

The imaginative appeal of Italo Calvino: A study of three novels

By

Tibor Munkacsi

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English

Program of Study Committee:

Leland A. Poague, Major Professor

Michael T. Mendelson

Robert Hollinger

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2004

Copyright © Tibor Munkacsi, 2004. All rights reserved.

Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master's thesis of
Tibor Munkacsi
has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter One: <i>The Baron in the Trees</i>	13
Chapter Two: <i>Mr. Palomar</i>	22
Chapter Three: <i>Invisible Cities</i>	36
Conclusion	51
References Cited	57

Introduction

In the field of literature, the search continues for authors who through their words and their vision allow their readers to step past old concepts of what literature should provide. These concepts may keep those readers firmly tied to accepted forms of analysis when it comes to interpreting literature and prevent the emancipation of the reader's thought and imagination when engaged with the text. To emancipate, in the dictionary sense, means to "free from restraint, cause to be less inhibited, release, liberate, set free" ("Emancipate"). To be emancipated is to be set free from some form of either societal or political stricture or self-imposed restriction. When an author appears who, through his writing, focuses on what the reading experience may impart to the reader, providing the means to this type of emancipation or escape, the experience is invigorating, refreshing, and may result in, to allude to a Joycean notion, an epiphany. One such author is Italo Calvino (1923-85). Not only does he ask that his reader have an unfettered mindset when reading, he stresses, through his words and imagery, that the reader should be open to new ideas and new, and at times unusual, approaches to understanding what is presented.

Of course, it is one thing to aspire to this emancipated mindset and it quite another to move past old perceptions of what

reading should be or ingrained habits of perceiving literature, but Calvino's imaginative and original approach to his relationship with his reader allows for this type of transformation. Calvino's underlying request, like Ralph Waldo Emerson's in his book *Nature*, is that this reader "look at the world with new eyes" (39). Without these "new eyes," the reader will revert to time-honored but limited ideological forms of interpretation, thereby missing the emancipation possible in the literary experience.

In this thesis, I will focus on three of Calvino's novels that display both the need to see with "new eyes" and the need to transcend old concepts and perceptions held by the reader as they pertain to the author/reader relationship. *The Baron in the Trees*, *Mr. Palomar*, and *Invisible Cities* each exhibits a distinct style that encompasses and demonstrates an imaginative approach to writing. More importantly, these works entail that the reader's imagination be set free and become part of the creative process, so as to feel the frustration and, equally, the accomplishment inherent in writing something that may enlighten the reader and thereby help that reader to attain a greater understanding of the literature being examined. By providing for this type of interaction, Calvino becomes intimate with his reader, but at the same time allows for logical detachment.

The introduction will deal mainly with the circumstances of Calvino's personal life that helped to form his artistic style. In Chapter One, I will examine *The Baron in the Trees* and show that, despite the seemingly simple presentation, this novel presents a complex picture of how interacting with literature can have an emancipatory effect. In Chapter Two, on *Mr. Palomar*, the investigation will focus on how entering the thoughts of the main character reveals a mindset that, although not lacking in imagination, remains closed and dependent on old ways of interpreting what is being seen. Chapter Three will deal with *Invisible Cities*, a novel that reflects the author's poetic vision as well as an inherent desire to interact with the reader in order to emancipate the reader's imagination and thus effect how the he or she views literature. Finally, in the conclusion, Calvino's literature will be revisited to establish a new construct of what the reading experience can provide for the reader. Although the novels are not examined in a chronological sequence based on their dates of publication, the sequence used provides for a steadily increasing imaginative interaction by the reader to both the selected text and the author.

Italo Calvino was born on October 15, 1923 in Cuba, near Havana, to Italian parents doing agronomical research on the island. Two years after his birth, the family relocated to his mother's coastal home town of San Remo, Italy. This move would

prove to have a lasting effect on Calvino. According to Beno Weiss in *Understanding Italo Calvino*,

The experience of living in San Remo on the Ligurian coast among so many exotic plants and trees was to have a profound influence on the future novelist and to provide him with much of the inspiration for his narrative writings. Indeed *Il barone rampante* (*The Baron in the Trees*) grew out of Italo's and his brother Florio's habit as children of climbing the numerous trees of Villa Meridiana [the family estate] and spending long periods of time perched among the branches. (2)

In addition to this idyllic setting for a child, Calvino's parents were "free thinkers" (Weiss 3) and made sure that he "received no religious training" (Hume 8). Calvino's parents had "unorthodox convictions" which resulted in his being sent "to a private Waldensian elementary school where compulsory catechism apparently was not an issue" (Markey 4). His parents continued to keep a tight control on the religious aspect of Calvino's secondary school education as well, so the impact that religious ideology had on his worldview was minimal. Constance Markey in *Italo Calvino: A Journey Towards Postmodernism* quotes Calvino as admitting to the fact that because his parents had such "unorthodox convictions" he grew up "'tolerant toward others' opinions, particularly in the area of religion'" (4).

This separation from the traditional mode of education in Italy at the time also isolated Calvino from other children of his own age. Markey claims that this separation resulted in Calvino "living somewhat apart from his peers" and Calvino found himself in situations that "sometimes compelled to him shut himself 'off in a kind of passive, silent resistance before companions and teachers'" (4). As a result, Calvino found solace at the movies. Markey suggests that movies provided "the young Calvino [someplace to immerse] himself in another world unlike the one he lived in" and that "[this] need to displace himself, to obliterate the real and extend himself into other worlds seemed to him a natural part of his personal evolution" (Markey 4). The effect that the cinema had on Calvino would pervade his intellectual and imaginative processes and, more importantly, it would influence his approach to writing.

In the "Visibility" essay from his book *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Calvino makes the link between the imagery presented by cinema and his own experience as a writer.

In devising a story ... the first thing that comes to my mind is an image that for some reason strikes me as charged with meaning, even if I cannot formulate this meaning in discursive or conceptual terms. As soon as the image has become sufficiently clear in my mind, I set about developing a story; or better yet, it is the images

themselves that develop their own implicit potentialities, the story they carry with them. Around each image others come into being, forming a field of analogies, symmetries, confrontations. (89)

The importance of imagery or an imagistic approach to developing story ideas is accentuated by Calvino's contention that, regarding the question of the "priority of the visual image or verbal expression (which came first the chicken or the egg) [I tend] definitely to lean toward the side of visual imagination" (86). It is evident from his statements that the imaginative and inventive freedom Calvino experienced while interacting with cinema, especially the cartoon shorts that were an integral part of that movie-going experience, continued to have a deep impact on Calvino throughout his life. The interchange between Calvino's mind and what he saw on the screen became one of the catalysts for the inventive and imaginative approach he later used in his writing (Markey 4). However, this freedom was soon to end.

The Second World War brought drastic changes in both Calvino's perception of his world and his place within it. In the early stages of the Second World War, Calvino enrolled at the University of Turin and spent a short time (1941-42) studying agriculture at the insistence of his father. By 1943, he had transferred to the University of Florence and it was there that

he made a decision that impacted both his personal life and his political views. During his time in Florence, Germany occupied Italy under the guise of protecting Mussolini, and consequently the Italian Fascists, under pressure from the Germans, instituted a draft, which Calvino managed to evade. Calvino's refusal to enlist stemmed from his parents vehement disagreement with Fascism and subsequently Calvino "joined the Italian Resistance together with his younger brother Florio" (Weiss 3). His refusal to enlist resulted in the arrest of his parents, a move designed to force Calvino to enlist, "thus increasing the burden of the choice he had made" (McLaughlin xiii). Although his parents were eventually released, Calvino was deeply affected by his war experiences and it would become the "raw material for his first successful literary attempts" (Weiss 3). Another by-product of his war experience was the sympathy he developed for the Communist cause that was spreading across Europe.

