Make gardens! True gardens, of course, wild and outlawed places. (.) Trace your design on the face of the earth, which always willingly lends itself to the dreams of man, plant a garden and take care of it, and also protect those that remain and resist, the old places inhabited by plants that come from afar and continue to dream, despite the senseless clamour that surrounds them. Work with poets, magicians, dancers, and all other artisans of the invisible to restore the mystery of the world to its rightful place.[10]

[10] De Précy, Yorn. *E il giardino creò l'uomo. Un manifesto ribelle e sentimentale per filosofi e giardinieri*. Edited by Marco Martella, Ponte alle Grazie, 2012, p. 120.

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Elettra Solignani

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From Page to Body: The Eros of Reading in Calvino's Difficult Loves and If on a Winter's Night a Traveler[1]

"La pagina scritta gli apriva la vera vita […]
alzando gli occhi ritrovava un casuale ma gradevole accostarsi
di colori e sensazioni, un mondo accessorio e decorativo" (Calvino 2:1134)

Within the varied and intricate landscapes of Italo Calvino's work, his attitudes toward literature shift from a sense of playful experimentation to one of rigorous, almost philosophical precision. From his early fiction to his later publications, the presence of a reader character is a recurring theme, tied closely to the concept of the book as both a physical and conceptual object. However, through a certain analytical lens, it appears that the relationship between the reader and the book evolves over time, eventually incorporating a third, transformative element. The objective of this article is to explore the transition between these two opposing literary approaches and illuminate the pivotal third element that drives this transformation.

In Calvino's earlier writings, a clear detachment exists between the human being—represented through certain characters or the concept of selfhood—and the literary realm, seen either as the act of reading or the book as an object. Yet, this separation gradually gives way to a growing sense of complementarity, ultimately culminating in a fusion within the novel he describes as his "iper-romanzo" (Serra 298-299).

One could even argue that this process extends beyond mere fusion, approaching a state where literature becomes synonymous with language itself, echoing Calvino's later inclination to explore humanity's primal origins in his fiction.[2] Nonetheless, delving further into this dimension lies beyond the scope of this study, which

[1] The following article is an excerpt from a larger study presented by the author at the Gardens of Culture conference in December 2023. The presentation focused on the development of the relationship between the figure of the reader and the object of the book, seen both as a physical and a conceptual entity, from Calvino's early fiction to his later production. For publishing purposes, this extract concentrates exclusively on the correlation between *Gli amori difficili* and *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, and thus underwent modifications.

[2] For further insights, I would recommend Calvino's *Sotto il sole giaguaro* (Vol. 3, 127-148) and Bonsaver's *Il mondo scritto.*

instead focuses on the element that drives the evolution of the reader's relationship with literature.

The initial separation between individuals and the literary world ultimately leads to the objectification of the former, juxtaposed with the anthropomorphisation of the latter, and these transformations are often intertwined with experiences of romance and eroticism. In Calvino's view, literature assumes various roles beyond communication, serving as a foundation for romantic and erotic dynamics. In *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, the boundaries between reader and text blur, embodying this metamorphosis: when writing about Ludmilla and the Reader, the author often chooses the semantic domain of the literary – until the characters morph into a book themselves, while the books they chase mirror their lives. This narrative arc extends across Calvino's works, drawing individuals closer not only to the symbolic realm of literature but also to one another, mirroring his broader exploration of human relationships in his writings.

In line with his predilection for rhetorical devices and layered imagery, Calvino's depictions of eros are intricate, often concealed behind a web of metaphors. This approach is consistent with his theoretical reflections in the essay *Definizioni di territori: l'erotico (Il sesso e il riso)* (Saggi 261), where he advocates for the use of figurative language, namely the 'traslati', to express such relationships. The interplay between eros and reading is a recurring theme in Calvino's work, carrying substantial weight in the broader literary tradition (Ferroni 35). Throughout Western literature, analogies between passion and reading have long evoked Dante's portrayal of Paolo and Francesca in *Inferno* V, where the fulfilment of eros is equated with the reading of a chivalric romance, a moment that ultimately leads to the lovers' tragic downfall. From classical to modern poetics, this association underscores the inherent romantic and erotic potential of reading, a motif that resonates deeply within Calvino's literary landscape.

In his debut novel, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, the author deliberately accentuates "i motivi della violenza e del sesso" (Calvino 1:1185–1204), a choice he attributes to the essence of the narrative and its thematic focus. In this work, the experience of reading is notably detached

from erotic themes[3], as the pervasive depiction of violence overshadows both aspects alike. In contrast, in the *Antenati* trilogy, the motif of reading is more prominent, with characters like il Buono and Cosimo assuming roles as avid readers, and Bradamante as a narrator. While romantic themes frequently emerge, they are often functional and intertwined with broader metaphorical constructs. Rather than equating literature with love, the trilogy's protagonists seem to embody distinct literary approaches, each reflective of specific historical and literary traditions. Their attempts to navigate romance and sexuality are marked by internal conflict, revealing a deeper sense of incompleteness and an ongoing struggle to forge connections with others (Calvino 1:1208-1219).

During the triennium 1955-1958, coinciding with Calvino's work on the *Antenati* trilogy, he experienced a significant romantic relationship that profoundly impacted his literary production. Certain characters from the trilogy, as well as *La nuvola di smog*, were inspired by this relationship, with *Il barone rampante* dedicated to the woman in question (Corti 303-308). Their correspondence reveals a reciprocal influence between their love and Calvino's literary work. The writer openly expressed how deeply this relationship shaped his creative process, asking her, "come ho fatto a scrivere per tanto tempo senza la tua lettura," and reflecting, "non avrei mai pensato che innamorarmi di te incidesse così profondamente in me, fino a toccare, a aprire una crisi anche nella strumentazione più tecnica del mio lavoro, cioè nel mio stile" (Corti 301-302). In his writings, the *topos* of literature and eros finds its most complete expression in *L'avventura di un lettore* from *Gli Amori Difficili* and in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*.

In *L'avventura di un lettore*, the protagonist Amedeo Oliva is portrayed as a methodical and analytical persona, more closely aligned with the world of fiction than with reality. The novella presents Amedeo on a seaside retreat with the primary intent of reading. His solitary endeavour, however, is interrupted by the presence of a woman sunbathing nearby, whom he initially views as a mere distraction. As Amedeo's gaze shifts between the lines of his book and the woman's body, the boundaries between literature and eroticism begin to blur. Calvino

[3] A direct quote from the text: "Ma Pin non capisce che gusto ci sia a leggere e s'annoia. Dice. – Berretta-di-Legno, cosa dirà tua moglie quella notte? – Quale notte? – fa Zena il Lungo detto Berretta-di-Legno […]. – Quella notte che andrete insieme a letto per la prima volta e tu continuerai a leggere libri per tutto il tempo!" (Calvino 1:76)

captures this moment, writing: "Ora lo stesso sguardo che scorreva le righe incontrava, ogni volta che doveva andare a capo, appena al di là del margine della pagina, le gambe della villeggiante solitaria. […] Non sapeva se guardarla facendo finta di leggere o se leggere facendo finta di guardarla" (Calvino 2:1131-1140). Their interaction unfolds in tandem with the rhythm of Amedeo's reading, culminating in a sexual encounter during which Amedeo maintains his hold on the book to keep the mark on the page, symbolizing the merging of the literary and the physical.

Amedeo's voyeuristic gaze—reflective of a broader discourse within Calvino's oeuvre[4] —transcends eroticism to embody an analytical pursuit of knowledge. He observes the woman as he would a book, emptying the erotic circumstance from its materiality (Bonsaver 222). It is intriguing to consider that Amedeo Oliva—whose identity hinges on the boundary he confidently establishes between reality and the printed word, thereby critiquing the peril of existing solely within literary fiction—may be urged by his author to venture beyond these confines. Critics suggest that Amedeo, the 'Lettore,' would eventually make it but only twenty-seven years later his seaside escapade, as the *Lettore* protagonist of *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (Ricci 78).

Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore serves as a 'modern *galeotto*' (Ricci 78), orchestrating the encounter between the *Lettore* and the *Lettrice*. Through a series of interrupted readings, these two characters embark on a mutual exploration and a desperate quest for lost books. Much like Paolo and Francesca, their readings spark an erotic and romantic relationship, yet the resulting rupture leads to a diametrically opposite happy ending: "Anticamente un racconto aveva solo due modi per finire" as Calvino writes in one of the final passages of the novel, "l'eroe e l'eroina si sposavano oppure morivano. Il senso ultimo a cui rimandano tutti i racconti ha due facce: la continuità della vita, l'inevitabilità della morte" (Calvino 2:869).

Contradicting Dante's "da quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante" (77), the Reader and Ludmilla continue reading, albeit in a manner distinct from Amedeo Oliva's. While Amedeo's

[4] For further insights, I would recommend Bonsaver's aforementioned book, Musarra-Schrøder's *Italo Calvino tra i cinque sensi*, Gabriele's, *Italo Calvino: Eros and Language*, and Belgradi's *Il voyeurismo e il desiderio dell'io.*

experiences of the world and selfhood serve as supplementary to the prioritarian connection to the book object, Ludmilla introduces the Reader to the tangible reality beyond fiction. In the novel closing lines, the Reader ultimately leaves his book to join Ludmilla. This romantic relationship is constructed within a fragmented narrative yet is integral, and not accessory to their readings.

In *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, the literary and the real converge, facilitating a fusion of literature and self. From the very beginning, Calvino alludes to the physicality of the reader, intertwining the semantic domains of the body and the literary. This reflection on physicality is developed in both metaphorical and literary terms. The novel presents various approaches to the characters' bodies, which all seem to be readable, corroborating Calvino's theory of the readability of reality. Some bodies transform into the shape of a printed book, becoming objects of scrutiny—as exemplified by the Readers, "[…] passa in rassegna il tuo corpo come scorrendo l'indice dei capitoli" (Calvino 2:726). Others communicate in different ways, with both instances carrying significance. Lotaria, for example, champions the body as a signifier, proclaiming: "Il corpo s'afferma come soggetto! Il corpo è un fine e non un mezzo! Il corpo significa! Comunica! Grida! Contesta!" (Calvino 2:829).

Throughout the novel, lexical choices hint at the physical pleasure of reading, culminating in the description of the protagonists' sexual intercourse in chapter seven. The use of *traslati* here reaches the "traslato definitivo" (Puglisi 392, 396).

> Siete a letto insieme, Lettore e Lettrice. Dunque è venuto il momento di chiamarvi con la seconda persona plurale, operazione molto impegnativa, perché equivale a considerarvi un unico oggetto (Calvino 2:761).

Calvino's layered figurative language in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* is rooted in the semantic field of reading. As the two characters proceed in their erotic interaction, the language shifts from colloquial to more literary and abstract. The use of technical-scientifical vocabulary (e.g., *vibrazioni*, *moti ondosi*, *sistematica*, *canali di informazione*) alongside poetic terms (e.g., *desiderio*, *annuvolarsi*, *sogni*) and rhetorical devices (e.g., accumulation, metaphor, synecdoche) supports the complex analogy that the author goes unravelling. If described in these

terms, for Calvino, there seems to be little distinction between sexual intercourse and the act of reading. Both in the description of the said intercourse and the mystified objectification she undergoes because of the male characters[5], Ludmilla emerges as a pivotal figure, furthering the figurative process by transforming into a book herself. She even becomes part of the interrupted readings that disrupt her reality, as during the quest for those, both the reader and the Reader, grasp hints at her in the texts. The *Lettore* engages in a philological adventure on a quest for her and the books alike, as they become a whole.

> Lettrice, ora sei letta. Il tuo corpo viene sottoposto a una lettura sistematica […]. Non solo il corpo è in te oggetto di lettura: il corpo conta in quanto parte d'un insieme d'elementi complicati, non tutti visibili e non tutti presenti ma che si manifestano in avvenimenti visibili e immediati […] tutti i poveri alfabeti attraverso i quali un essere umano crede in certi momenti di star leggendo un altro essere umano (Calvino 2:762-763).

