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The Abyss of Calvino's deconstructive writing:
An apologetic for Non-foundational Theology.

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M. Th. Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis argues that the later works of Italo Calvino function as an apologetic for a non-foundational theology. Calvino's two late novels *Invisible Cities* and *If on a winter's night a traveller* are viewed as embodiments of self-deconstructing rhetoric. Calvino's essays offer a literary theory which is practised in these novels to lead to an expression of aporetic epistemology. This technique of ironic reflexivity is described as a rhetoric of the abyss. This becomes an apologetic for a theology of postmodernism when *If on a winter's night a traveller* is viewed in terms of its treatment of the death of the author, because its application to theology is shown in a parallel to the historical process of secularisation. Similarly, *Invisible Cities* is offered as an apologetic for non-foundational theology because by embodying an exercise in rhetorical self criticism it becomes, for the reader, an experience of epistemological de-stabilisation. Reader-response criticism is the framework which makes this possible.

An allegorical model of reading *Invisible Cities* is offered in viewing Marco Polo as a Heideggerean counsellor who supports his interlocutor, Kublai Khan, to explore the inadequacy of a metaphysical mastery in terms of western concepts of imperialism and philosophical absolutism. The counsel offered is compared to the concept of gift as being without Being, and grace as icon, in Jean-Luc Marion's *God Without Being*.

The equation of the rhetoric of abyss with Tillich's God as ground and abyss is viewed as inadequate. The argument is made that instead, a careful reading of Calvino's rhetoric creates an appreciation of the reasons for accepting the radical a-theology of faith put forward by the work of Thomas J.J. Altizer and John Caputo.

Its ethical consequences are aligned to the argument made in Mark C. Taylor's *After God*, for religion as a complex adaptive system with ethical and social responsibilities. Finally, following on from the pastoral concern of the Polo-Khan dialogue and briefly discussing Calvino's novel *Mr Palomar*, links are made to the issue of autism as a spectrum of universal human problem and opportunity, and to the model of the 12 step recovery program of Alcoholics Anonymous as a secular spiritual praxis. The idea of nomadic theology is suggested as a possible response.

Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
List of figures.....	v
Notes and Abbreviations	vi
Acknowledgements.....	viii
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Oulipo and Iconoclasm	4
1.3 Methodology	6
1.4 Context.....	7
1.4.1 Calvino as intellettuale impegnato	7
1.4.2 Aesthetics	11
1.4.3 Myth and fable in Calvino's work	12
1.5 Critical receptions of Calvino's work	14
2 Chapter 2 The Abyss in Calvino's project	17
2.1 La Tromba delle scale.....	17
2.2 Hermeneutics as abyss	20
2.3 A Framework for Calvino's Hermeneutics.....	22
2.4 Calvino as deconstructivist.....	25
3 <i>If on a winter's night a traveller as abyss</i>	27
3.1 The Plot Structure of Winter's Night	29
3.2 The Reader's Journey	33
3.3 The Reader (Female).....	36
3.4 The Tortured Writer.....	37
3.5 The Death of the Author.....	38
3.6 'Messenger or Thief'	39
3.7 Printing and error.....	43
3.8 Felix Culpa.....	44
3.9 Winters Night and the Divine Comedy	44
3.10 The Non-actor as erased voice.....	49
3.11 Tropes of the Abyss and erasure in WN	51
4 Chapter 4 - Invisible Cities as Abyss	53
4.1 City and Civilisation	53
4.2 <i>Invisible Cities</i> as parable	56
4.3 How does <i>IC</i> embody (self-)criticism?	59
4.4 Metaphor and Metonymy	60
4.5 The Chess Board and creative opening	61
4.6 New Worlds.....	63
4.7 Intentional States.....	64
4.8 Poetic Dwelling	65
4.9 Cities as liturgical objects - The dislodging of ontology	67
4.10 'Moods, elegies, states of grace.'	68
4.11 Patterns in the Cities	71
4.11.1 Reading Invisible Cities.....	73
4.11.2 The City Reports.....	77
4.12 Cities as riddles	78
4.12.1 Cities and memory (CM)	78
4.12.2 Cities and Desire (CD)	78
4.12.3 Cities and Signs (CSi)	80
4.12.4 Thin Cities (ThC)	82
4.12.5 Trading Cities (TrC)	84
4.12.6 Cities and Eyes (CE).....	86

4.12.7	Cities and Names (CN)	89
4.12.8	Cities and the Dead (CDe)	91
4.12.9	Cities and the Sky (CSk)	92
4.12.10	Continuous Cities (CC)	94
4.12.11	Hidden Cities (HC)	95
5	Chapter 5 - Polo as Counsellor	97
5.1.1	Introduction	97
5.1.2	Possession	98
5.1.3	Certainty	99
5.1.4	Totality	102
5.1.5	Substance	103
5.1.6	Ontological Stability	106
5.1.7	God “under erasure”	107
5.1.8	The Gift	107
6	Chapter 6 - Conclusion	109
6.1	Calvino and Blanchot	109
6.2	Calvino, Tillich, Altizer.	110
6.2.1	Grigg’s reading of Calvino and Tillich	110
6.2.2	Franke’s Reading of Calvino as postmodernist	113
6.2.3	Calvino Engagé: Reading as Resistance	115
6.2.4	Obremski’s response to Calvino	118
6.3	A Protestant Calvino?	120
6.3.1	Altizer	120
6.3.2	Taylor on Responsibility	122
6.3.3	Spectral Hermeneutics	123
6.4	The Influence of Anxiety ; a speculative post-script	126
6.4.1	The Anxiety of Palomar	126
6.4.2	The Influence of (Palomar’s) Anxiety	130
6.5	Keeping it Light	132
6.1	Kublai Khan, the Ascent of Man and the return to the Nomadic.	132
	Bibliography	136

List of figures

<i>Image of Italo Calvino</i> by Gianni Giansanti	p.vi
Figure 1 <i>If on a winter's night a traveller</i> - contents page	p.29
Figure 2 Flow chart from <i>Presentazione</i>	p.31
Figure 3 Flow chart from <i>Presentazione</i> (English translation)	p.32
Figure 4 <i>Dante's Inferno</i> , by Massimo Tosi	p.45
Figure 5 Layout of chapter Headings, <i>Invisible Cities</i>	p.70

Notes and Abbreviations

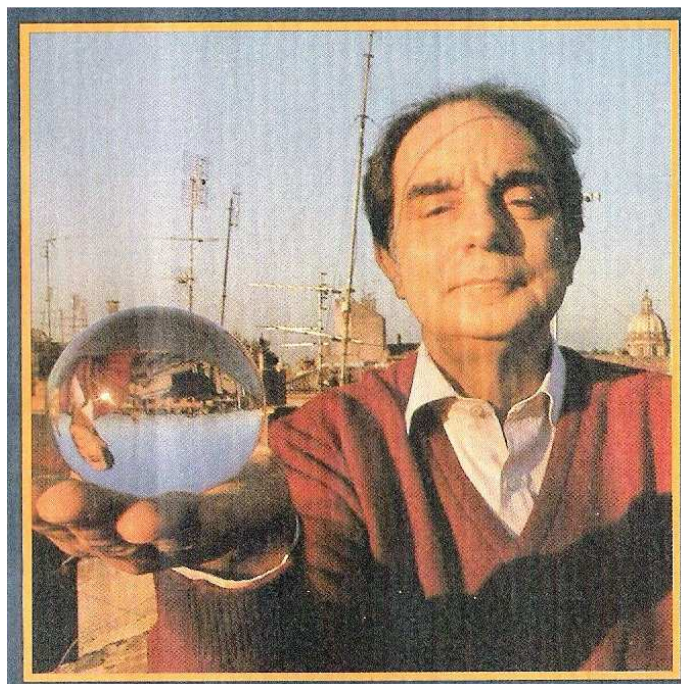
Most of Calvino's work, and a considerable amount of critical writing on it, is available in English translation. Where translations are not available, or an alternative translation is desired, the original text is provided with a translation by the author of this thesis.

The following abbreviations are used -

<i>IC</i>	<i>Invisible Cities</i>
<i>WN</i>	<i>If on a winter's night a traveller</i>
<i>CR</i>	<i>Calvino Revisited</i>
<i>GWB</i>	<i>God Without Being</i>

Invisible Cities' individual cities are abbreviated in chapters 4 and 5 according to the key provided in the table of cities on p.70.

Preface



Cover art from *Omaggio a Italo Calvino: Immagine di Italo Calvino*, photograph by Gianni Giansanti, reprinted with permission from Michele Neri, *Panorama-Mese*, 1985

Looking into each globe, you see a blue city ...

(Invisible Cities, p.33)

*... for Marco Polo requests Kublai to look more closely
at what he sees as nothingness ...*

(Six Memos for the New Millennium, p.72)

*To credit marvels ... So long for air to brighten,
Time to be dazzled and the heart to lighten*

(Fosterling, Seamus Heaney)

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I am grateful to the Arts Faculty of Glasgow University for their flexibility in allowing me to continue my studies. During the process of working on this thesis I was diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder. Through a long process of re-learning I was able to learn how to study and organise my thoughts and their presentation. This involved learning to accommodate the weaknesses and strengths of autism, and it has been a difficult but fascinating process.

I would also therefore like to thank the Glasgow Autism Resource Centre for personal support and guidance; my family whose faith and encouragement has been wonderful; and untold anonymous friends whose wisdom has contributed to my ability to learn, to grow, and to articulate the contents of this thesis.

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This thesis in Literature and Theology examines the work of the Italian writer Italo Calvino (1923-1985). Calvino was a prolific writer of essays, short stories and the type of extended experimental prose which could be described as meta-novels or hyper-novels.¹

Because this thesis is situated in the interdisciplinary meeting between literature and theology, it is concerned particularly with how a reading of Calvino's work, particularly his later meta-novels, addresses existential and theological concerns. This is appropriate because the aesthetic, epistemological and ethical questions raised by Calvino's work raise questions which are notably suited to a response from theological hermeneutics which draw on non-foundational theologies, which will also be explored.

Calvino's 1972 text *Invisible Cities (IC)* is the main focus of this exercise, because it provides a particularly rich poetic space for raising the questions which theological thinking can address. This thesis argues that the work of Jean-Luc Marion, Mark C. Taylor, Maurice Blanchot, Thomas Altizer and John Caputo can offer a theological response to Calvino's texts. Both Calvino's work and theirs share the 20th century impact of existentialism and postmodernism. More than this, the theologians I am citing share with Calvino a sensitivity which strives to respond to the intellectual history which has produced these challenges, to which both Calvino's project and the theological one offer a genuine response.

An important facet of Calvino's work is the tension it exhibits between scientific rationalism and poetic creativity. His involvement in the working group *OULIPO (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle)*² led Calvino to develop his interest in art as a combinatory game which used mathematical permutations as a structure in creating

¹ Calvino coins the term *hyper-novel* describing *WN* in 6 memos, 120; see also , "*metafiction: fiction about fiction; or more especially a kind of fiction that openly comments on its own fictional status ... the most celebrated case is Sterne's Tristram Shandy ... perhaps the finest of modern metafiction is Italo Calvino's If on a winter's night a traveller* (Baldrickp.133). This satirical self-awareness and self-unravelling of the 'hyper-novel' is best seen in passages from the 'reader chapters'; the novelist Silas Flannery says "*I have had the idea of writing a novel composed only of beginnings of novels. The protagonist could be a Reader who is continually interrupted ...*" (WN p. 197). This is exactly what the actual novel *WN* is by now known to be.

² *An Oulipo Primer*, 168 gives details of Calvino's involvement; see also following section.

literary texts.³ It was during this last decade that his most ambitious and adventurous experiments in fiction achieved a high point in technical innovation. His reputation as a writer of magic realism was secured by *Cosmicomics*, *Mr Palomar*, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, *If on a winter's night* and *Invisible Cities*. *Cosmicomics* (1965) is an experiment in the anthropomorphising of scientific concepts to demonstrate the process of myth-making. The background to this can be traced in two concerns of Calvino's. Firstly, his essay *Cybernetics and Ghosts* examines theories of the origin of myth and its relation to fiction.⁴ Secondly Calvino remarks in an interview that *Cosmicomics* is an experiment in the limits of human subjectivity.⁵ So a project of examining genre and the nature of reading as part of human self-understanding is already underway in this work (and its sequel, *Ti con Zero* (1967) (in English translation as *Time and the Hunter*)).

Where *If on a winter's night* (WN) (1979) focuses largely on exploring the truth-status of fiction and the nature of the act of reading, *Mr Palomar* (1983) examines the neurosis of the subject attempting to understand its own consciousness. Both books are masterpieces of parody and humour. However it seems to me that *Invisible Cities* (IC) (1972) absorbs both a concern about self-awareness and epistemology (as in *Palomar*) and the ontological status of art (as in WN) but perhaps more completely and more deeply than either. It is a more poetic work in language and tone, darker, more serious, and charged also with ethical questions.

I would argue that *Invisible Cities* amounts to a personal creedal statement by Calvino as the culmination, and the clearest expression, of not only these three works, but a life's work as writer and thinker.

These are late Calvino works of fiction, to be succeeded only by the posthumous anthologies *Sotto il sole giaguaro*, (*Under the Jaguar Sun*) (1986) and *Prima che tu dica 'Pronto'*, (*Numbers in the Dark and Other Stories*) (1993). This contrasts with earlier more realist styles in *Il Sentiero dei Nidi di ragno* (*The path to the Nest of Spiders*), 1947 or the *Marcovaldo* stories (1963). However, even his earlier works, particularly the *I Nostri Antenati* (*Our Ancestors*) trilogy, demonstrate a concern with metaphysical conundrums. The first work in the trilogy, *Il Barone Rampante* (*The Baron in the Trees*) (1957) by depicting a rebellious aristocratic boy who decides to live like a monkey in the trees, functions as an extended metaphor for the choice between an

³ See list of tables, page 5.

⁴ *The Uses of Literature*, 3ff.

⁵ "... about anthropomorphism in *Cosmicomics* : ... our imagination cannot be anything *but* anthropomorphic" (*Six Memos*,90).

(Enlightenment) civilisation and a (Romantic) return to nature along with ideas of 'groundlessness,' a theme which will gain increasing significance in Calvino's later existentialist writing.

More metaphysically charged than this, *Il Visconte Dimezzato* (*The Cloven Viscount*) (1952), by depicting a man who has been severed into two diametrically opposed and conflicting bodies, good and evil, reads as a retelling of Plato's myth of the soul's black (base) and white (noble) chariot horses in the *Phaedrus*.⁶

Thirdly and closest to Calvino's later preoccupations with existentialist questions, *Il Cavaliere Inesistente* (*The Non-existent Knight*) (1959) concerns an empty suit of armour who nevertheless acts as a human being, raising questions about the nature of being.

The surrealism which characterises particularly the third novel, by invoking an ontological anomaly within the literary construction, is similar to the Sicilian writer Pirandello's celebrated 1921 play *Sei Caratteri in Cerca d'autore* (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*). Pirandello's play constructs a dialogue between fictional constructs (the "characters") within the play, and the material characters scripted as the play's actors, comparing their respective ontological status. Similarly, in *The Non-existent Knight* Calvino has created a character who is conscious of his own lack of substance. In both cases, the *mise en abyme* of a fiction within a fiction which simultaneously questions its own status, is both humorous and disconcerting.

All three of Calvino's novellas function in the same way, as allegories which present a question or paradox. How - and why - does the baron live without the social and material structures of civilisation? Why - and how - has the viscount become so polarised into good and evil parts which act independently of each other, yet belong to one name and originate from one person? Most metaphysically demanding, more so than sociologically or psychologically, how can an empty non-material being act as a living entity? The technique which becomes crucial to Calvino's later method is already evident in these texts. The fiction acts as means to raise the questions, and leaves the reader to ponder them without any didactic or theoretical statement as a solution. As the American critic Obremski points out, the questions raised by Calvino's work are 'the big ones'.⁷ Calvino compares his own process as a writer to the following story -

⁶ *Phaedrus*, 246a-250c.

⁷ Obremski, 92.

The emperor asked (the great Chinese artist) to draw a crab, and the artist answered, “I need ten years, a great house, and twenty servants.” The ten years went by, and the emperor asked him for the drawing of the crab. “I need another two years,” he said. Then he asked for a further week. And finally he picked up his pen and drew a crab in a moment, with a single, rapid gesture.⁸

This level of commitment to a project of formulating belief and communicating it, is similar to the apocryphal story of the preacher who was asked to speak at short notice, and spoke so eloquently that he was asked how long he had spent preparing his sermon. The answer, of course, was “forty years” because the seamlessness of a dedication to a vocation demands an entire life, in its aim to give its utmost.

1.2 Oulipo and Iconoclasm

The combination of scientific precision and metaphysical questioning which characterises Calvino’s work is evident in the structures of *WN*, *IC* and *Mr Palomar*. All three are organised into chapters on the basis of a mathematical system which works like a classificatory key to the book (figs. 1,2,3).⁹ This system in each case is an elegant conceit which seems to function like a kind of word game. This device coincides with Calvino’s membership of Oulipo which began formally in 1973¹⁰ although *Invisible Cities* predates this by one year.

Raymond Queneau, a founding member of Oulipo, explains the nature of this group as follows -

...the Ouvrior de Littérature Potentielle :

Ouvroir because it intends to work.

Littérature because it is a question of literature

Potentielle - the word must be taken to mean various things...

In short: OU.LI.PO.

What is the objective of our work? To propose new “structures” to writers, mathematical in nature, or to invent new artificial or

⁸ Calvino: *An Interview* in CR 24.

⁹ The numerical schema used for *Mr Palomar* is explained by Calvino in the index pages of the novel (*Mr. Palomar*, 116).

¹⁰ *Oulipo, A primer of potential literature*, ed. Warren F. Motte Jr, University of Nebraska Press, 1986. P.168; see also *Cybernetics and Ghosts*, in *Uses of Literature* pp.11-12.

mechanical procedures that will contribute to literary activity: props for inspiration as it were, or rather, in a way, aids for creativity.¹¹

Oulipo tends to operate in a flippant way although, at least in Calvino's case, its flippancy yields results which are certainly not trivial, and are even iconoclastic.

An example of the irony at work in Oulipo's output would be on the subject of *Literary Madness and the Canon*, where Georges Perec is aware that Oulipans are ... *open to accusations of literary madness* (p.5) but *profess interest in literary madmen* (p.6). Perec comments that he *(has) been accumulating experiences of literary "madness" for years without having the impression that he (is) doing anything "madder" than, quite simply, writing.*¹²

The Oxford English Dictionary's definition of flippancy is "*Treating grave or sacred matters with disrespectful levity.*" My argument is that Calvino's levity, while playful, is not disrespectful but ultimately meaningful and a serious engagement with what it satirises, so that Calvino's irony, like Perec's, is more than merely amusing or entertaining.

Calvino himself remarks that

... there is such a thing as a lightness of thoughtfulness, just as we all know that there is a lightness of frivolity. In fact, thoughtful lightness can make frivolity seem dull and heavy.¹³

It contributes to a meaningful debate where I am using Blanchot, Marion and Heidegger to draw out the challenge Calvino offers to theological thinking. The deepest iconoclasm, this thesis argues, is the deconstructive assault on Western metaphysics which is demonstrated in IC and WN¹⁴.

¹¹ Raymond Queneau, *Oulipo Primer*, 51.

¹² *Oulipo Primer*, 6.

¹³ *Lightness*, in *6 Memos*, 10.

¹⁴ Paul Perron describes this intellectual iconoclasm as "what Barthes (1981) called the operation of semioclastics" (CR 110).

1.3 Methodology

This thesis argues that reading Calvino can provide an apologetics for non-foundational theology. This happens because the act of reading Calvino offers an experience which can destabilise hermeneutical and epistemic assumptions. The argument developed here is that Calvino's texts provide questions rather than answers, in a deliberate opening which aims to produce in the reader a dynamism which nurtures and even encourages intellectual freedom. This opening of epistemology creates a space where theologies informed by postmodernism are valued as valid stances towards the crisis Calvino has poeticised. It is Calvino's poetics which asks the relevant questions, for which a non-foundational theology might offer an appropriate response.

This thesis uses as a central organising principle the trope of the abyss which is demonstrated as a key to Calvino's work. Chapter Two examines how the abyss is addressed in Calvino's work generally. It also reviews how Calvino's use of the abyss as trope and philosophical underpinning can be understood in the light of theory which views hermeneutics as a key to the literary/philosophical strategy of deconstruction.

Chapter Three explores this in detail in the case of Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller*. Chapters Four and Five similarly explore questions raised by a close reading of *Invisible Cities*. Chapter Six in conclusion brings the questions raised by Calvino's work to a reading of non-foundational theologies. In response to this, a speculative post-script on what Gore Vidal describes as "*something wise*"¹⁵ in Calvino's work is added.

¹⁵ Gore Vidal, in Bloom, *Italo Calvino*, (2002), 22.

1.4 Context

1.4.1 Calvino as *intellettuale impegnato*

It appears, in Calvino's articles and interviews, that initially he followed a dual vocation in literature and politics, but rejected political activism in favour of literature. He joined the Italian Communist Party in order to oppose Fascism in the 1940s, but left it when the USSR invaded Hungary in 1956.¹⁶ It would seem that disillusionment with politics did not however destroy political convictions, but instead led him to remark that in fact literature is, or can be, hyper-political - dealing in

what the language of politics excludes or attempts to exclude ... literature is like an ear that can hear things beyond the understanding of the language of politics; it is like an eye that can see beyond the color spectrum perceived by politics ... to make discoveries that sooner or later turn out to be vital areas of collective consciousness.¹⁷

It is worth noting that even in this short remark, Calvino demonstrates a technique which uses figures of speech which use sensory images, fused within a discourse which addresses an intellectual proposition. This technique, I will argue in Chapter Two, is a poetics of the abyss and key to Calvino's project as a committed moral agent.

Calvino discloses in his essays his actively concerned response to the intellectual and literary tradition within which he writes. His essays provide such an abundance of reflections on this tradition and its evolution that they are in themselves a literary education, but they also explain Calvino's understanding of his own work and its context. The way in which literature relates to culture and the socio-political is best examined in his essay *Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature*.¹⁸

Having reviewed Italian literature and politics briefly, Calvino makes a number of observations about the role he sees as appropriate for writers. Firstly he says that *what we ask of writers is that they guarantee the survival of what we call human in a world where everything appears inhuman*.¹⁹

But he then qualifies this aspiration by adding that the power and efficacy of literature lie in *austerity ... modest and doubtful tones*.²⁰ This plea for restraint in contrast to

¹⁶ See Woodhouse, *CR* pp.33 ff for biographical details.

¹⁷ *Uses of Literature* 98.

¹⁸ *Uses of Literature*, pp. 89ff .

¹⁹ *Uses of Literature* 95.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

‘sensational and explosive statements’²¹ is made to enable literature to *(give) a voice to whatever is without a voice, ... a name to what as yet has no name,*²² and this project would aim at *the creation ... of a model of values that is at the same time aesthetic and ethical.*²³ Calvino’s *‘right political use of literature’* is *a type of education that can yield results only if it is difficult and indirect, if it implies the arduous attainment of literary stringency.*²⁴

The aesthetic and the ethical are twin concerns, then, for Calvino.

It is also an important part of this *‘literary stringency’* that ideological pressure of any kind, including the temptation to propagandise, be excised from the intention of the writer.²⁵ I will argue in Chapter Three that WN is in fact, among other things, an extended demonstration of this principle. His posthumously published interview with William Weaver gives a summary of the background to this conviction -

My formative years were the period of the second World War; and in the years immediately afterwards, I tried to grasp the meaning of the terrible traumas I had lived through, especially the German occupation. So politics, in the first phase of my adult life, had a great importance. In fact, I joined the Communist party ... later, I began to feel more and more that the contradiction between ... constructing a true democracy in Italy ... and the model ... of Russia became harder to reconcile in the reality of our day-to-day work. ...I felt totally cut off from that Communist world, and, in the end, from politics. *The idea of putting literature in second place, after politics, was an enormous mistake, because politics never achieves its ideals. Literature, on the other hand, in its own field can achieve something and, in the long run, it can also have some practical effect. By now I have come to believe that important things are achieved only through very slow processes* (my italics).²⁶

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, 98.