Calvino became a staunch Communist, advocating the cause through his contribution of articles and fiction to the Communist daily newspaper in Turin. Despite his involvement in activities related to the Communist cause, Calvino managed to enroll at the University of Turin in September of 1945 to study English literature, a decision that disappointed his father. Calvino graduated in 1947 with a thesis on Joseph Conrad (McLaughlin xiii). This period in Calvino's life was a time that was

fundamental to the intellectual and artistic formation of the young artist. He was put in touch with the controversial ideological, political, and literary ideas that were being discussed in the recovering nation, and he became personally familiar with their leading exponents. But above all, the nature of his work as a consulting editor [in the offices of Einaudi Editore] – reading manuscripts – not only gave him the opportunity of promoting the writings of the most significant authors of modern Italy, but also conditioned him to be a reader of texts. (Weiss 4)

Throughout the remainder of the late 1940s and into the mid 1950s, Calvino managed to publish a few modestly successful novels and worked as a contributing writer on essays dealing with “the problems confronting literature in industrialized society” (Hume 9). However, the most notable book Calvino published during this time was a collection of Italian folktales that Martin McLaughlin describes in his book *Italo Calvino* as “an experience which was to confirm [Calvino’s] own taste for non-realist fiction, as well as alert him to the structural similarities of all stories” (xiv). Additionally, in 1956 he published *The Baron in the Trees*, a novel in which “the decades of Enlightenment, Revolution, and Restoration hazily parallel the rise and fall of Communist hopes during the war and postwar

period" (Hume 9). Although Calvino's fascination with and loyalty to the Communist cause was tied to his belief that Communism was Italy's best path to restoration after the Second World War, by 1957 Calvino had resigned from the Communist party.

The reasons for Calvino's resignation are to be found in events and circumstances that he considered contradictory to his political stance and his artistic vision. Politically, his fervor for the Communist cause initially surfaced because of its new and largely unexplored promise for a better and more equitable society. However, as Italy began to industrialize, capitalism, or at least the "new materialism" that accompanied it, began to make the promise of genuine social reform at a community and world level less and less important for the average Italian worker (Markey 10). Additionally, the Soviet Communist agenda for world power status and "the violent suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956" caused Calvino to disagree and become disillusioned with the direction the Communist party was taking (McLaughlin xiv). The same type of totalitarian rule that he had experienced and been deeply effected by while Italy was under the control of the Fascists in the Second World War and that had caused Calvino to join the resistance was now reappearing in the not so benign demands of Soviet Communism. Artistically, Calvino, although "still a professed ... socially committed writer," began to resent the censorship imposed on his writing by

the Italian Communist party and he subsequently refused to "regiment his art" to any political ideology (Markey 10). The decision to resign from the Communist party convinced Calvino that he trusted his art more than any political system as the catalyst for social reform.

At this particular point in his life and his artistic development, Calvino discarded his belief in writing in a Neorealist style, a style favored by the Italian Communists, and began to forge his own artistic direction. This new direction led him to explore more abstruse themes in his work. For Calvino, these themes centered on two important philosophical questions: 1) man's place in the universe and thus the reason for his existence and 2) man's relationship to his environment (Markey 12). Throughout the rest of his writing career, Calvino returned to these issues. Moreover, though these two issues are rooted in metaphysics and philosophy, Calvino refused to use a strictly philosophical or metaphysical approach to his writing. To have done so would have meant that he had in some way "regiment[ed] his art" and would have placed restrictions on his artistic freedom, as the Communists had tried to do. Rather, Calvino chose the fullest measure of artistic freedom by incorporating and blending virtually every aspect of his life experience into his work. As Rocco Capozzi states:

Given the long history of Calvino's eclectic interests, his vast encyclopedic competence, his overall poetics of [instructing and entertaining], and his love of fusing interdisciplinary and multimedia elements, he can legitimately be seen as a pioneer of European postmodernism. Calvino's work combines classic and academic culture with popular culture, literary with theoretical and philosophical texts, science and the humanities, past and recent history, and written and visual images. Movie and comic-strip techniques abound [and] cinematic effects combine with techniques of science fiction, romance, and Westerns in a most clever and intertextual fashion. (71)

Capozzi claims that, by incorporating such an array of influences into his work, Calvino became "one of the most complex, cerebral, innovative, interdisciplinary, and playfully imaginative metafictional fabulators of the twentieth century" (70). Over the span of his writing career, Calvino allowed himself the freedom to evolve with this writing and, whether we label him a "fabulist" or a "Postmodernist," the end result of the blending of his interests, fueled by his imagination, allows his readers to explore his literature in an equally imaginative way. It is difficult to say if Calvino's methods ever allowed him to formulate more substantial answers to any of his philosophical or

metaphysical questions, but it is clear that if he did, he playfully veiled the answers from any superficial reading.

Although many of the aspects detailed by Capozzi are not demonstrated in the three novels I have selected to analyze, the fact remains that Calvino worked diligently at providing a means to change the literary experience. His imagination and inventiveness, other than being extremely invigorating and satisfying for the author himself, allow readers to approach his novels at different levels. Throughout the novels that are to be examined, these multiple levels challenge the reader to defy old concepts of interacting with literature, to emancipate the mind and open it to new ways of thinking regarding the part the reader plays in any text, and to encounter a new relationship with literature.

Chapter One: *The Baron in the Trees*

The notion of liberation inherently requires some form of rebellion or resistance. In *The Baron in the Trees*, Calvino ties the notion of liberation literally to moving to a position above the earthly plane. Set in the style of a fable, Calvino's novel relates the various adventures in the life of Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò, a young baron in Italy during the later half of the eighteenth century. Calvino introduces us to Cosimo, at the age of twelve, after he has refused to eat a disgusting midday meal of beheaded snails prepared by his sadistic sister and thus becomes, unwittingly, the agent of his own liberation. His refusal leads to his dismissal from the table and, in an act of defiance, Cosimo climbs into the trees surrounding his father's estate and vows never to come down. Biagio, Cosimo's younger brother and the narrator throughout most of the story, knows that on that day Cosimo had "decided to separate his fate from ours" (5).

Though Cosimo's ascent is an impulsive act and his decision to remain aloft is due initially to stubbornness, Biagio knows that it "hid something deeper" within his brother (BT 5). True to Calvino's own view of the value of solitude, Cosimo feels that he has "to find [a path] unbeaten by others" and ironically the path is to be one that requires jumping from branch to branch in his arboreal sanctuary (7). For Calvino, as author, solitude is

the necessary environment in which to look at the world unencumbered by the opinions and preconceptions of others. Similarly, Cosimo uses his solitude to study the natural world around him, to study and integrate philosophical concepts into his world view, and to study his relationship to his world and the people within that world.

Despite these moments of solitude and the distance that he maintains from the ground, Cosimo's life is filled with real and satisfying relationships. According to Alan A. Block, in his essay "The Utopian Reality of Italo Calvino: *Baron in the Trees*," these relationships are based in a different form of reality, something that Calvino searches to define throughout the novel. Block states that,

For Calvino, in *Baron in the Trees* [sic], reality depends solely on the materialist presences received through the complex ties and connections by which society is organized and controlled. Reality exists in the myriad interactions with which we engage as human beings during the course of our daily lives, and can thus be known in the conscious understanding of the relationships that exist between the self and everything else in the cosmos.

