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Italo Calvino: Mythical writing in an Enlightened World.

Myrto Petsota

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Italo Calvino: Mythical Writing in an Enlightened World

Desire, utopia and earthly transcendence in the cosmicomic stories, *Le città*

invisibili, and *Palomar*

Myrto Petsota

PhD

THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

OILTHIGH DHÙN ÈIDEANN

2012

Declaration

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due acknowledgement has been made in the text. It has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified.

Myrto Petsota

16th July 2012

Abstract

This thesis offers an interpretative framework of Italo Calvino's later work (the cosmicomic stories, *Le città invisibili*, and *Palomar*), based on the notions of myth, desire, utopia and science. Its aim is to suggest a reading of these texts as a common literary project best described as being deeply influenced by mythological elements and structures, while clearly bearing the mark of enlightened thought. The study exposes both the intellectual implications of such a project, and the aesthetic mechanisms by which it takes its form. The research was informed by Calvino's own relevant critical work, a network of secondary criticism approaching either the texts which were of interest to this particular work or the themes and notions that were to be explored, and a set of tertiary texts, which helped to consolidate pivotal notions. The latter include the work of thinkers who had a major influence on Calvino as it is known from his essays and his letters (like Charles Fourier or Giorgio de Santillana), but also other figures, such as Anton Chekhov or Albert Camus, who emerged as interesting comparative opportunities for our study.

The analysis of the cosmicomic stories explores the relationship between myth-making and individual responsibility. It draws parallels between intellectual commitment and literary projection, and defines Calvino's utopian project, including it in a reflection on knowledge, myth and the tyranny of abstract thought. Individual responsibility emerges as a prospective and a retrospective activity, which is explained alongside the idea of 'poetics in the making'.

Le città invisibili is studied as an illustration of Calvino's precise poetics using the image of the city. The notions of the episode and the frame are the central concepts around which the inquiry is articulated. Discussing the ideas of desire and the search for the ideal, it is possible to draw solid links with the cosmological project of the cosmicomics and Calvino's idea of utopia and myth.

With an examination of characterisation in *Palomar* and a close analysis of the quest for meaning, this thesis also attempts a definition of Calvino's aesthetics as the 'aesthetics of earthly transcendence'. It moves on to a comparative study of *Palomar* and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* by Albert Camus, in order to suggest an interpretation of the main character, as a man who lives and observes his life in the face of the absurd; the literary consequence being the immediate confrontation between writing and death, and the presence of silence threatening understanding and communication.

Dedication

To my brother Spyros, for whom I am always eagerly writing, hoping he will approve.

To my mother Maria, who always reads me, gently and constructively reminding me when she does not approve.

To my father Georgios, who is always quietly happy I am writing, hoping I am happy as well.

To all of them, for listening and for the love they generously allow me to return.

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Most of all, I would like to thank my family, who has made all this possible with hard work, sincere commitment, and abundant love.

Notes and list of abbreviations

List of abbreviations

All the listed volumes will be referred to with their abbreviation in the thesis

- RRI Italo Calvino, *Romanzi racconti*, ed. by Mario Barengi and Bruno Falchetto, 2nd edn, Vol. 1 (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1995).
- RRII Italo Calvino, *Romanzi racconti*, ed. by Mario Barengi and Bruno Falchetto, 2nd edn, Vol. 2 (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1995).
- SI Italo Calvino, *Saggi 1945-1985*, ed. by Mario Barengi, 4th edn, Vol. 1 (Milan : Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 2007).
- SII Italo Calvino, *Saggi 1945-1985*, ed. by Mario Barengi, 4th edn, Vol. 2 (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 2007).
- L Italo Calvino, *Lettere 1940-1985*, ed. by Luca Baranelli, 2nd edn (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 2001).

Notes

For all authors and historical figures born before 1900, the first time they are mentioned, their date of birth and death follows in parenthesis.

The dates of Calvino's essays will be mentioned in parenthesis the first time they appear in the thesis.

Unless otherwise stated, all translations of quotations from languages other than English and Italian are my own. These translations will immediately follow the indented quotations, and appear in parenthesis in the case of shorter quotations.

Introduction

Ιθάκη

Σα βρεις στον πηγαμιό για την Ιθάκη,
να εύχεσαι νάναι μακρύς ο δρόμος,
γεμάτος περιπέτειες, γεμάτος γνώσεις.
Τους Λαιστρυγόνας και τους Κύκλωπας,
τον θυμωμένο Ποσειδώνα μη φοβάσαι,
τέτοια στον δρόμο σου ποτέ σου δεν θα βρεις,
αν μόν' η σκέψις σου υψηλή, αν εκλεκτή
συγκίνησις το πνεύμα και το σώμα σου αγγίζει.
Τους Λαιστρυγόνας και τους Κύκλωπας,
τον άγριο Ποσειδώνα δεν θα συναντήσεις,
αν δεν τους κουβανείς μες στην ψυχή σου,
αν η ψυχή σου δεν τους στήνει εμπρός σου.

Να εύχεσαι νάναι μακρύς ο δρόμος.
Πολλά τα καλοκαιρινά πρωιά να είναι
που με τι ευχαρίστησι, με τι χαρά
θα μπαίνεις σε λιμένας πρωτοειδωμένους·
να σταματήσεις σ' εμπορεία Φοινικικά,
και τες καλές πραγμάτειες ν' αποκτήσεις,
σεντέφια και κοράλλια, κεχριμπάρια κ' έβενους,
και ηδονικά μυρωδικά κάθε λογής,
όσο μπορείς πιο άφθονα ηδονικά μυρωδικά·
σε πόλεις Αιγυπτιακές πολλές να πας,
να μάθεις και να μάθεις απ' τους σπουδασμένους.

Πάντα στον νου σου νάχεις την Ιθάκη.
Το φθάσιμον εκεί είν' ο προορισμός σου.
Αλλά μη βιάζεις το ταξείδι διόλου.
Καλλίτερα χρόνια πολλά να διαρκέσει·
και γέρος πια ν' αράξεις στο νησί,
πλούσιος με όσα κέρδισες στον δρόμο,
μη προσδοκώντας πλούτη να σε δώσει η Ιθάκη.

Η Ιθάκη σ' έδωσε τ' ωραίο ταξείδι.
Χωρίς αυτήν δεν θάβγαινες στον δρόμο.
Άλλα δεν έχει να σε δώσει πια.

Κι αν πτωχική την βρεις, η Ιθάκη δεν σε γέλασε.
Έτσι σοφός που έγινες, με τόση πείρα,
ήδη θα το κατάλαβες η Ιθάκες τι σημαίνουν.¹

Ithaca

As you set out for Ithaca
hope the voyage is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laistrygonians and Cyclops,
angry Poseidon—don't be afraid of them:
you'll never find things like that on your way

¹Κωσταντίνος Π. Καβάφης, *Ποιήματα 1897-1933*, (Ικαρος, 1984)

as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
 as long as a rare excitement
 stirs your spirit and your body.
 Laistrygonians and Cyclops,
 wild Poseidon—you won't encounter them
 unless you bring them along inside your soul,
 unless your soul sets them up in front of you.

Hope the voyage is a long one.
 May there be many a summer morning when,
 with what pleasure, what joy,
 you come into harbors seen for the first time;
 may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
 to buy fine things,
 mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
 sensual perfume of every kind—
 as many sensual perfumes as you can;
 and may you visit many Egyptian cities
 to gather stores of knowledge from their scholars.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
 Arriving there is what you are destined for.
 But do not hurry the journey at all.
 Better if it lasts for years,
 so you are old by the time you reach the island,
 wealthy with all you have gained on the way,
 not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvellous journey.
 Without her you would not have set out.
 She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.
 Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
 you will have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.²

i. Thesis aims and framework

Kathryn Hume speaks of four groups of critics who are distinguished by their general attitude and concern towards Calvino's work. The first usually discusses him, while working under the assumption that philosophy is a fundamental aspect of his work. The second insists on the relation established with the reader. The third typically analyses him in his own identity, as a unique literary specimen. The fourth orbits around a 'nexus of values that most concerns [Hume]. It may take the form of consciousness and cosmos, or individual and community, or the One and the Many'.³ Under this spectrum, this thesis supports the idea that there are important philosophical concerns in Calvino's fiction, and at the same time, it will contribute to the study of a variety of themes and values. It will also insist however, that Calvino's project was essentially literary and not a mechanical literary transposition of philosophical ideas, or philological arguments. Although we will engage in a variety of discussions, attempting to frame Calvino's literary discourse, we will always try to justify it

²C.P Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, ed. by George Savidis (Princeton University Press: Revisited Edition, 1992), pp. 36-37.

³Kathryn Hume, *Calvino's Fictions: Cogito and Cosmos* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 16.

aesthetically; in other words, any argument is ultimately to be tested against the aesthetics of the author's work. His own comments on his work, present in his essays and his letters, are not proof of one or another argument *per se*, but they are to be used as critical support, as an additional echo, and they will also be questioned where it is appropriate.

Overall, this work will be articulated around the key concepts of myth, utopia, desire, science and meaning. This thesis puts forward the idea that Calvino's work is not only mythical in imagery, but also in spirit, that the utopian impulse takes both form and content in Calvino's intellectual purpose and his poetics, that desire is at work and also represented in the process of literary creation, that science is both inspiration of form and the object of critical thinking, and that meaning is always desired and problematised. The concrete aesthetic proposal that emerged from the research undertaken has been named the 'aesthetics of earthly transcendence'. The thesis of earthly transcendence wishes to provide evidence of the tension present in Calvino's work, characterised by a powerful desire to reach a voice as universal as possible, while always remaining faithful to the human and historical dimension. We will discuss how metaphor and the symbolic are essential tools for aesthetic transcendence, and relate them to other arguments that will be made on myth. To avoid any confusion, and to discard any readings of this aesthetic proposal as a mystical one, we will insist that the transcendence we see in the works of Calvino, always remains in suspension. In other words, the stories do not effectively transcend the tension they initially present, but in the making of the story, transcendental desire plays a decisive role. We will also discuss how Calvino's predilection for short forms might be closely associated with this aesthetic proposition. Although some of the theoretical points that are discussed are borrowed from short story criticism and the effort to establish it as a genre, we would like to insist more on how some of these elucidate certain aesthetic effects and concerns in Calvino's work. This is also why these arguments are not taken from a consistent theoretical tendency, nor do they participate in the elaboration of a coherent genre criticism.

This study will concentrate on a corpus constituted exclusively of short stories, comprising the cosmicomic stories (*Le Cosmicomiche* (1965), *Ti con zero* (1967), *La memoria del mondo e altre storie cosmicomiche* (1968), and *Cosmicomiche vecchie e nuove* (1984)), *Le città invisibili* (1972), and *Palomar* (1983)). These units of study are interpreted as three different stages of a unique literary project, as it was shaped in Calvino's work from the mid-60's, and after the peak of the crisis of engaged literature, reached in the creation of the character of Amerigo Ormea, in *La giornata d'uno scrutatore* (1963). The themes explored in *Palomar* and their problematisation, stand on a delicate equilibrium between a critique of Western thought and its intellectual heritage. This thesis specifies

this line of thought, by tracing the origins of this discourse, in the fundamental aspects of the Age of Enlightenment and its criticism. Our task will also be to discuss, that it is not Western thought that is denied *en bloc*, but specific aspects of it, which are very often derivative of the Enlightenment. Calvino's literary enterprise is situated in the middle of the old debate between Enlightenment and Romanticism, especially regarding issues such as history, humankind's relation to the past, the idea of progress, determinism, occultism, or the very idea of utopia.

If the early 60's are a landmark for Calvino, signifying the epitome of the crisis of engaged literature, and specifically of the communist enterprise, they are also indicative of the beginning of a new utopian project, or even better: the same utopian drive rose again, reborn after the previous intellectual failure, richer in more rigorous intellectual effort, and even more flourishing literary images.

Pietro Citati, renowned Italian critic and a friend of Calvino's for three decades, spoke of a significant change which occurred in the author when he turned forty, and which was clearly discernible in his work. According to Citati, this change was characterised by a passage from a preference for linearity to a sincere interest in 'tutto ciò che è infinito, multiforme, spezzato, discontinuo, intrecciato, impensato'.⁴ Natalia Ginzburg, one of the early friendships that Calvino made at Einaudi, alongside Cesare Pavese and Elio Vittorini, speaks of a metamorphosis that she failed to understand completely, but which she partly recognised in the gradual disappearance of colourful landscapes in Calvino's fiction, in favour of a new 'lunar', desert light.⁵ For Perrella, this change was not so inexplicable. Calvino was part of an entire generation of writers, including Goffredo Parise, Elsa Morante, or Anna Maria Ortese, which in the sixties experienced a similar 'soul-searching'. Their intellectual reappraisal also coincided, according to Perrella, with a journey to the USA (see also 1.4.4. below), which came to signify the passage to a new order of things, as well as the lurking threat disguised behind economic prosperity. Another significant aspect which gave this change a certain direction, was Calvino's conception (also a common communist belief) that he was on the right side of History (and thus with a capital 'h'), that he would participate, after the Resistance, in the reconstruction of Italy.⁶

Calvino in the early sixties was already moving towards a decisive break from the old communist utopia, which brought him to fight in the Garibaldi Brigades. Even from his first novel, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1947), he was resisting the pressure of zhdanovism to represent the world

⁴Pietro Citati, 'L'antico ragazzo delle colline', *Il Corriere della Sera*, 20 September 1985, p. 3

⁵Natalia Ginzburg, 'Il sole e la luna', *L'indice dei libri del mese*, II, 8, (September, October 1985), p. 27.

⁶Silvio Perrella, *Calvino, Scrittori Italiani* (Bari: Editori Laterza, 1999), p.87.

in a radical dualistic way. Pin and his fellow Partisans are rough and uneducated characters, they are not the legendary heroes of the Italian Resistance.

The idea of a 'mythical writing in an enlightened world', wants to stress the inherent complexity of a literary project, which attempts to reconcile, or at least to create a dialectic space for aspects which appear or are initially experienced as contradictory. Terms such as 'myth' and 'science' have come in our modern age to express such an opposition. This study's aim is to express, as clearly as possible, the origins, characteristics and implications of such an enterprise. At times, we will emphasise the intellectual context (Italian, but also European, and Western more generally) to which Calvino's literary work contributed, but also the very specific literary identity of each work. Within the intricate, often paradoxical space created by a discourse articulated around myth and science, we shall discuss how this tension opens up to new literary possibilities, illustrating themes as complex as utopia and desire.

Throughout the research undertaken, it appeared that the premises of this thesis were best exemplified in the cosmicomic stories, *Le città invisibili* and *Palomar*. The cosmological dimension and the literary exploration of scientific images in the cosmicomic stories, responded well to the thematic prerequisites of the study. *Le città invisibili* also satisfied the general criteria on which the research was based: on the one hand, it presented the dream-like, mythical images of the cities, and on the other hand, it focused on an urban space, which echoed the growing industrialised age, coming hand-in-hand with the Enlightenment, and evolving into the twentieth century. Finally, *Palomar* figured as a character who engaged directly with the epistemological, ontological, and metaphysical questions raised by an increasingly diversified and confusing approach to knowledge and meaning.

In order to render the analysis of the works clearer in our frame of study, the next section will explore the different aspects of myth which will be relevant to the study, including contrasting theoretical material. Its purpose is not necessarily to provide a coherent theoretical framework of myth, but to map the mythical *topos* against which Calvino's fiction will eventually be discussed. It is therefore not a theoretical proposition as much as it is a hermeneutic framework.

ii. Literature, myth and desire

As it is one of humankind's most profound desires to understand and establish a dialogue with the world it lives in, the function of myth draws simultaneously on a desire for knowledge and on a creative impulse. This twofold purpose is itself at the origin of every human intellectual activity. From the dawn of humanity to the present day, the mythical discourse has evolved and diversified greatly.

From the ancient inventions of science, art, theatre and philosophy, we have reached today an astounding number of areas of interest; each of them claiming a distinct methodology and a different proposition. The process of diversification and specialisation has gone so far that at times it has become virtually impossible to bridge the gaps between separate disciplines (it is no coincidence that the contemporary academic world has developed a great interest in interdisciplinary intellectual work). Different world-views come into direct conflict, and the ongoing picture that people draw of the world appears to become hazier (and not clearer) as surveys flourish. Myth has been approached by that very variety of disciplines, such as anthropology, philosophy, sociology, history, psychoanalysis or even from the point of view of textual analysis. There is no study of myth *per se*, probably because a methodological or analytical approach of any kind defies the essence of myth itself (see also 1.1 below in reference to Kérenyi). Any approach to myth from within would nullify theories immediately. Each of the different approaches reveals an aspect of myth relevant to the discipline, but there are some aspects of myth, which disciplines once seemed to recognise: its appeal to the original and the sacred, its quality in bearing truth in its narration, both about the cosmos and the human soul.

Before being discarded as a petty lie and a regrettable habit, myth was a discourse closely associated with truth.⁷ Its symbolic structure very often consisted in the divine revelation through inscription, while its pragmatic function offered tales of origin and explanations for worldly phenomena. For literature, myth is both a source and a driving force. If science has claimed a greater role in explaining the world and its mechanisms, literature clearly inherited myth's creative impulse, elaborating and exploring its own possibilities in the realm of language. On a horizontal level, literature draws from myth as from a story, and on a vertical one, literature has a derivative relation to it. Literature's extensive borrowing from classical, and biblical myths is, first of all, an act of confirmation and recognition; it is proof of mythical pertinence and continuity. It also raises a sense of duty towards the past, and more specifically, towards past valuable human creation. It is also important to see in this return, a characteristic of mythical continuation, as myth gains its quality through this very repetition.

The most fundamental difference between literature and myth is probably literature's stern refusal to explain:

Le mythe, dans sa forme authentique, apportait des réponses sans jamais
formuler les problèmes. La tragédie, quand elle reprend les traditions

⁷André Siganos, 'Définitions du mythe', *Questions de Mythocritique* (Paris: Édition Imago, 2005), p. 87.

mythiques, les utilise pour poser, à travers elles, des problèmes qui ne comportent pas de solution. Cette distorsion littéraire du mythe est d'autant plus frappante que d'autres récits, à la même époque, s'attachent à colliger les versions courantes véhiculées, ici ou là, par la tradition orale.⁸

Myth, in its authentic form, brought answers without ever formulating the problems. Tragedy, when it revisits mythical traditions, uses these traditions, to ask through them, the questions that do not bear an answer. This literary distortion of myth is so striking, that other contemporary narratives attempt to bring together the current versions, conveyed here or there by oral tradition.

It appears then, that where myth reveals, literature suspects. Literature has a tentative approach which distinguishes its *modus operandi*. So while myth and literature might share a great deal in their symbolic quality, their function is quite distinct.

The symbolic mechanism reveals several key aspects of the mythopoietic and the creative literary process. In its original sense, the Greek word σύμβολο, designated an actual object which was broken and shared as a sign of recognition in the sphere of hospitality (see also 1.4.1 below).⁹ From this initial meaning, the word keeps nowadays the idea of a bridge between the individual and the communal, as well as the sense of reconstructing separate parts. In the making and reception of the symbol, both mimesis and semiosis are involved. Let us note here, that although we have distinguished the symbolic structure of myth and literature from their respective function, both gain part of their significance from their aesthetics (see also 1.4 below).

Mythopoiesis is not merely the tale of origins, it is also the process through which void becomes being and where from chaos springs cosmos. In this, literature sees an opportunity to explore the origins. However, creation, even mythic creation, is never original :

Il n'y a de création que là où préexiste le texte de l'œuvre naissante, qui ne peut accéder à la pleine représentation de soi qu'au prix de condensations, de déplacements, semblables à ceux du rêve, qui se nourrit du refoulement d'une histoire originelle. L'artiste sait par là qu'il n'est pas à l'origine première de ce qu'il dit, de ce qu'il crée dans son œuvre, mais il est ouvert à une parole, à une parole autre, à l'Autre d'une parole, dont l'œuvre va porter précisément la trace.¹⁰

There is creation only where the text of the budding work already exists. The latter can only reach its full representation at the cost of condensation and shifting, similar to those found in dreams, which draw upon the repression of an original story. The artist thus knows that he is not at the

⁸J-P Vernant cited in André Siganos, 'Définitions du mythe', *Questions de Mythocritique* (Paris: Édition Imago, 2005), p. 95.

⁹Claude-Gibert Dubois, 'Symbole et Mythe', *Questions de Mythocritique* (Paris: Éditions Imago, 2005), p.331.

¹⁰Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, 'Création artistique et mythique', *Questions de Mythocritique* (Paris: Éditions Imago), p. 71.

very origin of what he says, of what he creates in his work, but that he is open to a *parole*, another *parole*, to the Otherness of a *parole*, of which the work is precisely going to bear the mark.

In this sense, creation is never purely individual nor isolated. The most appropriate way to try and understand creation then, is to never separate it from human desire, in other words, it would be a mistake to study it as an external isolated object, for it is an intrinsic quality of conscience, a universal conscience. Describing the internal mechanisms and structures without relating them to the subject who interacts with them creates a break and is a fault of observation, if not hubris.¹¹

At this point it is necessary to recognise that literature operates in a largely de-mythologised age, or an age that has openly and repeatedly expressed its repulsion for myth. So what can the function of myth be in such a defiant environment? One possible interpretation is given by William Righter (1975): “the importance of myth in a ‘demythologized’ age, is not simply to provide us with the now missing sense of an ultimate frame of reference, but to provide an area of almost deliberate uncertainty as to what such frames might possibly imply”.¹² Another complementary proposition would be that literature sternly perpetuates the elements which in myth resist this very de-mythologisation. Literature cannot undertake the task of an impossible return to an age where myth was universally relevant, nor can it claim to replace myth in a similar project; yet acknowledging this unequivocal schism it repeats and re-creates what is relevant in its own poetic frame.

We can understand myth as a perpetual creation, as a *λόγος* which is constantly reshaped with its eyes always set on truth, origin and nature. It is anonymous, and grounded between cosmos and chaos, and this is also why it embraces both the repetition of the same and the possibility of the other. It is not fixed in time, nor does it dictate the order of things. ‘[Mythical figures] combine in themselves variety, eternity, and recurrence, for such is the nature of the cosmos itself’.¹³ Literature draws on myth, de-mystifies it only to re-mystify it again.

Bazzocchi argues that ‘secondo uno schema rigidamente dialettico, la letteratura prende coscienza di sé solo quando si allontana da un presunto stato mitico e il mito viene relegato in un’anteriorità che possiamo esaminare almeno in tre diversi aspetti: 1. *Prospettiva filosofica* [...] 2. *Prospettiva antropologica* [...] 3. *Prospettiva storico-culturale*’.¹⁴

¹¹By hubris here, we mean the exceeding self-confidence in certain methodologies, which leads to the inescapable failure to interpret (see also 4.1.2 below).

¹²William Righter cited in Hume, *Calvino's Fictions*, p. 71.

¹³Giorgio de Santillana, Hertha von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill: An Essay Investigating the Origins of Human Knowledge and Its Transmission through Myth*, 4th edn. (New Hampshire: David R. Godine Publisher, 1977), p.48.

¹⁴Marco Antonio Bazzocchi, *L'immaginazione mitologica. Leopardi e Calvino, Pasolini e Pascoli* (Bologna: Edizioni Pendragon, 1996), pp. 11-13.

If we wish to understand the relation between myth and desire it is fundamental to partly acknowledge myth itself as a manifestation of desire. All philosophical myths of desire are concerned with the power of desire which dictates human behaviour to some extent, as well as understanding – limiting it or enhancing it. Desire takes on different forms such as appetite, longing, lust, sexual desire, yearning, the power of desire which often dictates human actions. and philosophical desire. The Greeks for example, had several Gods for it, the Ἐρωτες: Ἔρως, Αντέρω, Ἴμερος, Πόθος, while Ἔρως himself was a unifying force, a cosmic engendering power.

There are two very distinct tendencies in the philosophies of desire: the reading of the myth of the Androgyne in Plato's *Banquet*, ultimately reveals for some philosophers not merely the loss of the desired object but its complete absence, while philosophers like Spinoza and Nietzsche are traditionally believed to affirm the absolute positivity of desire. The first tendency expresses the utter absurdity of human existence that longs for the impossible, the second suggests the immense power and grandeur of human endeavour. Historically, these two tendencies stand opposite one another. In parts of Christian tradition, human desire is held responsible for humankind's fall from God's grace, and represented as diabolical. It is in this tradition that Kierkegaard analyses the modern myths of Faust and Don Juan, and effectively performs a return to the essence of myth. His approach supports the distinction between three libidos: *libido sciendi*, which aspires to knowledge, *libido sentiendi*, which seeks pleasure, and *libido dominandi*, which strives for control. The multiple facets of desire reflect the multiplicity of human responses to them, so much so, that the interpretation of events in human history returns to the study and analysis of the desires that command them.

Anthropology and psychoanalysis have also greatly contributed to the study of myth and desire. The first tells us about their relevance for human communities, while the second sheds some light into the characteristics of the human psyche. Combining the two, we can get a glimpse of their function both on an individual and a more universal level.

In the tradition of structural anthropology, myths have been studied as the expression of desires produced under specific social circumstances. A very innovative thesis was expressed by Lévi-Strauss' (1829-1902) anthropological studies, namely that in the sphere of society, desire does not prohibit, it dictates. Furthermore, according to Lévi-Strauss, primitives are 'moved by a need or a desire to understand the world around them, [. . .] they proceed by intellectual means, exactly as a philosopher, or even to some extent a scientist, can and would do'.¹⁵ We can see therefore, that the link between myth and science still remains. Yet this is not a disinterested remark on Lévi-Strauss' part; his own

¹⁵Claude Lévi-Strauss cited in Robert Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 29.

work and methodology had scientific aspirations. As Calvino reminds us, ‘lavorando sui miti degli indiani del Brasile, vede in essi un sistema d'operazioni logiche tra termini permutabili, tali da poter essere studiate coi procedimenti matematici dell'analisi combinatoria’.¹⁶ Calvino does not fail to warn us of the limits of this frame of thought, and to remind us that however systematic some things might appear from these discoveries, the combinations of stories or cultural artefacts remain unlimited and consequently never fully graspable. From 1967, when he comments on Lévi-Strauss in ‘Cibernetica e Fantasmi’, to 1983 when he writes in his defence as a response to Roberto Calasso's depiction of Lévi-Strauss as the ethnologist who regrettably sectioned myth, depriving it of its vital force; Calvino manages to go a step further and articulate a new proposition which provides a partial answer to the fear of discontinuity: ‘la cultura della discontinuità, se alimentata da una sensibilità analitica sempre più esigente, può essere il solo metodo che renda ragione dell'unità dell'umano nell'unità dell'universo, e tenti di saldare ancora microcosmo e macrocosmo’.¹⁷ This conclusion is interesting for two different reasons: it states the impossibility of going back to a unitarian view of the world as such, since it would be a historical and intellectual fallacy, while at the same time, it subtly recognises the need for a vision of an un-severed man in the universe.

There is however an aspect of structural anthropology, which disregards some of the essence of myth, and that is mainly because it does not account for the unconscious mechanisms at work in human desire and the emergence of myths. It is precisely this, that the semiological approach tried to overcome, by attempting to account both for the means of the unconscious and the social structures at stake in the making of myth. It is such a study that leads Roland Barthes, in 1957, to the analysis of modern myths as the projection of a collective ideology. Barthes considers myth to be a form of communication, and for the most part of his analysis, he belongs to the tradition that retains myths to be delusions that need to be debunked. In fact, the meaning that he gives to myth has an underlying political function which aims at preserving a state of awareness, necessary for critical appraisal.

We have already mentioned the unconscious as a capital element in both myth and desire, so naturally, psychoanalysis has had its own share of interesting outcomes in their study.

If Oedipus Rex moves a modern audience no less than it did the contemporary Greek one, the explanation can only be that its effect does not lie in the contrast between destiny and human [free] will, but is to be looked for in the particular nature of the material on which that contrast is exemplified. There must be something [latent] which makes a voice within us ready to recognize the compelling force of destiny in the Oedipus. . . . His [Oedipus'] destiny moves us only because it might have been ours – because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our

¹⁶‘Cibernetica e fantasmi’ (1967), SI, p. 207.

¹⁷‘Roberto Calasso, *La rovina di Kasch*’, Ibid., p. 1022.

birth as upon him. . . . Our dreams convince us that that is so. King Oedipus, who slew his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta, merely shows us the fulfilment of our own childhood wishes. But, more fortunate than he, we have meanwhile succeeded, in so far as we have not become psychoneurotics, in detaching our sexual impulses from our mothers and in forgetting our jealousy of our fathers.¹⁸

Freud's (1856-1939) thesis interprets the relevance of Oedipus' story to the modern reader as a trait of human nature. Therefore, the relevance of the myth transforms into identification. For Freud, the therapeutic function of psychoanalysis was to raise awareness of the repressed reality of the unconscious, thus enabling some sort of venting, comparable to theatrical catharsis. Psychoanalysis has been interested in myth not merely because it is a working example of the works of desire, but because myth also actively influences desire. In Lacan's words:

Que sont donc ces grands thèmes mythiques sur lesquels s'essaient au cours des âges les créations des poètes, sinon de longues approximations par quoi ils finissent par entrer dans la subjectivité, dans la psychologie ? Je soutiens sans ambiguïté que les créations poétiques engendrent, plus qu'elles ne reflètent, les créations psychologiques.¹⁹

Then what are those great mythical themes on which the poetic creations of all times venture, if they are not long estimations by which they end up entering subjectivity, entering psychology? I claim without ambiguity, that poetic creations breed, more than they reflect, psychological creations.

Lacan's conclusion about myth is radically different from structural anthropology in its regard to myth and how it affects collective subjectivity. Yet the very myth with which psychoanalysis is born, the Oedipal myth, has been denounced by Lacan, as well as by Deleuze and Guattari, to be the myth of Freud.²⁰ According to this analysis, the Oedipal myth is the product of creation of the founder of psychoanalysis. For Deleuze and Guattari, psychoanalysis is guilty of the perpetuation of an older mistake, belonging to the platonic tradition of the conception of desire, which according to them associates desire with negativity.

¹⁸Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, IV, pp. 262–3 cited in Robert Segal, pp. 91-92.

¹⁹Jacques Lacan (1981), cited. in Camille Dumoulié, 'Désir et mythes', *Questions de Mythocritique* (Paris: Éditions Imago, 2005) pp. 105-106.

²⁰Dumoulié, *Ibid.*

1 Myth, desire, and science: Calvino in context

1.1 Calvino and myth

Calvino's work shows a considerable concern for myth even before the 1960's. His relation to Cesare Pavese, whose work was deeply influenced by the study of myth, was probably one of the first triggers resulting in his later substantial devotion to it. As Domenico Scarpa reminds us: “nel 1946 Calvino invoca una ‘gnoseologia’ del mito: a quell'epoca, Claude Lévi-Strauss è di là da venire e le opere di Karl Kerényi non sono ancora tradotte in Italia”.²¹ When their work did become available in Italian (between 1948 and 1950), ‘Calvino si affretterà a impadronirsi della loro lezione: da Lévi-Strauss impara che il mito è un linguaggio, da Kerényi la consapevolezza che il mito in quanto tale è inattingibile, vale a dire che è vana la pretesa di precisarne un'origine storico-geografica e di assegnargli un significato univoco’.²² In the period preceding the one we have set ourself to study, the trilogy of *I nostri antenati*, and the project of *Le fiabe italiane* are probably Calvino's most significant works revealing his strong interest in myth. Bart van der Bossche suggested that

non sembra esagerato considerare il discorso calviniano sulla fiaba quale perno di una costellazione di interessi e riflessioni che ha svolto un ruolo importante (e forse non ancora sufficientemente chiarito) nell'elaborazione della poetica calviniana della narritività e del rapporto tra testo narrativo e tensione conoscitiva. Sul terreno delle riflessioni calviniane dedicate alla narrativa tradizionale, mitopoietica e popolare, si intrecciano la fedeltà a un progetto (tardo)moderno e inevitabilità di fare i conti con qualcosa che si può chiamare ‘il postmoderno’.²³

As far as the trilogy is concerned, if we bear in mind the framework of over-lapping elements of the fantastic, the fable, and myth we can come to a better understanding of the evolution but also the continuity of Calvino's work on myth.²⁴ The very title of the trilogy discloses an interest in origins and tradition, some of the most significant aspects of myth and its study. While the trilogy experiments on creative opportunities, *Le fiabe* is a more scholarly systematic enterprise, which nonetheless confirms Calvino's knowledge and interest in the tale, another genre closely associated with myth.

²¹Domenico Scarpa, *Italo Calvino* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 1999), p. 179.

²²Ibid.

²³Bart van der Bossche, *Il mito nella letteratura italiana del novecento: trasformazioni e elaborazioni*, Nuova Serie 10 (Leuven, Firenze: Leuven University Press, Franco Cesati Editore, 2007), p. 175.

²⁴For an interpretation of the utopian quality of *Il Barone rampante*, see Eugenio Bolongaro, ‘The Baron in the Trees: The Utopian Moment in Calvino's Fantastic Trilogy’, *Italo Calvino and the Compass of Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 81-130.

Marco Belpoliti considers Calvino to be both a mythical writer and a rationalist.²⁵ Roberto Deidier offers a barthesian interpretation of Calvino's use of myth, in view of a 'conciliazione, almeno letteraria, tra Natura e Storia'.²⁶

Calvino was quite familiar with the multitude of approaches to myth and never failed to discuss them in his essays. In his critical work, he appreciates the contributions made by all these disciplines, but he also expressed quite clearly his own views on myth.

Il mito è la parte nascosta d'ogni storia, la parte sotterranea, la zona non ancora esplorata perché ancora mancano le parole per arrivare fin là. Per raccontare il mito [...] la parola non basta, occorre il concorso di un insieme di segni polivalenti, cioè un rito. Il mito vive di silenzio oltre che di parola; un mito taciuto fa sentire la sua presenza nel narrare profano, nelle parole quotidiane; è un vuoto di linguaggio che aspira le parole nel suo vortice e dà alla fiaba una forma.²⁷

According to this, we can suppose that for Calvino, myth belongs more to the realm of unspoken human experience, than to human discourse; and precisely because it is silent it is deeply rooted in the essential contact of humanity with the world. The power of myth is in fact so great, that it is revealed to the narrator in the most imposing way:

Per tornare al narratore della tribù, egli procede imperterrito a permutare giaguari e tucani, fino al momento in cui da una delle sue innocenti storielle esplode una rivelazione terribile: un mito, che esige d'essere recitato in segreto e in luogo sacro.²⁸

By placing the essence of myth in the realm of the unspoken, Calvino refuses to study it solely on a linguistic or narratorial level, establishing beyond doubt, its sacred identity.

In the argument between Lévi-Strauss, who believed that folktale and myth were simultaneous creations, distinguished only by their form and their tone, and Vladimir Propp (1895-1970) '[che] ribatte con argomenti storici miranti a mostrare la priorità cronologica del mito rispetto alla favola e soprattutto insiste sulla sostanziale antinomia tra mito-verità e favola-menzogna',²⁹ Calvino's idea of myth defies an assumed chronology, according to which myth comes first.

Another example which one could use in order to illustrate the importance Calvino gave to mythical writing, could be taken from 'Esattezza' (1985): 'Questo legame tra le scelte formali della composizione letteraria e il bisogno di un modello cosmologico (ossia d'un quadro mitologico

²⁵Belpoliti, *L'occhio di Calvino*, p. 248.

²⁶Roberto Deidier, *Le forme del tempo: saggio su Italo Calvino* (Milan: Guerini Studio, 1995), pp.77-83.

²⁷SI, p. 218.

²⁸Ibid., p. 221.

²⁹Furio Jesi, *Letteratura e mito* (Turin: Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, 1968), p. 28.

generale) credo sia presente anche negli autori che non lo dichiarano in modo esplicito'.³⁰

1.1.1. Jung: archetypes and myth

The archetype, as it was defined by Carl Gustav Jung (1875 - 1961), is a natural inclination towards certain collectively inherited concepts, which are manifested as adequate psychological reactions to certain situations. The archetype is an ancient mark, an old model. For Clement of Alexandria (c.150 – c. 215), the second century theologian, the archetype was a secret message encoded in Egyptian scripts, which communicated the idea of a common spirit between religions. Jung's idea of the archetype was strongly influenced by Plato's understanding of the Idea (εἶδος) and Kant's perception of the categories of the mind; a concept both related to the understanding of the outside world and an internal mechanism. From an extensive experience as a clinical psychiatrist and from the meticulous analysis of his own dreams, Jung came to the conclusion that the constants he found in the unconscious had an extra-individual level, which he called *complexes*. When studied on an inter-subjective level, Jung believed they exemplified the existence of archetypes. It is this, and the emergence of the idea of a collective unconscious, which revealed, as Jung admitted, the existence of a human nature, that distinguished his analytical psychology from Freud's psychoanalysis. Jung's thesis was that the archetype would determine a set of forms that were possible, and that the context deliberated which of these possibilities would eventually take place. Freud's *libido* as the main driving force of human actions and aspirations, was replaced by a broader concept of psychic energy. Although he believed those primordial images to be shared universally, Jung acknowledged, that they only had the form of potentiality and that their intensity could only be established according to the individual, the society, and the circumstances in which they were to be found.

In order to consolidate his thesis, Jung went on to study and compare his results with the findings of ethnology and comparative mythology. With Károly Kerényi (1897 - 1973) (see also 1.1.2 below) he also hoped to endow the study of myth with the status of scientific activity, with the co-authored book *Essays on a Science of Mythology: The Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis* (1941). In their book, the authors maintained that as far as the tales of origins are concerned, myth does not precede aetiologically (they insisted on the distinction between αἴτια and ἀρχαί). Their theory of archetypes and their proposed scientific thesis was therefore not a deterministic one; it represented the possibility to discuss under a new perspective the dialogue emerging from the observation of perceived phenomena and the inner world of representation and imagination.

³⁰SI, p. 687.

When Jung was studying myth, he believed that its function was primarily psychological, and that it served the purpose of revealing the aspects of the unconscious. According to him, myth was not merely a manifestation of the unconscious, but rather a mechanism which permitted the individual to access it; in this sense, myth is a fundamentally empirical process, one which enables individuation (whereby the unconscious is made accessible to the conscious). Jung also pointed out, that although myths seem to inform on the aspects of the outside world, their function is not explanatory but rather existential. The myth does not inform just for the sake of information, it does so in order to pacify humanity with the world. Jung also moved on to note a shift occurring from ancient myths to modern myths; the first, as we have said, was meant to reconcile humanity with the ways of the world, while the latter performed an appeasement with the inner world.

Another important notion in Jung's work and understanding of myth is the concept of synchronicity. In his later work, Jung sustained the idea that meaning was attained, not by a religious experience or a thorough work on personality, but by the experience of a correspondence between our thought and the world. 'Synchronicity is not itself myth. Synchronicity is the experience of the world as meaningful. Myth would be the account of that experience'.³¹ For Jung, the history of the interpretation of myths was generally characterised by a gradual movement towards self-consciousness (from the Stoics to the Gnostics and to alchemists). He did recognise however, that this progress was not absolute, and that in one era there were always things that its predecessors knew better, or studied more profoundly.

Jung had argued that, traditionally, religion has participated in preserving myth, arguing that as it is the case for myth, experience rather than belief or ritual is at its core. In this sense, in its early days, Christianity had managed to preserve the myths of the ancients in all their vitality. The same project was then gradually abandoned, as Christianity moved further and further away from them, discarding them as superstitious and heretical; a regrettable outcome in Jung's eyes. Regardless of its positive or negative aspects, Jung admitted that Christianity, and religion more generally, was no longer tangible for modern man. In an era where God has ceased to be a working myth, humanity is left with either secular myths or individual ones.

I can only make direct statements, only 'tell stories'. Whether or not the stories are 'true' is not the problem. The only question is whether what I tell is *my* fable, *my* truth [...] I had explained the myths of peoples of the past; I had written a book about the hero, the myth in which man has

³¹Robert A. Segal, 'Introduction', *Encountering Jung: On Mythology* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 20.

always lived. But in what myth does man live nowadays? In the Christian myth, the answer might be ‘Do *you* live in it?’ I asked myself. To be honest, the answer was no. For me, it is not what I live by. ‘Then do we no longer have any myth?’ ‘No, evidently we no longer have any myth.’ ‘But then what is your myth – the myth in which you do live?’ At this point the dialogue with myself became uncomfortable, and I stopped thinking. I had reached a dead-end.³²

Calvino's characters also find themselves in front of the necessity to forge an individual access to myth, when a collective one has been deemed impossible (see especially the analysis of ‘La Memoria del Mondo’ in 2.6 below).

INTERVIEWER

What is the nature of your dreams? Are you more interested in Jung than you are in Freud?

CALVINO

Once after reading Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, I went to bed. I dreamt. The following morning I could remember perfectly my dream, so I was able to apply Freud's method to my dream and explain it to the very last detail. At that moment I believed that a new era for me was about to begin; from that moment on my dreams would no longer keep any secrets from me. It didn't happen. That was the only time Freud had ever lit the darkness of my subconscious. Since that time I have continued to dream as I did before. But I forget them, or if I'm able to remember them I don't understand even the first things about them. To explain the nature of my dreams wouldn't satisfy a Freudian analyst any more than a Jungian. I read Freud because I find him an excellent writer . . . a writer of police thrillers that can be followed with great passion. I also read Jung, who's interested in things of great interest to a writer such as symbols and myths. Jung is not as good a writer as Freud. But, anyhow, I am interested in both of them.³³

The answer to this question reveals in fact much more about the importance of the difference between Freud and Jung and the influence that they had on Calvino's work. In ‘Visibilità’ (1985) he reported, that through his reading of Starobinski³⁴, he recognized a tension that resided in his own writing: ‘Starobinski riconosce in quest'ultima posizione il metodo della psicoanalisi freudiana, mentre quello di Jung, che dà agli archetipi e all'inconscio collettivo validità universale, si ricollega

³²Carl Gustav Jung, ‘Memories, Dreams, Reflections’ from *Jung on Mythology*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), p.173-174.

³³ Italo Calvino, The Art of Fiction No. 130’, *The Paris Review*, 124, (Fall 1992).
<<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2027/the-art-of-fiction-no-130-italo-calvino>>

³⁴ The essay refers to his work: ‘L'impero dell'immaginario’, *La relation critique* (Gallimard, 1970), which discusses the history of the idea of imagination. Calvino is more particularly interested in the passage from understanding imagination as a way towards truth, to interpreting it as a process completely independent from the scientific one – which in this way, remains the only valid way towards knowledge.

all'idea d'immaginazione come partecipazione alla verità del mondo'.³⁵ In order to establish towards which of these two options his own idea of imagination leaned, he admitted that while images were always at the origin of every story he had written, the written word was what truly established their significance. Within the same context he felt the need to clarify that what set the cosmicomic stories slightly aside from the rest of his work, was the setting of a scientific discourse at the origin of every story. Calvino explained his motivation: 'Il mio intento era di dimostrare come il discorso per immagini tipico del mito possa nascere da qualsiasi terreno: anche dal linguaggio più lontano da ogni immagine visuale come quello della scienza d'oggi'.³⁶ Why would Calvino feel the necessity to prove such a point if he did not believe that myth was somehow jeopardized in the network of contemporary discourses? Clearly, he saw myth as the safeguard of visibility. Those who wish to insist on Calvino's commitment will tend to support the idea that he valued more *what* he said, rather than *how* he said it. We will argue that Calvino understood *how* as an inherent quality of things (see also 2.5 below); we also defend the general concept that his extensive experimentation with styles is a proof of his concerns for manner. The cosmicomic stories for instance, tried to prove that mythical images can spring from the most apparently objective discourses, and this is their 'how-to': 'Insomma, il mio procedimento vuole unificare la generazione spontanea delle immagini e l'intenzionalità del pensiero discorsivo'.³⁷ As for the tension he identified in his work, he never did really resolve it, but in a rather typically subversive way he came to terms with it: 'il racconto è per me unificazione d'una logica spontanea delle immagini e di un disegno condotto secondo un'intenzione razionale. Ma nello stesso tempo ho cercato nella immaginazione un mezzo per raggiungere una conoscenza extraindividuale, extrasoggettiva; dunque sarebbe giusto che mi dichiarassi più vicino alla seconda posizione, quella dell'identificazione con l'anima del mondo'.³⁸ This process is in fact the process of individuation as Jung understood it, which occurs during the effort to establish a balanced and salutary dialogue between the conscious and the unconscious.

It was also Jung's mythical approach that attracted Calvino's interest, given that he largely based his work on mythological motives. Calvino might have claimed he was interested in both authors, but his tendency to lean more towards Jung than Freud is rooted in the fundamental differences between Freudian psychoanalysis and Jung's archetypes. Our thesis is that Jung's drive for more universal interpretation was more appealing to Calvino than Freud's idea of a unique individual unconscious, and we will try to demonstrate this desire for universality.

³⁵SI, p. 703.

³⁶Ibid., p. 705.

³⁷SI, p. 705.

³⁸Ibid., p. 706.

1.1.2. Genuine myth and collective language

Collettività significa comunanza di uomini che si riconoscono nel loro rispetto all'uomo, non nelle loro malattie morali e nelle loro colpe. Se il denominatore comune di un gruppo sociale è la colpa e la volontà colpevole, e se tale denominatore viene sfruttato 'dall'alto' come elemento di coesione, se quest'opera 'dall'alto' si esplica anche nel fornire miti deformati *ad hoc* e quindi nel favorire il predominio delle 'forze oscure' sulla coscienza, si può ben parlare di 'stato di sonno' per chi fa parte di tale gruppo.³⁹

There are a couple of key elements to Jesi's definition of 'collettività'. The first is that those who are part of the community, should have a positive relation to man. That is why the community should be based on respect for human nature and should therefore protect it. The second essential characteristic of a community, is that it should be grounded on a human level, and not be *imposed* 'dall'alto'; for if the cohesion comes from a source exterior to man, the community automatically loses its state of vigilance. We should point out the difference between a communion of people and a fellowship: the first is rooted in an intimate exchange between human beings, whereas the second is based on the joint interests, the sharing of moral illness and guilt.

Jesi followed Károly Kerényi's approach and distinguished 'mito genuino' from 'mito tecnicizzato'. Genuine myth is fully experienced and accepted in the life of an individual, even when it means adopting an irrational attitude, as opposed to a myth which is artificially conjured up for a specific purpose. The latter does not respond to the collective quality of the former, because it is simply used as a technical device, instead of emerging as *λόγος*. Kerényi and by extension Jesi, did not distinguish genuine from *technified* myth for the sole pleasure of inventing categories. What they were effectively revealing was the danger that a *technified* myth can represent when put in a certain political context. Examples such as the exploitation of obscure references to the Roman Empire during the fascist regime in Italy, or the cultural emergence of Nazism in Germany are named as the direct consequences of *technified* myth. Jesi also rushed to make a clear distinction between the artistic exploration of myth and the utilisation of engineered myths in the hands of criminal minds:

Sarebbe però superficiale e inesatto coinvolgere in un'unica accusa morale sia i pensatori e gli artisti la cui vicenda spirituale fu contrassegnata anche da elementi orridi generati dalla loro esperienza del mito genuino, sia i criminali che senza alcuno scrupolo tecnicizzarono il mito per i loro scopi più bassi e delittuosi.⁴⁰

³⁹Jesi, p. 30

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 38.

The project of de-mythologisation is closely associated with the broader criticism of religion and superstition. Much as Christianity was long engaged in polemical discourse against the pagan tradition, advocates of the utter negativity of myth considered it to be a permanent threat to political integrity. Kerényi however, was a fervent supporter of the idea that myth and religion were quite distinct in essence and procedure. ‘Sarebbe possibile demitizzare un'altra morte sulla croce, e mantenerla tuttavia per una religione?’ Kerényi's words, according to Jesi, ‘smentiscono anche la possibilità, ieri e oggi auspicata da certa parte della cultura occidentale, di attingere alla religione per la via dell'esoterismo; giacché ogni esoterismo procede per la via del mito’.⁴¹

Barthes made several points in his analysis of myth, which are quite relevant as a political commentary. His approach mainly regarded myth as a *parole*, he founded his analysis on the reading and deciphering of myth. He distinguished three different readings or reading attitudes towards myth. The image he used to illustrate his argument was that of a black soldier saluting in front of the French national flag. The first reading would consist of an empty signifier, through which the concept completely overtakes form, reducing thus the image to its literal meaning. The direct consequence of this being an understanding of the image as a symbol of French imperialism. Barthes named this the attitude of the ‘producteur de mythe’ (producer of myth),⁴² and it is very close to the fabricated quality of *technified* myth. The second reading appears to be quite different: concept and form are completely separated and myth is perceived as an ‘imposture’, thus, ‘le nègre qui salue devient l'*alibi* de l'impérialité française’ (the negro who salutes becomes the *alibi* of French imperialism).⁴³ This attitude is attributed to the ‘mythologue’,⁴⁴ and his reading is in fact a misreading. The last reading keeps both concept and form intact and intrinsically linked, and conceives the signification of myth as ambiguous. The implications of this last reading are comparable with the ones described for the genuine myth: ‘le nègre [...] est la *présence* même de l'impérialité française’ (the negro [...] is the very *presence* of French imperialism), and, ‘le lecteur vit le mythe à la façon d'une histoire à la fois vraie et irréelle’ (the reader lives in the myth as in a story both true and unreal).⁴⁵

There is a clear political motivation behind Barthes' definition and work on myth, which he justified in the following way: ‘le mythe ne cache rien et il n'affiche rien: il déforme; le mythe n'est ni un mensonge ni un aveu: c'est une inflexion [...] Nous sommes ici au principe même du mythe; il transforme l'histoire en nature’ (myth doesn't hide anything and does not reveal anything: it distorts;

⁴¹Jesi, pp. 50-51.

⁴²Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1957), p. 201.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 201-202.

myth is neither a lie, nor a confession [...] This is the very principle of myth; it transforms history into nature).⁴⁶

So if we look more closely, the myth of the black soldier saluting, is altogether a *technified* myth. Even when it is perceived as a mere symbol, or when it emerges as an unconscious perception, it always serves the purpose of French imperialism. The *technified* myth that Barthes tried to denounce was the transposition of the ideology inherent in French imperialism, to the realm of universal truth.

In a section of *Collezione di sabbia*, Calvino expressed his admiration for the famous French intellectual in the essay 'In memoria di Roland Barthes' (1980), where he celebrated him both as a rigorous critic and an advocate of pleasure. Calvino's own persistent and systematic observation, his fascination for models and great structures and his love for images and explorations of the unknown, bear many similarities with the qualities he recognised in Roland Barthes. 'Giappone' in *Collezione di Sabbia* and *L'empire des signes* (1970) are the accounts of Italo Calvino and Roland Barthes of their respective encounters with Japan. The intersection between these two books (the two authors often discuss the same elements: *Pachinko*, Japanese food and cooking, etc...) creates an ideal comparative space, as the country is for both, a new landscape, which triggers the curiosity of these two keen observers. Barthes' motivation was driven by the desire to experience 'le travail du signe le plus proche de ses convictions et de ses fantasmes, ou, si l'on préfère, le plus éloigné des dégoûts, des irritations et des refus que suscite en lui la sémiocratie occidentale.' (The work of the sign closest to his convictions and his fantasies, or rather, the most distant from the distastes, the irritations, and the denial, which western semiocracy creates in him).⁴⁷ Calvino's curiosity is less confined: "dalle 'cose viste' si aprono spiragli di altre dimensioni della mente".⁴⁸

Barthes' enterprise was haunted by his desire to find in this new realm of signs, elements which would contribute to the un-veiling of the erroneous ways of his own language: his work tended to proceed by systematic isolation and confinement of the objects he discussed. On the other hand, Calvino's approach only lingered on isolated scenes and images to explore the new narrative and critical qualities they might offer. In other words, while in Barthes, we are introduced to a collection of signs which are exposed for their own value and most of the time as a critical mirror for Western thought, in Calvino, even if the essays are partly a space for reflection on Western thought, they are also musings which already belong to the realm of the story. Calvino shared Barthes' concern for

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 202.

⁴⁷Roland Barthes, *L'Empire des Signes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005), backcover.

⁴⁸SII, p. 2952.

critical commentary of history and culture, but his view of myth *per se* was different. He did not express it clearly in the essay on Barthes, but he did so in 'La luce negli occhi' (1982), when he discussed Ruggero Pierantoni's book entitled *L'occhio e l'idea, Fisiologia e storia della visione* (1981).

Quest'approccio 'mitologico' alla storia della scienza e della cultura mi pare il più giusto e necessario: la mia sola riserva va all'atteggiamento di 'polemica contro i miti' che vi si annida. La conoscenza procede sempre attraverso modelli, analogie, immagini simboliche, che fino a un certo punto servono a comprendere, e poi sono messe da parte, per ricorrere ad altri modelli, altre immagini, altri miti. C'è sempre un momento in cui un mito che funziona veramente esplica la sua piena forza conoscitiva.⁴⁹

So where did Calvino stand on genuine and *technified* myth? Even from the earlier 'Cibernetica e Fantasmi', the answer seems to be quite clear:

il valore mitico è qualcosa che si finisce per incontrare solo continuando ostinatamente a giocare con le funzioni narrative. Subito il mito tende a cristallizzarsi, a comporsi in formule fisse, passa dalla fase mitopoietica a quella ritualistica, delle mani del narratore a quelle degli organismi tribali addetti alla conservazione e celebrazione dei miti. Il sistema dei segni della tribù si ordina in rapporto al mito, un certo numero di segni diventano tabù, e il narratore profano non può adoperarli direttamente. Egli continua a girare intorno inventando nuovi sviluppi compositivi, finché in questo suo lavoro metodico e oggettivo non incappa in una nuova illuminazione dell'inconscio e del proibito, che obbliga la tribù a cambiare di nuovo il suo sistema di segni.⁵⁰

Calvino's depiction of myth was that of a process in evolution which perpetually revised its own essence. He regarded the value of myth more like a destination than like a starting point. This vision of myth complied with the author's aversion for stasis. Furthermore, by placing myth on a moving trail, Calvino refused the orchestrated myth, simply because myth emerges and is revealed in spite of any intentions.

In the mythical tradition, Calvino tried to find his voice to tell the world, and he found the world in the human and not the human in the world. His humility consisted in depicting characters who take on human suffering, without delusions of grandeur, and intellectual elitism. One of the particular forms of suffering, is probably the one imposed from a dogmatic political thought, such as the one expressed in the Italian Communist Party, which was altogether quite totalitarian, in as far as it excluded any dialogue outside the rigid political discourse it had created. As was pointed out by Eugenio Bolongaro,

By 1947, when the polemics between Togliatti and Vittorini exploded [...]