From Calvino's debut novel to his final publications, love – whether positively or negatively connoted – remains elusive and difficult to articulate, often represented through the act of reading and the object of the book itself, as the quintessential medium of communication. The strong erotic connotation of the book-reader identification process in Calvino's fiction encapsulates both the incommunicable mysteries and the marvels of sexuality. Such thematic evolution develops alongside the author's literary trajectory, with the link between reading and eros becoming more pronounced as his writings progress. From characters like Pin or the *Antenati* to Ludmilla and the Reader, Calvino's exploration of literary identity embraces eros. The relationship with the book becomes transformative, fostering completeness not only for the reader and the text but also in their connection to others.

[5] It is worth mentioning that they all – the Reader, Flannery, and Ermes Marana – attempt to express their feelings through the medium of books, to compensate the inadequacy they feel in comparison to Ludmilla.

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Enzo Fileno Carabba

Author

The Branches of Calvino*

Like many of my generation, I grew up with Italo Calvino. As a child, I read The Ancestor's Trilogy, or it was read to me. It seemed to me a free and happy inventive explosion. Many years later, I again encountered Calvino. But he had changed: lucid, precise, composed, serious, perpetually awake: with a spotlight on the world. But how, I wondered? Where had that other Calvino gone? The one I kept in my most sheltered and shady internal thoughts? That dreamy guy with whom I could confide directly through fantasy, without going through the catechism? My imaginary friend? The one who spoke openly with forbidden words such as "fun," "escape," "disorientation"? And he had experienced it! Who had broken him in half? In reality my friend was still there, but less visible.

I think the paradoxicality of Calvino lies in this: on the one hand he is or was the king of Italian literature. On the other he is a gigantic foreign entity. His fantastical and mocking side is the very expression of the Mediterranean tradition. A world of sparks and expressive leaps ("the clash of words with new circumstances") that comes from the terraces overlooking the sea. But all that has been marginalized in favor of flat, uniform, urbanized thinking. Yet, for me, *in me*, it is his Mediterranean aspect that endures—far-reaching thought, not one-way thinking like that of predators and preachers. Thinking that, I would dare say, is of vegetal origin. It is no coincidence that in *American Lessons* he quotes a verse by Dante that thirsty plants would appreciate: "then it rained down into the highest imagination."

The photosynthesis of words. When I was a child and couldn't write yet, they gave me notebooks to draw in. In those days, notebooks had watermark signs in them, almost invisible curved lines. I thought that they were the famous writings that people seemed to attribute great importance to. I would trace the watermark lines with a pen, making them visible. I would then go to my family and declare, "I've learned to write." I was certain I had written something important. Those black lines were a refuge, and it amused everyone.

* Translated by Claire Kolb.

My father, who knew how to play (and gamble), said not to rush to learn to write, as other children in other families did, consequentially anticipating the start of the dreaded elementary school. Instead, he introduced me to comics. Just by looking at the pictures, one could understand the story, even if my understanding turned out to be completely different from how the author had imagined it. But this had no - and I mean no - importance. Dad was good at downplaying things: "They call me to lower the level," he would say. My comic book phase was followed by an adventurous period where I immersed myself in drawings, imagining the words. I looked at the pictures and heard the words by closing my eyes. They were the same comics that Italo Calvino had studied, allowing me to learn things that someone who only reads books cannot know. It may seem strange since Calvino was born in 1923, and I in 1966. But that is how it was.

In Calvino's *American Lessons*, he declares that his imagination was influenced mainly by the figures from *Corriere dei Piccoli.* From ages three to thirteen, before the figures began to move thanks to his passion for cinema ("an absolute obsession"), there were the "decisive years": especially from three to six. He looked at the figures of *Corriere dei Piccoli,* disassembled them, and reassembled them in his mind. "When I learned to read, the advantage I gained from it was minimal," he wrote.

I was born many years later, but during the time I'm talking about, my father was writing a book on the *Corriere dei Piccoli* comics. We had the complete collection at home, including issues from the 1920s. When I read Calvino, I recognize the logical mechanisms I encountered in those panels. There was, for example, Bilbolbul, a character created by Antonio Mussino. He's an African boy protagonist of many adventures, but the greatest adventure is expressive and consists of the materialization of sentences. If he turns red from embarrassment, he is truly painted red, requiring a thorough wash. If he stretches his eyes to see into the distance, his eyes pop out of the sockets like stretched tentacles. If fear gives him wings, then some kind soul must cut these wings with scissors because wings at the feet are very uncomfortable for walking. Taking phrases literally was an instructive game. A fundamental experience. If someone says, for example, "This sunset opens my heart," and for some reason, you don't like

emphatic expressions (Calvino preferred to be laconic), when you really visualize their heart open, you feel better. Calvino wrote that he didn't like the verb "express" because it made him think of squeezing a lemon, if I remember correctly.

Another character acting behind the scenes in Calvino is Pier Lambiccchi, created by Giovanni Manca. He is a solitary scientist who invents a paint that brings images to life. Cover a painting with archivernice, and the figure comes to life and bursts into reality, ready to mix all the colors. Archivernice allows us to have the historical character among us not as they truly were (a pedantic obsession that now dominates us) but precisely as someone has imagined them. This is true, for example, with the historical characters that appear in The Ancestors' Trilogy. After all, this is the truth of historical and imaginary figures: they act on us according to how we are convinced they are.

Finally, let's mention Pierino, created by Antonio Rubino. Pierino is a good kid who owns a puppet that he hates. He tries to get rid of it, throwing it away or destroying it, yet the puppet always returns. To me, this image represents Calvino's entire body of work, made up of two halves in a harmonious struggle with each other. On one side, the clear, precise, always clever author. An author (if I were to rely on this description) I would respect without reading. A kind of top student who always says the right thing: this is indeed a very popular trend. On the other side, the paradoxical, unsettling, unleashed author, who has escaped from some prison, amusing and profound. (Indeed, the opposite of amusing is not profound but boring). Also, dreamy. There is a passage in the "Autobiography of a Spectator" where young Italo is at the cinema. During the intermission, a metal dome opens, and he sees "the slow passage of a cloud that could come from other continents, from other centuries. On summer evenings, the dome remained open even during the screenings: the presence of the firmament incorporated all distances into a single universe." This is a vision.

Moreover, Italo Calvino's passion for combinatorial techniques and wordplay comes from a desire to lose control: "the juxtaposition of concepts that one has reached casually, unexpectedly, unleashes a preconscious idea, that is, half buried and erased from our consciousness."

And even the idea that Calvino is always precise is a cliché that everyone inexplicably seems to believe, as if they hadn't actually read his work. An author who is always precise can only be boring. Calvino, on the other hand, is very capable of writing where someone had assumed "command of such and such troops" in some army. That is, he is very capable of being vague. By the way, if some of my quotes, mostly made from memory, prove to be imprecise, let's consider it a tribute to our Author.

If I close my eyes, I immediately know that I come from an ancient Mediterranean tradition, made up of fantastic ramifications and paradoxical roots that feed on true experience. Even tufts of sneers appear at times. I feel terribly discriminated against by the direction that culture has taken, which to be considered such must be serious and moralistic. A twist which I don't know is either neo-Victorian, post-Taliban or what. Not because of the contents (those change) but due to the tendency where being incessantly indignant is seen as a sign of moral health. Why should someone who is always indignant (and therefore censorious) be preferable to someone who is indignant (and therefore censorious) less? It is a belief that we carry within us, but it should be demonstrated: if it weren't for the fact that it is a dogma. And it seems a little too convenient of a way to feel superior. I find comfort in Italo Calvino also because (he is an alien in this too) he almost never gets indignant, or at least he doesn't show it by spitting fire and flames every time he disagrees with someone. His two halves combine seriousness, accuracy, and analysis with the twist you don't expect. In fact, it is true that he is intelligent and hardworking, but these qualities have degenerated into horror many times during human history. Luckily, he is above all surprising and self-critical. There is no sentence in his work that does not contain a surprise (apart from one: a praise of the Soviet Union, which seems very much a product of the times). I think, I repeat, that this is thanks to his childhood spent among plants, which transmit branched thought; and from the ancient habit of moving on terraces poised over the Mediterranean. A child raised on terraces will never be able to have a clear thought.

In the *Odyssey* , Ulysses at a certain point escapes the Cyclops Polyphemus by saying that his name is Nobody, so when Polyphemus calls the other Cyclops and they ask him who he is angry with, he replies "Nobody" and then they don't help him. This scene left me perplexed

when I was a boy, I didn't believe it. Too clownish. Instead, now this mythical comic-book hoax seems wonderful to me. That the hero at the basis of our civilization escapes danger, not with seriousness, but with ingenuity, risk, and the grace of a play on words is a lesson and a reason for hope.

In many traditions (including ours) humanity's childhood takes place in an earthly paradise: that is, we could say, inside a garden. This obviously has a meaning. Plants influence the way we think and breathe, even when we don't realize it. In *Italo's Garden* I talk about the influence of plants on Italo Calvino, the decisive contribution of vegetal thought to his imagination. It is no coincidence, it seems to me, that Calvino wrote many books with a branching structure: forests in which to get lost.

Calvino spent his childhood in the experimental floriculture station at Villa Meridiana, in Sanremo. It was run by his parents, illustrious scientists who cataloged everything. Anyone who grows up in an earthly paradise feels, sooner or later, the desire to leave it. All stories, and sometimes even personal experience, confirm this. And so, at a certain point, Italo moved away from plants and cataloguing, instead trying to catalog everything. He threw the gardening tools into the air and ran towards the city without waiting for them to fall on his head. But sometimes what you reject today awaits you tomorrow. The plants had now entered him, he carried them inside him. In fact, sometimes he felt a strange sensation: it was the restless vitality of invisible seeds and non-existent roots which, who knows how, from the dark center of his rationality, were capable of exerting pressure towards the fantastic light. So he wrote *The Baron in the Trees*, which is also the story of a man who, by climbing trees, seeks the right distance from life's problems. The story of an attempt to make space. The story of how it is possible to transfigure the things we love - which we realize we love – in order to let them flourish. *Italo's Garden* is the story of this transfiguration, of this flowering.

Paolo Albani

OpLePo

Calvino Oulipiano: Rules and Inventions[1]

When we talk about Italo Calvino (1923-1985) we talk about a writer-world, in the sense that he helps us to know the World, inside and outside of books,[2] and also in the sense, I add, that Calvino is "a world of things": writer of narrative texts linked to the resistance, texts of social commitment, fantasy; essayist; scholar of fairy tales; author of works for music;translator; cartoonist; author of song lyrics; author of the story or screenplay of several films; etc.[3]

In my presentation, I address an aspect wrongly considered minor in Calvino's literary activity, namely that of play, linked in particular to his participation in the Oulipo (*Ou*vroir de *Li*ttérature *P*otentielle) activity. Calvino was admitted to the Oulipo as a "foreign member" with the title of *Brigadier*, through the good offices of Raymond Queneau, on 14 February 1973, Valentine's Day, as shown in the minutes of the meeting on that date: "Calvino, Matthews: members étrangers à l'unanimité."[4]

The Oulipo (translated into Italian by Calvino as "Opificio di Letteratura Potenziale"; *ouvroir* in French designates the sewing workshop in a nunnery or in a charitable institution) is "a singular coterie of men of letters, dedicated to devising bizarre inventions starting from

[1] Editor's Note: To preserve original attributions and avoid citation errors, full bibliographic footnotes have been retained instead of converting to parenthetical references. Translated by Claire Kolb

[2] This is a definition from Marco Belpoliti, *Instructions for Use*, introduction to the *Calvino A-Z Encyclopedia*, edited by Belpoliti himself, Electa, Milan 2023, pp. 18-21.

[3] These numerous aspects of Calvino's multifaceted personality are masterfully narrated in the *Fabulous Calvino Exhibition. The World as a Work of Art. Carpaccio, de Chirico, Gnoli, Melotti and others*, edited by Mario Barenghi, Scuderie del Quirinale, Rome, from 13 October 2023 to 4 February 2024. *Fabulous Calvino* comes from the title of the article by Gore Vidal published in the New York Review of Books of 1974, regarding *Invisible Cities*.