(6)

The changes that the reader sees in Cosimo and his view of the world are thus reflected in the changes that are made by the

general populace in dealing with his existence in the trees, and vice versa. As Sara Maria Adler observes in *Calvino: The Writer as Fablemaker*, "the peripheral figures are always portrayed in terms of their relationship with Cosimo, [and they] are ... never completely free of the influence that he holds over their lives," a reciprocity that also exists in the relationship between Calvino and his reader (37).

One example of the impact Cosimo has on a "peripheral character" and, conversely, of the impact of that peripheral character on Cosimo, is emphasized in his encounter with the brigand Gian dei Burghi. Having acquired a villainous reputation, Gian is constantly running from the law. It is during one of these flights from justice that Cosimo hides Gian in the trees. In a subsequent conversation, Gian reveals to Cosimo that reading merely fills the time he spends in hiding between jobs. Cosimo develops a friendship with the brigand and they decide that Cosimo will use Biagio to plumb the local library for books suitable to Gian's tastes in literature. As time passes, Gian begins to "devour novel after novel" and it becomes more and more difficult to find the type of sentimental novel that he favors (41). Despite this difficulty, the encounter between Cosimo and Gian has a reformatory effect on the brigand and he loses interest in returning to his life of robbery. The passion that Gian has for books also changes

Cosimo. Biagio describes the change.

[W]ith Gian dei Burghi always at him, reading, instead of being Cosimo's pastime for half an hour, became his chief occupation, the aim of his entire day. And what with handling the books, judging and acquiring them and getting to know of new ones, what with his reading for Gian dei Burghi and his own need to read as well, Cosimo acquired such a passion for reading and for all human knowledge, that the hours from dawn to dusk were not enough for what he would have liked to read, and he, too, would go on by the light of a lantern. (92)

Unfortunately, for Gian, his past life of crime finally catches up with him and he is hanged, which ironically "mirrors the fate of Jonathan Wild, hero of the Richardson book Cosimo is reading to him at the hanging" (Gabriele 98). This ironic ending to Gian's life, according to Tommasina Gabriele, might be interpreted to mean that "Gian has become his novel" (98). If Gian "has become his novel," it is because "the separation between life and literature which Calvino found so necessary" has disappeared (Gabriele 98).

The primary concern of any author should be to challenge the reader to create his or her own interpretations of the text and not to get so engrossed in the story that his or her perceptions become blurred or simply become those of the author

or the character. Identifying with the author of or a character within a novel serves to provide a connection to the situation described, a common starting point, but it stifles the literary experience and limits the reader's imagination to parameters outlined by the author. While we, as readers, may be dependent on the author to provide the necessary material to establish this connection, we should strive to be independent as to how we choose to react or interact with any given text.

In the relationship between Gian and Cosimo, Calvino also acknowledges that reading should and does have a transformative effect. Cosimo, after his encounter with Gian, is changed, but the change occurs in how he applies what he has read to alter his view of the world. The altered view that Cosimo adopts is noticed by Biagio when he says of Cosimo that "recently all his living with books had put his head in the clouds," and transformed his brother into someone that had rediscovered "everything around him as if he seeing it for the first time" (102). Along with having acquired a new relationship to all that surrounded him, Cosimo realizes that his mission is to be more "useful" to the people within and outside his immediate solitary world. This change in attitude effects not only Cosimo but his community throughout the rest of the book. Cosimo's identity is delineated more by what he does for others than by what he does for himself.

By this point in the book, Cosimo's arboreal "new kingdom" is believable and Calvino concentrates not on how his protagonist manages to survive but on the new ideal world of Cosimo and how it invades the consciousness of the traditional world he has left below (42). Calvino makes full use of Cosimo's interactions to demonstrate that "almost every encounter between Cosimo and another character or group of characters serves to sharpen Cosimo's identity and especially his strengths as contrasted to these characters' weaknesses" (Gabriele 94).

With the variety of voices available to Calvino from which to select a main narrator, it is interesting that he chooses Biagio. After all, Biagio represents all that Cosimo rebels against throughout his life; Biagio represents the conformity that Cosimo resists. Biagio eats the snails that his sister has prepared, he dresses customarily for the various activities around and at the estate, he studies the required books, and he learns and follows the age-old traditions befitting his station in life. He knows that his fate is to live an uneventful and common life as evidenced by his comments after his father's death.

All I had to do was to take over direction of the estate and choose myself a wife, and already I saw ahead of me that regulated and pacific life which, in spite of all

the great upheavals at the turn of the century, I have succeeded, in fact in living. (143)

By interspersing this type of monologue in his fiction, Calvino points to the fact that the narrational role in the novel has another dimension. The author's derision towards the accepted and common life led by Biagio is evident. The philosophical and metaphysical insights that pervade the novel, insights that Biagio supposedly has over the course of detailing Cosimo's life in the trees, he obviously gleans from listening to Cosimo's musings on his life. Calvino, by making this inference subversively, does not discount the possibility that Biagio is capable of some of the deeper insights presented in the novel. However, he does use Biagio as a symbol of the failure of the Enlightenment to create minds capable of finding deeper meanings in the individual's relationship with his community and the universe. The reader realizes that in some ethereal way Calvino uses Biagio's voice to reiterate not only his own thoughts but also those supplied by Cosimo. Then again, Biagio may simply be the willing pawn of an exceptionally gifted storyteller that can make anything seem plausible, a situation that Calvino's readers can easily sympathize with.

Whether or not we allow for the premise that Calvino is using Biagio surreptitiously to express his own thoughts on Enlightenment philosophies, the very last paragraph of the novel

puts Calvino himself in the role of narrator. In an interesting shift in perspective, if we allow our imaginations to take us there, it is as if Calvino is talking directly to us as he describes himself as "looking at the empty sky" and asking "if it ever really did exist" (217). From this point of introspection, he considers his novel as something "embroidered on nothing" and merely a

thread of ink which I have let run on for page after page, swarming with cancellations, corrections, doodles, blots and gaps, bursting at times into clear big berries, coagulating at others into piles of tiny starry seeds, then twisting away, forking off, surrounding buds of phrases with frameworks of leaves and clouds, then interweaving again, and so running on and on and on until it splutters and bursts into a last senseless cluster of words, ideas, dreams, and so ends. (217)

His musings reveal that literature, even when written with the intent to impart or simply illustrate higher ideals, is mainly valuable for the liberating effect it can have on the reader's imagination. Literature, as Calvino's description of his own work implicitly states, can become transitory and is useless if it fails to continually redirect, redefine, and cause the reader to reexamine what his or her role is in the literary experience. If literature has the effect of redefining or redirecting the

reader's literary experience, then the cooperation between the reader and the author will have liberated at least one new viewpoint, that of the reader.

Calvino's voice speaks throughout the novel, especially when the claim is made by Biagio that from Cosimo's tree-house vantage point, "everything ... looked different" and "nothing looked like anything to him" (13-14). An insight of this sort seems unlikely for Biagio, who has not spent a great deal of time distanced from the "grounded" view of life. It is as if Calvino is inviting his reader to climb into the trees with Cosimo, and experience the liberation that results from a different perspective, to attain a new truth, without your feet on the ground. To be truly enlightened an individual has to be bold enough to create and move to another level, to see the world from a previously unknown vantage point. Calvino's invitation, applied to literature and the literary experience, means that the whole notion of how to interact with the written word and the images it presents needs to be changed to one that values the ability of the reader to recreate the text in his or her own way and sees the author as an integral part of that process.