⁴⁹SI, p. 531.

⁵⁰'Cibernetica e fantasmi', Ibid., p. 222.

the intellectuals began to denounce partisan over-simplifications of cultural issues, while the PCI's leadership began to demonstrate a growing irritation toward the insubordination of the intellectual community. These differences would explode in the quarrel over *Il Politecnico*.⁵¹

In this attempt to resist oppression, the contact with the past gains in significance. In Calvino's fiction, this memory of the past extended to the very beginnings of the universe, thus including in the discussion all sorts of disciplines, like science and religion. Calvino's collective language can be interpreted as a language of recognition: the *cogito* is directed towards the past and records from it what is valuable and therefore desirable. It is a process which may, among other things, render the alien familiar. It is the action of incorporating the other to the realm of the self.

1.1.3. *Hamlet's Mill: myth, sky, and the universal*

Giorgio de Santillana (1902 - 1974) had had a considerable impact on Calvino since their first encounter in Boston, in 1959. His influence was in fact so great, that Calvino saw a part of the genesis of *Le Cosmicomiche*, in that encounter.

Mi sono avvicinato alla scienza attraverso l'astronomia. Qualcosa avevo letto da ragazzo, tipo l'Eddington, ma le letture più sistematiche sono cominciate intorno al '59-60, quando sono andato negli Stati Uniti. A Boston ho conosciuto Giorgio de Santillana. Ricordo che mi fece un'enorme impressione una sua conferenza che anticipava alcuni temi di quello che sarebbe poi diventato *Il mulino di Amleto*. Fu allora che cominciai a scrivere *Le Cosmicomiche*.⁵²

What attracted Calvino to de Santillana, was probably his cosmopolitan background and scholarly expertise (writing in English, French and Italian, and exploring the connections between world mythology and the history of scientific thought),⁵³ his challenging of all too often pedantic academic discourse,⁵⁴ his success in avoiding the trap of mysticism.⁵⁵ The encounter with de Santillana, and his ideas on science and myth came at a very strategic time for Calvino. In 1963, he had published *La giornata d'uno scrutatore*; a fairly autobiographical work accounting for the intellectual crisis engendered in the confrontation with a previously enlightened and Marxist engagement. At this moment of crisis, de Santillana's ideas represented an opportunity of renewal, a gateway to something different, which could go beyond the experience of an intellectual failure. The failed communist and enlightened utopia could give way to another still utopian thought, with its

⁵¹Bologaro, *Italo Calvino and the Compass of Literature*, pp. 23-23.

⁵²RRII, Note e notizie sui testi, 'Le Cosmicomiche', p. 1320.

⁵³Bucciantini, *Italo Calvino e la scienza*, p. 66.

⁵⁴Ibid., p.78

⁵⁵Ibid.

sources in an unexplored past, or rather in an unexplored point of view on the qualities of ancient thought. As Bucciattini rightfully notes:

A colmare questa distanza [tra scienza moderna e sapienza antica] e a ristabilire un contatto con il 'fuori' ci proverà per primo il vecchio Qfwfq, memoria del mondo e narratore di antiche storie scientifico-mitologiche. È da qui, da un'idea della letteratura come cosmologia, che Calvino ricomincia a scrivere per tornare a dire qualcosa di *umano*.⁵⁶

A return to the human, through the conscience of a narrator named Qfwfq, who has lived through all the ages of the universe and taken many forms, is certainly controversial. However, the human story told in the cosmicomic tales, is the story of the memory of the world passed on to us through mythological discourse.

L'umanità porta con sé una memoria remota degli spostamenti celesti, tanto che tutte le mitologie conservano la traccia d'avvenimenti che si producono ogni 2400 anni circa, quali il cambiamento del segno zodiacale in cui si trova il sole all'equinozio; non solo, ma quasi altrettanto antica è la previsione che l'incessante lentissimo movimento del firmamento si saldi in un immenso ciclo o Grande Anno (26.900 anni dei nostri).⁵⁷

The human prospect is embedded in the greater process of memory, the greater memory of humanity, which is also a memory of the world. All the cosmicomic discourse remains enclosed in the human discourse, the ancient scientific and mythological discourse that told the place of humanity in the world.

Like Lévi-Strauss, in *Hamlet's Mill*, Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend suggested a higher intellectual exercise behind myth in so-called primitive society, explaining that ancient peoples were capable of much more complex thought than we tend to imagine. The book's thesis revolves around several key notions. It affirmed that ancient peoples were capable of extremely meticulous and accurate observation. At the same time, it identified astronomical knowledge as the origin of mythical imagery, observing that the world is mainly constituted of sky, rather than earth: 'Myth is essentially cosmological. As heaven in the cosmos is so vastly more important than our earth, it should not be surprising to find the main functions deriving from heaven'.⁵⁸

Although they supported in part the anthropological analysis of myth, which revealed its complexity and the depth of ancient thought, the authors believed that the discipline was overall disregarding some of the aspects of myth.

But this science [current anthropology], although it has dug up a

⁵⁶Bucciattini, *Italo Calvino e la scienza* p. 75.

⁵⁷SII, 'Fato antico e fato moderno di Giorgio de Santillana', p. 2087

⁵⁸*Hamlet's Mill*, p. 50.

marvellous wealth of details, has been led by its modern evolutionary and psychological bent to forget about the main source of myth, which was astronomy--the Royal Science. This obliviousness is itself a recent turn of events--barely a century old.⁵⁹

The book drew on a wide variety of material collected by the two authors to attempt a universal argument, and to discuss the similarities and the discrepancies that can be made out as to the ancient and the modern experience of the world. From their study, three conclusions seemed to emerge. The first consists in recognising that there is a continuity in the endeavour to understand humankind alongside the universe: 'What [archaic cosmology] did was to mark out the unity of the universe, and of man's mind, reaching out to its farthest limits. Truly, man is doing the same today'.⁶⁰ The second is, that despite this continuity, having lost the anchors provided by a time connoted with a sense of destiny, modern man loses his grasp on the cosmos: 'Modern man is facing the nonconceivable. Archaic man, however, kept a firm grip on the conceivable by framing within his cosmos an order of time and an eschatology that made sense to him and reserved a fate for his soul'.⁶¹ The third one is a sense of an inherited and preserved wisdom of a ruling-class: 'The memory of an ancient nobility is the means of preserving the *arcana imperii*, the *arcana legis* and the *arcana mundi*, just as it was in ancient Rome'.⁶²

The project of *Hamlet's Mill* was thus far greater than a mere cosmological study, or a treatise on comparative mythology: 'Spirito scientifico e spirito metafisico non sono forme simboliche che possiedono via autonoma separata, bensì aspetti di una totalità che nelle diverse epoche storiche assumono tratti e specificità le più diverse, ma che un legame spesso invisibile riesce a tenere uniti e che è compito dello storico svelare'.⁶³

Another important statement of the book concerns the relation between myth and history. The authors traced the tradition of demythologisation to the practice of historiography, and more specifically to the historiography that tries to incorporate myth and de-code its supposed temporal message.

To recapitulate for clarity, whatever is true myth has no historical basis, however tempting the reduction, however massive and well armed the impact of a good deal of modern criticism on that belief. The attempt to reduce myth to history is the so-called 'euhemerist' trend, from the name of Euhemeros, the first debunker.⁶⁴

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 3.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 5.

⁶¹Ibid., pp. 5-6.

⁶²Ibid., p. 7-8.

⁶³Bucciantini, *Italo Calvino e la scienza*, p. 65.

⁶⁴*Hamlet's Mill*, p. 50.

Moving in the space created earlier by sophism, which regarded religion as project with a definite scope, for Euhemeros, myth always had an underlying historical story. He believed that the gods of myths once walked among men, mortal and terrestrial. Euhemerism is the philosophical approach which moves towards a rationalisation of myth.

1.2 Calvino and desire

1.2.1. Cosmicomic desire and imagination

Kathryn Hume analyses how desire in the cosmicomic stories tries to bridge the 'gaps between self and society, self and one's own ideal, self and the universe'.⁶⁵ The stories flourish within love triangles, sexual longing, rivalry and jealousy (see 'La forma dello spazio', or 'Il guidatore notturno'), but 'self-definition is one of [Calvino's] most durable longings' (see 'I Dinosauri', or 'Gli anni-luce').⁶⁶ There is also alongside these desires, the desire to find meaning in the universe.

Jenny Webb has also stresses the aesthetics of desire at work in the stories, drawing a parallel with the genre of the fantastic, and establishing some comparative arguments about its relation to Edgar Allan Poe.⁶⁷

Desire, and especially desire for the other, is never without consequence. The natural attraction to what is alien is risky and at times traumatic;

[For,]is it not obvious that there is something dreadfully violent about openly displaying one's passion for and to another human? Passion by definition hurts its object, and even if its addressee gladly agrees to occupy this place, he or she cannot ever do it without a moment of awe and surprise. Or, to vary yet another time Hegel's dictum 'Evil resides in the very gaze which perceives Evil all around itself': intolerance towards the Other resides in the very gaze which perceives all around itself intolerant intruding Others.⁶⁸

Slavoj Žižek discusses this in the rising tendency in the Western world to promote an ideal safe distance between individuals, to minimise the damage caused by proximity. This is mainly the discourse of tolerance, which is in fact the fear of the other disguised as a liberal value. Is Calvino really part of this tradition then? Did he perceive this distance as the new social order at which to aspire? It would seem that on the one hand Calvino did value distance from a certain critical point of view ('Io vorrei servirmi del dato scientifico come d'una carica propulsiva per uscire dalle abitudini

⁶⁵Hume, *Calvino's Fictions*, p. 63.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 65.

⁶⁷See Jenny Webb, 'Fantastic Desire. Poe, Calvino, and the Dying Woman', *The Comparatist* 35: 2011, pp. 211-220.

⁶⁸Slavoj Žižek, "'God is Dead, but He Doesn't Know It': Lacan plays with Bobok", *How to read Lacan* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 102.

dell'immaginazione, e vivere anche il quotidiano nei termini più lontani della nostra esperienza').⁶⁹

His characters however do not fail to rub themselves against the other, and make the experience of its violent intrusion. His distance is a levity of representation, an aesthetic choice, which does not conceal the nature of the passionate encounter.

1.2.2. Empire, travel, dialogue and cities

In *Le città invisibili* we can distinguish the same three different types of desire that we can find in the cosmicomics. There is desire for self-knowledge, which translates into the Khan's desire to know his empire, as well as Polo's desire to know himself through his travels. Secondly, there is the desire to know the other, which is mainly revealed during the dialogue between the emperor and Polo. Polo, insists, even when he does not speak the Kan's language, to try and communicate with him, using body mimicry and objects to convey his meaning.

Nuovo arrivato e affatto ignaro delle lingue del Levante, Marco Polo non poteva esprimersi altrimenti che con gesti, salti, grida di meraviglia e d'orrore, latrati o chiurli d'animali, o con oggetti che andava estraendo dalle sue bisacce: piume di struzzo, cerbottane, quarzi, e disponendo davanti a sé come pezzi degli scacchi.⁷⁰

Between Marco Polo and Kublai Kan, the desire to communicate does not only precede articulate language, but it enables its emergence. There is also the desire to know the world, in which the cities are a working metaphor of it. Within the structure of the book there is also the section entitled 'Le città e il desiderio', which deals more closely with the issue of desire (see also 3.3.2 below). It tells how the city, or the idea of the city, participates in the process of desire: how desires are projected on the cities, how the cities themselves affect the nature of desire, and how both cities and desires change in their perpetual confrontation. We can say therefore, that desire works on different levels in the book, determining its form and its content, while also simultaneously being shaped by it.

1.2.3. Palomar's desire for meaning

Palomar initially presents himself to the reader as a keen observer, a man distancing himself from people and things, a man that is quite obsessed with the meaning of things. He appears to interpret before experiencing. He is the *Homo Legens* of 'Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto' (1985) (see also

⁶⁹See the introduction to the 1968 edition of *La memoria del mondo e altre storie cosmicomiche*, RRII., pp. 1300-1303.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 373.

1.4.4 below). Palomar though, does not manage to stay detached and unstained by the world, the world touches him despite his efforts, he eventually experiences it and is also forced to go into the inward journey of self-knowledge in his efforts to understand the world.

This desire is the working force of the book, it is present in every story separately and in all of them as a binding entity. There is also another desire, related to the narration itself. Despite the fact that the comments about the section of the book appearing next to the contents in the various editions of *Palomar* (preceding the book in the edition of his collected works), are not to be taken literally, they provide some useful elements about this narratorial desire.

Gli 1 corrispondono generalmente a un'esperienza visiva, che ha quasi sempre per oggetto forme della natura; il testo tende a configurarsi come una descrizione.

Nei 2 sono presenti elementi antropologici, culturali in senso lato, e l'esperienza coinvolge, oltre ai dati visivi, anche il linguaggio, i significati, i simboli. Il testo tende a svilupparsi in racconto.

I 3 rendono conto d'esperienze di tipo più speculativo, riguardanti il cosmo, il tempo, l'infinito, i rapporti tra l'io e il mondo, le dimensioni della mente. Dall'ambito della descrizione e del racconto si passa a quello della meditazione.⁷¹

It is not true that every section, with its corresponding number, can be defined so exclusively and distinguished from one another. Some of the stories do have a tendency towards one or the other direction, but no effort to describe, or to narrate, is untainted by a desire to meditate both on the object or the phenomenon which is described, and the story that is told.

1.3 Science, the legacy and the criticism of the Enlightenment.

1.3.1. History of science and world-view

Notwithstanding the history of science is rarely taught in a science course, it is a fundamental aspect for the philosophy of science. These practices were not always separate; there was a time when the scientist also reflected on the importance and the implications of his discoveries, when his research was always put in the context of his time, when the scientific discourse was in dialogue with history and society. Nowadays science and the philosophy of science are clearly separated and one might wonder about the danger that this might represent for both sides. For is it not fair to wonder, how much can the philosophy of science achieve without the expertise of the practical field? And similarly, does science not lose a great deal of significance should it be completely detached from the realm of human endeavour and its thought? Following the intellectual disengagement of the scientific

⁷¹RRII, p. 872.

community, the philosophy of science has devised its task: to ‘analyse the methods of enquiry used in various sciences’, and to ‘uncover assumptions that are implicit in scientific practice, but which scientists do not explicitly discuss’.⁷²

The development of science was anything but gradual. The Aristotelian view of the world, dominated for many centuries, and the theory that all earthly bodies were composed of earth, fire, water, and air, long remained in place. From 1500, and in the next 250 years, the image of the world was to be stirred dramatically and repeatedly. In 1542, Nicolaus Copernicus (1473 - 1543) dismantled the ptolemaic geocentric model, replacing it with the heliocentric one. Humankind was to change its point of reference completely, and see the world it inhabited in a whole new way. From then on, the changes continued to happen; soon, Kepler (1571 - 1630) established that the planets' revolution around the sun was elliptical, and when Galileo Galilei (1564 - 1642) set his eyes on the sky with his telescope, the stars, the moon and the planets were never to be the same. Galileo's contribution to mechanics was even greater with his laws on freely falling bodies, for which he maintained, that in vacuum, they would fall at the same rate, despite their weight, and that they would accelerate uniformly. Galileo was also the first to highlight that mathematics could be used to describe objects in the material world, and established the empirical scientific approach. The final blow to the Aristotelian world view was struck by René Descartes (1596 - 1650), and his ‘mechanical philosophy’, whereby the world was made by particles colliding with each other, and the task left before the scientist was to describe and explain the phenomena mechanically.

The last great revolution in physics in the 18th century, arrived with Isaac Newton (1643 - 1727). His contribution included the three laws of motion, universal gravitation, and the invention of calculus. Newton's work was important because it established a solid confidence in the scientific method. The 18th and the 19th century subsequently, saw great advancement in the field of chemistry, optics, energy, the discovery of thermodynamics and electromagnetism. The history of science, de Santillana and von Dechend remind us, tells us a great deal about the fundamental differences between the ancient and the modern age:

It should be understood once and for all that the gulf between the archaic world and ours was as wide as science itself. Prodigies of exactitude and computation could not bridge it. Only the astronomical map could. Whitehead has summed it up succinctly: ‘Our science has been founded on simple location and misplaced concreteness.’ Modern physics has turned the original words into queries. For Newton, it had the force of evidence: ‘No person endowed with a capacity of rational understanding will believe that a thing acts where it is not.’ Newton himself put the first

⁷²Samir Okasha, *Philosophy of Science: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 12.

query, by stating the theory of gravitation--mathematically irresistible, physically unexplainable. He could only accept it: 'I do not understand it, and I am going to feign no suppositions.' The answer was to come only with Einstein. It amounted to pure mathematical rationalization, which did away with simple location, and with concreteness altogether. The edifice of Descartes lay in ruins.⁷³

The big ideas of physics have had a tremendous impact on our way of perceiving the world, and have also actively changed our social behaviour. This is also true for biology with Charles Darwin's (1809 - 1882) *Origin of Species* published in 1859, and his theory of evolution by natural selection. Notwithstanding substantial theological opposition, Darwin's thesis soon became widely accepted and provided a rather solid frame for a new biological world-view. In the new Darwinian world-order, humankind had to re-think its position in the animal kingdom.

In the 20th century another grand discovery was made: in 1953, James D. Watson and Francis Crick revealed the structure of DNA and its role in the transmission of genes, the hereditary material of living organisms. The double helix had added another dimension to Darwin's story: man was not only an intrinsic part of the animal world, but the entirety of the living realm was constituted of the same material. The story of the DNA is the story of the unity of life, as Theodosius Dobzhansky put it:

The unity of life is no less remarkable than its diversity. Most forms of life are similar in many respects. The universal biologic similarities are particularly striking in the biochemical dimension. From viruses to man, heredity is coded in just two, chemically related substances: DNA and RNA. The genetic code is as simple as it is universal. There are only four genetic 'letters' in DNA: adenine, guanine, thymine, and cytosine. Uracil replaces thymine in RNA. The entire evolutionary development of the living world has taken place not by invention of new 'letters' in the genetic 'alphabet' but by elaboration of ever-new combinations of these letters.⁷⁴

The unity of life resides in the presence of the same few nucleobases, and its diversity, in the immense possibilities resulting from their repetition and their combination. The earthly bodies might not have been composed of Aristotle's four elements, but all living organisms shared the four fundamental nucleobases.

Lately, computer science, linguistics, and neuroscience have developed quite quickly, and the scientific world has seen the rise of cognitive science, which postulates important similarities between brain functions and the ways in which computers process information. Calvino saw a similarity between the developments in molecular biology and the theses of information theory:

⁷³*Hamlet's Mill*, pp. 64-65.

⁷⁴ Theodosius Dobzhansky, 'Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution', *The American Biology Teacher*, 35, (March 1973), 125-129, p.127

Watson e Crick ci hanno dimostrato come [...] la sterminata varietà delle forme vitali si può ridurre alla combinazione di certe quantità finite. Anche qui è la teoria dell'informazione che impone i suoi modelli. I processi che parevano più refrattari a una formulazione numerica, a una descrizione quantitativa, vengono tradotti in modelli matematici.⁷⁵

1.3.2. Rhetoric of emancipation and scientific arrogance

The Age of Reason was, above all, a European cultural movement, led by intellectuals, whose main aspiration was to achieve a reformation of society, based on the value of reason and a constant effort to advance knowledge. The pioneers of enlightened thought, the more radical Baruch Spinoza (1632 - 1677), John Locke (1632 - 1704), Pierre Bayle (1647 - 1706), and Isaac Newton, openly opposed the oppression exercised both by the Church and the political order. In this sense, the Enlightenment was deeply rooted in the upsurge of political consciousness and echoed the political turmoil of the times (the 17th century saw the unfolding of the English Revolution, followed a century later in 1776 by the American Revolution, and the French Revolution in 1789). The Enlightenment is therefore greatly related to the utopian tradition, taking a most practical and political form. Enlightened utopias are typically secular, gazing at the future, eagerly hoping for progress, and gradually abandoning the admiration and study of the past, that had been the trademark of the Renaissance. The utopias of the 17th and the 18th century, celebrated communal property, promoted social regulation, and economical growth. In France, the leading figures of the Enlightenment, Voltaire (1694 - 1778), Denis Diderot (1713 - 1784), Montesquieu (1689 - 1755), denounced the mysticism of Catholicism, leading the way to the establishment of the secular state. Yet the shift from the utopia of revolution to dystopia was soon to become apparent; its most obvious example being the establishment of the Reign of Terror (1793 - 1794) after the French Revolution.

In the prospect of enabling the advancement of knowledge and making it widely accessible, the Age of Enlightenment led to flourishing schools, universities, learned academies (including the revival of *L'Académie Française*), journals, the book industry, and debating societies. It was also the birth of secret societies, such as the Freemasons.

An interesting and emblematic figure of the Enlightenment was Sir Francis Bacon (1561 - 1626), whose work includes contributions to law, politics, history, philosophy and science. In *The Proficiency and Advancement of Learning*, written in 1605, he maintained that European intellectual life was in danger of remaining trapped in a static, unproductive state, because it stubbornly insisted on looking up to the achievements of the past, and glorifying them. It is from this same book, that the

⁷⁵SI, 'Cibernetica e fantasmî', p. 211.

idea of progress, and more specifically of technological progress, is born. For Bacon, history was progressive, and not cyclical as Aristotle believed. He identified three regrettable tendencies in the pursuit of knowledge, which he associated with vanity, and wished to dispel: *fantastical learning*, *contentious learning*, and *delicate learning*. The first, belongs to the custom of occultism, devoid of any substantial foundation, in which we find the practices of astrology, magic, and alchemy. The second, is affiliated to the Aristotelian and the Scholastic tradition, of which he criticised the logic going adrift, and the metaphysical concern. The last one he associated with the endeavours in the humanities, which all too often according to him, found a self-gratifying pleasure in reproducing classical rhetorical aesthetics. Interestingly enough, Francis Bacon's utopia, *The New Atlantis* (published in Latin in 1624, and later in English in 1627), was founded on rationalism, technology and modernity (or its conception of it in the spring of the 17th century). In *The New Atlantis*, Salomon's House, an establishment of scientific knowledge and research, presides over society; the political establishment resembles closely a form of Scientocracy.⁷⁶ The members of Salomon's House retain the right not to communicate the outcome of their research, somehow revealing a greater power than the state.⁷⁷ Francis Bacon was certainly part of that tradition which will later see in the 19th century technological utopias thrive under their hedonistic banners. Yet the scientific utopia came soon to be hand in hand with the scientific dystopia, and the schizophrenic literary portraits of scientific aspiration have only thrived ever since.

The Enlightenment stood for much more than its immediate political dimension; it was a state of rational thought with specific values about humanity.

Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity. Enlightenment's program was the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge.⁷⁸

For Adorno and Horkheimer, the failure of Enlightenment, was a direct consequence of lack of self-criticism, a result of an inherent arrogance in enlightened tradition. The criminality of the Enlightenment was to instate the general belief that knowledge was the only safe and ethical gateway

⁷⁶See J. Weinberger, 'Science and Rule in Bacon's Utopia: An Introduction to the Reading of the New Atlantis', *The American Political Science Review*, 70.3 (September 1976), 865- 885.

⁷⁷Although the association of Francis Bacon with Freemasonry or the Rosicrucians is disputed among historians, one cannot ignore the resonance between Salomon's House and Salomon's Temple of the Freemasons, nor can it be overlooked that scientific dedication in *The New Atlantis*, echoes the ritual of The Lecture of the Middle Chamber, practiced by the members of the brotherhood.

⁷⁸Theodore Adorno with Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. by Guzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. by Edmund Josephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p.I.

to freedom. It is precisely the emancipatory aspect of the discourse that has been failed. Adorno and Horkheimer insisted on how blind celebration of knowledge could drift to technocratic oppression and abuse of power.

Knowledge, which is power, knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in its deference to worldly matters. Just as it serves all the purposes of the bourgeoisie economy both in factories and on the battlefield, it is at the disposal of entrepreneurs regardless of their origins. Kings control technology no more directly than do merchants: it is as democratic as the economic system with which it evolved. Technology is the essence of this knowledge.⁷⁹

The thinkers of the Frankfurt school saw in the project of the Enlightenment a trenchant failure to break out of the age of myth; an outcome which they thought to be regrettable and catastrophic. In the Western tradition, mainly because of the wide triumph of the Enlightenment, science is so closely associated with knowledge that their correlation is often considered exclusive and as a result, we traditionally tend to think that knowledge is only possible through science. Even within the Western tradition however, science is not our only gateway to the world. The experience of the world remains multiple and consequently, knowledge can still be achieved through a variety of means. The advantage of science, it is well known, is that it can be expressed in a language that is universally relevant and that it can be confirmed regardless of the cultural background, the gender, or the personal and unique experience of each individual. But there are other truths, equally universal and accessed through experience and collectively, as we have discussed in relation to myth.

Adorno and Horkheimer however, traced the origins of the enlightened degeneration in what they interpreted as the myth of the bourgeois hero: Ulysses and the tradition of the *Odyssey*. Ulysses' cunning character, especially in the episode where he manages to escape his fate, despite listening to the sirens' songs, is interpreted as an early form of narrative of Man establishing himself as master of Nature. It is in the same tradition that the literary image of Robinson Crusoe is later engineered. Myth therefore remains indelible in enlightened thought by nourishing an irrational positivist belief.

From the triumph of science emerges a criticism; it is generally not a criticism of science in itself, but rather a warning against the forms of scientism that can result from an overbearing reliance on the natural sciences to provide a coherent world-view.

On their way toward modern science human beings have discarded meaning. The concept is replaced by the formula, the cause by rules and probability. Causality was only the last philosophical concept on which scientific criticism tested its strength, because it alone of the old ideas still stood in the way of such criticism, the latest secular form of the creative

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 2.

principle.⁸⁰

Such criticism was strongly present in Adorno and Horkheimer, and it is also expressed in *Hamlet's Mill*:

Mistaking cultural history for a process of gradual evolution, we have deprived ourselves of every reasonable insight into the nature of culture. It goes without saying that the still more modern habit of replacing 'culture' by 'society' has blocked the last narrow path to understanding history. Our ignorance not only remained vast, but became pretentious as well.⁸¹

If the ancients can be said to have been blissfully ignorant, however deplorable that might be, the moderns in their turn, displayed an arrogant contempt for the limits of their own understanding. This is a direct attack to the big Idea of Progress, which was one of the fundamental notions of modernity, but also one of the cardinal aspects of Italian nationalism, which resulted in the formation of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861.

One of the most radical critical approaches to science however have been initiated by the Austro-British philosopher Sir Karl Raimund Popper. His analysis gives an account of science which takes it back to its mythological origins (1963).

My thesis is that what we call 'science' is differentiated from the older myths not by being something distinct from a myth, but by being accompanied by a second-order tradition – that of critically discussing the myth. Before, there was only the first-order tradition. A definite story was handed on. Now there was still, of course, a story to be handed on, but with it went something like a silent accompanying text of a second-order character: 'I hand it on to you, but tell me what you think of it. Think it over. Perhaps you can give us a different story.' . . . We shall understand that, in a certain sense, science is myth-making just as religion is.⁸²

Popper went further to attempt a clear distinction between genuine science and pseudo-science. This distinction is achieved through his definition of scientific theory. According to him, a scientific theory ought to be falsifiable, in other words, its premises should not defy the possibility of empirical testing.

1.3.3. 'Dare to know!' or 'Dare to be!?' Charles Fourier

We have already mentioned how enlightened thought, and its unconditional faith in reason, soon saw the birth of a counter-discourse, which challenged its very foundations. We would like to discuss now, the case of Charles Fourier (1772 - 1837) and Utopian Socialism, which followed the Romantic outcry against the philosophy of the Enlightenment, particularly because Calvino showed a great interest in

⁸⁰*Hamlet's Mill*, p. 3.

⁸¹*Ibid.* p. 71.

⁸²Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 171

him. Utopian socialism, to which the names of Robert Owen (1771 - 1858) and Henri de Saint-Simon (1760 - 1825) were also affiliated, was born with Romanticism, the French Revolution and the Industrial revolution in the background. The romantic poetry of John Keats (1795 - 1821) and William Blake (1757 - 1827) were suggesting an alternative to the exuberant rationalism of their time, with a focus on subjectivity and introspection and a celebration of the mysteries of the soul. For them it was the genius of poetry that could venture in this sacred direction. In Italy we can mention the name of Giacomo Leopardi (1798 - 1837), whom Calvino praised on numerous occasions, and also identified as one of the most important Italian writers: ‘possiamo segnare una linea Ariosto-Galileo-Leopardi come una delle più importanti linee di forza della nostra letteratura’.⁸³

Charles Fourier was above all a visionary. He believed that the ideal society for which he advocated was possible, and feasible in the immediate future. The utopian qualification was only given later by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848).

But these Socialist and Communist publications contain also a critical element. They attack every principle of existing society. Hence, they are full of the most valuable materials for the enlightenment of the working class. The practical measures proposed in them — such as the abolition of the distinction between town and country, of the family, of the carrying on of industries for the account of private individuals, and of the wage system, the proclamation of social harmony, the conversion of the function of the state into a more superintendence of production — all these proposals point solely to the disappearance of class antagonisms which were, at that time, only just cropping up, and which, in these publications, are recognised in their earliest indistinct and undefined forms only. These proposals, therefore, are of a purely Utopian character.⁸⁴

What earned Marx and Engel's sympathy was Fourier's criticism of industrial society, which also inspired Marx's theory of alienation. As Calvino points out however, Fourier's was not only a criticism of industrialisation, ‘Fourier elaborò una critica radicale della civiltà mercantile. Anzi: della Civiltà *tout-court*’.⁸⁵ This is from the introduction to his *The theory of the four movements*:

On the stupidity of civilised nations which have forgotten or scorned the two branches of research which lead to the theory of destinies: the study of Agricultural Associations and the study of Passionate Attraction. And the dire results of this stupidity which, for 2,300 years, has needlessly prologued the period of social chaos, i.e. savage, barbaric, and civilised societies, which are far from being the destiny of the human race.⁸⁶

⁸³SI, ‘Due interviste su scienza e letteratura’ (1968), p. 232.

⁸⁴Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, ‘Critical-Utopian Socialism and Communism:’, *The Communist Manifesto*, from the English edition of 1888, ed. by Friedrich Engels (Teddington: The Echo Library, 2009), p.41.

⁸⁵SI, ‘Per Fourier. 1. La società amorosa’, p. 274.

⁸⁶Charles Fourier, *The theory of the four movements*, ed. by Ian Patterson, Gareth Stedman Jones, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 5.

Fourier's criticism extends to the internal function of the family, and to the oppressive nature of any civilisation towards human passion. He advocated a society, Armonia, where the education of children would be taken out of the restraining familial order and its psychological impairments, into the hands of vocational governesses. The children would take on a role in society very soon, but one that would not be in conflict with their desires and their amusement. Fourier devised a peculiar social landscape for children; one of its most striking features was the *Petites Hordes*. These satisfied two different things at the same time: some children's preference for playing and meddling with dirt, and society's need for a cleaning agent.

Così quello che nella civiltà è un vizio, diventa in Armonia una passione benemerita della collettività; e ciò che nella Civiltà è una fatica ripugnante, diventa in Armonia un gioco che corrisponde all'intima vocazione.⁸⁷

Fourier's ideal society was one that would combine the individual and collective desires of its members, with a functional aspect of its organisation, thus providing a feeling of belonging without demeaning any of the human passions. In the adults' world the same principle is applied; the dominant morality among his contemporaries is discarded as a dogmatic stance. Fourier suggested that a harmonious society should not aspire to constrain passions, nor attempt to modify them to adapt to a certain order, but rather to devise the order that would allow them to be integrated in the greater whole, unaltered. This was the essential idea behind Fourier's conception of attractive labour.

The devices that were designed by Fourier, will certainly seem peculiar to the modern reader, for the proliferation of strange neologisms, the presence of many lists, categories, sub-categories, and an almost maniacal tendency to describe in the most minute details products of his imagination. Yet Calvino insists on this quality of his work:

è questo che rende Fourier uno scrittore unico nel suo genere, bensì la sua facoltà di *vedere* un mondo completamente diverso, di descriverlo nei più minuti particolari, di analizzarlo nel meccanismo delle sue motivazioni.⁸⁸

This is the literary value that Calvino attributes to Fourier as a utopian writer; the imagery of his utopian world remains powerful and relevant because Fourier himself was deeply committed to it. The world that he himself had created, never stayed in the confined space of the page, nor in the abstraction of thought, it was a living image that was revealed to him through his own creation. Fourier's utopia was read and interpreted in different ways from his contemporaries to the present day, but Calvino distinguishes two tendencies, which are essentially two practical ways to read utopia as

⁸⁷SI, p. 276.

⁸⁸Ibid., p. 275.

such:

È la contraddizione tra i due modi d'*usare* l'utopia: considerandola per quello che in essa appare *realizzabile*, come il modello di una società nuova che possa crescere in margine alla vecchia per eclissarla con l'*evidenza* dei nuovi valori, oppure per quello che in essa appare *irriducibile* a ogni conciliazione, in opposizione radicale non solo al mondo che ci circonda ma ai condizionamenti interni che governano le nostre attribuzioni di valori, la nostra immaginazione, la nostra capacità di desiderare un vita diversa, il nostro modo di rappresentarci il mondo: una rappresentazione totale che ci liberi dentro per renderci capaci di liberarci fuori.⁸⁹

Calvino mentions in these readings of Fourier the political communist readings which started with Marx himself, but also the influence it had on architecture and on the idea of urbanism, on literature, particularly in writers such as Dostoevsky, and on the concrete social experiment carried out by George Ripley and the establishment of the Brook Farm community, in New England.

Calvino tells us, that Fourier's main difference from the other contemporary Utopian Socialists, and mainly Henri de Saint-Simon, was that all the attempts to put Fourier's models into practice, fell apart. On the other hand, 'se nessuno legge più Saint-Simon né si richiama a lui, è perché ci viviamo dentro, perché la 'società industriale', tecnocratica e produttivistica che egli aveva profetato ha vinto'.⁹⁰ Saint-Simon's utopian effort was defeated by its own practical manifestation; his writings do not induce any of the excitement achieved by Fourier, because his world is all around us, materialised outside the page and the reader's imagination. We can read further into Calvino's comment and discern an essential quality of utopia itself, that of a form that defies being fastened firmly into a confined space.

Calvino admits that Fourier's work was by no means a sustainable prophecy: 'Paragonato a Saint-Simon, Fourier resta l'inattualità assoluta: lucido com'era nella sua critica del presente, non aveva capito nulla di quel che bolliva in pentola'.⁹¹ That was the main reason behind the successive social experiments carried out from the influence of his work. The real value that Calvino attributes to Fourier is clearly a literary one. He does not celebrate him as an accurate social commentator, his greatest achievement, was the creation of powerful literary images:

Più ancora che la visione d'una società dedita alle feste e ai cortei [...] erano le profezie cosmiche che facevano le spese dei motteggiatori: l'aurora boreale che diventerà stabile e renderà temperato il clima di tutto il globo; il mare che acquisterà sapore di limonata; la luna che, da tempo uccisa dai miasmi della terra, sarà sostituita da cinque lune più piccole.⁹²

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 281.

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 283.

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Ibid., p. 285.

It is hard not to see the similarities with Calvino's project of the cosmicomic stories. To name just one example, let us just mention the first story of *Le Cosmicomiche*, 'La distanza della luna'. The characters in the story go on the surface of the moon, close enough to the earth to be reached with a long ladder. On its surface they venture to collect a precious substance: 'il latte lunare era molto denso, come una specie di ricotta'.⁹³ In this sense, Calvino's world of cosmicomic imagination is very close to Fourier's. It is not accurate however, to say that Fourier inspired the project, because the twelve stories collected in the volume *Le Cosmicomiche* was published in 1965 and composed between 1963 and 1964, whereas the reading and studying of Fourier started in 1968 for Calvino. Additional evidence of Calvino's literary interest in Fourier, is also the second half of his essay 'Per Fourier. 2. L'ordinatore dei desideri'. Having discussed the failures of Fourierism, especially among American Transcendentalists, he discusses his literary legacy: Charles Beaudelaire (1821 - 1867), Gustave Flaubert (1821 - 1880), Stendhal (1783 - 1842), André Breton (1866 - 1966).

To come back to our discussion of Fourier in the context of the Enlightenment, Calvino writes a very revealing comment:

Certo la cultura del secolo XVIII da cui egli nasce è più complessa che ogni etichetta pretenda di spiegare, e proprio Fourier non si sa bene situarlo al termine della linea degli 'Illuministi' (nel senso che questa parola ha assunto in italiano, cioè delle Lumières, dell'Aufklärung, dell'Enlightenment) o degli 'Illuministes' (nel senso prevalente che la parola conserva in francese, cioè 'illuminati', degli occultisti): due aree della mappa settecentesca che in parte si oppongono e in parte si sovrappongono.⁹⁴

He creates a special space for Fourier in this dialogue: he refuses to place him on the one or the other end of the debate. Fourier stands in the position that resists both these poles. When we move this discussion to Calvino himself we might be confronted with the same difficulty: does Calvino write in the tradition of the Enlightenment, or does he write in the tradition of its criticism? Our suggestion is quite simple (though the space defined might itself be more complicated): Calvino writes, somehow continuing the spirit of Charles Fourier.

1.3.4. Writing in an enlightened world: Calvino and science

Calvino explained that he encountered and became interested in science during his stay in the United States and his meeting with de Santillana (see also 1.2.1 above). This confirms the claim made by Perrella, that the journey to the United States had had a significant influence on Calvino's work, and

⁹³RRII, p. 84.

⁹⁴SI, p. 295.

that that was closely associated with his encounter with de Santillana.

There have been several arguments made about the importance of science in Calvino's work, but the most extensive critical works on this aspect that are available to us today, are probably those from Kerstin Pilsz⁹⁵ and Massimo Bucciantini.⁹⁶ Bucciantini's work is particularly interesting because it relates Calvino's concern for scientific discovery with a concern to think the human experience of the world and how it is constantly reshaped by the scientific discourse. He also never fails to mention that Calvino's interest is not scientific: Calvino does not have scientific aspirations, as he does not have philosophical or anthropological ones, but really literary ones. In his book, Bucciantini explores Calvino through de Santillana, Galileo, Lévi-Strauss, Prigogine, and many others, in order to formulate a proposition about Calvino's literary project and its dialogue with science. His conclusion is that Calvino was trying to create a literary world that would offer a way to 'sfuggire a un mondo di pietra'.

One of the fundamental scientific influences in Calvino's fiction concerns the conception of time and space. When it comes to discussing their importance, we set ourselves to look at it from two different angles: we shall first understand why the author at times chooses those specific images as a primary material and then we shall discuss their function and evaluate their literary impact. Time and space can be interpreted as referential systems, as dimensions for story-telling. Where does the need to transcend those limits that are time and space come from? Because Calvino advocated 'per una letteratura che chieda di più', the need comes from the belief that the story must point at more than its own self-contained dimension to be considered worthy of being told.⁹⁷ Calvino was convinced that in facing the developments in politics, society (specifically those of May '68), and science, literature was facing a renewed task enriched in challenges:

Così [come una messa-in-questione di tutto l'acquisto della letteratura] vedo la letteratura che caratterizzerà l'inizio di secolo che ora siamo vivendo: come discorso che conta per l'esigenza su cui si apre, e non per il modo in cui più soddisfarla. Una letteratura che deve servire ad alzare continuamente la posta, a porre la domanda su un livello sempre più irraggiungibile dall'offerta, senza affrettare risposte che se arrivano troppo presto somiglieranno troppo a quelle che stiamo rifiutando.⁹⁸

Calvino's first concern seemed to be the need to discuss the appearance of modern images through the advancement of science and the invention of new areas of study. His use of science,

⁹⁵Kerstin Pilsz, *Mapping Complexity. Literature and Science in the Works of Italo Calvino* ed. by George Ferzoco (Leicester: Toubador Publishing Ltd, 2005).

⁹⁶Massimo Bucciantini, *Italo Calvino e la scienza. Gli alfabeti del mondo* (Rome: Donzelli Editore, 2006).

⁹⁷SI, p. 238.

⁹⁸SI, 'Per una letteratura che chieda di più (Vittorini e il Sessantotto)', p. 241.

which was mainly centred around cybernetics, theoretical physics and evolutionary biology (the main new trends of his time), opens a discussion on how the new images introduced by those subjects are capable of affecting our collective imagery and more specifically how this can be done through the use of literature.

What strikes the reader and the literary community of the time is the use of such seemingly unconventional images. Before going into the process of looking at how those images are used and how they function within Calvino's composition and within the literary realm more generally, let us attempt a justification of their use in the first place. Of course the problem faced by many authors of the second half of the 20th century is the highly difficult task to use images that would not appear redundant, fallacious, arbitrary or ineffective. In this frame of mind, using new images introduced to our era by the means of new scientific discoveries seems quite sensible. Modernist fiction has very widely used technological advance: the images of the clock or the train for instance are quite common both in prose and poetry. In that way Calvino's use of images inspired by science was only a recycling of methods already known until then. What made the images appear unconventional is probably the use that he made of them: he subverted them either by using them as a hook for a different discussion or as established literary *topoi*.

The discourse introduced by theoretical physics attempts to re-contextualize human conscience within the new framework of time and space created by the latest scientific discoveries, and Calvino's time was stirred by those major breakthroughs that radically changed our way of thinking time and space.

In terms of structure, the first volume of cosmicomic stories systematically presents a header at the beginning of each story, which is a scientific briefing of the images that the author has decided to use. Despite this image being presented as the basis of the story yet to be told, most of the times the initial aspect is merely a catcher, a lure into another secret and real story (see also 2.7). As far as *Palomar* is concerned, one way to interpret its affiliation, or relation to the scientific discourse, would be to follow after Alberto Oliviero's interpretation:

Il naturalismo di Calvino, se così si può definire la sua attenzione nei riguardi della realtà circostante, è invece ben diverso da quello dello stampo positivista, rispecchiando un'ottica scientifica di tipo relativista [...] Lo scienziato, come Palomar, dovrà continuare nel suo cammino, fiducioso e scettico nello stesso tempo: ed è nell'aver saputo individuare questa contraddizione tra il grande potenziale della scienza moderna e la consapevolezza relativistica degli scienziati che sta la modernità, triste ma razionale, di *Palomar* e di altre opere 'scientifiche' di Calvino.⁹⁹

⁹⁹Alberto Oliviero, "L'opera di Calvino alla luce delle 'due culture'", *Italo Calvino. La letteratura, la scienza, la città*, a cura di Giorgio Bertone (Genova: Casa Editrice Marietti, 1988), p. 88.

We will later argue, through a systematic approach to those stories, that the point of view expressed by several critics that in Calvino's fiction science is a meaning-giving structure, is to be reconsidered or at least to be nuanced. Scientific reference will still remain the mould but not the only origin of meaning and structure itself. Especially about *Palomar*, we will discuss the importance of the concept of the absurd (see also 4.2.2 below) over Calvino's alleged rationality. Kathryn Hume writes that 'Calvino understands the scientist's joy of discovering pattern. However, the limitations of this kind of meaning are obvious to Calvino, because he observes the human imagination as well as external data. He knows that we create such meanings'.¹⁰⁰

It is futile to deny that Calvino had shown all throughout his career a sympathy for geometrical patterns.¹⁰¹ Patterns in his books appear nearly as a necessity, almost as if they were dictated by the story. What we wish to stress out however, is that under no circumstances do those patterns appear to be a solution to the problem of being in the world. The choice to discuss this problem under an ontological spectrum might appear problematic at first, however, Calvino's proposition is that self-knowledge cannot and should not be conceived as separate from knowing how the self is in the world.

'Nothing in Biology makes sense except in the light of evolution',¹⁰² is the title of Theodosius Dobzhansky's famous essay in defence of the theory of evolution. Even though it was published six years after the first collection of cosmicomic stories came out, this essay is very useful in the way it summarises all the most important scientific aspects of the theory of evolution and their ethical consequences. Only by knowing those things will we be able to understand Calvino's use of evolutionary biology. We do not know whether Calvino had read Dobzhansky himself, but we do know that he had most probably read Morgan, who was Dobzhansky's teacher and precursor. This is suggested by one of the epigraphs that he uses in the opening the section 'Priscilla'.

To the statement, 'The environment does not impose evolutionary changes on its inhabitants [...] the environment presents challenges to living species, to which they later *might* respond by adaptive genetic changes' Dobzhansky adds: 'Natural selection is at one and the same time a blind and creative process', 'natural selection does not work according to a foreordained plan, and species are produced not because they are needed for some purpose but simply because there is an environmental opportunity and genetic wherewithal to make them possible'.¹⁰³ Accepting the theory of evolution

¹⁰⁰Hume, *Calvino's Fictions*, p. 6.

¹⁰¹See *Cosmicomic stories, Le città invisibili, Il castello dei destini incrociati, Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*.

¹⁰²Theodosius Dobzhansky, 'Nothing in Biology Makes Sense Except in the Light of Evolution'. *The American Biology Teacher*, 35, (1973), 125-129.

¹⁰³Dobzhansky, p. 126.

implies turning one's back to a belief in a Nature or a God that rules the world with specific intentions or moral grounds.

Mi pare che le due posizioni che ho descritto definiscono abbastanza bene la situazione: due poli tra cui ci troviamo a oscillare, o almeno io mi trovo a oscillare, sentendo attrazione e avvertendo i limiti dell'uno e dell'altro. Da una parte Barthes e i suoi 'avversari' della scienza, che pensano e parlano con fredda esattezza scientifica; dall'altra parte Queneau e i suoi, amici della scienza, che pensano e parlano attraverso ghiribizzi e capriole del linguaggio e del pensiero.¹⁰⁴

This is then the real stance that Calvino takes when confronting science: an attitude both of gratitude and intellectual belonging, always pondered by critical distance.

So where does Calvino place the space literature may wish to occupy in an enlightened age, in an age of growing computerised processing? In 1973, in an interview with Ferdinando Camon, the question is addressed directly:

CAMON *Allora bisogna dire che Fourier con lei non ha funzionato. Dell'ottimismo di Fourier, nelle Città invisibili non v'è traccia. Forse in Fourier lei andava cercando di ritrovare l'illuminismo, il razionalismo, lo spirito settecentesco del Barone Rampante. Ma lo andava cercando perché questo spirito era per lei ormai lontano, perduto.*

CALVINO *Prima c'erano dei critici che dicevano: Calvino non ha il senso del tragico, è troppo razionalista. Adesso ci sono dei critici che dicono: Calvino rappresenta la sconfitta della ragione, non crede nelle magnifiche sorti e progressive. [...] D'essere settecentesco, razionalista, come dicono i critici, non l'ho mai né confermato né smentito. [...] un cambiamento di clima per l'Italia [...] potremmo farlo coincidere con la traduzione della *Dialettica dell'illuminismo* di Horkheimer e Adorno, i quali fanno risalire ai Lumi i colpi di tutti i mali, anzi rintracciano le origini dello borghese nientemeno che nell'Odissea, Be', questo mi dispiace, Ulisse mi è sempre stato simpatico.*¹⁰⁵

We have seen that, to a certain extent, Calvino abided by part of the criticism of the Enlightenment, but it is in Adorno and Horkheimer that he draws a line. His view is not as grim as Adorno and Horkheimer, mainly because he did not share their deep distrust in myth. The qualities of myth were altogether too important to him, to accept their discourse fully. There was another reason behind the fact that he never discarded the Enlightenment entirely: he found a controversial comfort in the failure of the grand project of the Enlightenment: 'Più le nostre case sono illuminate e prospere più le loro mura grondano fantasmi; i sogni del progresso e della razionalità sono visitati da incubi'.¹⁰⁶ The nightmare of rationality, that space created by uncertainty, is the unequivocal temple of literature. Literature might as well be a combinatorial machine,

¹⁰⁴SI, 'Cibernetica e fantasmi', p.231

¹⁰⁵SII, 'Colloquio con Ferdinando Camon', pp. 2793-2794.

¹⁰⁶SI, p. 219

ma il risultato poetico sarà l'effetto particolare di una di queste permutazioni sull'uomo dotato d'una coscienza e d'un inconscio, cioè sull'uomo empirico e storico, sarà lo shock che si verifica solo in quanto attorno alla macchina scrivente esistono i fantasmi nascosti dell'individuo e della società.¹⁰⁷

We remember that the Romantics offered poetry as a counterpart to the excessive rationalism of their time; here Calvino does something typically subversive with that polarity: first, he welcomes the rationality of the combinatorial process, and then strips it of its deterministic interpretation, by bringing back poetry in the discourse, as the ultimate judge. We would also like to stress Giuseppe Conte's idea concerning Calvino, myth, and the Enlightenment, as an anchor for the thesis of 'mythical writing in an enlightened world':

In Calvino si è sempre sottolineato l'illuminismo, il culto della precisione scientifica, il forbito duttile del razionalismo. Può apparire dunque oggi scandaloso parlare di mito. Ma questo per chi si crogiuola ancora nella falsa divisione fra razionale e irrazionale, per chi vede il mito come il principio stesso dell'irrazionalismo e vede la ragione nella scienza e nell'ideologia, collaborando così a costruire il suo terribile totalitarismo.¹⁰⁸

1.4 The aesthetics of earthly transcendence

Parlo della mia mente, perché è l'unica che posso avere in mente; e parlo della mente di Akarawa, che certo è quella che ha in mente lui; ma penso anche alla mente universale, che secondo Averroè è unica per tutti noi, e che forse è quella a cui tutti pensiamo quando diciamo "mente", perché ciascuno di noi ha bisogno di credere che la propria mente funziona in modo universale, e inversamente non riesce a immaginare una mente universale se non attraverso la propria.¹⁰⁹

As we have previously mentioned, this thesis claims that a characteristic aesthetic quality of Calvino's work, especially in the works that will be discussed, is that of an earthly transcendence. By earthly transcendence, we describe a twofold movement, which goes from the particular to the universal, and back. Earthly transcendence is not essentially mystical or divine, it is inherently human. It does not aspire to a unique universal truth belonging to a heavenly place, detached from the contradictions of human experience; it is always relevant to the senses. It does not come from above, or from a realm beyond reach, it stays close to the tension at work in every event. By characterising this transcendence as 'earthly' we mean to release it from any occult connotation possible. However, Calvino's aesthetics always disclose a desire to overcome a certain difficulty or contradictions, and in that they remain transcendental.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., p. 221.

¹⁰⁸Giuseppe Conte, 'Il tappeto di Eudossia', *Italo Calvino. La letteratura, la scienza, la città*, ed. by Giorgio Bertone (Genova: Casa Editrice Marietti, 1988), p. 46.

¹⁰⁹SII, p. 2001.

It is through these aesthetics that the utopian impulse takes its literary form, refusing any dogmatic formulation, or any confining depiction. It is also by the means of earthly transcendence that Calvino's mythical spirit emerges. The transcendental effort is constantly put to empirical trial. This aesthetic quality also accounts for the typically calvinian humour. Some of the tools of comic effect in fact participate in the aesthetic. We have for instance the practice of reframing an argument, usually abruptly applying it to a different context or scale. This is quite common for instance in the cosmicomic stories. We can mention for instance 'Mitosi' and Qfwfq's 'innamoramento da morire'. The story achieves a comic effect by an almost literal use of the expression 'innamorato da morire', and Qfwfq goes from being conscious of himself to being conscious of the possibility of otherness, always keeping to his own personal experience. In *Palomar*, humour is not as explicit as it is in the cosmicomic tales, but some of the stories still maintain a comic tone, if the reader is careful not to take Palomar's contemplation to the letter. We can think of 'Il seno nudo' for example (see also 4.1.1). Out of the three main works that we have chosen to discuss, *Le città invisibili* is probably the book in which the comic effect is less present, in fact, it almost disappears. However, the same aesthetic effect is achieved. This is an argument in favour of the aesthetics that we have suggested, for it cannot simply be assumed that what we call earthly transcendence is merely another name for Calvino's comic tone.

1.4.1. The metaphor and the symbolic as tools

Se il discorso non si riferisse ai simboli funerari, ma alle epifanie mitiche genuine, il nulla si ritroverebbe nella prospettiva del riso nullificante degli dèi ellenici, il quale scava l'abisso più profondo tra uomini e dèi nell'istante stesso in cui i volti degli dèi appaiono agli uomini [...] Questo discorso potrebbe apparire un vano gioco di parole, se non ci si ricordasse che il rimando al nulla è un'esperienza eminentemente religiosa, di cui si posseggono documenti storici assai antichi, e tale da costituire addirittura una delle costanti della fenomenica religiosa.¹¹⁰

The laughter of the gods is the quintessential humbling experience. Yet it is not the experience of the ineffable, but more accurately, that of the ephemeral. The divine appearance is revealed to man through his experience, but it is lost in the very moment of revelation.

Jesi sees in the eminent interest expressed by the scientific studies of religion and ethnology 'il desiderio di impadronirsi della morfologia del simbolo e del mito per rendere meglio cosciente (o per giustificare) la sopravvivenza di elementi arcaici (alterati o genuini)'.¹¹¹ Once it is used, the symbol

¹¹⁰Jesi, p.18.

¹¹¹Ibid.

becomes a gateway to an ancient realm, which is still capable of speaking to us. The symbol might be a reference to an empty space, but to a space left empty by the divine revelation which has been instantly lost. In other words, the symbolic is the language of absence. For Calvino's writing, metaphors and symbols, are the tools the artist has at hand to convey the earthly transcendence we have set ourselves to discuss. For the reader and the critic, they are evidence of that aesthetic. In the cosmicomic stories, the metaphor of time and space ('Ti con zero': time as an arrow, 'Tutto in un punto': time as a moment, space as a point, 'La memoria del mondo': time as memory) is the overwhelming evidence of Qfwfq's cosmic desire, the utmost transcendental desire. In *Le città invisibili*, the metaphor of the city has a great range: utopia, desire, memory, language, loss, the other, world-view... In *Palomar* also, almost every observation experiences the temptation of metaphor (the wave as time and the world, the odd slipper as the other, the universe as a mirror of humanity, etc.). But the metaphors never really meet their end, they do not always do what they promise (bring in the same and the other). In the Aristotelian tradition of poetics, metaphor is part of the great artistic mimicry, and in the same context, metaphor enables poetry to say more than what it *actually* does. This is also the tradition that associates metaphor with transcendence. In 1735, Gottlieb Baumgarten published his book *Reflections on Poetry*, imposing the discussion of aesthetics in the world of poetry. Baumgarten wished to separate the metaphysical from the poetical discourse, and as a spirit of his times, he insisted on the self-sufficiency of the work of art and the aesthetic experience it offered to the audience. The work of art had a life of its own, a reality of its own. But the temptation of metaphor is admittedly very great:

This tension the poet cannot escape. His works will never be pure enough; his work will always bear traces of the sensuous music of nature that they cannot silence as they gesture towards an elusive eternity, the metaphor of a transcendence that is nothing other than the place left vacant by the dead God.¹¹²

Metaphor, much like the symbol Jesi discusses, is also the story of an absence. In earthly transcendence, the metaphor is the memory of a metaphor that could transcend, the memory carried by the symbol of the face of gods and their laughter.