²³ Ibid, 99.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ “.. above all, I grew tolerant of others’ opinions ... the truth of life must be allowed to develop its richness beyond the necrosis imposed by institutions ... what has really counted, more than the weight of well-defined moralities, has been a process of ethical seeking, forever problematical and forever risky. A Christian too sure of himself about what is right and wrong has never, I believe, been a good Christian” (Calvino, quoted by J.R. Woodhouse in CR pp. 34,35; and in *Two Interviews on Science and Literature*, in *The Uses of Literature* 36).

²⁶ *Calvino Revisited (CR)*, 29.

Recognising the ethical contribution involved in post-structuralism, he adds that *Politics, like literature, must above all know itself and distrust itself.*²⁷ Writing, in a media-saturated culture, can be in Calvino's view an act of violence which is not legitimate, and he also rejects a model of writing as tied to civic authority -

... dove la scritta è un a nuda affermazione o negazione che richiede dal leggente soltanto un atto di consenso o di rifiuto, l'impatto della coercizione a leggere è più forte delle potenzialità messe in moto dall'operazione con cui ogni volta riusciamo a stabilire la nostra libertà interiore di fronte all'aggressione verbale ... né mi sentirei di prendere a modello le città dell'Impero Romano, in cui tutti i messaggi epigrafici e architettonici ufficiali erano di imposizioni dell'autorità e della religione statale.²⁸

(where writing is a bare affirmation or negation which asks of the reader only an act of agreement or disagreement, the impact of the coercion to read is stronger than the potentialities generated every time we succeed in establishing an inner freedom in the face of verbal aggression ... neither would I take as a model the Roman imperial city, where official epigraphic and architectonic messages were impositions of state religion and authority).

In contrast to this Calvino sees in the protest writings of graffiti the possibility of an authentic writing -

Tali da non trasmettere altro messaggio che l'insoddisfazione d'ogni parola e il rimpianto per le energie che si sprecano ... forse la scrittura ritrova il posto che è insostituibilmente suo, quando rinuncia a farsi strumento d'arroganza e di sopraffazione: un brusio che occorre tendere l'orecchio con attenzione e pazienza fino a poter distinguere il suono raro e sommerso d'una parola che almeno per un momento è vera.²⁹

(... (graffiti)transmitting no message except that of the dissatisfaction of every word and a cry of regret for wasted energies ... perhaps writing regains its insubstitutable place here, when it refuses to be an agent of arrogance and oppression: a whisper you need to put your ear to attentively and patiently until you can distinguish the rare, submerged sound of a word that even for a moment, is true).

The remarks cited here underline an important emphasis on autonomy and integrity as social responsibilities for what Calvino aspires to write. The argument of this thesis is

²⁷ Ibid, 100.

²⁸ *La città scritta: epigrafi e graffiti*, in *Collezione di sabbia* 109.

²⁹ Ibid, 110.

that in his use of rhetoric, he does a genuine service to theological thinking by offering these qualities to the theological reader.

Calvino is reticent on the subject of personal religious conviction; yet this does not imply inattentiveness to its importance. His treatment of the Adam and Eve story in *Adam One Afternoon*³⁰ reads as an evocation of myth retold in contemporary realist style. Myth is a subject he discusses from an anthropological standpoint in *Cybernetics and Ghosts*, although he rejects a completely materialistic positivism when he adds that the idea of inspiration from a 'world soul' is one he cannot avoid.³¹ There is a suggestion of the poetic as revelation occurring from a transcendent source outwith the bounds of authorial intention when he says of oral tradition in primal cultures that *the moment comes when one of (the story-teller's) innocent little tales explodes into a terrible revelation: a myth, which must be recited in secret, and in a secret place.*³²

He remarks humorously on the dichotomy of his name; 'Italo' referring to the 'carefree, slipshod Italy' belied by 'Calvino' (Calvin) - he has

A certain conflict ... stuffed full of scripture (in a Protestant elementary school, because his parents opposed Catholic schooling due to its then Fascist alignment in Italy) ... from a very austere family ... predestined to make moral choices ... on the other hand, my disposition is not at all that of the Puritan.³³

Alberto Rosa argues that Calvino is indeed a moral writer, independent of partisan concerns and perhaps therefore more concerned with the ethical stance towards religion than might be otherwise -

Ma, dentro la ricerca letteraria (non fuori di essa, voglio dire, ma proprio dentro le sue strutture costitutive, e perfino dentro il suo stile), l' "ostinazione volontaria", la "riduzione all' essenziale", il "rigore autocostruttivo", il sentimento virile "dell' attrito con il mondo" producono la morale più perfettamente laica che la cultura letteraria italiana contemporanea abbia mai prodotto, e cioè più coerentemente antideologica e antireligiosa che si potesse immaginare in un paese come questo.³⁴

(But within his literary research (not outwith it, I mean, but actually within its constitutive structures, and even within his style), the 'voluntary persistence', the 'reduction to the essential,' the 'self-

³⁰ *Adam One Afternoon*, Vintage Classics, 1992.

³¹ *6 Memos*, 91.

³² *Cybernetics and Ghosts*, in *Uses of Literature* 22.

³³ Wm Weaver Interview, *Calvino Revisited* 26.

³⁴ *La Repubblica*, 1st Jan 1985, culture section, p.16

constructing rigour,' the virile sense of 'struggle with the world', produce a morality more perfectly secular than Italian culture has ever produced, that is, more anti-religious and anti-ideological than one could imagine in a country like this.)

1.4.2 Aesthetics

In the William Weaver interview, Calvino discusses how his early literary career was shaped by his involvement with the Turin publishing house Einaudi and particularly with the politically motivated writers Cesare Pavese, Elio Vittorini and Natalia Ginzburg.³⁵ In a letter to Calvino from Vittorini (whose 1945 novel *Uomini o No* was an experiment in formal technique) it is evident that form and genre are a concern in how Calvino consciously shapes his work. Vittorini comments that -

... mi sembra che, *per te*, in questo momento, non esista la possibilità di realizzare contemporaneamente in senso di racconto e in senso di saggio. Ogni volta che passi dalla chiave di saggio alla chiave di racconto e viceversa non sei più padrone della materiale. E infatti ti accade di tentare la realizzazione degli elementi saggistici con una *finzione* ancora narrative. Il che pure si può fare ... come Huxley per esempio. Ma a te importa di Huxley?³⁶

(... it seems to me that, *for you* at this time, the possibility does not exist to realise a work simultaneously as story and as essay. Every time you pass from the register of essay to the register of story and vice versa, you cease to be the master of your material. And actually you end up trying to construct essay-style elements within a narrative fiction. Which can be done ... as Huxley did, for example, but are you bothered about Huxley?)

So the precise form which will result in the later 'hyper-novel', WN, and the particular fragmentary structures of IC and Palomar, are already hinted at in Calvino's early experiments with form (in this case, ironically, Vittorini praises Calvino's short story *Ultimo Viene il Corvo* precisely because it does *not* transgress formal conventions to attempt the kind of synthesis he will later use to such great effect).

Calvino wrote his university thesis on Conrad,³⁷ and was influenced undoubtedly by Conrad's aspiration '*above all, to make you see.*'³⁸ Not only does the theme of visibility form one of the Norton lectures anthologised in *6 Memos for the Next*

³⁵ Ibid, 27.

³⁶ Letter, Jan. 1947, *Gli Anni del <<Politecnico>>* 101.

³⁷ Omaggio, 16; see also *From Italo Calvino to Tonio Cavilla*, J.R. Woodhouse, in CR 35.

³⁸ Conrad, Preface to *Nigger of the Narcissus*.

Millennium, but the qualities and limits of the visible and the image are key concerns which will be discussed as aspects of the 'fruitful abyss' through which this thesis approaches Calvino's work. This is summed up in his statement that *The tale is born from the image, not from any thesis which I want to demonstrate, and the image is developed in a story according to its own internal logic, adding that you are free to interpret (the Our Ancestors trilogy) in any way you wish, and there is no need to feel shackled by my present deposition on their genesis.*³⁹

The 'death of the author' which features in WN is pre-figured here in an emphasis on the integrity of the image itself giving a sensitive response as listening/observing mediator, which takes primacy over a tyranny of authorial intention.

Kafka, RL Stevenson and Borges, along with the visual impact of cinema and children's comics in childhood, are cited as important influences⁴⁰ so that what could be called almost a Heideggerean faithfulness to the visual/sensory image, as site of the 'thing in itself,' the project of a crafted style from modernist thinking and, similar to Borges, a postmodern concern with the ontology of the work of art contribute to a literary project which is, I will argue, equipped to articulate questions which interrogate theological thinking.

1.4.3 Myth and fable in Calvino's work

Elio Vittorini, who supported and advised Calvino at an early stage in his career, summarised Calvino's work with a useful formula -

"Calvino ha interessi che lo portano in più direzioni: la sintesi delle quali può prender forma (senza che cambi nè di merito nè di significato) sia in un senso di realismo a carica fiabesca sia in un senso di fiaba a carica realistica."⁴¹

(Calvino has interests which pull him in more than one direction: the synthesis of which can take form (without suffering in terms of merit or significance) either in a sense of realism charged with fable, or a sense of fable which is realistic).

I will argue in Chapter Two that this duality functions as a literary operation which deliberately plays on the abyss between sense and reference which Ricoeur has

³⁹ *Our Ancestors*, London 1980, xi-xii, quoted in Woodhouse, CR 46.

⁴⁰ Wm Weaver Interview, CR 28-30; 6 *Memos*, 93.

⁴¹ Preface to Calvino's short story, by Vittorini, quoted in *La Repubblica*.

explored⁴² and will be discussed in more depth in Chapter Two. Myth is a concern which has shaped Calvino's development, and its consideration resonates in the background of much of his writing. It is not unreasonable to see this as part of an existential issue in its historical context. In the essay *Cybernetics and Ghosts*, which is primarily on the status of myth and fable, Calvino argues that

The line of attack of modern literature is in its consciousness of bringing into words whatever is still unsaid in the collective or individual unconscious remaining unsaid: this is the challenge it continually offers. The more illuminated and prosperous our houses, the more their walls ooze ghosts; dreams of progress and rationality are disturbed by nightmares. (175)

The juxtaposition between the 'rational' and mechanistic view of writing and the language of a supernatural realm of 'ghosts' is repeated -

The literary machine can produce all the possible permutations of a given raw material; but the poetic result will be the particular effect of one of these permutations on the man gifted with a conscious and unconscious awareness, the actual historically sited man, and it will be this shock which will prove itself true only in as much as there exist alongside the writing machine the hidden ghosts of the individual and of society. (p. 177)⁴³

Here Calvino is clearly invoking a reader-response theory of literature, and exploring as he perennially does, the problematic status of the space of the text.

This leads to a more explicitly religious frame of reference:

To return to the tribal narrator (of myth and fable), he proceeds untroubled in making permutations of jaguars and toucans until the moment when one of those innocent tales explodes into a terrible revelation: a myth, which must be recited in secret and in a sacred place. (177)

Calvino's remark on siding with the 'world soul' idea of artistic inspiration suggests that he is not unsympathetic in principle but the concept of the sacred used here is almost unique in his writing, and this essay remains within an ethnological bracketing of the phenomenon of myth.

⁴² 'It is ... this presupposition (of a reference) that causes us to err; but if we are wrong, it is because a reference is demanded by our intention in speaking or thinking. This intention is the striving for truth which drives us always to advance from the sense to the reference,' Ricoeur 257.

⁴³ Literature as combinatory process versus spiritual experience is parodied in the opposition of the *OEPHLW* project (122) (a satirical play on *OULIPO*) to the "primordial, universal source of narrative" embodied in the *Father of Stories* (117).

In the literary world of post-war Italy, Calvino associated with his fellow Italian novelists Elio Vittorini and Cesare Pavese⁴⁴, Vittorini and Calvino co-founding the literary magazines *Il Menabò della Letteratura* and *Il Politecnico*.⁴⁵

All three faced the ideological problem of a literary response to Fascism, and were part of the Neo-realist school. However, they developed and matured in different ways. For all three, myth was an issue to be addressed in the 'mapping' of their intellectual surroundings, in contrasting ways. Calvino cites Vittorini's theory of the development of myth in the essay *Cybernetics and Ghosts* and displays an affinity with Vittorini's ideas. With Pavese, however, there is a marked difference in the outcome of this exploration of myth - for Calvino, it provides the impetus for a new creative project. For Pavese, it leads to despair.

For Pavese, alienation is treated in spiritual- psychological as well as classical Marxist political terms in his 1950 novel *La Luna ei Falò* (*The Moon and the Bonfire*). The interpretation of this, Pavese's last novel, as a testament of despair is reinforced by the fact of Pavese's suicide soon after its completion.

What contrasts most strongly with Calvino's later work here is Pavese's profound sense of loss of belief in the power of myth as a spiritual focus. This thesis argues that instead, Calvino develops an aesthetic secular faith which offers an entry towards current non-foundational theology.

1.5 Critical receptions of Calvino's work

Harold Bloom, who has edited two critical anthologies on Calvino,⁴⁶ gives a summary of the particular richness and depth of epistemological possibility suggested in Calvino's work -

It is difficult to find a modern author writing in Italian more revered than Italo Calvino. In heeding his famous credo, "I believe that fables are true," most critics choose to view his fantasies not as escapes from reality but as alternative ways to perceive it. His literary career stands as a restless search for the newest approach to story-telling, with each successive work opening another door of the imagination.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ *Calvino Revisited* 27; also, Domenico Ribatti describes Pavese as *il maestro di Calvino* at this time (*Omaggio* 107).

⁴⁵ *Omaggio*, 16.

⁴⁶ See bibliography.

⁴⁷ *Bloom's major short story writers: Italo Calvino*, 14.

Gore Vidal remarks on Calvino's short story *The Argentine Ant* - '*I don't know what this coda means. I see no reason for it to mean.*'(11), and again, on *IC*, that '*Of all tasks, describing the contents of a book is the most difficult and, in the case of a marvellous invention like IC, perfectly irrelevant*' (Vidal has just spent the previous sixteen pages precisely in summarising the contents of Calvino's fictions, with precious little of the much more difficult task of analysing or evaluating them) - '*I shall spare myself the labour; noting, however, that something wise has begun to enter the Calvino canon.*'⁴⁸

Ribatti's *Omaggio a Italo Calvino* remarks that '*lo scrivere costituiva per lui un impegno assoluto*' (writing was for him an absolute commitment), adding Calvino's wife Esther's comment that '*era uno scrittore molto particolare, un vero scrittore, con quell'unica e fortissimo vocazione: era un'uomo che non poteva fare altro*'⁴⁹ (he was a very particular writer, a true writer, with that single, very strong vocation; he was a man who could do nothing else but write).

Ribatti agrees with Maria Conti that

"Calvino is the greatest post-war narrator. I believe he is the most complete ... with an extremely coherent process of development from Neorealism up to the present, but also attentive to the development of Italian culture ... enormous inspiration combined with tremendous precision. He even said as much: a very patient elaboration of style is needed to produce the effect of spontaneity. Spontaneity is not the starting point but the destination ... he used to tell me that the writer must never forget that he is a writer, that is, he must know how to transform the world into a formal fact."⁵⁰

The impact of Modernism is evident in this dedication to writing as formal, self-reflective project, and indeed Calvino's essays are full of admiration for the technique of Kafka, among other modernist writers.⁵¹

Calvino himself made clear his aspiration that literature should be 'difficult' (demanding) with a responsibility to meet criteria of 'literary stringency.'⁵²

⁴⁸ Vidal 22.

⁴⁹ *Omaggio* pp.6,7.

⁵⁰ Translated from *Omaggio*, 12.

⁵¹ Eg in *6 memos* – commenting on Joyce and T S Eliot (p117); on Thomas Mann (116); on Henry James, (p.17); Kafka is 'Calvino's author' in CR, 30.

⁵² From *Uses of Literature* – see note 24, above.

Calvino's writing is frequently very funny, certainly entertaining, but the critics quoted here also bear out that a seriousness of purpose painstakingly creates the *subtle pattern(s)*⁵³ at work in his texts. He does this in order to carry out operations which explore *the conflict between the world and man's efforts to make sense of it*⁵⁴ in order to fulfil the vocation he attributes to the work of the literary classic; *to make sense of who and what we are* in a humanist project which seeks to *rescue what is human*.⁵⁵ His aesthetic creed is not only that *fables are true*⁵⁶ but that literary classics are worth reading *for no use at all ... just because it is a good thing to read them*.⁵⁷

⁵³ *Invisible Cities*, 6.

⁵⁴ *CR*, 30.

⁵⁵ *Uses of literature*, 98.

⁵⁶ *Italian Fables*, preface.

⁵⁷ *Uses of Literature*, 134

2 Chapter 2 The Abyss in Calvino's project

2.1 La Tromba delle scale

This chapter argues that the abyss as the site of the human subject, not so much theologically 'fallen' as existentially in 'freefall,' is a key metaphor underpinning both content and form in Calvino's work, particularly in his later fiction. In an interview in the periodical *Ulisse* in 1956-7, Calvino uses the metaphor of free-fall:

Calvino spiega che lui avrebbe voluto sì, scrivere romanzi di tipo tradizionale, ma che, per l' appunto, non glie n' è venuto di farne neanche uno. E prosegue: "C' è Thomas Mann, s' obietta; e sì, lui capì tutto o quasi del nostro mondo, ma sporgendosi da un' estrema ringhiera dell' Ottocento. Noi guardiamo il mondo precipitando nella tromba delle scale."⁵⁸

(Calvino explains that he certainly would like to have written novels in the traditional form but, as it happens, he has not been able to write even one. And he adds "There is Thomas Mann, one might object, and yes, he understood everything, or nearly everything, about our world, but looking at it from a last balcony-view from the 19th century. We are looking at the world falling down the stair-well).

The idiom *tromba delle scale* which translates into English as stair-well contains in Italian the metaphor of *tromba* (trumpet) as musical instrument, so that the site of this falling is also a place of sound, or even of music, presumably giving the possibility of an echo or a cry. The act of writing from within the *tromba delle scale* can be seen as a conscious articulation of the act of freefall. This as the site of creativity is argued in this chapter to be a *felix culpa*, a fortunate fall, because it is in the gap where indeterminacy follows from relativism that creativity can exist in a state of free play.

The argument that Calvino writes consciously in and from the state of free fall is arrived at first by looking at his understanding of hermeneutics and then by testing this idea as a possible reading of his fiction.

The precise nature of free fall is elaborated in some key statements in Calvino's essays. In particular, the essay *The Sea of Objectivity* describes *la perdita dell'io, la calata nel mare dell'oggettività indifferenziata* - *il punto di vista è quello del*

⁵⁸ *Ulisse* Autumn-winter 1957-58, quoted by Alberto Asor Rosa in *La Repubblica*, 1 Dec. 1985, culture section p.16.

magma⁵⁹ (*The loss of the 'I', the fall into the sea of undifferentiated objectivity - the point of view is now that of the magma*). Writing in 1960 in post-war Italy, Calvino is in the context of a culture still emerging from Fascism and seeking new directions. Calvino himself had been connected to the anti-fascist resistance,⁶⁰ and yet the anxiety which this article shows is less political than artistic and existential. He says

I don't think we have yet realised the shift that has taken place in the last seven or eight years, in literature, in the arts, in a wider variety of cognitive activities and in our very attitude to the world. From a culture based on the relationship and opposition of two terms, on one hand consciousness, will, judgment and individuality, and on the other hand the objective world, we are passing into or have passed into a culture where the first set of terms has become submerged in a sea of objectivity, an uninterrupted flux of what exists.⁶¹

Belpoliti, in his analysis of Calvino's key metaphors, links this statement to the labyrinth⁶² where, in Calvino's Borgesian short story *The Count of Monte Cristo*, the maps which should offer escape instead offer an endless blurring of the levels of reality.⁶³

In the William Weaver interview, Calvino remarks: *The conflict between the chaos of the world and man's obsession with making some sense of it is a recurrent pattern in what I've written*.⁶⁴ This conflict and its arrival at the relativism of the 'sea of magma' where consciousness is 'submerged in a sea of objectivity' is certainly the nature of the dilemma this thesis argues as abyss. Calvino's work tends to oscillate between, and at its most successful, synthesise, the systematising tendency and the apparent objectivity of a pure descriptive quality which captures a faithfulness to subjective receptivity towards the 'thing in itself' in Heideggerean terms. Good examples of the first tendency - to systematise - would be the highly philosophically self-conscious '*Before You say Hello*,'⁶⁵ or the later *Cosmicomics* stories where the mathematical/conceptual is manipulated in an anthropomorphic experiment in

⁵⁹ *Il Mare dell'Oggettività, Una Pietra Sopra*, 40, 1956.

⁶⁰ See Woodhouse, *CR*, 35.

⁶¹ *Il Mare dell'Oggettività*, 39.

⁶² Belpoliti, 17.

⁶³ *The Count of Monte Cristo* in *Time and the Hunter*, pp. 137ff.

⁶⁴ *Calvino Revisited*, 30.

⁶⁵ *Numbers in the Dark*, pp. 195ff .

contemporary myth making.⁶⁶ Highly successful works in terms of aesthetics, because of the poetic charge in their attention to carefully observed detail without an apparent agenda, I would argue, are the second category - his simpler, apparently innocent stories - even although the possibility of an allegorical content never seems absent - such as *Adam One Afternoon*⁶⁷ or *Numbers in the Dark*.⁶⁸

This thesis concentrates largely on the third category, the successful synthesis of the previous two tendencies. *IC*, *WN* and *Mr. Palomar* as later works, in their synthesis of poetic texture and systemising project, yield profound illustration of the abyss which results from the tension between the two. This thesis also argues that the abyss is a fruitful one. As noted in chapter 1, Vittorini's description of Calvino's technique as 'realist fable versus fabular realism' operates on the manipulation of levels of reality. The ontology here becomes increasingly challenging as the descriptive texture becomes more beguiling, and at the same time devices to deconstruct this fabric from within are an elaborately constructed inbuilt system. The aim, as the following chapters demonstrate, is to challenge the reader's epistemology and expand ontological horizons.

Calvino's homage to Roland Barthes might equally apply to Calvino himself -

...the one who subordinated everything to the rigor of a method, and the one whose only sure criterion was pleasure (the pleasure of the intelligence and the intelligence of pleasure) ... the truth is that these two Barthes are really one⁶⁹.

The figure of abyss this thesis employs is intended to agree with Franke's analysis, (see chapter 6) as against de Laurentis' account of *IC*.⁷⁰ Where de Laurentis sees the Polo/Khan metaphoric/metonymic opposition towards a dialectical synthesis, it is important to note here that as Franke points out, the point is to leave the process (as abyss) open, not resolved. The skill with which Calvino creates, to use Stanley Fish's

⁶⁶ Calvino explains that he consciously experimented with the anthropomorphisation of science 'to show that myth could spring from any soil', *Visibility* in *6 Memos*, 89.

⁶⁷ *Adam One Afternoon*, pp.3 ff - Retelling the garden of Eden myth with a twist on a Heideggerean return to 'the things in themselves.'

⁶⁸ *Numbers in the Dark*, pp.57ff; a metaphor of human finitude/incompleteness in the telephone receiver which guarantees nothing, yet actually surpasses physical intimacy because of the intervention of distance and imagination as creative (fictive) space.