[4] Michele Costagliola d'Abele, *L'Oulipo e Calvino*, Peter Lang SA, Editions scientifiques internationales, Bern 2014, pag. 88; Costagliola d'Abele consulted the annual files of the Oulipo minutes from 1971 to 1985, for a total of 169 dossiers mensuels; In Autumn 2005, the Oulipo Archives were transferred to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, and are kept at the headquarters of the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, in Paris, accessible only with the prior authorization of the secretary of the group. On the relationship between Calvino and Oulipo, see also: Marcel Bénabou, *Si par une nuit d'hiver un oulipien*, magazine littéraire, 274, février 1990, pp. 41-44; Raffaele Aragona, *Italo Calvino oulipien*, in Marie Caroline, Jean-Loup Champion, *Oulipo*, Éditions de la BnF, Éditions Gallimard, Paris 2014, pp. 122-126; Marcel Bénabou, *L'Oulipo between France and Italy. The Example of Calvino*, in Raffaele Aragona, edited by *Italo Calvino. Potential Paths,* inline edition, Bologna 2023, pp. 19-31; Domenico Scarpa, *Oulipo, Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, in Id., *Calvino fa la conchilla. The Construction of a Writer,* Hoepli, Milan 2023, pp. 470-475. There is a counterpart of the French group in Italy, Oplepo, founded in Capri in 1990 by Raffaele Aragona, Domenico D'Oria and Ruggero Campagnoli.

severely constraining formal rules, marked by a strong mathematicizing taste,"[5] born within one of the numerous Working Sub-commissions of the College of 'Pataphysics.

The "potential" character of the literature practiced by Oulipo lies in the fact that it is a literature that still does not exist, still to be created, to be discovered in already existing works or to be invented through the use of new linguistic procedures, a literature driven by idea that creativity and imagination find a stimulus in respecting rules, constraints, constraints (*contraintes*), explicit or hidden, such as that of writing a text without ever using a specific letter or more than one (lipogramma). Calvino's Oulipian experiments can be divided into:

– writings attributable to the type of creations that go by the name of Syntactic Oulipo (OuSin), i.e. those texts whose fabrication is based on a series of formal contraintes,[6] in other words texts "constructed starting from a series of restrictions which act on lower linguistic levels which do not concern, that is, the sphere of meaning; their aesthetic value, consequently, is not determined by semantic effects, but rather derives from more specifically linguistic-structural and prosodic[7] components." This is *the Illustrated Little Syllable* (*by Georges Perec), Poème à lipogramme vocaliques progressifs and Georges Perec oulipien;*

– Oulipiens writings of lesser scope, short compositions made up of Oulipian exercises, poems, stories that date back to the Parisian period of Italo Calvino, of fundamental importance to "better evaluate the horizon in which his books of the decade 1969-1979 are inserted, from The Castle of Crossed Destinies to If a Traveler on a Winter's Night."[8] This is the case of *Hommes illustres + 7 and The Fire of the Abominable House*;

– Projects announced but not implemented;

[5] Mario Barenghi, *Poems and Inventions Oulipiennes*, in Italo Calvino, *Novels and Stories*, edition directed by Claudio Milanini, edited by Mario Barenghi and Bruno Falcetto, with a bibliography of Italo Calvino's writings edited by Luca Baranelli, third volume, Mondadori , Milan 1994, pp. 1239-1245. The exercises and first creations of the Oulipo members appear in Oulipo, *La littérature potentielle*, Gallimard, Paris 1973.

[6] On the distinction between Semantic Oulipo (OuSem) and Syntactic Oulipo (OuSin), see Jacques Roubaud, *Calvino and the search for semantic Oulipo*, in Raffaele Aragona, edited by, *Italo Calvino. Potential paths*, cit., pp. 171-176.

[7] Michele Costagliola d'Abele, *op. cit*., page 156.

[8] Claudio Milanini, *Introduction* to Italo Calvino, *Novels and Stories*, cit., pp. IX-XXXIII, quoted from page. XXI.

– Finally, the two Oulipian novels, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies (1969) and If a Traveler on a Winter's Night (1979)*.

The Illustrated Little Syllabus (by Georges Perec) was released in a first version (19 exercises) in issue 1 of *Il Caffè* in March 1977, accompanied by a series of nineteenth-century stencils. Like Georges Perec's *Petit abécédaire illustré* which inspired it,[9] Calvin's *Syllable* is also composed of very short texts whose key is given at the end: each of them is semantically equivalent to another text of a few syllables which in turn is equivalent phonetically to the succession of a consonant and five vowels as in the syllabaries: BA-BE-BI-BO-BU, CA-CE CI-CO-CU, DA-DE-DI-DO-DU, and so on for all the consonants of the alphabet."[10] An example for everyone, the one relating to SA-SE-SI-SO-SU:

To convince the owner of a nightclub to hire her, a stripper assures him of her effectiveness in arousing spectators' excitement.

– Sa? Sessi isso su!

A *Poème à lipogramme vocaliques progressifs*,[11] written in November 1977

to pay homage to Queneau, in which the vowels within the first line of the first quatrain all appear in the first word (*flowerbeds*), then disappear one after the other in the following words (*obliate, yellow, grass, sa*), i.e. they contain 4, 3, 2, 1 vowels; in the second verse the words contain 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 vowels; the second quatrain opens with the series "aa, ee, ii, oo, uu" and then uses only the vowel "e."

The poem *Georges Perec Oulipien*, composed between 17 and 21 March 1983, uses only the letters of the title (the Oulipian procedure is called "beau présent"), released in the collective plaquette *A Georges Perec*, Bibliothèque Oulipienne N° 23 of 1987.[12]

[9] Published privately in 1969, then in Oulipo, La littérature potentielle, cit., pp. 235-240 and pages. 301.
[10] Italo Calvino, *Piccolo Sillabario Illustrato (by Georges Perec)*, il Caffè, 1, 1977, pp. 7-18; Italo Calvino, *Novels and Stories*, cit., pp. 334-341; also in Ruggero Campagnoli, Yves Hersant (ed.), *Potential Literature* (Creazioni Ri-creazioni Ricreazioni), Clueb, Bologna 1985, pp. 224-231, and Ruggero Campagnoli, edited by, *Oulipiana*, Editorial Guide, Naples 1995, pp. 55-61.
[11] Oulipo, *A Raymond Queneau*, Bibliothèque Oulipienne N° 4, Paris 1977, pp. 49-73; then in Oulipo, *La Bibliothèque Oulipienne*, préface by Noël Arnaud, volume 1, Éditions Ramsay, 1987, Éditions Seghers, Paris 1990, pag. 63; with the title *Progressive Vocal Lipograms*, L'Europeo (Magazine), 23 August 1979; and in Italo Calvino, *Novels and Stories*, cit., pag. 333.
[12] Oulipo, La Bibliothèque Oulipienne, précédé des Deux Manifestes de François Le Lionnais, volume 2, Éditions Ramsay, 1987; Éditions Seghers, Paris 1990, p. 110.

It is interesting to note that these Oulipian texts, *Poème à lipogramme vocaliques progressifs* and *Georges Perec oulipien*, are the only poems written by Calvino. In reality, some poetic proofs are preserved in Calvin's manuscripts, such as the sonnet *Nocturne*, or the "*hermetic lyric*" *Chiarodiluna*, which has this annotation: "No, no! Compassion! I will not do it again! I promise I won't do it again!" Calvino's poetic attempts are "sporadic and all variously occasional and provisional."[13]

L'Hommes illustres + 7 is an extension of the so-called "S + 7 method," invented by Jean Lescure, one of the first members of Oulipo. The Lescurian method consists in replacing each noun in a text with the one that is in the next seventh position of a chosen dictionary. Calvino's exercise, published in the *Atlas de littérature potentielle* (1981),[14] starts from a dictionary of characters and replaces the seventh character name that follows in alphabetical order in the starting dictionary in a passage full of proper names.[15]

The story *The Fire of the Abominable House*, from which Calvino would have liked to make a real novel entitled *L'ordre dans le crime* (The Order in Crime); the story was published in the Italian edition of "Playboy," February-March 1973. The first pages of the story appeared in the French version, *L'incendie de la maison maudite*, in paragraph 5 of the IV section, dedicated to OULIPO ET INFORMATIQUE , of the *Atlas de littérature potentielle* (1981).[16]

Two novels belong to the last group of "Oulipian exercises," in which the combinatorial element, i.e. the variations on a theme, a procedure dear to Queneau in the *Exercices de style*

[13] Mario Barenghi, Poems and inventions oulipiennes, cit., pag. 1239.
[14] Oulipo, Atlas de littérature potentielle, Gallimard, Paris 1981, pp. 169-170. The volume is edited by Calvino himself, who also chooses the title (preferred to Traité or Précis de littérature potentielle and Littérature: mode d'emploi) as demonstrated by Marcel Bénabou, L'Oulipo tra Francia e Italia. The example of Calvino, cit., pp. 19-31, see page. 27.
[15] Mario Barenghi reports that there is a typewritten text by Calvino dated 2 November 1977 with the indication anecdote P + 7 for Oulipo, where presumably P stands for Character (Mario Barenghi, Poesie e invenzioni oulipiennes, cit., p . 1244).
[16] Oulipo, Atlas de littérature potentielle, cit., pp. 319-331. Originally the novel planned by Calvino was called Les mystères de la maison abominable: On 8 November 1972, participating as a guest of honor in a monthly meeting at François Le Lionnais, Calvino, after having been introduced by Queneau, the which "marks the existence, in some of Calvino's works, of Oulipian-type concerns," presents the participants with a novel project: The Mysteries of the Abominable House. In his project "four particularly perverse characters commit twelve crimes, but it is not said who commits what; it is the reader's job to find out"; the eminently combinatorial character of the proposal suddenly captures the attention of the Oulipians and lays the foundations for Calvino's inclusion in the group, which is officially ratified during the meeting of 14 February 1973" (Michele Costagliola d'Abele, op. cit. , page 201, my translation from French).

and the *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*, plays a decisive role.

The first is *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*,[17] originally published in the *Tarocchi* volume. *The Visconti deck of Bergamo and New York* (1969),[18] therefore before Calvino entered the Oulipo, where the narrative path is entrusted to the combination of the cards of a tarot deck, used, Calvino says in the presentation of his book, as a combinatorial narrative machine.

A group of wayfarers meet in a castle: each has an adventure to tell but cannot do so because he has lost his ability to speak.[19] To communicate, the wayfarers then use tarot cards, reconstructing their vicissitudes thanks to them.

The other novel that smells of "oulipianness" is *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*.[20] There are two writings[21] in which Calvino took the trouble to explain the structure of the novel, or more precisely "hyper-novel,"[22] which has as its protagonists a female Reader and a male Reader who attempt to read a novel (precisely entitled *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*) and who for various reasons (defects, thefts, seizures, censorship of the various copies) are always forced to interrupt reading the book they are reading. Parallel to the reading of the various incipits of the novels of imaginary authors, there is the love story of the Reader (explicitly called the Reader) and Ludmilla (the Reader) which follows a traditional narrative scheme in which the happy ending is not lacking (the two protagonists they get married).

A sort of anticipation, in a small way, of the structure of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*

[17] Italo Calvino, The castle of crossed destinies, Turin, Einaudi, 1973.
[18] Italo Calvino, Tarot. The Visconti deck of Bergamo and New York, Franco Maria Ricci editore, Parma 1969.
[19] This contract is defined by Marcel Bénabou as lipofonia, coining a neologism that follows the rules of lexical formation of the term lipogramma (Michele Costagliola d'Abele, op. cit ., page 111 and page 180).
[20] Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter Night a Traveler*, Einaudi, Turin 1979. In a squared piece of paper, kept in a folder bearing the words materials discarded from If on a night, Calvino wrote down a list of possible titles of this novel: Debut, Prelude, Here the adventure begins, Who begins well, The entrance, Alfa, Everything is about to begin (cassato), Who opens, closes, The start, Raise the anchor, Sailing to the winds , The beautiful day can be seen from the morning, Overture, The initiation, Primordi" (Italo Calvino, *Novels and Stories*, second volume, cit., page 1386).
[21] Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Narrator*, Alfabeta, I, 8, December 1979, pp. 4-5; then, *as Presentation, in If on a winter's night a traveller*, Oscar Mondadori, Milan 1994, pp. V-XV; Italo Calvino*, Comment j'ai écrit un de mes livres*, Bibliothèque Oulipienne N° 20, Paris 1983; then in Oulipo, *La Bibliothèque Oulipienne*, volume 2, cit., pp. 25-44; There is an Italian translation of this text in Ruggero Campagnoli, edited by, *Oulipiana*, cit., pp. 153-170.
[22] This is what Calvino calls him in the American lesson on multiplicity (Italo Calvino, *American Lessons*, Garzanti, Milan 1988, page 117). Remeber that Perec's *La Vie mode d'emploi* is subtitled: *Romans*, in the plural.

is found in Calvino's story *The Decapitation of the Leaders*, published in 1969 in *Il Caffè*,[23] in which he proposes a model of utopian society, i.e. a political system based on the ritual killing of the entire ruling class at regular intervals. There are four "outline chapters," explains Calvino, of a book that he is planning and which he will not finish. He then adds:

> Each of the chapters that I am now presenting could be the beginning of a different book [as in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, ed.]; the order numbers they carry do not therefore imply a succession.