1.4.2. The choice of writing short

Recent genre theory has faced the difficulty to define the short story as distinct from the novel. Norman Friedman explained that theories are divided between those that explain the

¹¹²Karsten Harries, 'Metaphor and Transcendence', *Critical Inquiry* 5.1, Special Issue on Metaphor (The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 73-90, p. 83.

particularity of the genre mainly in terms of its shortness, and those that attempt to differentiate it from the novel in terms of subject matter, narrative form or effect. Valerie Shaw situated the short story on the thin line between reality and dream, fixity and evolution, ordinary and peculiar.¹¹³ Charles E. May suggested that the brevity of the short story is due to the fact it deals with experiences that are short and that those are most suitable to the short story itself.¹¹⁴ As Friedman noted though, such theories fail to the extent that both epiphany and the experience of the margin can be found in the novel.

In 1959, 'Risposte a 9 domande sul romanzo' was published 'Nuovi Argomenti'. The last question of the series is: '*Quali sono i romanzieri che preferite e perché?*' Calvino gives a list of twenty-four names. More than half are short-story writers, and some of them are emblematic figures of short fiction.

Amo Hemingway perché è *matter of fact*, *understatement*, volontà di felicità, tristezza. [...] Amo Čechov perché non va più in là di dove va. Amo Conrad perché naviga l'abisso e non ci si affonda. [...] Amo Chesterton perché voleva essere il Voltaire cattolico e io volevo essere il Chesterton comunista. [...] Amo Poe dello *Scarabeo d'Oro*. [...] Amo Gogol' perché deforma con nettezza, cattiveria e misura. [...] Amo Maupassant perché è superficiale. [...] Amo la Mansfield perché è intelligente.¹¹⁵

It is unlikely that Calvino himself wished to engage in theoretical distinctions between genres.

However, as a craftsman, he certainly favoured shorter forms. It was in the experience of writing and reading short pieces that he justified his predilection.

Io speravo di fare un librettino di raccontini, tutto bello pulito stringato, ma Pavese ha detto no, i racconti non vendono, bisogna che fai il romanzo. Ora io la necessità di fare un romanzo non la sento: io scriverei racconti per tutta la vita. Racconti belli stringati, che come li cominci così li porti a fondo, li scrivi e li leggi senza tirare il fiato, pieni e perfetti come tante uova, che se gli togli o gli aggiungi una parola va tutto in pezzi. Il romanzo invece ha sempre dei punti morti, dei punti per attaccare un pezzo all'altro, dei personaggi che non senti. Ci vuole un altro respiro per il romanzo, più riposato, non trattenuto e a denti stretti come il mio. Io scrivo mangiandomi le unghie. Tu scrivi mangiandoti le unghie? Gli scrittori si dividono in quelli che scrivono mangiandosi le unghie e quelli no. C'è chi scrive leccandosi un dito.¹¹⁶

The purpose of this thesis in discussing the short story is neither to participate in the theoretical debate about literary genre, nor to establish whether the short story can stand on its own. However we

¹¹³See Valery Shaw, *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Longman, 1983).

¹¹⁴See Charles E. May, *The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice* (Studies in Literary Themes and Genres: Twayne Publishers, 1995).

¹¹⁵SI, pp. 1528-1529.

¹¹⁶L., a Silvio Micheli, 08/11/1946, pp. 167-168.

draw from this theoretical discourse certain arguments that are rather relevant to the discussion of Calvino's aesthetics, and more particularly to the idea of earthly transcendence.

It appears that there are historical and social reasons that lie behind the rising interest in short stories over the last two centuries. Chesterton's account of this is remarkably interesting; he wrote in 1906:

Our modern attraction to the short story, is not an accident of form, it is a sign of a real sense of fleetingness and fragility; it means that existence is only an impression and, perhaps, only an illusion [...] We have no instinct of anything ultimate and enduring behind the episodes. The moderns, in a word, describe life in short stories because they are possessed with the sentiment that life itself is an uncommonly short story, and perhaps not a true one.¹¹⁷

Calvino's understanding of the tendency towards the short story seems almost identical in 'Pasternak e la rivoluzione' (1958):

Io credo che non per nulla il nostro è tempo del racconto, del romanzo breve, della testimonianza autobiografica: oggi una narrativa veramente moderna non può che portare la sua carica poetica del momento (qualsiasi momento) in cui vive, valorizzandolo come decisivo e infinitamente significativo; deve perciò essere 'al presente', darci un'azione che svolga tutta sotto i nostri occhi, unitaria di tempo e di azione come la tragedia greca.¹¹⁸

Calvino's experience of the world remains the same with Chesterton, and in his modern experience also of the world resists harmony: 'Nel modo in cui la cultura d'oggi vede il mondo, c'è una tendenza che affiora contemporaneamente da varie parti: il mondo nei suoi vari aspetti viene visto sempre più come *discreto* e non come *continuo*';¹¹⁹ this means that it is extremely complicated to choose one specific way to translate this experience into literature. The difficulty derives from the problem of choosing an appropriate style, or rather from achieving an aesthetic which renders this sense of discontinuity. According to its historical circumstances every age has created artistic trends that were believed to be more adequate for their time. This idea, expressed at the beginning of the century, suggests that the proliferation of short fiction and the growing interest in it, was a form of literary necessity. Henry James believed that the short story could 'mirror contemporary life and epitomize modern conditions'.¹²⁰ These modern conditions are in fact the experience of fragmentation of life: of the self, of the collective, of a harmonious whole. The short story in this sense is the literary synonym of the episode in life. The question of an increasingly fragmented experience of everyday life has been a poignant one in literature. Valerie Shaw suggests that "the short story has marked ability to bring

¹¹⁷G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, 7th edn. (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1911), p. 85.

¹¹⁸SI, p. 1364.

¹¹⁹SI, 'Cibernetica e fantasmi', p. 209.

¹²⁰Cited in Valerie Shaw, *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Longman, 1983), p. 17.

apparent extremes of style together, mingling self-conscious literary devices and colloquial spontaneity within the ‘essentially poetic’ compression of single narrative’.¹²¹ The short story has therefore very often been a conscious literary choice, which allows the rendering of discontinuity thanks to its brevity and its episodic nature. Calvino was very much aware of this increasing impression of discontinuity, and Claudio Milanini epitomised this aspect of his work in his book *L'Utopia Discontinua*.¹²² Milanini saw in Calvino's fragmented aesthetics, the inevitable questioning of certainty :

l'esercizio metodico del dubbio, la convinzione secondo la quale non c'è verità che possa dirsi raggiunta una volta per tutte, s'accompagna col richiamo sistematico a principi di moralità pubblica oltre che privata, con l'aspirazione esplicita a una convivenza civile che sappia tutelare, almeno, un patrimonio basilare di valori indefettibili.¹²³

The process of filtering is inherent in the process of the creation of the story: ‘Stories, to be stories, must leave things out’.¹²⁴ Fiction in other words has to leave space for its own reconstitution, which takes place during the process of reading. This linguistic filtering process gains even more importance when it comes to short stories. Italo Calvino starts *Lezioni Americane* with a lecture titled ‘Leggerezza’ where he attempts to explain his method of writing: ‘la mia operazione è stata il più delle volte una sottrazione di peso, ho cercato di togliere peso ora alle figure umane, ora ai corpi celesti, ora alle città; soprattutto ho cercato di togliere peso alla struttura del racconto e al linguaggio’.¹²⁵ His quest for narrative lightness appears in this essay as one of the reasons that pushed him towards writing short fiction. In order to convey what he means however, Calvino very often turns to examples of poets such as Dante (1265 - 1321), Ovid (43 BC - AD 17/18), Montale (1896 - 1981), Valéry (1871 - 1945) or Emily Dickinson (1830 - 1886). This effect of lightness that Calvino longs for, as a reader and as a writer, is to be achieved through poetic resources. The short story, as it appears in Calvino's work, is impregnated by poetic style. It is arguable whether it is to be found more frequently in short stories than in novels. Walton R. Patrick suggests that

it probably appears more consistently in the short story than in the novel for quite a logical reason: the short story is a ‘much in little’ proposition, so that while metaphorical dilatations of language may be useful to the novelist, they are not merely useful but functionally necessary to the short-story writer who strives to pack the utmost meaning into his

¹²¹ Shaw, p. 6.

¹²² Claudio Milanini, *L'utopia discontinua. Saggio su Italo Calvino* (Milan: Graziante, 1990).

¹²³ Ibid., p. 9.

¹²⁴ Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

¹²⁵ SI, p. 631.

restricted space.¹²⁶

Patrick distinguishes two main categories of short stories: the 'lyrical' and the 'mimetic'. The first one is closer to poetry, and it aims at 'dramatizing an idea or emotional situation'; the second 'places the primary emphasis on narration'.¹²⁷ The poetic style is characterized by 'a consistent and extensive use of imagery, figurative language, symbolism and other linguistic and structural elements'.¹²⁸ Since Calvino's aim is to take out weight from the narration through the poetic process, and since the latter is associated with the use of images and metaphorical procedures, we can begin to understand both why the form of the short story is chosen and why the visual is such a capital aspect in his work.

1.4.3. 'Del cominciare e del finire', 'Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto'

The issue of how to begin and end a story is omnipresent in short story criticism and it was one of Calvino's main concerns as well. The appendix to *Lezioni americane* is titled 'Cominciare e Finire' and deals directly with this problem and the author's choice or even necessity to write short. Calvino wrote: 'L'inizio è anche l'ingresso in un mondo completamente diverso: il mondo verbale'.¹²⁹ The beginning of a story is what defines its borders in relation to the world and to what is yet to be told. The reader's pact consists in the necessity to leave the 'real' world behind, or at least standing by, in order to enter the realm of the story, and to accept the rules that are set by the written word and the story that is about to be told. For Calvino the beginning is what defines literature to some extent: 'L'inizio è il luogo letterario per eccellenza perché il mondo di fuori per definizione è continuo, non ha limiti visibili'.¹³⁰ The story is defined as an entity that draws a borderline between itself and the world while telling it, and whose motivation is to 'compiere un'operazione che ci permetta di situarci in questo mondo'.¹³¹ This relation between the story and the world is somewhat paradoxical because it wishes to distance itself from what it attempts to incorporate. This contradiction is also the one that we can find between 'real', mental and verbal images. It is a relation that associates mimesis and differentiation. The story can be understood as a resistance to the continuous and chaotic nature of the world. There is a will to make some events, characters or landscapes stand out of the amorphous

¹²⁶ Walton R. Patrick, 'Poetic Style in the Contemporary Short Story'. *College Composition and Communication*, 18.2 (National Council of Teachers in English, May 1967), p. 77.

¹²⁷Ibid., p. 78.

¹²⁸Ibid., p. 77.

¹²⁹SI, p. 735,

¹³⁰Ibid.

¹³¹Ibid., p. 734.

whole that threatens to engulf them: ‘esso sottintende la preoccupazione di sottrarre la storia che si sta per narrare alla confusione con altri destini, altre vicissitudini, è ancora in qualche modo un omaggio alla vastità dell’universo’.¹³² In his essay Calvino depicted a historical evolution of the conception of beginnings in literature, and he explained that in the last two centuries narrators have moved away from the concern to make a story stand out and have accepted that ‘siccome la vita è un tessuto continuo, siccome qualsiasi inizio è arbitrario, allora è perfettamente legittimo di cominciare *in medias res*, in un momento qualsiasi’.¹³³

The beginning of a story unmistakably marks the passage from the universal to the particular and Calvino added that ‘dal patrimonio della narrativa orale nasce [...] quella che nella cultura italiana si chiama la novella, che invece punta su un massimo di individuazione’.¹³⁴ However, the short story is also a ‘much in little’ proposition that attempts to include the infinite in a limited space with a limited amount of tools that are defined by the potential of language. From the contradictory nature of the story and its function Calvino raised two main questions that he ironically presents as a personal problem he has to face when writing, but that can also be considered to be the problem of many other writers of short fiction: ‘è possibile raccontare una storia al cospetto dell’universo? [...] E se l’universo non può essere contenuto in una storia, come si può da questa storia impossibile staccare delle storie che abbiano un senso compiuto?’.¹³⁵ In this essay Calvino also explained that because of those problems he could not trust himself to write longer narratives and he clearly associated this choice with his persistence in thinking about beginnings and ends:

Forse è questa ansia per il problema del cominciare e del finire che ha fatto di me più uno scrittore di short stories che di romanzi, quasi non riuscissi mai a convincermi che il mondo ipotizzato dalla mia narrazione è un mondo a se stante, autonomo, autosufficiente, in cui ci si può installare definitivamente o almeno per tempi lunghi.¹³⁶

Starting with Poe, critics and writers like Brander Matthews, A. L. Bader or Somerset Maugham have argued over the last two centuries that ‘symmetry of design’ is an essential quality of the short story, and that the Aristotelian principle that a beginning, a middle and an end is always needed, is also to be applied to the genre as an axiom. It is however indispensable to note that in many short stories that have been regarded as masterpieces of the genre, symmetry is not present. Calvino believed that the end of a story can echo the function of the beginning, i.e. to remind the reader of the

¹³²Ibid., p. 735.

¹³³Ibid., p. 738.

¹³⁴Ibid., p. 741.

¹³⁵Ibid., p. 751.

¹³⁶Ibid., p. 750.

level of reality of the story, to point at a cosmic dimension, or to have an unresolved or undetermined dimension that questions an established hierarchy of values. In ‘Cominciare e finire’ he also expressed the idea that the end is not significant in itself but points at everything that has come before and therefore that it can be arbitrary:

Il problema di non finire una storia è questo. Comunque essa finisca, qualsiasi sia il momento in cui decidiamo che la storia può considerarsi finita, ci accorgiamo che non è verso quel punto che portava l’azione del raccontare, che quello che conta è altrove, è ciò che è avvenuto prima: è il senso che acquista quel segmento isolato di accadimenti, estratto dalla continuità del raccontabile.¹³⁷

‘Symmetry of design’ designates a parallel between beginning and end, and Calvino’s point of view was that ‘inizio e finale, anche se possiamo considerarli simmetrici su un piano teorico, non lo sono sul piano estetico’.¹³⁸ He made it clear that beginnings have a higher aesthetic impact by pointing out that in the history of literature there are more memorable *incipits* than endings.

The ‘moment of crisis’ and the ‘unity of impression’ are the other two main characteristics that have been attributed to the genre. The ‘moment of crisis’ includes surprise endings such as those that are to be found in Maupassant’s short stories, or an ‘epiphany’ as it was coined by James Joyce. This characteristic mostly points at the end of the story, and as we have seen before, it is not what Calvino insisted on. His idea of what makes a good story seems to be closer to Poe’s idea of ‘unity of impression’. Poe insisted that a short story should be the product of deliberate artistry; it had to put emphasis on a single effect and ought to be characterized by economy of language, which put the genre formally very close to the aesthetics of poetry. In his essay Calvino said that ‘l’opera letteraria è una di queste minime porzioni in cui l’universo si cristallizza in una forma, in cui acquista un senso, non fisso, non definitivo, non irrigidito in un’immobilità mortale, ma vivente come un organismo’.¹³⁹ This sentence expresses the same need for singleness of effect conveyed by the image of a living organism, which is perceived as an exception, a unique instance in the chaotic cosmos and which incorporates multiplicity and complexity. The image of an organism that reflects the complexity of the universe has an all-inclusive dimension that goes along with the ‘much in little’ proposition of the short story. ‘Il cosmo può essere cercato anche all’interno d’ognuno di noi, come caos indifferenziato, come molteplicità potenziale’.¹⁴⁰ Jorge-Luis Borges wrote in the first edition of *Doctor Brodie’s Report* ‘there isn’t anywhere on earth a single page or single word that is [simple], since each thing

¹³⁷Ibid., p. 749.

¹³⁸Ibid., p. 750.

¹³⁹Ibid., p. 751.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., p. 740.

implies the universe, whose most obvious trait is complexity'.¹⁴¹ Let us at this point suggest that resistance is another way to talk about the tension that is inherent in fiction. This tension is the symptom that reflects the complex dimension of life. Calvino's idea that the complexity of the universe is to be found even in the smallest of things echoes the idea that Borges expressed in the preface of *Doctor Brodie's Report*. This all-embracing dimension is what gives Calvino's stories a transcendental aesthetic that attempts to include in the fiction even what is apparently beyond the senses and creates a consciousness of chaos and complexity, while simultaneously bringing it back to the terrestrial sphere of the senses. Borges' approach has an all-inclusive dimension that can be found in some of Calvino's works as well.

Calvino often said that through his writing he attempted to give a voice to anything that was lacking one, in other words to incorporate into literature things that were outside its realm until then. In 'Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto' Calvino wrote: 'nella mia esperienza la spinta a scrivere è sempre legata alla mancanza di qualcosa che si vorrebbe conoscere e possedere, qualcosa che ci sfugge'.¹⁴² This idea of writing about something that already escapes our perception even before beginning to write about it goes along with the tension that exists within the fiction itself. He also adds that it is desire which keeps the possibility of writing alive and says that a writer's secret is 'il saper conservare intatta la forza del desiderio'.¹⁴³ Those last two remarks are an attempt to discuss the complex mechanisms that result in the written world.

1.4.4. Calvino and Chekhov

Anton Chekhov is one of the short story writer that Calvino greatly admired, and whose work he found paramount to the human experience. On March, 19th 1943, in a reply to Eugenio Scalfari (whom he rebukes for presuming Chekhov's work was not relevant any more), he explained the reasons for his attachment to the Russian author:

Perché il dramma di Checov è il dramma del positivismo, la concezione tragica di un universo senza scopo, gente in cui disperati « perché » rimangono senza risposta, che cerca di ingannare in fittizi ideali l'inutilità dell'esistenza. È il mio, anche il tuo dramma. E lo stile dell'opera, questo stile che la rende pressoché irrepresentabile e soporifera, è anch'esso partecipe di questo positivismo portato alle estreme conseguenze che conduce appunto a un realismo squallido nella sua obiettività estrema: l'impressionismo. Oltre a questo limite è impossibile andare: verranno le reazioni, gli idealismi in filosofia, gli espressionismi in arte, ma saranno tutti palliativi, costruzioni nel vuoto; il tormento de personaggi di Checov

¹⁴¹Jorge Luis Borges, *Doctor Brodie's Report* (London : A. Lane, 1974), p. 11.

¹⁴²SII, p. 1874.

¹⁴³Ibid.

è immanente nel nostro pensiero perché non è stato ancora risolto.¹⁴⁴

To a certain extent, Chekhov's world is the same as Calvino's; the latter recognises that the struggle of man to live in a world devoid of teleological answers is ongoing and clearly far from being resolved.¹⁴⁵ This preoccupation is to be read in continuation of the problems and challenges of writing after the Enlightenment. The criticism of logical positivism is unmistakable, Calvino speaks of 'il dramma del positivismo [...] che conduce appunto a un realismo squallido nella sua obiettività estrema'. We have seen before, that paradoxically, Calvino sees in this failure, a literary opportunity, which Chekhov does not fail to exploit as he points out. What Calvino appreciates about Chekhov's aesthetics is the perennial suspension of aetiology, and the portrayal of men hanging on to ideologies, orchestrated to bypass the utmost triviality of existence. His comments on Chekhov are interesting on various levels. First of all, he recognises that Chekhov's world, in all its preoccupations, its difficulties, and its existential questioning, is the same as ours. The literary project in this sense, remains similar on many levels. Chekhov is therefore a contemporary, because humankind's historical condition has not changed dramatically since his time; or more precisely, even if circumstances have indeed changed, the centrepiece of how we are in the world remains the same. Calvino's own work was no exception, it is equally concerned with the overwhelming presence of doubt and threat to meaning. Much like Chekhov, he refused to give in to the temptation of providing a definite answer to these doubts, making it an intellectual and artistic responsibility to remain faithful to them as to a form of truth about human experience. The loyalty to the sense of doubt, also extends to his considerations about myth and science, especially when he discusses de Santillana:

Per esempio, tutti i benefici che gli psichiatri e i neurologi riscontrano nell'assenza di dubbio e di scelta, non possono far dimenticare a Santillana che ciò vuol dire anche assenza di *sense of humour*: una perdita che certo lui non si sarebbe mai sentito di affrontare¹⁴⁶

It is only fair to assume, that Calvino himself was not ready to accept the prospect of a loss of sense of humour; his entire literary work is strongly characterised by a sense of humour.

Let us also remember Calvino's thoughts about beginning and ending a story; he declared that stories always began and ended *in medias res*. Chekhov expressed it even more provokingly by saying 'I think that when one has finished writing a short story one should delete the beginning and the end'.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴L., p. 125.

¹⁴⁵The last chapter of this thesis develops further this idea alongside Camus' idea of the absurd.

¹⁴⁶SII, *Fato antico e fato moderno* di Giorgio di Santillana, p. 2091

¹⁴⁷Cited in Ian Reid, 'Essential Qualities?' *The Short Story* (London, New York: Methuen. Barnes & Noble Books, 1997) p.

In other words Calvino shared with Chekhov a world-view and an aesthetic. The first resulted from a characteristic of the human condition which had remained the same, and an adjacent point of view from which to look at it. The second, was not only an artistic choice, simply relying on subjective taste (although it was that as well), but also a form revealed and emerging from that world-view. In 1954, Calvino writes an article in 'L'Unità', in the context of the commemoration of Chekhov's death on July, 1st 1904. In 'I piccoli uomini di Anton Čekhov' he writes about the controversy around which his critics have discussed him:

In Unione Sovietica c'è per lui un affetto che tocca la venerazione, e ne fanno, di questo medico dallo sguardo lampeggiante e ironico dietro il *pince-nez*, quasi un profeta della società socialista; mentre in Occidente lo celebrano ora come un padre del pessimismo e dell'agnosticismo liberali ora addirittura come un simbolista mistico; e tutto questo, si badi bene, abbia mai dato prova di volubilità o di piaggeria, anzi al contrario restando sempre ostinatamente fedele a se medesimo spietato nelle cose che aveva da dire, procedendo su una strada senza svolte, diritta, lineare.¹⁴⁸

Calvino draws our attention to a tendency among critics to often subdue the work of an author to the general spirit of an era, or on a harsher note, to suit it in a certain ideology. At the time he wrote the article, and at the time of the fiftieth anniversary of Chekhov's death, the world was already in the middle of the escalation of the Cold War. Taking sides in that debate, Calvino maintains, reduces the depth of Chekhov's literary quality. Question such as 'is Chekhov in fact a pessimist, or a mystic?', completely miss the point. The essence of his work is not to be sought in revealing which side he takes (if he can even be imagined to take one). The artistry at work is made visible in the making of the tension.

Ma i risultati più alti, Čekhov li raggiunge quando lo smascheramento della dignità falsa e il ritrovamento della vera avvengono nello stesso personaggio; quando il coltello che incide la cancrena tocca la carne viva: ed ecco la 'pietà' di Čekhov, sempre presente quanto più egli è 'spietato', ecco che dopo aver scoperto sotto il personaggio piccolo-borghese, - la sua meschinità e bruttezza storica, - sotto il piccolo-borghese scopre l'uomo.¹⁴⁹

In Calvino's eyes, Chekhov's great literary achievement is this 'spietata pietà'. He does not yield to the pressure to take sides. While he sees clearly the 'momento di crisi del pensiero scientifico e umanitario borghese', he does not give in to the temptation of declaring an intellectual or artistic suicide.

At this point, I would like to draw a line of comparison between Calvino's discourse on

¹⁴⁸SI, p. 796.

¹⁴⁹Ibid., p. 799.

Chekhov and Fourier. It is no coincidence, that these two authors were discussed under the controversial interpretation and analysis that they owed to their critics, and that Calvino wished to place his own critical voice right in the middle. It is also revealing to point out that the polarity discussed is also the same: science and mysticism, rationality and irrationality, pessimism and optimism. Their *modus operandi* was radically different: Fourier was a visionary, a writer of utopia; Chekhov more at ease among his 'piccoli uomini'. But in the eyes of the critics they remained a puzzle, they were hard to confine and resisted systematic qualification. Calvino's article about Chekhov and his second essay on Fourier, end on the similar note:

Non è un caso che attraverso un testo 'bastardo', 'ambiguo', 'composito' come l'opera di Fourier (do a questi aggettivi il valore positivo che avevano per lui e che giustamente meritano) si giunga a definire l'esperienza che il discorso letterario ha fatto su di sé, per il proprio uso, per la propria *utilità* pubblica, e che può trasmettere per l'uso, per l'*utilità* di ogni altro tipo di discorso.¹⁵⁰

E in questo non è elegiaco o rassegnato: se la piglia con noi, è d'una severità feroce. Questa è la sua morale, la 'porta stretta' che apre ai suoi personaggi e a noi. Per questo resta, quanto più è chiaro alla mano, uno scrittore 'difficile', 'scomodo': perché è più comodo scansarlo e ricamarci su che accettarlo com'è.¹⁵¹

Both Fourier's and Chekhov's prose were characterised by an inherent tension that always remained unresolved, and Calvino greatly disapproved of the tendency to simplify the critical task by leaning more on one side of the scale than the other. Calvino being himself the object of a divided critical reception, we can maybe understand the affinities he had with these two authors. As a critic himself he was doing for other writers what he hoped someone would do for him.

The discussion of the aesthetics of earthly transcendence wishes to give Calvino what 'la spietata pietà' gave to Chekhov: a critical interpretation that sheds light on some of the intricacies in his work, without dissolving their essence by forcing a stand when it is not there. Maybe a first step in that direction was Claudio Milanini's idea of 'pietà creaturale',¹⁵² in which he discusses *Palomar* and *Sotto il sole giaguaro*, as two composite responses to the problematic modern experience and the constant shadow of doubt. Claudio Milanini however, interprets Palomar's death, as a sacrifice; this thesis will offer an alternative interpretation (see also 4.2.2).

¹⁵⁰SI, p. 306.

¹⁵¹SI, p. 800.

¹⁵²Claudio Milanini, 'VII Criticismo etico e pietà creaturale: *Palomar* e *Sotto il sole giaguaro*', *L'utopia discontinua. Saggio su Italo Calvino*, Strumenti di studio (Garzanti, 1990), pp. 170-190.

2 Lightness or utopia? Myth-making and individual responsibility in the cosmicomic stories

Calvino started publishing the cosmicomic stories in 1965 (his first volume was *Cosmicomiche*), and he went on writing them until the end of his life (it was in 1984 that he published *Cosmicomiche vecchie e nuove*, including 2 new stories which had not appeared in previous volumes). In between, further editions were published, including *Ti con zero* (1967), *La memoria del mondo e altre storie cosmicomiche* (1968). The origin of the stories was clearly influenced by a need to establish a dialogue with the scientific discourse (see also 1.1.1 above). In the *Cosmicomiche*, the first part of *Ti con zero*, and all the new stories appearing in *La memoria del mondo* (except for the one giving its name to the collection) feature the narrator with the unpronounceable and palindromic name: Qfwfq.

Calvino's long commitment to the project reveals its significance and contributes to a better understanding of his greater literary project. Furthermore, he thought of them as 'un nuovo genere letterario', which he clearly wished to set apart from Science Fiction.¹⁵³

‘Il procedimento delle Cosmicomiche non è quello della Science Fiction (cioè quello classico – e che pur molto apprezzo – di Jules Verne e H. G. Wells). [...] Le cosmicomiche hanno dietro di sé soprattutto Leopardi, i *comics* di Popeye (Braccio di Ferro), Samuel Beckett, Giordano Bruno, Lewis Carroll, la pittura di Matta e in certi casi Landolfi, Immanuel Kant, Borges, le incisioni di Grandville’.¹⁵⁴

This description does not give a sense of coherence as to the nature of the project, but it does provide us with an idea of some influential elements and accounts for some of the project's main characteristics, such as its visual quality (less in the 'deductive stories' like 'L'inseguimento' or 'Il guidatore notturno' for example) mostly concerning the lunar stories, like 'La distanza della Luna' or 'La Luna come un fungo'; the stories also pay tribute to Leopardi of whom Calvino thinks as a poet who shaped Italian literature, especially through his poetic explorations of the moon. The name of Immanuel Kant suggests the strong philosophical concern behind the work, and Beckett's and Carroll's names hint at the absurdity of some situations which will often contribute to the comic effect of the stories.

The cosmicomic cycle was born, evolved and was contained within the relationship between humankind and cosmos, and the imagery created is shaped by those two parameters. The characters are not human but their language, their relations, and their philosophical concerns most certainly are.

¹⁵³From 'L'Espresso', 4 Novembre 1965, RRII., p. 1343

¹⁵⁴RRII, 'Notizie sui testi', *Le Cosmicomiche*, p. 1321-1322.

Depending on the terms on which they are discussed, the characteristic qualities of the stories change. If for instance man and cosmos are in conflict, which they usually are, tension will be at the core of the product of imagination.

Of particular interest to us, are the stories' numerous intertextual references to classical myths,¹⁵⁵ and 'two different kinds of myth are placed side by side in the cosmicomic tales: the Greek myth and the modern myth of science'.¹⁵⁶ The cosmicomic stories are the project within which the influence of myth is most pronounced and figures in the foreground of Calvino's literary preoccupations. It may also be useful to use Antonio Illiano's words which contain in them several elements which we will look deeper into:

In Calvino però la parodia del mito contiene ormai palesemente il germe dell'assurdo moderno e della farsa trascendentale, che è parodia fatta di continue inversioni ed enuncleantesi in una concatenazione plurima di spunti fantastici e umoristici: a cominciare dal titolo genialmente reversibile le 'cosmi-comiche' creano un nesso inscindibile tra universo e comicità, tra destino umano e riso.¹⁵⁷

In this chapter, we want to analyse the ways in which Calvino explored the connections between myth and utopia, and how these can account for a general concern about intellectual responsibility involved in the art of fiction. To do so, we will first discuss Calvino's literary project, relating it to the debate with Pasolini and its critical responses. In order to develop this argument further within the context of the cosmicomics stories, it is necessary to study how utopia is represented and how it is defined. For the purpose of clarifying Calvino's 'utopia pulviscolare', we will analyse 'I dinosauri', which appeared in *Le Cosmicomiche*, and the three stories in the section 'Priscilla', taken from *Ti con zero*. Secondly, we shall analyse the speculative and emotional responses to utopia as they are represented within 'La distanza della luna', 'Giochi senza fine', and 'La forma dello spazio' (all in *Le Cosmicomiche*). Thirdly, we will define the narratorial voice (mainly in 'Gli anni-luce' in *Le Cosmicomiche*) as a strong utopian element. We will also study 'La memoria del mondo' (from *La memoria del mondo e altre storie cosmomiche*) as an example of prospective and retrospective intellectual responsibility, and the problem of historiography. And finally we will see how Calvino challenges the scientific myth, through the depiction on the tyranny of abstract thought in 'L'inseguimento' and 'Il conte di Montecristo', both taken from the collection *Ti con zero*.

¹⁵⁵See Margarethe Hagen, 'The Visual in the *Cosmicomics*: Myth and Classical Rhetoric', *Image, Eye and Art in Calvino*, ed. by Brigitte Grundtvig, Martin McLaughlin and Lene Waage Petersen (Legenda, MHRA and Maney Publishing, 2007), 48-59.

¹⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁵⁷Antonio Illiano, 'Per una definizione della vena cosmogonica di Calvino. Appunti sulle cosmicomiche e *Ti con zero*', *Italica*, 43:3 (1972), p. 292.

2.1 Intellectual commitment and literary project

While he was working on the project of *Ali-Babà* (1968-1972),¹⁵⁸ Calvino expressed the need to create or discover a literature that would point at more than its own self-contained dimension. He had identified a *ménage à trois*,¹⁵⁹ constituted of literature, philosophy, and science, which should ideally be a mutually and continuously challenging relation. He recognised however that such an ideal situation was merely an intellectual utopia, he suggested, that in the meantime literature should follow the discoveries and tendencies revealed by science and philosophy, discuss them, while at the same time, it should keep a certain critical distance. Calvino also points out that the encounter between literature and philosophy ideally produces ‘comicità, ironia, humour’. The comic effect is indeed crucial in the body of the cosmicomic stories that we set ourselves to discuss. With his work on the cosmicomic genre, Calvino experimented on the possibility to make mythological motifs emerge from a scientific discourse, which had so insistently tried to set itself quite apart from any such affiliations, and which is also systematically transcended.¹⁶⁰

One of the recurrent criticisms against Calvino consists in accusing him of intellectual lightness and disengagement. This opinion was first articulated by Pasolini and gave birth to a debate that would last long after Pasolini's death, but also Calvino's. *Pasolini contro Calvino. Per una letteratura impura*, was Carla Benedetti's account¹⁶¹ of this opposition and it raised important questions, which judging from the number of varied polemical responses, have not been answered yet.¹⁶²

The intellectual opposition that divided Pasolini from Calvino, is characteristic of a country

¹⁵⁸The intellectual implications of the time during which the project was on and the project itself are discussed by Monica Jansen and Claudia Nocentini in “Ali Babà and Beyond: Celati and Calvino in the Search for ‘Something More’”, Proceedings of the International Conference: *The Value of LITERATURE in and after the SEVENTIES: The Case of ITALY and PORTUGAL*, <<http://congress70.library.uu.nl/>>, and in Marco Belpoliti, *Settanta* (Turin: Einaudi, 2001) (see 4.4 below).

¹⁵⁹This idea is very clearly explained in ‘Filosofia e letteratura’ (1967), *SL*, p.188-196.

¹⁶⁰See Teresa de Lauretis, ‘Calvino e la dialettica dei massimi sistemi’, *Italica*, 53 (1976), 57-74.

¹⁶¹Carla Benedetti, *Pasolini contro Calvino. Per una letteratura impura* (Bollati Boringhieri, 1998). In this book, Carla Benedetti summarises the difference between Calvino and Pasolini to a battle where one side remained engaged (Pasolini) and the other became gradually disengaged.

¹⁶²With the occasion of J.D. Salinger's death for instance, Antonio Scurati recycles the criticism on Calvino, and puts Salinger in the same context: ‘Il mio problema con Salinger è, insomma, lo stesso che ho con Calvino: è un problema con i salingeriani, con i calvinisti della levità a tutti i costi e costi quel che costi. Ho già scritto su questo giornale, che l'influsso sulla cultura letteraria (e non solo), delle lezioni americane di Calvino è stato, a mio modesto parere, tra i più nocivi. In nome della sua eredità, incompresa, fraintesa, equivocata, enormi volumi d'inanità hanno potuto trovare un formidabile alibi nell'autorevole elogio della leggerezza. Vale lo stesso per Salinger’. Scurati, Antonio <<http://www.lastampa.it/redazione/cmsSezioni/cultura/201001articoli/51706girata.asp?>>

like Italy, in which the figure of the intellectual is prominent both in cultural and public spheres.¹⁶³ Robert Gordon reminds us that the debate was followed by a series of arguments for and against Calvino, leaving Pasolini in the background; a trend that according to him partly confirms Benedetti's assumption that Calvino had won this battle. But there might be an alternative interpretation to this outcome. If the intellectuals and artists who chose to mark their stance in this debate were indeed divided between Calvino's and Pasolini's supporters, then it is only fair to assume that those in favour of Calvino, opted for a positive narrative in support of the writer of their predilection, while Pasolini's advocates preferred a polemical stance against the identified enemy. In this sense, both sides closely followed the steps of their inspirational figure. Through their stance, supporters on each side can thus be said to have perpetuated the debate roughly on the same level on which it was set by its emblematic figures. It is probably this that Robert Gordon regrets when he decides 'to show in the detail of the inbred and often *monotonous exchanges* of such debates a source of possible evidence for the sociologist of culture, in the broader sense of the term we are perhaps more at home with now' (my emphasis).¹⁶⁴

The opposition that typically wants Calvino leaning towards a disengaged literature of pure mind-play and experimentation, and Pasolini in constant struggle with the viscosity of life, is in fact based on a major misinterpretation of Calvino's concepts of 'lightness' and 'multiplicity', where 'lightness' is interpreted as frivolity, and 'multiplicity' is not understood as the potential of literature, but as meaningless games. Is it really accurate to assume that choosing language over base matter, or form over content necessarily translates into detachment? And more importantly, is it fair to exclusively associate engagement with action? Language is as important as base matter if we recognise that we are entirely conditioned by it; and form equates to our way of being in the world. Once these issues have been taken into consideration we have to admit that what is called disengagement by some is in fact essentially an ethical choice. The utopian images that Calvino offers us are to be understood as the most sincere intellectual and political engagement.

What prevents Calvino from stating a political preference or from indicating a supposed solution to a social or political conflict is his anti-authoritarian approach. Calvino's utopian impulse is not historically unimportant. He was living in Paris during the student movement of May '68, and although he chose to stay silent somehow and not make any open political statements, his concern about this utopian drive is transparent in the cosmicomic stories. One can discuss whether his attitude

¹⁶³Robert Gordon, 'Pasolini contro Calvino: culture, the canon and the millennium', *Modern Italy*, 3: 1(1998), 87 – 99.

¹⁶⁴Gordon, p. 88.

was or is effective in political or social terms - provided that effectiveness is a valuable criterion, and given that it can be evaluated in an unquestionable way. In 'Usi politici giusti e sbagliati della letteratura' (1976), he clarifies his reserve towards the student movement due to the consequences it had in his opinion regarding the value of literature.

Il nuovo radicalismo politico degli studenti del Sessantotto è stato caratterizzato in Italia da un rifiuto della letteratura. Non era la letteratura della negazione che veniva proposta, ma la negazione della letteratura. La letteratura era accusata soprattutto d'essere una perdita di tempo contrapposta alla sola cosa importante: l'azione. Che il culto dell'azione fosse innanzi tutto un vecchio mito letterario fu compreso - o sta per essere compreso - molto lentamente.¹⁶⁵

In *Pasolini contro Calvino*, Carla Benedetti explains one of the major differences between Calvino and Pasolini, which consists on the one hand, in understanding Pasolini's work as a performance: 'L'opera di Pasolini può essere insomma considerata come una grande *performance*, in cui l'oggetto estetico è meno importante della presenza o dell'azione dell'artista',¹⁶⁶ and on the other hand in interpreting Calvino's enterprise as a failure to 'forare la convenzionalità del "gioco" letterario'. Even if Pasolini should be praised for putting the author forward in his work, one cannot ignore that throughout the centuries, orality and anonymity have also played an important role in literature, participating in the enrichment of literary culture. This thesis however, presumes that Calvino's style and his stubborn reluctance to use autobiographical elements in his fiction, reduces the whole of his work to an artistic object that denies its context and fails to challenge the important questions raised by the reality of his time. It is not obvious, and maybe it should not be accepted that these are the only two ways to evaluate the literary value of an author. In the quotation from 'Usi politici giusti e sbagliati della letteratura', Calvino clearly expressed his rejection of the *cult of action* that was so popular during that time; as he criticised (in 'Il midollo del leone') direct political confrontation from engaged intellectuals:

Chi conosce quanto complessa e delicata e difficile e ricca sia l'attività politica [...] resterà sempre insoddisfatto e infastidito dallo scrittore che imita dall'esterno le operazioni del dirigente politico e sindacale, o dal critico che - con ancor maggiore facilità - gli chiede di far ciò: di passare dalla *analisi critica* alla *denuncia*, alla *critica delle deficienze*, alla *soluzione positiva* e così via. Questa tendenza da parte della letteratura e dell'arte alla mimesi pura e semplice delle organizzazioni di partito e delle Camere del Lavoro, non è solo infantilismo politico, ma un residuo di presunzione intellettuale¹⁶⁷

Action is not a value *per se*, and it cannot be taken for a criterion. When it comes to Pasolini and

¹⁶⁵SI., p. 354.

¹⁶⁶Benedetti, p. 15.

¹⁶⁷SI., p. 20.

Calvino, we can state that one was a fervent supporter of action, while the other questioned it more and more after his experience during the Italian Resistance. Calvino wrote that the student movement was characterised by radical points of view, and that that was devastating for literature. He also associated this radicalism with the blind faith expressed in action. Thus, action became more and more linked to oppressive and authoritarian behaviour in his work, while he insisted that action also meant the exertion of force by one person on others. Carla Benedetti explains how Pasolini chose to address the problem of a certain disturbing conventionality in literature by attacking it as an institution.¹⁶⁸ In this way however, the debate is exclusively discussed on a political level. When literature becomes a political action, it is incorporated in the political sphere, and it therefore loses its ability to look at politics in a critical way. It is therefore not far-fetched on Calvino's part to express concerns for the blows literature could take from this attitude.

Calvino's intellectual commitment to political, historical and social issues had changed form, but it had been there all throughout his career as a writer. In 'Il midollo del leone' (1955), it is clear that he was favouring a more direct implication of the writer and the intellectual in the state of affairs, and regretted for instance that Italy should not share the same tradition as France in this aspect: 'Se in Francia la narrativa affronta ancora di petto le discussioni tra intellettuali, [...] Si direbbe che in Italia il fatto di essere un intellettuale sia sentito come un guaio, come una condizione negativa senza riscatto'.¹⁶⁹ Some years later, in 'Cibernetica e fantasmi' (1967) Calvino explained his fascination for the impact that the new scientific discoveries (and more specifically for my argument, information theory) could have on our understanding of literature. Calvino's concerns in this essay might not be how historical events directly or indirectly influence literature and what the intellectual's attitude towards them should be, but he was concerned with the role of literature *vis-à-vis* the scientific discourse and its importance for society. As it comes out of 'Due interviste su scienza e letteratura' (1968), we have to agree that Calvino believed that in literature, literature comes first; or otherwise put, he thought that a work of literature cannot replace and should not aspire to pass as a political manifesto. In the same way a novel, a short story or a poem should not try to be a philosophical treatise. In 1976, Calvino wrote another essay entitled 'Usi politici giusti e sbagliati della letteratura', where he expressed his doubt and maybe his regrets about a literature that was directly involved in an engaged political way. He did however keep the right to express his need for literature to participate in the political debate. One of the ways he suggested this should happen is the following: 'La letteratura

¹⁶⁸ Benedetti, pp.17-23.

¹⁶⁹SI, pp. 14-15.

è necessaria alla politica prima di tutto quando essa dà voce a ciò che è senza voce',¹⁷⁰ becoming thus the *porte-parole* of oppressed minorities. He also pointed at another level in which literature participates effectively in the social discourse, and that consists in the – accidental most of the times – discovery of concerns that are of general interest. Calvino explained how good literature has educational outcomes, but that it should not be driven by a didactic scope; and how it should always keep a critical approach to the world.

Through his fiction, his essays and his correspondence, we understand that Calvino believed in action only to a certain extent; the most significant and fundamental changes, the ones that can last, are the ones that happen in thought.

It appears that the values Calvino fought to find and defend in *Lezioni americane* are still problematic to the critical audience. It is with lightness that Calvino tackles the subject of utopia in the cosmicomic stories, and yet within the same work, the sense of individual and more obviously intellectual responsibility is omnipresent. Those who take after Pasolini's views, interpret Calvino's lightness as intellectual superficiality in engaging with important political, ethical, critical and artistic issues. On the contrary, it should be interpreted more as tolerance, caution, and sincere and responsible personal involvement. One can also refer to Mario Barenghi's idea of 'Un'utopia senza incendi',¹⁷¹ which he explains alongside Calvino's story 'La decapitazione dei capi' (1969), and where he insists that

Il Calvino della *Decapitazione* riprende bensì da Pavese questo tema [dei riti sacrificali], ma sottoponendolo ad alcune drastiche riduzioni. La più vistosa è l'esclusione del fuoco. Se nell'opera pavesiana il fuoco è una presenza diffusa, quasi endemica, in Calvino non se ne trovano che rare, sorvegliatissime occorrenze, all'insegna di una valenza univocamente distruttiva.¹⁷²

In his own way, Calvino refused to perpetuate in his fiction and his critical work the violence of the outside world, without ever ignoring its existence and without failing to try and warn his readers against the dangers he had identified through his own personal experience. Because critics like Benedetti argue that Calvino tended to judge only on basis of the criteria he promoted himself, we would like to use Albert Camus' words during the Banquet Speech for the acceptance of the Nobel Prize in 1957 in order to illustrate the values we believe Calvino responded to:

Quelles que soient nos infirmités personnelles, la noblesse de notre métier s'enracinera toujours dans deux engagements difficiles à maintenir : le

¹⁷⁰SI, p. 358.

¹⁷¹Mario Barenghi, *Italo Calvino: le linee e i margini*, Saggi 668 (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007), p. 236.

¹⁷²Ibid., p.238.

refus de mentir sur ce que l'on sait et la résistance à l'oppression.

Whatever our weaknesses may be, the nobility of our craft will always be rooted in two commitments, difficult to maintain: the refusal to lie about what one knows and the resistance to oppression.¹⁷³

Calvino's own comment in 'Il midollo del leone', written two years before Camus' speech, also stresses that it is the intellectual's responsibility not to lie about the reality that he had come across: 'meglio la bocca un po' storta di chi non vuole nascondersi nulla della realtà negativa del mondo'.¹⁷⁴

2.2 'Utopia pulviscolare'

Utopia is the place and time in which individual interests, values and desires do not induce damaging and destructive conflict. Oscar Wilde wrote in 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' (1891): 'A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing'.¹⁷⁵ The search for utopia itself gives meaning for Wilde, and the struggle to attain it is a perpetual one. 'The concept of utopia in every age is some variation on an ideal present, an ideal past and an ideal future, and the relation between the three'.¹⁷⁶ Historically, every age and every civilisation fabricated its own utopian tradition: the Greeks had the Egyptians, the *polis*, and the 'Elysian Plains'; the Romans had the Greeks and Arcadia; Christians had the Garden of Eden; 'and today...we are confused'.¹⁷⁷

We would like to put forward the idea that Calvino advocated a literary utopia of prospective and retrospective responsibility, or in other words, he put forward the intellectual as an individual responsible both towards the past and the future. Utopia would thus be the place and time in which the violence that has ravaged society through the fallacies of science, philosophy, politics and the individuals within it, is amended by the artistic literary process.

Calvino only recognized the possibility of a utopian impulse instead of a solid utopian construct, but like Wilde, he affirms the necessity of utopia. His comments on Fourier reveal the essence of his own conception of utopia: 'non d'utopia si tratta ma d'una carica utopica che deve continuamente fare i conti con i nuovi dati che si aggiungono'.¹⁷⁸ In the cosmicomic stories, the

¹⁷³ Albert Camus, Banquet Speech, Nobelprize.org, <http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1957/camus-speech-f.html>

¹⁷⁴SI., p. 24.

¹⁷⁵Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism', *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*, (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1997), p. 1051.

¹⁷⁶ Gregory Claeys, *Searching for Utopia: the History of an Idea* (Thames & Hudson, 2011), p.7.

¹⁷⁷Ibid.

¹⁷⁸'Per Fourier. 3. Commiato. L'Utopia pulviscolare' (1973), SI., p. 308.

utopian dimension is partly achieved because the stories are taken out of context. The problems that are dealt with have no historical reference and the elements of the descriptions do not allow the reader to place the story anywhere near a realistic image of the world. However, all the issues, emotions, struggles and dilemmas remain human. We could refer to *Palomar* in order to understand how the same project can be attempted using different means. Unlike the stories we are mostly studying here, *Palomar* is confronted with everyday images and events that eventually trigger his intellect and his imagination. The issue of sexuality for example is discussed on completely different terms in 'Meiosi' and in 'Gli amori delle tartarughe'. In the first one the experience of sexuality is narrated from the point of view of the individual who experiences the effects of his own sexuality, while on the other hand the turtles are being spied on by *Palomar*, an observer. *Palomar* sees the lack of elegance of the sexual act, whereas in the 'Priscilla' section the sexual encounter, and more specifically the orgasm, is also understood as a transcendent moment for the individual's experience. *Palomar* is therefore puzzled when he has to associate the sloppiness, and the inarticulate scene he has witnessed with the idea of wholeness and he asks himself: 'Forse l'eros delle tartarughe segue leggi spirituali assolute, mentre noi siamo prigionieri sappiamo d'un macchinario che non sappiamo come funziona, soggetto a intasarsi, a incepparsi, a scatenarsi in automatismi senza controllo... Capiranno meglio se stesse, le tartarughe?'¹⁷⁹ This is also an example of how humans project their own understanding of the world onto the animal realm, which can be compared to the way human conscience has infiltrated a pre-human world one can find in the cosmicomic stories.

In 'I Dinosauri', taken from the first collection of *Cosmicomics*, which was written before his essays on Fourier, Qfwfq tells a story of an extinct species, fallen from grace. He narrates the time of a *status quo*, when the order of things seemed practically and ethically ideal: 'allora essere dinosauro si aveva la coscienza d'essere nel giusto, e ci si faceva rispettare'.¹⁸⁰ The sentence mentions the idea of conscience, which implies the decisive importance of individual responsibility. It also suggests that the way in which we conceive our social order is bound to evolve, in other words that any form of utopia is subjected to the parameter of time. Its inconsistency in time is what makes Calvino's utopia discontinuous.¹⁸¹ Another piece of information disclosed by Qfwfq's statement is the existence of a hierarchy: 'allora ci si faceva rispettare' followed later on by 'cominciarono guai di tutti i generi, sconfitte, errori, dubbi, tradimenti, pestilenze. Una nuova popolazione cresceva sulla terra, nemica a noi'.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹RRII, pp. 889-890.

¹⁸⁰RRII, p. 164.

¹⁸¹See Claudio Milanini, *L'Utopia Discontinua*, Strumenti di Studio (Garzanti, 1990).

¹⁸²RRII, p. 164.

Calvino's attempt to bring utopia closer begins by ruling out all the attitudes that render it practically and conceptually impossible and therefore infinitely distant. One such attitude is fatalism. 'Adesso qualcuno dice che il gusto di tramontare, la passione d'essere distrutti facessero parte dello spirito di noi Dinosauri già da prima. Non so: io questo sentimento non lo ho mai provato; se degli altri l'avevano, è perché già si sentivano perduti'.¹⁸³ Instead of welcoming or passively accepting an apocalyptic closure, Qfwfq survives the harsh and degrading experience of the fall. He survives to tell a story of hope but also to remind us that the equilibrium we take for granted is ephemeral. New and Old combine and confuse categories that had previously been the only frame of reference. Utopias are thus not only discontinuous but also conflictual: an order of things that was once ideal becomes gradually oppressive and needs to be overruled. However, all these characteristics are intrinsic to the very nature of utopia as Calvino understands it. In other words Calvino's utopias are only defined as such if they do not last in time and space.

Utopian creations usually have a divine dimension – as is the image of Heaven in the Christian tradition or the image of Valhalla in the Viking world – if there is one to be found in Calvino's work then it is created in the image of the world with all its tensions and inconsistencies. Whereas Christians are guaranteed a way to Heaven provided they live by God's rules, and Viking warriors are accompanied by the Valkyrie to Valhalla if they live and die like brave warriors; there is no prescribed path to utopia in the world of the *Cosmicomics*. Life being a flow conditioned by the arrow of time, and decisions being made on the spot, there can be no warranty. We have seen that utopian states are not perennial; they perish almost as soon as they have been recognized. The utopian nature is defined along with other things by its infinitesimally short life. Under that prism the form of the short story does not seem arbitrary at all but very adequate to render this sense of finiteness.

Within the cosmicomic stories utopia also keeps its etymological meaning: it is a no-place, a place that is not. Being *atopic*, heterogeneous and sometimes paradoxical, it is also amorphous. Many cosmicomic utopias are indeed indefinitely-remote, both in time and space. Most of them are reported as memories of the same narrator, Qfwfq, from his experience in the most distant corners of the universe.

In the section 'Priscilla', we are confronted with the problem of discriminating in from out, I from non-I, and even life from inanimate matter. All of these aspects are relevant to utopia in as far as they contribute to its definition of relations in scientific, conceptual but also ethical terms. In the second story of the section, 'Meiosi', Qfwfq concludes after he has experienced the process of

¹⁸³Ibid.

meiosis:

Tutto quel che possiamo dire è che in certi punti e momenti quell'intervallo di vuoto che è la nostra presenza individuale viene sfiorata dall'onda che continua a rinnovare le combinazioni di molecole e a complicare o cancellare, e questo basta a darci la certezza che qualcuno è 'io' e qualcuno è 'Priscilla' nella distribuzione spaziale e temporale delle cellule viventi, e che qualcosa avviene e o è avvenuto o avverrà che ci coinvolge direttamente e – oserei dire – felicemente e totalmente.¹⁸⁴

The utopian dimension of this metaphorical conclusion consists of course in considering the possibility of a moment when all individuals would coexist 'felicemente e totalmente' while being completely conscious of their existence and of others. Aesthetically speaking, the utopian aspect in the work coincides with what Calvino calls *the moment of crystallisation*, the moment in which literature reveals its greatest potential, where it achieves order and harmony: 'l'opera letteraria è una di queste minime porzioni in cui l'universo si cristallizza in una forma, in cui acquista un senso, non fisso, non definitivo, non irrigidito in un'immobilità mortale, ma vivente come un organismo'.¹⁸⁵ In this case it is the organic process that is identified as ideal, both aesthetically and ontologically and Calvino expressed this idea earlier with the *Cosmicomiche*, but also with the essays written for the journal project called Ali-Babà. The organic process mainly involves self-preservation, reproduction, and potential change. This 'felicemente e totalmente' is also a poetic characteristic, dated back to the *Odyssey*, and one particular word which is repeated several times in the epic poem: τέρπειν (please). There is even more evidence that what Calvino is writing about is indeed the power of poetry. If we look further into this passage, we can see that what is responsible for that *moment of crystallisation*, is the 'onda che continua a rinnovare le combinazioni di molecole e a complicare o cancellare'. It is narrative, that combinatorial machine,¹⁸⁶ which creates the possibility of poetic delight.

2.3 The devastating contact with failed utopias

Paradoxically, the immediate consequences of utopia on the characters seem to be frustration and unhappiness. In the situations we are about to discuss, utopia does not work as a dreamed destination of infinite possibilities; it is the certitude that the characters will never get (back) there. The characters are *ipso facto* denied utopian images as they contemplate reaching them. The Edenic model has been a utopian one for a long time, and Calvino persisted in exploring it even if it was only to stress that it was pursued in vain. In 'La distanza della Luna' the Moon, a symbol of the unobtainable for centuries

¹⁸⁴RRII, p. 298.