⁶⁹ *In Memory of Roland Barthes*, *La Repubblica* April 9th 1980, reprinted in *The Uses of Literature* 302.

⁷⁰ De Laurentis, "Semiotic Models, *Invisible Cities*", *Yale Italian Studies* col. 2, no. 1, winter 1978 pp 21, 25, in Franke p.37.

expression, a 'self-consuming artefact' of such sophistication as his late works, is an ability which would also recall his words again on Roland Barthes -

The science of the uniqueness of every object that Roland Barthes continually approached with the instruments of scientific generalisation, and at the same time with poetic sensitivity aimed at defining what is singular and unrepeatable (this aesthetic gnosiology or eudaemonism of understanding), is the great thing that he - I do not say *taught* us, because one can neither teach nor learn this - but showed us it is possible. Or, at least, that it is possible to seek it.⁷¹

2.2 Hermeneutics as abyss

This journey of western cultural self awareness is clearly problematic as Calvino's essays have described, but is also seen by Calvino in terms of a hermeneutic which has matured in its self-understanding to the point where it is able to reflect upon its own process. The 1978 paper *Levels of Reality in Literature* gives an example of this hermeneutical self-understanding from the example of reading the *Odyssey* - *every reader of the Odyssey knows that more exactly it ought to be written, "I write that Homer tells that Ulysses says: I have listened to the song of the sirens."*⁷²

This observation becomes the platform from which the discussion opens into views of the ontology of literature -

... the credibility of what is written can be understood in very different ways, each one corresponding to more than one level of reality. There is nothing to prevent anyone from believing in the encounter of Ulysses with the sirens as a historical fact, in the same way as one believes in the landing of Christopher Columbus on October 12, 1492. Or else we may believe it by feeling ourselves struck by the revelation of a truth beyond perception that is contained in a myth. But here we enter a field of religious phenomenology in which the written word would merely act as a spur to meditation.⁷³

It is important to note that there are two poles between which Calvino is operating - the historical (*the same way as one believes in the landing of Christopher Columbus on October 12, 1492*) and the mythical/religious (*a truth beyond perception that is contained in a myth... the written word would merely act as a spur to meditation*).

⁷¹ *The Uses of Literature*, 306.

⁷² From the Florence conference proceedings, *Levels of Reality* September 1978, reprinted in *Uses of Literature* 107.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 105.

Both modes, the religious and the historical, can provide stable frameworks for interpretation. Historical method and religious authority are, in terms of the free fall metaphor, balconies to stand on, but writing as secular aesthetic reader (and writer), Calvino rejects both modes of belief, for the purposes of literature, as a possible level of reality. The question then remains as to what exists for literature between these two modes of interpretation. He continues -

However, the credibility that interests us here is neither of these, but the kind of credibility peculiar to the literary text, in parentheses, as it were, matched on the reader's part by an attitude Coleridge defined as "suspension of disbelief." This suspension of disbelief is the condition on which the success of every literary invention depends, even if it is admittedly within the realm of the fabulous and incredible.⁷⁴

The suspension of disbelief entered into in the reception of the work of literature can be seen as an abyss of paradoxical world and non-world - *"I write." This statement is the one and only real "datum" a writer can start from ... your judgement (as reader) would ... be wrong if you hoped to enter into a direct relationship with the experience of worlds other than that of the written world.*⁷⁵

The 'world ... of the written word' operates in an indeterminate space -

... literature rests precisely on the distinction among various levels (of reality), and would be unthinkable without an awareness of this distinction. A work of literature might be defined as an operation carried out in the written language and involving several levels of reality at the same time.⁷⁶

Operating in the spaces which occupy the gaps, in an encounter with the process of *"I write that Homer tells that Ulysses says: I have listened to the song of the sirens"* is precisely what literature does, by inviting the suspension of disbelief. Suspension itself is a metaphoric statement of weightlessness and non-foundation, which Calvino describes as *Lightness*.⁷⁷

In this space, both belief and disbelief in reality are suspended -

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 104.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 101.

⁷⁷ In *6 memos for the next Millennium*, he refers to an existential attitude which celebrates the freedom of cognitive and artistic weightlessness – "Whenever humanity seems condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly like Perseus into a different space. I don't mean escaping into dreams or the irrational. I mean that I have to change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective" (*6 memos*, 7).

... literature does not recognise Reality as such, but only *levels*. Whether there is such a thing as Reality, of which the various levels are only partial aspects, or whether there are only the levels, is something that literature cannot decide. Literature recognises the *reality of the levels*, and this is a reality (or “Reality”) that it knows all the better, perhaps, for not having come to understand it by other cognitive processes. And that is already a great deal.⁷⁸

What gives value to the entry into the space of free-falling literature is described in the essay *Why Read the Classics* -

... the classics help us to understand who we are and where we stand ...

(yet paradoxically avoiding the idea that) the classics ought to be read because they “serve any purpose” whatsoever ...

the classics are books that exert a peculiar influence, both when they refuse to be eradicated from the mind and when they conceal themselves in the folds of memory, camouflaging themselves as the collective or individual unconscious.⁷⁹

There is a tension between resisting the ‘*being of any use whatsoever*’ and the ‘*exerting a particular influence ... (in) the ... collective unconscious*’ which cannot be resolved, precisely because the ‘world of the written word’ is a non-space which cannot be co-opted into any agenda. It belongs to what Georges Poulet describes as the ‘*semi-mystical experience of reading*’⁸⁰ and what Maurice Blanchot calls ‘*The Space of Literature*.’⁸¹ I will return to these possibilities in later chapters.

2.3 A Framework for Calvino’s Hermeneutics

This thesis aims to demonstrate how Calvino’s remarks on ‘the loss of the ‘I’ and the sea of objectivity are worked out as an expression of the concept of abyss in the three works *Mr. Palomar*, *If on a Winter’s night a traveller (WN)* and *Invisible Cities (IC)*.

⁷⁸ *Uses of Literature* 120-21.

⁷⁹ *Why Read the Classics?*, in *L’Espresso* (Rome), June 28, 1981, reprinted in *The Uses of Literature*, 133, 134, 127..

⁸⁰ See chapter 4.

⁸¹ See chapter 5.

To contextualise this, critical theory can provide a vocabulary for how Calvino's technique might be explored in this reading. Robert Holub's essay on Hermeneutics⁸² provides a useful summary of the background from which Calvino is speaking. Holub defines hermeneutics as *the translation of the unfamiliar into a comprehensible form ... (the) mediation of understanding*, and adds that in the twentieth century, hermeneutics has become concerned at a fundamental level with ontology, so that hermeneutic theory has viewed understanding as *a basic orientation for our being-in-the-world*.⁸³ This is demonstrated as the fruit of Heidegger's project, which Holub summarises as a radically reviewed approach to epistemology. Epistemology cannot, in this light, be separated from hermeneutics because hermeneutics is seen as a fundamental human activity -

Understanding is not to be conceived transitively; we are not concerned with understanding something. Rather understanding is grasped as our way of being-in-the-world, as the fundamental way we exist prior to any cognition or intellectual activity.⁸⁴

Calvino's essays have described an intellectual crisis where epistemology has become aware of its inescapably hermeneutical foundation. Calvino's imagery is of free-fall (we are observing ourselves '*as our world is falling down the stair-well*'); relativity (the '*undifferentiated objectivity whose point of view is that of the magma*'); the loss of binary subject-object opposition ('*consciousness, will, judgement, individuality.. submerged in a sea of objectivity*'); and a problematised cosmology ('*conflict between the chaos of the world and man's obsession with making some sense of it*').

These statements are in accord with Gadamer's distinction between truth and method, as Holub explains. Gadamer opposes *an epistemological method that relegates all possibilities of cognition outside of (the scientific method) to an arena of non-truth*⁸⁵ by seeing in art and aesthetic judgement *a truth that is more fundamental than that of the scientific method*⁸⁶ which is achieved by stepping back from the binary subject-object opposition which underpins the scientific method - *While Kant privileges*

⁸² Holub pp 255ff, in *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* vol.8.

⁸³ Holub, 255.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 262.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 264.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 265.

*knowledge based on subjects confronting objects, it is precisely the absence of this model for aesthetic judgement which appeals to Gadamer.*⁸⁷

This 'more fundamental truth' is what Calvino describes as the truth that literature discerns non-cognitively within the unresolved play of levels of reality (see above).

What Holub says of Gadamer's theory could equally be said of Calvino's work -

Play or game (is) a way of overcoming the subject-object dichotomy ... (in) a set of rules beyond any individual subjectivity ... we do not confront the game as object, but rather participate in it as event ... and are ourselves transformed ... play is the truth and essence of authentic art.⁸⁸

Through the formal mechanisms of Calvino's texts, and the particular allusiveness of his metaphors towards open-ness and paradox, the experience of reading potentially becomes a game where the reader is challenged, and invited to be transformed, by an appreciation of new ontological discernment within the 'levels of reality.'

The concept of play and of the death of the author are two major concepts in Calvino's work which reflect his admiration of Roland Barthes.

A useful summary on this reads as follows -

Based on the idea that writing, unlike speech, has no context, (Barthes) asserts that the author is 'untraceable,' cannot be located or characterised from his production, being as good as dead in that regard.... The author is also redundant in his work inasmuch as language is, for Barthes ... inherently assertive, dogmatic, and even terrorist.⁸⁹

And the idea of play on Barthes' thinking is summarized by Fish - *Roland Barthes ... in the concept of "jouissance" makes a (non) constitutive principle of the tendency of rhetoric to resist closure and extend play.*⁹⁰

A better description of Calvino's project could hardly be written.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 265.

⁸⁹ *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* vol.8, 148.

⁹⁰ Fish, 500.

2.4 Calvino as deconstructivist

The theory of 'play' which is achieved between the 'levels of reality' has already been quoted from Calvino's essays. Holub's essay on deconstruction helps to situate this kind of activity within a context which is theorised by Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man.⁹¹

As his works mature in technical sophistication, Calvino's technique constantly plays games with the reader's assumptions, as a close reading of *WN* and *IC* demonstrates. (see following chapters). The play 'between levels of reality' in his essays as already discussed, destabilises what Heidegger calls the forgetfulness of Being. The forgetfulness of Being has assumed a Platonic subject-object dichotomy, thus losing a deeper awareness of Being as essence -

To forget Being, on Heidegger's account, is to confuse Being with beings. Plato, (Heidegger) claims, ran together the question 'What is Being?' with the question 'what is the most general characteristic of beings? - an assimilation which obscures what Heidegger called 'the ontological difference ... (which is) parallel to the difference between a listening acceptance and a desire to schematise and control.'⁹²

Holub then develops from this awareness, the agenda of Derrida's deconstruction in terms of a more provocative question - *How can we subvert the intentions of texts which invoke metaphysical oppositions?*⁹³

The 'metaphysical oppositions' subverted by deconstructive criticism are an attempt to escape into an a-historical and a-linguistic assumed foundation, which forgets that, in Wilfrid Sellars' words, *all awareness is a linguistic affair*.⁹⁴

Deconstructive criticism typically takes pre-existing works of literature and searches for traces of complicity in this forgetfulness of the (lack of assumed) primordial Being.

Calvino's later works, in contrast, build into their structure layers of paradox which consistently frustrate the anchoring of linguistic activity in an extra-linguistic referent. This happens functionally in the fragmented structure of *WN*, and allegorically in *IC* through the metonymy of cities as intentional qualities prioritised over mimetic fictions.

⁹¹ *Deconstruction*, Holub, in *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* vol.8, pp 166ff.

⁹² *Ibid*, 170.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 171.

⁹⁴ Wilfred Sellars, *Science*, 160, quoted in Holub, 175.

This is the crisis of mimetic art which Paul de Man describes in its American incarnation:

Instead of revealing a continuity affiliated with the coherence of the natural world, (New Criticism) takes us into a discontinuous world of reflective irony and ambiguity ... it pushes the interpretative process so far that the analogy between the organic world and the language of poetry finally explodes.⁹⁵

Calvino's comment in the essay *Visibility* provides the rationale for this self-deconstructive project - '*Only after coming to understand the surface of things ... can one then begin to explore what lies beneath. But the surface of things is inexhaustible.*'⁹⁶

The 'inexhaustible surface' is the slippery slope of an unavoidable relativism emerging from the consequences of Heidegger's sensitivity to ontological difference. When the subject tries to secure a viewpoint to encompass human experience of the aesthetic, the metaphysical foundation is compromised so that Calvino can then only invoke the metaphor of free-fall. How is this stance expressed in his work?

The abyss of Calvino's non-foundational epistemology poses the challenge of a hermeneutical self-awareness by embodying deconstructive practice from within the work of his fiction.

⁹⁵ De Man, *Blindness*, 28, quoted in Holub, 177.

⁹⁶ *Visibility*, in *6 Memos*, quoted in *Omaggio*, 8.

3 *If on a winter's night a traveller as abyss*

It could be seen as strange for Italo Calvino to publish in 1994, a strung together collection of disparate aborted plots, in the guise of a novel. But this is exactly what *If on a winter's night a traveller* seems at first sight to be.

However, this string of disparate narratives is bound together by a narrative which draws the reader into a second level of plot. In this second level the protagonist is 'you, the reader' and the plot is the search for the authentic text.

So 'you, the reader' (in inverted commas), embarks on a journey to find which plot, and which characters, among a series of competing texts, is the real one.

Already two things are apparent. One is the notion of a privileged text which is authentic - the first story fragment, or second or third, or any?

Secondly, does the actual reader accept the author-ity - a word I have precisely used in its double sense - which uses the second person in the narrative throw down an invitation to the actual reader to comply with? At what point, exactly, does Calvino's 'you' become a third person, a rhetorical device, rather than a literal use of the second person as the text suggests?

As soon as these two questions are apparent, it is evident that *If on a Winter's Night* is a text which opens up the question of textuality itself. When the narrative voice is disrupted by the device of 'your' discovery of its incompleteness, immediately the implicit trust an actual reader gives to the reading is broken. The unspoken agreement of reading, the Coleridgean 'willing suspension of disbelief', is forced open and broken by the text itself. *If on a Winter's Night* is an exercise in self-deconstruction.

Firstly, above all, the idea of authority is examined. The reader is caught in the dilemma of thinking, how much did I trust this narrative which dissolves and disappoints; what author-ity did I invest in this text to take me to a fictive space?

What does the act of trusting a written authority involve?

Is this the end of the story then, that no written authority can be trusted, and that the subject alone and abandoned creates an autonomous and perhaps therefore arbitrary meaning? The text, designedly, does not provide an answer.

3.1 The Plot Structure of Winter's Night

Contents
1
<i>If on a Winter's Night a traveller</i>
2
<i>Outside the town of Malbork</i>
3
<i>Leaning from the steep slope</i>
4
<i>Without fear of wind or vertigo</i>
5
<i>Looks down in the gathering shadow</i>
6
<i>In a network of lines that enlase</i>
7
<i>In a network of lines that intersect</i>
8
<i>On the carpet of lines illuminated by the moon</i>
9
<i>Around an empty grave</i>
10
<i>What story down there awaits its end?</i>
11

Figure 1 - Table of Contents, WN

The table of contents reproduced here shows how the chapter headings extend and complete a grammatical sentence which begins with the book's title. The title itself unsettles the convention of completeness representing a coherent whole. It is grammatically incomplete. There is an irony in that the headings between each numbered chapters do combine to form a grammatically complete sentence, or more to the point, a grammatically complete question. The irony lies in the discovery of a subversion of this apparent unity. The contents of each section fail utterly, and for the reader, disastrously, to provide a narrative continuity, because each is a fragment of a different plot, with different characters, in a different genre.

Helpfully, in the Italian edition of the book, Calvino provides a preface in which he offers a key to explain the rationale of the book's structure. He even goes so far as to provide a flow chart (figs 2 and 3). He tells us that an (unidentified) 'wise friend' helped him to see its logic, and hence to construct the chart, but only after the text had been completed⁹⁷. The chart which functions as a key to the reading of his book, is like a parody of the 'schemes to read by' which the 'Reader' narrator encounters throughout the text, in particular the satire of Lotaria's exercises in 'scientific' textual analysis in Chapter Three. In presenting the chart, Calvino rather facetiously defends himself against a charge of 'a totalising intention' -

This scheme has a circularity in the sense that the last section could link back towards the first. Totalising, then? In that sense, certainly, I would be happy if it was. And in the deceptive bounds drawn up in this way, you would be able to circumscribe a white (blank) zone where you could situate a 'discontinuous' stance towards the world which you propose as the only non-mystifying one, when you state that 'the world cannot be witnessed (or preached) in other than a discontinuous way, divorced from any kind of tutelage, individual or collective, and reduced to its irreducibility.'⁹⁸

⁹⁷ This recalls Gayatri Spivak's discussion of Hegel's preface in the preface to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. (Derrida /Spivak 1997, pp. lx ff).

⁹⁸ *Se una notte, presentazione* xiv (my translation).

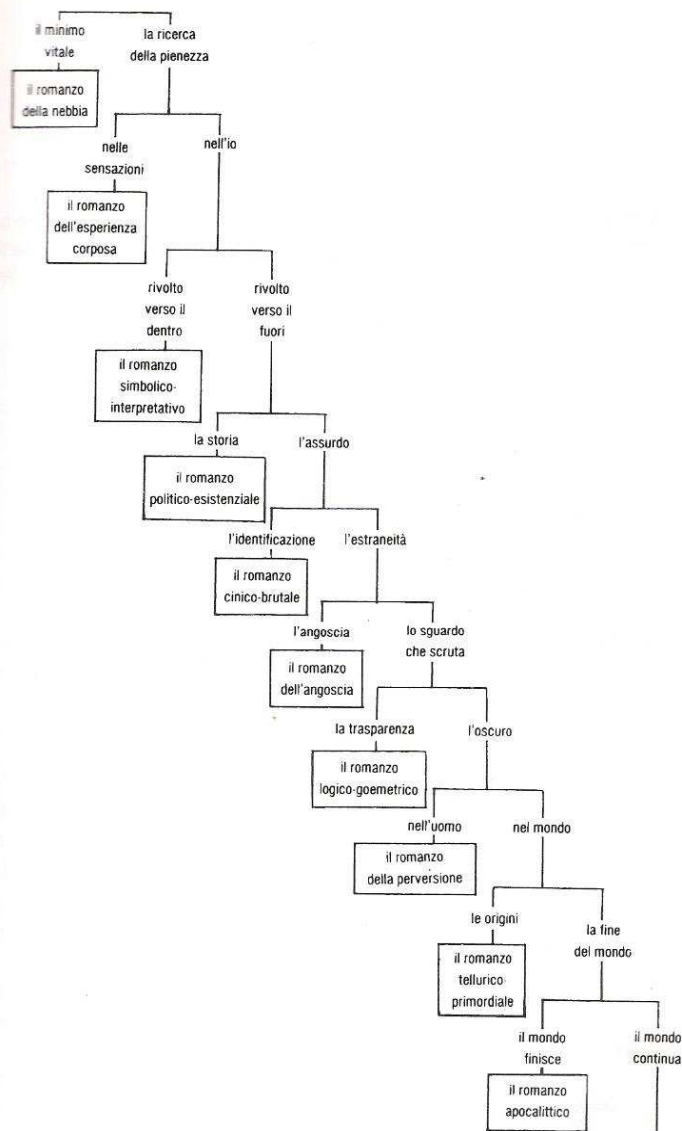


Figure 2 - Flow Chart from *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*.⁹⁹

So then for Calvino there is a 'totality' in the scheme of *Winter's Night*, but it is a 'discontinuous' one of 'irreducibility.' There is no 'tutelage' to guarantee the stability or cohesiveness of the text.

⁹⁹ *Se una notte*, *Presentazione*, xv.

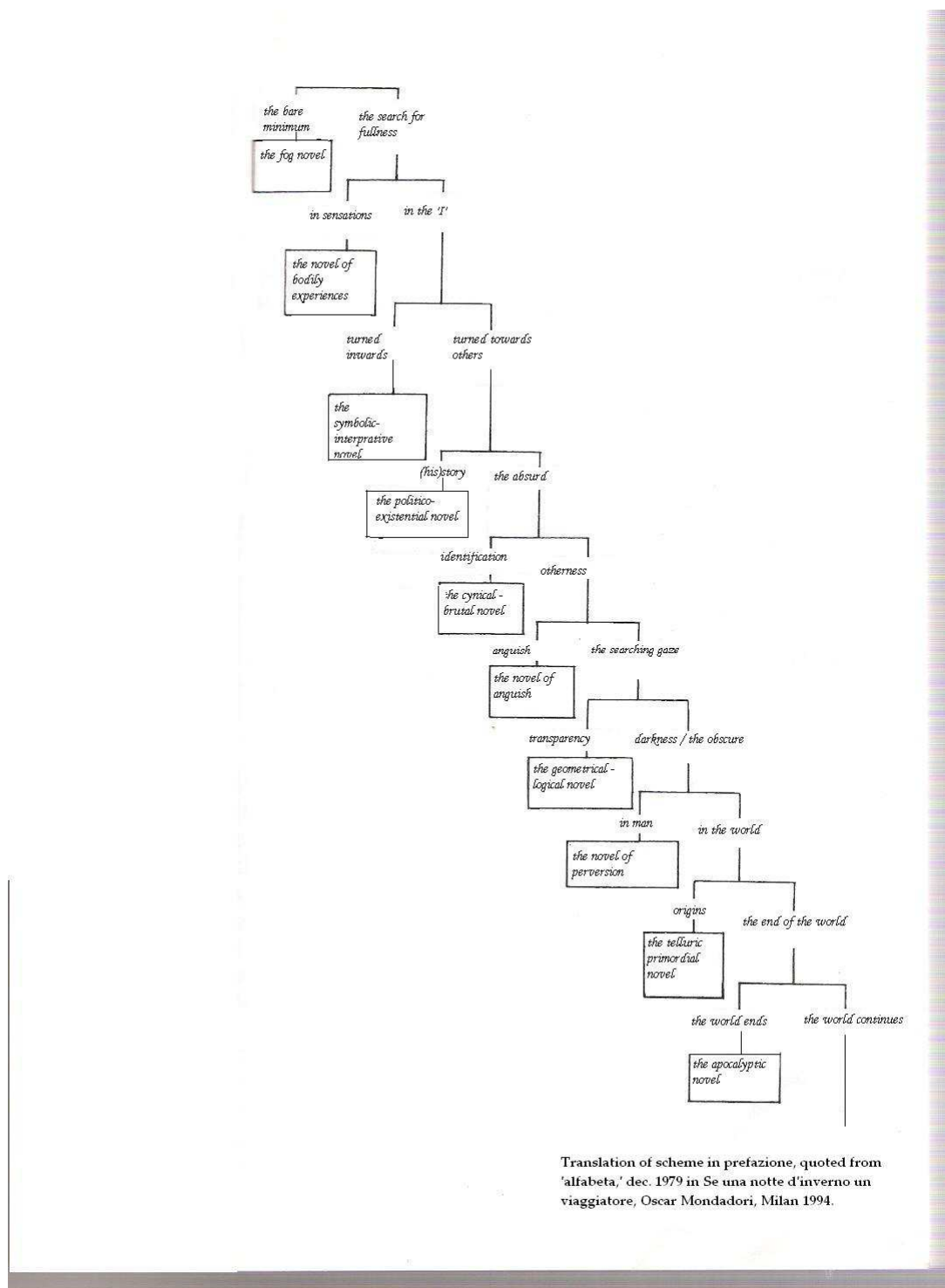


Figure 3 - translation of Flow Chart, WN.

The scheme is an elaborate piece of irony, then. The irony lies in the 'discontinuity' of the 'totality'; two seemingly irreconcilable opposites which Calvino consciously juxtaposes.