Chapter Two: Mr. Palomar

As bold as Cosimo's move into the trees to gain a different perspective on the world is, Calvino's *Mr. Palomar* presents the story of a man that cannot move past his self-made boundaries. As in *The Baron in the Trees*, the main character in *Mr. Palomar* is a solitary being amidst a world peopled with possibilities to inspire the imagination and achieve new perceptions regarding those possibilities. However, the solitude in this novel reverberates with the inability of one man to interact with either his imagination or his environment in all but a superficial way. Unlike Cosimo, Palomar is not a man capable of adapting or redefining his place in the universe based on acquired new knowledge or insights. Instead, Palomar expects the world or the phenomena he sees to conform to his models, however erroneous those models may be. These models, built on Palomar's previous perceptions and knowledge, are not easily reshaped to incorporate the possibility that a new perspective is necessary. Thus Palomar, according to Jeff Wallace in "The World Before Eyes: Calvino, Barthes, and Science," "is obsessed with the adjustment of his perceptions in order to achieve a perfect knowledge of the natural world" (275). Implicit in Wallace's claim is the view that Palomar's desire to really change his vantage point, despite his own belief that his efforts are

laudable, is based in his inability to admit his own incapacity to do so.

In his own mind, Palomar does not appear to think that his old perspective is necessarily deficient; all it lacks is finding "the key to mastering the world's complexity by reducing it to its simplest mechanism" (6). Palomar continually misses the point; he is caught in a reversal of the Bauhausian paradox of "less is more." The more he tries to simplify this "mechanism" to understand himself and everything in the universe, the more frustration he experiences, and the less he seems to understand. However, Palomar's constant failures with his search become the reader's means of connecting to the character. The reader can see the parallel in his or her own search for meaning, and Calvino expects this to happen. More importantly, Calvino wants the reader to recognize that the deficiency lies in Palomar's constant reliance on a mindset that has served no useful purpose up to this point. Calvino further plays on this recognition by using an interesting mix of first person narration and third person omniscient narration. In the first person, we are subjected to Palomar's inner dialogue and, truly, we feel his frustration throughout the novel. However, in the third person, Calvino acts as the reader's guide to deeper philosophical possibilities and in an unusual way helps us to laugh through our and Palomar's painful searching.

Palomar's lack of imagination and inventiveness are the source of his frustration. Anything that Palomar happens to imagine or invent he dismisses as not the idea or truth sought and as one that only serves to clutter his thinking and to make him "even more unsure about everything" (8). His uncertainty dwells in the certainty of his methodology. Palomar believes that breaking down each experience that merits his consideration into definable parts will reveal the universal truth hidden within. In presenting even ordinary objects or natural phenomena to the mind for consideration, all the imaginings and inventions that occur must be factored in, but by being selective, Palomar stymies any hope of finding any truth, let alone one that may be universal. Palomar, for example, sees the wave he tries to isolate as part of the larger ocean, but the relationship between the part (him/wave) and the whole (society/ocean) eludes him and, being the impatient sort that Palomar is, he goes home with the unknown-as-yet realization that he "no longer knows where his self is to be found" (118).

In his search for inner meaning, Palomar refuses to come to terms with the idea that his knowledge may be insignificant in understanding his relation to the universe. In order to reach a more profound understanding, Palomar, in "The universe as mirror" chapter, reaches the point in his life where for the first time he understands that his relationship to his fellow human beings

is more important than his relationship to the universe. He muses that

Knowledge of one's fellow has this special aspect: it passes necessarily through knowledge of oneself; ... Not only is knowledge needed, but also comprehension, agreement with one's own means and ends and impulses, which implies a mastery over one's own inclinations and actions that will control and direct them but not coerce or stifle them. (119)

Upon reading this passage, the reader is hopeful that Palomar, along with the reader, is poised on the edge of a major insight. Palomar, in this moment of self-reflection, surmises that his search for meaning should have "begun by finding an inner peace" (119). Despite this supposition, Palomar's trepidation towards allowing "his gaze to rove freely inside himself" is palpable in the Calvino's description of what transpires (119).

What will he see? Will his inner world seem to him an immense, calm rotation of a luminous spiral? Will he see stars and planets navigating in silence on the parabolas and ellipses that determine character and destiny? Will he contemplate a sphere of infinite circumference that has the ego as its center and its center in every point? He opens his eyes. What appears to his gaze is something he seems to have seen already, every day: streets full of

people, hurrying, elbowing their way ahead, without looking one another in the face, among high walls, sharp and peeling. In the background, the starry sky scatters intermittent flashes like a stalled mechanism, which jerks and creaks in all its uncoiled joints, outposts of an endangered universe, twisted, restless as he is.

(119-20)

What he finds is not the "harmony of the world" that he hopes to find but a further discontinuity between the universe and his concept of reality. According to Kathryn Hume in *Calvino's Fictions: Cogito and Cosmos*, "this failure to remove the last veil" is the last "frustration in the series of failed attempts to order the universe" by Palomar (153). She goes further by saying that Palomar's attempt to know himself

can also be taken as Calvino's joke upon us as readers. Throughout, Palomar has obviously been avoiding confrontation with himself and humanity. We find him gearing up for the great breakthrough, and so we gear up emotionally ourselves—but by now we should realize that no such breakthrough can or will occur. Calvino's glancing, oblique approaches toward self suggest that he believes that the invisible can only be observed indirectly. (Hume 153)

Neither Palomar nor Calvino provides us with an easy way out of this dilemma. Palomar seems afraid to look within, at least for any length of time, afraid that he will find that his methods are wrong or at least skewed to generate acceptable answers and so he continues to return to his safe phenomenological interpretation of the world.

Palomar's obsession to observe, whether it is trying to avoid looking at the bared bosom of a sunbather, staring into the night sky to find certain stars, selecting the right cheese based on its position in the hierarchy of taste and appearance, or watching the seemingly awkward mating habits of turtles, fits into Calvino's idea on the "question of the reliability of the perception" (Cannon 97). In *Postmodern Italian Fiction*, JoAnn Cannon considers Palomar's swim at sunset a prime example of his inability to "[distinguish] reality from illusion" (97). In contemplating the reflection of "the sword of the sun," Palomar, at first, with his "egocentric, megalomaniac ego," imagines that his experience is singular and belongs to no one else (14). Noticing that the reflection of the sun in the water has some relation to everyone that is swimming around him, he muses that "Everyone with eyes sees the reflection that follows him; illusion of the senses and of the mind holds us all prisoners" (14). His attempts at making sense of this phenomena continues to expand or contract, depending on the stance taken, to a point

where Palomar's analysis returns to trying to determine if perception is based on what the eye sees or if perception becomes reality only because the object is there to be observed.

One day an eye emerged from the sea, and the sword, already there waiting for it, could finally display its fine, sharp tip and its gleaming splendor. They were made for each other, sword and eye: and perhaps it was not the birth of the eye which caused the birth of the sword but vice versa, because the sword had to have an eye to observe its climax. (18)

Thoughts of this sort are interesting to examine and Palomar delights in distracting himself with them, but they do not help him get past the "inexhaustible" "surface of things" and to truly "seek what is underneath" (MP 55). The "underneath" that Calvino refers to resides within and revolves around the author's hope that the reader sees the deficiency in Palomar's approach. Palomar's major obstacle in achieving even a glimpse at the "underneath" is his consistent gaze outward. He does not reference some internal criteria as to the meaning of or truth resulting from any particular episode in the novel. Yes, Palomar does have his models, but these models are constructs of his previous perceptions, all of which have the illusion of being applicable to virtually any type of phenomena encountered, but which in reality have proven fairly unreliable as the means to

gaining either knowledge or understanding.