¹⁸⁵'Cominciare e Finire' p.751

¹⁸⁶See SI, 'Cibernetica e fantasmi'.

in Western culture, is brought as close to Earth as it can get. This is the initial image created by the story. However, under those presumably ideal circumstances Qfwfq's love becomes rivalry and his attempt to create an ideal space for himself and 'la signora Vhd Vhd' results in her becoming more and more distant to the point where he cannot tell the difference between her and the Moon herself. While trying to remember an ideal past Qfwfq loses both the Edenic image, of him and his beloved inhabiting the Moon, and la 'signora Vhd Vhd'.

Childhood has also been linked to utopia in many different ways. It has been a *topos* where utopian hopes have been placed, wishing the forthcoming generations what the previous ones were unable to achieve. Childhood has been idealized in various literary contexts, and depicted as a place and time deprived of all evil intentions. Even though the twentieth century, especially with the advancement of psychology, has demystified most of this ideal childhood narrative, many of its aspects still persists. In 'Giochi senza fine', Calvino challenges the presumed innocence of children's games and states a continuity within the individual from his childhood to his adult life, excluding therefore the assumption that the early stages of one's life are characterized by innocence and purity. The very first sentence of the story marks the presence of deeply rooted conscience, from which even children are not granted exemption: 'Ero un bambino e già me n'ero accorto'.¹⁸⁷ The story also reveals that however ideal a game might appear, over time things are bound to evolve and therefore to degrade: 'Così il nostro gioco non finiva mai, e neppure ci veniva a noia, perché ogni volta che ci ritrovavamo con atomi nuovi ci pareva che anche il gioco fosse nuovo e quella fosse la nostra prima partita. Poi con l'andar del tempo, d'ài e d'ài, il gioco si fece più fiacco [...] Anche Pfwfp era cambiato'.¹⁸⁸ What made the game ideal therefore was the fact it could last forever due to its never ending mutability. It is interesting to notice that change is almost understood as a synonym for an ideal state of things. As soon as the circumstances change, the relation between the two children does as well; they are no longer companions, they are rivals. They engage in what seems to be a new game where they chase after each other, which eventually turns out to be merely a new condition: 'Di giocare a rincorrerci avevamo perso ogni gusto, e del resto non eravamo più bambini, ma ormai non ci restava altro da fare'.¹⁸⁹

'La forma dello spazio' is another story that in a way refers to the imagery of the Edenic ideal. Ironically, it starts with the image of a never ending fall and instead of having only two individuals longing for each other, we are introduced to a peculiar triangular situation.¹⁹⁰ One of the outcomes of

¹⁸⁷RRII, p. 135.

¹⁸⁸Ibid., p. 136.

¹⁸⁹Ibid., p. 141.

¹⁹⁰This triangular love affair is not uncommon in Calvino's fiction. It explores the implications of male

the story seems to be that within the frame of a quest for a partner, rivalry and desire dictate almost everything. Yet again, Qfwfq is looking for a universe where he could meet and be with his beloved, but in the end he can only point at it. He cries at her: 'Là! Guarda! Là c'è roba!'.¹⁹¹ He persists however, and describes his own condition as follows: 'In questo alternarsi di speranze e apprensioni continuavo la mia caduta, senza però smettere di scrutare nelle profondità dello spazio se mai qualcosa annunciassero un cambiamento attuale o futuro della nostra condizione.'¹⁹²

It appears in general that Calvino has a tendency to anchor the impossibility of utopia in situations where nothing seems to move. Motion in time and space are represented as necessary conditions for any utopian hope to be expressed.

2.4 The narrator of the utopia of fine dust and individual

responsibility

The most utopian aspect of the stories is introduced by the narrator. He has witnessed the world from its very beginning, and he is still around to tell. He is the embodiment of the idea of a universal consciousness, and most extraordinarily, he is a narrator of what happened prior to human consciousness. The credibility of this narrative is of course questionable. The stories of the cosmicomic cycle owe their humorous tone to the utter unlikeliness of their narrative. Also, various scientific theories and discoveries mentioned or indirectly referred to in the stories are in opposition. The scientific framework behind the narration is to be taken more like a well of inspirational images than like a network of unquestionable information.

One of the aspects that render utopia ever so distant is the multi-layered problem of language. *La parole* encloses within it the entire struggle, the injustice, the weight of tradition, the mannerisms of various discourses, and the sclerosis resulting from ready-made, de-mythologized logos.¹⁹³ It is however the weight of all these elements that ensures that language will not be an empty succession of sounds and symbols, which will prevent the possibility of meaning and communication, and through Qfwfq's narration, Calvino does not fail to report this inevitable but necessary polarity:

Quelle che potevano essere pure considerate linee rette unidimensionali erano simili in effetti a righe di scrittura corsiva tracciate su una pagina bianca da una penna che sposta parole e pezzi di frase da una riga all'altra

rivalry or instance, or the problems induced by a new element in a polarized situation.

¹⁹¹RRII, p. 185.

¹⁹²Ibid.

¹⁹³R.-L. Etienne Barnett engages a relevant problem in his essay 'Les Enjeux de la Parole', in which he discusses the challenges in finding and defending a personal voice and opinion both as an author and as a critic. 'Les Enjeux de la Parole' appears in *Neohelicon XXXV*, 2,(2008), 181-189.

con inserimenti e rimandi nella fretta di finire un'esposizione condotta attraverso approssimazioni successive e sempre insoddisfacenti [...] Mentre naturalmente le stesse righe anziché successioni di lettere e di parole possono benissimo essere srotolate nel loro filo nero e tese in linee rette continue parallele che non significano altro che se stesse nel loro continuo scorrere senza incontrarsi mai così come non ci incontriamo mai nella nostra continua caduta io, Ursula H'x, il Tenente Fenimore, tutti gli altri.¹⁹⁴

The characters do not intersect during their free fall because they lack precision and consistency – this is suggested by ‘un'esposizione condotta attraverso approssimazioni successive e sempre insoddisfacenti’, and also because their existence is completely self-absorbed – this is implied by ‘che non significano altro che se stesse’.

In order to attempt a depiction of utopia, Calvino's strategy is quite consistent: he first warns his reader about a specific danger, and then proceeds to reveal possible ways out of the trap that lays ahead. For instance, in ‘La forma dello spazio’, the narrator tries to share the experience of living in a world without referential points:

Cadere nel vuoto come cadevo io, nessuno di voi sa cosa vuol dire [...] Ripensandoci, non c'erano prove nemmeno che stessi veramente cadendo: magari ero sempre rimasto immobile nello stesso posto, o mi muovevo in senso ascendente; dato che non c'era né un sopra né un sotto queste erano solo questioni nominali e tanto valeva continuare a pensare che cadessi, come veniva naturale di pensare.¹⁹⁵

The whole credibility of the narration collapses with the last statement: ‘come veniva naturale di pensare’. The witness who can account for the history of the universe repeatedly falls into ominous logical traps, making the authority of his narration crumble to the extent that it can definitely not be taken for granted. Ironically, this states the impossibility to fully grasp circumstances that involve parameters, which are unconceivable for us. However, should we attempt to appropriate them, it seems we are bound to fall into the same traps as Qfwfq. The narrator of these stories is the embodiment of the individual trying to impose order onto chaos. In this endeavour he faces other individuals as well as the entire world, both in its physical and metaphysical dimension. In spite of the utopian world view that he is chasing only revealing itself in a fragmented form (‘partendo di lì metterò assieme pezzo a pezzo la città perfetta, fatta di frammenti mescolati col resto’¹⁹⁶) the necessity to keep looking for it is clearly stated. In order to achieve this, Qfwfq is always willing to reconsider his point of view. I would like to borrow Kathryn Hume's hypothesis that the narrator's tendency towards change can be understood as a quest for meaning.¹⁹⁷ Qfwfq's versatility is not only visible in

¹⁹⁴RRI, p. 182.

¹⁹⁵Ibid., p. 182.

¹⁹⁶*Le città invisibili*, RRII., p. 497.

¹⁹⁷‘The mediation – that which is sacred in this cosmos – is metamorphosis or change. Metamorphosis

his discourse, it is also metaphorically portrayed through his perpetual metamorphosis: depending on the story he can be literally nothing – before the Big Bang, a cell, a dinosaur, a giraffe, etc... Insisting on changing oneself serves the purpose of being able to adapt according to the challenges raised by different circumstances. It also suggests that the rigidity found in some ideologies can lead to intellectual dead-ends or oppressive behaviours. In this sense Qfwfq always seems to be anticipating change in order to avoid this dangerous kind of stasis.

The last example we would like to use in order to illustrate the way individual responsibility in relation to utopia is depicted in the *Cosmicomics* is that of ‘Gli anni-luce’. In this particular story, whose function is primarily humoristic, Qfwfq sees a message written on a board on another planet while he is observing the sky from his telescope. This message reads: ‘TI HO VISTO’ and it triggers all sorts of feelings and paranoid reactions on the part of the narrator. Most of them are translated into possible answers he could give to that message. Here are a few of them. ‘LASCIA CHE VI SPIEGHI’ is an apologetic response which implies guilt for a past action. ‘AVREI VOLUTO VEDERE VOI AL MIO POSTO’ puts the narrator in a defensive position and the author of the message in an accusing one. ‘MA HAI VISTO PROPRIO TUTTO O APPENA UN PO?’ is a slightly more careful answer, whereas with ‘VEDIAMO SE DICI LA VERITÀ: COSA FACEVO?’ , Qfwfq is on the offensive side, putting his interlocutor to the test. ‘E CON CIÒ?’ is apparently a completely disarming answer to which the other person cannot possibly reply because the discussion has been arbitrarily declared irrelevant or with no interesting consequences for Qfwfq. The point is that Qfwfq does not rush into any decision making. It is an entire process of thinking that he reports through his narrative¹⁹⁸. He assumes that out of all the individuals in the universe this message he has just read is meant for him, and he seems to suffer from delusions of persecution.¹⁹⁹ What is really at stake here, is illustrated quite well in Furio Jesi's discussion about symbols and silence: “Per quanto un λόγος oscuro sia per definizione inoscibibile, la tentazione di interpretare segni e prodigi è ben difficile da vincersi, e almeno sopravvive nell'atteggiamento di chi trova nella propria vicenda personale l'estrinsecazione della massima ‘ciò che è accaduto doveva accadere’”.²⁰⁰ It is precisely like this that the story of Qfwfq evolves in ‘Gli anni-luce’; the sign on the board becomes an irresistible temptation, whose (forced) interpretation is eventually accepted quite naturally.

The expression of hope for a utopia in this story comes from the narrator's acceptance of the largely replaces death in this mythology, and offers us one way of transcending it.’ (Hume, p.72.)

¹⁹⁸We can almost see here the seeds of what is to become the extremely persistent intellectual efforts of Mr Palomar.

¹⁹⁹Delusions of persecution were one of the most common problems during the war, and within the political left Calvino knew so well.

²⁰⁰Jesi, p. 31.

judgment of other individuals for his actions, not only as a necessary evil, but mostly as a proof that he exists and that his actions, be they made out of choice or necessity, are important in some way. Qfwfq is interacting with a message which is several light-years away from where he is. Whereas his reaction to the sight of the board is immediate, what the board refers to and the moment he reacts are light-years away from each other. There are several intriguing elements that are brought together by the particularity of this situation: the image of the individual judged by society, the hierarchy of values on which justice is based, the disguised guilt and remorse embedded in human existence, the anonymous, almost god-like quality of the person who has written the message on the board, the implications of an ever so distant judicial process, and the exercise of intimidation. The ethical aspects of an individual being judged by others are redefined constantly within the story.

There is another story, 'Sporgendosi dalla costa scoscesa', taken from *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, where the narrator also interprets certain images as universal messages intended for him. The story is written in the form of a diary that covers an entire week, with one additional introducing passage that consolidates the entries coming afterwards. It may only depend on faith, whether or not we believe that the world actually sends messages to individuals that they are left to interpret; however we should notice certain interesting similarities and differences between the narrator of 'Gli anni-luce' and the one of 'Sporgendosi dalla costa scoscesa'. To some extent both narrators resemble each other inasmuch as they rely on signs to interpret the world, to give their life a meaning.

Mi sto convincendo che il mondo vuole dirmi qualcosa, mandarmi avvisi, segnali.[...] Ci sono giorni in cui ogni cosa che vedo mi sembra carica di significati: messaggi che mi sarebbe difficile comunicare ad altri, definire, tradurre in parole, ma che appunto perciò mi si presentano come decisivi. Sono annunci o presagi che riguardano me e il mondo insieme: e di me non gli avvenimenti esteriori dell'esistenza ma ciò che accade dentro, nel fondo; e del mondo non qualche fatto particolare ma il modo d'essere generale di tutto, Comanderete dunque la mia difficoltà a parlarne, se non per accenni.²⁰¹

In 'Gli anni-luce' the narrator has a completely paranoid reaction to the sign on the cardboard that he sees, which produces an unmistakable comic effect. The story is also set in an environment completely detached from history and any recognisable reality. Calvino has in fact taken the problem of how a person is supposed to assimilate and interpret the events in his life, and put it completely out of context. In the other story, this problem is more anchored to the world. Furthermore there are images that give the issue a whole different weight; such as the prison and the hand he sees hanging

²⁰¹RRII, p. 662-663.

out from the bars, the cemetery, or the inn and its drunken customers. When we read the second story, we realise that the narrator has a tendency to avoid action and instead he tries to enact in his mind a scene that could have been. The narrator has a clear tendency towards abstraction, and as a consequence he tends to project it on other people. One example can be taken from his interpretation of Miss Zwida's drawings of shells -- the lady he has been meaning to approach:

A ciò si aggiunga il fatto che l'applicazione con cui questa ragazza si dedica a disegnare conchiglie indica in lei una ricerca della perfezione come forma che il mondo può e quindi deve raggiungere; io al contrario sono da tempo convinto che la perfezione non si produce che accessoriamente e per caso; quindi non merita interesse alcuno, la natura vera delle cose rivelandosi solo nello sfacelo.²⁰²

It is only after he has been assigned the task to take note of some measurements, by the meteorologist Kauderer, that he finally decides to speak to Miss Zwida and also interprets her drawings in a different way, that also involves an emotional response to them: 'Il discorso che avevo in mente, sulla forma delle conchiglie come armonia ingannevole, involucro che nasconde la vera sostanza della natura, non cadeva più a proposito. Tanto la vista del riccio quanto il disegno trasmettevano sensazioni sgradevoli e crudeli, come un viscere esposto agli sguardi'.²⁰³

The second task he is assigned to do, by Miss Zwida is to buy an anchor from a fisherman. This second task also leads him to confront the world outside and challenges his capacity to interpret it. But this narrator is only interested in the inanimate signs: he sees the hand of the prisoner hanging out of the prison and chooses to see it as coming straight out of the rock. Kauderer tells him he will have to go away for a couple of days, and, shortly after that, two suspicious men come asking about him, but he ignores that coincidence. The fisherman tells him he does not want to sell him an anchor out of fear of being of helping a prisoner to escape. The narrator keeps looking for signs that will eventually point at the meaning of the world, while the events in his life lead him straight into a trap, where he ends up helping a prisoner escape.

The narrator of 'Gli anni-luce' reads a sign that is probably not even meant from him and goes into a delirious state when he tries to figure out what his response could be, while the one of 'Sporgendosi dalla costa scoscesa' is oblivious to the signs passing before his eyes that tell him clearly he is about to be caught in a trap because he is too busy looking at peripheral meanings that might help him understand the world. Those two narrators seem to be at the opposite side of the same problem. There is however something that is common to both of them and that is the feeling of guilt.

²⁰²RRII, p. 665.

²⁰³Ibid., p.667

In ‘Gli anni-luce’ it is obviously guilt that drives the narrator into his paranoia, while in the second story the narrator admits

il fatto che qualcuno dimostri ancora tanto scrupolo e metódica attenzione, anche se so bene che tutto è inutile, ha su di me un effetto tranquillizzante, forse perché viene a compensare il mio modo di vivere impreciso, che – malgrado le conclusioni cui sono giunto, - continuo a sentire come una colpa²⁰⁴

Finally, we can compare those stories with ‘Attesa della morte in un albergo’. This was one of Calvino's early stories, which appeared in *Ultimo viene il corvo*.²⁰⁵ Like in ‘Sporgendosi da una costa scoscesa’, we find the image of the prisoners' hands; only this time the image is not taken out of context, the prisoners are really trying to communicate with the world outside, they are trying to reach out to their families: ‘e le mani delle donne, a basso, e le mani degli uomini lassù, sembrava volessero raggiungersi attraverso quei metri d'aria vuota’.²⁰⁶ The mention of Goebbels anchors the story in a specific historical reality. Diego and Michele are waiting for the decisive call, which will determine whether the Nazis will let them go or whether they will be executed. Anxiety, despair, and fear are omnipresent in the story: they do not only concern the prisoners, but also the wives who are waiting outside to get their husbands back, but also Pelle-di-biscia, the collaborator who has a final say on who lives and who dies: ‘Erano momenti di trionfo inebriante per lui, ma sempre popolato d'angoscia [...] - Oggi mi fate la corte, domani mi sparate nella schiena. [...] Pelle-di-biscia ora sembrava perduto sulla via del sangue, ora in preda ai rimorsi’.²⁰⁷ Unlike most of Calvino's stories, this one does not really have an evolution, a progress, or even the built-up of case. It is almost merely the descriptive parenthesis of a desperate situation: anxiety does not gradually gain the characters while they are facing death; it is rather a state they are already in. There are, very early on in the story, two sentences that might explain the characteristic aspect of this story: Diego's point of view guides the reader through the story, and we are led to think from the very beginning that unlike some of his co-prisoners he has almost completely given up on any hope: ‘Egli era stanco di quell'ininterrotto ondeggiare di previsioni, di supposizioni, di notizie buone e cattive che l'andirivieni del giardino dell'albergo spingeva fin lassù [...] Ma il tempo era una ragnatela di nervi tesi, un *puzzle* che si può comporre in mille figure, tutte senza senso’.²⁰⁸ These are also two of the very few abstract images of

²⁰⁴Ibid., p. 666.

²⁰⁵ Along with ‘Angoscia in caserma’ and ‘La stessa cosa del sangue’ it was taken out of the 1969 edition, only to be re-included in 1976. What these stories have in common, was that they were autobiographical, and Calvino always felt at great unease with autobiographical pieces. The parallel has been pointed out by Martin McLaughlin in ‘The Apprentice Artisan’, *Italo Calvino*, pp. 3-4.

²⁰⁶RRI., p. 228.

²⁰⁷Ibid., p. 231.

²⁰⁸Ibid., p. 228-229.

the story and it is interesting they should evoke space and time. Diego's surrender in fact affects his abstract conception of time and space, imposing on them the lack, or better the loss of meaning he experiences in his own life.

'Gli anni-luce' and 'Sporgendosi dalla costa scoscesa' are much more solidly constructed, and consequently, they trigger challenging questions, such as the problem of social justice, or the understanding of the world through our senses. On the other hand, 'Attesa della morte in un albergo' is more faithful to the depiction of anxiety, anchoring the narrative onto recognisable historical and everyday elements; but the story itself does not share the vibrant question that arise from the stories we have discussed previously.

We have not insisted so far on the implications of the cosmicomic stories in a demythologized age, but the mythical perspective of Qfwfq and his narration does promote intentional and yet cautious acceptance of uncertainty. Through his stories Calvino seems to express the need to find a middle-ground between dangerous over-confidence in one's intellectual and practical capacities and the ethical implications of utterly refusing to put an effort into addressing problems of individual and general concern of all nature. We believe that Calvino's choice to discuss the need for perpetual reconsideration of where one stands through human relations such as camaraderie, rivalry or love, in order to avert the impossibility of utopia, is not a mere aesthetic or functional choice, but it states that individual responsibility has to be situated within that specific frame in order to be effective and significant.

2.5 'Una poetica del fare, anzi del farsi'²⁰⁹: Calvino ἔν τῷ γίγνεσθαι

We will argue that Calvino understands *how* as an inherent quality of things, in other words process is considered as an ontological quality of things. This is also the claim of Evolutionary biology, whose processes are put at work in the stories of the section called 'Priscilla'. His extensive literary experimentation can only support these assumptions. With the cosmicomic stories he tries to prove that mythical images can spring from the most apparently objective discourses: 'Insomma, il mio procedimento vuole unificare la generazione spontanea delle immagini e l'intenzionalità del pensiero discorsivo'.²¹⁰ As for the tension he identifies in his work, he does not really resolve it, but in a rather typically subversive way he comes to terms with it:

il racconto è per me unificazione d'una logica spontanea delle immagini e di un disegno condotto secondo un'intenzione razionale. Ma nello stesso

²⁰⁹'Lo sguardo dell'archeologo', SI, p. 327.

²¹⁰'Visibilità', SI, p. 705.

tempo ho cercato nella immaginazione un mezzo per raggiungere una conoscenza extraindividuale, extrasoggettiva; dunque sarebbe giusto che mi dichiarassi più vicino alla seconda posizione, quella dell'identificazione con l'anima del mondo.²¹¹

Interestingly, we have suggested before, that Calvino links stasis with the impossibility of utopia. One of the scientific theories that have inspired the cosmicomic stories is the biological theory of evolution. The three stories of the section 'Priscilla' deal with the novelties and the implications introduced by the advancement of biology. The section tells the story of living in three different stories entitled 'Mitosi', 'Meiosi' and 'Morte'; they are the stories of life and consciousness in the making. Calvino uses those images both because they define a living organism, and also because of their potential to generate literary images and engage with aesthetic, ethical and metaphysical questions.

In 'Mitosi', Calvino writes the story of the introduction of sexuality into the living world, basing it on an Italian expression: 'innamorato da morire'. George Bataille's quotation, which Calvino uses as an epigraph at the beginning of the section, associates the notion of eroticism with the fact that

nella riproduzione asessuata [...] Il primo è scomparso. Possiamo dire che è morto, dato che non sopravvive in nessuno dei due esseri che ha prodotto. [...] Il primo muore, ma nella sua morte si manifesta un istante di continuità.²¹²

The story therefore borrows the ancient idea that life springs from "Ἐρως (as a creative deity), while the cell perpetuates life by dividing itself and therefore by dying as a singular entity. What gives 'Mitosi' a characteristic quality is that these ideas happen to coincide conveniently with the expression 'innamorato da morire', all the more emphasised when it is associated with Bataille's idea.

The first story of the section 'Priscilla' deals with the specific biological process during which 'a eukaryotic cell separates the chromosomes in its cell nucleus into two identical sets in two daughter nuclei'.²¹³ Qfwfq is a monocellular organism who tells the story of life, a story of survival that is still repeated today. It is the story told by the genetic material, whose characteristics are shared by all living beings. Qfwfq explains that this story is repeated, multiplied, diversified and full of potential. Those are the elements of evolution: 'una crescita esponenziale di storie che è sempre come fosse la stessa storia, ma io di questo non è che sia sicuro'.²¹⁴ Calvino's literary adaptation of the story told by mitosis is that of an 'innamoramento da morire'. Calvino's choice to tell the story of evolution, a relatively new discourse, by reusing one of the oldest mythical images, is partly to confirm or at least

²¹¹ Ibid., p. 706. This process is in fact the process of individuation as Jung understands it, which occurs during the effort to establish a balanced and salutary dialogue between the conscious and the unconscious.

²¹² RRII, p. 271.

²¹³ Rubenstein, Irwin, and Susan M. Wick. 'Cell.' *World Book Online Reference Center*. 2008.

²¹⁴ RRII, p. 276.

to make an effort to support the theory of evolution. Very soon in the story, Qfwfq discusses the story of his 'amore da morire' within the context of time and space. We are taken through the journey of how he tries to understand his own being in relation to those notions. He also discusses how the perception of being evolves through the different stages of an individual's life. Qfwfq's early stages of life as the first living organism are assimilated with childhood. In fact, though the character's identity is that of a unicellular organism with no conscience, the narration is completely anthropomorphic. Childhood is described as the coming into consciousness of 'Being-in-Time' and being content of grasping one's own existence. What follows naturally is the stage of adolescence and youth, characterized by waiting, hope and despair, pain and Angst. Once he has tried to understand the experience of being through the prism of time, which also includes the consciousness of being and the unconscious fear it might escape us, he starts thinking of the problem of understanding dimensions and therefore placing being within a spatial referential system: 'lo spazio che sebbene io non avessi cognizione si capiva che continuava da tutte le parti'.²¹⁵ The story helps us construct a cognitive link and correlation between time and space. Just as we have a three-dimensional perception of space, we also have one of time (where the axes would be present, past, and future). In narrative terms what happens is that these notions become interchangeable and they condition one another:

voglio parlare soprattutto della soddisfazione e smania di far qualcosa con lo spazio, di avere il tempo per trarre un godimento dallo spazio, di avere spazio per far passare qualcosa nel passare del tempo.

Fin qui ho tenuto separati tempo e spazio per farmi capire meglio da voi, o meglio per capire meglio io quello che devo farvi capire [...] e quindi il vuoto che era insomma il mondo e il futuro ma io ancora non lo sapevo, vuoto perché la percezione mi era ancora negata e come immaginazione ero ancora più indietro e come categorie mentali ero un disastro [...].²¹⁶

This sentence truly links time and space with our cognitive processes, our understanding of the world. It suggests that separating space and time is purely arbitrary and yet necessary in order to categorize things in the world, making it thus easier to express, share and discuss our understanding of it. Within the same sentence we find the limits of our cognition, which is associated with the limited amount of senses that we have and their capacity. This is manifested in the text by the association of terms such as 'vuoto', 'mondo', and 'futuro'.²¹⁷ Qfwfq also gives a list of our main mental activities in an order of increasing complexity, which of course is also the chronological order in which they

²¹⁵RRII, p. 271.

²¹⁶Ibid., p. 277.

²¹⁷Ibid.

happen: 'percezione', 'immaginazione', and 'categorie mentali'.²¹⁸ The collapsing of time into space takes its ultimate literary form in the expression 'rotolandomi nel tempo e nello spazio innamorato da morire'.²¹⁹

Whereas at the beginning it appears that the story will not discuss the process of mitosis itself, Qfwfq resumes talking about nuclei, chromosomes and expression of genes. One of the most significant aspects of the character's thinking deals with one of the biggest ethical problems that rose from the genetic breakthroughs of biology: the debate between genetics and social determinism. Qfwfq says 'adesso potrei tentare un'affermazione un po' azzardata, e dire che io ero nient'altro che la somma di quei filamenti'.²²⁰ Such a statement is risky because it falls into the trap of merely reducing existence to a collection of data in a completely and simply decodable process. This is also why the statement is nuanced very quickly: 'cioè quello che di me era possibile tradurre in bastoncini, per poi, eventualmente ritradurlo in me'.²²¹ In other words there is unquestionably a relation between genetic material and being, but it is certainly not exclusive and perfectly transposable. Once this has been settled as well, we move to the section where Qfwfq actually tries to express and explain his 'innamoramento da morire'. This brings us straight to an attempt to define desire and clear it from any erroneous ideas that might have been attached to it: 'Cioè quella tensione verso il fuori l'altrove, l'altrimenti, che e' poi quel che si dice uno stato di desiderio'.²²² The common mistake that is made, and which should be avoided, is to confuse desire for lack of fulfillment: 'che su di uno stato di mancanza puro e semplice non può nascere nulla, nulla di buono e nulla di cattivo, soltanto altre mancanze fino alla mancanza della vita, condizione notoriamente né buona né cattiva'.²²³ He continues: 'non è vero che uno stato di desiderio presupponga necessariamente qualcosa di desiderato; il qualcosa desiderato comincia a esserci solo una volta che c'è lo stato di desiderio'.²²⁴ Here, Calvino confirms the Platonic idea of *The Banquet* whereby desire happens without the existence of an object of desire, but also contributes the additional idea that the object of desire is an invention which occurs only after the individual has reached a state of desire. The dimension given to desire is quite compatible with Heidegger's definition of Building, which among other things aims at the preservation of what already is in the world. Ultimately it is desire that is recognised to be the source of expression: 'il mio stato di desiderio [...] mi muoveva a dire [...] a dire me stesso, cioè a

²¹⁸Ibid.

²¹⁹Ibid., p. 278.

²²⁰Ibid., p. 279.

²²¹Ibid., p. 280.

²²²Ibid., p. 280.

²²³Ibid.

²²⁴Ibid., p. 280.

esprimermi'.²²⁵ The expression of genetic material is taken to the status of a metaphor, where desire is conceived as the fundamental driving force:

per dire ci vuole un linguaggio, e scusate se è poco. Io come linguaggio avevo tutti quei bruscolini o stecchini per ripetere me stesso, si capisce per ripetere me stesso in quanto linguaggio, che come si vedrà è il primo passo per ripetere me stesso in quanto tale, che poi come si vedrà non è affatto ripetere.²²⁶

Language under the light of evolution is recognized as an original and creative process, which bears two distinctive qualities, diversity and unity. However contradictory those elements might appear, they are always associated and they are responsible for any dynamics created. Immediately after this, memory and its preservation become a major concern, and we are reassured that 'fin qui ricordo benissimo, perché i ricordi del nucleo, coscienza o non coscienza che sia, conservano una maggiore evidenza'.²²⁷ Literally, there is in every individual a genetic memory of life from its origin. Metaphorically, the nucleus, what is essentially common to all individuals, binds them together through the process of memory.

We are now left with the condition of being in love *per se*. The first remarkable consequence seems to be a deep confusion of being and dwelling themselves: 'cioè avevo il senso di essere abitato, no: di abitararmi, no: di abitare un me abitato da altri, no: avevo il senso che un altro fosse abitato da altri'.²²⁸ Let us paraphrase this: when in love, individual identity is shaken by the impression of an intrusion, of a stranger dwelling within it, while the experience of being is fragmented to the point where the individual does not feel like home any more; he also fails to recognise himself as such and reaches the point where it thinks of his former state as another. We are also told that the state of being in love is 'una golosa impazienza' and 'una gelosa disperazione'; it is the experience of utmost confusion and pain, and at the same time of almost mystical communion with the absolute totality of the world. This 'innamoramento da morire' is the transcendental experience of the unveiling of truth, the manifestation of the essence of the divine:

e in quell'istante ebbi per la prima volta la coscienza della pluralità per la prima e ultima volta perché ormai era tardi, sentii la pluralità ma come immagine e destino della pluralità del mondo [...] i messaggi ripetuti attraverso trilioni e trilioni d'innamoramenti mortali, vidi il mio mortale innamoramento tornare alla ricerca della saldatura originaria o finale.²²⁹

Another important aspect of the story can be related to Jung's idea of synchronicity and the

²²⁵Ibid., pp. 281-282

²²⁶Ibid., p. 282.

²²⁷Ibid.

²²⁸Ibid., p. 283.

²²⁹Ibid., p. 287.

desire for meaning. Qfwfq explains how he proceeded in order to express himself:

Stavo rendendo conto di quanto succedeva a me attraverso quanto succedeva al nucleo e in particolare ai cromosomi del nucleo, la coscienza che attraverso di essi si determinava in me d'un volto oltre di me e oltre di essi, la spasmodica coscienza che attraverso di essi mi obbligava a qualcosa, uno stato di desiderio che, per poco che ci si possa muovere, diventa subito un moto di desiderio.²³⁰

At this stage it seems that Qfwfq's thoughts completely coincide with the events of the nucleus, this could be interpreted as an occurrence of synchronicity. We have also established that the account of that experience is essentially a myth (see also 1.1.1 above). The narrator also insists that this synchronicity is intrinsically linked to his desire, partly his desire to express himself: 'Parlando del nucleo viene naturale farne una cosa sola con la coscienza, il che è solo una semplificazione un po' grossolana'.²³¹ As soon as the synchronicity between the nucleus and Qfwfq's conscience has been established, the narrator takes a step back to underline that the metaphor of language creates an inherent tension with the conscience making it difficult, or rather impossible to convey it faithfully. A trauma appears to be born as soon as this tension becomes real. As soon as the synchronicity seems to have been lost irretrievably, the tension created inside Qfwfq's conscience once again finds its counterpart in his desire, which in its own turn finds its repercussion in the world: 'm'era preso un bisogno di stirarmi quant'ero largo, fino a una specie d'irrigidimento spasmodico dei nervi che non avevo: e così il citoplasma era andato affusolandosi come se le sue due estremità volessero scappare una dall'altra'.²³² In the separation of the nucleus there is of course the tragedy of separation, of the experience of a crisis of conscience. There is however something else happening simultaneously with it: in the same moment that the link between the conscience and the world seems to have been broken forever, it is immediately translated in the material separation of the cell. However regrettable the separation may be, the link still remains.

The plurality inside the individual who has opened himself to the world, reflects the plurality of the world itself. This is probably the essential image which emerges from the story. Mitosis is an episode in the cell cycle. Calvino presents story-telling as a process that perennially tends towards transcendence. Although the story of manifestation cannot be told, it systematically escapes the realm of language because it belongs exclusively to the realm of experience; what literature can try to do is either refer to the experience or try to trigger it through reading. In 'Mitosi' as soon as revelation is suspected, and we realise its fleetingness: we are redirected to another trigger, Priscilla, and therefore

²³⁰Ibid., p. 281.

²³¹RRII, p. 282.

²³²RRII, p. 283.

another story. This last element is palpable, almost absurdly mundane compared to the atmosphere of the rest of the story, but also familiar in a very relieving way with the arrival of Priscilla: ‘incontro dal vuoto dell'altrove altravolta altrimenti con cognome indirizzo soprabito rosso stivaletti neri frangetta lentiggini: Priscilla Langwood, chez Madame Lebras, cent-quatre-vingt-treize Rue Vaugirard, Paris quinzième ’.²³³

‘Meiosi’ tells the story of the dangers entangled in the rigorous and perfectly symmetrical model of cell-doubling. Its perfection is interpreted as rigidity and condemnation to unlimited repetition; transforming thus transcriptional errors and the process of crossing-over²³⁴, into sparks of hope for change, and therefore diversity and evolution. Meiosis is a process of cellular reductional division, which results in the production gametes, essential for sexual reproduction. This process, unlike mitosis, produces daughter cells containing half of the chromosomes in the mother cell.

The first sentence of the story sets it straight into a mythological discourse of origins.

Raccontare le cose come stanno vuol dire raccontarle da principio, e anche se si attacca la storia in un punto in cui i personaggi sono organismi pluricellulari, per esempio la storia dei miei rapporti con Priscilla, bisogna cominciare definendo bene cosa intendo quando dico io, e cosa intendo quando dico: Priscilla, per poi passare a stabilire quali sono questi rapporti.²³⁵

Within the story, beginning with the problem of defining the relation between the proteins of two different individuals, we witness how one image, and the mental processes it influences (perception, imagination, conceptualisation) trigger another. Of the two characters of the story, Qfwfq and Priscilla, we know nothing but the fact that they are two living organisms with different genetic material. ‘Dunque raccontare la storia di me e di Priscilla vuol dire per prima cosa definire i rapporti che si stabiliscono tra le proteine mie e le proteine di Priscilla sia prese separatamente sia nel loro insieme [...]’.²³⁶ In other words defining the relation between two individual means establishing what constitutes their unique characteristics and what is common to both of them: ‘io e Priscilla abbiamo elementi uguali identici – comuni a noi due, o all'ambiente, a alle specie -, ed elementi che stabiliscono una differenza’.²³⁷ Common elements allow the individual to identify or place himself (herself) in different contexts: facing another individual, facing the environment, their species and all

²³³Ibid., p. 288.

²³⁴‘A phenomenon, also known as recombination, that sometimes occurs during the formation of sperm and egg cells (meiosis); a pair of chromosomes (one from the mother and the other from the father) break and trade segments with one another’, *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*, 87.1, (January 1995), p. 26.

²³⁵RRII, p. 289.

²³⁶Ibid.

²³⁷Ibid., p. 291.

other species. Of course, even before starting to do so, Qfwfq stumbles on the problem of the continuity and the discontinuity of individual identity. He faces a major contradiction, which consists in the fact that the individual has an unalterable core while it is also changing constantly: ‘di momento in momento io non sono più lo stesso io e Priscilla non è più la stessa Priscilla’. However as soon as we have been introduced to this problem we are warned against it: ‘Questo è il tipo di ragionamento che porta completamente fuori strada [...] si può benissimo sostenere che io continuo a essere io e Priscilla Priscilla’. He eventually comes to this conclusion after having taken into account that identity is preserved because all the cells ‘continuano a seguire il programma stabilito da quelle che c'erano prima’.²³⁸ ‘Tutto quel che il patrimonio genetico ha da fare e' trasmettere quel che gli e' stato trasmesso da trasmettere, infischandosi di come venga ricevuto’.²³⁹ If we listen to this sentence with Dobzhansky as an echo in the back saying ‘natural selection is a blind and creative process’, we understand the importance that both give to making absolutely clear that in Nature's processes, there is no such thing as intention or aim. This clarification, and the urgent need to express it, is also probably an indirect attack (for Calvino, but a direct one for Dobzhansky) to any form of dogmatic religion, which dictates God's rule in terms of intention and judgement. So what are the rules, if there are any that those processes follow? They are named later on in the story: ‘il caso, il rischio, l'improbabile’.²⁴⁰

Being conscious of his ancestry and of the process that led to his coming to life, Qfwfq wonders in fact how much of himself is unique, if what he is derives entirely from what his progeny has passed on to him. There is nothing new in him, in terms of genetic material per se, and yet he considered to be, and sees himself as a new individual. He is in fact so conscious of his ancestry that he experiences the conditioning of the Self by the very heavy load of the past:

Quindi si può dire che tutto il possibile è come se mi fosse successo [...] fuori di me non ho né avrò rapporti con niente e con nessuno [...] cioè io continuo a portarmi dietro i genitori in tutte le mie cellule, e non potrò mai liberarmi di questo fardello[...] [in] un'interminabile catena d'obbedienza.²⁴¹

Never does Qfwfq say that his past really prevents him from being, but he does insist thoroughly on how much it weighs on his conscience.

So if every individual contains in himself the past, what is then sexual reproduction, what is the joining of two individuals? Qfwfq interprets it as follows: ‘Insomma, nessuno s'è perso nell'altro, nessuno ha dato o si è dato; le cellule diventate una si trovano gli impacchettate insieme ma tali e

²³⁸Ibid., p. 290.

²³⁹Ibid., p. 291.

²⁴⁰Ibid., p. 297.

²⁴¹Ibid., pp. 292-293.

quali a prima: la prima cosa che sentono è un po' una delusione'.²⁴² Sexual reproduction does not result from the union of two genetic materials but from their superposition. This is a delusion in the sense that expectations might have been pointing towards a more homogeneous way of reproduction, whereas here things seem to still be kept quite separate from each other. This story, as the previous one, reflects on the implication of a particular biological process both on an individual level and a global one. Globally speaking, there is another common misconception that Calvino points to, and that is interpreting evolution as progress; Qfwfq wonders if he is the result of a selective process that only keeps the best characteristics 'o se invece la mia vera essenza non è piuttosto quella che discende dalla successione di caratteri sconfitti'.²⁴³ However complex the processes of evolution and sexual reproduction might be, Qfwfq chooses to hold on to the fact that

la nostra presenza individuale viene sfiorata dall'onda che continua a rinnovare le combinazioni di molecole e a complicarle o cancellarle, e questo basta a darci la certezza che qualcuno è 'io' e qualcuno è 'Priscilla' nella distribuzione spaziale e temporale delle cellule viventi, e che qualcosa avviene e o è avvenuto o avverrà che ci coinvolge direttamente e – oserei dire – felicemente e totalmente.²⁴⁴

'Felicemente e totalmente' is essentially the experience of epiphany and revelation; and it consists in the establishing of the certitude that the Self exists and the experience of communion between individuals is possible.

In the last section of 'Priscilla', Qfwfq is confronted with the problem of reconciling the discontinuity of individual identity and the continuity found in a world in evolution. The reader is exposed to the frightening aspect of crystalline rigor and the threat of a perennial pattern, which would exclude the possibility of being as we understand it. Calvino chooses to interpret death in a slightly ironic manner, ever since the first sentence of the story. 'Il rischio che abbiamo corso è stato vivere: vivere per sempre'.²⁴⁵ Death is therefore not seen as the end, or the finality of life; on the contrary, it is presented as the solution to the problem of immortality. In this context immortality is the rigid repetitive pattern, which excludes diversity: 'ogni forma resta esclusa per sempre; anche la nostra'.²⁴⁶ The reason why this can become a menace is because order has a contagious quality by nature, in other words, order breeds order, as a chain will always repeat the same sequence of elements. The preservation of order is possible through the perpetuation of specific geometrical patterns. Qfwfq interprets the potential diversity inscribed in the genetic material of every individual

²⁴²Ibid., p. 294.

²⁴³Ibid., p. 295.

²⁴⁴Ibid., p. 298.

²⁴⁵Ibid., p. 299.

²⁴⁶Ibid., p. 300.

as an arena where two forces compete for their own interests: ‘Ormai la lotta è ingaggiata tra coloro che ci sono e vorrebbero essere eterni e noi che ci siamo e vorremmo esserci, non fosse che per poco’.²⁴⁷ The image of the unborn asking to be brought into life is not new to mythical and mystical discourse, however the fact that every potential form of life is already inscribed in the genetic material gives it a real dimension. The image created by Qfwfq, is in fact the image imposed by a language that cannot be used to look at the world without projecting intentionality onto it.

The problem that Qfwfq faces in reconciling continuity and discontinuity is found at all levels of life. The introduction of sexual reproduction in the story of life on the planet is yet another one. ‘Nell’invisibile distesa delle cellule-programma dove tutte le combinazioni si formano o si disfano all’interno della specie, scorre ancora la continuità originaria; ma tra una combinazione e l’altra l’intervallo è occupato da individui mortali e sessuati e differenti’.²⁴⁸ Continuity therefore lies not in the individual but in the species itself. The establishment of sexuality is presented as irreversible and was it to be reversed it would be uncalled for: ‘gli eterni sono morti, nessuno pare disposto a rinunciare al sesso, sia pure alla poca parte di sesso che gli tocca, per riavere una vita che ripete interminabilmente se stessa’.²⁴⁹ What in fact they are resenting to give up is their own individuality in the way life has evolved so far. In contrast to that, what still remains unchanged and keeps repeating itself is what threatens other forms of life but is now subjugated to them: ‘il mondo degli eterni è inglobato nel mondo dei perituri, e la loro immunità dalla morte serve a garantirci la nostra condizione mortale’.²⁵⁰ The immortals are viruses for instance. It is relevant to point out Dobzhansky’s mentioning of the debate between biologists on whether a virus is to be considered a form of life or not: ‘It is a matter of opinion, or of definition, whether viruses are considered living organisms or peculiar chemical substances. The fact that such differences of opinion can exist is in itself highly significant. It means that the borderline between living and inanimate matter is obliterated’.²⁵¹ Once this continuity and discontinuity of life has been established, what remains, is the wondering, and the choice of the attitude to have towards it. That which is presented by Qfwfq is hope for the story to keep being told even when we are long bygone:

Il circuito dell’informazione vitale che corre dagli acidi nucleici alla scrittura si prolunga nei nastri perforati degli automi figli di altri automi: generazioni di macchine forse migliori di noi continueranno a vivere e parlare vite e parole che sono state anche nostre; e tradotte in istruzioni

²⁴⁷Ibid., p. 301.

²⁴⁸Ibid.

²⁴⁹Ibid., p. 302

²⁵⁰Ibid.

²⁵¹Dobzhansky, ‘Nothing in Biology Makes Sense Except in the Light of Evolution’, p. 126.

elettroniche la parola io e la parola Priscilla s'incontreranno ancora.²⁵²

Qfwfq sees machines taking after us in the stream of evolution, substituting the language of nucleic acids and our own with electronic signals. The hope that he hangs on too, even humans as we know them are to disappear, is that the individual will always be identified as such, and it will always be in and create relationships with others. In other words Qfwfq wishes that the world will be a place where dynamics between individuals are still and always will be possible, and most importantly, through language.

This language is the same as the one discussed in 'Cibernetica e Fantasmî'; a language that is understood as a combinatory system influenced by Calvino's reading in information theory and cybernetics.

2.6 Retrospection, knowledge and personal myth

Mûthos et lôgos sont des mots grecs. On en revient au grec parce qu'on en revient toujours à ce qui nous précède et que l'on a perdu. On dirait que le savoir est toujours le souvenir du savoir. L'apprentissage se fait au passé. L'homme n'apprend rien (il répète), mais comme il a conscience de son ignorance (c'est sa peur). Il s'ingénie à comprendre le monde, c'est-à-dire le chaos. Comme le chaos est par définition chaotique, l'homme cherche à s'en saisir, et il invente la mémoire, pour se rappeler de ce qu'il fut et transmettre ce qu'il a été: la flèche de l'arc comme le langage, comme la mémoire et le temps, sont des *pellicules* qui empêchent l'homme d'être touché par le monde.²⁵³

Mûthos and *lôgos* are Greek words. We go back to Greek because we always go back to what came before us and which we have lost. It seems that knowledge is always the memory of knowledge. Learning happens in the past. Man never learns (he repeats), but since he is conscious of his ignorance (it is his fear). He strives to understand the world, in other words chaos. Since chaos is chaotic by definition, Man tries to grasp it, he invents memory, to remember what he was and to pass on what he has been: the bow's arrows, language, memory and time, are the coats which prevent man from being touched by the world.

I would like to remain on the idea that it is only possible to retrieve knowledge from something that has already been lost. Knowledge would thus be deeply embedded in the process of memory and therefore exclusively retrospective. The quality of knowledge can be evaluated on different levels: the capacity to recollect elements from the past, to understand their original context and to be able to estimate their value in the present. In the cosmicomic stories the process of memory and the question of the validity of knowledge is explored quite extensively. The story which seems to directly engage

²⁵²Ibid., p. 303.

²⁵³Benoit Vincent, 'Épistémologie et mythe', *Questions de Mythocritique* (Paris: Éditions Imago, 2005), p. 123-124.

with the problem is 'La Memoria del Mondo'. The unnamed narrator addresses a character named Müller, who remains silent all the way through the story. Both are supposed to be working for an enterprise that is responsible for the compilation of a catalogue of all the people and events that have been and continue to be, in order to manufacture and preserve a comprehensive, objective and non-exclusive memory of the world in the face of an utter eradication of humanity. This is how the project is initially presented to the reader; however, the narration gradually dismantles the possibility of such a project revealing another truth behind it. To begin with, the narrator seems to be dealing with this apocalyptic truth with the most surprising rationality and calm. He explains to Müller that he has summoned him in order to explain to him his responsibilities as the supervisor of this project, since he has to retire for personal reasons. The narrator claims that the disappearance of his wife has affected him so deeply that he has become unable to carry on this ambitious but none the less crucial task. This is in fact the first inconsistency that we encounter in the narration: it is almost impossible to conceive that a man is capable of looking at the end of the world with such peace of mind, while he cannot come to terms with his wife's loss. This titanic project is carried out by two main branches. The first one concentrates exclusively on the collection of all the data in the world, while the other one works on the means to communicate all the information to other planets in order to ensure that the memory of the world will not be lost. What are the criteria on which the choice of information is based? This is a question that comes naturally, and it translates into a question of authority. The narrator explains that 'Il risultato finale del nostro lavoro sarà un modello in cui tutto conta come informazione, anche ciò che non c'è. Solo allora si potrà sapere, di tutto ciò che è stato, cos'è che contava davvero, ossia cos'è che c'è stato veramente, perché il risultato finale della nostra documentazione sarà insieme ciò che c'è, è stato e sarà, e tutto il resto niente'.²⁵⁴ Instead of achieving a disambiguation of how the information is going to be processed, ironically the narrator manages to confuse us even more. Yet, his statement contains an element of truth: it states indirectly that ambiguity is an inherent and necessary quality of language. Were it non-ambiguous it would not be a sign. This idea is pushed even further when the narrator tries to convince Müller: 'Mi ascolti: la menzogna è la vera informazione che noi abbiamo da trasmettere'.²⁵⁵ This can be interpreted as a mere shift in point of view, namely that one way to look at a lie is to think of it as a mechanism of distortion, which misshapes a *real* information, but which is in the end yet another decodable sign. Or to put it more simply, any information *is* a lie.

The story moves on from the memory of the world to the memory of Angela, the narrator's wife who is said to have disappeared. The narrator reveals how when it came to registering the

²⁵⁴RRII, p. 1251.

²⁵⁵Ibid., p. 1253.

information concerning his wife's life and his into the system, he went through a process of *correction*, selecting and rectifying the events in order to suit the subject that remembers (himself) and for the world to remember Angela in the best of lights. I think it is fair to understand the project undertaken by the narrator's organization as the production of the last myth of humanity before its extinction. It would both tell the origins of humanity and account for its entire evolution. As most myths, it is driven by the need of a group (in this case humanity itself) to tell a story which usually appeals to universal concerns. But what is to be made of how the narrator develops this project? In psychological terms, Jung acknowledges the surfacing of personal, individual myths when group myths fail to meet their purpose, such is the case of many religious or scientific myths in the modern world. In his memoirs, Jung specifically speaks about how his own personal myth emerged from the failure of group myths (see 1.2.3), and his account bears striking similarities to what happens to the narrator of 'La memoria del Mondo', who, facing the impossibility to abide by a universal memory of the world, engages in the making of his own myth of it.

We can assume that there is a link of causality between the organization's project and the narrator's forgery. He is trying to tell another story, another myth from the one he is supposed to be working on, and this happens because the story told by his organizations fails him in his most profound needs as a human being. But why is the organization's myth a failure? This is the most important question in my opinion. It is here that we find again Calvino's values as we have discussed them before: the myth that is being created in the face of human extinction is too rigid. If the project was to be faithful to the reality of events, the memory of Angela would remain fixed in the collective imagery as a woman who betrayed her husband by having lovers, and the narrator's marriage would be remembered as an unhappy one. This myth would not help the narrator to come to terms with reality, so he tries to construct one of his own. Calvino however does not provide us with a viable solution with his narrator's personal myth. His attempt is merely another failure, which consists only of working on his myth retrospectively. He tries to find a solution, but he keeps his back turned against the future, obsessively trying to correct what came before. The consequences in the present of the narration remain as catastrophic as the future foreseen at the beginning of the story: 'È per questo che ora estraggo la pistola, la punto contro di lei, Müller, schiaccio il grilletto, l'uccido'. Once the narrator has identified the enemy – an enemy that in reality he creates himself – he directs his despair towards him: violence is performed and affirmed in the present of the narration, in a way that tells us the deed cannot be undone. The narrator explains to Müller that it is not enough to omit the existence of Angela's lover from the books, his existence needs to be literally terminated: 'Come ho cancellato

l'esistenza dell'amante di mia moglie dalle schede perforate così devo cancellare lui dal mondo delle persone viventi'.²⁵⁶

Issues such as historiography, relations of power and conflict between private and public sphere are discussed within the story. The urge to write a comprehensive history of the world is triggered by an imminent end. By taking such an extreme scenario Calvino seems to suggest that the writing of history originates in facing the fear of extinction. However, the apocalyptic dimension of the story is not the focal point in my opinion. Calvino is more concerned with the motivations which are ultimately going to shape the written story, and those motivations often come into direct confrontation. On the one hand, we are told that the aim of the organisation is to ensure that the memory of human existence and creation will remain indelible and inalienable even after the end of human life. On the other hand, the individual interests of the narrator clearly disturb the way the project is carried out. Immediately the problem of the objectivity of history is raised, once we understand that the subjectivity of the people responsible for writing it is inevitably going to influence the result. Is it possible to speak or write in a language which sets and preserves universal values, or does such a language even exist? Since the story closes on the shooting of Müller, the answer to the previous questions is apparently negative. Paradoxically, literature is put in the foreground once more. Calvino presents it as the art which will attempt to identify the reasons behind the failure of the historical discourse as well as the place where this failure is going to be depicted in its process: ultimately, the story shows how the titanic project undertaken at the beginning, degenerates into a vulgar display of violence. 'Lo sguardo dell'archeologo' expresses very clearly the problematic raised around history in Calvino's opinion:

I metodi continuamente rettificati e aggiornati durante gli ultimi quattrocento anni per stabilire un posto per ogni cosa e ogni cosa al suo posto (e mettere da parte ciò che resta fuori), - quei metodi unificabili in una metodologia generale, la Storia, cioè la scelta d'un soggetto denominato l'Uomo, volta a volta definito dai suoi predicati, - hanno patito troppe crepe e falle per pretendere di tenere ancora tutto insieme come se niente fosse.²⁵⁷

The common ground shared by history and myth is axed by Thucydides who draws the line for the first time, and rejects the poetic qualities of myth as an undesirable displacement from the quest for truth. While for myth the measure of validity was the extent to which people believed it, for Thucydides, history should be subjected to empirical and rational verification. Furthermore, history

²⁵⁶Ibid., p. 1225.

²⁵⁷Italo Calvino, 'Lo sguardo dell'archeologo', 'Ali-Babà' Progetto di una Rivista 1968-1972, Riga 14 (Milan: Marcos Y Marcos, 1998), p. 197.

has the meaning of a narrative but a narrative that is worth being told. As for the issue of history and historical sources: 'l'habitude de citer ses autorités, l'annotation savante, n'a pas été une invention des historiens, mais vient de controverses théologiques et de la pratique juridique'.²⁵⁸ It is theological dispute and judicial concerns, which establish the practice of substantiation. This very exercise has created havoc: the practice of history has known on its own premises a confusing proliferation of validation methods, which have only succeeded in producing an increasingly hazy story of humanity. The disputes which initially demanded methodological discipline for clarification purposes, eventually subsidised further disagreement. What Calvino questions is the authority of historians to tell this story under the current circumstances.

Having acknowledged that a multitude of collective mythological discourses might have failed the individual, the attempt to create or discover within oneself a personal myth must be carefully thought through in terms of ethical values, or else the violence and oppression is bound to be repeated on an individual level. This story reminds us of the baleful consequences of a *technified* myth, as it is orchestrated by the narrator, which 'è appunto il simbolo di un passato ridotto a a polveroso e caotico repertorio di immagini, dalle quali una volontà criminosa evoca quelle utili a mantenere la propria potenza'.²⁵⁹ If 'La Memoria del Mondo' appears to be quite a sinister depiction of our experience of the modern world, it does not fail to be, however indirectly, a positive affirmation that individual responsibility retains a decisive role in the order that we try to impose on the chaos around us. It partly implies that the individual is responsible for his own alienation, when it is the case, but it also suggests that since he is still the author of his own stories, he is also master of himself. With this story Calvino subversively manages to reassert individual identity by rediscovering the amplitude and implications of individual choices and actions.