In the essay *Una Pietra Sopra*, Calvino sees the literary work as cosmology, saying that ‘the literary work is a map of the world and of knowledge,’¹⁰⁰ but he also tells the reader that this totalising cosmology is doomed to failure, as we read, ... “from one moment to the next we expect the secret filigree of the universe to appear, transparent, before us. It is an expectation which is always frustrated, as well it should be.”¹⁰¹

3.2 The Reader’s Journey

The novel, although fragmented, at another level possesses unity. A coherent plot of two ‘you’s, a masculine and feminine reader,¹⁰² does survive and in fact contrives a romance.

It is no accident that the consummation of the relationship between ‘you’ (female reader) and ‘you’ (male reader) is described as an act of reading the body of the other. The text explicitly invokes reading as a metaphor for sex - ‘*Ludmilla, you are now being read*’ (p.155). If there is a metaphoric correspondence between the intimacy of sexual union on one side, and the reader-text relationship on the other, at this point the object of the hermeneutical search, the ‘thing in itself’ in terms of Kant’s categories, is reached as the union of ‘you’ (male) and ‘you’ (female) is consummated. But here too incompleteness resists a totalising solution, as this act is described as ‘*All the poor alphabets by which one human being believes at certain moments that he is reading another human being*’ (155).

So a possible strategy for reading with certainty is constructed only in order to be undermined - he ‘only believes’ he is reading, and uses a ‘poor alphabet’ - a deconstruction which is indeed the method throughout WN.

¹⁰⁰ *Una Pietra Sopra*, 187, quoted in Cannon, CR 52

¹⁰¹ *Una Pietra Sopra*, 156, quoted in Cannon, CR 52

¹⁰² ‘*Lettore*’ and ‘*Lettrice*’ are written as ‘Reader’ and ‘Other Reader’ in William Weaver’s translation of *Winter’s Night*; to clarify their respective genders this chapter generally refers to them as ‘Reader Male’ and ‘Reader Female.’

There are overtones too of a rejection of the fixed (authoritative) text in the Female (Ideal) reader Ludmilla's reciprocal reading of the Male Reader- *'You begin to harbour a doubt, that she is not reading you, using fragments of you detached from the context to construct for herself a ghostly partner, known to her alone, in the penumbra of her semiconsciousness, and what she is deciphering is this apocryphal visitor, not you'* (156).

Apocrypha is a word to which Calvino's text will return, with an agenda of deconstructing narrative authority, and it is worth noting at this point that the entrance of an impostor is foreshadowed here, with overtones of the apocryphal. Moreover, the novel ends with a twist of irony in which male reader and female reader are left in a position of shared intimacy - both reading in bed, entering into separate texts in search of what is presumably the infinitely receding object of the text. If they do indeed find a stable text, they read it alone and apart from each other. Their search for the stable text of the plot fragments is what has brought them together. As the text will demonstrate, the search does not reach closure in any metaphysical sense. Does this mean that the act of reading, exposed as an artifice which can be trusted only so far and no further, should be abandoned?

Why in fact do Reader (male) and Reader (female) pursue the text?

Reader (male) is aware of an amount of hypocrisy in his agenda. He 'uses' the text as a pretext in order to engage with his more fundamental object of desire, the reader (female). When Reader (male) initially engages Reader (female) in conversation, on the pretext of asking about the missing text, we read - *'Listen, why don't we exchange telephone numbers? (this is what you were aiming at, O Reader, moving around her like a rattlesnake!)'* (p.31)

The comedy of how the hapless Reader Male pursues a relationship with Reader Female is similar to the vignettes collected in Calvino's *Difficult Loves*, as early as 1957.¹⁰³

There is a wider context here though, than the humorous romantic adventures which *Difficult Loves* depict. The Reader (male) is aware that through his contriving a conversation about the book, the text has become a pre-text. He is challenged by the text itself, in the second person 'tu' narrative, '*does this mean the book has become an instrument, a channel of communication, a rendezvous?*' (p.32)

(and immediately another circularity occurs in the question this raises, of whatever else a novel is intended as, if not a channel of communication).

Levels of reality in the plot are shifted yet again when the play on the word *romanzo* is made explicit - '*al romanzo da leggere si sovrappone un possibile romanzo da vivere*' (36) (- to the **romanzo** - novel/romance to read is added the possibility of a **romanzo** novel/romance to be lived.) This is no empty pun - the pun in fact indicates narrative powers to create, to embroider, and to deceive, as the novel will continue to demonstrate. The Male Reader's use of the text stands as a metaphor, the first of many as the book unfolds, for how texts are used.

¹⁰³ *Amori Difficili*, 1957.

3.3 The Reader (Female)

By contrast it appears that Ludmilla, the Reader (female) is the 'pure' or ideal reader, whose search for the text is driven solely by desire to access the world of the text. In this way she functions as an autonomous subject exercising free will. The reader (male) is aware that this gives her a strength he lacks - *'How can you fail to keep up with her, this woman who is always reading a book another book besides the one before her eyes, a book that does not exist, but which, since she wants it, cannot fail to exist?'* (72). This portrays the reader (female) as either deluded or, by *'reading another book besides the one before her eyes'*, she possesses the poetic gift by which, in terms of Romanticism, we *half create what we perceive*¹⁰⁴ In this sense she is a 'believer', and she speaks in terms of faith - *'Reading is going towards something that is about to be, and no-one yet knows what it will be'* (p.72), words which closely parallel St Paul's words in Romans 8. 24-25 - *Hope that is seen is not hope. For hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience*, and more explicitly invoking faith in 2 Corinthians 5.7 - *For we walk by faith, not by sight*. Ludmilla defines the ideal novel as *'(having) only the desire to narrate, to pile stories upon stories, without trying to impose a philosophy of life on you, simply allowing you observe its own growth, like a tree ...'* (92)

This ideal of pure unmediated organic life also implies a spontaneity which involves the death of the author as controlling authoritative mediator. The desire to escape having a *philosophy of life imposed on you* argues for a purity escaping ideology.

¹⁰⁴ (William Wordsworth, *Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*, 1798, quoted in D. Jasper, *Reading Theological Texts*, unpublished paper, 2008).

3.4 The Tortured Writer

The dilemma of the 'ideal' writer seeking to be free of ideology or personal bias becomes more apparent through the later chapters where the writer Silas Flannery's diary describes his ideal female reader who experiences '*reading turned into a natural process....absorbed by the circuits of her mind and disappearing, transformed into her interior ghosts, into what in her is most personal and incommunicable*' (169-170).

So Silas Flannery is driven to say '*I would like to vanish...How well I would write if I were not here! If between the white page and the writing of words and stories that take shape and disappear without anyone's ever writing them there were not interposed that uncomfortable partition which is my person!*' (171)

The desire which Silas Flannery as writer articulates is closely allied to the Reader and Other Reader's search for a perfect, stable text on which they can rely. Both Reader and writer (Flannery) alike express a yearning for a transcendent authority - both are writing, and reading, in Mark C. Taylor's phrase, *After God*. The yearning for a transcendent purity of inspiration echoes Calvino's remarks on the emergence of revelation -

To return to the tribal narrator (of myth and fable), he proceeds untroubled in making permutations of jaguars and toucans until the moment when one of those innocent tales explodes into a terrible revelation: a myth, which must be recited in secret and in a sacred place. (177)

The '*man gifted with a conscious and unconscious awareness*' in this case would seem to be the ideal (Female) Reader.

In order to meet the demands of this reader's quest, two new characters are introduced to the 'Reader' plot strand: Silas Flannery, the pulp fiction writer, and Ermes Marana, the deceitful translator.

3.5 The Death of the Author

Silas Flannery, the pulp fiction writer, enters the plot as the purported author of one of the contesting fragments encountered by the Readers Male and Female.

Echoing the images of ghosts, the text tells us that Flannery is an author '*whose exact whereabouts are unknown and whose actual existence is in doubt*' (120).¹⁰⁵

Not only does this lead us to doubt his status as authentic author of the text fragments. We are also told that Flannery '*has been suffering a crisis. He can't write a line....at the mercy of (a) spiritual crisis,... (needing the assistance of) ... a team of ghost writers*' (121). This 'crisis' leading to Flannery's need for 'ghost writers' leads him into an inquiry about his authority as a writer, and indeed about the authority of texts more generally. He is a '*tormented*' writer (p.174) because he searches for an ideal text. The ideal text he searches for is impersonal, divested of the limitations of the historically situated subject -

... the objectivity of thought can be expressed using the verb 'to think' in the impersonal third person: saying not "I think" but "it thinks" as we say "it rains." There is thought in the universe - this is the constant from which we must set out every time. (176)

So that, regarding writing,

Only when it will come natural to me to use the verb "write" in the impersonal form will I be able to hope that through me is expressed something less limited than the personality of an individual. (176)

Clearly, Flannery sees his own subjective voice as a limitation he wants to escape, and as he considers this dilemma, he examines the idea of the sacred text.

He tells an apocryphal story about the scribe Abdullah who lost his faith when the Prophet failed to finish a sentence of the sacred revealed text he was dictating. When Abdullah *instinctively suggested the conclusion* of a sentence of the Koran being dictated to him, the Prophet *accepted as the divine word what Abdullah had said*. (182) Abdullah then decides to reject the sacred text, because it has no greater status than the words he himself has supplied.

¹⁰⁵ See Barthes' concept of the death of the author (footnote 89, p.24).

Flannery comments that Abdullah was wrong to lose faith - *he lost his faith in Allah because he lacked faith in writing, and in himself as an agent of writing.* (182)

According to this logic, Flannery himself has not ‘lost his faith,’ even if a Platonic idealism which assures him a hypothetical perfect text, is troubled by the ‘gaps’ of human frailty -

It is only through the confining act of writing that the immensity of the nonwritten becomes legible, that is, through the uncertainties of spelling, the occasional lapses, oversights, unchecked leaps of the word and the pen. Otherwise what is outside of us should not insist on communicating through the word, spoken or written: let it send its messages by other paths. (183)

The ‘*what is outside of us*’ which ‘*communicates*’ through the word, is then satirised with the appearance of UFO hunters who believe that extraterrestrials are communicating through an author - Flannery is told he will not even be aware of his function as mediator of external communications from ‘out there’ - ‘*he would believe he is writing as he likes; instead, the message coming from space on waves picked up by his brain would infiltrate what he is writing.*’ (184) Flannery’s answer leads us straight to the problem of hermeneutics - “*And would you succeed in decoding the message?*” *They did not answer me.* (184)

There is no exclusion of the possibility of an ‘objective’ external source of thought in the universe - but for Flannery the problem lies in the realm of mediation and hermeneutics , since the UFO hunters cannot assure him that they could take the text and decode it with any certainty to validate their claims.

The next development in Calvino’s narrative is a Nietzschean figure who asserts the will to power and autonomous creativity.

3.6 ‘Messenger or Thief’

Ermes Marana corresponds to his namesake Hermes, as Wiley Feinstein explains quoting Plato :

... Hermes has to do with speech, and (this) signifies that he is the interpreter (Hermeneuteus), or messenger or thief, or liar, or bargainer; all that sort of thing has a great deal to do with language...¹⁰⁶

and so Feinstein sees Ermas Marana's function as *to criticise the mimetic fallacy, i.e. the notion that literature ought to represent extra-textual reality faithfully.*¹⁰⁷

Feinstein concludes :

If one were still able to speak without irony about Deep Meanings at the Core of Literary Texts or about the Deep Meaning of an Epoch of History, it is now a truth, more than universally acknowledged, that humor would be the only serious candidate for consideration as the transcendental Signified of the Novel in our century.¹⁰⁸

... The deconstructionist commonplace about the impossibility of getting to the bottom of textuality and sexuality interests Calvino mainly as a pretext for humor.¹⁰⁹

Undoubtedly, humour is where Calvino excels, in *WN* no less than anywhere else. What Feinstein's reading overlooks, however, is the work of Calvino the critic, who, albeit ironically, wrestles repeatedly in his essays with exactly the problem of the text and the struggle to establish a transcendental ideal. Rather than the problem being a pretext for humour, I would argue that the humour is instead a strategic response to the problem which, in itself, is utterly serious.

Marana's role is as shady and ambiguous conspirator in a war among factions who both equally stake a claim to ownership of the text; either as agent to '*bear a truth perhaps human or extraterrestrial (following the Archangel of Light)*' (129).

or to bear '*counterfeiting, mystification, intentional falsehood (as a means by which to find) absolute value in a book, a truth not contaminated by the dominant pseudo-truths (following the Archon of Shadow)*' (129).

¹⁰⁶ Plato's *Cratylus* p.149 in *The Doctrinal Core of If on a winter's night a traveller* (CR p.149).

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 153.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

Feinstein sees these two factions as representing *traditional humanist critics and avant-garde anti-humanist structuralists or deconstructionists*.¹¹⁰

He also observes that *Ermes Marana is an enemy of both groups and we can take this as Calvino's attempt at refusal to commit himself to either camp of warring critics*.¹¹¹

However, Ermes Marana does have an agenda which I would describe as the creative audacity, or the will to power. He is the '*founder*' of the group which has split into these two warring factions (WN p 129), and although they have '*eluded the control of their founder,*' (p.129) he continues to disseminate forgeries in the shape of the novel fragments found by Reader (male) and Reader (female). He produces falsehoods which for one faction represent in Nietzschean fashion '*the switch from cheap and relative bad faith to essential and absolute bad faith, the masterpiece of falsity as knowledge,* and for the other represent *falsehood... (from which) only a cataclysm of truth could be born*' (130).

Feinstein is right to point out how closely this satire mimics the kind of rhetoric Stanley Fish has discussed¹¹² and which was discussed earlier in this thesis.

In either case, the motivation for Ermes Marana's falsehood is the same - '*The secret spring that set (Marana's project) in motion was his jealousy of the invisible rival who came constantly between him and Ludmilla, the silent voice that speaks to her through books*' (159). He wants to '*defeat the author*' by a process of distortion where '*he, identifying himself with every mystification, would have affirmed his presence*' (159).

Ludmilla knows this - so we are told that '*Marana convinces her that the difference between the true and the false is only a prejudice of ours*' (152).

¹¹⁰ CR, 150.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Fish 1989, chapters 19 and 20.

It is in response to this threat of relativism that Ludmilla emerges as the pure reader and the person who keeps her faith in the unseen, because it is in the face of Marana's project that she *'feels the need to see someone who makes books the way a pumpkin vine makes pumpkins'* (152).

So Ludmilla, the Ideal reader female stands alone in her intuitive belief, and her faith in the text as a phenomenon which can reach her in a pure, unmediated way.

A sub-plot involving a third reader figure, the female reader's sister, complicates this picture. Readers male and female are entangled with Flannery the embattled writer and Marana the deceitful translator. The reader (female)'s sister leads the reader (male) into a convoluted world of conspiracy where her agenda is to analyse the text and find its 'secret' meaning.

A mechanised science of hermeneutics is displayed where the original act of reading - to enter an imaginary space - becomes impossible. In a wonderful satire of semiotics as social science turned mechanistic, the text is stripped down until it loses semantic content. In the increasing gibberish of the result, the lack of artistic sensibility in a pseudo-scientific category mistake is parodied to the point where 'the text' has lost its essence. It is also, in this battle of frenzied ideologies, perceived as an object of political power which is both sought and feared.

So as the text suffers all these adventures, it is clear that as actual readers we are invited to consider carefully our own attitude to the text.

As an exercise in how to read, *WN* might stand theologically as a plea for the exercise of a hermeneutic of suspicion which reads by knowingly examining its own presuppositions about the text. It requires from the reader an autonomy of judgement and an awareness of the rhetorical claims which are invoked by a text. It can also be read as a Lutheran appeal for the priesthood of individual believers, who take the authority of interpretation and belief upon themselves without the imposition of external authority. There is, to support the interpretation I am suggesting, an

intriguing parallel here. The Lutheran Reformation is advanced by the mass availability of the printed text, with the Gutenberg Bible becoming more widely available.

3.7 Printing and error.

The disruption of the reader's text in *WN* is introduced to us as the result of a printer's error -

Wait a minute! Look at the page number. Damn! From page 32 you've gone back to page 17! What you thought was a stylistic subtlety on the author's part is simply a printer's mistake: they have inserted the same pages twice (25)

This is bad news for the author as all-powerful creative agent - the author's message has become dependent on the fidelity of a printer, and has no power over errors in that process.

Still worse news is ahead, too, when the Reader is offered an authentic replacement, because he has been led astray by the power now given him to choose his own version of authenticity. So the reader says on learning that what was sold as a Calvino text is in fact a completely different novel by an unknown Polish writer, *'No, actually I don't give a damn about that Calvino any more. I started the Polish one and it's the Polish one I want to go on with'* (28).

The process of secularisation and the loss of authority is underway. It will continue in increasingly elaborate chains of events, which lead to conspiracy, falsehood and absurdity, but which leave the reader unable to deny that Pandora's box has now been opened. Or, as in the character of Hermes Marana as we have seen, the serpent has entered the Eden of a *'pure reading'* (the metaphor is used explicitly in p. 125) with a deliberate agenda of falsification, and a decided effort in the words of Harold Bloom (and Andrew Marvell before him), *To Ruin the Sacred Truths*.¹¹³

¹¹³ Marvell "On Paradise Lost" in Bloom 1989 p. 125 – "the Argument/Held me a while misdoubting his Intent,/ That he would ruin (for I saw him strong)/The sacred Truths to Fable and Old Song."

3.8 Felix Culpa

There is a sense however in which this process itself might also be equally sacred, as a *felix culpa* (“fortunate fall”)¹¹⁴ providing the source of creative freedom. The sanctity in this case would be the act of creativity itself, even of the ‘falsehood’ of the fictional. The ‘empirically based scientific narrative’ of Western culture is demoted from its authoritative position by the faith of the ideal reader (female) who persists in seeking an authentic, organic text. Her feminist sister, who is portrayed so unsympathetically as to amount to an insulting caricature,¹¹⁵ fails to win the text as the misguided object of possession and control.

The process of reading *WN* evokes the possibility of an act of a ‘second naïveté’ after the loss of a perhaps more primitive and literal reading.

3.9 Winters Night and the Divine Comedy

In its visual layout Calvino’s flow chart¹¹⁶ provides an interesting parallel to Massimo Tosi’s famous plan of the circles passed through by Dante in his journey through *Inferno*(fig.3).

The idea in The *Divina Commedia* is of a journey progressing through existential states as Dante passes through the circles of Hell, with each circle embodying a different

¹¹⁴ This reworks the view of *felix culpa* ; ie, the traditional Christian view of sin as a fortunate fault because it leads to the incarnation of Christ as Saviour; see Adam’s speech predicting the Incarnation at the end of Book X, *Paradise Lost*:

“But JOSHUA whom the Gentiles JESUS call,
His Name and Office bearing, who shall quell /The adversarie Serpent, and bring back
Through the worlds wilderness long wanderd man /Safe to eternal Paradise of rest.
O goodness infinite, goodness immense! /That all this good of evil shall produce,
And evil turn to good; more wonderful / Then that which by creation first brought forth
Light out of darkness! full of doubt I stand,/Whether I should repent me now of sin
By mee done and occasiond, or rejoice /Much more, that much more good thereof shall spring,
To God more glory, more good will to Men / From God, and over wrauth grace shall abound.”

¹¹⁵ See de Laurentis 1982.

¹¹⁶ Figs. 2 and 3.

moral weakness - sin- by which the souls in Hell have become ensnared. WN's flow chart progresses through the numbered chapters in the Reader plot, leaving behind each plot fragment in the same way that Dante leaves behind the sinners in each circle of Hell as he passes on to the next.

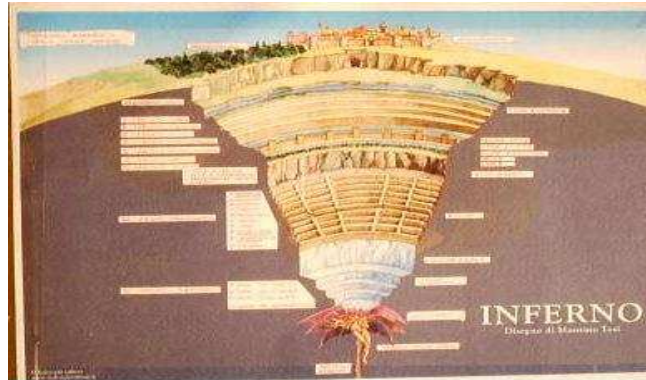


Figure 4 - Dante's *Inferno*, by Massimo Tosi

In addition, WN shares with the *Commedia* a quest and a guide: both Dante's first person protagonist and WN's 'you' (Reader (Male)) are led by faith in, and desire for, the beloved female, Dante's Beatrice and the Reader's Other (Female) Reader. Altizer, commenting on the role of Beatrice in the *Commedia*, would go further to argue that Beatrice embodies a deeper actuality for Dante -

Beatrice is not only the guiding spirit of this voyage, and is so for the most part through Virgil and then finally through herself, but Beatrice is the source or agent of the deepest revelation which here occurs.
(p.147)

Similarly, the Other (Female) Reader is the 'ideal reader' who alone keeps faith in the authentic, organic status of the text as a work of art.

Dante's text was revolutionary, not only by being written in the Italian '*volgare*' (vernacular) (as was Luther's Gutenberg Bible) and in his imaginative departure from Christian orthodoxy, but also in his audacity in merging a (fictional) Dante the

narrator/protagonist in a spiritual allegory, with an autobiographical Dante whose presence as a historical figure is made clear frequently in the text. Altizer comments on the project of the *Commedia* -

Dante goes far beyond Aquinas in calling forth the actuality of the world. It is.. inseparable from Dante's revolutionary discovery of a *truly new perception, a perception unfolding within us an interior reality* (my emphases added) and our interior turning to that reality is the movement of love, a love which a response to that reality which is finally "isness" and love at once.¹¹⁷

Altizer notes the radical secularising power of the *Commedia* - "*Dante's most revolutionary vision is an enactment of an actuality of God that is inseparable from the actuality of the world.*"¹¹⁸

Calvino's text takes Dante's leap of writing the subject into an imaginative fiction, and reworks it. Where Dante has expressed 'a perception unfolding within us an interior reality' which is 'an enactment of an actuality of God that is inseparable from the actuality of the world', Calvino's text expresses the drama of the postmodern loss of the subject. He moves the narrative voice from 'Io (I)' to 'Tu (You)' in order to chart a postmodern spiritual allegory, if not completely from Hell safely through to Heaven then at least as safely as can be expected, through a kind of earthly Purgatory.

The journey for Calvino's writer contrasts with Dante's journey which begins in the famous opening lines of the *Commedia* with a moral and existential dilemma -

Half way along the road we have to go,

I found myself obscured in a dark forest,

Bewildered, and I knew I had lost the way

(*Inferno* 1. 1-3)

Calvino's *Reader* instead begins from the place which this thesis has discussed already as *The Sea of Objectivity*. The death of the author, which is portrayed in WN's

¹¹⁷ Purgatorio XVIII, 22-33, quoted in Altizer, 146.

¹¹⁸ Altizer, 147

fragmentation, is related to the wider issue of the death of the subject in the face of an existential alienation. Calvino's essay describes it in apocalyptic terms -

The loss of the 'I', the fall into the sea of undifferentiated objectivity, was back then, twenty years ago, explored for the first time by Sartre, in *Nausea*, but it was by a process of inference. The protagonist saw the distinction between himself and the external world vanish little by little, his face in the mirror becoming an object, and a uniform viscosity merging the 'I' with the world of objects. But this representation completed by Sartre was done from an external perspective, from the point of view of consciousness, choice and freedom. Today this has been turned around: the point of view is now that of the magma itself¹¹⁹.

