Abstract:

Italo Calvino, attentive observer of life, experienced or imagined.

The Italian writer Italo Calvino, who died in September 1985, is remembered as a fabulist and essayist. His writing spans a range that reflects the diversity of his cultural interests but shows a basic consistency of narrative purpose, as outlined in his essays and responses to his cultural environment. The intellectual curiosity that marked Calvino’s writing from his beginnings in the immediate postwar period of neorealism led him to many areas, the recent political situation as well as fantasy that at surface level seemed disengaged. Even though remaining a fabulist, his approach to his material gradually became concentrated on that close observation of the surrounding reality that we find in his last writing (Eng. titles: Mr Palomar of 1983, and Under the Jaguar Sun, 1986).

The early distinguishing mark of Calvino’s narrative mixture of authentic detail from Italy’s (partisan) wartime reality coupled with fantasy was evident in his first novel (in English The Pathway of the Nest of Spiders), and in the short stories that continued these themes through the 1950s; but by 1952 he had published the first of the trilogy of short novels (in Eng. The Cloven Viscount, followed by The Baron in the Trees and The Inexistent Knight), later given the title I nostri antenati (Our Ancestors) in which fantasy predominates over underlying comment on the condition of modern humanity. By degrees, the focus and the material itself moved from tales of realistic (mis)adventure of often fable-like brevity (as in the Marcovaldo stories of 1963), to those that purported to eschew any pretence at realism, such as the series of fantastical stories on cosmology (Eng. The Comics of the Cosmos of 1965 and Time and the Hunter of 1967).

On 24th December of the year of publication of Time and the Hunter, Calvino’s rationalist intent is evident in his letter of response, through the Milan newspaper Corriere della Sera, to the writer Anna Maria Ortese concerning the contemporary space programme: “What interests me is everything that is the true appropriation of space and celestial bodies, that is knowledge; emergence from our limited and certainly deceptive perspective, the definition of a relationship between us and the non-human universe.”¹

This, despite the fact that up to this point his thematic material often lies outside any rational expectation of normal human experience: our heraldic ancestors are a knight split down the centre into two opposing halves; a baron living in the trees; an empty suit of armour; and his tales of the cosmos are related by an equally non-human being that evolves along with nature, from the start of the universe. By making reference to this typical Calvinian mixture of insistence on the observable reality and on the writer’s, and readers’, freedom to float with the imagination, this paper points to the layers of reflection that the author brings to one of the traditional tropes used in his writing. In his essays, and in all manner of public utterances, Calvino’s writing remains consistently balanced around certain coordinates. The following are just two of these statements such as will be relevant for the discussion in this paper, one from a letter to the critic Mario Boselli in 1969 and the other from an interview with Guido Almansi a decade later:

¹ Cp. his Una pietra sopra. Discorsi di letteratura e società, Turin: Einaudi, 1980, p. 183. These are a collection from his essays and conference papers over the years 1955-1978; Eng. title: The Literature Machine.
In speaking of the conclusion he gives to his story based on Dumas’ “The Count of Montecristo”, Calvino writes to the critic Mario Boselli (on 23rd October 1969): “I think that the end of Montecristo is the main gnoseological and ethical conclusion that I have reached […] It is necessary to take account of the details of experience (the Abbot Faria’s attempts to escape from the prison) so as to establish the model to be compared continually with empirical facts. Only in this way can one discover the weak spots in empirical reality, that is those points where a person in a certain historic situation can find a breach [in the enclosing walls] and go forward. […] My Montecristo is intended to downplay the existential drama of the prisoner […] depersonalise his tension, as a necessary condition for his escaping the prison.”

The following extract is from his interview with Guido Almansi in 1978: “Voyages can consist of actual travel, the crossing of an extent of land, the use of a chemical substance. But they can also be a change in our manner of observing the world, an obliqueness of gaze, a change in dimension, a question mark.”

The first of these statements recalls the ending of The Invisible Cities (1972), where the speaker urges his interlocutor to the more difficult option of not ignoring, but paying close attention to the ‘hell-like’ reality one inhabits so as to be able to recognise those things or those beings that are not part of it, and to nurture them. This novel, more than any other part of Calvino’s work brings us to the theme of travel, a theme to which we now turn. As we see from his response to Almansi, Calvino’s literary interest in travel is not associated with the material facts of transport, distance, exploration, curiosity about and enjoyment of difference, although, in keeping with what we know of his interests, we would expect to have records of his own travel within and outside Italy. We do have such writing, but it is almost marginal, being almost completely contained in two sections of the volume Collezione di sabbia (A Collection of Sands) (1984), the final section of which is composed of fifteen short studies concerning aspects of his travel in Japan, Mexico and Iran in 1975-76; another ten occasional pieces in the first section tell of his impressions arising from visits to exhibitions of various kinds. The stylistic difference between these two sections is minimal, and the reader’s attention is directed in each case to a single item, or to a series of like objects isolated in an atmosphere of reflective repose.

Not surprisingly, travel assumes more central importance in the fiction of The Invisible Cities where Calvino re-appropriates the 13th century journey of Marco Polo to China. Far from re-presenting the adventure of Polo’s travels, however, he draws us into touch with a legendary figure in an exotic setting who sits with the Kahn in iconic calm, mentally contemplating fifty-five cities in the Kahn’s Empire.

The Venetian’s travels and the accident of his imprisonment in later life by the Genovese which led in turn to the dictation of his adventures to a scribe in the same prison is here simply treated as a level of the story-telling that Calvino absorbs into background colour; in the same way, the alluring title of the novel Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore (1979) proves to be a false hope, and the text fragments into ten attempts

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at new beginnings. The reader’s interest is directed away from the emotion of an ongoing adventure, towards the questioning and the change of dimension mentioned in the interview a year earlier. In Calvino’s hands, even Polo’s reassessment of “elsewhere” becomes the recognition of one’s limitations. The later character Mr Palomar concludes that only after one has come to know the surface of things can one look at what is underneath; but he is faced with an endless surface. The central focus of these stories is the gaze that seeks knowledge, and the writer’s challenge is to narrate it.