I would like now, to look more closely into the essence of myth itself and how far Calvino's proposition about individual responsibility affects it. Among other things, *Hamlet's Mill* explains the significance of the Greeks'

quest of their first sages as the Problem of the One and the Many, sometimes discussing the wild fecundity of nature as a way in which the Many could be deduced from the One, sometimes seeing the Many as unsubstantial variations played on the One.²⁶⁰

De Santillana was convinced that myth is the first scientific discourse; this is in fact the thesis of the book. To some extent Calvino's cosmicomic stories seem to have a similar goal, namely that of

²⁵⁸P. Veyne, *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes* (Paris : Le Seuil, 1983), p.23.

²⁵⁹Jesi, p. 40.

²⁶⁰*Hamlet's Mill*, 'Preface', p. v.

representing the intersection between myth and science. However, whereas de Santillana's starting point is myth, Calvino's is always a scientific theory. Among other things, he explores the mythical dimension of the theories he chooses to illustrate. If we go back to the idea of the Many resulting from the One, we can easily relate it to the theory of evolution developed by biology. Calvino uses the images offered to us by modern biology, namely those of mitosis, meiosis, and death,²⁶¹ and gives them a mythological dimension by narrating them as a story of origins. In 'I Dinosauri' it is the phenomenon of the extinction of an entire species, which is explored in order to discuss catastrophic images, which are also widely present in mythology.

De Santillana warns against inaccurate projections of scientific discourse:

One calls this the primitive way of life, and blithely conjectures extermination in the biological sense, forgetting what biology has to say of real conflicts among animal tribes. It is only man, more especially modern man, who knows the art of total kill, the quick and the slow. But archaic cultures, devoid of history but steeped in myth, did not find in events the surprise of the *fait accompli*, stunning and shattering to the mind in the way Auschwitz was to us. Mythical experience has its own way of meeting catastrophe. Men were able to see things nobly. Narration became epic.²⁶²

As a dinosaur Qfwfq also wishes to clarify the same misconception: 'Adesso qualcuno dice che il gusto di tramontare, la passione d'essere distrutti facessero parte dello spirito di noi Dinosauri già da prima. Non so: io questo sentimento non lo ho mai provato; se degli altri l'avevano, è perché già si sentivano perduti' (see also 2.2).²⁶³ Even though he acknowledged the mistake of interpreting fatalistically certain ancient pages of human history, Calvino's narrative is unavoidably retrospective. Calvino had known Auschwitz; more importantly, he was a member of a generation of writers which had to find a way to write in a post-Auschwitz world. Consequently his narrative cannot be epic like the one de Santillana describes.

As we have seen with the example of the cosmicomic stories, Calvino tried to promote the value and necessity of individual responsibility, especially through the artistic process. In his latest years he expressed those ideas in his essays more clearly and in a more straightforward way. In many ways, *Lezioni Americane* is to be read as a series of conclusions that the author has drawn after years of literary research and experimentation. In 'Esattezza' Calvino starts by mentioning his reading of de

²⁶¹'Mitosi', 'Meiosi', and 'Morte' are the three stories that constitute the section 'Priscilla'. It is interesting to notice that, unlike with the other two terms, Calvino chooses to use the common word of death instead of the scientific word for programmed cellular death, called *apoptosis*. This should probably be interpreted as an intention to convey some form of universal truth, and death is indeed a universal truth in the world of mortals.

²⁶²*Hamlet's Mill*, p. 336.

²⁶³RRII, p. 164.

Santillana and how he is indebted to him.

Perché sento il bisogno di difendere dei valori che a molti potranno sembrare ovvi? Credo che la mia prima spinta venga da una mia ipersensibilità o allergia: mi sembra che il linguaggio venga sempre usato in modo approssimativo, casuale, sbadato, e ne provo un fastidio intollerabile. Non si creda che questa mia reazione corrisponda a un'intolleranza per il prossimo: il fastidio peggiore lo provo sentendo parlare me stesso. Per questo cerco di parlare il meno possibile, e se preferisco scrivere è perché scrivendo posso correggere ogni frase tante volte quanto è necessario per arrivare non dico a essere soddisfatto delle mie parole, ma almeno a eliminare le ragioni d'insoddisfazione di cui posso rendermi conto. La letteratura – dico la letteratura che risponde a queste esigenze – è la Terra Promessa in cui il linguaggio diventa quello che dovrebbe essere.²⁶⁴

Calvino puts the 'I' at the core of this problem, stressing the need not to address one's convictions against others. In respect to the arguments concerning utopian suggestions, we would also like to stress the use of the expression 'Terra Promessa'. Calvino did not want to create a literary utopia, which would yet again reassert its impossibility, he tried to unveil the aspects involved in the literary process (writing, reading, criticizing, re-writing, etc), which constitute milestones for the creation of a way towards utopia. Some of these aspects are also inherent qualities of myth.

2.7 The tyranny of abstract thought

'L'inseguimento' (1967) presents claims to be the story of a chase. If there is a chase, it implies that there are two individuals, whose relationship is defined according to two different roles; that of the chaser and that of the target. If the conventions are respected for the chase to end successfully (this is the case where the chaser finally manages to catch his target), the chaser has to be faster than his target. Speed is a notion that is defined by combining the notion of time and space. Calvino in this story works both on this elementary aspect and on the common depiction of a chasing scene. A typical chasing scene in the cinema for instance would involve plenty of motion, a fast chain of action and reaction, suspense and fear in terms of character depiction and effect on the audience and eventually some form of violence. This story achieves at least three things that are closely intertwined in the story: the subversion of a chasing scene, which leads to the affirmation of the importance of the narrative voice and point of view, and the critical approach that results from the exposure to the narrator's theoretical approach. All of these three elements are present simultaneously in the story and the trigger one another.

The first sentence of the story, 'L'auto che mi insegue è più veloce della mia',²⁶⁵ should make

²⁶⁴SI, pp. 677-678.

²⁶⁵RRII, p. 322,

the reader presume he is about to read another somewhat regular chasing story. The terms ‘più veloce’ does imply motion and speed. If we add to that the next piece of information we are given by the narrator: ‘armato di rivoltella’, ‘buon tiratore’,²⁶⁶ the reader should also be granted with suspense and violence. The first person narration, however, which should contribute to the suspense created by the story, because it would disclose the emotions and fear of the narrator from its source, is peculiarly objective and blunt. Gradually the story dismantles all expected features of a chasing scene, and instead we have a virtually stagnating and motionless scene with a narrator who has a theoretical approach to the situation substituting the story-telling. As long as the essential relation between chaser and target remains, the short story can still be considered to respect the most important convention. However, the narration reaches the point where even this aspect ends up being questioned: ‘Con un inseguitore che mi precede, io non sarei più un inseguito’.²⁶⁷ Once this aspect has been questioned it is impossible to go back to the original order of things, even when the narrator tries to reassure us, and probably himself that: ‘non per questo cesseremmo di essere io l'inseguito e lui l'inseguitore’.²⁶⁸ Even when we reach the last paragraph of the story where some sort of action seems to be resumed from a previously paused state, the outcome is yet the same: this is merely a new digression, and the situation come back to utter stagnation. ‘Non è cambiato assolutamente nulla’.²⁶⁹

The use of ‘io’ and ‘loro’ and their definition puts the chase on a different level: it becomes the trigger for a search for identity on the main character's side. The element that should be crucial in the context of a chase: ‘(io sono disarmato)’, is put into brackets, blurring the expectations of the reader furthermore. The brackets, as a form of punctuation reminds us that time and space in a story are not given, it is the narration that creates them. ‘Se uno di noi o tutti e due lasciassimo le nostre auto e proseguissimo a piedi, ritornerebbe a esistere uno spazio e la possibilità di muoverci nello spazio’.²⁷⁰ The narrator does not fail to mark the fact that his particular point of view abolishes the possibility of a space in which to move and that only by following another narration would we be able to overcome it.

The question that is urged from the narration is what consequences do we face when we adopt such an absolute theoretical point of view. ‘Cerco di fare tutte le ipotesi perché più particolari prevedo, più probabilità ho di salvarmi. Del resto cos'altro potrei fare? Non ci si muove nemmeno d'un centimetro’.²⁷¹ This is how the narrator justifies his choice. When facing a life and death situation one

²⁶⁶Ibid.

²⁶⁷Ibid., p. 328.

²⁶⁸Ibid., p. 330.

²⁶⁹Ibid., p. 335.

²⁷⁰Ibid., p. 325.

²⁷¹Ibid., p. 326.

would hardly ever consider a theoretical approach to resolve the situation. We have to acknowledge the comic effect this sentence has as well as the indirect suggestion that theoretical thinking can only occur from a static standpoint. The narrator's almost blind faith in theoretical analysis goes on as we realize that abstract thinking leads to more abstract thinking. Even when he realizes his trail of thought is leading him astray, he cannot restrain himself from sinking even deeper into the vortex of abstract thought: 'non mi resta che continuare ad approfondire la conoscenza teorica della situazione'.²⁷² When his attempts to normalize the situation he is in are eventually swallowed by his own spiral of thought he calls on an arbitrary resolution, a philosophical kind of *Deus Ex Machina*, or rather a very childish way to make up one's mind: 'se sul portaoggetti della mia macchina c'è una pistola è segno che sono anch'io un inseguitore'.²⁷³ Further comic effect is achieved here by the assumption that the narrator, who is also the main character, might be ignorant of such an indispensable piece of information. If the hypothesis came out to be true, this would also clash with one of the pieces of information we were given at the beginning of the story, that is to say that the narrator is unarmed. We have assumed so far that the contradictory elements we are given in the narration are to be interpreted as an unreliability of the narrator. However what happens if we were to consider that the narrator, instead of being merely someone who is being chased, is a philosopher trying to resolve a hypothetical conundrum in which he would be involved personally?

Let us suppose that there is an original narration of this story that comes before the one we are reading, and that it is a third person narration and an external an impersonal one. The story that we get to read would be a transcription of it in the first person, where the narrator and the main character would collapse into one. The issue of unreliability is no longer of our concern. The absurdity of the thinking and the comic effect still remain though. In this case theoretical thinking as a systematic arbitrary exercise is discarded as a meaning-giving structure since it can lead to absolute absurdity or, and intellectual dead-ends. We are brought therefore to discuss the intentionality of the narration; in other words that it is not enough to do a transcription of the narration in the first person, the narrative voice has to be an essential aspect of the story, not a mere tool. Besides the narrator does reach the same conclusion in a metaphorical way: 'io sono sempre prigioniero del sistema generale delle macchine in marcia, in cui non si distinguono gli inseguitori e gli inseguiti'.²⁷⁴ The trap the narrator has confectioned for himself confines him to a static stance even in a life threatening situation, it is also capable of oppressing massively other individuals, by assuming that his analysis can simply be

²⁷²Ibid., p. 330.

²⁷³Ibid., pp. 334-335.

²⁷⁴Ibid., p. 335.

projected on everyone else, and it eventually leads to a total confusion of the nature, the function and the identity of things.

'Il conte di Montecristo' (1967) is another story from the collection *Ti con zero*, where Calvino uses combinatory process to discuss the notions of imprisonment and escaping. Calvino's story does not share the adventurous nature of Alexandre Dumas' novel. Rather than portraying the physical struggle involved in the attempt to escape the fortress of If, Calvino chooses to put Edmond Dantès in the position of an intellectual, who tries to deduce a way out of the prison based on abbot Faria's failures: 'le sole informazioni di cui dispongo sul luogo dove mi trovo mi sono date dalla successione dei suoi errori'.²⁷⁵ The entire story constitutes an effort to conceptualize the nature of imprisonment in order to eventually overcome it. Under this perspective Calvino suggests escaping can be interpreted as the emancipation of the individual from the condition of imprisonment: 'Una cosa ho compreso: che l'unico modo di sfuggire alla condizione di prigioniero è capire come è fatta la prigione'.²⁷⁶ In order to achieve this emancipation several aspects need to be explored, such as the definition of the condition of imprisonment, the structure of the prison or the relation between the prisoner and its prison. These considerations push Edmond Dantès into thinking more about generic spatial and temporal dualities (in and out, past and present, future and present).

Initially, Dantès appears to be an observer, someone who is not directly involved in the process he is watching and trying to unravel. He tries to interpret Faria's attempts to escape as a game where Faria and the fortress are rivals: 'il mio sforzo è inteso a vedere [la partita] con distacco, in una rappresentazione senza angoscia'.²⁷⁷ His effort probably resides in the belief that a proper understanding of the situation can only be achieved if he strips himself of any emotional involvement. He tries to keep his distance by making the problem as abstract as possible; this is why he tries to think of the fortress in numerical terms, or of the relation between Faria and the prison as a mechanical one: 'Bisognerebbe invertire il rapporto tra la velocità in modo che la fortezza, contraendosi espella l'Abate come una palla di cannone'.²⁷⁸ This over-abstraction of the situation is however constantly challenged by the imposing aspects of reality and experience: 'Ma per pensare una fortezza così ho bisogno che l'Abate Faria non smetta di battersi contro frane di terriccio, chivarde d'acciaio, scoli di fogna, garitte di sentinelle, salti nel vuoto, rientranze dei muri maestri, perché l'unico modo di rinforzare la fortezza pensata è mettere continuamente alla prova quella vera'.²⁷⁹ This

²⁷⁵RRI, p. 347.

²⁷⁶Ibid.

²⁷⁷Ibid., p.349.

²⁷⁸Ibid., p. 350.

²⁷⁹Ibid.

sentence echoes the point of view which he expresses in 'Filosofia e letteratura', namely that there is a battle ('lotta' between literature and philosophy in the essay, and between abstract thought and concrete experience in the story), which protects language from the permanent threat of verbal paralysis.²⁸⁰

Not even half-way through the story, Dantès fails to keep himself uninvolved and starts seeing himself at the centre of the story:

Ecco che sono tornato a immaginare me stesso come protagonista dell'evasione, e subito ho messo in gioco non solo il mio avvenire ma il mio passato, i miei ricordi. [...] Se la prigione è circondata dal mio fuori, quel fuori mi riporterebbe dentro ogni volta che riuscissi a raggiungerlo: il fuori non è altro che il passato, è inutile tentare di fuggire. [...] Devo pensare la prigione come un luogo che è solo dentro se stesso, senza un fuori – cioè rinunciare a uscirne -²⁸¹

The implications of such an enterprise are quite radical. As soon as he becomes the main character, even if it is in his imagination, he jeopardizes his identity. It is necessary to understand that once Dantès' identity is represented by his past, his future and his memories, his 'story' takes an ontological dimension. Furthermore, by collapsing the axis of time on that of space, Calvino puts side by side the tension between past and present, or future, and the tension between inside and outside. Consequently the prison becomes an inherent aspect of Dantès' own identity; it is no longer a foreign construct of seclusion from the rest of the world.

As the story evolves, the approach to the problem of imprisonment becomes more and more psychological, the answers are always more likely to be found from within: 'Se fuori c'è il passato, forse il futuro si concentra nel punto più interno dell'isola d'If, cioè la via d'uscita è una via verso il dentro'.²⁸² So when Dantès tries to tell the true fortress from the virtual one he is indeed attempting to reveal the aspects of his own identity that imprison him.

Se riuscirò col pensiero a costruire una fortezza da cui è impossibile fuggire, questa fortezza pensata o sarà uguale alla vera – e in questo caso è certo che di qui non fuggiremo mai, ma almeno avremo raggiunto la tranquillità di chi sa che sta qui perché non potrebbe trovarsi altrove – o sarà una fortezza dalla quale la fuga è ancora più impossibile che di qui – e allora è segno che una possibilità di fuga esiste: basterà individuare il punto in cui la fortezza pensata non coincide con quella vera per trovarla.²⁸³

Kathryn Hume relates this story to the theme of the labyrinth: 'Calvino points out two

²⁸⁰ 'L'opposizione letteratura-filosofia non esige d'esser risolta; al contrario solo se considerata permanente e sempre nuova ci dà la garanzia che la sclerosi delle parole non s richiude sopra di noi come una calotta di ghiaccio' SI., p.129.

²⁸¹ RRII, p. 351.

²⁸² Ibid., p. 351.

²⁸³ Ibid., p. 356.

responses to the labyrinth: to lose oneself in it and insist that being lost is the human condition, or to provide as precise a map as possible, and better yet, to encourage an attitude suited to coping with the search for an exit. He favours the latter'.²⁸⁴ Her comment echoes of course the very end of *Le città invisibili*, where the labyrinth has become hell itself.²⁸⁵

We will maintain here however, that much like it was the case for 'L'inseguimento', pure abstract thought does not provide any valuable answers to the question of imprisonment. It is only by constantly putting it in comparison with the elements given by empirical knowledge that one can maintain hope to escape from this condition or to understand it in order to come to terms with it.

In *Utopia of the Usurers and other essays*, Chesterton maintained that as time went by, the Prison became more and more present.

If the capitalists are allowed to erect their constructive capitalist community, I speak quite seriously when I say that I think Prison will become an almost universal experience. It will not necessarily be a cruel or shameful experience: on these points (I concede certainly for the present purpose of debate) it may be a vastly improved experience. The conditions in the prison, very possibly, will be made more humane. But the prison will be made more humane only in order to contain more of humanity.²⁸⁶

We may attempt a further interpretation of 'Il conte di Montecristo' under this new perspective, also in order to escape a completely abstract interpretation, and attempt something more concrete. The fortress of If, is the ultimate prison from which one cannot escape precisely because If is the new universalised prison that Chesterton talks about, in which all humanity lives. It is possible to read the story just in the same frame of criticism of society under capitalism. Faria is the figure of the working class: 'L'Abate scava, scava, ma i muri aumentano di spessore, si moltiplicano le bertesche e i barbacani';²⁸⁷ If is the ultimate capitalist product, it grows indeterminately: 'una fortezza che cresce intorno a noi, e più tempo vi restiamo rinchiusi più ci allontana dal fuori'.²⁸⁸ In this context Dantès can be the communist intellectual, or his comical representation: he might not always be taking part in the struggle, but his heart is always there, in a convenient displacement ('Ecco che sono tornato a immaginare me stesso come protagonista dell'evasione'). There is in this passage, a criticism of a tendency among intellectuals to appropriate themselves of a cause, speaking as if the actions carried out by others were theirs. In this fallacious commonplace an old mistake is perpetuated: the

²⁸⁴Hume, *Calvino's Fictions*, p. 43.

²⁸⁵See *Le città invisibili*, RRII, pp. 497-498.

²⁸⁶G.K. Chesterton, 'VII The Evolution of Prison', *Utopia of the Usurers and other essays* (A Penn State Electronic Classic Series Publication, 2005), p. 25.

²⁸⁷RRII, p. 350.

²⁸⁸*Ibid.*, p. 351, p. 350.

intellectual activity does not do justice to the past and to itself. We have insisted on the economical interpretation of the story, in order to prove that even in these existential, and seemingly abstract stories, a solid real background is always present.

2.8 'La taverna dei destini incrociati': 'Quale storia attende laggiù la fine?'

We have chosen in this thesis not to dedicate a substantial section to *Il castello dei destini incrociati* even though it was written in the period considered by our research, because we believe that although the book contains a rather large amount of direct or indirect references to myth, it does not seem to achieve the level of mythical quality *per se*, as the other works we have chosen to study do. By that we mean that the intertextual references to myth do not give the work the aesthetic quality and philosophical dimension, which we have tried to establish as far as Calvino's later works are concerned.

It is however interesting to take note of the myths that Calvino chose to discuss in order to keep track of the evolution of his thought. Particularly in the second section of the book, 'La taverna dei destini incrociati', where Calvino explores a series of influential Western myths, we shall concentrate on the last three stories with the most explicit mythological references.

'Due storie in cui ci si cerca e ci si trova' features the legends of Faust and Parsifal, the alchemist, and the knight. Calvino tries to imagine the story that would emerge from an inversion of the original stories:

ma si dia il caso d'un dottor Faust che inverte la regola dell'alchimista, fa dell'anima un oggetto di scambio e così spera che la natura diventi incorruttibile e non occorra più cercare l'oro perché tutti gli elementi saranno ugualmente preziosi, il mondo è oro e l'oro è il mondo.²⁸⁹

ma proviamo a supporre un Perceval-Parzival-Parsifal che inverte la regola della Tavola Rotonda: le virtù cavalleresche saranno in lui involontarie, verranno fuori come un dono della natura, come i colori delle ali delle farfalle, e così compiendo le sue imprese con attonita incuranza, forse riuscirà a sottomettere la natura alla sua volontà, a possedere la scienza del mondo come una cosa, a diventare mago e taumaturgo, a far cicatrizzare la piaga del Re Pescatore e a ridare verde linfa alla terra deserta.²⁹⁰

The attempt to look at the inverted stories simply confuses the narration, the limits between one character and the other become uncertain and it becomes almost impossible to distinguish them at all;

²⁸⁹RII, p. 584.

²⁹⁰Ibid., pp. 584-585.

a confusion which reaches its climax as more stories are introduced: ‘la storia di Faust si confonde con quella di Don Giovanni Tenorio’²⁹¹, ‘la storia del dottor Faust si confonde anche con quella del Re Mida’.²⁹² The direct consequence of this constant reshuffling of cards and retelling the stories is an evident loss of self which in its own turn affects the characters' vision of the world: ‘ – Il mondo non esiste, – Faust conclude [...] Mentre questa sarebbe la conclusione (sempre provvisoria) di Parsifal: – Il nocciolo del mondo è vuoto’.²⁹³ It may be the case to suggest that there is a point where humanity cannot hope to pursue any meaning in the world and that occurs with the loss of memory, which the narrator mentions in the first story of ‘La taverna’: ‘Come faccio a raccontare adesso che ho perduto la parola, le parole, forse pure la memoria’.²⁹⁴ The answer to this question seems in fact extremely simple: there can be no stories, there can be no story of the world without memory.

‘Anch'io cerco di dire la mia’ puts the biblical stories of Saint Jerome and Saint George side by side. If this story is, like McLaughlin suggests, the most important of the volume,²⁹⁵ then we could continue from the dreaded idea already expressed in the previous story: is it possible that, at least in the case of *Il castello*, there is no story to be told? The narrator sees in the two figures of the hermit and the knight, two fundamentally different attitudes towards writing: one which favours distance in order to observe and tell the world, and the other which prefers and regards confrontation as the only ethical stance. The narrator clearly recognises himself in the figure of the hermit but wonders whether there is something in the knight's ways which he regrets not having: ‘Forse mi viene di rimpiangere modi più estroversi d'esprimere me stesso?’.²⁹⁶ The story of Saint Jerome is therefore not enough to fill in the void and to answer the ontological question asked earlier concerning literature and by extension life: ‘Cos'è che teneva insieme tutto questo e se n'è andato?’.²⁹⁷ Equally unsatisfactory is the story of Saint George: ‘come santo di legenda, troppo simile al Perseo del mito; come eroe del mito, troppo simile al fratello minore della fiaba’.²⁹⁸ Just like he did in ‘Due storie in cui ci si cerca e ci si trova’, the narrator tries to invert the stories, hoping to reveal a clearer picture: ‘Ma se proprio adesso adesso ero riuscito a rovesciare il San Girolamo verso il fuori a il San Giorgio verso il dentro?’.²⁹⁹ Once again the inversion is not enough, because the essential problem that the narrator recognises is the very distinction between the hermit and the knight. As long as these two remain separated, there

²⁹¹Ibid., p. 586.

²⁹²Ibid., p. 587.

²⁹³Ibid., p. 589.

²⁹⁴Ibid., p. 550.

²⁹⁵McLaughlin, *Italo Calvino*, p. 113.

²⁹⁶RRII, p.599.

²⁹⁷Ibid., p. 596.

²⁹⁸Ibid. 599.

²⁹⁹Ibid., p. 601.

can be no hope of retrieving '[quello] che teneva insieme [la vita]'. The stories of Saint Jerome and Saint George will always be insufficient; the only story which can hope to achieve what the other two cannot is the story which tells both of them at the same time, the story of one single character:

Il personaggio in questione o riesce a essere il guerriero e il savio in ogni cosa che fa e pensa, o non sarà nessuno, e la stessa belva è nello stesso tempo drago nemico nella carneficina quotidiana della città e leone custode nello spazio dei pensieri: e non si lascia fronteggiare se non nelle due forme insieme.³⁰⁰

This character is of course Oedipus (a warrior and a wise man at different moments of his life), and the beast is the Sphinx, whose presence is confirmed through a reference to its riddle: 'E forse sono davvero una sola storia, la vita d'uno stesso uomo, giovinezza maturità vecchiaia e morte'.³⁰¹ 'Anch'io cerco di dire la mia' is the story of the failure of Saint Jerome's and Saint George's story to remedy the narrator's *dimidiamento*, thus: 'Dentro di me resta tutto come prima'.³⁰²

Taking into consideration what we have said so far, it is probably easier to understand why the volume ends with, 'Tre storie di follia e distruzione', which introduces to the narration three of the most famous and influential tragic Shakespearian characters: Hamlet, Macbeth and King Lear. The successive failures encountered while trying to tell a story of origins, a myth which will account for the nature of humanity as it appears to be at the time the book is written, inevitably unfolds into the 'specchio del disastro'.³⁰³

Why does *Il castello* not seem to achieve the mythical quality the cosmicomic stories do? Is it because of the very nature of Calvino's experiment? Or is it because there was something inherent in the stories he relied on, which in the end prevented him from carrying it out? Calvino goes back to myth in the cosmicomic stories attempting to tell a story that has not yet been told, but he trusts the ones that have been told before to create the necessary space for new ones. In *Il castello* we witness almost a confession of despair, not because certainties are shattered, but because the stories seem to lose their essential qualities and are revealed more as *technified* myths than genuine ones: they are almost exclusively imposed by the experimental design of the tarot decks.

2.9 Revisiting the Orpheus myth

We shall conclude this chapter with another significant mythological reference, which appears twice in the cosmicomic stories: that of the Orpheus myth. The first one is found in the story 'Senza colori',

³⁰⁰Ibid., p. 602.

³⁰¹Ibid., p. 601.

³⁰²Ibid., p. 602.

³⁰³Ibid., p. 610.

appearing in *Cosmicomiche* (1965), the other one is 'Il cielo di pietra', from *La memoria del mondo e altre storie cosmicomiche* (1968). The two stories revisit the myth from a very different point of view. In 'Senza colori', Qfwfq is the voice of Orpheus who narrates the story of the loss of Euridyce (Ayl) in a world in which the characters will experience a significant and potentially traumatising change: the arrival of colours. Qfwfq will lose Ayl in this shift, as he welcomes with enthusiasm all these fascinating events and tries to share his experience with his loved one, whereas she remains attached to the old order and refuses to accept the change and to adapt to the new world:

io cercavo un mondo diverso al di là della patina scialba che imprigionava le cose, e ne spiavo ogni segno, ogni spiraglio [...] invece Ayl era un'abitante felice del silenzio che regna là dove ogni vibrazione è esclusa; per lei tutto quel che accennava a rompere un'assoluta neutralità visiva era una stonatura stridente³⁰⁴

On the one hand, the story is faithful to the ancient myth as Ayl stays a creature of the underworld, whom Qfwfq tries to lure towards the surface. On the other hand, his failure to bring her with him is not a consequence of his disobedience to Hades or Persephone, who ordered him not to look back at her before they reach the surface. It is Ayl's own wish that he should only see her as she has chosen: ' - Mi rivedrai solo come piace a me. Va' avanti e non voltarti' .³⁰⁵ This alteration can be read in the following way: the rule which Qfwfq breaks, is not a divine imposition, the equally disastrous consequences Qfwfq will face are a result of a breach of trust between two equals, two individuals who should have come to an agreement. The other significant aspect of the story is how the narration places everything in an interstice which challenges the relationship between Qfwfq and Ayl. Their commitment to one another is tested against the violent changes of their environment, which materialise in explosions of colours leaving the world in a state of uncertainty (will it get back to its old grey reality, or will the colourful order replace the previous one?), and the quakes which create rifts between the two lovers. Ultimately however, much as it is the case in the Orpheus myth, the first impression would be that the lovers are separated due to Orpheus' mistake.

More than attempting to answer the question 'why does Qfwfq/Orpheus lose Eurydice/Ayl?', we should try to answer the question 'who is Ayl and who is Qfwfq?'. Qfwfq's first encounter with Ayl ('vidi come un lampo incolore correre veloce, scomparire e riapparire più il là: due bagliori appaiati che apparivano di scatto; ancora non m'ero reso conto di cos'erano e già correvo innamorato inseguendo gli occhi di Ayl'),³⁰⁶ shows that Qfwfq's desire for Ayl is born in utter uncertainty of who

³⁰⁴Ibid., p. 128.

³⁰⁵Ibid., p. 133

³⁰⁶Ibid., p. 125

she is. Her entire existence appears to be trapped between the visible and the invisible, one moment she is there and the next she is nowhere to be seen. She has no distinguishable form. It may then not be so far-fetched to attempt an interpretation of her name based on this characteristic: the word ‘ἄυλος-η-ο’ means immaterial, it is something that has no bodily substance, which can refer to a purely spiritual essence. Ayl's presence is never asserted (‘Se la luce tendeva ogni momento a cancellare Ayl, a metterne in dubbio la presenza, il buio mi ridava la certezza che lei c'era’);³⁰⁷ throughout the story, Qfwfq finds himself in a perpetual chase and Ayl is merely revealed partially: ‘Finché la nostra vista non si riabitò a scrutare in quella luminosità caliginosa e a riconoscere il rilievo d'un sopracciglio, d'un gomito, d'un fianco’.³⁰⁸ The story also narrates the dialogue between two characters who try to affirm their identity within the world, first by asserting their significant distinguishable qualities, which can tell them apart from the things that surround them: ‘ – Sabbia. Non sabbia, – dissi, indicando prima intorno e poi noi due’³⁰⁹. Yet when Qfwfq tries to distinguish himself from Ayl, the latter disapproves:

– Io. Tu non io, – provai a spiegare a gesti.
Ne fu contrariata.
Sì. Tu come io, ma così così, – corressi.
Era un po' rassicurata, ma diffidava ancora.³¹⁰

It is clear very soon in the story, that Ayl's own fear will be a catalyst in her relationship with Qfwfq, but also that their respective desires will irrevocably make them inhabitants of two worlds, radically opposed to one another: ‘mentre io smaniavo di strappare dalle cose vibrazioni sconosciute, lei voleva ridurre ogni cosa all'al di là incolore della loro ultima sostanza’.³¹¹

Calvino's own re-reading and multiple interpretation of the underworld, is representative of his concerns, some of which will be discussed later on. For instance, it is no coincidence that the concept of stasis should be associated with Ayl's world, nor that the underworld is the realm of limited visibility (see also 3.1.3 on the ‘cities and the dead’ for more representation of the underworld in *Le città*). Concerning the latter, we can also note here, that unlike Orpheus, who could be read in this particular moment of the myth in the tradition of the blind poet,³¹² Qfwfq is the one who sees the

³⁰⁷Ibid., p. 127.

³⁰⁸Ibid.

³⁰⁹Ibid.

³¹⁰RRII, p.126.

³¹¹Ibid., p. 128.

³¹²See Cavarero's commentary on Hannah Arendt's interpretation of the myth: “Similmente a Omero, a Tiresia e all'aedo di Ulisse, Orfeo infatti *non* può vedere colei di cui narra. Come vuole l'immaginario antico sul poeta, egli – almeno simbolicamente e, di certo, in modo improvviso e inaspettato – esperisce la cecità che è tipica del narratore. Pur temporanea, essa rende ancor più significativo il dramma dello sguardo che Orfeo interpreta col suo ‘voltarsi’. Il mito gioca sugli effetti di una sequenza inesorabile. Voltando le spalle alla luce, Orfeo guarda indietro. Euridice torna nel buio da cui

colours. Another interesting aspect of the story as far as visibility goes, is embedded in Qfwfq's exclamation: 'Mostrati e guarda!'.³¹³ This double quality of visibility is Qfwfq's cry to Ayl; he asks her to look at the world, also implying that only then she will be able to reveal herself to him. This is in fact a rather subversive way to re-read Orpheus' symbolical blindness.

In his other retelling of the Orpheus myth, 'Il cielo di pietra', Calvino puts the narrator Qfwfq in the role of Pluto, and Rdix in the role of Eurydice. This story represents an ideal pivotal opportunity for our analysis as it recycles some of the aspects of Calvino's work which we have already discussed (such as the idea of the prison, or the critique of totalitarian thought) as well as a reference to more utopian concepts which will be explored further in the next chapter.

The story reverses the conventional representation of the underworld as a prison, and more generally the assumption that the *outside* stands for freedom whereas the *inside* remains a trap: 'Rdix era prigioniera, esiliata nelle lande scoperciate del fuori'.³¹⁴

There are two totalitarian utopias which are in direct confrontation. The first is embodied by Qfwfq:

Certo, anche Rdix era convinta come me che il punto cui dovevamo tendere era il centro della Terra. Solo raggiunto il centro potevamo dire nostro il pianeta [...] dovevamo cominciare a rendere la Terra vivente dal suo nucleo, irradiando via via la nostra condizione a tutto il globo.³¹⁵

The other is represented by those living above the ground, who remain convinced that life on the surface is the only one worth living. On his side, Qfwfq is convinced he is in the right: 'È stata la via sbagliata, la vostra'.³¹⁶ The conflict of the two sides materialises in the claim of Rdix. For Qfwfq, Rdix is lured to the surface by a treacherous song. The narrator wanted to create a realm as close to the core of the world as he could for him and Rdix to live. As it was the case for 'Senza colori' though, it appears that Rdix's own desire was different from his: 'Ma per Rdix, attratta come sempre dal raro e dall'inconsulto, c'era l'impazienza d'appropriarsi di qualcosa d'unico, buono o cattivo che fosse'.³¹⁷

The music which enchanted Rdix and won her over to the surface of the earth will become the unbearable noise in Qfwfq's ears, which will mark his final loss: 'il canto da cui e di cui vivevamo era sommerso dall'irruzione della valanga del rumore, non riuscivo più a distinguere lei né il suo canto'.³¹⁸

era venuta. In quell'attimo, uniformandosi alla figura classica degli aedi e degli indovini, il poeta per antonomasia diventa cieco". Adriana Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti: filosofia della narrazione* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1997), p. 127.

³¹³Ibid., p. 129.

³¹⁴Ibid., p. 1221.

³¹⁵Ibid., p. 1218.

³¹⁶Ibid., p. 1218.

³¹⁷Ibid., pp. 1219-1220.

³¹⁸Ibid., p. 1222.

Qfwfq's utopian vision and his desire to create a realm with his loved one have come to naught, instead, Rdix will be part of the foundations of the city above the ground; but this victory on the side of Orpheus' city, might only be an illusionary one, as on the surface, Rdix' song can no longer be heard: 'ora è chiaro che la vostra vittoria è una sconfitta'.³¹⁹

We have seen therefore, that Calvino re-visits the utopian tradition with a subversive approach. The utopia that we find in the cosmicomic tales, challenges the rigidity of previous ideal *topoi*, and suggests a more versatile, subtler concept. This is made possible through the narrative voice of Qfwfq, who despite his mysterious identity, manages to convey what we have called, a sense of prospective and retrospective responsibility. We have also discussed how this utopian drive is characterised by a 'poetica del farsi', which defines the flexibility of Calvino's utopia, and which also accounts for its reflexive quality; thus, pondering on the possibility of a retrospective knowledge, and criticising the ominous effects of over-abstract thinking.

³¹⁹Ibid., p. 1223.

3 The Image of the City: the Episode, the Frame and the Ideal

As was the project of the cosmicomics a long one, so was that of *Le città invisibili*. The book emerged from Calvino's desire to write about cities, hesitating between two opposites: 'Per qualche tempo mi veniva da immaginare solo città tristi e per qualche tempo città contente'(1983).³²⁰ Yet, this duality is not sufficient to account for the complexity present in the book, as far as the image of the city is concerned. Certainly, the tension which was at the origin of the project still survived in the final work, but the cities themselves are not only either sad or blissful, utopian or dystopian, they are reminders, statements of and tributes to human desires and interactions. There was also a concern for the very nature of contemporary urban life (already expressed in *Marcovaldo*, through the successive failures of its main character to find a lost natural order in the city, and to adapt to its often cruel consumeristic mechanisms), which inspired Calvino to produce this work. He perceived this attempt as an urge for travel: 'Forse l'unico viaggio ancora possibile: quello che si svolge all'interno del rapporto tra i luoghi e i loro abitanti, dentro i desideri e le angosce che ci portano a vivere le città, a farne il nostro elemento, a soffrirle' (see also 3.3.2 for the idea that *Le città* is written in the tradition of the *Odyssey*, following this image of the voyage).³²¹ In terms of structure, the book has two distinct bodies of text: the dialogue (the frame) between the two main characters (Marco Polo and Kublai Khan), interrupted by Marco's descriptions of the cities (the episode).

This section will attempt to establish a clear relation between the visual dimension of the text and the notion of the episode and the frame, particularly significant in short fiction. The analysis will begin by establishing a conceptual background on which the rest of the study will be based. We will attempt some definitions around the notion of the image, its characteristics, its function and how it is manifested in the text we have chosen to study. We will look at how Calvino seems to discuss the role of the image in the complex process of literary creation and more generally its importance in the realm of literature. We will also discuss issues of form and aesthetics in relation to the processes of depicting and writing. We will then analyse those notions and issues as they are manifested in *Le città invisibili*. The image of the city will be explored in its multiple forms and functions, as the trigger of the fictional process, as a sign, as a content and as a form. The other major aspect that will be looked at is the nature of the frame that holds the various sections of the narration together. To do so, we will study the mechanisms of this process of cohesion and evaluate its structural and aesthetic importance.

³²⁰RRII, p. 1361

³²¹RRII, p. 1362

The image, in Calvino's work, is present at every stage of the creative literary process. Calvino presents it as the trigger of every story. It is also to be found in the narration; Eugenia Paulicelli, Franco Ricci and Calvino himself, have insisted on the importance of the visual in his work. Furthermore, literature is among other things, evaluated on its capacity to carve mental images. The image is therefore present before, during and after the narration. In order to determine the role of the image in the literary process, it is important to acknowledge the primordial and inalienable function of the narrator and the story, whose nucleus lies in the process of shaping. The notion of shaping involves three different elements, crucial to understand the relation between image and story: a primary amorphous material, most probably chaotic, a force guided by the will to give shape, as well as a final form that will potentially arise from this process. It appears that the image is the raw material the story-teller has in his hands. In other words, what we are brought to discuss here is the origin of literature in visual terms.

3.1 Image and episode: origins and function

3.1.1. Image and literary value

There is a significant amount of works that attempts to discuss the relation between words and images either in terms of similarities or in terms of differences. Their aim is to reconcile the arts that are traditionally dealt with separately, or to possibly clarify the limits of each field. Simonides of Ceos is generally considered to be the precursor of a long tradition that draws parallels between the visual arts and literature. The most relevant aspects of his reflections on images and words for our study are related to his conception of the process of memory as a capacity to recall impressive images and to create chains of associations that lead from one image to the other. Another important source of study is indebted to his idea that there is a link to be drawn between poetry and painting, based on the concept that painting is a mute poetry and that poetry is a speaking painting. It is along those lines of production, association and recreation of images that the relation between images and literature is to be understood and studied. Bolzoni explains that 'il paragone con le arti figurative sottolinea il carattere artificiale, in un certo senso artigianale della creazione poetica, la rende visibile e riconoscibile' and that Simonides 'sperimenta il potere delle immagini mentali, la loro forza di suggestione e di incantamento'.³²² Those are the most significant aspects of the value of images in literature. When it comes to talking about images and their role in establishing the aesthetic value of a

³²²Lina Bolzoni 'Presentazione', from Eugenia Paulicelli, *Parola e immagine* (Florence: Edizione Cadmo, 1996), p. VII-VIII.

literary work, studies mainly concentrate on two qualities that are traditionally associated with imagery. On the one hand, they acknowledge an image as something that bears a likeness with the object that it refers to (in other words they refer to the primarily mimetic function of graphic and optical images). On the other hand, they insist on the innovative quality of mental and verbal images that results from interpretative and creative processes, which are involved within them. The mimetic process allows, through the reproduction of objects of the world, the creation of a referential system, which aims among other things, at understanding them. The interpretative and creative processes provide us with methods and ways of looking at the world, which at the same time, enrich it with new notions, connotations and even new images. The making of images is both a reflex and a conscious effort. The process of representation is to be understood as an evolutionary one: it is capable both of preserving some characteristics that allow our conscience to recognize categories or species, and adds new ones or points out at differences that preserve the unique qualities of each specimen.

In October 2010, the literary magazine *L'Atelier du Roman*, organised another of its annual meetings in Nafplio, Greece. The chosen topic was: ‘Y a-t-il un monde en dehors de l'image ? Ou le roman face à l'image omniprésente’ (Is there a world outside the image? Or the novel facing the omnipresent image). Its aim was to open a dialogue, facing the overwhelming dominance of prefabricated images, which appear to dictate the ways of the world, and in the face of this threat, to attempt a different approach, centred around another possible image, the ‘image romanesque’ (novelistic image).

Dimitris Dimitriadis, whose article opens the issue, chooses to challenge the subject with a return to origins, in other words, to etymology. His account, quite short and concise, is more than a mere historical account of words; it reveals several fundamental aspects of the image, which will be relevant to our study.

Εἰκόν (εἰκόνα en grec moderne) a une origine qui se rapporte à quelque chose d'hypothétique, disons de probable ou d'incertain mais qui contient un attente ou un souhait, comme cela devient plus clair avec le mot εἰκασία (*ikassia*), qui vient du verbe εἰκαζω (*ikazō*) (il s'agit évidemment de la même racine), et dans l'expression antique κατά τό εἰκός (*kata to ikos*) qui veut dire ‘selon les apparences’; mais le mot εἰκόν a aussi à faire avec quelque chose de différent, comme nous le donne à voir le mot εἶδωλον (*idolon*) qui signifie la ressemblance ; cette dernière signification, on la rencontre chez Homère lorsqu'il écrit βροτῶν εἶδωλα (*brotōn idōla*) : la représentation des humains ; chez Eschyle qui emploie l'expression εἶδωλον σκιᾶς (*idolon skias*) : la ressemblance d'une ombre.

Εἰκόν (εἰκόνα in modern greek) has an origin which refers to something

hypothetical, let's say probable or uncertain, but which contains an expectation or a wish, as it becomes clearer with the word εικασία (*ikassia*), which comes from the verb εικαζω (*ikazō*) (which obviously has the same root), and from the ancient expression κατά τό εικόζ (*kata to ikos*) which means 'apparently'. But the word εικών is also related to something different, as it is suggested by the word εἶδωλον (*idōlon*) which mean likeness. This last meaning is encountered in Homer when he writes βροτῶν εἶδωλα (*brotōn idōla*) : the representation of humans ; in Aeschylus who uses the expression εἶδωλον σκιᾶς (*idōlon skias*) : the resemblance of a shadow.³²³

This etymological overview is extremely interesting, because it brings out central aspects of the discussion around the image, and reveals that they are inherent to the meaning of the words themselves. The most important characteristic found here is the unreal dimension of the image, which points not at something that already exists but rather considers a possibility or expresses a certain hypothesis about the world. In this sense, the image is a tentative and a cognitive approach. This takes the idea, mentioned earlier, that fiction has a 'carattere artificiale' a step further. Let us make the parallel here with Jesi's discussion about the symbol and Johann Jakob Bahofen's observation that "i simboli dei rilievi funerari romani 'riposano in se stessi' [...] e quindi non rimandano ad alcuna realtà che li trascenda"³²⁴. Those symbols according to Bahofen do not have a double in reality because they point at death, not to a physical death but to the myth of death itself. Interestingly enough, Dimitriadis also wonders about the relation between image and death. 'L'image serait-elle liée à la mort ? Et, plus encore, à la mort volontaire ?' (Is the image bound to death? And more so, to voluntary death?).³²⁵ A further etymological remark reveals another interesting fact: imagination, in Greek φαντασία, is directly affiliated to φάντασμα, which is both appearance and ghost. The image, as a product of the imagination is then both an appearance, a revelation in the real world, and a ghost. Dimitriadis also points to Lessing's essay *Laocoon*, in which he claims that Homer 'a peint le bouclier comme un objet en progrès' (has painted the shield like an object in progress) and 'comme image vivante de l'action' (like the living image of the action).³²⁶ From this perspective it seems that there is a clear line to be drawn between poetry and the visual arts. This argument is of particular interest to us, because it stresses the idea that the poetic image is a work in progress (see also 2.5), which resists fixity, stasis, and that is something Calvino also desired and aspired to. But how does the 'image romanesque' resist the prefabricated image so prominent in our world? Dimitriadis' suggestion is quite clear: because the poetic image involved in the literary process is not a replica of the world it discusses, but rather a

³²³Dimitris Dimitriadis, 'Image/EIKON', *L'Atelier du Roman*, 66 (Flammarion, 2011), p. 15.

³²⁴Jesi, p. 17.

³²⁵Dimitriadis, p. 16

³²⁶Cited in Dimitriadis, pp. 17-18.

living addition to it, it escapes creatively the endless repetition of the dominant visual culture.

When it comes to the dialogue between painting and poetry then, the first will generally become associated with the representation of the visible world, whereas poetry will be concerned with the realm of the invisible, usually that of feelings and ideas. It is important to acknowledge however, that ‘a picture may articulate abstract ideas by means of allegorical imagery, a practice which, as Lessing notes, approaches the notational procedures of writing systems’.³²⁷ In *Painting with Words, Writing with Pictures*, Franco Ricci’s study of Calvino’s work ‘postulates first that Calvino’s narrative is generated by an imagocentric program and, second, that the nature of Calvino’s literary proposal is ekphrastic’. His thesis acknowledges the author’s insistence on the influence that visual images have had on his work. Ricci is very clear on whether to discuss the relation between word and image in Calvino’s work in terms of similarities or differences; he suggests that ‘word and image controversy [...] strikes at the very nature of Calvino’s writing style and his use of imagery and images’.³²⁸ Calvino was probably the critic who discussed most thoroughly the relation between his literary work and the visual realm it is to be associated with. In ‘Visibilità’, he explained: ‘l’unica cosa di cui ero sicuro era che all’origine d’ogni mio racconto c’era un’immagine visuale’.³²⁹ The images that came to his mind developed into stories when he felt that they were significant. Though he is very affirmative about the origins of his fiction he points out that the meaning of this or that image is unclear to him ‘in termini discorsivi o concettuali’.³³⁰ The images, he explains, gradually develop their own potential. This could account for what Ricci calls an imagocentric program, to the extent that visual images are recognised by Calvino as the trigger for his process of writing and that their evolution in conceptual terms still belongs to the realm of imagery, and more specifically to that of mental images. The way Calvino chooses to talk about these images repeats the metaphysical dimension that Simonides gives to them: he talks about their ‘forza di incantamento’ that goes along with the traditional image of the poet, whose inspiration is thought to come from mysterious sources.³³¹ What is certain therefore, is the origin of the fiction, but not the origin of the image itself. In ‘Visibilità’, Calvino asked a question: ‘da dove provengono i messaggi visivi che tu [immaginazione] ricevi, quando essi non sono formati da

³²⁷Franco Ricci, *Painting with Words Writing with Pictures* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), p. 41.

³²⁸Ibid., p. 17.

³²⁹SI, p. 704.

³³⁰Ibid.

³³¹His interpretation of what Dante tries to do, goes along with this idea when he comments: ‘Dunque è il ruolo dell’immaginazione nella *Divina Commedia* che Dante sta cercando di definire, e più precisamente la parte visuale della sua fantasia, precedente o contemporanea all’immaginazione verbale’. Ibid., pp. 698-699.

sensazioni depositate nella memoria?'.³³² His question suggests that there is a level of uncertainty as to the origin of the visual messages that imagination gives birth to, and we find an echo to the previous arguments from Bahofen and Dimitriadis who underline a non-coincidence between certain symbols and poetic images with the real world. In terms of literature, the image does not only intervene before the act of writing, it also comes afterwards; and that is how the image is to be conceived as a ongoing living process. Earlier on in the essay Calvino distinguishes two processes of imagination: 'quello che parte dalla parola e arriva all'immagine visiva e quello che parte dall'immagine visiva e arriva all'espressione verbale'.³³³ This goes along with what Eugenia Paulicelli expresses in the first chapter of her book, in other words that 'la memoria visiva si muta in una memoria scritta che produce a sua volta, nuove immagini visive'.³³⁴ Calvino attributes the passage from word to image to the reader and then, as he explained for himself, the passage from image to word to the writer. This gives the image a capital role in the literary process, which includes the act of writing as well as that of reading. There is an impression that images are recycled and enriched in this sense.

Again in 'Visibilità':

Se ho incluso la Visibilità nel mio elenco di valori da salvare è per avvertire del pericolo che stiamo correndo di perdere una facoltà umana fondamentale: il potere di mettere a fuoco visioni a occhi chiusi, di far scaturire colori e forme d'allineamento di caratteri alfabetici neri d'una pagina bianca, di *pensare* per immagini.³³⁵

When we talk about images in literature we talk about mental and verbal ones; in other words representations of graphic and optical images. The images that are present within a literary creation have already been through a double filtering; which involves the author's understanding of that image and its passage from an abstract form to a written one. On the one hand, the images that are to be found in fiction have a mimetic function, which is faithful to the real image, and on the other hand there is a discrepancy between the original ones and those they are replaced by. The passage from a 'real' image to a written one participates to the tension that is present in any form of fiction.

Let us not forget that Calvino insists thoroughly on the visual quality that literature should have, and presents it as one of the most important and essential qualities to be explored and preserved in the new millennium, and one that is intrinsically linked with the role of the writer. In 'Mondo

³³²Ibid., p. 698.

³³³Ibid., p. 699.

³³⁴ Eugenia Paulicelli, *Parola e immagine : sentieri della scrittura in Leonardo, Marino, Foscolo, Calvino* (Firenze : Edizioni Cadmo, 1996), p3

³³⁵SI, p. 707.

scritto e mondo non scritto’, he wrote: ‘Quello che ci si aspetta da me è che mi guardi intorno e catturi delle immagini rapide di quello che succede, per poi tornare a chinarmi sulla mia scrivania e riprendere il lavoro’.³³⁶ The writer can be considered therefore as a mediator between the images of the world and their representation in the written language. I would like to point out the use of the expression ‘delle immagini rapidi’ in the previous quotation and link it to the preference Calvino had shown in writing short works or at least to his tendency to punctuate his work by short and powerful sections. This recycling is the general outline of how images intervene in and out of the narration. In terms of historical literary context, it is essential to understand Calvino’s particular position towards language in comparison to his contemporaries. The Italian post-war literary world, and more specifically Italian neo-realism, is characterised among other things by the attempt to resolve the problem of the Italian language, which mostly consisted of a literary language that did not correspond to the large variety of dialects, and thus could not fulfil the need for a more global literary language.

‘Cibernetica e fantasmi’ is very interesting in order to establish how Calvino understood the crafting of stories. The essay starts with ‘la narrativa orale primitiva’, and explains that its tools, its images, are limited in number. This imposed limit is the challenge the narrator faces in order to say what he wants to express; it is the origin of the tension present in any literary form. Calvino also adds that ‘il narratore esplorava le possibilità implicite nel proprio linguaggio combinando e permutando le figure e le azioni e gli oggetti in cui queste azioni si potevano esercitare’.³³⁷ This representation of the narrator gives his work an alchemic dimension, where the traditional tools of the alchemist are replaced by images and words. This goes along with a double characteristic Bazzocchi sees in Calvino’s work: he sees his writing as a combination of magic coming from a wizard [stregone] and that of a very strict and meticulous method used by a scientist [scienziato].³³⁸ The alchemist is both a scientific and a magical figure. In the context of image and story, the original image springs from the mystical origins of literature and the story is the result of a complex process of assimilation, combination, adaptation and innovation.

3.1.2. The precise poetics of cosmogony

‘Esattezza’, which is the essay that follows ‘Visibilità’ in *Lezioni Americane*, explains how Calvino understood and dealt with this inherent form of tension. When we read the first sentence of the lecture: ‘La precisione per gli antichi Egizi era simboleggiata da una piuma che serviva da peso sul piatto della

³³⁶SII, p. 1867.

³³⁷SI, p. 206.

³³⁸Antonio Bazzocchi, *L’immaginazione mitologica* (Bologna: Edizioni Pendragon, 1996), p. 83.

bilancia dove si pesano le anime',³³⁹ we will notice that it is very significant that Calvino should have chosen the ancient mythical image of the weighing of souls in ancient Egypt to start discussing the value of exactitude. It is particularly interesting, given the overtly scientific age which he was writing in, that he should attempt to assert himself on a topic like exactitude by means of a mythological image.

Calvino gave a threefold definition of exactitude: '1) un disegno dell'opera ben definito e ben calcolato'.³⁴⁰ This first point insists on the architecture of the literary work. According to Calvino, a literary work must have a design, an ordering mechanism. (see also 3.2). "2) l'evocazione d'immagini visuali nitide, incisive, memorabili; in italiano abbiamo un aggettivo che non esiste in inglese 'icastico', dal greco εικαστικός".³⁴¹ The second point that he makes recycles to some extent his argument about visibility. Exactitude and visibility are thus very closely intertwined in a reflexive manner: the exact quality of a literary work is partly measured by its capacity to evoke memorable visual images. '3) un linguaggio il più preciso possibile come lessico e come resa delle sfumature del pensiero e dell'immaginazione'.³⁴² The third point directly concerns the primary material of literature: language.

It is interesting to note that in this definition of exactitude that Calvino gives, the arguments move from the more general to the more particular; from the general structure of a piece of literature, to its visual quality, and then to its very core.³⁴³

In 'Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto' he suggested that the contemporary man had lost a significant amount of his skill to understand the world through his five senses and that this loss translated into a plague ('peste') that invaded language and which consisted of the growing of abstraction and inexactitude. According to him this is due to the fact that 'il mondo [...] porta su di sé una pesante crosta di discorsi'.³⁴⁴ The word 'crosta' suggest a form of opacity which threatens both the visibility of the world and the accuracy of language. Calvino explained that this threat is mainly due to our moving from the condition of *Homo sapiens* to that of *Homo legens*: 'L'abitudine di leggere ha

³³⁹SI., p. 677.

³⁴⁰Ibid.

³⁴¹Ibid.

³⁴²Ibid

³⁴³Straight after that, Calvino tried to justify the questions that he had chosen to discuss, and wondered whether they could be too obvious to deal with; he asked: 'Perché sento il bisogno di difendere dei valori che a molti potranno sembrare ovvi?' (p.677). Maybe it is worth echoing this question with a claim George Orwell made some 45 years earlier while reviewing Bertrand Russell's *Power*, in 1939, and which may suggest a more general condition of the intellectual in the 20th century: 'If there are certain pages of Mr Bertrand Russell's book, *Power*, which seem rather empty, that is merely to say that we have now sunk to a depth at which the restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men'. Review of *Power: A New Social Analysis* by Bertrand Russell in *Adelphi* (January 1939).