Salvation for Dante lies in a journey of discovery and recognition, as he sees a moral and spiritual order laid out in the historical examples he encounters travelling through Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso. For Calvino, salvation lies in attaining a paradoxical rationale of the irrational, or the acceptance of non-resolution. There is also a theological parallel between Dante's journey and Calvino's Fictional Reader's search for the text. In *Purgatorio* XXI, an encounter between Virgil, Dante's (intriguingly pagan) guide and another illustrious 'shade', as the narrative describes departed souls, leads to the following dialogue -

*Already he was stooping to embrace the feet
Of my teacher, but the latter said: 'Do not,
Brother, for you are a shadow and so am I.'*

*And he, rising: 'Now you can understand
The quantity of love which warms me to you,
When I put out of mind our vanity,*

¹¹⁹ *Il Mare dell'oggettività*, Italo Calvino in *Il Menabò di letteratura*, Vittorini and Calvino, no.2, Einaudi, Turin, 1960.

*Treating shadows as if they were solid things*¹²⁰

The action of moving to hold the beloved, and being forbidden to do so, follows the Johannine narrative, where the risen Christ tells Mary, *Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father* (John 20. 17). Throughout *Purgatorio* Virgil seeks to enlighten the pilgrim Dante on the spiritual quality of love which transcends physical boundaries. Indeed, in contrast to the scientific master narrative of Newtonian natural philosophy which explains force and motion to readers in our post-Renaissance context, Dante's text invokes love as the prime mover, most of all in Cantos XVII and XVIII when Virgil tells Dante for example, that

..the captive mind enters upon desires,
Which is a spiritual motion, and does not rest
Until the thing that is loved makes it be glad.¹²¹

There is an irony at work in Dante's text here - throughout the *Commedia* both metaphor and simile are extremely grounded not only in physical but also historical actuality. And yet the departed spirit Statius in his dialogue with Virgil recognises his 'vanity' or error in '*treating shadows as if they were solid things*'. So Dante is alerting his readers to be wary of a literal reading of the text, and reminding the reader that there is a need for care when interpreting textual phenomena.

'*Do not hold me*' or '*noli mi tangere*', in both the Gospel and the *Commedia*, with a salvific instruction in love as a spiritual and moral force, leads the reader into a hermeneutic of questioning beyond a superficial literalism. For the theological writer, this invites the questioning of the master narrative of materialistic reductionism as

¹²⁰ *Purgatorio*, XXI.

¹²¹ *Purgatorio* XVIII.

much as it does any fundamentalism of religious belief. This tension is, this thesis argues, Calvino's deepest concern.

3.10 The Non-actor as erased voice

Calvino also exerts a '*noli mi tangere*', a refusal to give us a coherent text we can hold directly before us. This is so not only in the Reader's comically absurd chase for the authentic novel, but also within each fragment. Rather than offering a discursive narrative, the fragments are written hovering between a kind of 'stage direction' for the novel and self-reflexive journeys into the substance of it. The 'stage directions' take place in a region which is not even fixed as that of a fictional narrator's mind. Instead, the third-person narrative gives a voice to 'the novel' itself, with the (fictional) author almost as an accessory to the fact. This point of view is in fact an experiment in what Calvino elsewhere calls the point of view of 'the sea of objectivity' as already discussed. So rather than opening the first novel fragment with '*I /he/she/we/they*' or even (as in Chapter One) '*you*' being '*in the setting of a railway station*', the text tells us that '*the novel begins in a railway station*' (p10). Whose point of view is this, if anyone's?

When the entry into the space of a stable narrative begins, even then we as readers are not allowed to suspend our disbelief. So we read of the protagonist in the first novel fragment, '*I am the man who comes and goes between the bar and the telephone booth. Or rather : that man is called 'I' and you know nothing else about him, just as this station is called only 'station' and beyond it there exists nothing except the unanswered signal of a telephone ringing in dark room of a distant city.*' (p.11)

This trick of deconstructing its own fictions is used most of all in this first fragment, but recurs relentlessly throughout the ten fragments in order to oust the reader again and again, 'just when you thought it was safe to go back in the plot,' from a stable

narrative. The imagery which heightens a sense of loss and liminality weaves a continuity of metaphors between fragments and the Reader-search chapters which pursue these fragments. The image of the railway station is as a place of transition, with the vocabulary of fog, darkness and social exclusion which permeate this first fragment. The climax of this sense of loss and abandonment reaches its climax in the ending of this first fragment : *'The express arrives at top speed. It slows down, stops, erases me from the chief's sight, pulls out again.'* (25)

Not only is the image of erasure used, but to double its effect in undermining a stable subject, it is used so that the protagonist's first person voice becomes passive, and the point of view of the subject, grammatically belonging to an 'I', is reduced to an inanimate object, the train which 'erases me.'

There is in fact a narrative unity or totality which binds together fragments and Reader-search chapters, by the interweaving of images in both. This brings to mind, again, Calvino's theories of writing where in *Cybernetics and Ghosts* he speaks about *Literature (as the) combinatory interplay between elements which follow the possibilities implicit in their basic material, (which) at a certain point finds itself invested with an unforeseen significance, unintended in the linguistic level we were moving in, but slipped in from another plane.*¹²²

The 'ghost in the machine' in this case, which *'finds itself invested with an unforeseen significance,'* is an elaborate system of recurring metaphors. These have been planted as a rhetorical device by Calvino as actual author, to give the impression of images moving between apparently true *'You, the Reader'* in the numbered chapters and the heightened significance they then gain in the apparently fictional novel fragments - or

¹²² *Cybernetics and Ghosts*, in *Uses of Literature*, 22.

vice versa, according to the combinatorial play which Calvino's essay privileges us to detect in *WN*.

3.11 Tropes of the Abyss and erasure in *WN*

In the novel fragments, an imagery develops corresponding to the 'gaps' between each fragment, and *abyss*, *erasure*, and *uncertainty* are persistent both as metaphors and within the plot of each fragment. This culminates in the final fragment, which Calvino's Preface¹²³ describes as the apocalyptic novel. Earlier in the fourth fragment, the politico-existential novel, the protagonists are walking over an abyss in a setting of precarious political double-dealing and betrayal. By the final fragment, the world itself is being erased. Is there a salvation for the novel, or for the philosophical realm of nihilism which is portrayed? There is, but it is not a reified or certain one. When the world appears about to disappear in the final fragment, a dramatic resolution occurs. It consists of hope, relationship, openness and play. The image which survives the end of the world is a question - *'I know a café here at the corner, all lined with mirrors, and there's an orchestra that plays waltzes. Will you invite me there?'* (p. 252).

So the hope of survival lies in the relationship of the protagonists who might dance together, with the element of play which doesn't seek to escape, or build a brave new world, and with the openness of an unanswered question. In the final interlude of the numbered sections of *'Reader ('you')'* plot, this conclusion is paralleled. The Reader Male is seeking the advice of the community of Readers. The seventh Reader refers Reader male neatly back to the circularity with which we began:

Do you believe that every story must have a beginning and an end? In ancient times a story could end only in two ways; having passed all the tests, the hero and the heroine married, or else they died. The ultimate meaning to which all stories refer has two faces: the continuity of life, the inevitability of death.' (p.259)

Faced with the choice of 'life or death' the Reader Male decides -

¹²³ See figures 2 and 3.

The choice is for relationship, and not for an answer, but a question and a desire-
You decide you want to marry Ludmilla (p.259).

4 Chapter 4 - Invisible Cities as Abyss

4.1 City and Civilisation

Credo di aver detto più cose.. perchè ho potuto concentrare su di un unico simbolo tutte le mie riflessioni, le mie esperienze, le mie congetture; e perchè 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.¹²⁴

(I believe I have said more.. because I was able to concentrate in a single symbol all my reflections, my experiences, my conjectures; and because I constructed a multi-faceted structure in which every short text lies close to others in a succession which does not involve a causality or a hierarchy but a network, within which one can trace multiple paths, and uncover diverse and ramified conclusions.)

Calvino wrote these words looking back on his novel *Invisible Cities* (IC) and they offer to the reader a ‘network’ which does indeed offer ‘multiple paths’ towards ‘diverse conclusions.’

This chapter aims not to attempt a totalising survey of possible conclusions, but to examine how the concept of non-totality informs the text and functions as an extended demonstration of deconstruction. What better symbol for the object of deconstruction, than the crowning achievement of human construction, the city?

It is Cicero who gives Stanley Fish the strongest expression of the argument for rhetoric in *Doing what comes Naturally*, and the confluence of the Roman *civitas* as both city and civilisation bear witness to this, when Cicero argues for rhetoric as civilising force, so that “by reason and eloquence” (“*propter rationem atque orationem*”)....(people have been) ... “transformed ... from wild savages into a kind and gentle folk” ... (and) “*many cities have been founded*”¹²⁵ (my italics)¹²⁶

¹²⁴ *Le Lezioni Americane* (6 Memos),71) quoted in Belpoliti, 27

¹²⁵ Fish, 436.

Civitas as the founding Roman ideal invites comparison with the concept of civilisation as the human enterprise more generally, drawing in turn upon the Greek *polis*. In a chapter on Xenophon in *Perchè Leggere i Classici* (*Why to read the Classics*) Calvino writes that

Xenophon has the great merit, in moral terms, of not mystifying or ever idealising his own position. If against the customs of the 'barbarians' he often shows the distance and aversion of a 'civilised man,' it goes without saying however, that 'colonialist' hypocrisy is foreign to him. He knows he is at the forefront of an order of predators in a foreign land, he knows that it is not his own party but the barbarians who are in the right. In exhorting his soldiers he does not fail to remember the reasoning of their enemy - "There is another thing to be considered. The enemy will have plenty time to despise us, and they have good reasons for doing so, from the moment we occupy their territory ..." (the advance of the Greek army) inspires a symbolic anguish which perhaps only we can understand.¹²⁷

This sense of self-criticism from within the Western tradition, going back to its foundation, was written in 1978 and shows how Calvino's thinking, even before turning to the fantastic fable genre I am here considering, sees *polis/civitas* as a trope for western values and morality. Why is the advance of the 'civilising' army in Xenophon 'a symbolic anguish which 'perhaps only we (ie., Calvino and his readers) can understand?' This implies a critical stance towards 'our' (Western civilisation's) project, leading to the anguish which will figure in the trope of the infernal city towards which the Khan's metaphoric quest advances in *IC*.

As early as 1973, in *La città-romanzo in Balzac*, Calvino is writing about the city as trope for intangible and subjective concerns, in a kind of reflexive relationship between the city and its representation or use in fiction -

Far diventare romanzo una città; rappresentare i quartieri e le vie come personaggi dotati ognuno d'un carattere..... far sì che in ogni mutevole momento la vera protagonista sia la città vivente ...¹²⁸

(To turn a city into a novel; to represent its quarters and its streets as people each given a specific character.. to achieve this so that in every fleeting moment the real protagonist is the living city...)

Quel che ora appassionava Balzac era il poema topografico di Parigi, secondo l'intuizione che egli per primo ebbe della città come

¹²⁶ Cicero, *De Inventione*, (I.1) quoted in Fish, *Doing what comes Naturally* pp.481-82.

¹²⁷ *Perchè Leggere i Classici*, 35.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 173.

linguaggio, come ideologia, come condizionamento d'ogni pensiero e parola e gesto.¹²⁹

(What now impassioned Balzac was the topographic poem of Paris, according to the intuition he had at the outset of the city as language, as ideology, as conditioning for every thought, word and gesture.)

He also sees a link to Baudelaire in the development of the City as source of ways to write about human experience - quoting Walter Benjamin on *Fleurs du Mal* and *Spleen de Paris* - *Baudelaire non descrive la popolazione né la città. E proprio questa rinuncia gli ha permesso di evocare l'una nell'immagine dell'altra*.¹³⁰

(Baudelaire describes neither the population nor the city. And precisely this renunciation enables him to evoke one in the image of the other).

This ambiguity about subject-matter and representation reflects the metaphysical depth of descriptive material available in the concept of the city. It works well, if this is the case, for Calvino to have chosen the characteristics of the city as human production and enterprise, to convey his concerns about that enterprise.

It is worth remembering that as a young man Calvino witnessed, and to some degree actively opposed, the united power of Church and State in the Italian fascism of the 1930s and 40s. This vision of a new Roman empire founded on oppression shaped Calvino's lifelong wariness of religious or political dogmatism and control (see page 8, Chapter 1).

¹²⁹ Ibid, 175.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 179.

4.2 *Invisible Cities* as parable

IC is based on the conceit of an imitation. It contains the fictionally reworked reports and conversations of Marco Polo and Kublai Khan. The choice of this type of historical basis immediately raises questions of genre, since the conflation of history and fiction leads the reader initially to look for boundaries between the two. Very quickly the choice seems settled in favour of fiction; but a third level of thinking becomes apparent, and this level is that of the self-deconstruction of the notion of genre itself. This is achieved by the way the poetic ‘invades’ the narrative. The poetic here I am taking to mean the way in which metaphor uses the image contained in the narrative to suggest another level of meaning. Metaphoric allusion is non-coercive; the text leaves the responsibility of its application to the reader. The genre here could be argued as fable, parable or allegory. Which category best describes the function of images here?

Calvino collected and edited Italian folk tales, many of which function as fable. The definition of fable as ‘*a brief tale in verse or prose that conveys a moral lesson*’ (Baldrick, 1996) might seem suitable for the use of metaphor here, in *IC*. However, the didactic tone implied sits uneasily with the way the city reports operate. The fable as moral tale implies strict rules of causality recommending prescribed moral codes; for example, the structural formula results in the ‘rightness’ of the happy ending.¹³¹ The fable has a plot structure of moral problem and firm resolution. Unlike this structure, the city reports tend not to run along the temporal succession of plotline, but are more a narrative purely of description. Where a story is told, it tends not to reinforce any moral causality but to illustrate a situation.

Allegory, too, is a possible way to categorise the city reports, in that clearly the interest lies not in the simple suspension of disbelief of an escapist entertainment but in an intimation of wider and other concerns than the apparent images of the story itself. The definition of allegory as *metaphor... extended into a structured system* (Baldrick, 1996) does in fact describe the way in which the cities embody intentional acts although perhaps metonymy is strictly speaking more accurate (see discussion of metaphor and metonymy, below). The problem with describing *IC* as allegory, however, is that this implies that the images themselves are secondary to a didactic function operating at the second level of their interpretation. This misses the point of

¹³¹ Eg *I Tre Orfani*, ending formulaically with “Così visse felice e contento” (so he lived happily and contentedly) *Fiabe Italiane*, 48.

the power lying in the images. They are more paradigmatic examples perhaps than allegorical types.

David Tracy writes convincingly that the parable genre has been relegated to the status of didactic allegory. Tracy argues that the power of simile and metaphor is undervalued in theological uses of the parable. Tracy argues in *The Analogical Imagination* for literary classics, including religious classics also, as vital forces within ongoing cultural and social dialogue. He says of the function of literature that *If the text is a genuinely classic one, my present horizon of understanding should always be provoked, challenged, transformed* (Tracy, p.102).

According to this criterion of challenge at the fusion of reader-text horizon, the status of the New Testament parables is elevated by a hermeneutic in which *The interpreter learns, though literary-critical methods, the shock and confrontation to our everyday manner of living disclosed by any reading of the parables which honors their form as intrinsic to their message* (p.325).

With this weight assigned to form itself, as opposed to it being a mere vessel, *We learn through these methods to stop allegorising, moralising, historicising these parables and allow them to confront us with their provocative picture of what the reign of God is like* (ibid). The distinction is subtle, but important. Allegory, functioning strictly as a didactic rhetorical device, what Tracy calls *an idea clothed in a dispensable story* (ibid), lacks the full power of story. Metaphor and simile, the poetic of the story, are elevated into a higher form of value when Tracy quotes James Tate's lines -

*When I think no thing is like any other thing
I become speechless, cold, my body turns silver
And water runs off me. There I am
Ten feet from myself, possessor of nothing,
Uncomprehending of even the simplest particle of dust.
But when I say, You are like
A swamp animal during an eclipse,
I am happy, full of wisdom, loved by children
And old men alike. I am sorry if this confuses you.
During an eclipse the swamp animal
Acts as though day were night,
Drinking when he should be sleeping, etc.
This is why men stay up all night
Writing to you. (p.446)*

The power of the metaphor's image is that it exists within poetic form to challenge the reader by means of poetic thinking. If the reader chooses (and is able) to respond to the resonances of the image, the power of metaphor becomes undeniable, in the way that Tracy has described.

Is *IC*, then, parable?

Parabola as picture, and as shape embodying mathematical/physical/artistic properties certainly fits the image-based writing.

In fact the primacy of the image in Calvino's work has given rise to numerous responses highlighting this quality. Marco Belpoliti, for example, calls his critical study of Calvino *Storie del Visibile*. ("*Stories/histories of the Visible*", see Bibliography).

There is within this principle an aesthetic and intellectual ethic of faithful adherence to the poetic reality of the image. Respect for the integrity of the image implies a listening and responding to the power of the image, so that it is *enlarged*, as opposed to *manipulated* (see Calvino's remarks in *Visibility*, 6 *Memos* pp. 88-89.)

There is a poetic faith at work, in an alternative metaphysics of presence which respects *i livelli* - 'the levels,' plural, as the authentic place, or non-place, of the genuinely poetic work.

Does the image as it is deployed in *IC* contain sufficient force to qualify as parable of classic quality? The melding of form and content to create a meta-fiction which disturbs the reader's assumptions certainly meets this requirement.

Calvino's technique in *IC* is to blend the image into the narrative so that it is difficult to detect where novel-becomes-poem-becomes essay.

The formal unity suggests a totality which in fact is more than allegory, because its ambiguity resists didactic closure.

The text, by moving in and out of genres, leads the reader to examine the criteria by which we distinguish fiction and history. Once the historical frame of characters and place and time is established at the outset of each episode, the action of a narrative plot gives way to resemble more the subject matter of the essay form, only in order to return repeatedly to the descriptive framework of the Khan - Polo setting. This manipulation of genres is crucial

to the exercise *IC* offers the reader. It acts to subvert the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ by disrupting the narrative continually, inviting the reader to question the truth-status of the text.

This self- questioning is implicit in the genre manipulation of *IC*. It functions more as an invitation to exploration of ontology than simply the entertainment of fiction, although it succeeds on both counts. Its title invoking the invisible is an indicator of its deliberate manipulation of metaphor as an aid to critical thinking.

4.3 How does *IC* embody (self-)criticism?

How does the technique of *IC* work? In the light of Fish’s discussion of rhetoric in *Doing What Comes Naturally*, it is clear that Calvino’s work can be viewed as a demonstration of rhetoric both resisting closure and at the same time making its own existence utterly transparent.

How so?

Fish’s criticism of the Frankfurt school of rhetorical criticism is that

... the dilemma ...awaits anyone who first acknowledges the historicity of all human endeavour but then seeks a place or a moment in which the pressure of that historicity can be escaped - (Toulmin’s argument) falls apart in the space between ... (a problematised) rationally warranted choice (and) the rationality of choice.¹³²

Fish exposes the dilemma of non-foundationalist rhetorical criticism -

an interpretative and therefore *partial notion of what impartiality means..* is the strong thesis of anti-foundationalist or interpretivist thought ...¹³³ (my italics) Even as they claim freedom from prejudices, they are slaves to prejudices they cannot see¹³⁴ ... we are ... proceeding in the dark ... critique in its positive aspect looks very much like a project without content.¹³⁵

The crux of the matter is the nature of an apparently naive utopian ideal -

Horkheimer.. acknowledges that while he can easily name his desire - the transformation of a “fragmented society in which material and

¹³² Fish, 438

¹³³ Ibid, 439.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 446

¹³⁵ Ibid.

ideological power operate to maintain privileges” into “an association of free men in which each has the same possibility of self-development” - he can say little about the steps by which that desire could be achieved.¹³⁶

The key word here is *desire*.

If Calvino is knowingly outworking a new critical attack on his own work to demonstrate the dilemma he is embodying, the level of reality where IC operates is precisely outwith a temporal reality, because the city reports make amply clear that desire, memory, signs, names are the constitutive elements of the space of literature. The text makes this as explicit as it is possible to be.¹³⁷ In that case, the non-space-time world of IC can indeed be an expression of desire, and can also freely withhold a specific content - cities and desire in fact largely work as a metonymic embodiment of the phenomenon of desire precisely as an irrational drive. It is paradoxically stated in a teleology which resists closure because of human self-deception and incompleteness.¹³⁸

Calvino in 1980 states that the role of the ‘*engagé intellectual*’ has not led to a successful critical outcome, and that finally the content of critical enterprise is indeed an empty failure -

The identification with (the role of the ‘*engagé intellectual*’) slowly dissolves along with the pretence of being able to interpret and guide a historical process.¹³⁹

Therefore a meta-criticism, ironic and wary of false closure, is the project this admission requires from the writer. It exists, in a self-deconstructing rhetoric, self-consciously fictive, which is found in *IC*.

4.4 Metaphor and Metonymy

Teresa de Laurentis and JoAnn Cannon both describe the dynamic of IC as a tension between the Khan’s metaphoric catalogue and Polo’s metonymic reports.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Ibid, 447.

¹³⁷ See ‘*moods, elegies, states of grace*’, section 4.6.

¹³⁸ See chapter 5.

¹³⁹ Calvino, *Una Pietra Sopra*, viii, quoted in Cannon, *CR*, 51.

¹⁴⁰ “In the dialogue between Kublai Khan and Marco Polo, Calvino’s obsession with cataloguing is played off against his equally-felt desire for abstract models ... (in terms of the essays *Collezione di Sabbia* (*Collection of Sand*) ... Calvino hopes that by abstracting the sand from the confused winds of lived experience we can begin to understand and construct a model of the world” (*Cannon, in CR pp. 56,61*); *De Laurentis is quoted in Franke, p.39*. See also Sbraglia, p. 31; “Synecdoche and *mise en abyme* are Calvino’s unruly tools in his attempt to impart order to

This opposition is fundamental. It works by the repeated challenges and demands for reassurance which issue from the Khan's discontent; a discontent which he also tries to comprehend and conquer by repeated systematic metaphor.¹⁴¹

Polo's responses in the form of the city reports are metonymic to the core; that is to say, his reports each contain an allusive fragment from which a whole essence can be extrapolated.

The rhetorical play of dialogue takes the pretext of historicity and veracity further and further from its initial moorings. Eventually two key denouements of bare rhetoric appear - 1, "*smuggling elegies, moods, states of grace*"¹⁴², and 2, the revelation that "*all the cities are Venice.*"¹⁴³

Are all the cities to be taken as metonymic fragments of Venice? No, but of Polo's subjective impressions of the genus 'city' whose essence derives, in his own personal mythology, from his lived experience of city as home-city, namely, Venice-as-Polo's city.

An exploration of metaphysics here emerges which plays with the limits of rhetoric to challenge the Khan's desire for mastery of his empire through knowledge.

4.5 The Chess Board and creative opening

This culminates in the chess board incident - the Khan collapses his empire to the metaphor in the shape of the chess board, and despairs at seeing it recede into the nothingness of an abstract schematic. Polo counters this by reversing the metaphoric reduction. Starting from the chess board he performs a creative reconstruction of the empire the Khan has just destroyed through abstraction.¹⁴⁴ From the substance (wooden chess board) Polo projects a logically necessary genus (tree) and constructs a theoretical genealogy. From this he then constructs a plausible imaginary scenario of the empire as lived phenomena - the river by which the tree grew, the men who transport the logs, etc. Polo is giving the empire back to the emperor, but only on

his fictional universe... Calvino uses them to probe the contiguous and metaphysical boundaries of literature."

¹⁴¹ "Possessing" the empire through knowing its emblems (22-23); the empire is "crushed by its own weight" (73); the empire as a chess board (121-23, 131); as an atlas (136, 138, 164); the empire is "like a corpse rotting in a swamp (59) or "made of the stuff of crystals"(60).

¹⁴² *IC*, 98.