Another obstacle that may impede Palomar's ability to find what is "underneath" is the constant mental chatter that he involves himself in. Calvino, as the observer detailing the thoughts of the phenomenological observer Palomar observing his world, leaves virtually no room for the role of silence in Palomar's understanding of the relationship between man and his environment. Palomar may sit in quiet contemplation of all that he sees, but his mind is never silent. While observing the blackbirds in "The blackbird's whistle," he focuses on what the silences between the bird whistles may mean and, instead of savoring the silence, he fills his mind with more of his frustrating mental meanderings. Here Calvino, through Palomar, is addressing the question of communication and its ability to transmit meaning. Palomar wonders whether the silence between the whistles is any less significant in what it says than the whistles themselves. Do the blackbirds "speak to one another by remaining silent[?]" Palomar asks (25). As he ponders this question, he realizes that "human dialogue" may be no different (25). In the conversation with his wife that ensues, if it can be called that, sixteen words are actually spoken and most of these words are intended to protect the silence that he and his wife feel is important to prevent frightening the blackbirds away. Calvino expects readers to presume that, being married,

the Palomars have devised a system of communication that "allows them to understand each other without having to make everything specific and detailed" (26). But then, as is usually the case, Calvino, much like Palomar, adds an element that frustrates any conclusions regarding the efficacy of the premise.

Mrs. Palomar expressed herself with complete sentences, though often allusive or sibylline, to test the promptness of her husband's mental associations and the syntony of his thoughts with hers (a thing that does not always work); Mr. Palomar, on the other hand, from the mists of his inner monologue allows scattered articulate sounds to emerge, confident that, if a complete meaning does not result, at least the chiaroscuro of a mood will.

(26)

An inference that can be made here is that for Calvino language does not have the imaginative capacity to communicate the full meaning of any situation or perception. Regarding this inference, Stefan Franchi, in "Palomar, the Triviality of Modernity, and the Doctrine of the Void," contends that

if language is so inefficient (or perhaps too efficient) in carrying out communication, silence is certainly not a better solution, because it simply does not exist. In a universe as saturated with communication as ours, silence is but a different form of communication. Silence

communicates as *effectively* as speech. Mr. Palomar—who has made it a habit to bite his tongue three times before speaking as a healthy antidote to the flood of opinions that surround him—soon realizes the futility of his pledge. In a universe of communication, not to speak means to let the other speak, to conform to their opinions and implicitly to justify their glib words. Methodical silence seems only to increase the amount of words in circulation.... True silence, like things, keeps escaping beyond words—or their absence. (761)

Yet, if "silence" as "Palomar always hopes ... contains something more than language can say," then silence cannot be so easily dismissed based on a mind-noisy view of society (27).

This ability of silence to generate different meanings is one that Calvino returns to later in the novel. According to the narrator, Palomar spends "whole weeks, months in silence" and appears to value that silence (102). However, the silence Palomar values in this chapter is not the silence I have in mind. The silence I refer to is the one that *exists* in the mind. Palomar's mind, in contrast, is constantly churning and comparing, dissecting and deducing, so it is never quiet. Moreover, although "he has made a habit of biting his tongue three times before asserting anything," this only keeps him from speaking at inopportune times (102). Palomar knows "that his

thinking does not proceed in a straight line but zigzags its way through vacillations, denials, corrections" and to Palomar, who is a man of extremely few spoken words, the "art of keeping silent [is] even more difficult than the art of speaking" (103). Calvino, by allowing Palomar to come to this conclusion, alludes to a broader meaning. His allusion concerns the silences or spaces between the words contained in any literary text. The spaces between the words create a meaning of their own. They represent what the author does not say, but may imply. This implication involves the reader by making her fill in the spaces, from her own knowledge base, and come to the meaning intended by the author or, more importantly, to a meaning not considered by the author. This type of involvement requires both imagination and inventiveness and should be, as Calvino implies throughout the novel, the main purpose of any literary work.

Before leaving *Mr. Palomar*, it seems only fitting that his final attempt at resolution of the conflict between himself and the world be examined. In "Learning to be dead" Palomar has resigned himself to the fact that his attempts—to build models, to catalogue all that he sees into some sort of order, and to remain silent—have produced conclusions of no real usefulness in his search for meaning. He thinks that in death, he

should feel a sensation of relief, no longer having to wonder what the world has in store for him; and there

should be relief also for the world, which no longer has to bother about him. (121)

But "the very expectation of enjoying this calm" has the opposite effect on him and it only makes him more "anxious" (120).

Palomar, despite his anxiety, relishes the thought that since he has had a minimal effect on the world, "the world can well do without him" (122). What Palomar sadly does not realize is that he has been dead to most of society for much of his adult life. His investigations have lead him no closer to any real meaning and in many ways they have served to increase the confused state that he lives in every day. Despite his delight in the connection he shares to the famous stellar observatory due to his last name, he is myopic and near-sighted in his vision of himself, his world, and the universe. In this final episode in his life, it is as if the telescope that he uses to view the stars is reversed, instead of projecting himself into the cosmos and finding a sense of belonging there, he attempts to make himself the focus of his universe. But even in pretending to be dead, his inward focus is one that dwells on self-absorption rather than self-examination and is more laudatory than introspective.

A person's life consists of a collection of events, the last of which could also change the whole, not because it counts more than the previous ones but because once they

are included in a life, events are arranged in an order
that ... corresponds to an inner architecture. (MP 124)

In looking at Palomar's life, it becomes clear that the inner edifice is in serious need of repair. His reluctance to move out of established modes of interpreting the sensory data presented to him has resulted in a vision that has become microscopic instead of telescopic. His pretense of death only serves further to alienate him not only from society but also from himself. Palomar needs to explore the possibility that the answer lies in the terrifying thought he is wrong. He needs to look inside and base his understanding of the world on what he thinks, not on what others may think of what he thinks.

When reading *Mr. Palomar*, the genuine sense is that eventually the main character will find that epiphanic moment when all becomes clear. However, Calvino presents us with a sort of reverse epiphany that results from viewing the life of a man who refuses to expand his vision to include more than his own good opinions. Yes, he does interact minimally with the human aspect of his world when, for example, he goes shopping for cheese or on vacation to Mexico, but the reader gets the sense that Palomar never really belongs. On the one hand, Calvino holds this solitary mirror up so that as readers we too feel somewhat disconnected from the world and see our reflection in Palomar as we follow him on his frustrated, fruitless search. On

the other hand, Calvino's main intent may be to excite our imagination to take a hard look at how we react to the world and analogously to the literature we read, to realize that staying safely in the cage of traditional reading and analytical methods leads only to building, yes, a structured world, but certainly one with a world view that is narrow and restricted. Calvino seems to be urging his readers to realize that to really know something it has to be part self, part other, part known, and in a terrifying sense, to someone like Palomar, it must include our willingness to expand our view and deal with the consequences. Any form of freedom, whether literary or otherwise, involves a certain amount of trepidation about the unfamiliar, but without the attempt, we, as Palomar, will remain removed from the "underneath" of things.