³⁴⁴SII, p. 1869.

trasformato attraverso i secoli l'*Homo sapiens* in *Homo legens*, ma questo *Homo legens* non è detto che sia più sapiente di prima'.³⁴⁵ Reading has become not only a particular human activity but the exclusive process through which mankind perceives the world. In 'Esattezza' we understand that for Calvino literature may be the means by which to cure this plague that infects language: 'Il mio disagio è la perdita di forma che constato nella vita, e a cui cerco d'opporre l'unica difesa che riesco a concepire: un'idea della letteratura'.³⁴⁶

The discomfort raised by orality lies in its immediacy and the difficulty to achieve precision. This problem associated with oral language is, according to Calvino, a contemporary phenomenon, which stretches to others areas, such as visual images and 'the lives of people and the history of nations'. Each of these areas face the pestilence which constantly threatens their existence in a variety of ways. Language is threatened by generic ideas, anonymity, abstraction, diluted meanings, and a loss of expressivity. Visual images are doomed to fade away like traceless dreams; while history becomes formless, random and confused, without beginning nor end.³⁴⁷

In order to prove his argument about exactitude, Calvino discussed Leopardi in his distinctive, subversive way. He tried to turn around Leopardi's argument about vagueness, by suggesting that his poetics might as well be the poetics of vagueness, while still remaining highly exact and meticulous. The precision of poetics is measured by the quality of the visual image produced. Once again, visibility and exactitude are closely intertwined; consolidating in this manner the global structure of the *Le lezioni*.

Calvino noted, that in Leopardi's poetics of vagueness we find the tension between the ideas of absolute forms of time and space, which we cultivate in our minds, and our empirical knowledge. This tension however, does not prevail as anguish in Leopardi's poetry. At the end of the poem 'L'infinito', which he discussed, what remains is a sense of 'dolcezza'.³⁴⁸

In all the following examples that he gave, similar characteristics emerge. He noted that Musil had understood something important, namely that 'problemi matematici che non consentono una soluzione generale ma piuttosto soluzioni singole che, combinate, s'avvicinano alla soluzione generale'.³⁴⁹ Similarly, Roland Barthes was tempted to suggest a *Mathesis Singularis* instead of a *Mathesis Universalis*.³⁵⁰ With Paul Valéry on Edgar Allan Poe, he finally concluded on the idea of

³⁴⁵Ibid.

³⁴⁶SI, p. 679.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 682.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 683.

³⁴⁹Musil in SI., p. 683

³⁵⁰SI., p. 683.

‘cosmogonia, genere letterario prima che speculazione scientifica’ insisting on how Valéry ‘compie una brillante confutazione dell’idea d’universo, che è anche una riaffermazione della forza mitica che ogni immagine di universo porta con sé’.³⁵¹ But let us go back to the idea of the *ménage à trois* (see 2.1). The idea of the universe that is discarded, is associated to the scientific construct. He is not refuting scientific theories or observations, but merely stating that with the proliferation, the division and subdivision of scientific subjects, studying the ‘universe’ as one entity has become obsolete. It is utterly impossible to imagine the ‘universe’ as one under this perspective. Literature comes to play its role precisely at this stage: after the apparent collapse of the notion it can claim a new attempt at universality

Le città invisibili is a book where the role of the image is most prominent. Throughout the novel Calvino discusses several issues that revolve around the problem of images and our conception of the world. Paulicelli also suggests, that ‘*Le città invisibili* sono un testo che per molti aspetti racconta i sussulti della storia, problematizzando le parole su cui regge la narrazione, nell’inscenare diversi spettacoli visivi che sono appunto le città descritte’.³⁵² Marco Polo is entrusted with the task to give an account of the Mongol empire to the Great Kan. This task becomes a way to discuss the process involved in the making of images especially through language. Although it appears that Marco Polo and Kublai Kan do not share the same way of looking at the world, what is indeed common between them is the wish to understand it. The process that results in the making of an image of the world incorporates certain aspects that need to be taken into account and that are discussed in the book, more specifically during the dialogues between the two characters. Making an image involves first of all the process of vision which defines the relation between the object of the observation and the observer himself. Once again, the motivation behind this relation is defined by the observer. It is his desire to understand it and in a certain way to possess it, to incorporate it in his realm of referential points. In order for Marco Polo to express that image afterwards, it is necessary for him to translate it in a language that is recognizable by the Great Kan. Eugenia Paulicelli writes:

Il dialogo tra Kublai Kan e Marco Polo segue e rammenta il processo di visione e di percezione dell’universo, insieme ai suoi possibili. Il ‘tempo grande’, come direbbe Bachtin, di questo romanzo di Calvino risiede nell’aver tracciato mappe diverse di mondi reali e fittizi e di avere espresso il tentativo di fuga o di superamento di ‘una oscura condizione di infelicità, di prigionia quasi del cervello nel suo involucro di pelle e ossa’.³⁵³

³⁵¹Ibid., pp. 686-687.

³⁵²Paulicelli, p. 115.

³⁵³Paulicelli, p. 117.

What is particularly interesting for this study is first, the way in which those images are used in the book, and second, the idea of a desire to overcome certain limitations that we are here to interpret as the essence of Calvino's transcendental aesthetics.

The descriptions of the cities will be interpreted as episodes that are framed by the dialogues between Kublai Kan and Marco Polo. The episode presents a scene, a segment of life, and it implies that there is a before and an after that is left outside the story; it also accounts for brevity. In other words, it can be understood as an attempt that puts the visible forward in order to allude to the infinite amount of things that are invisible. The episode can both be understood as an independent entity as well as a section of a greater whole. When it is understood as a part of a bigger and more complex body some links are formed. Those links bring in the notion of the frame. The latter is a consolidating structure, which is introduced as a cohesive and ordering mechanism. It can be considered to be a counterpart to brevity as well as an aesthetic tool.

In terms of form, the description of the cities could be affiliated to the narrative category of the sketch. Ian Reid explains that 'there is a broad distinction between writing about conditions and writing about events. On the one hand primary emphasis falls on what something, place or person is like; on the other, it falls on what happens'.³⁵⁴ Even if the cities are grouped in thematic or conceptual categories, there is not a plot to be followed from one city to another. In our study this is particularly interesting because the sketch seems to be the narrative form that is closer to drawing than any other. Irving's account for what he wanted to stress in his sketches is quite illuminating for our own study:

the play of thought, and sentiments and language; the weaving in of characters, lightly yet expressively delineated; the familiar and faithful exhibition of scenes in common life; and the half-concealed vein of humor that is often playing through the whole.³⁵⁵

Kublai Kan demands sketches of the cities of his empire, and Marco Polo gives in his sketches all the elements that Irving talks about even if 'the familiar and faithful exhibition of scenes in common life' is not always to be found in the depictions. The major difference that we can point out is brought up by the fact that Marco Polo's cities do not exist. Another aspect of the cities that distances the narration from the archetypal form of the sketch is of course the fantastic dimension that some of those have. In this sense, the narrative form of the sketch might seem somehow misleading. Within the descriptions of the invisible cities there are different layers of fiction to be found, and this is probably the reason why the nature and the function of the cities seem uncertain. The cities are a way to deal

³⁵⁴Ian Reid, *The Short Story* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1980), p.30.

³⁵⁵*Sketch Book*, 1820, cited in Ian Reid, *The Short Story* (London: Methuen & Co, 1980), p.31

with visibility, existence and personal experience, and this is why they are at times to be considered as concrete visual images, at times as mental images and also as verbal ones.

3.1.3. 'Le città e i morti'

In order to have a closer look at how the images function in *Le città invisibili* we will study in more detail some of the cities that are described. Among the different categories of cities that are to be found in the book, there is one Calvino calls 'le città e i morti'. We will analyse all of the five cities that belong to this category: Melania, Adelma, Eusapia, Argia and Laudomia. The main reason that lies behind the choice of this specific category is because in order to deal with the subject of death Calvino uses most of the qualities related to the overcoming of boundaries, which are characteristic of the transcendental aesthetics we have set ourselves to discuss. Another way to justify this choice would be to acknowledge the vast literary but mostly mythological tradition that comes with the subject of death.

Melania is the first of the cities falling into the category of 'le città e i morti' to be described. The name of the city means black; in Greek mythology, Melania was a Corycian nymph, whose name revealed that she commanded over matters of the underworld and the unseen. The original image that defines the particularity of Melania as a city is that of a dialogue between its inhabitants that keeps repeating itself. As it happens in many of Calvino's stories, there is a paradox that is introduced in the story, which needs to be resolved. The main paradox consists in the fact that Melania's identity relies on the perpetual quality of the dialogue between the inhabitants, whereas their lifespan is limited. In order for Melania to survive she needs to overcome the mortality of her inhabitants. The problem is resolved in the following way: 'La popolazione di Melania si rinnova: i dialoganti muoiono a uno a uno e intanto nascono quelli che prenderanno posto a loro volta nel dialogo, chi in una parte chi nell'altra'.³⁵⁶ Melania is similar to a living organism that needs to adapt, in other words to develop specific mechanisms in order to bypass the problems that prevent its normal functioning. It is worth pointing out that the solution does not rely on making the inhabitants immortal but rather to find a way to keep the dialogue going despite their mortality. The processes involved in the adaptation of Melania to the mortality of its inhabitants include: the substitution of the people who die by others in order to fill in the gaps in the dialogue, the redistribution of the roles, the multiplication the roles in the dialogue in order to coincide with the number of the people in the city,

³⁵⁶RRII, p. 426.

or even the division of one person into several different roles. Those processes resemble the ones that Calvino mentions in 'Cibernetica e Fantasmì', when he talks about the solutions that are offered to the narrator (combination, permutation, and multiplication). However, these characteristics do not only allow for the dialogue to go on; they also introduce variations and changes. Calvino ends the description of the city with the following sentence: 'Chi s'affaccia alla piazza in momenti successivi sente che d'atto in atto il dialogo cambia, anche se le vite degli abitanti di Melania sono troppo brevi per accorgersene'.³⁵⁷ The description of Melania is thus closed symmetrically since the story also begins with the point of view of an external observer, who first accounts for the repetition of the same scene and then for the possibility of change. The observer 'si affaccia alla piazza'; he has to see the scene from above.

This specific point of view is quite characteristic of Calvino; we can find it in *Il Barone Rampante*, where Cosimo di Rondò after that crucial day he refused to eat the snails that had been put in front of him he decided to spend the rest of his life living in the trees and watching the world from above, or in 'Il conte di Montecristo', in which Montecristo wants to draw a map of the prison he is in so he can find a way to escape. It is exactly the same desire that governs *Le città invisibili*: 'Solo nei resoconti di Marco Polo, Kublai Kan riusciva a discernere, attraverso le muraglie e le torri destinate a crollare, la filigrana d'un disegno così sottile da sfuggire al morso delle termiti'.³⁵⁸

Another parallel interpretation of the city is possible. Melania is also the memory inscribed in the black of ink, of all those dialogues past, which have been performed by those who died. (Interestingly, from the Ancient Greek meaning of μέλας, which meant 'black', μέλανι comes to mean ink in Modern Greek). The impression of a perennial suspension of the dialogue, and the metaphor of death, can also be understood to take place in the realm of what has been written. In this sense, we can re-write the first sentence of the story: 'A Melania, ogni volta che si entra nella piazza, ci si trova in mezzo a un dialogo' becomes, 'nella città scritta che è la letteratura, ogni volta che si apre un libro, ci si trova in mezzo a un dialogo'. The idea that Melania is inscribed in the written tradition is supported by the characterisation of its inhabitants. We can hear the echo of E. M. Forster's reflections on flat and round characters and point of view in his book *Aspects of the Novel*.

The novelist [...] has a very mixed lot of ingredients to handle. There is the story with its time-sequence [...] there are ninepins about whom he might tell the story, [...] he prefers to tell his story about human beings; he takes over the life by values as well as the life in time. The characters arrive when evoked, but full of the spirit of mutiny. For they have these numerous parallels with people like ourselves, they try to live their own

³⁵⁷Ibid., p. 427.

³⁵⁸Ibid., p. 361.

lives and are consequently often engaged in treason against the main scheme of the book³⁵⁹

In Melania, the time-sequence is imposed by the life-span of its inhabitants, and the characters are indeed invoked to meet the needs of the story, by replacing those who die with new ones who will take their place. The ultimate treason in which the characters of Melania engage is of course that of dying.

As for flat and round characters, Melania also has something to say. All the participants in the dialogue that takes place indefinitely in the city are initially two-dimensional characters that are easily recognisable. 'Flat characters were called 'humours' in the seventeenth century, and are sometimes called types, and sometimes caricatures. In their purest form, they are constructed round a single idea or quality'.³⁶⁰ Indeed the inhabitants of Melania are all described and identified by one unique characteristic: 'il soldato millantatore', 'il parassita', 'il padre avaro', 'la figlia amorosa', 'l'ipocrita', or 'la servetta spiritosa', to name just a few. These types are of course also deeply embedded in literary history and tradition, and the unfolding of the story also partly accounts for their evolution. 'The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way',³⁶¹ and in Melania the inhabitants do so: 'Capita alle volte che un solo dialogante sostenga nello stesso tempo due o più parti: tiranno, benefattore, messaggero; o che una parte sia sdoppiata, moltiplicata, attribuita a cento, a mille abitanti di Melania'.³⁶²

Forster also tells us that the second device the novelist has in his hands in order to meet the challenges imposed by his craft, is the point of view from which he chooses to tell his story. 'The novelist [...] can either describe the characters from outside, as an impartial or partial onlooker; or he can assume omniscience and describe them from within; or he can place himself in the position of one of them and affect to be in the dark as to the motives of the rest'.³⁶³ With Melania, the reader has an opportunity to experience all three of these points of view. At the beginning of the story, the traveller arrives in the middle of the square where the dialogue takes place, while in the last paragraph we are told that the story of Melania looks very different to one who looks at the square from above, and that the inhabitants themselves, within their limited life, cannot be aware of the changes that happen along the way.

The next city described in the book that falls into the category 'le città e i morti' is Adelma.

³⁵⁹E. M. Forster, from *Aspects of the Novel*, 1927, in *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London & New York: Longman, 1972), p. 137.

³⁶⁰Ibid. p. 138.

³⁶¹Ibid. p. 143.

³⁶²RRII, p. 426.

³⁶³Foster, p.143.

Adelma is the city where the traveler sees again those he has known and who have died. The dilemma he confronts is whether to look at those faces he has known or not. When the realm of the dead apparently meets that of the living and all frontiers are shattered, doubt and anxiety become inevitable. The correspondence between the mental images of the people he has known and those he meets in the city is gradually established from the most uncertain to the most absolute way; we can notice the change of figures of certainty or uncertainty all throughout the description of Adelma, we go from 'credetti di riconoscerla', to 'somiagliava', to 'come lui tal quale', to 'era uguale' and finally to 'era mia nonna'. Adelma is a name of Spanish origin that means 'old', and it is no coincidence that the traveller should be reminded of all those old people he had once known. Furthermore, the emotions and reactions that the visiting of Adelma trigger in the traveller are also evocative of old age. He finds himself always facing death, and he is terrified by it, and at the same time his memories become quite blurred and he finds it difficult to interpret similarities and tell people apart.

The traveller's experience in Adelma, points at a specific aspect of images discussed as early as the time of Simonides of Ceos, that which is involved in the process of memory. As far as the latter is concerned, we have suggested that the overlapping of the world of the living and that of the dead results in immediate confusion and anxiety; however it is also the mnemonic process that appears to be defective. The confusing experience of finding oneself in a city like Adelma triggers certain thoughts and leads to making hypotheses that would have never sprung up otherwise. When he appears to have confirmed that the people he meets around the city are those he has known and who are now dead, he thinks: 'Si arriva a un momento nella vita in cui tra la gente che si è conosciuta i morti sono più dei vivi. E la mente si rifiuta di accettare altre fisionomie, altre espressioni: su tutte le facce nuove che incontra, imprime i vecchi calchi, per ognuna trova la maschera che s'adatta di più'.³⁶⁴ This idea that is expressed through the thoughts of Marco Polo echoes the beliefs of other authors such as Borges, who believed that the mind is only capable of a limited amount of metaphors, or Jung, who conducted a comparative study of myths from different backgrounds and came to the conclusion that there are some primordial images in the process of myth-making that are at the source of every other image the oral tradition has produced.

There is another important topic, which belongs to the long literary and mythical tradition of the underworld, and that is the idea of looking at death in the eyes. The Ancient Greek myth of Medusa tells us that it is impossible to look at her in the eyes and survive, and it is precisely this that is discussed in the story: 'in un caso o nell'altro è meglio che non insista a guardarli'. Since the

³⁶⁴RRII, p. 439.

traveler has looked at those dead people he has known ('ma non staccavo gli occhi da loro'), his last thoughts become inevitable: 'è segno che sono morto anch'io'.³⁶⁵ Fabio Pierangeli sees in fact, a more general association of the book to the myth of Medusa: 'Ne *Le città invisibili* la lotta tra Perseo e Medusa, solo più tardi individuata come simbolo di una poetica, giunge ad un aspro confronto. È un libro di echi infiniti, di libera fantasia e insieme di estrema nostalgia'.³⁶⁶

Eusapia has its own particular way of dealing with the issue of the afterlife, and its description is very close to being a criticism of how our own culture has prevailed upon this matter. In the beginning we are told that in order to make the passage to the afterlife somewhat less abrupt, the inhabitants of Eusapia have built an identical city to theirs below the ground, where the dead keep their activities and sometimes find themselves in a different, more pleasant fate than the one they had while they were still alive. Eusapia (Eusebia), means pious, and in the city there is a specific group of people who is responsible for accompanying the dead to their new realm.³⁶⁷ They are first described as a brotherhood ('confraternita'), they are then referred to as a congregation ('congregazione'). Whereas the word brotherhood is more generic and indicates a group of people that share the same occupation, the word congregation implies that the 'incappucciati' share the same faith and are related to the same church. The term brotherhood and its association with some form of secret knowledge, shared and protected by the members of the society, also recalls the orders of secret societies (see also 1.3.2 above). While in Bacon's portrayal of Salomon's House, it is scientific knowledge that is concerned, in Eusapia, the brotherhood is an authority in matters of the after-life. Although the words religion or church, are not to be found in the text, the description of the city of Eusapia clearly discusses the role of an established religious organization in matters of faith, especially those that are related to the belief in an afterlife. The difference that the congregation makes comes from the fact that it establishes itself as the absolute authority as far as what happens in the city underground is concerned. The members of the congregation are the only ones allowed in there, therefore if the inhabitants of Eusapia want to know about the city that they will go to in the afterlife they have to take their word for granted. If there is a criticism to be made on such an established order it consists in the fact that whereas the problem of the after life is a matter of general concern; after all, we are told that it was the

³⁶⁵Ibid.

³⁶⁶Fabio Pierangeli, *Italo Calvino: la metamorfosi e l'idea del nulla*, Iride 16 (Rubbettino Editore, 1997), p. 73.

³⁶⁷Another relevant reference to the name of the city can be made to Eusapia Palladino (1854-1918), who was a spiritual medium from Naples. She was famous around Europe (Italy, France, Germany, Poland and Russia) for her performance during which she did, among other things, materialise the dead and communicate with them.

inhabitants of Eusapia that built a copy of their city underground, and yet, after a while, that kind of knowledge is restricted to a very limited group of people. This results in a gradual confusion of norms. First, the congregation creates a rather mystic narrative around itself, which works as a form of enhancement and protection for their power: ‘lasciano credere che alcuni di loro siano già morti e continuano a andare su e giù. Certo, l’autorità di questa congregazione sull’Eusapia dei vivi è molto estesa’.³⁶⁸ Their apparent religious devotion is in fact an obscene hypocritical display of virtue that serves the sole purpose of keeping them in power. The use of the word ‘certo’ makes of this authority a factual statement: such a consequence is inevitable when knowledge is thus restricted to the few. After having spread the idea that they are obscurely different and more powerful than the rest of the people of Eusapia, the congregation goes on to blur the image of the Eusapia of the dead, which only they are allowed access. In other words they create yet another narrative that completely reshapes the common depiction of the other city underground. The narrative is so powerful that it even results in the reversal of the order of things: whereas at first it was the Eusapia underground that was made in Eusapia’s own image and likeness, gradually the copying process changes direction: ‘Così l’Eusapia dei vivi ha preso a copiare la sua copia sotterranea’.³⁶⁹ The last paragraph shows that the confusion that results from this change of order is ultimate: ‘Dicono che questo è solo adesso che accade: in realtà sarebbero stati i morti a costruire l’Eusapia di sopra a somiglianza della loro città. Dicono che nelle due città gemelle non ci sia più modo di sapere quali sono i vivi e quali i morti’.³⁷⁰ If we bear in mind that the congregation is responsible for the new conception of the relation between the city above the earth and the one below, it is in fact they who have created the new Eusapia of the living in the image of their narration. Another level of interpretation consists in understanding how in general, our reality, and the choices that we make about our terrestrial life, are very often conditioned by the image that we make ourselves of an after-life. For example, for a Christian who aspires to go to Heaven, the way he lives his life on the living side of the world will be crucial when judgement finally comes. This is true of religious belief in general, with the eyes set on the eternal, we decide what values and what rules we are going to live by. Sometimes, the after-life is a utopian construct, and then we realise that the utopian vision lives side by side with our common every-day life. Yet as Mario Barenghi notes, the duplication of reality and its relation to the utopian figure, shifts from the first to the second period of Calvino's literary creation. For Cosimo, the detachment and the projection of an ideal space between the branches was rather salutary, on the other hand, in his later fiction ‘la figura

³⁶⁸RRII, p. 453.

³⁶⁹Ibid.

³⁷⁰Ibid.

della duplicazione del reale perde ogni carattere costruttivo, utopico: esprime piuttosto uno smarrimento crescente circa la natura stessa del reale, un dubbio angoscioso che investe il proprio medesimo essere'.³⁷¹

Argia, the fourth city of the category, is described as a city that has been constructed to be covered by tons of soil. Its darkness and density make it motionless and impenetrable to all the senses. It is therefore the city of the underworld par excellence: 'i luoghi sono deserti'.³⁷² No one from above can testify to its existence, because no one can claim to have visited it and come back to describe it. The description of Argia is also the shortest of the five; this is quite significant since the truth is that there is not much that can be told about a city that no one knows anything about. So when it comes to discussing its existence the answer is very simple and absolute: 'non resta che crederci'.³⁷³ We can also assume that Calvino is making a statement here: that all matters of pure faith exclusively belong to a personal choice and are not or cannot be discussed or debated upon within a literary context. Paradoxically, the name Argia means 'light'. We can assume that the discrepancy between the meaning of the name of the city and its dark and viscous subterranean quality is a reflection on the nature of faith, which stands beyond the dictates of material measurement and scientific observation.

Laudomia is the fifth and last in the category of 'le città e i morti'. Laudomia is related to two other cities: the Laudomia of the dead and that of those still unborn. In this section Calvino appears to suggest that in the conception that we have of life, if the three dimensions that we have for time – past, present and future – do not coexist they are at least perpetually present in our concerns. The importance that the people of Laudomia give both to past and future is reflected in the size of those sibling cities: 'Giustamente Laudomia assegna una residenza altrettanto vasta a coloro che ancora devono nascere'.³⁷⁴ It is very interesting to note here, that what begins as an abstract conception is translated into an image of a somewhat measurable size. The issues raised by Laudomia are the main philosophical questions that humankind has always pondered upon. The function of the two other cities that exist side by side with the present Laudomia have a very specific function that is stated twice in the description:

E per sentirsi sicura la Laudomia viva ha bisogno di cercare nella
Laudomia dei morti la spiegazione di se stessa, anche a rischio di trovarvi

³⁷¹Mario Barenghi, *Italo Calvino, le linee e i margini*, p. 47.

³⁷²RRII, p. 465.

³⁷³Ibid.

³⁷⁴Ibid., p. 477.

di più o di meno: spiegazioni per più d'una Laudomia, per città diverse che potevano essere e non sono state, o ragioni parziali, contraddittorie, delusive [...] ed è sempre di sé che chiedono i vivi.³⁷⁵

The other two cities are meant to help the living understand the meaning of their own existence; in other words it is the question of *γνώθι σαυτόν* par excellence that prevails in the mind and concerns of the inhabitants of Laudomia.³⁷⁶ Aside from the creation of the image of a triple city that opens a discussion on self-knowledge, Calvino also includes the image of an hourglass in order to reflect the fear that the end of human existence as we know it might come. The image of the sand, which is dear to the author and which he has used on several occasions, conveys ideas such as how small our existence is compared to that of the universe, or the passing of time, or even that every grain of sand regardless of its size is a separate entity in its own.³⁷⁷

Through five distinct images of cities that are in one way or another related to the dead, Calvino has managed to discuss different aspects of this subject, such as the perpetuation of life, the problem of dealing with death, the problematic establishment of authorities in matters of faith, literature's handicap to convincingly and significantly discuss the afterlife, and the never ending quest for self-knowledge that characterizes and distinguishes humanity.

On a more generic scale, it is clear that in this book Calvino is very interested not only in the origins of the story and the power of mental and literary images, but also in the older forms of short fiction. The descriptions of the cities belong in terms of form to the long history of the short story, starting even from its pre-verbal origins. Some short-story critics believe that the origins of the genre are to be found back in the prehistoric cave-murals. This primitive form of art is indeed the first encounter with an effort to render 'the familiar and faithful exhibition of scenes in common life' (see also 3.1.2).³⁷⁸

3.1.4. Emblems and literary topoï

Now that we have mentioned the role of the image of the cities in terms of short fiction, let us discuss the literary effect that they have. In 'Rapidità', from *Lezioni americane*, Calvino chooses to start from a story about Charlemagne and a magic ring. He explains that the ring is the magic object that keeps everything together. In this aspect it is particularly interesting to study the equivalent role that the

³⁷⁵Ibid., pp. 477-478.

³⁷⁶ The subjects of self-knowledge and multiplicity that are raised by the city of Laudomia will be discussed in more detail along with other pieces of fiction and essays in the last section of this thesis.

³⁷⁷ See Francesco Muzzioli, 'Polvere di utopia', *Nuova Corrente XXXIV* ed. by Mario Boselli, 99 (1987), 147-156. Muzzioli associates the image of sand with the idea of 'utopia pulviscolare' and Calvino's tendency for micro-structures, or miniaturisation.

³⁷⁸ Ian Reid, p.31

image of the city has in *Le città invisibili*. It is unquestionable that the frame of the book lies within the communication between Marco Polo and Kublai Kan. In this case, it is the conversation about the invisible cities that has an effect of incantation. An incantation is a spoken charm. In *Le città invisibili* the charm consists in the emotional bond that is created between the two characters and between them and the cities. The cities Marco Polo describes to Kublai Kan do not exist, and the emperor accuses at times his messenger of falling into melancholy instead of reporting the state of different regions of his empire: 'Perché indugi in melanconie inessenziali? Perché nascondi all'imperatore la grandezza del suo destino?'.³⁷⁹ Here the uncertainty concerns the way in which Marco describes the cities, as well as the very nature of those cities. They are at times part of Marco's memories, at times topoi of imagination, or even projections of his desires. Qualifying them therefore as invisible might refer to the fact that they correspond to different levels of reality and that they cannot be *seen* or perceived from one single point of view. Where does the melancholy that the Kan talks about come from? Jean-Paul Manganaro describes the cities as a series of representations of women. He insists: 'elles ont des noms de femmes, des noms antiques et purs'.³⁸⁰ Their ancient names and their purity give the cities a utopian dimension at times, often associated with fantastic elements; it is because of this that Kublai Kan accuses Marco Polo of an omnipresence of melancholy in his descriptions. The female quality of the cities is particularly interesting in order to understand the function of the images of the cities. Being represented as women the cities are emblems of otherness, but also symbols of what is not present and what is not *in* the present. One single image suffices to discuss otherness, time and space. This is the fundamental transcendental quality of the image. In 'Gli dèi della città' (1975), Calvino's notes echo Manganaro's interpretation of the names of the cities:

Gi antichi rappresentavano lo spirito della città, con quel tanto di vaghezza e quel tanto di precisione che l'operazione comporta, evocando i nomi degli dèi che avevano presieduto alla sua fondazione: nomi che equivalevano a personificazioni d'elementi ambientali, un corso d'acqua, una struttura del suolo, un tipo di vegetazione, che dovevano garantire della sua persistenza come immagine attraverso tutte le trasformazioni successive, come forza estetica ma anche come emblema di una società ideale.³⁸¹

The names of Calvino's invisible cities bear in them that same ancient function, they are the spirit of the city. There is a specific word of this passage that is also to be found in *Le città invisibili*, and which accounts for the inalienable quality of certain images: 'emblemì'. That is exactly what those cities become in the mind of the Kan as Polo describes them. At the end of the first chapter

³⁷⁹ RRII, p. 406.

³⁸⁰ Jean-Paul Manganaro *Italo Calvino, Les Contemporains* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2000), p. 132.

³⁸¹ SI, p. 350.

Calvino writes: ‘Ma, palese o oscuro che fosse, tutto quel che Marco mostrava aveva il potere degli emblemi, che una volta visti non si possono dimenticare né confondere’.³⁸² The quality of Marco’s descriptions is measured by its capacity to remain carved into his audience’s memory. The last paragraph of the chapter is also a representation of the way literature progresses. The communication between the Kan and Marco Polo evolves by recalling the emblems that have already been established as given between them and new elements add up to the original one thus giving the first emblem a new sense: ‘e insieme aggiungeva all’emblema un nuovo senso’.³⁸³ Emblems have therefore both inalienable characteristics as well as the possibility of novelty. They are in other words the perfect example of evolution. In biology the cell has exactly the same properties: it is a unitary living organism that is both responsible for the perpetrations of some characteristics as well the inclusion of new ones. It is easier now to understand why the cities are related to issues such as memory or desire. Because they assure preservation they allow the process of memory to take place, and because they leave space for change and mutations, desire, or in other words the projection of subjectivity, is made possible. Memory and the projection of subjectivity are not only areas of psychology, they are particularly important for the creative literary process. With this book Calvino seems to suggest that when it comes to literature, if we consider image as primary material, it is the qualities of the emblem that are responsible for the evolutionary potential of literature. The power of the emblems is expressed in all its greatness at the end of the first chapter:

- Il giorno in cui conoscerò tutti gli emblemi, - chiese a Marco, - riuscirò a possedere il mio impero, finalmente?
E il veneziano: - Sire, non lo credere: quel giorno sarai tu stesso emblema tra gli emblemi.³⁸⁴

Because of their intrinsic representative and evolutionary qualities, the emblems can incorporate in their web of significance even those who have created them.

The fact that Marco Polo and Kublai Kan do not share the same language is important in the understanding of the establishment of their communication. In order to give the Kan an idea of the cities that he wants to describe to him is forced to make gestures and use objects. The omnipresence of concrete visual images is once again stated. It is only after the visual dimension has been established, and symbolical meanings start to be attributed to each city that the descriptions can be enriched by new images and therefore new symbols. Slowly Marco Polo and the Kan start sharing verbal communication as well, and their conversations become more complex. However, there is another

³⁸²RRII, p. 374.

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

form of melancholy that emerges from this communication: both interlocutors are at times ill-at-ease with words. There is a feeling that words betray them and the images they want to convey, and at times they even try to return to their first form of communication, which appeared purer.

Through the effort to describe the cities, and more generally through the evolution of the communication between Marco Polo and Kublai Kan the story of literature is told. Marco Belpoliti's book, *L'occhio di Calvino* is one of the most interesting surveys on the issue of the visual in Calvino, and some of the points that he has made are very relevant to this thesis. In a section called 'La mappa del mondo', he discusses the relation that is established in *Le città invisibili* between writing and the world, especially in terms of cartography. He suggests that, Calvino 'con *Le città invisibili* ha cercato di piegare il foglio-mondo verso l'interno, compiendo il tragitto contrario rispetto a quello tentato in precedenza: disegnare il mondo mediante la scrittura: ora invece disegna la scrittura mediante il mondo'.³⁸⁵

3.2 The frame: a consolidating and aesthetic mechanism

Anarchism adjures us to be bold creative artists, and care for no laws or limits. But it is impossible to be an artist and not care for laws and limits. Art is limitation; the essence of every picture is the frame.³⁸⁶

What is then the relation between the cities, the world and how Marco sees it and narrates it? The collection of cities functions, among other things that we have discussed, as an alter ego for Marco Polo. We know that they do not exist but that they are products of his imagination, projections of desires, memories, and more generally of his mindscape and his understanding of the world. The Kan tries at different stages to have Polo describe to him the cities as they really are, in other words he asks him to get rid of his utterly subjective accounts of his empire. By insisting on his own way of doing things, Polo somewhat excludes even the eventuality of being able to do as the Kan demands. The images that he has to describe can only be filtered by his own understanding. There is particular reference in the book to what the function of the cities might be: 'L'altrove è uno specchio in negativo. Il viaggiatore riconosce il poco che è suo, scoprendo il molto che non ha avuto e non avrà'.³⁸⁷ This negative reflection is significant for Marco Polo because these cities are a result of how he interprets the world and how he projects his subjectivity onto it, but they are also important for the Kan because through this process of communication he tries to understand the mechanisms that lead to Marco

³⁸⁵ Marco Belpoliti, *L'occhio di Calvino* (Einaudi, 1996), pp. 75-76.

³⁸⁶ G.K. Chesterton, Chapter III. 'The Suicide of Thought', *Orthodoxy*, September 28, 2005
<<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16769/16769-h/16769-h.htm>>

³⁸⁷ RRII, p. 379.

Polo's *Weltanschauung*. The choice to reveal Marco Polo's characteristic way of looking at the world through invisible cities might seem peculiar. However, if we combine the sentence that has been quoted above and the title of the book we might gather some explanations. The title tells us that the cities that are described to the Kan and to the reader are invisible. This can be interpreted in two different ways: that invisibility is an intrinsic quality of the cities, and/or that the eye that looks at them is insufficiently sensitive in order to see them. The double characteristic of the invisibility of the cities is closely related to the traveller's way of looking at the world. The visibility/invisibility of the outside becomes a criterion for the traveller in order to understand inside characteristics that go beyond the senses. In other words Calvino's method of approach is very similar to that of the traveller: it works in a retrospective way. He starts from an image in order to understand vision, and then analyses vision in order to reveal what lies behind it. Let us note here that there is a quite characteristic uncertainty about the nature and function of the invisible cities that also reflects the complexity of human nature that lies behind it as well as the complexity of the process of literary creation. Franco Ricci in his article 'De Chirico City: Calvinian Ambulations' says that "Calvino's painterly urge stems from a profound interest in what Arnheim calls 'the intelligence of perception' where 'vision is the primary medium of thought'"³⁸⁸. If we combine this information with what has been said before we can easily understand why the visibility/invisibility of the cities is immensely important for the understanding of Polo's *Weltanschauung*: the descriptions of the cities reveal what he can and what he cannot see of the world. 'Il poco che è suo' and 'il molto che non ha avuto e non avrà' is therefore a result of what his 'intelligence of perception' can and cannot achieve.

We have already suggested that the cities are part of Marco Polo's mindscape, it is therefore easier now to understand why every time that the Kan interferes with the act of telling the cities he is in several different ways discouraged by Polo. What holds the cities together is not only their power of incantation for the Kan, but also the fact that are intrinsically linked with Marco Polo's inner world. This dimension of the book brings us to properly discuss the issue of the frame of *Le città invisibili*.

The function of the frame is to consolidate the pieces of a work and make them stand as a whole. In order to achieve consolidation some links must be formed. Some of them occur naturally and others are imposed by the writer in order to make the book appear as a single entity. *Le città invisibili* is probably the book in which the issue of the frame is the most interesting to study. In 'Esattezza' Calvino explains:

³⁸⁸Franco Ricci 'De Chirico City: Calvinian Ambulations', *The Modern Language Review*, 91.1, (Jan., 1996), p. 81.

Un simbolo più complesso, che mi ha dato le maggiori possibilità di esprimere la tensione tra razionalità geometrica e groviglio delle esistenze umane è quello della città. Il mio libro in cui credo d'aver detto più cose resta *Le città invisibili*, perché ho potuto concentrare su un unico simbolo tutte le mie riflessioni, le mie esperienze, le mie congetture; e perché ho costruito una struttura sfaccettata in cui ogni breve testo sta vicino agli altri in una successione che non implica una consequenzialità o una gerarchia ma una rete entro la quale si possono tracciare molteplici percorsi e ricavare conclusioni plurime e ramificate.³⁸⁹

The first important information that comes from this quote is related to the 'much-in-little' proposition of the short story. Calvino tells us that he values the book for its capacity to use one single symbol in order to convey a multitude of ideas. The quality of the object that makes the frame results from its all-inclusive dimension and its capacity to bring together two opposite aspects of the world: 'razionalità geometrica e groviglio delle esistenze umane'. We can deduce that the first thing that makes a good frame is a powerful image. The other aspect that must be pointed out is that there is a mechanism constructed around the symbol of the city, which allows it to reveal all its potential. Calvino insists that the mechanism he has constructed does not regroup the texts on a vertical level ('non implica una consequenzialità o una gerarchia') but on a horizontal one ('una rete entro la quale si possono tracciare molteplici percorsi'). In a review that appears in a collection of essays on *Le città invisibili: la visione dell'invisibile*, Gianni Celati suggests that:

Il libro è dunque una metafora spaziale (vedi alla fine l'atlante) prima che temporale; non libro sulle memorie evocate dalle tracce della scrittura, ma sulla spaziatura delle tracce. Ridurre il tempo a spazio della memoria è negare che la storia o le storie abbiano qualche analogia con la dimensione dell'io, che è temporale, che è la memoria. Quindi accettare la pura exteriorità del libro come oggetto.³⁹⁰

In *Le città invisibili* the frame of the book is to be understood and analysed on different levels. One of the links that are formed results from the common theme of the city, which all of Marco Polo's tales share. This is probably the most obvious link that is to be made. Another link consists of the different categories that regroup several cities in conceptual terms, such as 'memory', 'desire', or 'signs'. Understanding the book, and more specifically its frame, on a spatial level rather than on a temporal one is what allows the figure of the diamond to stand out from the sections of the work. It is all the more important to conceive it in such a way since what is supposed to result from Marco Polo's tales is the depiction of an empire. Even if this depiction does not correspond to the level of reality that the Kan desires, it does render the mapping of Polo's experience and understanding of the world.

³⁸⁹SI, p. 691.

³⁹⁰ Gianni Celati, 'Recensione Inedita', *La visione dell'invisibile: Saggi e materiali su Le città invisibili di Italo Calvino*, ed. by Mario Barenghi, Gianni Canova and Bruno Falchetto (Mondadori, 2002), p. 108.

Celati's idea that the book is more about space than time goes along with Calvino's insistence that multiple *itineraries* can be traced through the frame of the book. An interesting analysis of the referential framework on which the book is written is to be found in Federica Pedriali's essay 'Under the Rule of the Great Khan: on Polo, Calvino and the Description of the World'.³⁹¹ She reminds us of an already troubled visibility of the book's background. Firstly, the missing Polo manuscript. Secondly, the problematic duality of the Polo/Rustichello authorship. Thirdly, the inherent mysterious quality of the Western travel narrative in the East. The real problem is therefore to understand how exactitude can still claim to be part of *Le città*.

We have already briefly discussed the issue of the inherent tension that exists in fiction, and part of the function of the frame is directly associated with this issue. In 'Esattezza' Calvino confesses that

In realtà sempre la mia scrittura si è trovata di fronte due strade divergenti che corrispondono a due diversi tipi di conoscenza: una che si muove nello spazio mentale d'una razionalità scorporata, dove si possono tracciare linee che congiungono punti, proiezioni, forme astratte, vettori di forze; l'altra che si muove in uno spazio gremito di oggetti e cerca di creare un equivalente verbale di quello spazio riempiendo la pagina di parole, con uno sforzo di adeguamento minuzioso dello scritto al non scritto, alla totalità del dicibile e del non dicibile.³⁹²

This long sentence reveals three aspects that are of utmost importance to our study. To begin with, it defines the two poles of the tension, which are on the one hand rational knowledge and on the other one empirical knowledge. The next facet that deserves attention is that Calvino chooses to describe knowledge as a force that moves within two different spaces. Finally it is necessary to distinguish that reason creates links whereas empirical knowledge recognises diversity. Calvino ironically presents the challenge of combining those two diverging processes as a personal one; however it seems rather natural to assume that rational and empirical knowledge are the two basic faculties of human understanding. In terms of fiction, the episode is related to the fragmented experience of life, whereas the frame is associated with the rational effort to bring things together in recognisable forms and constructs. Calvino's choice to define knowledge within a spatial context and more specifically within a bi-dimensional one is rather significant since it points both generally at a visual level and at the spatial possibilities offered by a page, where writing is materialised on bi-dimensional space).

The notion of the frame itself assumes two different dimensions that somehow correspond to the ones mentioned above. A frame can be understood on a conceptual and therefore abstract level as a

³⁹¹Federica Pedriali, *La farmacia degli incurabili. Da Collodi a Calvino* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 2006), pp. 21-33.

³⁹²SI, p. 679.

system of assumptions and principles, which give meaning to a whole. It can also be conceived as a more concrete construction, a skeleton, which works as a more or less obvious supporting structure that provides, in this case, a work of art its shape. We may assume that it is precisely this spatial expression of the frame that allows Gianni Celati to drive to the conclusion that in *Le città invisibili* Calvino wishes the reader to accept ‘la pura esteriorità del libro come oggetto’. Moving to the end of the chapter V, there is a very short dialogue between Marco Polo and Kublai Kan, which deals directly with the issue of the frame:

*Marco Polo descrive un ponte, pietra per pietra.
- Ma qual è la pietra che sostiene il ponte? – chiede Kublai Kan.
- Il ponte non è sostenuto da questa o quella pietra, – risponde Marco, –
ma dalla linea dell’arco che esse formano.
Kublai Kan rimase silenzioso, riflettendo. Poi soggiunge: – Perché mi
parli delle pietre? È solo dell’arco che m’importa.
Polo risponde: – Senza pietre non c’è arco.³⁹³*

When the Kan asks Polo to talk about the arch and not about the stones that sustain it, he probably means that he wants to have a global overview of the construct; he would rather have Polo had a holistic approach when telling stories. In literary terms this could be associated with the choice between writing short and writing fragmented. Polo explains to the Kan that the arch is inconceivable without the stones, in other words that the whole cannot be told without referring to the parts.

There are two images that correspond to the different dimensions of the frame. The first one, which we have already mentioned, is that of the diamond and which corresponds to the structure with a concrete shape. The other one is the image of the chess game, which works on the basis of a geometrical space governed by arbitrary rules. Both those images reflect the numerous possibilities of meaning and interpretation that the symbol of the city allows. The crystal combines a multitude of mirroring effects in a very regular and organized form. When Calvino talks about *Le città invisibili* in ‘Esattezza’ he insists that the cities are never what they seem, they always point to their contrary, or to their own image and every possible interpretation of it that might occur: ‘Nelle *Città invisibili* ogni concetto e ogni valore si rivela duplice: anche l’esattezza’.³⁹⁴ Probably one of the most explicit passages expressing this idea is to be found in the description of the city of Valdrada:

Gli antichi costruirono Valdrada sulle rive d’un lago con case tutte verande una sopra l’altra e vie alte che affacciano sull’acqua i parapetti a balaustra. Così il viaggiatore vede arrivando due città: una diritta sopra il lago e una capovolta. Non esiste o avviene cosa nell’una Valdrada che l’altra Valdrada non ripeta, perché la città fu costruita in modo che ogni

³⁹³RRII, p. 428.

³⁹⁴SI, p. 670.

suo punto fosse riflesso dal suo specchio.³⁹⁵

The question that may be asked, is why choose such a versatile image to consolidate the work. Neither the crystal nor the chess game, allow an impression of certainty. Calvino believes that it is precisely the flexibility of the symbol that is used that can tend towards exactitude. It appears though that the choice is not only functional but aesthetic as well. In the opening of the book Calvino writes: ‘Solo nei resoconti di Marco Polo, Kublai Kan riusciva a discernere, attraverso le muraglie e le torri destinate a crollare, la filigrana d’un disegno così sottile da sfuggire al morso delle termiti’.³⁹⁶ ‘La filigrana d’un disegno’ reminds us of the vagueness that Calvino praises in Leopardi’s poetry and which here also characterises the quality of the frame. Let us note that instead of the importance of detail that prevails in the depiction of specific episodes, when it comes to the frame, the quality of the image is completely different. The emblems that Marco Polo presents to Kublai Kan ‘una volta visti non si possono dimenticare né confondere’, but the general impression of his tales is hidden behind an opaque veil.³⁹⁷

In the first section we briefly discussed the issue of beginning and ending a story; the limits of the story in terms of narration are directly related to the frame of the work. Calvino has clearly stated that for him it is the beginning of the story that plays the most important role, whereas the end is merely there to refer back to it and mark the importance of some details contained in the story. The incipit of *Le città invisibili* expresses Kublai Kan’s fear facing the threatening decomposition of his empire and his desire and hope to avoid fatality through Marco Polo’s story-telling. Joyce coined the notion of ‘epiphany’, the moment of clarity of a character, which usually occurred towards the end of a story; but here the story begins with one:

è il momento disperato in cui si scopre che quest’impero che ci era sembrato la somma di tutte le meraviglie è lo sfacelo senza fine né forma, che la sua corruzione è troppo incancrenita perché il nostro scettro possa mettervi riparo, che il trionfo sui sovrani avversari ci ha fatto eredi della loro lunga rovina.³⁹⁸

The reader is given the impression from the very beginning of the book that both Marco Polo and Kublai Kan are about to engage in a process that is bound to fail because the problem has already taken irreversible proportions. The very first sentence of the incipit settles the reading pact on the basis of ‘curiosità e attenzione’ and not on credibility (‘Non è detto che Kublai Kan creda a tutto

³⁹⁵RRII, p. 399.

³⁹⁶Ibid., p. 369.

³⁹⁷Ibid., p. 374.

³⁹⁸Ibid., p. 361.

quello che dice Marco Polo’).³⁹⁹ There seems to be an underlying suggestion that the aim of the story, and more generally of literature, should not be to offer knowledge about the world but to keep alive the interest and the desire to understand it. This interest and desire to know and tell the world is Calvino’s conception of what being a writer is about and which is most clearly expressed in ‘Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto’. The last dialogue between Marco and the Great Kan confirms the fear that already existed and was clearly expressed since the first page: they do indeed find themselves in a living Hell from which there is no possible escape. It appears therefore that the situation has not evolved. However Marco Polo does suggest that there are ways not to suffer from the hellish reality that constantly weighs on their shoulders:

L'inferno dei viventi non è qualcosa che sarà; se ce n'è uno, è quello che è già qui, l'inferno che abitiamo tutti i giorni, che formiamo stando insieme. Due modi ci sono per non soffrirne. Il primo riesce facile a molti: accettare l'inferno e diventarne parte fino al punto di non vederlo più. Il secondo è rischioso ed esige attenzione e apprendimento continui: cercare e saper riconoscere chi e cosa, in mezzo all'inferno, non è inferno, e farlo durare, e dargli spazio.⁴⁰⁰

This suggestion proposes a general attitude towards life, but it is also an attempt to define literature. ‘Cercare e saper riconoscere’, refers to the process of discrimination, which is inevitable when deciding to write a story; some elements have to be isolated from the rest in order to make them stand out. Calvino also hints at the main criterion of this choice: what has to stand out is ‘chi e cosa, in mezzo all'inferno non è inferno’. Finally he explains that the way to do it is to ‘farlo durare, e dargli spazio’. It is precisely what literature does: the space that is given to those things, which stand out from an omnipresent hell, is materialised on the page where the words are written; likewise the time that is given to them corresponds the time that is taken to write them and to read them. This is probably one of the most important characteristics of the frame of a work of literature, which consists in defining and delimiting the space and the time, which is going to be dedicated to those issues that the book intends to deal with.

3.3 Writing the ideal city

3.3.1. ‘Città scritta’ and ‘città pensata’

I would like to discuss now, as both a conclusion and an opening to this study of *Le città invisibili*, two additional pieces, ‘La città scritta: epigrafi e graffiti’ (1980), and ‘La città pensata: la misura degli

³⁹⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰RRII, pp. 497-498.

spazi' (1982); they can be found in the second section of *Collezione di sabbia* (1984) (named 'Il Raggio dello Sguardo').

In 'La città scritta', Calvino retraces the history and evolution of inscriptions and of writing in general in Italian cities, with a reference to Armando Petrucci's essay 'La scrittura fra ideologia e rappresentazione'. Calvino starts his essay with an interesting observation:

Quando pensiamo a una città romana dei tempi dell'Impero immaginiamo colonnati di templi, archi di trionfo, terme circhi teatri, monumenti equestri, busti ed erme, bassorilievi. Non ci viene in mente che in questa muta scenografia di pietra manca l'elemento che era il più caratterizzante, anche visualmente, della cultura latina: la scrittura.⁴⁰¹

The idea that we make ourselves of the ancient Roman city is therefore partly a misconception; we have exclusively associated it with its visual architectural equivalent, but in our memory we have stripped it of its written substance. This error is also a great one given the omnipresence of the written word in various forms: 'ora pubblicitarie, ora politiche, ora funerarie, ora celebrative, ora pubbliche, ora privatissime, di appunto o di insulto, o di scherzoso ricordo'.⁴⁰² Inscription was an organic constituent of the city, exposed in the open to the public eye, assuming a variety of functions, serving as frame of reference and a working commentary.

During medieval times, the city changed and so did writing. It disappeared from the public sphere, both because reading and writing were only accessible to small groups, and because the church was established as the only institution which produced a discourse on the world. It mainly did so through oral tradition, except for the very secluded cells of medieval monasteries, where a different kind of writing still survived. The cultural shift which takes place from Antiquity to the Middle Ages also sees the emergence of a new written dichotomy. On the one hand we have the geometrical clarity of the epigraphs, characterised by their capital structure, and on the other hand we have the Gothic, tortuous, intricate appearance of the written alphabet as it is to be found in medieval books. In the 1400's, the once solid capital letters of the Roman alphabet, undergo a new adventure, and witness their shape change, become more plastic, less static. Their form and representation changes and this very change is a reflection of a profound modification in the concept of writing itself. With the establishment of typography, and more specifically the 'arte tipografica', the style and appearance of the printed page invents a new written geography and represents a true aesthetic proposal, not lacking a strong authoritarian voice. It is on the premises laid down by print that the baroque is allowed to flourish, along with a rising interest for fiction. What is born from this evolution of writing and the

⁴⁰¹SI, p. 506.

⁴⁰²Ibid., p.506.

concept of writing itself is in fact a dialogue with the Latin vestiges, as Calvino notes, and more generally a dialogue with the past. As the story unfolds, we are taken to the eighteenth century and the antinomic co-existence of the visionary and the neoclassical. In the essay that Calvino discusses, Petrucci sees in the modern era the birth of the avant-garde as the writing tradition which defies aesthetics and as the 'presa di parola da parte dei giovani e degli esclusi, partendo naturalmente dalle famose scritte del maggio parigino e dal fenomeno delle firme di New York' ('le firme' refers to the graffiti on the walls of New York).⁴⁰³ Calvino's objection to Petrucci's analysis is in the celebration of a monstrous proliferation of the written message in the city, and his objection is of a clear political nature.

La città è sempre trasmissione di messaggi, è sempre discorso, ma altro è se questo discorso devi interpretarlo tu, tradurlo tu in pensieri e in parole, altro se queste parole ti sono imposte senza via di scampo. Sia essa epigrafe di celebrazione dell'autorità o insulto dissacratorio, si tratta sempre di parole che ti piombano addosso in un momento che tu non hai scelto: e questa è aggressione, è arbitrario, è violenza [...] questo mio discorso non vale per le scritte di protesta sotto i regimi dell'oppressione, perché lì è l'assenza della parola libera l'elemento dominante anche nell'aspetto visivo della città.⁴⁰⁴

Calvino urges us to make an important distinction between the written word which is an instrument of power, and that which leaves the reader space for interpretation and enables critical awareness. The first one can exert numerous forms of oppression including fascist propaganda and is also found in the alienating nature of the advertising boards that overtake our cities. The second is valuable 'perché il percepirne il valore, di pensiero o umoristico o poetico o estetico-visivo, implica un'operazione non passiva, un'interpretazione o decrittazione'.⁴⁰⁵ Calvino takes his argument a step further and attempts the utopian formulation of an ideal city in terms of its written substance: 'la città ideale è quella su cui aleggia un pulviscolo di scrittura che non si sedimenta né si calcifica'.⁴⁰⁶ Calvino wrote this essay in 1983, but already in 1972 when he was writing *Le città invisibili* he was concerned with this aspect of the written city. Tamara is the first city in the category named 'le città e i segni', and in terms of where it stands according to Calvino's argument, Tamara is rather a dystopian city.

Lo sguardo percorre le vie come pagine scritte: la città dice tutto quello che devi pensare, ti fa ripetere il suo discorso, e mentre credi di visitare Tamara non fai che registrare i nomi con cui essa definisce se stessa e

⁴⁰³Ibid., pp. 509-510.

⁴⁰⁴Ibid., p. 511.

⁴⁰⁵Ibid., p. 512.

⁴⁰⁶Ibid., p. 513.

tutte le sue parti.⁴⁰⁷

Travelling to Tamara is a missed opportunity to see the city, because the city refuses to be seen. Like old Medieval towns, Tamara is protected, but instead of bridges and rivers, it is barricaded behind an impenetrable construct of signs and the traveller is condemned to leave the city without ever knowing it.

The sixth section of the book begins between another dialogue between Marco Polo and Kublai Kan, that we have already mentioned, in which the emperor expresses his discontent with Polo's accounts, for they fail to reveal the crystalline essence of the empire that the Kan longs for. Polo's answer is to remind the Kan, that despite the emperor's desire, his discourse is conditioned by a very distinctive function:

io raccolgo le ceneri delle altre città possibili che scompaiono [...] Solo se conoscerai il residuo d'infelicità che nessuna pietra preziosa arriverà a risarcire, potrai computare l'esatto numero di carati cui il diamante finale deve tendere, e non sballerai i calcoli del tuo progetto dall'inizio.⁴⁰⁸

Whereas the Kan demands from Polo that he should provide the description of an ideal empire, Polo firmly replies that such an empire is not there to be described; however, by pointing out the elements of imperfection he offers the emperor the possibility to rely on them for a future utopian project.