A curiosity, to conclude. Calvino's "combinatorial" passion is demonstrated, albeit marginally, by the 39 anagrams (in the anagram the same letters of a word or phrase are recombined in order to obtain words or phrases with different meanings) of his name, made by Calvino: Vito Alcalino, Avo Antillico, Clio Tavolina, Latino Cavoli, Nicola Volati, Catilina Volo, Tonio Cavalli, Lola Cativoni, etc.

[23] Italo Calvino, *The beheading of the Chiefs*, il Caffè, 4, ag. (Dec.) 1969, pp. 3-14; then in Id., *Before you say Hello*, cit., pp. 126-139, here the word chiefs has a lowercase c. On the influence of the idea of an upside-down world codified by Mikhail Bakhtin on the writing of this unfinished novel by Calvino, see: Marco Piana, *L'utopia corporea. Italo Calvino and the world upside down*, Carte italiane, volume 9, 2013, pp. 53-71.

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In Calvino's Library: Reading Classics in Middle School

I worked fifteen years in publishing; during that time I pursued a doctorate in Italian Literature at University La Sapienza in Rome. Then, about ten years ago, I began teaching Italian in middle school. As a teacher, one of the challenges I face is trying to help students discover the joy of reading. I do believe that it is possible for children to appreciate classics, even those commonly considered boring and "heavy." These books are often despised during the school years, only to be rediscovered later in life.

At school I read aloud with my students but I also ask them to read on their own at home. I always try not to spoil the pleasure of a good book. In my work I keep in mind the lesson I learned from Italo Calvino: we should discover the classics without any intermediaries. Critical discourse is certainly necessary, but only later on. In this paper I will illustrate the tools I use to keep my students engaged and how Calvino's works can be a useful resource.

1. A Squirrel in the Library

Six Memos for the Next Millennium is one of Calvino's most quoted works. As we know, he should have presented them at Harvard in the autumn of 1985 but he died in September and they were published posthumously in 1988. They were translated into many languages and immediately had a huge success. Many scholars praise this book because it anticipated some of the fundamental issues of our present, but others, especially in Italy, have been willing to prove that it is highly overrated. For example Claudio Giunta condemns Calvino's tendency to compare texts on the basis of analogies that are only superficial and considers the *Memos* largely imprecise and unfocused.

In my opinion, both supporters and detractors often fail to consider Calvino's target audience. Keeping the recipient in mind, without any prejudice, we can observe how the author creates chemical reactions on each page by simply juxtaposing elements which are extremely different from each other. Calvino approaches the classics from a writer's perspective. He appears to be up-to-date and competent on specialist literature, but he is not a scholar and does

not even pretend to be one. Indeed, he sometimes even commits some technical missteps.[1] Calvino's readings may not always be philologically orthodox but, through his lens, many classics take on a completely different light.

Calvino has often been compared to a squirrel. This fitting image first appeared in Cesare Pavese's review of the novel *The path of the spider's nests*: "We could then say that Calvino's cunning, the squirrel of the pen, was this: to climb the trees, more for play than for fear" (1947).[2] Calvino himself clearly liked this idea: when the *Path* was republished a few years later, he inserted his friend's words in the introduction. And in the *Memos* he will recall that at the time of his first literary attempts he hoped to possess a snappy *agility*.

For these reasons, I like to use this image to picture Calvino as a quick and agile squirrel who jumps across centuries and geographical borders creating connections between authors so distant from each other.[3] It is not an erudite game: he was not an exhibitionist, as testified by many intellectuals who knew him personally.

In the heart of "Lightness," after having spoken of ancient, medieval and modern authors, and before starting his overview again, Calvino says: "I think that with these definitions I can begin to leaf through the books in my library, seeking examples of lightness" (1988, 17-18).[4] In 2020, the Central National Library of Rome established the Italo Calvino Room, which preserves his library together with the furniture from his Roman home.[5] I like to imagine the writer moving in front of these bookshelves, now reading an eighteenth-century English novel, now picking up a Renaissance treatise in search of a quotation.[6]

If we join him in opening these books, we may discover that they can speak to us directly. They carry the traces of the readings that came before ours, but Calvino in *Why read*

[1] See, just as an example, in the lecture *Leggerezza* an attempt at textual analysis of Cavalcanti's sonnet *Biltà di donna* compared with *Inferno* XIV, 30 which presents several inaccuracies in terminology and procedure.
[2] "L'Unità", 26 October 1947, in the column "Cronache letterarie." The expression was used by Giorgio Biferali in the title of a recent book about Calvino for young readers (La Nuova Frontiera, 2017).
[3] In *The Baron in the Trees*, Calvino tells that Cosimo keeps books in hanging libraries, constantly changing their place, because books are like birds.
[4] In 1984 in a conference he stated that we can only find the truth by chasing it from the pages of one volume to those of another.
[5] See http://www.bncrm.beniculturali.it/it/3287/sala-italo-calvino.
[6] Calvino speaks suggestively about the books he owned in *Hermit in Paris*, text taken from an interview conducted in 1974 by Valerio Riva for Swiss TV (Rsi) and directed by Nereo Rapetti: "Italo Calvino: un uomo invisibile."

the classics? recommends the direct reading of the works, "leaving aside critical biography, commentaries, and interpretations…" (1986)

2. Calvino and Middle School

So, according to Calvino, the classics of "literature of all times" can speak directly to the reader. And I am deeply convinced that this is the way to bring children closer to literature. Many people say that middle school children are "difficult." In my opinion they live a challenging and promising age. Sometimes they are still receptive and ready to be amazed, curious to know. In those three years they experience a growth that can mark their future life. For some years, the Italian Ministry of Education has been proposing the study of epic classics in sixth grade and the study of some authors of Italian literature in the following two years. For a student of this age it can be hard to grasp the chronological arc that connects different writers. In my opinion it is absolutely useless to memorize biographies or titles without having read anything. I prefer they approach an author by reading the texts directly.

For example, in the first lesson about a poet, I read a poem and I ask the students to repeat a verse that resonated with them or may have puzzled them. Then I use the smart board to paraphrase and annotate the text, listen to readings by professional actors, draw connections with works of art of that period and watch videos. I do not use school editions of fiction books, full of notes and comprehension exercises at the end. My pupils are young, they will have plenty of opportunities to study these authors in more depth in the future. What I care about is for them to remain fascinated and intrigued. We often hear Italians say that they rediscovered a classic, for example *The Betrothed*, only as adults, after school had made them hate it. I try to make my own little contribution to the future adults I meet at school by making them experience the joy of reading.[7]

Calvino knew middle school well. In 1969 he edited an anthology for middle schools, *La lettura*, with Giambattista Salinari and a small group of teachers. The choices made and the notes and letters written during that experience are useful for understanding how he intended

[7] For the most recent methodologies in the italian school context, see biblioterapiaitaliana.com, www.italianwritingteachers.it.

reading for students of this age. In the introduction the editors said they wanted to make a "a fun anthology that would present to the eyes of young readers the pleasure of reading," without a long series of exercises and notes. They tried not to stand between the authors and the students. That anthology was really modern and I frequently use it in my lessons.

Many of Calvino's novels are considered "books for young readers," but in my daily work I have experienced that they can be quite difficult to read. Some students appreciate *The Nonexistent Knight* or *The Cloven Viscount* although the language is not simple, *The Baron in the Trees* can fascinate them but they can't read it on their own, and they usually do not like *Marcovaldo*, probably because they do not understand its irony which is so deeply related to its historical context.

3. Calvino's Ariosto

In the second year of middle school, we read selected passages from classics of fourteenth-century Italian literature (Dante, Petrarca, Boccaccio). During the second part of the year I introduce the sixteenth-century chivalric poem *Orlando furioso* by Ludovico Ariosto. I begin with the prologue, in verses, and then I read some pages from Calvino's version of the poem.

Calvino considers Ariosto fundamental and there are countless echoes of this poet in his works. In 1959, during a lecture tour in the USA he stated that Ludovico Ariosto was the poet he felt closest among all the authors of the Italian tradition.[8]

In 1966 he wrote an introduction to *Orlando Furioso* for Einaudi and the following year he dedicated some radio broadcasts to the poem. Then in 1970 he published *Orlando Furioso di Ludovico Ariosto raccontato da Italo Calvino*, which mixes prose parts with the original verses[9]. This book has been translated into several languages but never into English.

Reading these pages to my students opened up unexpected horizons. One of the most ironic passages of the poem, appreciated usually by young readers, is when Orlando becomes mad. We are in canto XXIII. Orlando walks in a forest and sees trunks full of writings and pierced

[8] The lecture, entitled *Main Currents in Italian Fiction Today*, was read in English on December 16, 1959 at Columbia University, and in early 1960 at Harvard, Yale, UCLA.

[9] In 1988 a school edition was released: *Italo Calvino racconta l'Orlando Furioso*, edited by Carlo Minoia.

hearts. He recognizes the name of Angelica, his beloved, with an unknown name, Medoro. His first thought is that the woman gave him that nickname because she doesn't dare write his name. Then he reads in a cave: “Oh to be here with Princess Angelica embraced morning and evening, oh how beautiful it is.” Signed: “Medoro.” Maybe Angelica, fantasizing about being there with him, used a male handwriting to imagine what Orlando would have felt. But the worst is yet to come: he enters a shepherd's house, welcomed for the night, but he cannot sleep. The shepherd approaches his bed and begins to tell him the story of a oriental princess who stopped by them one day. She was with an infantryman and they had spent their wedding night in that bed. To demonstrate her gratitude, the princess left the shepherd the jewel that Orlando had given her as a token of love. Calvino tells us that Orlando jumps up as if stung by a wasp. And he bursts out into the night screaming and tearing everything to pieces for three days and three nights.
Ariosto knows the inner workings of the human soul. Calvino turns his admiring gaze to Ariosto and presents the progressive awareness of the character in a language that is clear without being poor. A thirteen year old immediately pricks up his ears because he knows those psychological mechanisms. He has seen them happen to himself or to his friends. Orlando is unable to accept the truth, he tells himself a mountain of lies, he doesn't want to recognize that the woman he is in love with has betrayed him. The student smiles at something that is often a drama, exchanges a look of understanding with one of his peers, and then bursts into a liberating laughter at the masterful end of the prose passage. Calvino captures Ariosto's narrative mechanisms and reproduces them like a fascinated reader who wants to get others involved. It may not be the most authentic critical and philological reading, but it surely conveys the lively spirit of the literary experience.

My students usually also appreciate the canto of Astolfo's journey to the Moon. There he finds Orlando’s wisdom, in the place where everything lost on Earth ends up:

And many a lover’s sigh, many a tear,

All the long idleness of foolish men,

All the time we lose in gaming here,

And vague plans made, and never seen again.

Our vain desires are such that they appear

To cover a vast portion of that glen;

For all that, on Earth, you've lost entirely,

You'd find there, if you made the journey.

We are in Canto XXXIV and Calvino tells us: "Astolfo sees the crowns of ancient empires, the gifts made to win over the powerful, the flattery. Furthermore, there are the ill-fated loves, the fleeting favors of princes, the vain honors, the broken agreements, the alms left by will (which the heirs will never fulfill)" (1970, 133). After reading, I propose three different activities:

– Learn a few octaves by heart;10

– Draw the scene;11

– Write your own text: "If Astolfo went to the Moon today, what would he find that was mine?"