Chapter Three: *Invisible Cities*

Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions, but the emperor of the Tartars does continue listening to the young Venetian with greater attention and curiosity than he shows any other messenger or explorer of his. (5)

Thus begins the great adventure that is Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. Unlike the other two novels considered so far, *Invisible Cities*, from its onset, requires that we, as readers, understand that it is necessary to allow our minds to be open to the images presented by Polo's descriptions, but that we, as the Khan does, should question the veracity of what Polo recites to the emperor. It would be easy to let the imagination run rampant as we construct the various cities that Polo so richly details and to be overwhelmed by the poetic language of the novel. Alternatively, we could concentrate on the dialogue between Khan and Polo in the italicized inter-chapters and try to decipher the didactic lesson contained therein. However, neither of these approaches is complete in and of itself. Instead, this inquiry will focus on how Calvino uses both methods and in the process plays a game with our imagination in order to inspire and to challenge the inventiveness of that imagination in his reader. It is important to understand that this imagination game has four

participants that interact with each other: Kublai Khan, Marco Polo, the reader, and the author.

The first participant, Khan, uses what Polo recites to him to imagine, thus to possess, his empire. Although he is physically stuck in the capital attending to the affairs of his government, he knows that within his mind he can travel to any corner of his empire. One obstacle that faces the Khan in this enterprise is that most of his ambassadors relate the information they have gathered "*in languages incomprehensible to the Khan*" (21). However, with Polo, the Khan participates in a different form of communication,

Newly arrived and totally ignorant of the Levantine languages, Marco Polo could express himself only with gestures, leaps, cries of wonder and of horror, animal barkings or hootings, or with objects he took from his knapsacks—ostrich plumes, pea-shooters, quartzes—which he arranged in front of him like chessmen. Returning from the missions on which the Kublai sent him, the ingenious foreigner improvised pantomimes that the sovereign had to interpret: one city was depicted by the leap of a fish escaping the cormorant's beak to fall into a net; another city by a naked man running through fire unscorched; a third by a skull, its teeth green with mold clenching a round white pearl. (21-22)

The Khan watches Polo's pantomimes and is forced to rely on something other than words to form the images that Polo is trying to impart. Despite the realization by the Khan that "*the connection between them and the places visited remained uncertain ...[,] everything Marco displayed had the power of emblems, which, once seen, cannot be forgotten or confused*" (22). The emblems, at least in the beginning, hold visual elements that are beyond the ability of words to describe. With subsequent excursions in the Khan's empire Polo learns the language of the region and it would seem that this fact would add to the descriptions that he relates.

Nevertheless, eventually "*the words failed [Polo], and little by little, he went back to relying on gestures, grimaces, glances*" (22). Therefore, the Khan and Polo have created a multi-form way of communication that relies as much on the gesticulations as on the words the two exchange:

A new kind of dialogue was established: the Great Khan's white hands, heavy with rings, answered with stately movements the sinewy, agile hands of the merchant. As an understanding grew between them, their hands began to assume fixed attitudes, each of which corresponded to a shift in mood, in their alteration and repetition. And as the vocabulary of things was renewed with new samples

of merchandise, the repertory of mute comment tended to become closed, stable. (39)

In a natural progression from this point, the Khan and Polo rely less and less on words and movement until they both remain "*silent and immobile*" (39). Calvino, with this passage, returns to the idea of silence being an integral part of the imaginative process. This silence resides in "*the space that [remains] around [the words]; [in] a void not filled with words,*" a "*space*" uncluttered by the noise and confusion that words can engender (38). Contrary to Palomar's approach, the Khan uses Polo's words to create images in his mind of the splendor and grandeur of his vast empire. However, even in this imagery, it can be seen that the Khan's empire does not exist in reality.

Polo and the Khan discuss the concept of reality and the effect that it has on imagination or vice versa, where they imagine themselves as two beggars talking while they go through some garbage. As an added dimension to the game Calvino is playing, he interjects the premise that this is another fiction within a fiction, where all we have imagined so far as the Khan's magnificent empire has just been relegated to the "*rubbish heap*" of fictional musing (104). Calvino calls into question the ability of words or the spaces in between to do anything besides complicate our concept of reality because "*we cannot know which is inside and which is outside*" (104). This paradox regarding

words and the reality they presume to depict is tied to the moment that we close our "eyelids" (104) and are forced to explore the ability of our imagination to see in both directions, inward and outward; are we on the outside looking in or on the inside looking out? Additionally, leaving the grand tour of the empire and finding Polo and the Khan, along with ourselves, on a trash heap calls into question the efficacy of the narrative thus far.

If we rely on the Khan to be the catalyst for the imagination of the reader, then we rely on much the same method to deduce reality as did Palomar. The Khan, while introspective and philosophically erudite, builds his empire through a phenomenological approach relying on the exterior characteristics Polo has ascribed to these "emblems." However, as with Palomar, this method fails and he falls back on his knowledge of and the model of chess. Martin McLaughlin, in *Italo Calvino*, details the logic behind the Khan's strategy and its result:

The Khan decides that since all his cities are like a game of chess, then if he knew the rules of chess he would be able to possess his entire empire, so he asks Polo to describe them using chess pieces, but at checkmate Kublai is left staring at the empty void.

(106)

The Khan, by using the rules of chess, traps his imagination in both the linear and spatial dimension of his favorite game. His strategy of gaining knowledge regarding his empire by turning it into a game stratifies and limits his comprehension, which ultimately leads him to see the void between his understanding of his empire and the empire that actually exists. Although chess requires imaginative and inventive thinking in the progression of moves to checkmate, what the Khan does not realize is that chess is another metaphor for language, a device that has proved mostly useless in his quest. By using the game of chess as his model, the Khan appears to be headed for a stalemate. Whether he imagines his empire as "*made of the stuff of crystals*" or as a "*rotting corpse in a swamp*," he is right either way, because the void has room for an infinity of conclusions (59-60). Using chess as a metaphor for language, a construction that tries to incorporate linearity in its connection from one word to the next and spatiality in the connection of those words to a larger context, the Khan comes to accept that perhaps the gap between his created reality and the reality of his empire is unbridgeable, a void, much like the void between the stark reality of written words and the images they present to the imagination. Stuck in this paradox through his discussions with Polo, aloud or silent, no method of approaching the nature of

reality has proven to be the key to his possession of his own empire.

Polo's role in Calvino's game of imagination is pivotal because he provides the game board and recounts the rules. Without his descriptions and the resultant dialogues with the Khan, this novel would be another travelogue, much like the one, *Il Milione*, that the historical Polo wrote following his travels in China. Polo is Calvino the orator and scribe personified. Not a great deal can be found in critical studies as to the distinct personality of Polo other than that he mirrors the author in the way he presents his entire narrative. The love of poetry, the frequent changes in mood and atmosphere, the questioning of what is meant by what is said (written?) versus what is unsaid (unwritten?) are all elemental factors in the novel. Polo plays the cooperative companion whose sole purpose is to either elucidate the text or confuse it. While the role is not a new one for characters or authors, by using this second person narrative technique in Polo's reports to the Khan, Calvino sits beside his reader and gently but continuously keeps elbowing that reader to look just a little deeper. Unlike the Khan, Polo/Calvino is interested in looking into the "void" to see what appears there and what reaction he receives from his audience.