In the next city that follows this dialogue, which is the last city under the category 'La città e i segni', Polo puts his argument to the test and apparently reveals all the mechanisms supporting his discourse. As an echo to the essay on the written city, the story starts: 'Nessuno sà meglio di te, saggio Kublai, che non si deve mai confondere la città col discorso che la descrive'.⁴⁰⁹ The description of the city immediately invites the listener, and the reader, to take a critical distance and to keep alive in his mind, that the city and the story about the city are not identical. 'Eppure tra l'una e l'altro c'è un rapporto'.⁴¹⁰ The nature of the relation between the city and its story, or rather its stories, resembles a dialogue. The story tells the city, and the recipient of this story interprets both the story and the city, in a dynamic exchange. In order to answer the Kan's accusation, Polo also tells him:

'Questo forse non sai: che per dire d'Olivia non potrei tenere altro discorso'.⁴¹¹ But what does Marco Polo really mean when he says 'se devo dirti dell'operosità degli abitanti, parlo delle botteghe dei sellai odorose di cuoio', or that in order to speak about Olivia's prosperity he has no choice but to

⁴⁰⁷RRII, p. 368.

⁴⁰⁸Ibid., p. 406

⁴⁰⁹Ibid., p. 407

⁴¹⁰Ibid.

⁴¹¹Ibid.

speak of its palaces? He means not only that some images impose themselves in the discourse, but also that the description of Olivia can only be the description of certain characteristic aspects of Olivia. The story of Olivia, as it is told by Marco Polo, can never be about its entire essence, but merely brings out several distinguishable features. Polo also points out, that every discourse will always be haunted by its sarcastic counterpart, which always reveals what the discourse inevitably left out. Furthermore, very often, the hidden part of the story also comes to contradict the one at the surface. To follow this train of thought, Polo concludes: 'La menzogna non è nel discorso, è nelle cose'.⁴¹² Polo's statement does not mean that the things intentionally make false statements about themselves. More likely, that we are always given a mistaken impression of things, both through our senses and our cognition; and this mistake, this lie, is subsequently translated in the discourse that surrounds them. There is no ideal city to be described, as much as there is no ideal description, precisely because the attempt can only be partial, both incomplete and favouring one particular side of it. The utopian possibility consists in this: that the discourse should reveal its own limits and fallacies, and/or that the interpreter of the discourse should unveil it himself.

In 'La città pensata: la misura degli spazi', Calvino develops a bit more the importance of the image of the city in our everyday experience. He starts by reminding us of the characteristics of the medieval city:

Quella medievale è la città dei vivi e dei morti: i cadaveri non sono più considerati impuri ed espulsi fuori dalla cerchia delle mura; la familiarità coi morti, la comunanza con la necropoli sono una delle grandi trasformazioni della civiltà cittadina.⁴¹³

The inner structure of the city, its urban development, reflects the contemporary Zeitgeist; and the relation of the city to the dead is one of its most significant aspects (see also 3.1.2). This change in the structure corresponds to a change in the function of the city: 'È la funzione della città che è cambiata: non più militare e amministrativa [...] ma di produzione di scambi e consumi'.⁴¹⁴ Calvino then moves on to Leopardi and to the agoraphobic accounts of the city of Rome in the letters to his sister Paolina. With Leopardi's letters, Calvino gets to the real aspect of the city that he wants to discuss: the relation established between the spaces, the images in the city, and our perception. In other words, how the visual experience, and its recall in the memory, really define the city. Towards the end of this essay, Calvino reinstates the importance of the image as we have already discussed:

⁴¹²Ibid., p. 408.

⁴¹³SI, p. 514.

⁴¹⁴Ibid., p. 515.

Le Torri Pendenti e le Moli Antonelliane non sono altro che sigle iconiche sintetiche, stemmi o allegorie. L'importante è che servano a distinguere e non a confondere e appiattare.⁴¹⁵

The effective and the valuable image, is therefore the one which enables critical thought, one which stands out in all its significance, and not one that serves as a blurring background, or it is the result of an incessant frenetic production.

3.3.2. Cities and desire: in search of the ideal

Perhaps *Le città invisibili* could be read in the mythical tradition of the *Odyssey* and more precisely in how Calvino read the *Odyssey*:

Difatti nel proemio c'è un verso che dovrebbe presentarsi come la sintesi di tutta l'*Odissea*: 'Di molti uomini vide le città e conobbe i pensieri'. Quali città? Quali pensieri? [...] Non è forse l'*Odissea* il mito d'ogni viaggio? Forse per Ulisse-Omero la distinzione menzogna-verità non esisteva, egli raccontava la stessa esperienza ora nel linguaggio del vissuto, ora nel linguaggio del mito, così come ancora per noi ogni nostro viaggio, piccolo o grande è sempre *Odissea*.⁴¹⁶

It is then unmistakable, all these elements of the *Odyssey* that Calvino recognises are also in *Le città invisibili*. The Kan keeps wondering about the cities that Marco Polo describes to him, and what they mean for him. Do they exist? Are they a lie, or do they tell some truth? Every city is both an experience and a myth, and the desire of the voyage of discovery is its voice. Be it Ulysses' longing for a return to Ithaca, Polo's dear Venice, or Calvino's own Sanremo,⁴¹⁷ the story is that of the eternal impossible return.

Within the book itself, there is a distinct category 'Le città e il desiderio', which is worth exploring. Of Dorotea, the first city, Polo maintains that "si può parlare in due maniere: dire che quattro torri d'alluminio s'elevano sulle sue mura [...] oppure dire come il cammelliere che mi condusse laggiù: 'Vi arrivai nella prima giovinezza' [...]".⁴¹⁸ From Dorotea we learn that desire can be told from a distant objective point of view, described as a particular phenomenon, or from the point of view of him who desires. Once it has achieved its goal, the first point of view, remains fixed despite its grandeur: 'fino a sapere tutto quello che si vuole della città nel passato nel presente nel futuro'.⁴¹⁹ On the other hand, the second story reserves the possibility of opening up to other stories: 'ma ora so

⁴¹⁵SI, p. 518.

⁴¹⁶SI, 'Le Odissee nell'Odissea', p. 896.

⁴¹⁷See Claudia Nocentini, *Italo Calvino and the Landscape of Childhood* (Northern Universities Press, 2000).

⁴¹⁸RRII, p. 364.

⁴¹⁹Ibid.

che questa è soltanto una delle tante vie che mi si aprivano quella mattina a Dorotea'.⁴²⁰ Dorotea is the divine gift; and in Dorotea it is revealed only through the the account of the personal experience of the city. The access to the divine through the gift of desire, is achieved from within, instead of receiving it from above.

The second city associated with desire, Anastasia, is characterised by another duality, much like Dorotea. Polo says:

Dovrei ora enumerare le merci che qui si comprano con vantaggio [...] Ma con queste notizie non ti direi la vera essenza della città: perché mentre la descrizione di Anastasia non fa che risvegliare i desideri uno per volta per obbligarti a soffocarli, a chi si trova un mattino in mezzo ad Anastasia i desideri si risvegliano tutti insieme e ti circondano.⁴²¹

In Anastasia the essence of desire itself is controversial: 'Anastasia, città ingannatrice: [...] se la tua fatica che dà forma al desiderio prende dal desiderio la sua forma, e tu credi di godere per tutta Anastasia mentre non ne sei che lo schiavo'.⁴²² This view of desire has an unmistakable lacanian tone to it: Anastasia, the 'objet petit a', is the object which causes desire, rather than being the object towards which desire tends. It is in this sense that the city is treacherous. Anastasia, means resurrection, but its real meaning, as it was for Dorotea, is quite terrestrial: it means awakening. The realisation of Anastasia's deceptive nature, is a blow to the conscience, which becomes alert and knows desire by its true face.

Despina 'si presenta differente a chi viene da terra e chi dal mare'.⁴²³ The third city of desire is also characterised by a duality. The city appears different to the traveller, according on how he reaches it, according to his place of origin. Despina is the maiden, the desired female by the two male figures of the story, and each of the travellers' projects on Despina the image of the other:

Il cammelliere che vede spuntare all'orizzonte dell'altipiano i pinnacoli dei grattacieli [...] pensa a una nave, sa che è una città ma la pensa come un bastimento che lo porti via dal deserto [...] e pensa [...] alle finestre illuminate a pianterreno, ognuna con una donna che si pettina. [...] il marinaio distingue la forma d'una gobba di cammello, [...] sa che è una città ma la pensa come un cammello [...] che lo porta via dal deserto del mare, verso [...] cortili di piastrelle su cui ballano scalze le danzatrici, e muovono le braccia un po' nel velo un po' fuori dal velo.⁴²⁴

Despina is for both of them, the opportunity to escape the desert of their solitary existence, and whose form they modify depending on their own idiosyncrasy.

⁴²⁰Ibid.

⁴²¹Ibid., p. 366

⁴²²Ibid.

⁴²³Ibid., p. 370.

⁴²⁴Ibid.

The name Fedora, or Theodora, is the second part of the chiasmic structure, which emerges from its counterpart: Dorotea. Fedora is also the gift of God. ‘In ogni epoca qualcuno, guardando Fedora qual era, aveva immaginato il modo di farne la città ideale’.⁴²⁵ Utopian visions in Fedora are born by reconsidering the relation with the past, and this takes a material form, and a specific place in the city: ‘Fedora ha adesso nel palazzo delle sfere il suo museo: ogni abitante lo visita, sceglie la città che corrisponde ai suoi desideri’.⁴²⁶ The museum is the architectural space in which desires, past, present and future can be in dialogue. Memory has its own privileged place in the realm of desire. We have already suggested a reading of *Le città invisibili* in the literary tradition of the *Odyssey*; we can now point at the chiasmic structure revealed by Dorotea and Fedora as another element of comparison. The chiasmic structure was characteristic of epic poetry, mainly because of its oral tradition; it offered both a mnemonic and an aesthetic function (see also 3.1.1). Furthermore, the use of the chiasmus, essentially a poetic form, supports the reading of the cities as *petits poèmes en prose*. The chiasmus emphasises the idea and offers an elaboration of it. Yet the individual projections of desire onto Fedora cannot account for a greater idea of utopia. Polo addresses the emperor directly to show him how the utopian image truly comes to be:

Nella mappa del tuo impero, o grande Kan, devono trovar posto sia la grande Fedora di pietra sia le piccole Fedore nelle sfere di vetro. Non perché tutte ugualmente reali, ma perché tutte solo presunte. L'una racchiude ciò che è accettato come necessario mentre non lo è ancora; le altre ciò che è immaginato come possibile e un minuto dopo non lo è più.⁴²⁷

A real utopian project, an empire, cannot be an individual fantasy; it has to include the communal and the individual alike. As Claudio Milanini has commented:

Il fatto che si possano immaginare altre Fedore lascia sperare che la Fedora attuale possa essere trasformata; ma ogni progetto compiuto rischia di diventare a sua volta una gabbia, un inganno, un giocattolo inutile o addirittura pericoloso: ‘mentre si prescrivono mezzi per cambiare il mondo qual è, il mondo è già cambiato’, e guai a non tenerne conto. [...] La struttura sfaccettata del libro sottintende, di per sé, un confronto tutt'altro che pacifico con la tradizione degli *utopia-writers*, infrange i canoni del genere letterario.⁴²⁸

Calvino's utopia always includes a warning about the utopia that has just been formulated.

The last city in the category ‘Le città e il desiderio’ is Zobeide. Zobeide is the city built by men with the same dream, the dream of following a naked woman with long hair, running in the streets at night.

⁴²⁵Ibid., p. 382.

⁴²⁶Ibid.

⁴²⁷RRII, p. 382.

⁴²⁸Claudio Milanini, ‘Arte combinatoria e geografica mentale. *Il castello dei destini incrociati* e *Le città invisibili*’, *L'utopia discontinua*, pp. 142-143.

Nella disposizione delle strade ognuno rifece il percorso del suo inseguimento; nel punto in cui aveva perso le tracce della fuggitiva ordinò diversamente che nel sogno gli spazi e le mura in modo che non gli potesse più scappare.⁴²⁹

In a sense, Zobeide is a dreamcatcher. In the Ojibwa tradition, the dreamcatcher was a protective charm, whose function was to trap and protect from bad dreams. The reference to the dreamcatcher is also supported by the description of the city as being 'ben esposta alla luna'.⁴³⁰ Later, it was also adopted as a symbol of unity of the Indian Nations, and we cannot but see the echo in Calvino's story: 'Dopo il sogno andarono cercando quella città; non la trovarono ma si trovarono tra loro'.⁴³¹ Yet the web on the dreamcatcher, is the place where all the bad dreams have been stored, and in the web itself there is no fortunate story to be told: 'I primi arrivati non capivano che cosa attraesse questa gente a Zobeide, in questa brutta città, in questa trappola'.⁴³²

The name of the city makes reference to a character from *Arabian Nights*.⁴³³ Zobeide's story, is the story of a woman trapped in a fate she has not chosen, condemned to afflict a punishment that makes her unhappy. Zobeide's fate is ugly, as is the city's, because both are the embodiment of a forsaken dream: 'Questa fu la città di Zobeide [...] senza più nessun rapporto con l'inseguimento sognato. Che del resto era già dimenticato da tempo'.⁴³⁴

The description of the city of Zobeide come after a piece of dialogue between the emperor and Polo, which specifically deals with the theme of cities and desire.

⁴²⁹RRII, p. 393.

⁴³⁰Ibid.

⁴³¹Ibid.

⁴³²Ibid.

⁴³³ This is a summary of the story that Zobeide tells the caliph. Zobeide had two sisters, Amina and Safie. After their father's death, Amina and Safie marry, leaving Zobeide behind. Some time later however, both come back to their sister after being mistreated by their husbands. Zobeide works and provides for all of them. Soon, Zobeide's older sisters express the wish to re-marry; despite their sister's warnings, they find new husbands, leaving their sister alone one more time, only to return, begging Zobeide to have them back. As they begin their life together again, Zobeide decides to expand her trade and to start travelling onboard a newly bought ship with her sisters. One day, impatient to wait for them, she decides to go ashore and arrives in a strange city. All its inhabitants seem to have turned to stone, no one is to be met in the street, only the ghostly faces made of stone and the haunting impression that once, there was still life. She finally reaches the heart of the city and the palace, equally void of life. Its riches hold her attention and she forgets about the time and her sisters. When it gets really late, she eventually decides to spend the night in the palace. During the night she discovers the prince of the palace, still alive, reading the Koran. The entire city was the place of worship of fire. When God's judgement befell on the infidels, the prince was spared because he was the only one who had been converted to the word of the Koran. Zobeide decides to take him back to Bagdad with her, and on their way back, much to her sisters' discontent and jealousy, they become engaged. During the night, the two envious sisters throw both of them in the water. While Zobeide survives and finds refuge on a desert island, the prince drowns. On the island, Zobeide saves a snake from another one attacking it, which transforms into a woman, who in her turn hands Zobeide two black dogs. She had transformed her sisters and made her promise, if she wanted to escape the same fate, to keep them and whip them every night.

⁴³⁴RRII, p. 393.

Le città come i sogni sono costruite di desideri e di paure, anche il filo del loro discorso è segreto, le loro regole assurde, le prospettive ingannevoli, e ogni cosa ne nasconde un'altra.
- Io non ho desideri né paure, – dichiarò il Kan, – e i miei sogni sono composti o dalla mente o dal caso.
- Anche le città credono d'essere opera della mente o del caso, ma né l'una né l'altro bastano a tener su le loro mura. D'una città non godi le sette o le settantasette meraviglie, ma la risposta che dà a una tua domanda.
- O la domanda che ti pone obbligandoti a rispondere, come per Tebe per bocca della Sfinge.⁴³⁵

The cities, their form, but also their essence are never quite separated from our understanding and our desires. In this piece of dialogue we have a perfect example of an earthly transcendence: the city is the metaphor of dream, and therefore also fears and desires (this is the first, transcendental movement), but the dialogue closes on the enigma of the Sphynx; ultimately the city, the universal image asks the question that brings us back to man.

To conclude, the enlightened background on which the cities are written, is subtly conveyed through the references to the scientific study of language (in the dialogue between Polo and Kan), the industrialised buzz of the megalopolis, or Kan's own desire to rationalise his empire. The mythical quality of the book, resides in its poetic images, and their universal appeal, always showing their utopian desire. The theme of death, which we explored, was particularly revealing of the mythological vein, so present in the book.

⁴³⁵Ibid., p. 392.

4 The earthly transcendence of Mr. Palomar

Calvino publishes *Palomar* 4 years after his last book: *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*. Taking his name from a famous observatory in California on Mount Palomar, the main character confirms, once more, Calvino's conviction that literature should be able to create a narrative inspired by science, thus bridging the gap between an objective and abstract discourse and our everyday experience of the world. Presented in the form of a collection of 27 short stories, organised in 3 main sections, comprising 3 sub-sections, each of them containing 3 stories.

Initially, what strikes the reader most, is the silence imposed by an incessant observation, which presents itself as a reaction to the excess of words present in our lives. More interestingly, this observation is often directed towards the sky, perhaps another reference to *Hamlet's Mill*, which consolidates the idea that astronomy played a very important role in the development of Calvino's thought and in the most mature stages of his imagination.

In this chapter we will work on characterisation in order to establish Palomar as a character with an empathic drive, which affects his vision of the world dramatically. We will also see how Calvino develops in Palomar's narrative a critique of model-making and explores how this also casts doubts on the potential of observation, as well as the intense threat of uncertainty which steadily gains more space. We will then conduct a comparative analysis of Albert Camus's *Le mythe de Sisyphe* and *Palomar*, in order to discuss Palomar's relation to the concept of the absurd. We also look at how Calvino takes these considerations into a confrontation between literature and death, and how the main character's silence offers an engaging reflection on the limits of understanding and communication.

4.1 Who is Palomar?

Palomar is a character who is obsessed with the question of observation, and longs to discover how much observation can do in the quest for truth and meaning. According to the 'Corriere della sera' in 1975, Calvino's last character was to account for the detachment of contemporary life:

Nasce un nuovo personaggio: il signor Palomar. Forse dandogli il nome di un famoso osservatorio astronomico Italo Calvino ha voluto significare che la realtà contemporanea, la natura e gli atteggiamenti umani sono guardati come da un lontano attento telescopio.⁴³⁶

Generally, in Calvino's fiction, the search for truth and meaning translates into the hope of finding

⁴³⁶Cited in Francesca Serra, *Calvino* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2006), p. 341.

patterns, harmonious constructions that link events and processes in an inalienable way. In *Le Cosmicomiche*, Qfwfq travels through the ages of the universe in search for signs and other beings that will help him tell the story of the cosmos. In *Le città invisibili* Marco Polo is summoned by the Great Khan in order to draw a map of his empire, in the hope of understanding it and to distinguish: 'la filigrana d'un disegno così sottile da sfuggire al morso delle termiti'.⁴³⁷ Palomar's voyage is anchored into a world which we can recognise more easily. He observes things, phenomena, and the interaction between people, that a reader is familiar with.

Through his journey of persistent observation, rather than discovering patterns or reaching an almost perfect objectivity, Palomar comes across numerous traps: the limits of his own senses and his intellect, the ethical and aesthetic weight of his culture, but also the possibility that the essence of things might be inscrutable. The struggle that Palomar faces is both experimental and philosophical.

I would like to stress here, that despite Palomar's reputation for detachment, his intellectual attitude towards things and people is not one of passive contemplation. The eventual silences, which accompany his musings, his descriptions, his thoughts, and his analyses, are part of a complex response to the tensions created when the elements of the outside world reach out and impregnate him. We will evaluate *Palomar* and its relation to the Absurd, while trying to show that the book is far more than a celebration of abstraction, more complex than a mere portrait of contemporary disengagement, and that it remains, a work of art. Through the narration of Palomar's experience, observation becomes the starting point which can lead to the transcendence of the subject-matter of his descriptions, his narrative, and his meditations, when that is possible, but also to the inevitable discovery of the tragedy of life and to the reality of death. This transcendence does not resolve the tension in a cathartic fashion; it does not negate the problems that the book identifies and immortalises despite Palomar's failed attempt at observing a wave in an absolute way. Palomar remains throughout the book, in the succession of his efforts, faithful to his struggle, which is not only his, but also common to all human experience. Because of Calvino's use of irony and humour, the stories never fall into pathos; the comic tone resonates in *Palomar* without doubt.

There are several critics who have interpreted Palomar's struggle in a rather pessimistic way. To cite just two examples:

Il signor Palomar lotta giorno per giorno contro la disarmonia, e ogni volta ne esce sconfitto: di conseguenza il testo che ne racconta le avventure non potrà essere a sua volta un testo sempre braccato e sconfitto dal suo contrario.⁴³⁸

⁴³⁷RRII, p. 361.

⁴³⁸Serra, p. 346.

Calvino's profoundly pessimistic conclusions in *Palomar* not only underline the chaotic nature of contemporary man's universe but also contradict and deny his former humanistic faith in man's creativity and capability to see the world afresh.⁴³⁹

Francesca Serra's remark is of course less apocalyptic than Guj's. The former mainly states a prominent opposition in the book, which she puts in the foreground, while the latter evaluates Palomar, as Calvino's last character, his last explorer, and concludes that he 'ends his journey in a dark forest of distrust and despair, where even being dead provides no ultimate solution'.⁴⁴⁰

The present analysis will on the other hand follow the lead of less defeatist interpretations like Martin McLaughlin's, or JoAnn Cannon's, whose conclusion could be taken as a starting point for our study:

It should not surprise us that Palomar's search for 'la chiave per padroneggiare la complessità del mondo' is inconclusive. Nor should that inconclusiveness be read as a sign of surrender. Rather, it should be read as Calvino himself read other examples of the literature of the labyrinth, as 'una sfida al labirinto', a challenge to comprehend the multiform and indeterminate world.⁴⁴¹

We can also add Nathalie Roelens' conclusion, which echoes the previous one, and reminds us, how we, the reader, are in a way indebted to Palomar's apparent failure: 'Quest'uomo curioso ma simpatico avrà se non rivelato la *chiave per padroneggiare la complessità del mondo* [...], almeno destato la nostra curiosità per essa. E non è impresa da poco'.⁴⁴²

4.1.1. Palomar, uomo empatico

It is in the very first and the very last sections of the book that Palomar is most directly characterised. In the first section the characterisation is done in an authoritative way, and there still seems to be a link of causality between him and the world, although it is only implied and never clearly stated. 'Uomo nervoso che vive in un mondo frenetico e congestionato, il signor Palomar tende a ridurre le proprie relazioni col mondo esterno e per difendersi dalla nevrosi generale cerca quanto più può di tenere le sue sensazioni sotto controllo'.⁴⁴³ His neurotic nature seems to be reflected in the present state of the world, and by world he means the world of human interaction. He is said to have erected a protective barrier by which the reader can discern a deeply rooted sense of fear of alienation. Even if

⁴³⁹Luisa Guj, "The Loss of Self: 'La selva oscura' of Mr Palomar", *The Modern Language Review*, 82:4 (1987), 862-868, (p. 868).

⁴⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴⁴¹JoAnn Cannon, 'Calvino's Latest Challenge to the Labyrinth: A Reading of *Palomar*', *Italica*, 62:3 (1985), 189-200, (pp.198-199).

⁴⁴²Nathalie Roelens, *L'Odissea di uno scrittore virtuale* (Florence: Franco Cesati Editore, 1989), p. 123.

⁴⁴³RRII, p. 876.

Palomar appears to be a rather solitary figure, his adventures revolve around two main concerns that are closely interwoven: the desire to understand the world and the desire to understand his own desire.

Apart from his obsession with observation, Palomar also has other characteristics. One could say, that although he appears to be quite an isolated man, he is also concerned and empathic with others.

In 'Il seno nudo'⁴⁴⁴, Palomar's gaze moves from a wave to that of the naked bosom of a young lady: 'Una giovane donna è distesa sull'arena prendendo il sole a seno nudo. Palomar, uomo discreto, volge lo sguardo all'orizzonte marino'.⁴⁴⁵ His character has a direct consequence on the way he interacts with the world, yet once he realises that, his behaviour immediately appears problematic to him. Initially, his discreet nature, seems to dictate his conduct: he should subtly look away. Palomar questions the legitimacy, the adequacy and the ethical fairness of his reaction, hoping to discover the most desirable attitude to adopt. There is a great deal of irony and humour in the opposition between Palomar's excessive worry and the young lady's sudden reaction. The important comic effect of the story relies on the two different layers of reality that the narration exposes. On the one hand, the story directly informs the reader of Palomar's noble intentions and it illustrates his inner struggle to find the right answer to the question of whether and/or how to look at the young semi-naked lady who is sunbathing, without offending her. On the other hand, the parallel truth revealed by the story, is that Palomar passes four times past the lady whom he does not want to offend: 'Il signor Palomar cammina lungo una spiaggia solitaria [...] Una giovane donna è distesa sull'arena prendendo il sole a seno nudo', 'Ritornando dalla sua passeggiata, Palomar ripassa davanti a quella bagnante', 'Si volta e ritorna sui suoi passi', 'Fa dietro-front. A passi decisi si muove verso la donna sdraiata al sole'.⁴⁴⁶

The comic effect of the story consists in Palomar's disproportionate over-philosophising in the middle of a relatively simple scenario. Since the story is constructed mainly on those two contradictory axes, its achievement is double. The problem of human interaction and cultural consensus, which Palomar is so deeply absorbed in when he encounters the lady's naked bosom, is quite a relevant one; and the narration of his dialectic reveals several interesting points.

In order to be fair to others, several requirements must be met: a deep knowledge and understanding of the current social and cultural state of things, a sincere empathic drive, and the capacity to amend for and resolve previous unjust and oppressive behaviours.

These are the elements which will dictate Palomar's behaviour. Palomar is so eager to keep his

⁴⁴⁴The first part of this interpretation comes from Claudia Nocentini's course at the University of Edinburgh, Italo Calvino: Four decades of renewal. 2010.

⁴⁴⁵RRII, p. 880.

⁴⁴⁶Ibid., p. 880-882.

integrity that he adapts his actions to his train of thought. The consequence is immediate and inevitable: he changes his mind all the time. The conclusion of the story is crushingly humorous: Palomar, the empathic and intellectually committed man, is mistaken for an annoying voyeur (or at least, this is his interpretation).

The story could also be read on another more ambiguous level; namely that the character's cogitations are conveying a more basic instinct. Even though he is trying hard to work purely on an intellectual level, Palomar cannot hide from his own sexual drive. In this sense, the humour of the story comes from the information that he has withheld: after all, he is walking up and down the beach and the woman who is sunbathing is not asleep, and therefore, understandably annoyed. Let us at this point recall Žižek's words on the pro-feminist discourse when it is taken on by a man:

One should especially be suspect about the obsession with sexual harassment of women when it is voiced by men: after barely scratching the 'pro-feminist' PC surface, one soon encounters the old male-chauvinist myth about how women are helpless creatures who should be protected not only from the intruding men, but ultimately also from themselves. The problem is not that they will not be able to protect themselves, but that they may start to enjoy being sexually harassed - that the male intrusion will set free in them a self-destructive explosion of excessive sexual enjoyment.⁴⁴⁷

Palomar never thinks about the possibility of the woman deciding for herself, she is at the mercy of his thought. The conclusion to the story is not the one anticipated by Žižek's analysis, because the story has a slightly different function. On Palomar's last return towards her, 'lei s'alza di scatto, si ricopre, sbuffa, s'allontana con scrollate infastidite delle spalle come sfuggisse alle insistenze moleste d'un satiro'.⁴⁴⁸ In one abrupt movement, the woman puts an end to Palomar's internal debate, and to the story. It is perhaps worth wondering about Palomar's motives. Are his intellectual interests genuine? Is he conscious of his own sexual drives? Is the whole intellectual questioning a scheme to peek at the young woman, and a sort of glorified mental masturbation? It is possible. It cannot be discarded, for Palomar's account are not to be taken literally, and a reader of Calvino is usually aware of the existence of different layers of reality within the same work. It is not impossible either, that Palomar should be naïve enough on the subject as to remain oblivious to a sexual drive at work in his interest for the naked breast. The conclusion to this incident in Palomar's mind, is a regrettable consequence of an ill-founded social practice: 'Il peso morto d'una tradizione di malcostume impedisce d'apprezzare nel loro giusto merito le intenzioni più illuminate, conclude amaramente

⁴⁴⁷Slavoj Žižek, "'God is Dead, but He Doesn't Know It': Lacan Plays with Bobok", *How to read Lacan* (New York, London: W.W.Norton & Company, 2006), pp. 91-104, (p. 102).

⁴⁴⁸RRII, p. 882.

Palomar'.⁴⁴⁹ Whatever Palomar's intentions may be, the conclusion of the story retains its humorous effect. In the interpretation of the story that wants Palomar unconscious of the real sexual impulse behind the scene, the comic effect is even greater because the character does not realise how inappropriate his behaviour is, and of course that the woman cannot possibly be expected to judge him on the nature of his inner thoughts, regardless of how noble they may be; she is merely left to interpret his actual physical behaviour.

Another story which illustrates Palomar's empathic drive, and exemplifies Calvino's earthly transcendence is 'La pantofola spaiata'.⁴⁵⁰ The story is also characteristic of Calvino's empathy when writing (see also 2.1 above), where the reader can catch a glimpse of the aesthetic choice not to show suffering, thus still remaining comic and humorous, despite the underlying sadness. It is also perhaps worth remembering how Roland Barthes perceived Calvino's empathy:

Il y a une chose encore; mais elle est plus difficile à dire, parce que l'on n'a que des mots un peu anciens et qu'on hésite toujours – mais pourquoi pas? – c'est que, dans l'art de Calvino et, dans ce qui transparait de l'homme, en ce qu'il écrit, il y a – employons le mot ancien – une sensibilité.

On pourrait dire aussi une humanité, je dirais presque une bonté, si le mot n'était pas trop lourd à porter, c'est à dire qu'il y a, à tout instant, dans les notations, une ironie qui n'est jamais blessante, qui n'est jamais agressive, une distance, un sourire, une sympathie. La sensibilité réunie, précisément, avec sorte de vide.⁴⁵¹

On a journey in the East, Palomar buys a pair of slippers from a bazaar. Unfortunately, he realises later on that one of the slippers is smaller than the other. This experience triggers the following thought: 'Forse adesso, - pensa il signor Palomar, - un altro uomo sta camminando per quel paese con due pantofole spaiate'.⁴⁵² All of a sudden a pair of unmatched slippers, becomes the opportunity to create a link between Palomar and this other imaginary man (who could be any man). The slippers constitute the bridge that links them despite the distance that separates them. At this stage two things are apparently already transcended: the unique personal quality of Palomar's experience and the space between him and his imaginary co-sufferer. As a consequence, a beautiful image is created in Palomar's mind: 'Forse anche lui in questo momento pensa a me, spera d'incontrarmi per fare il cambio. Il rapporto che ci lega è più concreto e chiaro di gran parte delle relazioni che si stabiliscono tra esseri umani. Eppure non ci incontreremo mai'.⁴⁵³ In order to counter the fact that they will never

⁴⁴⁹RRII, p. 882.

⁴⁵⁰Interpretation, Dr. Claudia Nocentini. University of Edinburgh, 2010.

⁴⁵¹Roland Barthes, 'Italo Calvino ou les mécaniques du charme', *Le Monde* (20th February 1981), p.20.

⁴⁵²RRII, p. 958.

⁴⁵³Ibid.

meet, Palomar decides to act ‘per solidarietà’, and to wear the uncomfortable pair, thus perpetuating this image (‘questo specchiarsi di passi zoppicanti da un continente all'altro’) that has been created in the world: ‘Indugia nel rappresentarsi quest'immagine, ma sa che non risponde al vero’.⁴⁵⁴ We can read an interesting statement behind these words: the image that Palomar has created in his own mind, does not exclusively gain its value from its likeness with reality. Its value springs from its potential symbolism and the meaning that Palomar is willing to give it.

As the story moves on another aspect is transcended: when Palomar tries to imagine how the merchant ended up selling an unmatched pair of slippers, he comes up with a similar image and expresses a rather interesting hypothesis:

Forse il mercante sapeva bene quel che faceva, - pensa il signor Palomar, - dandomi quella pantofola spaiata ha messo riparo a una disparità che da secoli si nascondeva in quel mucchio di pantofole, tramandato da generazioni in quel bazar.
Il compagno ignoto forse zoppicava in un'altra epoca, la simmetria dei loro passi si risponde non solo da un continente all'altro, ma a distanza di secoli. Non per questo il signor Palomar si sente meno solidale con lui. Continua a ciabattare faticosamente per dar sollievo alla sua ombra.⁴⁵⁵

Time has also been transcended now. This person, whom he imagines sharing the same problem with him, may be from another time, yet the slippers still unite them and for a moment, Palomar gets an impression of order. This order is purely a creation of his own fantasy, and a projection of his own desires, but it is clear in this story, in this instance, that the image that he has created deeply and wholly satisfies him. One may ask if in the end, the problem of cosmos and chaos might not be resolved by the creation of appropriate images; and by appropriate we mean capable of conveying meaning and making the personal experience into a universal one. In the case of ‘La pantofola spaiata’ it is the earthly image of a limping man, carrying with him the memory of another fellow limping man.

When he was originally working on the book, Calvino had imagined two central characters: Palomar and Mohole. The two were supposed to be complementary. ‘I due personaggi avrebbero dovuto tendere, Palomar verso l'alto, il fuori, i multiformi aspetti dell'universo, Mohole verso il basso, l'oscuro gli abissi interiori’.⁴⁵⁶ Eventually Calvino admits that the two were always embedded, and that the final project was a unique creation that he initially had considered to be dual. Francesca Serra makes an interesting remark, which relates particularly to the last story that we have discussed. She writes:

⁴⁵⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵RRII, p. 959.

⁴⁵⁶RRII, ‘Note e notizie sui testi’, Palomar, p. 1402.

Nell'opera di Calvino a un certo punto succede che il testo scopre la sua ombra e non se ne libera più, diventa un'ossessione. Da quel momento in poi non c'è più soltanto un testo: ma un testo sempre accompagnato dalla sua ombra appunto, il non-testo. [...] Come condannare un corpo vivo a camminare sempre a braccetto col suo cadavere.⁴⁵⁷

Before leaving the image of 'La pantofola spaiata', one might stop a brief moment on another similar image encountered in the work of a contemporary Greek author, Yannis Kiourtsakis, who wrote a literary triptych called 'Τό Ίδιο καί τό Άλλο', in which the voice of the narrator is obsessed with the figure of the Dicôlon, a figure of popular Greek theatre which represents a man carrying a dead corpse on his back. The vision is seen from the back and the figure appears to have two behinds, thus the di-côlon.⁴⁵⁸ It is the same literary image at work in Palomar, in 'La pantofola spaiata'. In this story Palomar bears the memory of his brother in creation, Mohole; a brother that had to be anchored in the viscosity of life. In Kiourtsakis the figure bears the weight of his brother like a hunch on his back,⁴⁵⁹ Palomar decides to go on limping in solidarity and in memory of an ancient disparity. Like the Dikolôn, the image of the limping man is also carnivalesque. It corresponds to certain criteria as they have been underlined by Mikhail Bakhtin, and discussed by Calvino in 'Il mondo alla rovescia' (1970).

È abolita qualsiasi *distanza* tra le persone ed entra in vigore una particolare categoria carnevalesca, il *libero contatto familiare tra gli uomini*. Questa categoria del contatto familiare determina anche il particolare carattere di organizzazione di massa, e il libero gesticolare carnevalesco, e la franca parola carnevalesca.⁴⁶⁰

How carnivalesque is the image of Palomar limping? He might not be part of a large event involving many people participating in the capsizing of a certain order; but the other conditions named by Bakhtin are met. Distance, both in time and space, is abolished, and the familiar contact is achieved by Palomar's desire to act in solidarity with his fellow man, whom he imagines being in distress. Furthermore, Palomar's desire for solidarity, is not born from actual suffering, it is hypothetical. What we mean is that it is not the sight of a man with an odd pair of slippers which moves him, and pushes him to act in a compassionate fashion. His empathic drive is innate, and at the very origin of the

⁴⁵⁷Francesca Serra, *Calvino* (Roma: Salerno Editrice, 2006), p. 340.

⁴⁵⁸In the beginning of his third book *Τό βιβλίο τοῦ ἔργου καί τοῦ χρόνου* (*The Book of the Creation and Time*), Kiourtsakis writes: 'Εγώ εἶμαι ὁ Χάρης', ἐκείνη ἡ ἀπρόσκλητη σκέψη: ὅτι τό Δίκωλον, αὐτή ἡ μορφή που ἐνώνει σέ ἕνα σώμα τόν ζωντανό καί τον πεθαμένο ἀδερφό, αὐτή ἡ μάσκα τοῦ καρναβαλιοῦ που τυραννάει τή σκέψη μου ἐδῶ καί χρόνια, ἦταν, ἡμουν ἐγώ: ἐγώ που κουβαλάω πάντα μέσα μου τόν νεκρό μου ἀδερφό, ἀπό ἐκείνη τή νύχτα τοῦ Γενάρη, τοῦ 1960, στις Βρυξέλλες, ὁ ὁ Χάρης ἔβαλε τέλος στή ζωή του./ 'I was Harris', that thought, uncalled for: that the Dikolôn, that form which unites in one body the living and the dead brother, that carnival mask which has been torturing my thoughts for years, *it was I*: I who carries within me this dead brother of mine, from that night in January 1960, in Brussels, when Harris put an end to his life.

⁴⁵⁹Jacques Jouet, 'La bosse de l'art', *L'Atelier du Roman*, (Éditions Flammarion, 2011), pp. 59-62.

⁴⁶⁰SI, Bakhtin cited in 'Il mondo alla rovescia', p. 257.

creation of the literary image.

If we go back to ‘Lettura di un'onda’, we can draw an interesting parallel. Just as in this story, Palomar cannot isolate his own being from the rest of the world, his own suffering from the suffering of his fellow men, he cannot isolate one wave from another. He finds it hard to understand the singularity of a phenomenon within its more complex structure, as he struggles not to bridge the gaps between himself and the rest of humanity. But even if we can call this a failure, as far as the phenomenon of the wave is concerned, it would be hard not to see the profound desire for communication, or more precisely, for communion, we find in ‘La pantofola spaiata’.

4.1.2. ‘Il modello dei modelli’: dogma and the limits of model making

As we have already suggested in the first chapter, the process of modelling and scientific thinking, but more importantly, the need for a meaning-giving structure is crucial to understanding Calvino's work. The intricate construction of the chapters of *Le città invisibili*,⁴⁶¹ the complex narrative of *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (1973), which relies on the use of tarot cards, the narrative frame of *Se una notte d'inverso un viaggiatore*,⁴⁶² and the significance of numbers in the chapters of *Palomar* given by Calvino himself as a postface to the volume, are only a few examples of the significance modelling has had in Calvino's work. However, Calvino was very aware of the limitation of model making and methodology (see also 2.6 above).

Through the experience of Palomar, this aspect of Calvino's work is underlined: ‘Questo procedimento, elaborato dai fisici e dagli astronomi che indagano sulla struttura della materia e dell'universo, pareva a Palomar il solo che gli permettesse d'affrontare i più aggrovigliati problemi umani, e in primo luogo quelli della società e del miglior modo di governare’.⁴⁶³ Let us just point out, that very often, there might be a slightly less obvious dimension to the scientific method:

Mais on sent aussi que cette méthode est d'analyse et non de connaissance. Car les méthodes impliquent des métaphysiques, elles trahissent à leur insu les conclusions qu'elles prétendent parfois ne pas encore connaître.⁴⁶⁴

But we also guess that this method is one of analysis and not of

⁴⁶¹SII, Mario Barenghi, *Le città invisibili*, pp. 1359-65.

⁴⁶²SII, Bruno Falcetto, *Se una notte d'inverso un viaggiatore* pp.1394-1395

⁴⁶³RRII, p. 964.

⁴⁶⁴Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1992), p. 28.

knowledge. For methods imply metaphysics, they give away unknowingly the conclusions that they sometimes pretend not to be aware of.

Palomar is often referred to as one of Calvino's most autobiographical works of fiction, if not the most autobiographical one.⁴⁶⁵ The political concern associated with the impulse to find the appropriate social model, clearly echoes Calvino's early experience within the PCI. It is all the more important to note that this tendency towards modelling identified by Palomar, is situated in the past: 'c'era stata un'epoca'.⁴⁶⁶ This implies that Palomar's concern for models is mainly retrospective in the attempt to evaluate his own mistakes and in the hope of finding an alternative way to approach the world. The political dimension of this meditation can also be considered in parallel with the utopian drive that this thesis has already underlined in *Cosmicomiche*.

In tutto questo, non che Palomar elaborasse lui stesso dei modelli o s'adoperasse ad applicarne dei già elaborati: egli si limitava a immaginare un giusto uso di giusti modelli per colmare l'abisso che vedeva spalancarsi sempre di più tra la realtà e i principî. Insomma, il modo in cui i modelli potevano essere manovrati e gestiti non entrava nelle sue competenze né nelle sue possibilità d'intervento [...] come strumenti di potere, soprattutto, più che secondo i principî o le conseguenze nella vita della gente.⁴⁶⁷

The exertion of power on humanity through a model, which is usually absolute and rigid, creates a conflict which results in a violent totalitarian imposition of the model involved. Since Palomar empirically acknowledges this, he reaches a different observation of humanity:

Palomar che dai poteri e dai contropoteri s'aspetta sempre il peggio, ha finito per convincersi che ciò che conta veramente è ciò che avviene *nonostante* loro: la forma che la società va prendendo lentamente, silenziosamente, anonimamente, nelle abitudini, nel modo di pensare e di fare, nella scala dei valori.⁴⁶⁸

There is an assumption that the essence of humanity, that which is universally shared, resides in all these aspects and details which resist even the most oppressive and totalitarian of models. But where does that leave Palomar and his quest for *the* model? 'Se le cose stanno così, il modello dei modelli vagheggiato da Palomar dovrà servire a ottenere dei modelli trasparenti, diafani, sottili come ragnatele; magari addirittura a dissolvere i modelli, anzi a dissolversi'.⁴⁶⁹ We should try to understand the implications of this conclusion; all the tension and the problematic aspects of model making and

⁴⁶⁵Calvino's own claim can be found in 'The Written and the Unwritten Word', *The New York Review of Books*, 12th May 1983, pp. 38-39.

⁴⁶⁶RRII, 'Il modello dei modelli', p. 964.

⁴⁶⁷RRII, p. 966.

⁴⁶⁸Ibid.

⁴⁶⁹Ibid.

the process of extracting essential structures resides in the rigidity and the lack of fairness to reality which they all bear. The passage from ‘magari addirittura a dissolvere i modelli’, to ‘anzi a dissolversi’ is essentially transcendental. What is indispensable is to understand that the dissolution of the model and the dissolution of the subject is not the negation of the need for a model, but rather an experimental necessity. In other words, Palomar does not reach the conclusion that the quest for models itself is futile, nor does he intend to suggest that all previous efforts have come to naught.

4.1.3. ‘Il mondo guarda il mondo’: epitomising or debunking observation

‘In seguito a una serie di disavventure intellettuali che non meritano d'essere ricordate, il signor Palomar ha deciso che la sua principale attività sarà guardare le cose dal di fuori’.⁴⁷⁰ This last section of the book opens again on his intention to observe the world around him. This time however, the extremely objective observation that he is aiming at, is identified as the result of an intellectual failure. Ironically, this enterprise is announced to be somewhat doomed from the very beginning: ‘Un po' miope, distratto, introverso, egli non sembra rientrare per temperamento in quel tipo umano che viene di solito definito un osservatore’.⁴⁷¹ After this characterisation, we are told that regardless of his impediments, Palomar intends to strengthen his capacity of observation by doing the following: ‘primo, nel non lasciarsi sfuggire questi richiami che gli arrivano dalle cose; secondo, nell'attribuire all'operazione dell'osservare l'importanza che essa merita’.⁴⁷² This assumes that the world around him is capable of producing some sort of sign which he can intercept, and that there is an inherent value in things which he can, and should, identify through his observation. The idea, or rather the illusion that the world might be capable of producing such signs, is not unfamiliar in Calvino: we have already discussed in this thesis for instance, stories like ‘Gli anni-luce’ and ‘Sporgendosi dalla costa scoscesa’, where the narrators look for answers in the inanimate matter of the universe.

Very soon, the story will reveal Palomar's failure to achieve what he intended to do, and the reason for this is stated clearly: ‘presto s'accorge che sta guastando tutto, come sempre quando egli mette di mezzo il proprio io e tutti i problemi che ha con il proprio io’.⁴⁷³ In his relation with the world, and as far as his observational skills are concerned, his relation with himself, with all the problems that it encompasses, remains fundamental and unavoidable. This realisation drives him to

⁴⁷⁰Ibid., p. 968.

⁴⁷¹Ibid., p. 969.

⁴⁷²Ibid.

⁴⁷³Ibid., p. 968.

wonder whether it is even possible to engage with the world outside oneself: ‘Ma come si fa a guardare qualcosa lasciando da parte l'io? Di chi sono gli occhi che guardano?’.⁴⁷⁴ Once he has expressed these concerns, the problem of observation is translated into the effort to define the self within the world and *vice versa*. The formulation of a philosophical question emerges: where does the inside end and where does the outside begin, and where do those two meet?

Luisa Guj goes as far as to suggest that in Palomar's experience the Self eventually completely dissolves into the chaotic nature of the world before it. In such an interpretation, the boundaries are not only blurred, but the arbitrariness of the world takes over completely. However, the recurrent representation of Palomar's cognitive struggles and his affective experiences go against an assumption of a complete dissolution of the Self in the world.

I would like to venture into an alternative interpretation. Although the unity between the subject and the world might not be strongly stated, there are several aspects in the story that at least suggest it, even in the more subtle way. First, there is the title: ‘Il mondo guarda il mondo’, in which the observed becomes the observer, in other words, in which the subject and the world coincide. This possibility is echoed in the last paragraph, where, against all odds, the question of observation remains, and the only possible assumption for Palomar at this stage is the following:

basta aspettare che si verifichi una di quelle fortunate coincidenze in cui il mondo vuole guardare ed essere guardato nel medesimo istante e il signor Palomar si trovi a passare lì in mezzo. Ossia, il signor Palomar non deve nemmeno aspettare, perché queste cose accadono soltanto quando meno ci s'aspetta.⁴⁷⁵

The conclusion to this story is quite characteristic of Calvino, as it is disconcerting, humble and yet not completely negative. Even if the conditions which render observation possible can neither be provoked nor predicted, they are bound to be met eventually. Therefore, the possibility of observation is not denied, nor is the self annihilated in ‘Il mare dell'oggettività’.

4.1.4. ‘L'universo come specchio’ or the tragedy of uncertainty

There is a very interesting process of thought which is triggered by Palomar's difficulty with human relations: ‘Palomar soffre molto della sua difficoltà di rapporti col prossimo’.⁴⁷⁶

In this story, after having failed to look at the universe from the outside and see it for what it is; after having failed to look at himself from the inside for what he is in order to learn to love himself,

⁴⁷⁴Ibid., pp. 968-969.

⁴⁷⁵Ibid., p. 970.

⁴⁷⁶Ibid., p. 971.

Palomar eventually sees a reflection of himself in the universe.

The reason *why* he suffers is exposed at the beginning: he envies people capable of having ideal human relations, and goes on to define a utopian realm where they can exist. The people who are being ideal at having human relationships are the ones who:

hanno il dono di trovare sempre la cosa giusta da dire, il modo giusto di rivolgersi a ciascuno; che sono a loro agio con chiunque si trovino e che mettono gli altri a loro agio; che muovendosi con leggerezza tra la gente capiscono subito quando devono difendersene e prendere le loro distanze e quando guadagnarsi la simpatia e la confidenza; che danno il meglio di sé nel rapporto con gli altri e invogliano gli altri a dare il loro meglio; che sanno subito quale conto fare d'una persona in rapporto a sé e in assoluto.⁴⁷⁷

On the opposite side from those people, he places himself in what in fact is the tragedy of uncertainty. ‘A chi è amico dell'universo, l'universo è amico. Potessi mai, sospira Palomar, – essere così!’: this is Palomar's cry of desperation and it echoes like a prayer. His hopes lie in the possibility of ever being able to make the experience of the world peacefully. In order to achieve the state that he longs for, Palomar assumes that ‘Non solo conoscenza ci vuole, ma comprensione, accordo con i propri mezzi e fini e pulsioni, il che vuol dire possibilità d'esercitare una padronanza sulle proprie inclinazioni e azioni, che le controlli o le diriga ma non le coarti e non le soffochi’.⁴⁷⁸ These are essential and necessary conditions that he identifies for any successful relationship; and it is the failure to meet these conditions that is responsible for his suffering.

His effort to look at the universe objectively followed by his introspection, drive him to the following conclusion: ‘Non possiamo conoscere nulla d'esterno a noi scavalcando noi stessi, – egli pensa ora, – l'universo è lo specchio in cui possiamo contemplare solo ciò che abbiamo imparato a conoscere in noi’.⁴⁷⁹ As was the case for ‘Il mondo guarda il mondo’, Palomar ponders about the inescapable nature of his own subjectivity. While he wonders whether his introspection will result in the discovery of a reality which has been denied to him so far, the only image that he sees is one he has seen a million times before: “un universo pericolante, contorto, senza requie come lui”.⁴⁸⁰ The question is whether there is some meaning or conclusion to be drawn from this portrait. If we paraphrase the precariousness that Palomar projects onto the universe, it establishes a deeply rooted sense of uncertainty, a perpetual menace. The foundations of his own being are shaky, and the contorted nature of the image that he sees suggests struggle and extreme complexity. Ultimately he is

⁴⁷⁷Ibid., p. 971.

⁴⁷⁸Ibid., p. 973.

⁴⁷⁹Ibid., p. 974.

⁴⁸⁰Ibid., p. 974.

not at peace, he is restless and suffers from his own condition. In fact, the last paragraph of the story comes to confirm the suffering evoked in the first sentence. Unlike the previous story, Palomar remains more clearly trapped within his own uneasiness.

4.2 Palomar and Sisyphus

καὶ μὴν Σίσυφον εἰσεῖδον κρατέρ' ἄλγε' ἔχοντα,
 λαῶν βαστάζοντα πελώριον ἀμφοτέρησιν.
 ἦ τοι ὁ μὲν σκηριπτόμενος χερσὶν τε ποσὶν τε
 λαῶν ἄνω ὄθεσκε ποτὶ λόφον· ἀλλ' ὅτε μέλλοι
 ἄκρον ὑπερβαλέειν, τότε ἀποστρέψασκε κραταίῃς·
 αὐτίς ἔπειτα πέδονδε κυλίνδετο λαῶς ἀναιδῆς.
 αὐτὰρ ὃ γ' ἄψ ὄσασκε τιτανόμενος, κατὰ δ' ἰδρῶς
 ἔρρεεν ἐκ μελέων, κονίη δ' ἐκ κρατὸς ὀρώρει. (Ὀδύσσεια, λ, 593-600)

*There, too, the hard-task'd Sisyphus I saw,
 Thrusting before him, strenuous, a vast rock.
 With hands and feet struggling, he shoved the stone
 Up to a hill-top; but the steep well-nigh
 Vanquish'd, by some great force repulsed, the mass
 Rush'd again, obstinate, down to the plain.
 Again, stretch'd prone, severe he toiled, the sweat
 Bathed all his weary limbs, and his head reek'd.*⁴⁸¹

4.2.1. Beyond the dichotomy between literature and philosophy

Calvino's style might appear to swing between *narrativa* and *saggistica*,⁴⁸² but regardless of the philosophical concerns the book might bring up, *Palomar* remains a collection of short stories, a work of literature.

Calvino's opinion on the relation literature was to have with philosophy has probably been expressed more clearly in his essay 'Filosofia e letteratura'. He makes his case by stressing that when it comes to literature, philosophy should only be portrayed in the background. At the origin of this protective need to define and identify the artistic space, we can find the uproarious breakthrough of literary theories. This concern is not only Calvino's and it certainly is not symptomatic; the tendency of various literary productions towards over-philosophising triggers various reactions among writers and critics. Camus' critique of Sartre's *Nausée* for instance, resembles a lot what is expressed by

⁴⁸¹Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. William Cowper, (13th January 2008)
 <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/24269/24269-h/24269-h.htm>>

⁴⁸²Martin McLaughlin draws a parallel between *Se una notte* and Borges. He explains that the influence of Borges' style is found at different levels of the book (structure, inter-textual references, etc.). See 'A Borgesian Summa', *Italo Calvino*, Writers of Italy (Edinburgh University Press, 1998). pp. 116-128.

Calvino :

Un roman n'est jamais qu'une philosophie mise en image. Et dans un bon roman toute la philosophie est passée dans les images. Mais il suffit qu'elle déborde les personnages et les actions, qu'elle apparaisse comme une étiquette sur l'oeuvre pour que l'intrigue perde son authenticité et le roman sa vie [...] cette fusion secrète de l'expérience et de la pensée, de la vie et de la réflexion sur son sens, c'est elle qui fait le grand romancier [...] Il s'agit aujourd'hui d'un roman où cet équilibre est rompu, où la théorie fait tort à la vie.⁴⁸³

A novel is nothing but a visual implementation of a philosophy. And in a good novel, all the philosophy has been integrated in the images. But it only takes a philosophy that is overloading characters and action, appearing as a label on the work, and the plot loses its authenticity and the novel loses its life [...] this secret fusion of experience and thought, of life and thinking its sense, it is this that makes a good novelist [...] We are facing today a novel where this balance is shaken, where theory does not do life justice.

We can read this side by side with Calvino's comment in 'Filosofia e letteratura':

Il filosofo-scrittore può gettare sul mondo un nuovo sguardo filosofico che sia nello stesso tempo un nuovo sguardo letterario? Per un momento, quando il protagonista della *Nausée* osserva la sua faccia nello specchio, questo può essere possibile; ma per la larga parte della sua opera il filosofo-scrittore appare come un filosofo che ha al suo servizio uno scrittore versatile fino all'eclettismo. La letteratura dell'esistenzialismo non ha più corso perché non è riuscita a darsi un proprio rigore letterario. Solo quando lo scrittore scrive *prima* del filosofo che lo interpreta, il rigore letterario servirà di modello al rigore filosofico: anche se scrittore e filosofo convivono nella stessa persona. Questo vale non solo per Dostoevsky e per Kafka, ma anche per Camus e per Genet.⁴⁸⁴

Obviously, the respective proportions of philosophy and literature are not quantifiable; Camus does provide us with a criterion, which can be used as a golden line not to be crossed, and that is the point 'où la théorie fait tort à la vie'. But what does this really imply? Both Camus and Calvino reject any moralising or pedagogical function of literature. A further parallel study will reveal that in fact, the most trustworthy and valid criteria are not ethical but aesthetic. Camus's assessment is the following:

Pour que soit possible une œuvre absurde, il faut que la pensée sous sa forme la plus lucide y soit mêlée. Mais il faut en même temps qu'elle n'y apparaisse point sinon comme l'intelligence qui ordonne. [...] L'œuvre d'art naît du renoncement de l'intelligence à résonner le concret. [...] On peut voir là en même temps une règle d'esthétique. La véritable œuvre d'art est toujours à la mesure humaine. Elle est essentiellement celle qui dit 'moins'⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸³ Albert Camus, *Essais*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1965), p. 674.