¹⁴³ *IC*, 86-87.

¹⁴⁴ "Polo applies the rules of synecdoche to the chess square and recreates the universe" (Sbraglia, in Bloom 2002, 31).

condition that this happens in the space of the imagination. This is a creative act of grace on Polo's part which functions only through the Khan's submission to Polo's rhetoric and by his acceptance of the limits of his frustrated desire for objective truth.

This is exactly what Calvino has elsewhere already told his reader the act of writing is -

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 stories that they carry within them.¹⁴⁵

The conclusion JoAnn Cannon offers, that the tension between these opposing forces of metaphor and metonymy is stabilised by a dialectical synthesis, closes down the space of indeterminacy. Calvino continues his explanation of the writing process by insisting that this space rather is kept open, and can then, he concedes, be defined only in mystical terms. By conceding that rational discourse is not ultimately the self-anchored phenomenon of the Enlightenment project, Calvino, the most rigorously rational writer, is forced to adopt a stance closer to the Romantic framework -

From what I have said, I ought to be a determined supporter of (imagination as an instrument of knowledge), since for me the story is the union of a spontaneous logic of images and a plan carried out on the basis of a rational intention. But at the same time, I have always sought out in the imagination a means to attain a knowledge that is outside the individual, outside the subjective. It is right, then, for me to declare myself closer to the second position, that of identification with the world soul.¹⁴⁶

The project of the imaginary is then, by Calvino's logic, one which exists suspended over the abyss of indeterminacy, and he explains this by referring to Starobinski's use of Giordano Bruno's anti-metaphysical mysticism -

There is still another definition in which I recognise myself fully, and that is the imagination as a repertory of what is potential, what is hypothetical, of what does not exist and has never existed, and perhaps will never exist but might have existed ... According to (Giordano) Bruno, the *spiritus phantasticus* is "mundus quidem et sinus inexplebilis formarum et specierum," that is, a world or a gulf, never saturable, of forms and images.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ *Visibility*, in *6 Memos* pp. 88-89.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

The abyss is however, redeemed by the virtue of *Lightness* which is mindful that freefall can be viewed not as catastrophe so much as the play-ful opportunity - so the imagination “*takes account of all possible combinations and chooses the ones that are appropriate to a particular purpose, or are simply the most interesting, pleasing, or amusing.*”¹⁴⁸

Of course, it should also not be overlooked that the theory Calvino offers the reader in this essay is written in the first person as a reflection on his own literary practice. This is, for the theological reader, an act to be viewed as the grace of humility. It constitutes a refusal to enter into the third person of a purported theoretical objectivity. Instead the first person voice alerts the reader to the writer’s subjectivity as the historically situated person who remains suspended in the very double bind of rhetoric which Fish has already described.

The imag-inative creative work which mediates the image has already been declared subject to subject-ivity in Calvino’s 1977 essay ‘*The Pen in the first person*’ -

To draw a cube observing the rules of perspective, and then allow one corner to go off in a direction where it will never join up with the other corners: this incongruous corner contains the real proof of the “I,” the *ergo sum*.¹⁴⁹

4.6 New Worlds

The central premise of *IC*, that it contains the record of a fictionalised Marco Polo’s reflections, invites comparisons with similar past figures.

Firstly, the original Marco Polo figure is sited at the outset of a period of exploration of new worlds, by his travels to the court of Kublai Khan. Challenges to the Eurocentric worldview emerge from his travels and the records of them, so that the old world is threatened and challenged by new paradigms. *IC* as a postmodern text can be compared to this in its entry in to the end of a new world - the end of metaphysics and the exploration of existentialist and postmodern worldviews.

The title of *IC* invites another comparison, with Augustine’s *City of God*.

The new world represented here is a spiritual (and invisible) entity which Augustine represents under the metaphor of city. Augustine’s city, like Calvino’s cities, is not

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ *The Pen in the First Person*, in *Uses of Literature*, 294.

historical (or even apocryphal, as some of the ‘historical’ detail of the original Marco Polo’s *Il Milione* might be viewed). Augustine’s city is rooted in a hermeneutic of scripture which, while allowing for allegory, intends to represent moral and spiritual truth. This truth is revolutionary in its radical divergence from earthly worldviews which lack awareness of God. The citizens of the city of God also inhabit earthly civilisations, but partake in a spiritual reality which only the existence of the City of God can enable. The nature of this dual citizenship is a Platonist idealism, and the City of God ushers in this new worldview.

Calvino’s cities in turn depart from the Platonic Christian ideology of reification to disrupt logocentric assumptions.

4.7 Intentional States

Underpinning the rhetorical criticism I have argued to be key to Calvino’s project, is reader-response criticism as a phenomenological approach to literature. The *Blackwell Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism* defines Husserl’s original use of the word intentionality as a tool for phenomenological discussion -

every cogito contained an equally immediate and compelling cogitatum. Intentionality meant the tendency of subjective consciousness to strive toward an object as its teleological goal, the object providing the terminal focus for the subject.¹⁵⁰

In Husserl’s special lexicon, the intentional content or “noema” manifests itself in the “noetic” multiplicity of perceptions of its apparently objective existence¹⁵¹. While a geographical description of cities might include qualities such as population size, industries, history, culture, and precise location, in a ‘scientifically accurate form’, Calvino’s cities are instead written deliberately as subjective and selective views. Neither are these views entirely written in the way that a travel diary might provide a conversational style of reporting to merely create a ‘sense of place.’ The cities are not only imaginary - fictional - but in fact, are most accurately described as intentional states. More than this, in the Khan-Polo dialogues the search for an ‘*object as ... teleological goal, the object providing the terminal focus for the subject*’ is radically questioned as a limiting concept which is ultimately unobtainable. ‘*Perceptions of ... apparently objective existence*’ as stated above, fits well with the categories of chapter headings Calvino uses -

¹⁵⁰ *Companion*, 93.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Cities and memory
Cities and desire
Cities and signs
Thin (Subtle) Cities
Trading Cities
Cities and eyes
Cities and names (or Cities and the Name)
Cities and the dead
Cities and the sky
Continuous Cities

The first two, memory and desire, are clearly “*noetic*” in the terms used by Husserl, as states of consciousness which are oriented towards an object of “*apparently objective existence*.” The qualities of memory and desire, not their objects, are the content of the writing.

However the apparently concrete nouns which accompany the other eight cities are in fact equally noetic, because the ‘signs,’ ‘eyes,’ etc. are consistently what is metonymically evoked by the city report vignettes. City reports are metonymic embodiments of desire, memory, and perception, emotion and interpretation, ie, states of consciousness.

4.8 Poetic Dwelling

The experience of reading viewed in this light is one which opens out to look back to Heidegger’s radical critique of Western metaphysics. Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore this in depth, it can be noted that Heidegger’s *Elucidations on Hölderlin’s Poetry* offer a poetics which anticipates the kind of reader-response criticism which explains so much of Calvino’s deconstructive edifice.

Reader response theories attempt to examine not the text as object so much as the nature of the experience of reading as an interaction between reader and book.

‘The extraordinary fact in the case of a book is the falling away of the barriers between you and it. You are inside it; it is inside you; there is no longer outside or inside’ ¹⁵²

Freund describes as a ‘semi-mystical experience’ Poulet’s account of reading - *This is the remarkable transformation wrought in me through the act of reading... My consciousness behaves as though it were the consciousness of another ...The subject*

¹⁵² Georges Poulet 1969, 54 in Freund 137.

*who is revealed to me through my reading is not the author - what matters to me is to live, from the inside, in a certain identity with the work and the work alone.*¹⁵³

In the *Elucidations*, Heidegger demands of the reader of Hölderlin's poetry a sensitivity which discerns a paradoxical "mediation of the immediate" which is the ability of poetry to give a sense of 'the things in themselves.' It is the poetic, not the philosophical discourse, that can perform this function. Heidegger discerns it as the real subject of Hölderlin's poetry¹⁵⁴, and describes it in terms of mediating the transcendent.

The poet is a vulnerable mediator who is willing to stand *Bare headed beneath God's thunderstorms/to grasp the Father's ray, itself, with our own hands.*¹⁵⁵ This poet does not seek shelter or self-preservation but is willing to be exposed to what Heidegger terms *ereignis* -

Ereignis - 'en-owning' - something 'befalls us, strikes, us, comes over us, overwhelms us, and transforms us'.¹⁵⁶

This encounter can happen only within the poetic, since non-figurative discourse, by assuming an absolute status of objectivity, would attempt to confine the infinite within finite formulas.

For this reason it is the poetic which offers the kind of 'dwelling' Hölderlin writes about -

But man dwells in huts and wraps himself with a modest garment, for the more intimate he is,/ the more attentive too, and that he preserves the spirit, as the priestess the heavenly flame ... and that is why the most dangerous of goods, language, has been given to man, so that ... he may bear witness to ... the most divine gift, all-sustaining love.¹⁵⁷

To say that *language has been given to man so that...he may bear witness*, leads Heidegger to say that 'bearing witness' is the essential mark of the most authentic human experience. He says that "*to dwell poetically*" means *to stand in the presence of the gods and to be struck by the essential nearness of things.*¹⁵⁸

¹⁵³ Ibid, 55-56, 58, in Freund 137-39.

¹⁵⁴ For this reason Heidegger calls Hölderlin 'the poet's poet.'

¹⁵⁵ *Elucidations*, 61.

¹⁵⁶ Heidegger 1959: 59, quoted in *Companion* 97.

¹⁵⁷ *Elucidations*, 53.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 60.

This poetic dwelling can be compared to the liturgical presence of a Christian theology of sacrament, by offering presence in another ontological level than the material, although paradoxically it is the physicality of the sacrament which in a Eucharistic theology would constitute the mystery of incarnation.

Do Calvino's cities similarly carry sufficient implicit poetics to perform a similarly liturgical function? This can happen only if a materialistic objectivity which precludes other levels of reality can first be destabilised.

4.9 Cities as liturgical objects - The dislodging of ontology

The dialogue between Khan and Polo is described at times as '*silent*' or '*imaginary*'¹⁵⁹ and so existing in another mode than everyday reality. Similarly, the reading process is described by Freund as 'semi-mystical' when she outlines Ingarden's model of reading -

The reading experience is other than a common ontologically stable one:

the literary work, according to, presents the perfect case of an ontically heteronymous (ie. not autonomous) formation whose mode of existence exemplifies a purely intentional object - neither ideal nor real, but one which requires an act of concretization or realization by a reader.¹⁶⁰

The space of the text must be created as a self-conscious entity offered to the reader as such -

The literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic pole is the author's text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader. In view of this polarity, it is clear that the work itself cannot be identical with the text or with the concretization, but must be situated somewhere between the two ... It must inevitably be virtual in character, as it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader, and it is from this virtuality that it derives its dynamism.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ IC pp. 39, 28.

¹⁶⁰ Freund, 138.

¹⁶¹ Ingarden quoted by Iser, 1978, 21 in Freund pp. 140, 141-2.

This ‘virtuality’ leads to a consideration of ‘invisibility’ - *your experience of me is invisible to me and my experience of you is invisible to you ... we are both invisible men. All men are invisible to one another,*¹⁶² ... (so that) *the gaps* (the unspoken dialogue or the unwritten text) *are that which induces communication*¹⁶³. So it is ‘*the very lack of ascertainability and defined intention that brings about the text-reader interaction.*’¹⁶⁴

Is it reasonable to conflate Calvino’s Invisible Cities with R D Laing’s invisibility of subjective experience? Is it also possible to equate the noetic qualities of the cities with the ‘*lack of ascertainability and defined intention that brings about the text-reader interaction,*’ which is construed from Laing by Ingarden?

The Khan finds in listening to Polo’s reports that it is ‘*the spaces around Polo’s words*’¹⁶⁵ that offer the most fruitful place in which he can exercise the most fruitful creative reflection. This empty space might be compared to the ‘*ontically heteronymous (ie not autonomous) formation whose mode of existence exemplifies a purely intentional object*’ which is the space where the act of reading takes place, between the poles of text and reader. The city reports, then, are intentional objects which exist as virtual or sacramental objects. The purpose which drives *IC* as a work is in this case an invitation to develop awareness in the reader of alternative epistemological possibilities.

4.10 ‘Moods, elegies, states of grace.’

In Interlude 11, the Khan challenges Marco Polo about the reliability of his city reports. He tells Marco Polo they are ‘*a journey of memory ... to slough off a burden of nostalgia ... a cargo of regrets.*’ He continues to tell Marco Polo, ‘*confess what you are smuggling: moods, states of grace, elegies!*’¹⁶⁶

Smuggling: the Khan accuses Marco Polo of this activity. It is an apt expression. To smuggle goods is to import them secretly and dishonestly (as Hermes Marana has done in *WN*). The Khan is accusing Marco Polo of bringing in *moods, states of grace* and *elegies* under the pretence of factual reports. This is a good description of metaphor as the convention which accepts one sort of goods in the guise of another. From the outset

¹⁶² quote from R D Laing in Iser, 165, in Freund 145.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ingarden, 166 in Freund 145-6.

¹⁶⁵ *IC*, 38.

¹⁶⁶ *IC*, 98.

the reader is alerted that '*Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo tells him ... but does ... listen ...*'¹⁶⁷ - in fact, he listens with greater attention and curiosity than he shows any other messenger or explorer.

The implication is that the non-factual, the poetic, has a greater importance, in the terms Heidegger has used of Hölderlin's poetry.

What is a 'mood?' A mood is a subjective emotional state. According to 'good moods' or 'bad moods,' an individual will colour any perception and reaction with an underlying bias depending on this emotional flavour.

On p.59, the Khan's 'dark moods' or 'euphoria' dictate how Marco Polo creates his moods, states of grace, and elegies, '*thinking it best to fall in with the emperor's moods*' - reminiscent with the function of fiction as a strategy in 1001 Nights (which occurs in *WN*).¹⁶⁸ On the surface, it would appear that both for Marco Polo and for the princess on 1001 nights, it is a political exigency which dictates the form of the art created (since both are dependent on their storytelling ability for the tyrant's goodwill). Is this the only interpretation of this vital strategy of literature? Heidegger on Hölderlin speaks about the poets as mediators between gods and men and says that this is an essential function. The poetic cannot be substituted by a reduction to propositional truth. The 'mood' is the essential experience. There is no substitute.¹⁶⁹

Looking at *IC* as an embodiment of the problems of hermeneutics, in which the Khan is reader and Polo author, with the cities as text, moods are the conditions which make the artistic and the aesthetic of Ingarden's dyadic model possible by emotional commitment and response, and creating the bias of subjectivity this text explores. 'Mood' translates the original Italian '*stati d'animo*' (literally '*states of the soul*') so that the person, not merely the cognitive aspect, is what Polo is 'smuggling' in his fictions. Elegies, as poetic celebrations which praise but also mourn something lost, (here, the Khan's empire as the figure of metaphysical possession) stand for the poetic work. But grace?

¹⁶⁷ *IC*, 5.

¹⁶⁸ *WN*, 81.

¹⁶⁹ Heidegger says "*In poetry ... man is gathered upon the ground of his existence ... Poetry awakens the illusion of the unreal and of the dream as opposed to the tangible and clamorous actuality in which we believe ourselves to be at home. And yet, on the contrary, what the poet says and undertakes to be is what is truly real*" (*Elucidations*, p.62): see also chapter 4.5, pp.61-62 of this thesis on metonymic creation.

Grace is lightness/elegance which Calvino has exemplified here stylistically, to meet the criteria he himself set in his essay *Lightness*.¹⁷⁰ It is also the generosity of a gift. I will argue, in chapter 5, that this gift is the result of Polo's reports and conversations.

Perhaps the most fruitful use of the text of *Invisible Cities* is a kind of meditative reading which simply allows the poetic resonances of its images simply to be experienced. This is akin to a liturgical act which does not interpret or preach the word, but simply allows it to influence the reader. Meditation and sacrament are relevant models to use for the reading of *Invisible Cities*.

Particularly helpful to illustrate this, is the installation *Le Città Invisibili : Zirna* by Alessandro Farace in the 2008 Florence *Muv* festival (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLdKOMkokWg>).

Farace's film consists of the use of text from the chapter *Zirna* displayed in short fragments against a black background, with a sound track of appropriate sound effects to illustrate images from these phrases. Here the reading of the text is slowed down to give time for consideration of its implications and resonances. Interpretation and comment is minimal, since the only additional material is vague, muffled and generalised to evoke rather than accurately represent the images. Best of all, by the use of sound rather than picture to accompany the text, the additions made by Farace are *invisible*. The effect is that the reader is encouraged to read slowly and contemplatively, and to be left with the riddle of the chapter (which is such a crucial feature of the city chapters generally).

¹⁷⁰ 6 *memos*, pp 3-29.

4.11 Patterns in the Cities

Gore Vidal is right in observing that any attempt to analyse *Invisible Cities* which short-circuits or bypasses this experiential reading would be futile and irrelevant.¹⁷¹ However I disagree with his statement that a description of the contents is in itself irrelevant. On the contrary, the more one examines the meticulously crafted pattern structuring the contents, the more apparent it becomes that this is a book which yields deeper levels of insight precisely by a structured analysis of the totality of its contents. Figure 5 demonstrates the way in which simultaneous patterns of ascent and descent structure the layout of the city reports. Reading the graph vertically, by selecting the order of each city numerically, there is a positive progression from 1 to 5. Reading the graph horizontally, as the numbers occur in individual chapters, there is a descending order from 5 to 1. This reversal of the same material viewed differently is a statement about the multiple pathways through *IC* which Calvino wrote about in his *Visibility* essay.¹⁷²

	Classification of Cities											
Chapter 1	M1											
	M2	D1										
	M3	D2	Si1									
	M4	D3	Si2	Th1								
Chapter 2	M5	D4	Si3	Th2	Tr1							
Chapter 3		D5	Si4	Th3	Tr2	E1						
Chapter 4			Si5	Th4	Tr3	E2	N1					
Chapter 5				Th5	Tr4	E3	N2	De1				
Chapter 6					Tr5	E4	N3	De2	Sk1			
Chapter 7						E5	N4	De3	Sk2	C1		
Chapter 8							N5	De4	Sk3	C2	H1	
Chapter 9								De5	Sk4	C3	H2	
									Sk5	C4	H3	
										C5	H4	
											H5	

Figure 5 - Reading order of City Reports (© R. Dunster, 2010).

M = cities and memory
D = cities and desire
Si = cities and signs
Th = thin cities
Tr = trading cities
N = cities and names

E = cities and eyes
De = cities and the dead
Sk = cities and the sky
C = continuous cities
H = hidden cities

¹⁷¹ See footnote 48, p.24.

¹⁷² See footnote 124, p.62.

It is also an indication of the inter-weaving of the themes, which, because they operate as noetic phenomena, have a different ontological status than the purely spatial constraints of a material existence. So the complexity of a 'subtle pattern' is established by the crafting even of the book's layout.

It also works stylistically to take the book away from a linear discourse which might create a more didactic edifice. Calvino's dilemma is that he wants to discuss the dangers of didactic forms of communication as they form a threat to liberty and autonomy. However this raises the problem of how to do this without himself becoming didactic.

His solution is to create a text which a) alternates and interweave themes so that the point is not laboured and b) rather than stating a proposition, poses a riddle. This formula is repeated in different ways in each chapter, not to exonerate Calvino from having an agenda, but to engage with the reader in a process of dialogue whereby the reader is invited to respond to the riddle posed. Thus Calvino can legitimately communicate his own agenda in the form of a question which respects the reader's autonomy by inviting the reader, not the text, to supply the answer. Is this merely a rhetorical deception? There is no doubt that Calvino has an agenda and a view point, but his technique is to anchor this not in philosophical or political propositions but a) to appeal to the universality of poetic imagery and b) to use these images and his skill as poet to confront the reader with evidence. Like Montaigne,¹⁷³ he uses the evidence of a subjective viewpoint precisely because this makes no pretence to appeal to an

¹⁷³ The tension between 'things' and the self is resolved not by a pretended objectivity but by a poetics. Auerbach says of Montaigne that *It is in things that he can always be found ... not ... to attain knowledge of one thing or group of things (but to follow) his own inner rhythm (by) une allure poetique, a sauts et a gambades* (3.9, in Auerbach 294-5).

Similarly, Calvino's essays are, as already stated, subjective although immersed in a wider cultural context. The technique of starting with an image and developing its resonances is the lynch-pin of how *IC* and *Mr. Palomar* in particular operate. *A sauts et a gambades (by leaps and capers)* is echoed almost exactly as an aspiration in Calvino's *Six memos for the Next Millennium – Were I to choose an auspicious image for the new millennium, I would choose..the sudden agile leap of the poet-philosopher who raises himself above the weight of the world* (6 Memos, 12).

For Calvino, this use of poetic image and comedic irony is not simply a writing technique without purpose – like Montaigne he has an ethical commitment to use an '*allure poetique*' for a definite agenda –

"When humanity seems condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly ... into a different space. I don't mean escaping into dreams or the irrational. I mean that I have to change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective." (6 memos, 7).

alleged objectivity, but assumes the idea of a common humanity as basis. He justifies this elsewhere in his discussion of anthropomorphism in *Cosmicomics* -

One point to be cleared up about anthropomorphism in *Cosmicomics* - although science interests me just because of its efforts to escape from anthropomorphic knowledge, I am nonetheless convinced that our imagination cannot be anything *but* anthropomorphic.¹⁷⁴

Given Gore Vidal's warning, there is still a method of organising an analysis of the cities which seems to me to enhance the reading of *IC*. The method I am using is to strain out the city sub-chapter headings from each chapter, group them together, and see how they fit a particular template of concern.

Careful reading of *IC* leads to a useful starting point in the Khan-Polo dialogue (in its function as chorus commenting on the main city chapters). This starting point provides a key for both structure and content of the cities, as well as laying the foundation for the Khan-Polo narrative. It reads as follows -

Only in Marco Polo's accounts was Kublai Khan able to discern, through the walls and towers destined to crumble, the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termites' gnawing (p.6).

The first thing to notice about this statement is the paradox it contains. The enduring quality of something which will escape decay (*the termites' gnawing*) is not in its solidity but in its *subtlety*.

The Khan's concern is to find an enduring reality. Repeatedly in their dialogues, he voices this concern to Polo in terms of how he can 'master' and possess' his empire. For this reason, the process by which the city reports and dialogues offer a space for reflection on one's own thinking processes (both for the Khan, as ideal reader, and for the actual reader) I have adopted the model of Polo as counsellor, in the section 'Polo as counsellor.'

4.11.1 Reading *Invisible Cities*

A reader-response reading can only be subjective, drawing on the resources of the reader as creative appropriator and reporter on what is felt to be a communicable shared human response.

Auerbach, Montaigne and Calvino have each paved the way for this first-person voicing of convictions. So it is worth asking 'what's happening when I read *Invisible Cities*?'

¹⁷⁴ 6 *Memos*, 90.

In the opening Interlude (p.5) I learn that the narrative concerns the Khan's reception of Marco Polo's reports. Straight away I am led away from this setting in time and place to an abstracted generalisation - '*In the lives of emperors there is a moment which follows pride...*' and no sooner has this change taken place than I read another change of context, away from emperors' points of view to 'our' point of view - an extrapolation to a presumed common humanity intended to include me as reader ('*there is a sense of emptiness that comes over us at evening*').

However this 'we' is ambiguous - when I read that we discover that this empire is a ruin I can choose to view this 'we' as the collective voice of a class of people called emperors - which I view from outside, because I am not an emperor - or I can read the triumph over enemy sovereigns has made us heirs of their undoing as a trope where the figures of empire, conquest and ruin represent a more universal human phenomenon, world-weariness, for example, or contingency perhaps, in which case I can relate to these experiences on some level and I am included in the voice of the 'we' and 'us.'