Additionally, Calvino uses Polo's voice to introduce an element that "echoes the many theoretical statements [over the]

years about the pre-eminence of the act of reading over that of writing" (McLaughlin 107). The Khan interprets Polo's presentation and the words he uses, and consequently, the original text, Polo, is never sure of the images that his descriptions will elicit in the Khan. Even in the emblems he presents, the responses generated are unknown, leaving his narrations open to vast differences of interpretation. Due to the nature of Polo's presentation, which follows the oral tradition of the ancients, a method of storytelling that Calvino first used in composing *Italian Folktales*, Polo knows that other audiences will hear his stories in different ways. When asked by the Khan if he will repeat the stories exactly as he has recited them to the Khan, Polo replies,

"I speak and I speak," Marco says, "but the listener retains only the words he is expecting. The description of the world to which you lend a benevolent ear is one thing; the description that will go the rounds of the groups of stevedores and gondoliers on the street outside my house the day of my return is another; and yet another, that which I might dictate later in life, if I were taken prisoner by Genoese pirates and put in irons in the same cell with a writer of adventure stories. It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear."

(135)

Calvino, in a round about way, addresses the issue of translation and how this may result in losing the nuances contained in the original version of the story. Polo does not seem overly concerned because he himself has been subject to this loss and he feels that his story has been reconfigured into a new existence in the mind of the Khan.

Calvino's major role as author in this imagination game is that of the player who will ultimately control the outcome. Although the mathematical structure of *Invisible Cities* shows Calvino's love of combinatorial theory, of the use of enumeration to provide guidance during the reading experience, and of a fascination with linear order, his

prose poems of the cities themselves are widely scattered in all sorts of implied space. First, the categories themselves are mixed: *memory* and *desire* are clearly mental categories, but *thin* and *continuous* are physical traits; *signs* and *names* are similar, but *trade*, *eyes*, and *dead* bear little direct relation....[T]he cities soar in unlimited space. (Carter 112)

It is the "unlimited space" described by Carter that engrosses and excites the imagination of the reader. Calvino's deliberate antagonism between Polo's free-flowing poetic description of each city and the Khan's desire to establish a categorized order to his empire emphasizes Calvino's desire to include as much meaning

as possible into every word. This engorgement of meaning is important to Calvino as exemplified by his comment in "Multiplicity," another essay collected in *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*:

Literature remains alive only if we set ourselves immeasurable goals, far beyond all hope of achievement. Only if poets and writers set themselves task that no one else dares imagine will literature continue to have a function.... [T]he grand challenge for literature is to be capable of weaving together the various branches of knowledge, the various "codes," into a manifold and multifaceted vision of the world. (113)

In applying this principle of a grander vision to the role imagination plays in literature, Calvino's fifty-five cities in his novel embrace the breadth of history and knowledge. They also focus on the spiritual and emotional aspect of human nature. Noticeably, all the cities have feminine names, which is unusual for a novel that details the relationship between a mighty emperor and an adventurous young merchant. Perhaps the reason that the Khan does not fully comprehend this empire is that, despite relishing the general beauty of the exterior features of his empire, he does not understand the organic beauty that lies within and reflects an integral connection to the universe. Perhaps Calvino is referring to how we should view writing, not

as cold, hard, words that we can record, review, and then reorder into a coherent reality, but rather as an attempt by an author to alter or expand our perceptions within that coherent, hopefully redefined reality. And as Gila Safron-Naveh states in "The City as Text and Textuality in Calvino's 'Cities and Signs,'" "

To study the universe, which he deemed uncontrollable, Calvino used lists as a stylistic tool in his fiction. His attempts to make sense of a chaotic world are reflected also in the way in which his protagonists ponder the universe and the possibility to isolate part of the seamless, infinite whole. The question Calvino's protagonists most frequently face is about the limitations involved in trying to frame reality. (309)

Reality is based on both the outer and inner images that are produced by what we see or read. Moreover, this reality, to Calvino, is not based on "any detailed psychological analysis of characters" (Re 158-59). Instead, Calvino gets inside the mind of reader based on the images that he can create there for the imagination to play with, not on eliciting some macabre revulsion or empathy for the character. This imagistic approach is true to his writing process as he describes in "Visibility:"

In devising a story ... the first thing that comes to my mind is an image that for some reason strikes me as charged with meaning, even if I cannot formulate this

meaning in discursive or conceptual terms. As soon as the image has become sufficiently clear in my mind, I set about developing it into a story; or better yet, it is the images themselves that develop their own implicit potentialities, the story they carry with them. Around each image others come into being, forming a field of analogies, symmetries, confrontations. Into the organization of this material, which is no longer purely visual but also conceptual, there now enters my deliberate intent to give order and sense to the development of the story; or rather, what I do is try and establish which meanings might be compatible with the overall design I wish to give the story ... always leaving a certain margin of possible alternatives. At the same time, the writing, the verbal product, acquires importance....[What] really matters is the written word, first as a search for an equivalent of the visual image, then as a coherent development of the initial stylistic direction....[The] writing ... guides the story toward the most felicitous verbal expression, and the visual imagination has no choice but to tag along. (88-89)

The result is of such a process is epitomized in Calvino's description of the City of Tamara,

You walk for days among trees and among stones. Rarely does the eye light on a thing, and then only when it has recognized that thing as the sign of another thing: a print in the sand indicates the tiger's passage; a marsh announces a vein of water; the hibiscus flower, the end of winter. All the rest is silent and interchangeable; trees and stones are only what they are.

Finally the journey leads to the city of Tamara. You penetrate it along streets thick with signboards jutting from the walls. The eye does not see things but images of things that mean other things: pincers point out the tooth-drawer's house; a tankard, the tavern; halberds, the barracks; scales, the grocer's. Statues and shields depict lions, dolphins, towers, stars: a sign that something—who knows what?—has as its sign a lion or dolphin or a tower or a star. Other signals warn of what is forbidden in a given place (to enter the alley with wagons, to urinate behind the kiosk, to fish with your pole from the bridge) and what is allowed (watering zebras, playing bowls, burning relatives' corpses). From the doors of the temples the gods' statues are seen, each portrayed with his attributes—the cornucopia, the hourglass, the medusa—so that the worshiper can recognize them and address his prayers correctly. If a building

has no signboard or figure, its very form and the position it occupies in the city's order suffice to indicate its function: the palace, the prison, the mint, the Pythagorean school, the brothel....Your gaze scans the streets as if they were written pages: the city say everything you must think, makes you repeat her discourse, and while you believe you are visiting Tamara you are only recording the names with which she defines herself and all her parts.

However the city may really be, beneath the thick coating of signs, whatever it may contain or conceal, you leave Tamara without having discovered it. Outside, the land stretches, empty, to the horizon; the sky opens, with speeding clouds. In the shape that chance and wind give the clouds, you are already intent on reorganizing figures: a sailing ship, a hand, an elephant. . . . (13-14)

Tamara's metaphoric relationship to literature is stunning. Calvino knows that a page of meticulous detail can be replaced in a reader's mind by a single image created by a well-chosen word. The conciseness of the chapters bears out Calvino's contention that "felicitous verbal expression" is the ultimate end of all writing. And regardless of how many time *Invisible Cities* is read, the reader cannot help but feel that without imagination he

or she would not really have a great deal of fun playing
Calvino's game.

Conclusion

So, after examining Calvino's novels, what is the difference between the way that readers are asked to interact with his writing as opposed to how a reader may interact with any other writer? The difference lies in the relationship that Calvino establishes with the reader. With Calvino, the reader becomes the creator or at least the co-creator of the text. However, contrary to Roland Barthes' contention that by helping to create the text the reader causes the death of the author, Calvino does not relinquish his position when the reader participates in this cooperative effort. Calvino's presence is felt in his anticipation of a possible disagreement with and subsequent questioning of the basis for conventional habits of reading. This constant querying acts as a means to encourage the reader to free himself or herself from thinking in this mode. Calvino expects that every time the text is read, the reader brings something new to the experience and leaves open all possibilities.