Children of this age often experience the "loss" of something. They are frequently accused of "wasting time", they happen to lose objects because their head is "in the clouds", they live the experience of false flattery and hypocrisy. While many students interpret the concept of loss in a metaphorical sense (friendships, time spent in useless activities, dashed hopes.) some also include forgotten objects from their childhood.

These experiential tools help them relate the text they are approaching to their own imagination and life experience. Calvino's Ariosto is a primary example of how these methodologies can help children perceive classics written hundreds of years ago as alive and capable of speaking to their life.

[10] On this topic there is a interview with Calvino made in 1981 by Alberto Sinigaglia *Italo Calvino: le età dell'uomo*.
[11] For an interesting use of the drawing see https://nowsparkcreativity.com/2018/03/one-pagers-roundup-examples-to-inspire.html.

4. The classics Speak of Our Present

In 1956 Calvino wrote the essay *Il superfluo* on the topic of nuclear waste. How to get rid of it? We could send it into space: "Great missiles full of atomic garbage will be hurled into space, far from our planetary system, to rotate beyond the force of gravity, and perhaps to make trouble for a faraway galaxy."[12]

At that time the idea was starting to circulate but the writer took a leap into the imagination. Together with radioactive waste, we could get rid of everything that is no longer needed: "the empty shells of youthful errors, the balled up papers of botched first drafts, the chestnut scrolls of misdeeds; and then the spiderwebs of ancient institutions, the fishbones of traditions picked clean, the empty cans of useless grand undertakings" (81).

I dare say that Calvino had Ariosto's elegant verses in mind when he wrote this list. Doesn't it sound similar to the description of the mountains of "objects" forgotten on the surface of the Moon? Talking about contemporary themes, Calvino borrows the imagination of his favorite poet, because classics have a lot to say about the present. Three years later, during the conference tour in US universities already mentioned, Calvino concluded his analysis of contemporary Italian novel exactly with these words:

> [Ariosto] teaches us how the mind lives by fantasy, irony, formal accuracy… All up-to-date lessons, necessary today, in the age of electronic brains and space flights. It is an energy turned towards the future, I am sure, not towards the past, that moves Orlando, Angelica, Ruggiero, Bradamante, Astolfo… (1960, 14).

[12] The translation is by Maria Anna Mariani in her recent essay *Italian Literature in the Nuclear Age* (80).

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The Beauty of Materials: Queneau, Calvino, Melotti[1]

1. Ecological preamble

At the opening of one of her recent essays, Carla Benedetti observes that "Putting oneself in the shoes of those who will live after us is a cognitive and emotional process more complicated than one might think." and, in reference to an expression by Günther Anders, she specifies that only "few 'acrobats of time'" can succeed, whose multiplication is the best hope "in this our tragic present" (Benedetti).

The importance of a balanced relationship between human beings and the environment is also a literary question: attested by an increasingly conscious production set in the Anthropocene, also known as ecocriticism and, above all, renewed attention to the works of all times, drawing strength and guidance to reverse wrong courses and to amend the errors of politics and economics. This is not to say that literature must necessarily take charge of "promote the good, heal people, and repair the world", given its nature as a "contrarian" (Siti). Certainly, however, the attention that it has always had for the *οἶκος* – be it a home or dwelling or environment – leads us to recognize it as a salvific power with respect to the inexorable degradation of the biosphere and to consider it therefore as a successful expression of an ecology first and foremost of mind, within which – as Bateson taught us – ideas move, multiply, and contaminate each other (Bateson).

These preliminary considerations seemed appropriate to me to contextualize part of a broader ongoing research: in the following pages, I will talk about an editorial initiative carried out in the mid-1980s by Vanni Scheiwiller on behalf of Montedison (Queneau). A very elegant *plaquette*, entitled *La canzone del polistirene*, which combines the short poem *Le chant du Styrène,* written just under thirty years earlier by Raymond Queneau, as a commentary on the images of Alain Resnais's short film of the same name, the Italian translation by Calvino and

[1] Textual quotes originally in Italian have been translated by the curator, Fabio Binarelli.
Giulia Dell'Aquila expresses her heartfelt gratitude to the curator Fabio Binarelli who made the translation for textual quotes originally in Italian.

an etching by Fausto Melotti. Opportune, that is, to initiate a discourse that brings together an ingenious filmmaker, two established writers, a sculptor and a revolutionary plastic material that has greatly improved human living conditions but is also contributing to environmental pollution.

1. Le chant du Styrène, "mélange du sucre et du sel"

With significant coincidence, the same year in which Roland Barthes included *plastic* among the myths of modernity, the chemical and electro metallurgical company Péchiney commissioned the young French director to make a short documentary film on the wonders of polystyrene, to be presented at the Brussels Expo of '58 (Rot-Vatin). The choice fell on Resnais, due to the marked experimentalism of his cinematography: as is promptly noted, "rather than an industrial documentary, the film is a synthesis of visual abstraction and verbal lyricism," (Burch).

Produced by Pierre Braunberger at considerable expense, *Le chant du Styrène* – a title in explicit and allusive assonance with the bewitching sirens – was released in 1958 among "Les films de la Pléiade." It brings together a conspicuous series of high professionalism: with the narrative voice that punctuates Queneau's Alexandrian verses, provided by Pierre Dux, the photography from Sacha Vierny, and the music by Pierre Barbaud. As in *Toute la mémoire du monde* (1956), Resnais also uses artfully mounted tracking shots in the fourteen minutes dedicated to polystyrene to represent the production process backwards, from the objects made to the raw materials.

Already in the commission letter, Péchiney clarifies to Braunberger that the film will have to compete with similar foreign initiatives and generate curiosity in viewers towards the material and its production techniques (Rot-Vatin). More than being just merely intended for advertising purposes, the short intends to promote the interest of a wide audience in industrial projects intended for mass consumption. The French company has in fact recently started processing polystyrene in its factories and the technical modalities are still being perfected (Rot-Vatin). Resnais, "in the manner of Oulipo" (Rot-Vatin), accepts the client's ambitious indications and integrates them by identifying Queneau as the most suitable author to write the

verses commenting on the scenes, in the common propensity to go to the origin of something (Pistoia). Only a few years earlier, the French writer had in fact published a Lucretian-inspired scientific poem, again in Alexandrine verse, entitled *Petite cosmogonie portative*, which for Resnais acts as an architect. Queneau gladly accepted the invitation and wrote the verses for *Le chant du Styrène* when the editing was completed, completely sharing the filmmaker's filmic idea.

The *tandem*, however, brings problems: Péchiney greatly appreciates the images but firmly objects to the French scholar's verses, requesting a more anodyne prose commentary. In fact, the version released with the short film is the one considered definitive by both Resnais and Queneau. The lines praising progress taken from Victor Hugo's *Voix intérieurs* are followed by Queneau's Alexandrine verses "Ô temps, suspends ton bol, ô matière plastique," while a red plastic bowl appears on the screen: it begins like this, with the resumption of a famous verse taken from *Le lac* by Lamartine "Ô temps! suspends ton vol, et vous, heures propices!," the journey from the elementary and perfect shape of a bowl to the most remote origins of the material that composes it. As the images flow, an abstract universe is defined in which "the sudden appearance of a line of workers [...] recalls the irksome presence of mere humanity on the edge of this mechanical fairy-land" (Burch): a theme that confirms the possible intertwining of the two trends in which, according to Resnais, cinema has been divided since its birth, "celle du réalisme et cella de l'immaginaire" (Resnais). Yet, thanks to the many shots of pipes and machinery, the power of industry and the human work that is now subjected to it are celebrated with distinct alphabets (Rot-Vatin).

Despite the perfect understanding between filmmaker and writer, the judgment is not unanimous: the short film is considered among the most successful of the French director, while Queneau's Alexandrian verses seem devoid of the *allure* that emanates from the film, and perhaps for this reason they remain unpublished for a long time in Italy (Kerbaker, s.d.: *online*). Resnais, on the other hand, really likes the verses because they can be read both in their literal meaning and in a more free way, chasing the many double meanings and quotations spread out in the lines. He also likes a certain mix of flavors, that subtle "feeling of irony," which he

does not intend at all – as Péchiney does – in the direction of discrediting the theme; all the more so since, even for this initiative, Queneau – "unburdened and light-hearted writer," in the words of Alberto Savinio (Scheiwiller) – has extensively documented himself, in the constant combination of scientific rigor and creative imagination. To those who ask him whether there is a parodic intention to be seen in the poem, Resnais responds by recalling the didactic clarity of Boileau and Malherbe and attributing to the Alexandrian verses a pedagogical power that prose does not have (Resnais).

3. Two poems and an etching for Montedison

Some thirty years later, in August 1985 Calvino amused himself by translating Queneau's verses, while unknowingly vacationing for the last summer in his home in Pineta di Roccamare. Although busy as usual on several fronts, he gladly adhered to Montedison's gift-like initiative, for that lightness that made him a "childhood guest" until the end (Giorgetti).

In reality, it would be time to sing the wonders of Moplen, the polymeric macromolecule that has supplanted polystyrene in many domestic uses, discovered by Giulio Natta in the late 1950s and produced in Italy by Montedison. But in the production of polystyrene – which remained in use in many areas – Montedison was still in a strong position in Europe in the 1980s. So, similarly to what Péchiney did in '57, the Italian group renewed the art-industry combination by relying on the sensitivity of Scheiwiller who in the *plaquette* sutures the French text and the Italian translation with Melotti's etching and adds a piece by Calvino on the artist, *Le effimere nella fortezza*, in explicit allusion to the contrast between the ephemeral and the perennial, which plays into the discussion on plastic.

It may be surprising that the translator of the verses on polystyrene is an author with a decidedly ecological outlook who, even without apocalyptic tones, has always been attentive to the signs of degradation and the representation of the broken harmony between human beings and the environment (Scaffai). It is worth mentioning that in the mid-eighties the damage caused by this polymer, both to the environment and to humans, has not yet been ascertained. Explaining the timely enthusiasm with which Calvino, who had always been attentive to ecological issues due to sensitivity inherited from his parents, tackled the work on the poem.

What motivates the speed with which Calvino responds to Scheiwiller's invitation is recalled, above all, – as the Milanese publisher does in presenting the edition – in the challenging *untranslatability* of the text: already in '67, having overcome the "methodological-nervous resistance" that having long denied him "the courage of translating a book" (Calvino), the Ligurian writer published a successful Italian version of *Les fleurs bleues*, an untranslatable work like few others. Years later, the poem by Queneau – a writer "much loved, but linguistically very different" (Mengaldo) – seems to have once again pulled Calvino "by the edge of the jacket" (Calvino), causing him to overcome all uncertainty with the same recourse to an *inventive* – or rather *reinventive* – translation (Calvino). And while it is true that the differences between the Duke of Auge's novel and Cidrolin and the Alexandrian verses on polystyrene remain clear, it is also true that a dense web of literary quotations, *jeux de mots* and specialisms, also makes the translation of the song in praise of plastic truly complex, judging from the numerous sketches and working notes.

Just as in 1958 Queneau's text found its place within the framework of the film, with Calvino's translation now fitting fully into the *plaquette* which, outside the commercial circuit, is printed in one hundred and nineteen copies by Giorgio Lucini's graphic arts workshop on behalf of Montedison. This time, the elegance of the images of Resnais' film is replaced by a single etching by Melotti, an artist dear to Scheiwiller but above all an engineer, sculptor and musician, a figure therefore of successful hybridization. The artist's choice, made in absolute agreement with Calvino, sounds like a confirmation of the establishment of plastic materials also in twentieth-century art and of the definitive collapse in it of the concepts of eternity and immortality. The successful marriage between art and industry is reaffirmed by many initiatives that describe the work, sing the techniques and recognize the evocative beauty of materials (Marchis, 2013: *online*). It was precisely the white ductility of polystyrene that facilitated the expression of many twentieth-century artists; not to mention that *design* has similarly taken advantage of polystyrene. Think of the "Sacco" armchair, designed in '68 by the Italian company, Zanotta, and filled with polystyrene pellets, in imitation of the mattress containing chestnut leaves that farmers used to use (De Roberto, n.d.: *online*).