In fact my reading tends to suspend judgement and tolerate this ambiguity. The title *Invisible Cities* has alerted me in advance to the possibility of a fantastic narrative which does not stay within a simple narrative realism. On the other hand, while the narrative has widened to include a reflective access to inner realities - 'melancholy', 'relief', emptiness' and so on - I am continually brought back to a thick texture of descriptive material - for example, the chapter ends with this intentional act of 'discernment' being couched in images which are contained within the sort of architectural features I might conventionally expect in a realistic narrative of the historical setting of Marco Polo and Kublai Khan - '*walls*', '*towers*' and '*tracery*.'

As I read on through the city reports, the same technique embeds the intentional inner-ness of a generalised human subject within this poetically written texture of descriptive detail evoking a sense of time, place and 'things.' Sometimes the perceiving subject is a generalised 'everyman' figure - eg., '*the man*' (p.7), '*a man*' (p.8), '*the camel driver*' or '*the sailor*' (p.17). Sometimes an assumed Marco Polo first person reports directly to an explicitly named Kublai Khan (p. 10, p.61) or the first person remains anonymous (p.12, p.19, p.47). Sometimes a generalised '*you*' is the protagonist (p.9, p.12, p.13) and sometimes the report remains completely impersonal in the third person (p.20, p.30).

This variety in the narrative seems to open up surreptitiously the possibility of questioning the authority of the narrative voice. This becomes even more apparent when alongside this

trend is another which gradually feeds in departures from the archaic sense of place I have come to expect from the purported setting of Marco Polo at the court of Kublai Khan.

So cities are reported with the blatant anachronisms of bus stations, underpasses and factories (p.30ff), skyscrapers and underground trains (pp. 19ff), airports (pp.128ff) and finally, not in a city report but in the Khan's atlas, San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles and Kyoto-Osaka, ie., the modern metropolis.

This transition breaks the conventions of realistic narrative and at the same time entangles time and place by also returning to archaic references and styles of address. The archaic address is frequently how chapters begin, setting up an expectation of historic setting in order to subvert it ('*In vain, great-hearted Kublai, shall I attempt t to describe Zaira*' (p.10); *a traveller in distant lands* (p.47); *After a seven days' march through woodland* (p. 77). In general, a dispassionate tone of accurate description belies the highly selective use of images.

I find over and over reading *IC*, that I am not only led into a world of anachronisms and diverging levels of reality quite willingly by the strength of the writing's poetic imagery, but also that I follow the riddles it poses. Calvino has written elsewhere about his technique in *IC* -

My search for exactitude was branching out in two different directions - on the one side, the reduction of secondary events to abstract patterns according to which one can carry out operations and demonstrate theorems; and on the other, the effort made by words to present the tangible aspect of things as precisely as possible.¹⁷⁵

Calvino is writing here about the figure of the chess board in the interlude where Polo and Khan debate whether the empire can be reduced to a system on analytic principles, and how Polo counters the Khan's reductionism with an inverse process of creative extrapolation of story from the minimal material of the physical entity of the chessboard.

This play between abstract and concrete leads into the riddles which are produced by a twist or disconfirmation which is almost formulaic in the city reports. They are given greater strength by the way the abstract is embedded in concrete imagery. The riddles centre around ontology, as I will discuss in Chapter Five. For now I want to note that I feel when reading *IC*, that these riddles are not disembodied abstract thought experiments, because I am also engaged in a sympathetic reaction to the human experiences in the detailed descriptions of each city report.

¹⁷⁵ *Exactitude*, 6 Memos, 74.

I am led from chapter to chapter via the bridging interludes almost without noticing how the interlude dialogues both mirror and amplify the themes of the city reports, because the unity of the novel is given by a plot - the development of reasoning between Polo and Khan - which becomes believable as a coherent thread, in spite of its abundance of paradox and absurdity. Its debates become believable because they are in fact only reports of dialogue, making no claim to be more than a series of discussions, rather than (implausible) events.

In each city report I leave this plot line with questions unanswered from the debate between Polo and Khan, and am invited to use my imagination. My imagination is given space to work, because whereas Khan and Polo are fixed individuals, indeed historical characters about whom I can learn more from historical records, in the cities I only ever encounter glimpses of anonymous people. The text invariably creates a strong sense of place in meticulous and allusive detail, so that my imagination can recreate the scene. However the actions - which are few but significant - happen to or are performed by nameless people - '*the inhabitants*' (75, 77), '*the braggart soldier and the parasite*' (80), '*cats, thieves, illicit lovers*' (88), and so on. My imagination is free to connect these labels to my own interpretations and the associations my own reading and experience provides. The riddles which Khan and Polo debate in the interludes become embodied in my own imagination, and I realise I am in fact populating my own personal invisible cities.

Like Kublai Khan, I '*don't necessarily believe everything Marco Polo tells*' me, but also like the Khan I do '*continue listening (reading) with great 'attention and curiosity*' (p. 5). I neither believe nor disbelieve, because I don't think that is the response required from this novel. Instead, I think. I don't classify it as fantastic, realist or escapist. If anything it fuses elements of realism with fantasy, but it raises genuine questions so that my reflections as a result of reading it bear on my own life - it is anything but escapist. Instead I am made acutely aware that I have become more sharply aware of the fluctuation of levels of reality in the text, in the process of trying to untangle at what level each twist in the narrative is happening. I sense that I am observing multiple points of view, and in the process becoming both more sceptical - discerning (of the 'subtle pattern') - and more open minded towards different ways of viewing reality.

In the interweaving of the city categories I can feel bewildered by the variety of phenomena described. It is only when I 'play' with unpicking this subtle arrangement of Calvino's material that I come to see how in fact a very definite set of propositions about levels of reality, and a personal moral-existential creed, is encoded in what at my first reading would

have remained only an entertaining set of vague hints and allusions. Taking the cities apart, separating them theme by theme, yields surprising results.

4.11.2 The City Reports

A pattern emerges when each city heading type is examined in turn. It is a 'subtle pattern' which stems from Calvino's experiments in the tension between 'system' and 'thing.' The text move between these two emphases, frequently beginning with a generalised set of images (although carefully selected for the purposes of evocative addition to the theme), in order to turn in a more subjective direction with the formula of 'or else ...' or 'but ...' (eg, p.9, p.7, p.10, p.12, etc). This subjective, particular point of view will in turn also be subverted by an ironic conclusion which offers an opposite interpretation of the same phenomena. This process, repeated in each city report, leads the reader through the paradoxes which emerge when an attempt to systematise and reduce phenomena to a seamless unity is made. The paradox relates closely to the idea of ontological difference discussed by Marion, as I will demonstrate. In each city report, some kind of paradox is exposed by the disconfirmation of some kind of expectation which has been founded on too secure an ontological assumption. Of course, the basic category distinction is an ontological one. Each city is, although distinguished by a separate name, in reality not a separate geographical entity but a different phenomenological event organised around the central fictional conceit of the city. The city names are fictional - each one is named after some classical, literary or scientific reference, and all are female (*la città* is of course a feminine noun; Calvino is arguably guilty of sexism, as male writer stereotyping the object of desire as obviously female).¹⁷⁶ However it is made clear that the cities are 'not real' and are all in fact versions of Polo's memories of his home city, Venice (p.86). The construction of concretely described and separately named cities is only in order to disconfirm this illusion of reality from within, by the repeated use of twists of narrative in each category. The object is to challenge notions of objectivity and certainty in human perception.

¹⁷⁶ Sexism in Calvino's work is discussed by Teresa de Laurentis who takes issue with Calvino's parody of feminism in *WN*; see de Laurentis , *CR* pp.131-146.

4.12 Cities as riddles

4.12.1 *Cities and memory (CM)*

After the first interlude has expressed the Khan's initial concern with 'what endures', this will continue into a preoccupation about possession and mastery. Already (pp 5-6) the Khan's sense of futility and defeat in the midst of triumph has been described.

A first response to this 'will to power' is in the form of meditations on the subject of memory.

CM1's disconfirmation lies in the doubly ironic portrayal of the old who envy those whose (false) memory is of happiness. Casting doubt on nostalgia then is the first disconfirmation. Similarly, an inability to inhabit the present moment is again ironically portrayed in CM2. The desire to be in the perfect city comes to fruition too late when 'desires are already memories' and time has defeated the will of desire. Where the paradox of memory's power is most effectively exposed is in CM4. This city report takes memory and its construction as its theme, and then in the typical formula of reversal, comments on this description of flawlessly constructed memory, *But in vain I set out to visit the city* (16).

The point here is that memory, the means by which experience is hoarded and possessed, is in itself a false construct, so that the city's essence, if bound to a dead and static memory, loses its vitality.

So the Khan's desire for mastery and possession through memory is defeated.

4.12.2 *Cities and Desire (CD)*

CD2 (p.12) inverts an original description of desirable objects with the formula '*But with all this, I would not be telling you the city's true essence,*' so that the pursuit of desire is criticised as a failed enterprise.

'Each city receives its form from the desert it opposes; and so the camel driver and the sailor see Despina, a border city between two deserts.' CD3 (pp.17-18), in a doubling of classical binary oppositions, contrasts the mirrored inversions of two subjective perceptions. The camel driver and the sailor both perceive the city as an access point to the novelty of each other's experience. Here the point is that it is desire which colours their perception, so the intentional acts of perception simultaneously happening are not fixed but dependent on the varied intentional states of desire. An epistemology of subjective interpretation is embodied in the narrative of these two characters so that this description is not abstract but as always, tied to the texture of a realistic narrative of real phenomena describing the (materially) 'unreal' of intentional acts.

CD4 (p.32) also takes as its starting point concrete objects - the globes of imagined cities in the museum of Fedora. Immediately the globes lead into another level of metaphor with the image of their '*crystal*' form being compared to the '*grey stone metropolis*' of the city.

The assumed contrast of 'more real' (the grey stone metropolis) with 'less real' (the glass globes which are 'miniature models' chosen by 'every inhabitant' to correspond to his desires) is disconfirmed. In an echo of Leibnizian monads, the globes are brought together with the actual stone city to be described as *not all equally real, but ... all only assumptions*' so that the solidity of the 'grey stone metropolis' is portrayed also as 'only an assumption.'

In what way is a grey stone metropolis 'only an assumption?' This riddle might be answered by a Platonic answer stating the material world to be an imitation of a more solid reality elsewhere; it might refer to the Khan's faith in Polo's reports; at the very least it has created in the reader's mind a process of questioning about ontological status.

This play on ontological difference is tied to another riddle on the nature of time and duration, necessity and possibility - *the one contains what is accepted as necessary when it is not yet so: the others, what is imagined as possible and, a moment later, is possible no longer*(p.33).

The contrast of '*accepted as necessary*' with '*imagined as possible*', and the statement that neither condition is fulfilled, leads to a change of focus from the actual to the possibility of alternatives. The text does not supply a solid alternative reality. It only shows that desire, whether realised in an actual '*grey stone metropolis*' or not, is both unavoidable and incapable of complete, lasting fulfilment because the city which seems necessary is either '*not yet so*' or '*no longer so*.' The role of desire is very similar here to that of imagination in Calvino's essays in his last collection. Imagination (is for the writer) a means to attain a knowledge that is outside the individual, outside the subjective from *a repertory of what is potential, what is hypothetical, of what does not exist and has never existed, and perhaps will never exist but might have existed*.¹⁷⁷ An a-temporal eschatology of desire is suggested here, in keeping with Heidegger's poetic time -

The essence of poetry belongs to a definite time. But not in such a way that it merely conforms to that time as some time already existing. Rather, by providing anew the essence of poetry, Hölderlin

¹⁷⁷ *Visibility, 6 Memos, 91.*

first determines a new time. It is the time of the gods who have fled
*and of the god who is coming.*¹⁷⁸

The theme of suffering as linked to desire, as Calvino has portrayed it in these city reports,¹⁷⁹ could also be almost exactly paraphrased in a typical statement of Buddhism's second noble truth -

It is the desire for what belongs to the unreal self that generates suffering, for it is impermanent, changeable, perishable, and that, in the object of desire, causes disappointment, disillusionment, and other forms of suffering to him who desires.¹⁸⁰

Both memory and desire, looking either backwards or forwards, prevent the ability to inhabit the present moment.

4.12.3 *Cities and Signs (CSi)*

In *Csi1* (p.13) the falsity/coercion/inadequacy of language is described as a city which *says everything you must think and makes you repeat her discourse* (p.14).

Here the city stands for language - *your gaze scans the streets as if they were written pages ... however the city may really be, beneath this thick coating of signs ... you leave Tamara without having discovered it* (p.14). City as 'civitas' - civilisation - here functions as a force alienating the subject from the 'isness' of nature so that representation has become a distortion and a mis-representation - *in the shape that chance and wind give the clouds, you are already intent on recognising figures: a sailing ship, a hand, an elephant...* (p.14).

This preoccupation with the misrepresentation involved in language echoes the narrative in the Polo-Khan dialogues where Polo as the outsider/foreigner uses mime instead of a language he does not yet understand. The expectation that this will be a barrier to communication is overturned by the Khan's realising that Polo's lack of language is *enhanced by the space that remain(s) around* (the reports which are mimed), *a void not filled with words* so that the Khan actually inhabits the city reports poetically by using his own

¹⁷⁸ *Elucidations*, 64, quoted in Timothy Clarke, *Martin Heidegger*, 108

¹⁷⁹ CD2 tells us that *The description of Anastasia awakens desires one at a time only to force you to stifle them ... Since (the city) enjoys everything you do not enjoy, you can only inhabit this desire and be content ... Your labour which gives form to desire takes from desire its form... You believe you are enjoying Anastasia wholly when you are only its slave* (IC, 12).

¹⁸⁰ Edmond Holmes, *The Creed of the Buddha*, 68, quoted in *Buddhism*, Christmas Humphries, Penguin, Middlesex, 1981.

imagination - *'you could wander through them in thought, become lost, stop and enjoy the cool air, or run off'* (p.38).

An interesting observation is the apparent contradiction between *CiS4* and *CSi5* - *'There is no language without deceit in CSi4* (p.48) is followed by *'falsehood is never in words; it is in things'* in *CSi5* (p.61). Falsehood as creativity (storytelling) and as human limitation (the gaps involved in representation and hermeneutics) foreshadows much of Calvino's *WN*. If we take both cities together as parts of Polo's overall world-view (based on images of his primordial city, Venice) we are left to conclude that falsehood is not 'in' words but nevertheless there can be no language without accompanying deceit. It is 'things' themselves which confound and invert the observer's expectations in Hypatia (*CSi4*). This city then, figures as the sinister phenomenon of a hidden spiritual ugliness belying physical beauty (*'where young and beautiful ladies bathing are expected, crabs (are) biting the eyes of the suicides, and beyond the porphyry steps of the palace and the tiled courtyards with fountains lie iron gratings, beyond which are convicts with black chains on their feet'* (p.47)).

This disconfirmation of appearances becomes a complete inversion of wise/foolish and high/low - *'the philosophers are located in a children's playground and if the observer wants to leave, he must not go down to the harbour..., but climb the city's highest pinnacle and wait for a ship to go by'* (48). This inversion resonates with echoes of New Testament themes. The Beatitudes invert high/low, rich/poor;¹⁸¹ and wise/foolish are inverted by Paul in a New Testament passages which act as a statement of the values Jean-Luc Marion argues for in *God Without Being*.¹⁸²

CSi5 develops this exploration of falsehood with a more ethical emphasis. Hypocrisy consists in exploitation and oppression as the hidden dark side of an industrial economy. When Polo introduces this city by saying that *'The city must never be confused with the words that describe it'* he also adds that *'Between the one and the other there is a connection'* (p.61). This connection is the contrast between the elegance of the wealth produced and the class who enjoy it, and the squalor of production and the living conditions of the production workers (pp.61-62). The progress towards Calvino's vision of responsible ethics is underway in this critique.

¹⁸¹ Matthew 5.3-11.

¹⁸² The wisdom of God is stated as 'foolishness' and as 'non-being' in 1 Corinthians 1.26-29; see Marion, *GWB* pp. 89-91 for how this, in Marion's reading, 'outwits Being.'

Le Città Sottili is translated as “*Thin Cities*” in William Weaver’s English translation, but the additional nuance of *subtle* in translating the word *sottile* speaks about much of the content of these cities. Fluidity is a theme running (so to speak) through these city chapters. As the central metaphor of invisible cities, the *subtle pattern* sought by the Khan (p.6) is explored here to express a non-solidified quality of life and movement. In *Thin Cities* 1, 2 and 3, water is the metaphor which expresses this fluidity and subtlety.

In *ThC1* (p.20) a subterranean lake of the gods is contrasted to the upward movement of water in the city’s pipes as a possible residence for the city’s gods. The ‘*underground reservoir*’ which defines the limits of Thin City 1’s life can temptingly be interpreted as the unconscious. This is a plausible reading because the metaphor used here is one of Calvino’s rare references to religion, in the description of competing beliefs about ‘the city’s gods.’ Gods plural - as opposed to a theistic God singular - leads away from theological concerns to a more open reference back to archaic forms of religion, which the modern reader more readily associates with metaphor for spirit as temperament or mood. ‘The gods’ also lend themselves more easily to a poetic interpretation, not least echoing Heidegger’s use of ‘gods’ as poetic figures.

Recently Mark C. Taylor has written about water as both physical necessity and spiritual symbol for life in a meditation entitled ‘Fluid Dynamics’ (*After God*, pp 359 -377). Taylor points out the universal symbolism of water both as biological necessity and as non-solid entity as well as its symbolism of cleansing and renewal, quoting Eliade:

Water symbolises the whole of potentiality, it is the *fons et origo*, the source of all potential existence..the principle of what is formless and potential..in cosmogony, in myth, ritual and iconography, water fills the same function in whatever type of cultural pattern we find it; it *precedes* all forms and *upholds* all creation....because it incorporates in itself all potentiality, water becomes a symbol of life (“living water”).¹⁸³

The debate of the citizens over whether the gods - the city’s spiritual life - reside in a hidden underground lake or in the movement of water up through pipes in any case points to an ambiguity about spiritual/psychological life which whether hidden or in motion, (although neither is fixed on as the right answer) cannot be pinned down. Water is too fluid.

¹⁸³ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 1:188-89, quoted in Mark C. Taylor, *After God*, 360-61, University of Chicago Press, 2007.

The quality of fluidity then is linked to elusiveness, which will intertwine with the qualities of *Hidden Cities* later. The debate in any case - where the gods reside - fits metaphors of thin/subtle cities as phenomenological states where the conscious subjects (the inhabitants/builders of the city) consider the nature of their spiritual existence.

In *Thin City 2* (p.35) the city is built on stilts despite the absence of water to justify this construction. Here the city is described as 'giving form to desire' so the upward movement is purely a function of desire rather than any rational purpose. Again, a psychological connection is suggested by this focus on desire as motivating force.

The erotic theme suggested by these phallic images - pipes, stilts - is continued in the city of nothing but water pipes, *Thin City 3*. The male fantasy of the city inhabited by nymphs and naiads expresses a pure erotic joy where '*they seem content, these maidens: in the morning you hear them singing*' (p.50).

The Khan is frustrated by an inability to master and possess his empire - *thin (subtle) cities* suggest that pure, unspoilt joy (not defiled by human misuse of the waters, p.50) with the presence of gods giving spiritual life (p.20) and able to express desire (p.35) is enabled by fluidity, in contrast to the ossifying, concretising force of the Khan's aim to master and possess his empire. This is borne out further by the irony of *ThC4*'s reversal of expectations. In this city, the funfair is a permanent feature while the fabric of more seemingly vital institutions ('*marble pediments, stone walls, cement pylons, Ministry, monument, docks, petroleum refinery, hospital*') are itinerant and temporary.

This non-attachment to the apparently fixed structures of a civilisation, might teach the Khan to relax a demand for fixity and absolute mastery and possession. Secondly, the permanence of the funfair suggests the importance of a certain levity - the kind of lightness Calvino has advocated as already discussed with reference to Montaigne.¹⁸⁴ This lightness and fluidity also resembles the language of John's gospel in describing the Spirit as wind, also elusive, resisting concretisation, when Jesus tells Nicodemus that '*the wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit*' (John 3.8, NIV).

It is worth contrasting this depiction of subtle cities' successful relationship to desire with the snare which desire has become in the *Cities and Desire*, as previously discussed. Here the distinction is a quality of detachment and an absence of the will to power.

¹⁸⁴ See footnote 173, p. 72, chapter 4.10.

This is most strongly expressed in *ThC5* (p.75), where successful living lies in finding ‘*more security*’ through the paradox of embracing and coming to terms with insecurity and finitude. This subtlety is in the metaphor of a spider-web city suspended over an abyss. The spider-web of course is a thin (*sottile*) entity, but what is paradoxically more certain and secure is the inhabitants’ knowledge of fragility (they know the net will only last so long). This freedom from the illusion of permanence is poignant but also an expression of grace. The spider-web structure is described in terms of ingenuity and abundance of detail (‘*rope ladders, hammocks, houses made like sacks, clothes hangers, terraces like gondolas, skins of water, gas jets, spits, baskets on strings, dumb-waiters, showers, trapezes and rings for children’s games, cable cars, chandeliers, pots with trailing plants*’ (p.75)).

The element of grace is also expressed in the description’s opening formula - ‘*if you choose to believe me, good*’ (p.75).

The offering - not a dogmatic dictate - of this description’s introduction calls to mind the similar dilemma of confronting death and finitude in works like Roberto Benigni’s 1997 film *La Vita e Bella*. Here the hero Guido, facing extermination in a Nazi concentration camp, uses the grace of a story offered to his son in the form of treating their incarceration as a game. The complete fabrication - as a spider web-city is fabricated over an abyss - is not a denial of the facts but a way to negotiate them, since for his son, the gift does become reality when he role-plays his way to survival in the final liberation of the camp.

Polo’s formula of *if you choose to believe me, good*, holds good for the Khan only if he chooses to accept the gift of the story of the city. Its success lies not in its prolonged survival, but in the quality of its ability to adapt to reality. Subtlety is salvific not in material terms, but in the realm of maintaining an attitude to live by.

4.12.5 *Trading Cities (TrC)*

The metaphor of trading here stands for mental and psychological exchanges. In a physical geography, the trading would be in material goods but in these invisible cities, what is exchanged is intangible. When stories are exchanged in *Euphemia (TrC1)*, each person’s associations with the words attached to memories are changed by the stories which have been told and heard - ‘*When you start summoning up your memories ... your wolf will have become another wolf, your sister a different sister, your battle another battle ...*’ (p.36-37), so that *Euphemia* is ‘*the city where memory is traded*’ (p.37).

Whereas in *Cities and Memory*, memory has been criticised as a false calcification of the present moment in the Khan’s quest for mastery and possession, memories here are

cherished possessions auxiliary to the needs of travellers in the desert, to keep them from falling asleep in the long journey ahead of them (p.36). Because they already know that their memories evolve and change under the influence of new ideas and associations, they do not view them as static entities they can master and control.

TrC2 also explores an intangible psychological reality, fantasy. In this city strangers fantasise about each other but the fantasy is dependent on lack of actual knowledge and relationship. The ironic inversion at work here is that of reality and fantasy. In the psychological space of sexual fantasy, *'Meetings, seductions, copulations, orgies are consummated among them'* (p.51). This 'reality' of mental activity is dependent on a lack of actual reality. If men and women began to live their ephemeral dreams, *'every phantom would become a person with whom to begin a story of pursuits, pretences, misunderstandings, clashes oppressions, and the carousel of fantasies would stop'* (p.51).

The impersonal omniscient narrator of *TrC2* provides not only access to these unspoken inner mental activities, but a view also of their structure. Something runs among them, an exchange of glances like lines that connect one figure with another and draw arrows, stars, triangles, until *'all combinations are used up in a moment'* (p.51).