⁴⁸⁴ *SI*, p. 190.

⁴⁸⁵ *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, pp. 133-134.

For an absurd work of art to be possible, the mind needs to be involved in its utmost clarity. But at the same time, it should only appear as an ordering intelligence. [...] The work of art is born when intelligence refuses to think concretely. [...] In this, we can also see an aesthetic rule. A real work of art is always at the human scale. It is essentially what says 'less'.

Calvino expresses the same value when he talks about the authors who aspire to high philosophical concerns, while still remaining fundamentally literary:

Comune a loro è l'abitudine a nascondere le carte: le frequentazioni filosofiche traspasano solo attraverso l'allusione ai grandi testi, la geometria metafisica, l'erudizione. Di momento in momento ci aspettiamo che la filigrana segreta dell'universo stia per apparire in trasparenza: aspettativa sempre delusa, com'è giusto.⁴⁸⁶

Both authors situate the value of the work of art in the thin space between the great ideas it alludes to and what it is never clearly said.

4.2.2. Palomar and the absurd

We would like to point out the striking similarities between what Albert Camus describes as the Absurd in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942), which we believe will help us to argue that *Palomar* does not merely narrate paradoxes and oxymorons, thus condemning the reading experience to despair.⁴⁸⁷ The motivation of such an enterprise is very similar to the one underlining the importance of utopia and individual responsibility that we have previously discussed in the context of the cosmicomic stories: it addresses the negative criticism that accuses Calvino of giving up artistic and intellectual integrity for the sake of disinterested playfulness, self-indulging fabulation and aimless philosophical reflection. *Palomar* has extensively been studied as a work of disengagement, of rational quality attempting to grasp an increasing abstraction, of epistemological pessimism.⁴⁸⁸ Both critics that defend and attack *Palomar's* literary value, have pointed out its poor historical context, its descriptive quality, and the economy of its style. However, the criticism that lingers on the minimal aspects of the book, and the quantity of abstract images, or the epistemological conundrums that it refers to, runs the risk of misleading the reader into a restrictive interpretation. By bringing in Camus' idea of the Absurd, it is possible to reassert that Palomar as a character, is true to the complexity and the absurdity of life and deserves the recognition of such a literary function. We will summarise Camus' illustration of the

⁴⁸⁶SI, p.195.

⁴⁸⁷Italo Calvino makes a few direct references to Camus in his essays, recognising both his contribution to philosophy and literature among his contemporaries.

⁴⁸⁸Martin McLaughlin offers an overview of the critical work on *Palomar* in 'Words and Silence: The Strange Genesis of *Mr Palomar*', *Italo Calvino*, pp.129-144.

Absurd in order to set the context in which *Palomar*, will be discussed insisting on the section called “La création absurde” because it addresses directly the problem of literary creation within the frame of Absurd thought.

Camus starts by confirming the widely accepted mimetic function of art: ‘Créer, c'est vivre deux fois. [...] La création, c'est le grand mime.’ (To create is to live twice [...] Creation is the great mimesis).⁴⁸⁹ Within an absurd context, this mimetic function excludes any attempt at explanation:

Pour l'homme absurde, il ne s'agit plus d'expliquer ou de résoudre, mais d'éprouver et de décrire. [...] Le cœur apprend ainsi que cette émotion qui nous transporte devant les visages du monde ne nous vient pas de sa profondeur mais de leur diversité.⁴⁹⁰

For the absurd man, it is no longer a question of explanation or resolution, but a question of experiencing and describing [...] The heart thus learns, that this emotion, which takes us in front of the faces of the world, does not come from its depth, but from its diversity

At this point it is difficult not to see the parallel with what Calvino tried to do. Palomar's persistent observation can also be interpreted as the necessity dictated by the experience of absurdity.

Furthermore, one cannot but echo Camus's words with these: ‘Solo dopo aver conosciuto la superficie delle cose, - conclude, - ci si può spingere a cercare quel che c'è sotto. Ma la superficie delle cose è inesauribile’.⁴⁹¹ The inexhaustible surface of things and diversity are directly connected. This remark is equal to the intellectual assessment that our grasp on the world is not only limited but that it will also remain dubious in every attempt. Palomar's narrative of observation is Calvino's literary description, his mimesis. So an alternative interpretation of Palomar's repetitive failures would be to understand him as being part of a creation which ‘est aussi le bouleversant témoignage de la seule dignité de l'homme: la révolte tenace contre sa condition, la persévérance dans un effort tenu pour stérile’⁴⁹² (is also the overwhelming evidence of man's only dignity: the persistent revolt against his condition, the perseverance in a barren endeavour).

Under this light, Calvino's achievement is considerable, to say the least. Despite Palomar's distinctive nature - his dislike of conflict, his poor social skills, his neurotic and myopic eyes with which he so stubbornly tries to scrutinise the world – Calvino makes of him the literary image of human dignity, in its humility.

When reading *Palomar*, the reader is taken by the hand and follows Palomar's wanderings, his

⁴⁸⁹*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, p. 135.

⁴⁹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁴⁹¹RRII, *Palomar*, p. 920.

⁴⁹²*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, pp. 155-156.

experiences and also his train of thought. What may induce the error of analysing *Palomar* more as an essay than a narrative, is the fact the Palomar is an intellectual. But once again, if we use Camus's words as an echo, this takes a completely different dimension: 'L'œuvre incarne donc un drame intellectuel' (Therefore, the work incarnates an intellectual tragedy).⁴⁹³

The most prominent 'drame intellectuel' of the twentieth century is probably the death of God. The aim of existentialism (from which Camus affirmatively deviated after his quarrel with Sartre) was to find a meaning in life in a world without God. One of the possible consequences of an absence of God is that there might not be an immortal soul. Reflecting on the meaning of life in an anchored mortality is the difficult enterprise that man has to face since the Enlightenment. In choosing the myth of Sisyphus, Camus is able to discuss what seems horrible about this punishment: its cyclical redundancy and the impression that no progress is possible, despite all titanic efforts. The other important issue raised is that the meaning of life in relation to the myth of Sisyphus does not reside in immortality or in a supposed afterlife. Sisyphus is in fact immortal, yet indefinitely condemned to the same activity. Once it has been settled that the possibility of an afterlife, or the immortality of the soul do not provide a satisfying answer to the problem of the meaning of life, it is possible to modify the question or at least to try and establish more adequate criteria. The mere statement of an afterlife can also be said to avoid the question of the meaning of life, as it only addresses the fear of death and nothing more. The original and unique quality of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, lies in the following assertion which comes at the start of the essay: 'Mais il est utile de noter, en même temps, que l'absurde, pris jusqu'ici comme conclusion, est considéré dans cet essai comme un point de départ' (But at the same time, it is useful to point out, that the absurd, so far taken as a conclusion, is studied in this essay as a starting point).⁴⁹⁴

Humankind experiences absurdity in the interstice created between the habit of living and the hostility of a world in which he feels very much like an outsider. This feeling of absurdity reaches its climax when the perpetual menace of time and the certainty of death become obvious. For Camus, the world itself is not absurd; absurdity is born from the clash between the irrationality of the world (in the sense that it cannot be assessed by the power of reason), and the perennial human desire for clarity and meaning. Once this absurdity has been asserted, Camus insists that intellectual integrity commands that every thought and experience should be constantly tested under its light and resist the tendency to betray it. Such an engagement results in discarding any form of escapism as valid solutions to the Absurd; these include suicide itself (because it is the ultimate annihilation of

⁴⁹³Ibid., p. 135.

⁴⁹⁴Ibid., p. 16.

conscience), but also what Camus calls the ‘philosophical suicide of existentialism’: ‘le mouvement par quoi une pensée se nie elle-même et tend à se surpasser dans ce qui fait sa négation’ (the action by which a thought contradicts itself and tends to overcome its own contradiction), as well as any other effort to find a solution to the Absurd outside this world (be it an almost religious celebration of irrationality, or the assumption of a life ‘beyond this terrestrial one’).⁴⁹⁵

At this point it is also important to understand the essential truth behind the act of suicide, which according to Camus is the following: ‘Mourir volontairement suppose qu'on a reconnu, même instinctivement, le caractère dérisoire de cette *habitude*, l'absence de toute raison profonde de vivre, le caractère insensé de cette agitation quotidienne et l'inutilité de la souffrance’ (To die willingly it is assumed that one has admitted, if only by instinct, the absurd nature of this *habit*, the absence of any profound reason to live, the insane nature of this daily unrest and the uselessness of suffering).⁴⁹⁶ This act of suicide is directly placed on the opposite of the positive Absurd confrontation:

Vivre une expérience, un destin, c'est l'accepter pleinement. Or on ne vivra pas ce destin, le sachant absurde, si on ne fait pas tout pour maintenir devant soi cet absurde mis à jour par la conscience [...] Vivre, c'est faire vivre l'absurde. Le faire vivre, c'est avant tout le regarder [...] L'une des seules positions philosophiques cohérentes, c'est ainsi la révolte. Elle est un affrontement perpétuel de l'homme et de sa propre obscurité. Elle remet le monde en question à chacune de ses secondes [...] Elle n'est pas aspiration, elle est sans espoir. Cette révolte n'est que l'assurance d'un destin écrasant, moins la résignation qui devrait l'accompagner.⁴⁹⁷

To live an experience, a fate, is to accept it entirely. But knowing the fate to be absurd, one will not live it unless everything is made possible to keep in sight this absurd, made up to date by the conscience [...] To live, is to make the absurd live. To make it live, is above all to look at it [...] Therefore, one of the only coherent philosophical stances is revolt. It is man's perpetual confrontation with his own darkness. It questions the world at every moment [...] It is not an aspiration, it is without hope. This revolt is nothing but certainty of an overwhelming fate, not so much the resignation that should come with it.

It is under this perspective that I would like to attempt an interpretation of the last story of *Palomar*:

‘Come imparare a essere morto’.

‘Il signor Palomar decide che d'ora in poi farà come se fosse morto, per vedere come va il mondo senza di lui’.⁴⁹⁸ This first sentence conveys the intentionality of the act of suicide, and this is why this story becomes particularly interesting in relation to the Absurd. Of course, Palomar's suicide might just be yet another thought experiment in order to get closer to an ideal observation; however,

⁴⁹⁵Ibid., p. 63.

⁴⁹⁶Ibid., p. 20

⁴⁹⁷Ibid., pp. 78-79.

⁴⁹⁸RRII, p. 975.

the idea of voluntarily taking one's life still remains. But how does this thought experiment work? Palomar assumes his own death 'per vedere come va il mondo senza di lui'. What he hopes to achieve, is to see whether without his presence the world will be any different. Therefore, he wants to deduce the essential quantity and quality of his being 'in negative'. It is not the only thing that is considered in negative in the story. Later on, in order to explain what to be dead, Palomar explains how it is *not* being: 'Per prima cosa, non si deve confondere l'essere morto col non esserci [...] una volta morti, non possiamo realizzarci né nel passato [...] né nel futuro'.⁴⁹⁹ This peculiar disambiguation confirms the arrow of time, and the certainty of death, and their indelible consequences on the experience of life. Beyond this concern lies another one. By trying to pretend his own death, Palomar does not only try to discover some hidden truth about the world or himself, he also hopes to experience some sort of relief from the condition of being: 'Dunque il signor Palomar, dovrebbe provare una sensazione di sollievo [...] Ma proprio l'attesa di assaporare questa calma basta a rendere ansioso il signor Palomar'.⁵⁰⁰ The notion of desire, which is so central to Calvino's work, emerges once again, as Palomar's longing for peace of mind reveals a slightly different reality from the one the reader was exposed to at the beginning of the story. 'Il sollievo di essere morto dovrebbe essere questo: eliminata quella macchia d'inquietudine che è la nostra presenza, la sola cosa che conta è l'estendersi e il succedersi delle cose sotto il sole, nella loro serenità impassibile'.⁵⁰¹ Once again, this world in negative that Palomar is trying to contemplate reveals an affirmation, or even a confirmation: 'quella macchia d'inquietudine che è la nostra presenza'. Ironically, by trying to learn how to be dead, Palomar experiences the epitome of being as *Angst*. Every faint sense of hope to escape this condition is consistently echoed by disillusion: 'A tratti s'illude d'essersi liberato almeno dell'impazienza che l'ha accompagnato tutta la vita [...] non se n'è liberato affatto'.⁵⁰²

The confrontation with anxiety is not only indirect, but also very humorous. Palomar's portrayal of death is rather curious: the dead person supposedly deprives the world from his presence, and himself from his own habits (including any form of interaction with the world), and yet, his conscience remains. Just like he has always done while he was alive, he still observes the world, perpetuating the frustration of not being able to have any influence on the irrational and arbitrary nature of things. 'Lo sguardo dei morti è un po' deprecatorio. Luoghi, situazioni, occasioni [...] risultano arbitrarie e irregolari e questo dà fastidio, soprattutto perché uno è sempre tentato

⁴⁹⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰⁰Ibid., p. 974.

⁵⁰¹Ibid., p. 976.

⁵⁰²Ibid., p. 977.

d'intervenire ad apportare quella correzione che gli pare necessaria'.⁵⁰³ The comic effect is achieved by Palomar's psychological projection. He attributes to the dead characteristics of the living: they find the world troublesome and they cast their disproving eyes on it. The relation between the living and the dead, and how they may affect one another is also a reference to the work of Fourier. As Calvino wrote, one of the occult characteristics of Fourier's work, was

la convinzione che i morti nell'al di là non possono essere felici finché non saranno felici i viventi: la felicità non può essere che generale, di tutti i morti e di tutti i vivi; se i vivi sono infelici, come sarebbe possibile secondo giustizia che fossero felici i morti?⁵⁰⁴

The passage in *Palomar* discussing this relation, questions the occult dimension of Fourier's thought:

Certo quelli che continuano a vivere possono, in base ai cambiamenti vissuti da loro, introdurre dei cambiamenti anche nella vita dei morti [...] Ma sono cambiamenti che contano soprattutto per i vivi [...] Per questo Palomar si prepara a diventare un morto scorbutico, che mal sopporta la condanna a restare così com'è, ma non è disposto a rinunciare a nulla di sé neanche se gli pesa⁵⁰⁵

The impression given is that although the desire to establish a dialogue with the dead is apparently inevitable, intellectual honesty dictates that one should admit such an endeavour remain a projection of that desire, which is not that of the dead.

Paradoxically, while Palomar is trying to find 'il sublime distacco che credeva fosse proprio quello dei morti', he realises that if he was to achieve his goal, he would have to sacrifice one of the most precious aspects of being alive: 'la possibilità di migliorare il proprio passato'.⁵⁰⁶ In this story, we find again Calvino's fear and dislike of sclerosis; and death is precisely this condition of immutability which defies the possibility of change.

In *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, once Camus has discarded suicide as a metaphysical and philosophical solution, he names 'revolt' as one of the direct consequences of Absurd thinking. In this story Palomar's revolt is expressed with a comic hint: 'Per questo Palomar si prepara a diventare un morto scorbutico, che mal sopporta la condanna a restare così com'è, ma non è disposto a rinunciare a nulla di sé neanche se gli pesa'.⁵⁰⁷ Palomar's revolt resides in his peevishness while his ethical stance consists in his stubborn persistence to be true to himself. It is not the first time that this type of concern is expressed in Calvino's work. These passages from *Il visconte dimezzato*, were already clearly leading the way: 'avrà perso la metà di te e del mondo, ma la metà rimasta sarà mille volte più

⁵⁰³Ibid., p. 976.

⁵⁰⁴'Per Fourier. 2. L'ordinatore dei desideri', SI., p. 296.

⁵⁰⁵RRII., p. 978.

⁵⁰⁶Ibid., p. 977.

⁵⁰⁷Ibid., p. 978.

profonda e preziosa'⁵⁰⁸, 'questo è il bene dell'essere dimezzato: il capire d'ogni persona e cosa al mondo la pena che ognuno e ognuna ha per la propria incompletezza'⁵⁰⁹. Palomar remains a man of 'dimidiamento', although the metaphor as such does not figure in the book in the way Calvino depicted it in 1952.

Palomar's thought experiment has driven him towards an attitude that somehow tries to defy death. This leads him, in the last section of the story, to think about the issue of 'posterità'. 'Il dispositivo biologico' and 'il dispositivo storico' are the two main elements which allow humans to pass on their experience to future generations. The possibility of preserving individual experience however, does not offer Palomar any consolation: 'ma così non si fa che rinviare il problema, dalla propria morte individuale all'estinzione del genere umano, per tardi che questa possa succedere'.⁵¹⁰ From this point on, the story wants to transcend its own limits through Palomar's narrative. 'Palomar pensando alla propria morte pensa già a quella degli ultimi sopravvissuti della specie umana o dei suoi derivati o eredi'.⁵¹¹ From the anxiety of Palomar's individual death, we are taken to the apocalyptic end of humanity and to the universal end of time. It is important to acknowledge that there is nothing mystical about this transcendence. Palomar does not think of 'posterità' in terms of an afterlife, rather he recognises the concrete devices of posterity: 'il dispositivo biologico [...] che si chiama patrimonio genetico, e il dispositivo storico, che permette di tramandare nella memoria e nel linguaggio di chi continua a vivere quel tanto o quel poco d'esperienza che anche l'uomo più sprovveduto raccoglie e accumula'.⁵¹²

Literature belongs to the realm of historical posterity, given that it is embedded in memory and language. Under this perspective, the posterity of this particular book consists in the survival of a portion of Palomar's experience; and Palomar's experience is more the desire and struggle to describe, rather than a mere failure to do so.

Even if posterity is achieved through the means that Palomar is able to recognise, the problem of the end of time still remains. With this new problematic, description takes on a different function: 'Se il tempo deve finire, lo si può descrivere, istante per istante, - pensa Palomar, - e ogni istante, a descriverlo, si dilata tanto che non se ne vede più la fine'.⁵¹³ Description renders the end of time ever so distant, enough to make it virtually invisible. Now that he has established that, the story reaches its end and so does Palomar: 'Decide che si metterà a descrivere ogni istante della sua vita, e finché non

⁵⁰⁸ *I nostri antenati*, p. 40

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

⁵¹⁰ *RRII*, p. 979.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*

⁵¹² *Ibid.*

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*

li avrà descritti tutti non penserà più d'essere morto. In quel momento muore'.⁵¹⁴ In the last moment before his death he seems to have reached one of the most positive and affirmative conclusions in the book. Palomar, a man obsessed with observation, decides to spend the rest of his life describing very single moment without thinking about death. It might seem unsettling that straight after that he should die. Many critics have relied on this conclusion to support a pessimistic approach to the book. My interpretation is slightly different. The last thing Palomar does, is not to die, but to refuse suicide. In deciding to describe every single moment in his life, Palomar has not found a way to escape death. Description, no matter how much it can stretch time out, does not grant immortality. What he has found, is a way to live *despite* his mortality. The fact that he dies is merely a confirmation of his mortality, which does not undermine in any way his previous determination. There is no link of causality between Palomar's determination and his death, this is primarily why I tend to believe that a negative reading of the character's death is not accurate. What Calvino achieves with the juxtaposition of these two things is dramatic irony and a memorable ending.

With the eyes that Camus sees Sisyphus, rolling the rock uphill, watching it roll down and gathering up his strength to do the same thing over and over again, I would like to see Palomar, in his never-ending effort to observe the world, hoping to find a meaning, failing and then trying again. Just as Camus so poetically suggests at the end of his essay: 'Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux', I would like to echo him: 'Il faut imaginer Palomar heureux'.

4.3 Literature facing death

Calvino is both aware of the tradition which associated writing as a practice against death, and the trend among his contemporaries that believed this tradition to have shifted. Laurence Sterne is an author that Calvino himself discusses under this specific light.

La grande invenzione di Laurence Sterne è stata il romanzo tutto fatto di digressioni; un esempio che sarà subito seguito da Diderot. La divagazione o digressione è una strategia per rinviare la conclusione, una moltiplicazione del tempo all'interno dell'opera, una fuga perpetua; fuga da che cosa? Dalla morte, certamente, dice in una sua introduzione a *Tristram Shandy* [...] Carlo Levi[...] io non sono uno cultore della divagazione; potrei dire che preferisco affidarmi alla linea retta, nella speranza che continui all'infinito e che mi renda irraggiungibile.⁵¹⁵

For Sterne, the straight line takes you directly to the conclusion, as quickly as possible, and therefore, in order to delay the dreaded moment, digression becomes necessary; in *Palomar*, Calvino hopes to

⁵¹⁴Ibid.

⁵¹⁵SI, p. 669.

achieve this by prolonging the straight line, by extending his description as far as possible.

In Italian literature of the 20th century, the major figure writing in this tradition is Italo Svevo with his *Coscienza di Zeno*. Marziano Guglielminetti sees Palomar as a dialogue with Zeno:

Palomar è a sua volta una maschera non maliziosa e senile, come quella di Svevo, ma persino indifferente e scientifica, quale si addice ad un osservatore che reca fin nel nome, notizia della propria origine [...] ‘I silenzi di Palomar’, lascia intravedere anche la formazione di un'altra maschera, più filosofica e comportamentale che non quella dell'osservatore.⁵¹⁶

We would like to alter, and maybe specify this interpretation that does not seem to do entirely justice to the complexity of the character. Were Palomar merely a mask revealing another mask, the whole game at play in the book would be a game of deception. Palomar's function as a character is not to deceive the reader; certain aspects of his character are progressively disclosed not merely to play tricks with the reader's expectation, but because some of them are also revealed to him at different times. Other aspects can only be indirectly related to him, after reading into the discrepancy between some of his thoughts and his actions. Palomar-philosopher, is not another Palomar revealed when Palomar-observer is disposed of; he is the same, only enriched, made more complex, more controversial, and subsequently more human.

As far as literature and death go, I would like to refer to the discourse initiated by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault in the late 60's, which Calvino also indirectly refers to (and more directly so in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*). At the time, literature was intrinsically associated with the intention of authorship, and they were reacting precisely against that. Because literary experience occurs in the absence of the author, the old philological approach was primarily protective, and Barthes and Foucault also considered it restrictive, and consequently unfair. The essential controversy divided those in favour of explanation, and those in favour of interpretation. There is no doubt however, that the revolutionary stance of the late 60's and the early 70's was also absolute, so much so that even those who originally lead the way, diverged from it, sooner than one might think.

Comme institution l'auteur est mort : sa personne civile, passionnelle, biographique, a disparu ; dépossédée, elle n'exerce plus sur son oeuvre la formidable paternité dont l'histoire littéraire, l'enseignement, l'opinion avaient à charge d'établir et de renouveler le récit : mais dans le texte, d'une certaine façon, *je désire* l'auteur : j'ai besoin de sa figure (qui n'est ni sa représentation, ni sa projection), comme elle a besoin de la mienne (sauf à ‘babiller’).⁵¹⁷

⁵¹⁶Marziano Guglielminetti, ‘La scrittura contro la morte’, *Italo Calvino: Imaginaire et rationalité*, ed. by Aurore Frasson-Marin (Geneva: Éditions Slatkine, 1991), p. 78.

⁵¹⁷Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du Texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), pp. 45-46.

As an institution, the author is dead: his legal, passionate, biographical entity has disappeared; being dispossessed, it no longer exerts on its work that tremendous paternity that literary history, education, and opinion ought to establish and renew in the narration: but in the text, somehow, *I desire* the author: I need his figure (which is neither his representation, nor his projection), as much as it needs mine (except for 'chitchat').

These are Barthes' own words, only a few years after he had published his famous essay on the death of the author. In *Le Plaisir du texte* (1973), Barthes gives back a place to the author, through the desire of the reader.

The ontological threat that the death of the author seems to pose for literature, echoes in fact, the ethical imbalance created by the death of God. It is this of course what Camus points at when he discusses Dostoevsky's alleged 'If God is dead, everything is permitted'. The new order of things was to replace an obsolete symbolic frame by another: the mythical, by the religious, the religious by the enlightened. The cultural artefacts and the collective images that constitute this frame are not the evil bearers of humanity's crimes, nor are they the source and origin of virtue. They are nonetheless the proof that humanity is capable of creating a vast variety of things, and they are the expression of humanity's need to justify its actions and beliefs.

With the introduction of relativism, which many associate with tolerance, authority is put at peril. Of course, this occurs simultaneously with the death of God. If there is any universal aspect in ethics, which would therefore justify any discussion around it, it is the universal need for *some* ethics. The themes of the crisis of authority and ethics are not uncommon in *Palomar*. They are probably more directly discussed in the stories 'Del mordersi la lingua' and 'Del prendersela coi giovani', in which Palomar narrates the difficulty to express an opinion, and therefore the even greater difficulty to have any authority on younger people.

4.4 Palomar, silence and the limits of understanding and communication

The thematic exploration of silence is a central one in the narration of *Palomar*. One of the persistent difficulties that Palomar faces during his observations is the difficulty to interpret what he sees and to incorporate it in a sphere of knowledge. Very often, he is confronted with ambiguity, which prevents him from extracting the meaningful essence of his experiences, and therefore silence regularly prevails. The problem of silence and ambiguity has become quite prominent from the second half of the twentieth century, with the emergence of deconstruction and postmodern theories. Mario Perniola

gives a particularly good historical account and interpretation of the issue in his essay ‘Silence, the Utmost in Ambiguity’⁵¹⁸, which I would like to discuss in relation to *Palomar*.

As Perniola reminds us:

In Ancient Greek, *amphibolia* contains the prefix *amphi*, which means ‘on one side and the other’ and therefore implies that the ‘sides’ are a pair. This adverb entered into competition with *peri*, the meaning of which is ‘around’, and which prevailed. Furthermore, it is interesting to observe that one of the first uses of the word *amphibolia*, in Herodotus, for example, was in a strategic sense and meant ‘to be attacked from both sides’, to be caught in the crossfire. From this derives the verb *epamphoterizō*, which means to engage in double dealing, to help two adversaries simultaneously. This is not unlike the numerical adjective in Latin *ambo*, identical to the Greek *ámpho* (dual), which refers exclusively to the fact that two people are operating in the same place at the same time, while *uter* indicates that the two are separated in time and place. *Amphibolia* is therefore the same as the Latin *ambiguitas* (from *ambo* and *ago*, that is, literally to send something in two directions). Whilst this distinction may be blurred in classical Latin, with compound verbs with the prefix *ambi-* suggesting vagueness or more than two directions, and whilst this blurring is certainly also present when the word enters English in the sixteenth century, it is arguable that the dual sense tends to predominate.⁵¹⁹

Interestingly enough, the discussion on ambiguity, starts with a necessary disambiguation of the term itself, and there is evidence that the term has come to mean something different from its etymological sense. In short, the word comes to signify versatility instead of an alternative split between two elements. On the other hand, the conception and interpretation of silence has equally evolved and has gained a considerable complexity. In antiquity, silence was discussed in a religious and poetic context and in mystical terms, and was regarded as a form of creative contemplation. In the seventeenth century the argument shifts towards a more philosophical and aesthetic dimension. But as Perniola notes: ‘Independently of this mystical conception of silence which breaks into aesthetics, there has been since antiquity another conception of silence which understands it as practical action’.⁵²⁰ He also finds a good example of the versatile function of silence in the categories created by Dinouart, namely: ‘prudent’ silence, ‘courteous’ silence, ‘teasing’ (moqueur) silence, ‘spiritual’ silence, ‘stupid’ silence, ‘applauding’ silence, silence of ‘contempt’, ‘capricious’ (d’humeur) silence, and ‘political’ silence.⁵²¹ We can easily identify several of those in *Palomar*, but the most obvious and flagrant example can be found in the story entitled ‘Del mordersi la lingua’. The very beginning of the story is a statement of political silence: ‘In un’epoca e in un paese in cui tutti si fanno in quattro per

⁵¹⁸Mario Perniola, ‘Silence and the Utmost in Ambiguity’, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 12.4 (2010).

<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss4/2>

⁵¹⁹Perniola, p. 2.

⁵²⁰Perniola, p. 3.

⁵²¹Ibid., p. 4.

proclamare opinioni o giudizi, il signor Palomar ha preso l'abitudine di mordersi la lingua tre volte prima di fare qualsiasi affermazione. Se al terzo morso di lingua è ancora convinto della cosa che stava per dire, la dice; se no sta zitto. Di fatto, passa settimane e mesi interi in silenzio'.⁵²² In this context, Palomar's silence is not an involuntary reaction. On the contrary, it is something that Palomar consciously chooses to implement for himself after careful consideration of the situation in which he finds himself. His silence, and therefore his reluctance to implicate himself in a futile form of communication is itself a political statement. The three conclusions of Dinouart's analysis, as they are summarised by Perniola, are extremely relevant to the story and how it unfolds: 'we speak and write too much, we speak and write badly, we neither speak nor write enough (naturally in the sense that we neither say nor write that which it is necessary to say and write)'.⁵²³ Palomar preaches a humble attitude towards the unfolding events of his age; while "postmodern deconstruction widens the legitimacy of the interpretation of texts and behaviour to excess, and as a result produces that disease of communication which Umberto Eco defined with the expression 'hermetic semiosis'. The most important aspect of this approach is that 'hermetic syncretism does not encourage an attitude of humility amongst its followers',⁵²⁴ because it assumes that *any* interpretation is as valid as any other. Such an attitude reduces all problems to banality and in fact, strips them of any interest. Furthermore, this poses a serious and fundamental problem to the essence of criticism and critical ability. In his essay 'Fonction de la Critique' (1991), Cornelius Castoriadis goes to the trouble of reminding us the origins of the word : 'Critique, du verbe krinô, signifiant séparer, distinguer le bon grain de l'ivraie -, puis juger' (Critique, from the verb krinô, meaning to distinguish, to separate the wheat from the chaff -, then, to judge).⁵²⁵ What is really at stake here is the capacity to discriminate, because very often we tend to forget that a critical piece is not only about associating elements together, but also dissociating, clarifying, and distinguishing them. Castoriadis also points out that criticism is about making a judgement. In order to make a judgement, the critic has to accept the weight of responsibility and authority. Of course, judgement can be made in all humility, and accept its own limits, leaving space for further questions and required reconsideration; but in the end 'Ambiguous messages and texts can have many meanings, but not *all* meanings!'.⁵²⁶ Criticism should at least be capable of discarding the impossible or most unlikely meanings.

The particular image that Calvino uses to stand for this silence is also very important. Palomar

⁵²²RRII, p. 960.

⁵²³Perniola, p.4.

⁵²⁴Perniola, p. 4.

⁵²⁵Castoriadis Cornelius, *Fenêtre sur le chaos* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007), p. 122.

⁵²⁶Perniola, p.4.

does not simply stay silent; he bites his own tongue in order to prevent any impulsive expression of opinion when it is not judged appropriate. This image powerfully conveys the way in which such a silence is achieved. This attitude inevitably requires determination and restraint; in other words some form of self-control. This idea is so important that it comes again, in even more explicit terms in 'L'universo come specchio': 'Non solo conoscenza ci vuole, ma comprensione, accordo con i propri mezzi e fini e pulsioni, il che vuol dire possibilità d'esercitare una padronanza sulle proprie inclinazioni e azioni, che le controlli e le diriga ma non le coarti e non le soffochi'.⁵²⁷

Ultimately Perniola recognises three distinct ways of regarding silence: the mystical, the hermetic and a third intermediate attitude, which is expressed through oxymoron, and active contemplation for example. Such an attitude was present during the Eleusinian mysteries of the antiquity, which, unlike Orphism, were a 'recognition of the human condition' and devoid of radical conversion and obscure ritualistic proselytism. It is a paramount aspect of this thesis that the silences exercised by Palomar are neither mystical nor hermetic, but rather closer to the third type found during the Eleusinian mysteries. It is probably more adequate to reconsider briefly the last story of the book again under this particular light. 'It was characteristic of the Eleusinian mysteries that at the end of the ceremonies the initiates all returned to their own cities to take up entirely, that is, as much in legal as in religious terms, their own place in the world once more', while the participants will be initiated to the idea that 'it is well to die', 'in the sense that the initiate passes from the same to the same, but not from the identical to the identical'.⁵²⁸ In 'Come imparare a essere morto', Palomar first fakes his own death in his mind, and then at the end it is narrated that he actually dies. His Eleusinian initiation could be said to be that 'it is well to live'. Just before he dies Palomar, much like the initiates of the ancient mysteries, finds his place once more: 'Decide che si metterà a descrivere ogni istante della sua vita, e finché non li avrà descritti tutti non penserà più d'essere morto'.⁵²⁹

In his book, *Settanta*, Marco Belpoliti situates Calvino in a generation of Italian writers born in the 20's and writing from the 50's to the beginning of the 80's. What the authors of that generation (Pasolini, Parise, Calvino, Sciascia, Manganelli, Arbasino) had in common was a political and artistic commitment. His fourth chapter starts with a section entitled '*Silence*'. The section discusses an exchange of letters between Goffredo Parise and Calvino beginning in 1963. The reason behind these exchanges is Parise's wish to publish again with Einaudi (he initially wrote to Calvino as to an editor working for the publishing house), his first two novels: *Il ragazzo morto e le comete* and *La grande*

⁵²⁷RRII, p.973.

⁵²⁸Sabbatucci p.133, p.158, cited in Perniola, p.5

⁵²⁹RRII, p.979.

vacanza. The discussion immediately becomes one about a literary generation. Calvino comments on the characteristics of the literary works that were being written in the 50's:

Perdio, che fiato che avevamo da giovani! Forza di trasfigurazione, ricchezza, libertà, coraggio, cattiveria, insomma poesia. Come ci ha tarpato le ali (a te, a me, a tutti) il trionfo del verismo romano-piccoloborghese su tutta la letteratura italiana del dopoguerra. (Me la prendo più con i critici che con gli scrittori i quali da questo clima sono stati fregati, Moravia per primo, anche se non se ne rendono conto).⁵³⁰

In the letters exchanged between them, Belpoliti underlines Parise's intellectual struggle, and the suspicion, the fear of a threat: silence is closing in. He wonders/asks Calvino if the solution is to be found in imagination, in a literary creation completely outside reality. Calvino also sees the silence, he agrees that it closer every moment; but he does not believe it is a force trying to intrude from outside:

Ma il silenzio, gelido vento, di tanto in tanto attraversato da risonanze, da piccoli diapason, da lilliput avvolti nel sudario dei bagni turchi, il silenzio dico è la tentazione maggiore. Ed è una tentazione estetica prima di tutto non tanto una necessità filosofica (com'è però).⁵³¹

Here again Calvino puts his literary concern above all. His is also a slightly more positive message than the one anticipated by Parise: silence is not an ontological threat coming to shake the entire literary foundation of that Italian generation (or at least it should not). For, as an external threat, that silence ultimately means death, it marks the end of writing, and that was not a literary aspiration whatever the problems raised. Maybe Calvino was also trying to re-direct Parise, to trigger from his fear the gestation of a new writing perspective. Yet his indications to Parise were not only words of comfort from a fellow writer and an editor, in addition to that, they were Calvino's own writing concerns. As Belpoliti points out, the question whether or not to write, Calvino's definitive answer is that one should above all live. Only in living one could imagine the prospect of writing, and then perhaps, even writing well. In the years to come, silence became indeed an aesthetic characteristic of Calvino's work. We can recall the immanent threat of a book that will never meet its end, that will fall into a soundless space with no author. That is what the reader experiences in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*. The stories read by Ludmilla and il Lettore, one after the other come to naught. There is also silence in the cosmicomic stories, in those empty spaces that Qfwfq tries to fill-in with his imagination and his desire ('Un segno nello spazio'). There is the silence of the absence of time before the Big-Bang, the silence of unrequited love, or the silent message 'TI HO VISTO' on the board (silent because Qfwfq interacts with it but in never answers back), in 'Gli-anni luce'. There is of

⁵³⁰Marco Belpoliti, *Settanta* (Turin: Einaudi, 2001), p.181.

⁵³¹Ibid., p. 183.

course the silence of *Il castello dei destini incrociati*, where the travellers are denied the faculty of speech upon entering a castle by night, and are constrained to tell their respective story using tarot cards. There is also silence in *Le città*, we can recall Melania, the city that fights silence by perpetuating a dialogue among its inhabitants, and also the silences in the dialogue between Marco Polo and Kublai Kan.

Martin McLaughlin devoted a chapter in *Italo Calvino* to the theme of silence: ‘Words and Silence. The Strange genesis of *Mr Palomar*’.⁵³² He comments on the books minimalist aesthetics as an effect of aesthetic silence, but also the various silences that were involved in the genesis of the book (more particularly the absence of Mohole as a distinct character in the final project, and the debate with Pasolini, ending abruptly with his violent murder).

As to the silence as a characteristic of the generation of Italian writers that Belpoliti refers to, its difficulty to communicate is epitomised in ‘Del prendersela coi giovani’. Palomar expresses the experience of a difficulty of communication with younger generations. In his mind this difficulty resides in two apparently contradictory reasons. On the one hand, it must be, he thinks that the generations live in different times, each belong to a different era, and their experience of the world is so different that communication is made impossible: ‘non abbiamo più punti di riferimento in comune’.⁵³³ On the other hand, he remembers that he himself as a young man, had a similar reaction towards his elders when they tried to criticise him or offer him advice. In this sense, the two generations are the same. Ultimately, he concludes, these two aspects are part of the same problem:

La distanza tra due generazioni è data dagli elementi che esse hanno in comune e che obbligano alla ripetizione ciclica delle stesse esperienze [...] mentre invece gli elementi di diversità tra noi e loro sono il risultato dei cambiamenti irreversibili che ogni epoca porta con sé [...] la vera eredità di cui siamo responsabili, anche se talora inconsapevoli. Per questo non abbiamo niente da insegnare: su ciò che più somiglia alla nostra esperienza non possiamo influire; in ciò che porta la nostra impronta non sappiamo riconoscerci.⁵³⁴

The failure to communicate with the other, is first and foremost the failure to achieve an insight into one's own experience. It would appear that the failure of communication should extend to more than just another generation. It is indeed the case, since we can mention another story form a previous section: ‘Serpenti e teschi’. Claudio Milanini is right to stress, that

Come Popper, così il personaggio calviniano sa che non basta osservare: le osservazioni devono essere interpretate e le teorie che in tal modo si

⁵³²McLaughlin, *Italo Calvino*, pp. 129-144.

⁵³³RRII, p. 962.

⁵³⁴RRII, p. 963.

ricavano vanno a loro volta verificate davanti al tribunale dell'esperienza.⁵³⁵

Palomar's greater problem however, is that he struggles to interpret, from his observation he never really achieves a complete or satisfactory interpretation. The possibility of verification seems consequently very distant.

In the story, Palomar visits the ruins of Tula, the capital of the Toltec civilisation, which thrived in Mexico between the 11th and the 13th century. Palomar is accompanied by a Mexican friend, 'conoscitore appassionato ed eloquente delle civiltà preispaniche, che gli racconta bellissime leggende di Quetzalcoatl'.⁵³⁶ He has with him a connoisseur and a story teller, who 'si sofferma su ogni pietra, la trasforma in racconto cosmico, in allegoria, in riflessione morale'.⁵³⁷ Palomar's friend is very confident about the interpretations that he gives of the stones, the engravings, the world of pictorial representation. The arrival of a class on an educational visit to the archaeological site comes to disturb the harmony established by Palomar's friend's story-telling. The young boys, 'forse discendenti dei costruttori di quei templi' (satisfying with this idea the cosmic desire fuelled by his friend's narration), are led by their teacher around the ruins. Speaking about the columns at the entrance of the temple, he says: 'Non si sa cosa vogliono dire'. This is echoed several times in the story in various similar ways: '*No se sabe qué quierer decir*', 'Non si sa cosa significano'.⁵³⁸ The teacher's account tries the friend's patience, and eventually, after the fourth time, he cannot resist and interjects:

Si che si sa! È la continuità della vita e della morte, i serpenti sono la vita, i teschi sono la morte; la vita che è vita perché porta con sé la morte che è morte perché senza morte non c'è vita...⁵³⁹

The teacher is not discouraged however; he turns to his class, and denies the interpretation. The story itself ends with the very words: 'Non si sa cosa significano'. Palomar is caught in the crossfire. He, who was bemused by his friend's stories, the stories told by the ruins of the ancient city of Tula, cannot ignore the doubts which the words of the school teacher planted in him.

'Cosa vuole dire morte, vita, continuità, passaggio, per gli antichi Toltechi? E cosa vuole dire per questi ragazzi? E per me?' Eppure sa che non potrebbe mai soffocare in sé il bisogno di tradurre, di passare da un linguaggio all'altro, da figure concrete a parole astratte, da simboli astratti e esperienze concrete, di tessere e ritessere una rete di analogie. Non interpretare è impossibile, com'è impossibile trattenersi dal pensare.⁵⁴⁰

⁵³⁵Milanini, p. 188.

⁵³⁶RRII, p. 954.

⁵³⁷Ibid., p. 955.

⁵³⁸RRII, pp. 955-956

⁵³⁹Ibid.

⁵⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 956-957.

The problem of the interpretation of the ruins of Tula, and the entire Toltec civilisation is not simply a problem of the story 'Serpenti e teschi'. Most of the accounts about the Toltec civilisation come from the Aztecs. The scholarly debate about the Toltecs, which started in the 19th century, was divided between those who were ready to generally accept the Aztec story (Veitia, Manuel Orozco y Berra, Charles Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, and Francisco Clavigero), and those who believed it had to be questioned altogether (Daniel Garrisson Brinton). Those who questioned it, believed that there could not be a solid historical validity behind it because it was a characteristic quality of the Aztecs to glorify the past. Their account of the Toltecs must have been tainted by this tendency, and historians, could therefore not rely on it as historical evidence. For them, the Toltecs were a myth of the Aztecs, a story that was not true. With this we are back to the discussion we started in the first chapter of this thesis and the relation between history and myth, and especially the arguments brought forward in *Hamlet's Mill*. The scholarly community of the Toltec civilisation, is thus divided between euhemerists, and myth-sceptics. Further evidence that the story is a clear reference to this problem, is another story told by Palomar's friend, 'che gli racconta bellissime leggende di Quetzalcoatl. Prima di diventare un dio, Quetzalcoatl fu un re che ebbe qui a Tula la sua reggia'.⁵⁴¹ This is exactly the way Euhemerus proposed to read myth: all the deities were once great men, whose achievements were celebrated and glorified at the time they lived, and later elevated to the status of gods. In the more recent scholarly discussion about the Toltecs, some scholars (Michel Graulich, Susan D. Gillespie), have suggested that the historical data coming from the Aztecs was so problematic, that eventually, it could simply not be relied upon. This is then, the concrete debate in which Palomar finds himself trapped, forced to recognise, that both sides appeal to him. These reflections are anchored in a real historical problem: for all their philosophical interest, they refer back to life, how it is recorded, how the process of recording does or does not guarantee its validity.

To conclude this chapter I would like to go back to my initial question: 'Who is Palomar?' We have argued about an empathic Palomar, in his quest for meaning and his cosmic desire, but maybe we should also go back to that sentence in the last story: 'Per questo Palomar si prepara a diventare un morto scorbutico, che mal sopporta la condanna a restare così com'è, ma non è disposto a rinunciare a nulla di sé neanche se gli pesa'.⁵⁴² This is what Palomar thinks when he pretends to be dead. At the end of the story, he is killed in the narration. Our real question is therefore: As a character, did Palomar fulfil his ambition? Now that he is dead (yet immortalised on the page for the reader), is he a

⁵⁴¹Ibid., p. 954.

⁵⁴²Ibid., p. 978.

peevish character to us? In the critical work about *Palomar*, he has been interpreted in a variety of ways: in the imagination of his readers he has not stayed the same. Half of the task has been successfully undertaken. By trying not to disregard the controversies in the work, this thesis has tried to help Palomar get closer to achieving his second goal as well. So we can at this point, attempt yet another interpretation of the last story of the book. What if there was a clear performative dimension behind the idea of thinking the end; and here I would like to borrow one of the ideas developed by Slavoj Žižek in *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*:

we should first perceive [catastrophe] as our fate, as unavoidable, and then, projecting ourselves into it, adopting its standpoint, we should retroactively insert into its past (the past of the future) counterfactual possibilities ('If we had done this and that, the calamity that we are now experiencing would not have occurred!') upon which we then act today. We have to accept that, at the level of possibilities, our future is doomed, that the catastrophe will take place, that it is our destiny-and then, against the background of this acceptance, mobilize ourselves to perform the act which will change destiny itself and thereby insert a new possibility into the past.⁵⁴³

The catastrophe which is staged at the end of *Palomar*, embodies this subversive emancipatory dimension. Our current experience of the world, which also is Palomar's intellectual struggle, does not leave any space for pure passive optimism, namely the expression of an irrational hope that an imminent catastrophe might not be a real threat. Everything points in that direction: from the crude experimental trauma, to the exercise of analytical and critical thought. Yet the direct consequence of such a realisation is not the blatant imposition of nothingness, to repeat Calvino's answer to Parise; in front of this silence, which is real beyond doubt, the answer to the question of whether to write or not, is simply to live. This answer should under no circumstances be misinterpreted as a vulgar sophism; Palomar lives by this performative act, he is not trying to deceive us, or even himself, his pretending to be dead, is the ultimate choice of freedom, even if his reasoning might appear naïve. In this sense, the last sentence of the story, can be read on a strictly literal level, without even needing a very elaborate interpretation.

⁵⁴³Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London, New York: Verso, 2009), p. 154.

Conclusion

In this thesis, we have tried to establish a solid frame of reference, articulated around Calvino's concept of myth, desire, utopia, and scientific thought. We found that this framework worked particularly well for the last twenty years of his literary production, and more particularly for *Le città invisibili*, *Palomar*, and the project of the cosmicomic stories, which were written throughout that period. If we were to summarise the global impression that was brought in by this research, we would say, that in the mid-60's, Calvino grew more aware of the consequences of an ill-fated blind faith in reason and the grand project to pacify humanity with its mortal presence in the world (or to emancipate it from its bonds), and its counterpart, which resolved in retreating into pseudo-holistic metaphysical interpretations of the human condition. As far as his philosophical reflections are concerned, his ethical re-awakening seemed to dictate a careful return to myth, accompanied by a learned response to the outcomes of scientific discoveries. The literary result was that of a 'mythical writing in an enlightened world'. The desire behind the work was mythical, in its attempt to achieve a collective *λόγος*, and its utopian aspiration was universality. In an age which proclaimed the death of great narratives, Calvino's literary endeavour cannot but strike us with its tremendous obstinacy and its intellectual commitment.

Our first chapter's concern was to map a network of ideas which would contribute to a better understanding of Calvino's input on myth, the overwhelming presence of desire in his work, the elements which would contribute to his utopian thought and his reflection on scientific discourse. We started by stressing the importance Jung's and de Santillana's ideas had on Calvino's own perception of myth. We completed our hermeneutic framework with the inclusion of Jesi's work (via Kerényi, particularly concerning the distinction between genuine and *technified* myth) on the implications of a collective *λόγος*, and a comparative study of Barthes' and Calvino's stance on myth, which proved that despite his interest in the controversial work of the French intellectual, Calvino would never share Barthes' distrust in everything mythological. After a brief historical overview of the evolution of scientific thought and how it effectively contributed to the values represented by the Age of Enlightenment, we discussed the philosophical dimension of scientific arrogance and we studied Calvino's essays on Fourier, a representative figure of utopian thought, who challenged the enlightened establishment on many levels. In the last section of our chapter we dwelled deeper into the aesthetic foundations of our thesis. We explained how metaphor and the symbolic were essential tools in the aesthetics of 'earthly transcendence', and suggested a link with Calvino's predilection for

shorter forms.

In the second chapter, we discussed how the cosmicomic stories provided evidence of Calvino's dedicated intellectual commitment. We did so, starting from an overview of Calvino's debate with Pier Paolo Pasolini, and suggested an alternative and rather opposite reading of Calvino's alleged disengagement or detachment. We supported this idea by providing an interpretation of Calvino's utopian thought, which incorporated in its philosophy, humankind's experience of discontinuity in the world, as well as the conviction that the very idea of utopia can never be fixed, but should always remain in the making. Calvino made this possible in his work through the prospective and retrospective process inherent in mythical writing, which provides adequate critical appraisal to denounce the dangers of a growing abstraction of thought. In the cosmicomic stories, the response to the call for universality, took the form of a peculiar narrator, who, despite his mysterious and polymorphic identity, suggested a committed responsibility to the problem of the age. The idea of an 'utopia pulviscolare' took the form of Calvino's characteristic precise poetics, pointing at the very process of literary making. We also studied (making associations with the elements of history of scientific thought evoked in the first chapter) Calvino's dialogue with evolutionary biology, information theory and theoretical physics, and we discovered that his influence and inspiration was not limited to the potential imagery scientific thought created, but it extended to the way in which it projected truths about our perception of the world – more than providing us with a satisfactory picture of the essence of the world.

For *Le città*, the threat of invisibility was countered with an elaboration of evocative literary images, a devotion to the frame, and a constant desire for the ideal, which never ceased being problematised. We explored some theoretical questions concerning the relation between image and reality, as well as Calvino's work on image and visibility. We established a solid link between the concept of 'exactitude' and 'visibility' and defined this in relation to the 'precise poetics of cosmogony', characteristic of *Le città*. In order to consolidate our study of the image in the book – given that we had already established its relation to death – we analysed the stories in the category 'la città e i morti'. We saw that the city worked as an ideal image to discuss how a community relates to death, how it projects its fears and desires in the face of the afterlife – or its absence, and how this affects the city's very appearance and reflects the nature of the community that built it. We also discussed the city's capacity to represent otherness, and its symbolic aspect, its tendency to point at what has not (yet) been expressed or represented. In the second part of our chapter, we analysed the frame that holds the cities-episodes together. We explained that the dialogue revealed how the

narration of the cities was, to some extent, revealing of Polo's *Weltanschauung*, and Kublai Kan's struggle to possess his empire. In the last section of our chapter, we related our study of *Le città* to some of Calvino's essays, which discussed the presence of writing within the city, and how it asked crucial questions about the city as a projection of each society's ideals. Finally we argued that it is possible to read the book in the tradition of the *Odyssey*, drawing a link between 'le città e il desiderio', and the idea of the mythical journey.

As for *Palomar*, the main character's empathic drive, and his obstinate effort to create meaning through his observation, took all their significance in relation to the absurdity of humanity's experience of the world. Despite his seemingly detached attitude, and his solitary musings, Palomar was revealed as a character who strongly desires to communicate with and make sense of the world. We also saw how in this book Calvino repeats his warning concerning abstract thought and more particularly the practice of relying on models in order to interpret not only the world in its entirety, but also particular isolated phenomena. We returned to the very possibility of objective observation, and the opportunities it really offered in order to understand the world, and we analysed the rather tragic consequences of a growing sense of uncertainty. With a parallel between Camus' thought, and the myth of Sisyphus, we dared think of him as happy, despite his apparent subsequent failures. In the face of death, we could still see the mythical dimension of a collective conscience and the possibility to tell a true story in the way it tells the experience we have of the world.

In 1983, when he was writing 'The Written and the Unwritten World', Calvino appeared to be already conscious of a variety of things that would stigmatise critical work in the humanities; namely that the scientific impulse which trusted language to unveil with systematic analysis the essence of the world, was bound to meet its limits, but also that self-proclaimed objective methodologies could have hidden agendas, whether these were intentionally concealed or simply unconsciously and conveniently repressed. Despite this, the author believed that among other disciplines, literature was probably the one which better understood an existence halfway between a world of words and that of the unspoken or the unspeakable. He experienced the text as a protective mechanism – whose endeavour was to resist chaos – and was also very aware of the necessity to have an ongoing dialogue with disciplines traditionally opposed to it (particularly science), and others that threatened to replace it (like philosophy or even politics in times of great engagement on the side of intellectuals). Calvino insisted that in our new millennium, literature should have a penetrating visual quality, understand the limits of its own discourse in a continuous attempt to include in it oppressed minorities and concepts which

have yet to be expressed verbally. This puts his work in the middle of an acute tension, at the limits of expression and understanding, creating a powerful imagery which perpetually confronts silence and death.

So far, our research has explored the literary aesthetics of Calvino's work from the 60's onwards in relation to a mature mythical impulse, and although this research started as a study of Calvino, as a single Italian author, on several occasions, it opened up to the possibility of interesting comparative approaches. Our parallel study of *Palomar* and *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, was the most elaborate one. Perhaps one could hope in the future to carry out a similar task with the stories of Chekhov, or Calvino's own beloved Fourier; to explore, on the one hand, Chekhov's 'spietata pietà', and Calvino's empathic writing, and on the other, Fourier's stubborn and unrealistic utopia, and Calvino's obstinate critical thinking and utopian desire.

In order to prove that ideas expressed by Calvino in 1983 are of particular contemporary and universal interest, we could take our comparative study further, and study him alongside Greek contemporary author, Yannis Kiourtsakis, within the framework of 'mythopoetic autobiography'. This comparative thread would be significant on two levels: on the one hand, as far as a conscience and knowledge of national background and regional diversity is concerned – the authors studied oral and folklore tradition in their country – on the other hand, as both show a very clear cosmopolitan concern through their work, primarily because of an important intellectual dialogue with France (this is where further study on Camus would be best utilised), and a substantial reflection on the United States. One could hope to discuss the intersection between autobiography and intellectual historiography from which 'mythopoetic autobiography' emerges; cosmopolitanism through travel, study and dialogue; the strong utopian thought, mainly taking the form of reflection on the *polis*, which comes alongside autobiographical depictions of and reflections on cities such as Paris and New York; and giving a voice to the other through the voice of the self, (particularly in relation to the idea of a 'Written and Unwritten World').

In this journey many controversies have been raised, not always to be resolved. For Calvino, literature was not a closed system, it was not a philosophy. It certainly breathed through the possibilities that other disciplines could create for it, but in the literary works, the artist always prevailed on the critic. But 'our task is not artistic', the critic says, and he is right. Literary criticism ought to shed light on the works it studies, not to produce an additional space of doubt; in their relation, that should remain in the realm of the work of art. But our task is not to resolve the doubt in the artistic work, or to answer

the questions that have been left unanswered either. It is to show how it works, to reveal it in its making, and hopefully to argue its importance in a greater artistic frame.

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