Calvino was attracted to Melotti several times (Ciccuto). See the piece entitled *I segni alti* (Calvino) and the aforementioned *Le effimere nella fortezza* which with a more informative title – *Dialogo tra una fortezza e uno sciame di insetti* - was published in the newspaper "la Repubblica" on 27 May '81 as a commentary on the exhibition held at the Forte del Belvedere in Florence from April to June of the same year (Calvino); and consider the genesis of *Le città invisibili*, the "Thin cities," "On stilts," "Like a spider's web" (Calvino). Precisely between the end of the 1960s and the release of *Le città invisibili*, the writer/editorial consultant and Einaudi seemed to want to strengthen, also with other initiatives, the Calvino-Melotti relationship, with a clear increase in the notoriety of the Trentino artist, who until then had remained rather in the shadows (Modena). Already at the end of the '71 piece, Calvino warns that "the signs must still be kept high" without any "prosopopeia" but rather "with the lightness, attention, and industrious stubbornness of the stilt-house dwellers" (Calvino). It is an invitation to that perspective of light verticality which was then favored by the writer in his observation of reality. Exactly ten years later, in the piece *Le effimere nella fortezza*, Calvino shows that he has further absorbed Melotti's lesson, here also validated through a dialogical structure that becomes a rhetorical emblem of the inexhaustible dialectic between eternity and temporality. Dialoguing with the mighty walls of the Forte del Belvedere in Florence is a swarm of mayflies: the *incipit* of the text deliberately contrasts the robust defensive structures with the ribbing of the insects' very thin wings.

Certainly, the color etching included in Montedison's keepsake proposes, in the distinct essentiality of the elongated stroke typical of the artist from Rovereto, the characteristic of the celebrated material, polystyrene. A layer of white pearls assembled in irregular dimensions softly underlies the two human figures reproduced, with the result of an overall absence of gravity that is a typical feature of the work of this engineer and artist, ephemeral, mental, always striving towards the search for solutions that metaphysically reconcile the accuracy of the lines with the freedom of abstraction. The saving power of lightness - which is also the first of the values that Calvino delivers to the readers of the new millennium - is thus also reaffirmed by the words that the insects pronounce which, not by chance, put an end to the dialogue: like

"the writing on the blank sheet and the the notes of the flute in the silence," they dart into the void, dissolving with their beating of wings the heavy void "that crushes the world" (Calvino).

4. Calvino, or the lightness of translation

Perhaps also due to his few but significant experiences in the field, Calvino shows sensitivity to the role of translators, for their slow and thankless effort (Calvino). His active presence in Einaudi allows him to work alongside several of them, contesting their criteria and solutions with meticulous attention, "at times even tyrannizing [them]" (Eruli), or defending their actions. Supported by solid readings, since the mid-1960s, the writer has already felt the need for literary criticism expressly aimed at the quality of translations to be articulated on recognizable topics, for the benefit of readers, translators and publishers (Calvino). He is convinced that Italy lacks a real culture of translation: despite the widespread knowledge of languages, what is lacking are certain technical and moral skills, that "methodical madness" that characterizes the good translator (Calvino). And yet, despite the difficulties that every translation causes, Calvino does not hesitate to declare that "you truly read an author only when you translate them" (Calvino).

Reflections on translation increased at the beginning of the 1980s: in a conversation with Tullio Pericoli which took place on the occasion of the artist's exhibition entitled *Rubare a Klee* (1980), Calvino does not hesitate to declare that "translation is the most absolute method of reading" and, alluding to the determination to guarantee the target text the "rhythm," "lightness," "inner necessity" of the source text, he adds: "there is a break-in, a burglary with forced entry, in every true reading" (Calvino). But for the Ligurian writer the act of translating is also to be related to that of writing: for him translation "worked as [.] an additional sieve" with which to discard "the last remnants of impurity and inaccuracies" (Federici), to the point of "falling in love with the concept of crystal, as a metaphor for the aesthetics of writing" (Federici).

Only two years later, speaking at a conference on translation, Calvino declared that "translation is an art" and – with fossilized disappointment towards the translations of his books – he now sees only in miracle the possibility of a correct transition from one language to another (Calvino). Of course, for a translation to be successful, a multi-faceted collaboration is necessary

between author, translator, publishing house and *editor*, even more so when technical terms are involved. But it is above all to the symbiosis between author and translator that Calvino entrusts the fate of every translation: it is in this relationship that the greatest effort solidifies, to then evaporate with a certain disdain. To demonstrate this, it is worth mentioning the introductory hat placed in the review entitled *Tra Jekyll e Hyde è meglio Utterson*, published in the pages of the newspaper "la Repubblica" on 18 June 1983 (Calvino). Alluding to the newly created series *Scrittori tradotti da scrittori*, commissioned and edited by Giulio Einaudi on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the publishing house, Calvino encourages writers to the noble art of translating, to give new life to a work (Calvino). And even more so is the review entitled *Edgar Allan Manganelli*, published in the pages of the same newspaper on 29 December 1983, to warn of the release of Edgar Allan Poe's stories in the same series: "only a one-man show of translation by a writer like Manganelli could correspond to this gigantic one-man show," he writes (Calvino).

By the time Calvino translated *Le chant du Styrène*, he knew the French language and civilization very well. So much so that he was able to go beyond the literal meaning, up to a certain translational coldness already established with *I fiori blu* (Federici). And yet, in the end, some difficulties arose: on 10 August 1985, he resorted by letter to the chemical expertise of his friend Primo Levi, asking him for help in rendering some terms used by Queneau, as has already happened on other occasions. The doubts are different: including wanting certainty about the synonymy between *polistirolo* and *polistirene*. The meaning of some expressions are not clear to him ("Et, rotativement, le produit trébucha" and "Le formage sous vide," a possible pun on "le fromage sous vide") and some words: the "bol/scodella" of the first verse which hints at Lamartine's "vol/volo," resolved with the assonance "ferma/forma" (Ossola, however, points out that in one of the minutes, Calvino has translated "ruota," with reference to the "potter's wheel as a measure of time in St. Augustine" (Ossola). And again "tamis," "jonc," "filière," "boudin," "buse," later translated respectively as "setaccio," "spaghetto/spago," "filiera," "ugello;" the term "boudin," which although based on the images of the short could be easily rendered, remains untranslated, perhaps to avoid a possible and unwanted comedy of the verse;

moreover, already in the *incipit* of the poem, Calvino eliminated any mention of Lamartine's parody (Queneau). Between metric needs and translation difficulties, at several points of the text, Calvino diverges from Queneau's verses, moving towards solutions that are in some respects more poetic: just as an example, "ô matière plastique / D'où viens-tu? Qui es-tu?" which becomes "Canta il tuo carme, plastica! / Chi sei? Di te rivelami lari, penati, fasti!"[2]; and again: "De tuyau en tuyau ainsi nous remontons, / À travers le désert des canalisations" which becomes "Così, di arte in arte, pian piano si risale / dai canali dell'arido deserto inospitale."[3]

Beyond these specific requests – which confirm the translator's scrupulous application, for some even in this role as "careful naturalist (the agronomist by origin!)" (Giorgetti) –, I would say that the letter to Primo Levi is important in order to indicate a convincing key to reading Queneau's text, written "in the same manner as the *Petite cosmogonie*, of which it can be considered an appendix." Scheiwiller himself, in the brief *Editor's Note*, directs "the informed reader" (Scheiwiller) to two rather recent texts which may well guide us to understand Calvin's branching interests in Queneau: the introduction to *Segni, cifre e lettere e altri saggi* (Queneau) and the *Piccola guida* postponed to the translation of the *Piccola cosmogonia portatile* created for Einaudi by Sergio Solmi (Queneau). Even on a specific translation level, *Le chant du Styrène* shows analogies with the broader 'Lucretian' poem full of arduous, scientific neologisms and therefore presents Calvino with the same consulting needs: Solmi in fact had to submit to him several times "the list of obscure points" regarding specialized scientific aspects, made even more complex by the mixture "with continuous wordplay, *calembours*, and phonetic spellings" (Calvino). Convinced that the *Piccola cosmogonia portatile* is "a Queneau-like book like no other," as he wrote in a letter to Franco Quadri, in April 1965 (Calvino), Calvino committed himself tenaciously to consulting experts, treatises and encyclopedias, to guarantee the quality of the rendering: an exercise which shortly thereafter gave him a certain fluency in translating the verses on polystyrene, to which was added the much earlier translation experience of *Les*

[2] "Sing your hymn, plastic! / Who are you? Reveal to me your household gods, your ancestors, and your triumphs." Translation by the curator.
[3] "In this way, from art to art, gradually one ascends, from the channels of the arid and inhospitable desert." Translation by the curator.

Fleurs bleues. Therefore it is renewed, on the occasion desired by Montedison, the search for ingenious expressive ideas, equivalent to those of the French writer, in an almost competitive dimension that denotes a very high level of absorption of this original "chemical short story" (Mauri).

On August 23, 1985, after consultations with Levi, Calvino informed Scheiwiller by letter that the translation of *Le chant du Styrène* was now ready: "entirely in Italian alexandrines of 14 syllables (double seven-syllable lines) with rhymed couplets, like the original" (Queneau). But, in his typical perfectionism, he still was not satisfied with the work done, so much so that he stubbornly asked the publisher to procure some materials from Montedison on his behalf, at least "a booklet, a manual" (Queneau).

The plaquette will be released in November '85, unfortunately Calvino will not be able to see it in time.

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Italo Calvino's Influence on One Visual Artist

As an undergraduate, I enrolled in an advanced "Narrative Painting" course at Cornell University taught by a professor who spent his time between Gubbio, Italy, and Ithaca, NY. Our semester assignment was to read Italo Calvino's Baron In The Trees, then develop a series of drawings, sketches and paintings - poetic interpretations, not illustrations. I was drawn to Calvino's unique ability to paint visual imagery using words. After enthusiastically fulfilling the semester assignment, I set out to read every novel and short story written by Italo Calvino. I was not familiar with Calvino's writings before this assignment, but he quickly became a personal favorite. In America, few people are familiar with Calvino unlike in Italy where children are introduced to his writings from grade school.

I've continued to reference Calvino's visually fertile writing to inspire my own paintings. Calvino's words are pregnant with pictures and imagery - a true kindred spirit to visual artists.

1. Invisible Cities

Calvino's novel Invisible Cities had the greatest impact on me. The imagined dialogue between the Mongolian King who could never leave his kingdom unattended, and the medieval Venetian world traveler brought places to life through animated descriptions of cities and exotic lands. Kublai Khan lived vicariously through Marco Polo's animated stories of cities before turning the tables and announcing he would describe a place from his dreams and Polo would tell him what city it resembled and where it's located. This reversal applies pure abstract creative invention, not unlike how visual artists paint pictures upon blank canvases. Khan eventually inquires why Polo never once described Venice. Polo replied "every city he's ever described, speaks first of Venice."

As a native New Yorker, there are many comparable elements I find in cities around the world. Venturing and seeing the world through the eyes and experiences of a New Yorker, I find related motifs and imagery whenever painting plein-air, or from memory, a creative process at the core of my visual practice for 35 years.

I've painted cityscapes throughout my professional career, representing my local surroundings and the many places I am fortunate to have visited. Like Marco Polo with Venice, all of the foreign places I have seen and experienced are filtered through the lens of a native New Yorker. I find inspiration through the poetic dialogues in Calvino's Invisible Cities. Calvino employs language, whereas I work in the medium of oil paint.

Beginning my "Invisible Cities" painting series in 1993, I composed diptychs containing parallel compositions repeating similar architectonic forms of symmetrical shapes, changing the context, time, function and place between two mirror-image panels.

Calvino's Marco Polo character verbally describes places that Khan and the reader have never 'seen' promoting cerebral rather than visual imaginings of 'cities.'