Calvino seems to relish this partnership. Whether he asks us to step into the trees to access an unusual vantage point, or to enter the mind of an overly structured individual and follow a frustrating trail of dead ends that appear to further the dilemma, or to roam freely in a vast empire detailed in the archetypal form of cities, the effect is the same. Calvino's

literature involves more than just a response from the reader; he solicits his reader for a constant imaginative regeneration of his text. The emancipatory effect of this interaction leads the reader to develop a more intimate relationship with the author as the reader questions not only his own beliefs but also those of the author. Additionally, more so than other authors, Calvino, at the same time that he expects this imaginative interaction from his reader, is perfectly content if the reader refuses to play his game. Within this playful attitude, Calvino's fiction works at both the level of entertainment and at the level of an intricate intellectual inquiry. This aspect of his fiction is likely due to Calvino's love of the cinema where deeper meanings may be present, even screaming to be known, but if the viewer/reader wants only to relish the images presented for the simple pleasure they provide, that is an adequate result of the experience.

Calvino seldom forcefully attacks the reader's sensibilities or beliefs because he sees that doing so would be enforcing a type of censorship on his reader. The free flow of ideas and images is important to Calvino, who despised "regiment[ing] his art" to ideological protocols throughout his career and was very careful not to impose any restrictions on his reader (Markey 10). While it can be argued that he presents his ideas in a forcefully subversive manner, he relies on his reader

to create his or her own conclusions. We are allowed to accept or reject that Enlightenment ideas played a substantial role in the evolution of Cosimo into the man he became, but we are never sure of the exact impact that particular ideas had on Cosimo. By using Cosimo as his paradigm of the ultimate freethinker, Calvino's major point in *The Baron in the Trees* is that it is what we do with any idea and how we choose to recreate our world in relation to our fellow human beings based on that idea that matters.

With Palomar, Calvino presents the antithesis, in many ways, of Cosimo. Despite believing that his limited interaction with the people in his world will sharpen his focus on the phenomena of his physical world and lead to an ultimate truth, Palomar is a man who values his own skewed conclusions and half-hearted opinions on what he observes, which seem only to have a detrimental effect on his quest. Palomar's frustrating quest is Calvino's way of showing his reader that to truly emancipate our thinking, and perhaps get closer to a truth of some sort, we must allow ourselves to calmly encounter, deeply consider, and then rationally decide which of these encounters, both *human* and *non-human*, we wish to integrate into our newly formulated (created?) view.

In comparison to *Mr. Palomar*, *Invisible Cities* is a leap into the unknown, but only for the purpose of making it known.

The entire novel questions the basis of what we consider our reality, both as readers and as interpreters of the text.

Calvino presents the reality of two men who can be looked at as the author (Polo) and the reader (Khan) and how their interaction with each other changes the reality in which they live.

Invisible Cities questions the very ability of fiction to impart any reality-based knowledge to the reader. If reality, as in fiction, is based on fantasy and conjecture, then Calvino realizes that he has to rely on his reader's imagination to create his or her own reality, a reality that is separate from the author's but is equally viable.

The single most intriguing idea or construct that Calvino offers to his readers is that if we are to experience literature fully, we must emancipate our thinking from the regimens imposed by society and our selves. The reading of literature is a valuable tool in feeding our imagination new ideas and images, but it is not within the purview of the author to enforce a rigid or critical set of rules regarding the acceptance of those ideas in order to understand, perhaps even enjoy, what is written. By not enforcing such rules, Calvino offers a sense of freedom, a sense of playfulness, in the reading experience. Even in the case of Mr. Palomar, the reader knows that to escape the frustration, a frustration that is deliberately playful in the humor that it provides, all one has to do is close the book.

Additionally, while *Mr. Palomar* may require that we descend into a lengthy series of seemingly close-minded, desperate situations, Calvino concurrently allows us to transcend this "desperate" thinking by using our imagination to create various and numerous possible solutions to Palomar's dilemmas. Calvino also uses this playfulness in the story of Cosimo, which can be viewed as the story of a young boy who takes the idea of a tree fort to the nth degree. Additionally, in *Invisible Cities*, it is difficult not to agree that besides the metaphor of chess, the whole interaction between Polo (author) and the Khan (reader) is fun for both of them despite being an extremely intricate imagination game.

Each of Calvino's novels considered in this thesis requires that the reader return to a simpler approach to literature. Reading should not be an arduous task that requires that the reader squeeze every bit of meaning from the text. Instead, it should be an enjoyable, imaginative, emancipated adventure that is enjoyed for both the escape it provides and the new perception that it may provide. If we are the constantly changing end-points of our own history, then every word we read changes who we are. Reading should put us into a never before encountered place and provide us "new eyes" with which to observe ourselves and the world around us. If these observations are borne of an emancipated imagination and are, in some way, created by one of

his texts, Calvino would undoubtedly be pleased. Moreover, if these observations are then used to create a more harmonious existence between individuals and their world, then I am sure that Calvino would have considered himself successful in his relation to his participation in the literary game.

References Cited

- Adler, Sara Maria. Calvino: The Writer as Fablemaker. Potomac: Jose Porrua Turanzas, 1979.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001. 1466-70.
- Block, Alan A. "The Utopian Reality of Italo Calvino: Baron in the Trees." Italian Quarterly 30 (1989): 1-15.
- Calvino, Italo. Invisible Cities. Trans. William Weaver. San Diego: Harcourt, 1974.
- . Mr. Palomar. Trans. William Weaver. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1985.
- . Six Memos for the Next Millenium. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988.
- . The Baron in the Trees. Trans. Archibald Colquhoun. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1959.
- Cannon, JoAnn. Postmodern Italian Fiction: The Crisis of Reason in Calvino, Eco, Sciascia, Malerba. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1989.
- Capozzi, Rocco. "Italo Calvino." Postmodernism: The Key Figures. Ed. Hans Bertens and Joseph Natoli. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002. 70-75.
- Carter, Albert Howard., III. Italo Calvino: Metamorphoses of Fantasy. Ann Arbor: UMI Research P, 1987.

"Emancipate." The Oxford Pocket Dictionary and Thesaurus.

American Ed. 1999.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Nature. The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Ed. Brooks Atkinson. New York: Random House, 1992. 5-39.

Franchi, Stefano. "Palomar, the Triviality of Modernity, and the Doctrine of the Void." New Literary History 28.4 (1997): 757-78.

Gabriele, Tommasina. "Literature as Education and the Near-Perfect Protagonist: Narrative Structure in *Il barone rampante*." Stanford Italian Review 11 (1992): 91-102.

Hume, Kathryn. Calvino's Fictions: Cogito and Cosmos. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1992.

Markey, Constance. Italo Calvino: A Journey Toward Postmodernism. Gainesville: Florida UP, 1999.

McLaughlin, Martin. Italo Calvino. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1998.

Muckley, P.A. "A Senseless Cluster: A Note on Literary Allusion and Literacy in *The Baron in the Trees*." American Journal of Italian Studies 21 (1998): 139-46.

Re, Lucia. Calvino and the Age of Neorealism: Fables of Estrangement. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990.

Safran-Naveh, Gila. "The Cities as Text and Textuality in Calvino's 'Cities and Sign.'" Semiotics 1998 (1999): 306-

17.

- Wallace, Jeff. "'The World Before Eyes': Calvino, Barthes and Science." The Third Culture: Literature and Science. Ed. Elinor S. Schaffer. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998. 269-83.
- Weiss, Beno. Understanding Italo Calvino. Columbia: South Carolina UP, 1993.