A dome, derived from a circle, the concept of perfection and purity, may be imagined in the mind of listeners who inevitably relate only to domes previously seen. A dome was unfathomable until the 1st century's Pantheon designed by the ancient Romans. Domes have since appeared throughout the world but the mention of a dome is inevitably related to one we know intimately. Relying on our personal origins, we collaborate with the storyteller by listening. The word 'dome' may conjure images of Rome, Florence, Faenza, Prague, Boston, Jerusalem, Moscow, Mexico City, Cairo, Istanbul, Isfahan, Ithaca, Brooklyn, London or Paris. Invisible Cities becomes a "poetic travelogue of visual taxonomy" for making visual and conceptual connections between distant spaces that recur in the landscape and announce themselves for the observant traveler who over time has accumulated a storehouse of visual associations.

Kublai Khan's chessboard possessed corresponding forms to reality. Calvino's Marco Polo analyzed the chessboard's materials so carefully that he could articulate the specificity of sources, origins and growth climate conditions.

In his theory of forms, Plato suggests any conceivable thing or property has a corresponding form, a perfect example of that thing or property. The list is endless ergo the cerebral and the physical have corresponding counterparts. When Kublai Khan asked Marco Polo whether he would tell the same tales in his homeland that he's told Khan, Marco responds,

"I speak and speak, but the listener retains only the words he is expecting."[1]

Ending my diptych compositions by 1997, I stopped creating mirror-images as my invented cities became singular cerebral descriptions each connected to my birthplace: NYC. I have painted vertical cities surrounded by water accessed by bridges, tunnels, railways, interconnected rails and paved roads. While this is a description of NYC, it is also how a New Yorker may visualize and come to understand many different places: an urban design inherent in a variety of global cities.

Many cities have elevations, in both land and architecture. Building upon higher ground is a symbolic construct applying imagination and projected interpretations about a place. An acropolis, a city upon a Mesa, a group of skyscrapers, a temple mount, a Zapotec cloud city, or Etruscan city built atop volcanic tufa, elevated construction is found in many cities despite the practical challenges.

Using the visual taxonomy, I've organized my invisible cities paintings into these categories:

– Vertical Cities

– Domes

– Elevated Cities

– Singular Structures

– Corner buildings (rincon)

– Aerial views/cities from above

– Towers

– Bridges, overpasses, spans, (geometric spatial divisions)

– Rectangle right composition

Like domes, towers are repeated universal designs used for various purposes. Whether it's a bell tower attached to Kolomenskaya (Moscow) or Torre Mangia (Siena), industrial chimney stacks (Brooklyn), Gothic Cathedrals (Chartres), light-houses (Montauk), symbols of

[1] Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, p.135, A Harvest Book Harcourt, Inc., 1972

wealth, security and prestige (San Gimignano and Bologna), skyscrapers (NYC), or towering temples (Tikal); the tower is a repeated design in global art and architecture.

2. Six Memos for the Next (New) Millennium

The last writings by Italo Calvino of which only five of the six memos were completed before his death, have a strong visual element that inspires ideas and images responding to the words as with many of Calvino's writings. I will concentrate on passages from Calvino's Memos that inspired my own visual images created for this project.

In the first memo, Lightness, Calvino gives many examples of visual images brought to life through mythology and the rich history of art. One remarkable passage was Calvino's retelling the heroics of Perseus who embodied agility and great dexterity applied when slaying the gorgon monster, Medusa. Because no one could look at Medusa without petrifying, Perseus relied on the reflection in his shield to decapitate Medusa, a souvenir later used to sink the Kraken and liberate Andromeda. Calvino describes lightness not as a physical weight, but through lightning quick responses and associations, moving through space and time with fluidity, athleticism and agility of body and mind.

Quickness begins with a medieval tale about Emperor Charlemagne's expedient enchantment. Calvino ends the memo with another beautiful tale by relaying this story:

> "Among Zhuang Zhou's many talents was his talent for drawing.
> The King asked him to draw a crab. Zhuang Zhou said he would
> need five years and a villa with twelve servants.
> After five years he had not yet begun the drawing.
> "I need another five years," he said. The King agreed.
> When the tenth year was up, Zhuang Zhou took his brush and
> in an instant, with a single flourish, drew a crab, the most perfect crab
> anyone had ever seen."[2]

Retelling this story to my art students, the meaning is inevitably misunderstood. They respond with laughter assuming Zhuang Zhou took advantage of the King. The story is clear to

[2] Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the New Millennium*, p.65, First Mariner Books edition, 2016; 1988

anyone who has studied any subject for the decades required to achieve mastery in their field. Only after I elaborate on the story, detailing the long hours, hard work, and mental preparedness required for the artist to achieve the profound epiphany necessary to create the sublime drawing of the crab in one fluid action, do students then understand. Calvino doesn't elaborate on the time between the contract and the completion of the crab drawing. Every great master understands the commitment involved because they have done the work.

When someone asks an artist how long it took to make a painting, the inquirer is never prepared for the answer. Achieving Quickness requires tremendous time.

"Malcolm Gladwell published his blockbuster book, Outliers, in 2008 and the most talked-about idea from the text was the 10,000 Hour Rule. Gladwell, citing research by K. Anders Ericsson, explained that the key to becoming world-class in any field was to practice a specific task for at least 10,000 hours."[3]

Gladwell cited how extraordinary individuals stand out from all the rest because of the time invested to arrive at greatness. He describes the Beatles performing music together for twelve-hour days at Bruno's in Hamburg, Germany, where they became well-rehearsed with each other. The example of hockey players born in the first months of the year who are slightly older than their teammates, thus giving them a slight edge in physical maturity that allows more playing time leading to superiority, substantiated by a significantly higher number of NHL players born in January/February/March. Lastly, Bill Gates, while in high school, had access to computers at his local public library. Significant time spent after school on the library computer, years before anyone else had access to personal computers, Gates and his studious young classmates invested 10,000+ hours and began writing computer code before most people saw a computer.

Zhuang Zhou rehearsed for the moment when the King returned for his drawing by executing countless studies, dissections, analysis, physical exercises, mechanical movements, forensic investigations and mental preparedness. After ten years Zhou produced a masterpiece in what appeared to be created instantly, yet ten years of preparation preceded achieving sublime

[3] Malcolm Gladwell. *Outliers*. Little, Brown and Company, 2008

"quickness."

For my artwork, I produced dozens of drawings of crabs and crab parts, working in pencil, clay, watercolor, and oil paint. I'm nine years short of Zhuang Zhou's time preparing for his masterful crab drawing but I understand the artist's process.

Quickness also relates to the immediacy found in Calvino's books. Most are relatively short, never publishing tomes but wishing to keep the reader fully engaged from start to finish. Quickness is found in many examples of modernism yet some expect labor-intensive time investments as quantifiers of great art. This is as absurd as judging a book's merit by the number of pages. All masters have spent a lifetime to arrive at the point of making a masterpiece. The lesson here is to spend time rehearsing, and create quickly to keep it fresh. Many of Calvino's books can be read in one sitting, never failing to keep the reader fully engaged.

Calvino's memo on Exactitude begins with an account of an ancient Egyptian Psychostasis[4] that weighs the heart of the deceased against the feather of Maat used as the counterweight of the soul, a determinant for reincarnation. Calvino's exacting precision has no comparison in the real world but Christians may note symbolic similarities with St. Michael weighing souls to determine entry into heaven in the last judgment. To Calvino, exactitude is all about well-defined designs, *icastico,*[5] and precise language.

Visibility reveals Calvino's creative process, always beginning with a visual image that directs his story. Writing like a visual artist draws or paints makes Calvino's literature appealing, and he's a true kindred spirit. Calvino describes one example, "The Baron in the Trees" as his starting point for the book of the same name. From this visual image of a young rebellious boy who refuses to eat from his plate, the young Baron protests authority and climbs a tree, then never comes down. The power of the visual image of a boy in the tree is visually reminiscent of spectators in Giotto's "Christ's Entry into Jerusalem." We wonder about these climbers and what they did to get there and where they go from there. Before long, an entire novel develops about life in the trees for the defiant Baron including dialogues with people below, romance,

[4] Psychostasis The weighing of souls (Ancient Greek: psychostasia) is a religious motif in which a person's life is assessed by weighing their soul (or some other part of them) Egyptian 'Book of the Dead'.
[5] Icastico (Italian, gr. εἰκαστικός) adj. The evocation of clear, sharp, memorable images.

warfare, and a surprising departure.

Calvino discusses Italian comic strips from his adolescence that did not use bubbles with tails indicating the speaker. Calvino's bi-lingual pre-literate childhood naturally led him to invent stories from the visual images. Interpretation and misinterpretation became part of the pleasure of discovery and creative invention. Similarly, foreign travel requires creative intuition and acute visual observations when confronting language barriers.

In the memo Multiplicity, Calvino uses an esoteric term from Roman dialect to describe the confusing, multi-layered, convoluted situations that would require a detective's painstaking forensic examination to decipher. The term "gnommero" translates from the Roman dialect to mean a "big ball of yarn" that warrants meticulous unraveling. During WWII the US military used the term "snafu," an acronym meaning "situation normal all fouled-up." Snafu is comparable but the Roman dialect *gnommero* has no synonym and is the perfect adjective for complicated and multifaceted life in the 21st Century-far from simple and straightforward. Fake News, Demagogues, Artificial Intelligence, and Conspiracy Theorists accelerate the *gnommero* of our strange times.

Calvino intended to write the sixth memo "Consistency" while at Harvard delivering the Norton lectures but he died before starting. With many of Calvino's writings prompting visual inspiration, I pondered what he might have written about consistency," an ironic omission, and I began drawing. Initially, I thought death is consistent, because every life concludes with the same outcome. My visual reference came from a Baroque sculpture of a winged skull near the Caravaggio paintings in S. Maria Del Popolo in Roma. I've admired the wall-mounted sculpture and pondered its symbolism, and while considering Calvino's missing essay, I ultimately concluded that the theme of death is too predictable for Calvino's final memo. I then created a second work introducing the "Deus ex Machina," a machine used in Greco-Roman theatre to conclude a story's ending by wheeling in the "god-machine." With cranks, pulleys, ropes, and levers, the stage-hands lowered the actor playing the deity, to arrive on stage to restore order, and fix what humans had fouled, concluding a story-line that strayed so far, by connecting all the loose ends in a way only divine intervention can. Therefore, the final visual introduces

consistency as a god-head that resets our deviations from reason and restores a more desirable order of the cosmos.

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

Fig, 6

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Cultural Memory Through Multisensoriality: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Calvino's "A King Listens" and the Italian Auschwitz Memorial

1. The Quest for Cultural Memory

"Memory really matters – for individuals, for the collectivity, for civilization – only if it binds together the imprint of the past and the project of the future, if it enables us to act without forgetting what we wanted to do, to become without ceasing to be, and to be without ceasing to become," (Italo Calvino, Corriere della Sera, August 10, 1975).

Space, emotions, and body play a crucial role in conveying perceptions and interpretations of artistic representations of political events. The structure of any artistic creation reflects power dynamics (Startwell 190; Bleiker 14). The Second World War and the Holocaust inspire many artistic endeavors aiming to highlight the sensations and narratives of the creators and the role of memory for future generations. Halbwachs (1980) distinguishes between social and historical memory. Social memory is intertwined with lived experiences; historical memory is mediated. Levy and Sznaider (91-92) examine Halbwachs' definition in the context of the Holocaust, contending that it transcended social memory and laid the groundwork for the establishment of universal values. They argue, "strong identifications are only produced when distant events have a local resonance. [.] The basis of a wider shared morality is identification with distant others," (91-92). The latter is crucial in developing this paper, which seeks to underscore how multisensorial art, focusing on literature, can stimulate the creation of diverse contemporary sociopolitical discourses.The research starts with the exploration of the short story A King Listens by Italo Calvino and juxtaposes this with spatial, visual, and literary analyses carried out at the Italian Auschwitz Memorial, a multisensorial site that makes use of multidisciplinary art aimed at creating an embodied experience. The goal is to showcase how sensorial modalities of cultural memorialization prove useful in stimulating participatory involvement and meaningful connections with recent socio-political discourses.

2. Methodology and Methods

The memorial was assessed on-site twice. It first reopened in 2019 with a chronological exhibition, then closed for renovation in February 2022. Upon reopening in July 2023 with a different layout emphasizing literature, I was inspired to revisit my research. This desire emerged on Italo Calvino's centennial. The Italian writer, a Resistance member, valued memory and depicted sensory experiences. This paper explores connections between these realms.

The adoption of case studies as a methodology enabled the use of ethnography, autoethnography, visual, spatial, and literary analyses. Here, the reliance on a triangulation system aims to increase validity. Particular focus is given to autoethnography of multisensoriality,[1] which has become more prominent in social sciences studies that analyze ways of political and social understanding (Pink 19-20). Fieldnotes and texts were processed through the employment of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Fairclough (178), a CDA founder, describes it as a theory of analysis that frames discourse as an element of the political context so that particular emphasis is placed on the relationship between discourse and other elements, namely power, identity, ideology, and institutions.

3. A King Listens: Memory and Participation

Italo Calvino, born in Cuba in 1923, returned to Italy during his youth. Despite his inclination toward literature, familial pressures led him to pursue agricultural studies at the University of Turin and the University of Florence. World War II disrupted Calvino's academic pursuits and the establishment of Mussolini's puppet state drove Calvino underground to evade compulsory military service. He committed to the Resistance until Nazi Germany surrendered in 1945.

In 1984, Calvino began the collection of short stories Under the Jaguar Sun; each short story focuses on the senses. A King Listens, focusing on hearing, is the story of a paranoid king who hears the echo of insurgency in his palace walls, which transform into a giant ear—

[1] The term "multisensoriality" is increasingly finding application in the realms of social sciences and humanities. A pivotal study on this subject has been undertaken by Sarah Pink (e.g. Pink, S. 2011. "Multimodality, Multisensoriality and Ethnographic Knowing: Social Semiotics and the Phenomenology of Perception," Qualitative Research. 11(3): 261-276).

receptors of the rebellion in his mind. Although the short story does not provide references to the Second World War, ties to battle and memory are vivid:

> Sharper in your memory are certain glimpses remaining from the battle, when you moved to attack the palace at the head of your then loyal followers (who are now surely preparing to betray you): balustrades shattered by mortar explosions, breaches in the walls singed by fires, pocked by volleys of bullets. You can no longer think of it as the same palace in which you are seated on the throne; if you were to find yourself in it again, that would be a sign that the cycle has completed its course and your ruin is dragging you off, in your turn (Calvino).

Subsequently, it is compelling to argue that the embodied memorialization of the past occurs with the creative exposition of it. As argued by Lucia Re, "In many of his early stories that "write" the Resistance, [he] adopts the literary strategies of the fairy tale and the racconto d'avventura as forms with which to erode and undermine the dominant discursive logic of the epic" (157). Memorialization erupts in A King Listens through subtle, yet overarching, connections with keywords and correlated notions of battle, bullets, explosions, betrayal, and memory.

Composer Luciano Berio depicted the senses in the opera Un Re in Ascolto (the original title of A King Listens), drawing inspiration from Calvino's story and incorporating elements from Friedrich Einsiedel's 1778 libretto for an adaptation of Shakespeare's The Tempest. Berio characterized the work as an "azione musicale" (musical action) rather than a traditional opera. The translation from text on music to text of music demonstrates how memorialization can be a dynamic phenomenon. As this musical action merges codification, interpretation, and improvisation, it allows the production of meaning through the interrelationship of director, performer, and audience (Highton 3). Interpretation is open to challenge and allows for a plurality of meaning that fosters, even, resistance (Highton 5). This acknowledgement ties to the idea that attitudes of plurality and resistance represent effective azioni to memorialize the past via a participatory approach.

4. The Italian Auschwitz Memorial: Poetry in the Opera Totale

The project, a so-called opera totale,[2] coordinated by ANED (National Association of Ex-Deportees), involved several intellectuals, such as Mauthausen survivor and architect Lodovico Belgiojoso, Auschwitz survivor and writer Primo Levi, director Nelo Risi (survivor Edith Bruck's spouse), composer Luigi Nono, and painter Pupino Samonà. The memorial, inaugurated in 1980 as Italy's permanent exhibition, changed after the establishment of the International Auschwitz Council in 1990. The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Memorial and Museum shifted its emphasis from memorialization to education, leading to increased criticism of the Italian Holocaust Memorial (Insana 17). The Council decided the memorial required an overtly pedagogical approach to exhibitions (Arcidiacono & Scarrocchia 35-36). In 2011, Auschwitz's directorate threatened to dismantle the Italian memorial. In 2016, Florence renovated the memorial, reopening it in May 2019. An additional floor was constructed from scratch to maintain all the original proportions. With the reopening of July 2023, a greater focus has been placed on the literature that stemmed during WWI, WWII, and the Holocaust. Each room brims with words of notable authors, encompassing Giuseppe Ungaretti, Eugenio Montale, Ennio Flaiano, Violette Maurice, Hannah Arendt, and Thomas Mann. My emphasis will be on Salvatore Quasimodo and Primo Levi. Levi's presence is pervasive in the new exhibition and the original memorial.

Primo Levi (1919–1987) was an Italian-Jewish chemist, writer, and Holocaust survivor. He is best known for his autobiographical works that provide powerful accounts of his experiences during and after World War II. In particular, his imprisonment in Auschwitz. Before entering the memorial, visitors pass through the new ground-floor exhibition. A panel shows Levi's poem called *Of the Lagers, Today, it is Indelicate to Speak*:

We can never tell enough
We will never be able to say
Completely

[2] The notion of Opera totale is a borrowed from the german Gesamtkunstwerk, literally translating to 'total artwork', and refers to a piece of art that incorporates all or several art forms.

What our eyes

Have touched on these

Road of iron and monomers.[3]

Here, multisensorial references are particularly evident: speak, say, eyes, touch. The impossibility of speaking challenges the overarching need to do so. The words of Levi are near those of Salvatore Quasimodo (1901–1968), an Italian poet and Nobel Prize laureate in Literature. During WWII, Quasimodo faced significant life challenges. As an open anti-fascist, he was arrested in 1943 by the German occupying forces. He was detained briefly but eventually released. The experience of living through these challenging times and witnessing the impact of war and political upheaval influenced themes in Quasimodo's poetry, often reflecting human suffering and the existential challenges of the era. The embodied experiences Quasimodo lived are depicted in his multisensorial poem, *Upon the Willows*, showcased at the Italian Auschwitz Memorial:

And how could we sing

with a foreign heel on our hearts,

among the dead abandoned in the squares

on the hard and frozen grass, to the lament

of innocent children, to the dark cry

of the mother hastening to her son

crucified on a telegraph pole?

[Upon the willows, we too,

as an offering, hung our harps

which swayed quietly in the sad wind].[4]

Words such as sing, lament, and cry, convey a clear connection with the sense of hearing. The spatial analysis of the poem is noteworthy and is posed on a life-size stick figure, conveying the idea that these words apply to everyone. Like a non-King who listens to the sounds of

[3] Translation from Italian by Sofia Galli, 2023.

[4] Translation from Italian by Matilda Colarossi, 2016. The last three verses are not displayed in the exhibition.

desolation, Quasimodo presents us with a visual, spatial, and hearing analysis of the war, while the exhibition of the museum further emphasizes the universality of tragedy. Walking further to the last room on the ground floor there is an interactive screen displaying the ongoing conflicts on a global map, placed next to a child's drawing of a migrant boat. This is particularly striking, since in my previous fieldnotes, when this room was not present yet, a visitor walking in the shaky wooden planks of the memorial said, "It seems like being on a migrants' boat." Once again is the acknowledgment of the universal nature of suffering, while contemporary socio-political connections are generated thanks to the multisensorial nature of the exhibition, which calls for the participation of the visitor and the existence of plural gazes.

Then, stairs lead to the original memorial. The first encounter is with an engraved marble slab, which pronounces the following words: Visitor / Observe the vestiges of this camp and meditate: / wherever you come from, / you are not a stranger. / Make sure your trip / Was not useless, / Make sure useless / Was not our death. / For you and for your children, / The ashes of Oświęcim / Serve as a warning: / Make sure the horrendous fruit of hate, / Of which you have seen the traces here, / Will not providing a new seed / Not tomorrow nor ever (Primo Levi).[5] Then, the crooked walk inside the tunnels begins (see Figure 1). The geometric architecture is opposed to a path of unstable railway sleepers cutting through it. Soundtracks reproduce political speeches of the government and they collide with Luigi Nono's track Remember What They Did to You in Auschwitz that resonates in the memorial's tunnels with whistles and metallic noises. In the tunnels, canvases are color-coded: red for socialism, black for fascism, yellow for Judaism, and white for Christianity and freedom. On top of these colors, Samonà drew images using a pencil. Through time, pencil strokes will fade, whilst the four main colors will remain. The idea is that "details of the Holocaust might eventually disappear, but ideas and feelings of empathy will not" (fieldnotes, 2019). The experience is embodied, emotional, and participatory. Each body, thus each mind, follows the elliptical narration moving individually, and although a degree of choreography exists due to the horizontal path of the memorial, participation is requested to appreciate the entire artistic product fully. At the end, there is one last panel, which

[5] Translation from Italian by Sofia Galli, 2023.

is Primo Levi's poem, If This Is a Man (1946). The poem, also known as *Shemà* ("listen", in Hebrew), is incredibly popular in Italy, and it is the opening of Levi's homonymous book:

If This Is a Man
You who live safe
In your warm houses,
You who find on returning in the evening,
Hot food and friendly faces:
Consider if this is a man
Who works in the mud
Who does not know peace
Who fights for a scrap of bread
Who dies because of a yes or a no.
Consider if this is a woman,
Without hair and without name
With no more strength to remember,
Her eyes empty and her womb cold
Like a frog in winter.
Meditate that this came about:
I commend these words to you.
Carve them in your hearts
At home, in the street,
Going to bed, rising;
Repeat them to your children,
Or may your house fall apart,
May illness impede you,
May your children turn their faces from you.[6]

Primo Levi relies on the religious scheme of the Torah to perpetuate a 'desperately'

[6] Translation from Italian by Manuela Colombo, 2021.

atheist message, which instead of evoking God, rather invokes men (similarly to what occurs at the entrance), commending resistance and remembrance as mandatory for humankind (Dei 146-148). The merging of these words with Nono's composition enhances the efficacy of the admonition. In my most recent fieldnotes, taken in 2023, I marked this conceptual dialogue between the ground floor, the entrance, and the exit of the memorial, wherein words acquire an enhanced power because of their interrelation with multisensoriality.

5. A Precarious but Substantial Unity

At this juncture, the memorialization of WWII and the Holocaust might be assessed borrowing the argument made by Rosario Forlenza's (103): "Cultural memory shaped the representations of belonging to a people by weaving multiple and sometimes contrasting memories into a precarious but substantial unity, providing the emotional and cultural bonds for the regeneration of the political community. The democratic identity of Italy, therefore, was the result not only of the institutional memory elaborated by the anti-fascist political elites but also of lived experiences of people sharing memories of violence, war and traumatic incivility, which were unified by cultural memory."

The Italian stance remains somewhat ambiguous, yet endeavors to meet the imperative of remembrance to foster emotional and cultural connections with the past, forging a delicate but significant unity. A blend of emotional reactions to various artistic expressions, political dialogues, and collective memories has played a role in shaping cultural memory in Italy. The diversity of narratives is attributed to the varying experiences of the Italian people with the Holocaust, Fascism, and anti-Fascism across different periods and regions. The war did not yield a singular result; instead, it gave rise to a multitude of consequences, giving way to interconnected narratives. The common ground existing between Italo Calvino and the contributors to the Italian Auschwitz Memorial is, at the most basic level, the necessity to memorialize the past through culture. Among these authors' multiple, complex, navigated identities, one might claim that Calvino was a partigiano, Quasimodo was an outspoken anti-Fascist intellectual, Levi a Jewish deportee. Their experiences must have been profoundly different, yet the struggle of the war was embodied and sensorial for all.

A memorialization that enacts multisensoriality allows us "to become without ceasing to be, and to be without ceasing to become," precisely because it emboldens the creation of meaningful connections with the past and present while broadening our cultural understanding of the tragedy of the Holocaust and war. The assessed body of work by Calvino, Quasimodo, Levi, as well as Berio, Nono, Risi, Samonà, and Belgiojoso, demonstrates that multisensoriality is a means to foster dialogue, strengthen cultural memory, and engender new reflections, making us active, resistant, plural, and yet substantially united citizens.

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