'Lines that connect' anticipates the headings of two chapters of *WN*, exploring similar themes of reality and unreality in relationships. This image of lines is further developed in *TrC4* (see below).

TrC3 similarly expresses the intangible of fantasy and desire, not for the erotic but to escape boredom and futility. It is not so much that Eutropia has been abandoned in search of a better life, as that Eutropia is a collection of identical cities between which citizens regularly migrate in search of ways for their life to be *'renewed'* (p.64). The city narrative here echoes the chorus-interlude dialogues between Khan and Polo, describing the rotation of citizens between these virtually identical versions of Eutropia as shifting up and down on its empty chessboard (64), just as the Khan's game of chess reaches a stage where *'It (is) the game's purpose that [has] eluded him'* (p.123).

The exchange here is an inauthentic one - whereas memory and fantasy have been mutually exchanged in the invisible psychological-spiritual events of *TrC1* and *TrC2*, the exchange of mere outward realities in *TrC3* accomplishes nothing of value.

TrC4 and *TrC5* develop further the figure of invisible lines which appeared in *TrC2*.

In *TrC4* (p.76) the visible/invisible contrast is reversed. The city narrative here reads like a fable, quaint and archaic. The lines of relationships here are not invisible but material

strings which are suspended around the city to denote relationships. The image of strings hung around a city suggests the pageantry of flags and banners in medieval cities. There is a 'what if' quality to this narrative - what if all relationships were formally marked and fixed by a material symbol? The answer is that by this departure from the subtle, the fluid, invisible and unseen, the city fails to function and the inhabitants are forced to abandon it. As subtle cities have already suggested, the real life or spirit of cities is intangible and fluid. This fable seems to have a pessimistic moral.

The abandoned cities are '*spider-webs of intricate relationships seeking a form,*' suggesting perhaps a failure of human beings in sustaining relationships, the loss of community which comes with urbanisation requiring strings more complex and at the same time more regular; or at the very least the poignancy of separation due to the passage of time, decay and bereavement since '*the walls do not last and (the wind rolls away) the bones of the dead*' (p.76).

Why, after this, do the Spider-webs of intricate relationships seeking a form remain?

The reader must supply the answer, in a personal stance towards the invisible.

4.12.6 *Cities and Eyes (CE)*

At the centre - the sixth of eleven city-headings - lie *Cities and Eyes*. The centrality of this metaphor reflects how important perception, particularly vision, is within Calvino's later work.

Palomar deals exclusively with the issue of visual perception and the interpretation of the visible. The problem of what the visible discloses or fails to disclose is central to *IC*'s exploration of epistemology, reworking Calvino's previously discussed tension between abstract theorising (the mental space of bodiless rationality) and descriptive texture (a space crammed with objects) (*6 Memos*, p.74). How, then, is the seeing eye examined in *Cities and Eyes*?

There are three significant points about Valdrada (*CE1*). Firstly, it is a city not only perfectly reflected in a lake, but obsessed with that reflection - '*It is not so much their copulating or murdering that matters as the copulating or murdering of the images, limpid and cold in the mirror*' (53). Secondly, the perfect reflection is not in fact perfect at all but the opposite, a complete inversion - '*The twin cities are not equal, because nothing that exists or happens in Valdrada is symmetrical: every face and gesture is answered, from the mirror, by a face and gesture inverted, point by point*' (p.54). Thirdly, the obsessive relationship between image and reality is not a source of goodness - '*The two Valdradas live*

for each other, their eyes interlocked; but there is no love between them' (54). The phenomenon expressed in Valdrada is self-consciousness -concern with outward appearance as image is portrayed as both obsessive and unloving. It is also doomed to failure. The 'perfect' reflection is in fact perfect only in its complete inversion. Perhaps this expresses the unreadability and ultimate uselessness of mimesis (image) as validation (*'every face and gesture is answered from the mirror'*). If one thinks of mirror writing, it is unreadable because a lack of symmetry about the vertical axis means that an inversion along the horizontal axis produces a 'back-to-front' writing. The lack of perfection in actuality - nothing that exists or happens in Valdrada is symmetrical - means that the image is flawed, unreliable, and so not loved.

Subjectivity is emphasised in Zembrude (CE2). The subject's choice to look up or down dictates what is given to their field of vision. Calvino's descriptive details remove any ambiguity about the metaphors of 'up' as happiness / optimism / positive images, and 'down' as despair / pessimism / negative images - *'If you go by whistling, your nose a-tilt behind the whistle.. window-sills, flapping curtains, fountains ...(or)... If you walk along hanging your head, your nails dug into the palms of your hands, your gaze will be held on the ground, in the gutters, the manhole covers, the fish scales, wastepaper'* (p.66).

What the observer sees depends on where she depends to look - so that 'attitude' and 'point of view' are literal, physical choices - *'While you cannot say that one aspect of the city is truer than the other, the tendency is to choose the downward view, and the reverse is not impossible, but it is more rare'* (p.66).

This is a good example of Polo/Calvino's technique as counsellor - in being not directive ("look up!") but in raising the question of its possibility and awareness of the issue of choice in the direction of the gaze - *'They sink into the lower Zembrude.... the day comes when we bring our gaze down along the drainpipes and can no longer detach it from the cobblestones... (but) the reverse is not impossible'* (p.66).

CE3 introduces ecological concerns which develop as IC builds towards its climax of heavenly/hellish cities as human choice. This city is named Baucis, recalling the Greek myth of Baucis and Philemon who were turned into trees, and the traveller cannot see the city among the trees because it exists among them and above them. There is a connection to the previous *City and Eyes*, in that the city is invisible to those who fail to look upwards. (If this seems to imply some form of transcendent, this will be explored later, particularly in *Cities and the Sky*).

This image also recalls Calvino's 1957 novel *Il Barone Rampante* (*The Baron in the Trees*) where rejection of bourgeois lifestyle is expressed as the protagonist's decision to live like a monkey among the tree tops. Failure to perceive and cherish nature forms part of the moral charge of *Invisible Cities*. The later Khan-Polo dialogues and the *Continuous Cities* represent hellishness as an irresponsible unchecked urban sprawl and overdevelopment.

Again Polo/Calvino functions as non-directive mentor to the reader, presenting questions and withholding answers. The reader is not told which of the three hypotheses about the inhabitants of Baucis is correct. This is a strategy to invite the reader to think for herself, and so to enter the text as equal partner, rather than as the passive pupil of a didactic text. However this apparent refusal to tell the reader the answer is hinted away from (but only hinted, not told) by the extended image of the third hypothesis -

That they love it as it was before they existed and with spyglasses and telescopes aimed downward they never tire of examining it, leaf by leaf, stone by stone, ant by ant, contemplating with fascination their own absence (p.77).

The image of looking downward (looking down on their own reflection in the lake in CE1, looking down at the gutters in CE2) is inverted here. Instead of this downward look as a negative quality where '*there is no love*' (CE1), the natural world beneath the city is seen as a kind of uncorrupted paradise. Where the perfect image fails CE1 because of its imperfect symmetry, the perfection of nature can be achieved only by the absence of human beings. The idea of a primordial Garden of Eden figured early in Calvino's writings in his 1949 short story 'Adam One Afternoon', with the children-protagonists as allegorical Adam and Eve in a fable-like retelling of the Genesis 3 narrative.

CE4, *Phyllis*, embodies the phenomenon of failure to perceive because of complacency.

This theme revisits Cities and Memory by invoking memory as a remove from the immediacy of experience - '*Your footsteps follow not what is outside the eyes, but what is within, buried, erased (existing only as a p.91)*'. The selective perception of the city's inhabitants means that '*All the rest of the city is invisible*' (p.90).

This definitive description of '*Invisible City*' embodies much of the Cities', and the novel's, overall direction. When we are told that '*Many are the cities like Phyllis, which elude the gaze of all, except the man who catches them by surprise*' (p.91), this expresses the grace of perception as gift, which is the most persuasive reason why *IC* can be read as a fictional exercise leading to Marion's considerations of *God without Being*.

CE5 continues the trope of the city which cannot be perceived, through the idea of alienation in the Marxist sense of capitalist domination which prevents people from finding social harmony and integration. This is linked to perception - vision - through the metaphor of the city's "obverse" in contrasting the precious qualities of '*Alabaster gates ... coral columns ... pediments encrusted with serpentine ... with a hidden face (of) rusting sheet metal, sackcloth, planks bristling with spikes, pipes black with soot, ... ropes good only for hanging oneself with from a rotten beam*' (p.105). The contrasting vocabulary of rich/poor, costly/squalid is not merely a juxtaposition but a unity of inseparable opposites - '*Like a sheet of paper, with a figure on either side, which can neither be separated nor look at each other*' (p.105).

William Weaver's interview with Calvino gives an account of Calvino's Communist Party membership.¹⁸⁵ It is clear from this that the practical politics of communism, not its ideals, is the reason for his withdrawal from political activity. The alienation of humanity from nature through overdevelopment in *CE3* shares with this more economic critique a concern with development as inappropriate mastery (see also the Khan's desire for mastery), and perception is the key to an appropriate response. Alienated members of a capitalist society - rich or poor - are bound together, in Calvino's simile, '*Like a sheet of paper,*' with a figure on either side but the healing perception which could analyse this separation and integrate society is impossible - '*they cannot look at each other*' (p.105).

The healing element of perception which could achieve this is the finale to which the book progresses. Political activity without vision, as Calvino has implied in his essays, is worthless.

4.12.7 *Cities and Names (CN)*

The relationship between language and phenomena is the thread running through each of the *Cities and Names*. Nino Borsellino remarks on this preoccupation which runs through Calvino's work as a whole -

Per Calvino la parola ..è inseguimento perpetuo delle cose, adeguamento alla loro varietà infinita, e la letteratura resta per lui ricerca di conoscenza. Per questo è più necessaria una poetica dei modi letterari, anziché un sistema prestabilito di principi.¹⁸⁶

(For Calvino the word ... is a perpetual following of things, adapting to their infinite variety, and literature is for him the search for awareness. For this

¹⁸⁵ CR, 29.

¹⁸⁶ *Il Viaggio Interrotto di Italo Calvino*, Mucchi editore, Modena, 1991, 12.

reason, a poetics of literary modes, rather than a pre-determined system of principles, is the greater necessity).

The alienation in *Cities and Names* is not simply the political as in *CE4* above, but the inauthenticity of unchallenged metaphysical and linguistic assumptions.

The metaphor which best expresses this is *CN5*. Irene is the name for a city in the distance. This image functions as a parable for the power and necessity of distance to make perception possible. Immersion in the actuality would make perception impossible. Calvino/Polo expresses this within the parable - *Irene cannot be known from within* (124).

The paradox is that the alienation of the subject from the thing-in-itself is what makes knowledge possible.

This aspect of *IC* is a secular rendering of Jean-Luc Marion's theology of gift in *God Without Being* - distance is the loving withdrawal of God who grants autonomy to human subjects (see Chapter Five). Necessary alienation as distance is required too in the concept of perspective used by Jauss in the argument that distance is not to be overcome by a false historicism but used (see Chapter 4.9).¹⁸⁷

In *CN1*, it seems as if a city might be glimpsed which is '*unmistakeable, rare, perhaps magnificent,*' but cannot be said because description has already created a mental image which '*imprisons your words and obliges you to repeat rather than say*' (p.68).

The emphasis throughout *Cities and Names* is on forms of falsehood - the inadequacy of names (and by extension, Calvino here both parallels and poeticises the move towards post-structuralism in Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, 1967).¹⁸⁸ The city's Lares and Penates in *CN2* (p. 78) argue over continuity as a function of people versus place in assigning any permanent reality to the name which represents the actuality of a constantly changing city. *CN3* (p.92) describes the phenomenon of the mental picture attached to a name for a city which the traveller has never seen, and how this is replaced by new images when the city is visited in reality.

CN4 (p.106) deconstructs the concept of a historical narrative. Although the name, the site and the objects hardest to break remain, the survival or the memory of anything more than this cannot be said with any confidence because there are no proofs to support it (p.108).

¹⁸⁷ On Gadamer— a "positive and productive possibility of understanding" lies in temporal distance itself. Distance in time is to be put to use and is not — as historicism would have it — overcome, that is, abolished through a one-sided transplanting of the self into the spirit of the past (Jauss, 1989, 205).

¹⁸⁸ "There is not a single signified that escapes ... the play of signifying references that constitute language" (*Of Grammatology*, 7).

William Weaver's English translation of *IC* gives these chapters the title *Cities and Names* (plural) - in fact the Italian original is *Le Città e il Nome* (singular). When one reads this, an allusion seems suggested to Calvino's contemporary, Umberto Eco, and his novel *Il nome della Rosa* (1980).

There are several correspondences between both writers' use of the idea of *Il Nome*.

In the postscript to *The Name of the Rose*, Eco's narrator looks back on the issues the book has explored, and comments on the resolution of his beliefs as he faces his own death -

*'I shall fall into the silent and uninhabited divinity where there is no work and no image.'*¹⁸⁹

This conclusion sums up the deconstruction of the church's master narrative, which throughout the book has been probed by the detective figure of William of Baskerville. "No work and no image" undercuts notions of a City of God where earthly *works* and *images* find completion and fulfilment. Similarly, *Invisible Cities' Cities and The Sky* will set up structures of Platonic idealism in order to destroy them.

The final words of Eco's post-script express this rejection of a rational coherent solution also - 'I no longer know what it (this manuscript) is about: *stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus*' (p.502). For the name of the rose to remain pristine, but for us to be left with the bare name instead of the rose itself - this carries a suggestion similar to Calvino's *Città e il Nome* - that in grasping a name, ultimately we fail to grasp anything signified by it.

4.12.8 *Cities and the Dead (CDe)*

Death as negation of personhood is expressed in *CDe1*'s reworking of Shakespeare's '*All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players*' in '*As you Like It*' (Act 2, scene 7). The roles, as structuralist social patterns, possess a more enduring reality than their temporary (because mortal) individual actors. Similarly in *Adelma*, playing again on the concept of memory (*CDe2*, p.94), '*there is no future here but only past* - so ideas of death as resurrection or new beginning are discounted and *the beyond is not happy* (p.95). *CDe3* depicts a society modelled on a religious template, of the world of the dead. It is apparent that this reliance on religious authority leads to an absurdity - '*The (city) of the living has taken to copying its underground copy*' (110).

The fact that the brothers are 'hooded' suggests not only a monastic costume but also an undertone of deception, in the veiling of their faces. This power of belief in a 'copy' of life

¹⁸⁹ *The Name of the Rose*, 501.

is not described as a life-giving force, but as a deadening one - '*There is no longer any way of telling who is alive and who is dead*' (p.110). In this light, *CDe3* reads as a hostile reworking of Augustine's 'City of God' - as a city which provides the template for an ideal human society, it is viewed here as itself only a copy of earthly life, offering no real inspiration.

4.12.9 *Cities and the Sky (CSk)*

Concerns with religion have emerged in *Cities and the Dead*; this becomes more explicit in *Cities and the Sky*, where the sky functions as metaphor for heaven or the transcendent.

In *CSk1*, idealism is parodied in the carpet which stands as a template for both the city and the cosmos, in a classic Platonic dualism. Rather than discarding the correspondence of model and reality, Calvino inverts it: '*The true map of the universe is the city ... just as it is,*' and this is a negative image - '*A stain that spreads out shapelessly, with crooked streets, houses that crumble one upon another amid clouds of dust, fires, screams in the darkness*' (p.97). So any form of Platonic idealism is not merely rejected, but parodied in a hostile assertion that the source of ideology is human projection, and hence, as imperfect as humanity itself.

CSk2 seems to parody the City of God more explicitly, with its references to '*a city of pure gold, with silver locks and diamond gates, a jewel-city, all inset and inlaid*' ¹⁹⁰ with the belief that '*If the terrestrial city will take the celestial one as its model, the two cities will become one*' (p.111). This model, too is inverted by Calvino. The city's perceived wealth is in fact the opposite of the purity it is believed to be, because in pursuit of it, the city has become a '*city which, only when it shits, is not miserly, calculating, greedy*' (p.111).

In a sense, then, Calvino has reinstated the true moral order of Augustine's '*City of God*' by insisting that only a selfless moral freedom from greed can form a true celestial city.

By describing '*the celestial body that shines with all the city's riches as Enclosed in the treasury of cast-off things ... a-flutter with potato peels, broken umbrellas, old socks, candy wrappings, paved with tram tickets, finger-nail cuttings, and pared calluses, eggshells*' (p.111), what is certain is that this is a valid projection of (in Calvino's eyes at least) a complacent religious establishment ; merely the result of the materialistic formula '*[to] honour everything that suggests for them the celestial city ... [to] accumulate noble*

¹⁹⁰ Cf *Revelation* chapter 21, where the New Jerusalem is made of pure gold, and inlaid with precious stones.

metals and rare stones, renounce all ephemeral excesses, develop forms of composite composure' (p.111).

CSk3 and CSk4 read as similar critiques of religion - CSk3 (p. 123) is a city of unfinished building projects - *'the builders are held back from attaining completion by fear of failure.'* Their blueprint is *'the sky filled with stars'* and, because they are aiming for an impossible perfection, they delay its completion indefinitely out of a fear of its destruction.

CSk4 (p. 144) is a city *'guaranteed to reflect the harmony of the firmament'* but its actual outcome is to produce only a city of deformed monsters. The analysis of this purposeful calculation is unsparingly harsh when applied to religion, or ideology in general - *'Either they must admit that all their calculations were wrong and their figures are unable to describe the heavens, or else they must reveal that the order of the gods is reflected exactly in the city of monsters'* (p.145). The problem of suffering is thus offered as a challenge to religious belief, and Calvino is unsparing in his attack.

Surprisingly however, CSk5 (p.150) does not continue this attack but actually offers a model for a sane religion. Taking the metaphor of the sky-as-template, CSk5 repeats this but with different results, described, for the inhabitants, as *'their productive industry and their spiritual ease'* (150). How, then, does CSk5 differ from previous religious cities?

Calvino describes their virtues as *'self-confidence and prudence'* (p.151).The *'self-confidence'* is free from the servile fear of a punishing exacting deity implied in CSk3 and CSk4.

The *'prudence'* is demonstrated in two aspects of their belief and practice - mutuality and communality. Mutuality, because they see their actions as interdependent with the cosmos - *'Our city and the sky correspond so perfectly ... that any change in (the city) involves some novelty among the stars'* (p.151).

Communality, because their ethics extend beyond self-interest to a more global - or even cosmic- sense of responsibility, so that they are concerned to live in harmony with their environment in a total sense - *'They calculate the risks and advantages for themselves and for the city and for all possible worlds'* (p.151).This vision of an enlightened humanism which is *'confident'* and *'prudent'* anticipates Mark C Taylor's vision for faith in *'After God.'* Taylor's description of a mature faith features openness, mutuality, adaptability and responsibility in similar ways.¹⁹¹ The concern for *'all possible worlds'* in CSk5 leads to the

¹⁹¹ *After God* chapter 8, 'Ethics without Absolutes,' sets out four principles – 1. Embrace Complexity, 2. Promote Co-operation as much as competition, 3. Accept volatility, 4. Cultivate uncertainty (pp. 356-358).

book's next category, continuous cities, where 'all possible worlds' extend to a concern with the wider environment, similarly anticipating Taylor's view of ecological responsibility as an ethic of faith.¹⁹²

4.12.10 **Continuous Cities (CC)**

Each of the continuous cities expresses in some way the ugliness of unchecked urban development. CC1 (p. 114) depicts a planet covered with the converging refuse tips of consumerist cities who are part of a 'throw-away' culture. CC2 (p128) describes the uniformity and anonymity of cities developed and replicated across the globe so exactly that only the name of the airport changes and any individual local character has been erased. CC3 (p.146) describes the loss of the landscape and the natural world due to a population explosion which literally crowds out views of the sky or vegetation with a sea of faces.

In CC4 (p.152) there is an echo of Calvino's Marcovaldo stories, *Le Stagioni in Città (Seasons in the City)*.¹⁹³ Where Marcovaldo was portrayed as a tramp unable to adapt to life in the city, the protagonist in CC4 instead encounters a goat-herder who is similarly lost in an encroaching city-scape which progressively destroys the natural landmarks he knows until he becomes literally lost in the city. Similarly, the lack of a heart or centre in a large metropolis is described in CC5 as being a limbo where the city becomes *only the outskirts of itself* (p. 156). The urgency of this moral concern is shown by the way that it is more overtly woven into the chorus function of the Khan-Polo dialogues towards the end of the book, as continuous cities, interwoven with hidden cities, bring the book towards its conclusion.

So The Khan and Polo begin their discussion of an eschatology of cities - '*When the forms exhaust their variety and come apart*' (p. 139), the end of cities begins until with an apocalyptic turn of language, in the last pages of (the Khan's atlas) there is '*an outpouring of networks without beginning or end, cities in the shape of Los Angeles, in the shape of Kyōto-Ōsaka, without shape*' (p.139). The final category, *Hidden Cities*, do offer a kind of resolution to this crisis, in the form of the 'subtle pattern' the text has invoked at the outset.

¹⁹² *Fluid Dynamics*, in *After God* pp. 359-377.

¹⁹³ *Marcovaldo, ovvero Le Stagioni in Città* (Einaudi, 1963).

While continuous cities are all too visible, hidden cities by contrast are easily missed, and require discernment if they are to be perceived. *HC1* (p.129) is a model of organic growth 'from the roots up,' and reads as a parable of hope for the survival of human creativity. The city '*blossoms,*' stays '*in proportion*' and keeps its original '*flow of lymph.*' It is '*hidden*' because this authentic, healthy growth is not imposed wholesale from outside as macro-development would be, but emerges from '*a point no bigger than the head of a pin*' (p.129) and is not ostentatiously showcased but emerges almost unseen.

HC2 (p.148) returns to the image used in *Thin Cities* of the thread. Here, there are (also thin and 'sottile' - subtle) threads. *HC2* is a city of unhappiness, as we have been led to expect by the gloomy prognosis of the continuous cities. However there is within the unhappy city an invisible thread that binds one living being to another for a moment (p.149). To discern the hidden city of happiness requires spontaneity and an ability to transcend even the self-conscious preoccupation of a city that knows itself to be unhappy - (the invisible thread) draws new and rapid patterns so that at every second '*the unhappy city contains a happy city unaware of its own existence*' (p.149). This picture of happiness depends on being unaware of its own existence - is there a sense that it transcends Being? Memory has earlier been portrayed as a snare which alienates people from the experience of the present moment. Is it possible that the hidden city of happiness depends on a kind of forgetfulness of Being?

HC3 (p. 154) would support this view. In this city, there is a prophecy of two ages, the age of the rat (oppression) and the age of the swallow (freedom). However the passage from one to the other is not a temporal succession but a co-existence - '*the second is the one about to free itself from the first*' (p.155). Calvino also explains how this transition is accomplished, in a way which mimics the magic formula of a fairy tale (Calvino produced an edition of collected Italian fables in 1956).

'...when you least expect it, you see a crack open and a different city appear... perhaps everything lies in knowing what words to speak, what actions to perform, and in what order and rhythm...' (p.155). But he does alter the speculation on a 'magic formula' to a more exact description, which is not of a precise instruction but concerning attitude - '*It is enough for someone to do something for the sheer pleasure of doing it, and for his pleasure to become the pleasure of others....but everything must happen as if by chance, without attaching too much importance to it, without insisting that you are performing a decisive*

operation.' (p.155). This too invokes a kind of freedom from or of being in the terms Marion discusses in 'God without Being' (see Chapter 5).

The reverse process occurs in *HC4*, where an overly rationalistic mindset is represented as a city obsessed with cleansing itself of non-human life (p.159). When all the 'invading' life forms of condors, serpents, spiders, flies, termites, woodworm and finally rats are destroyed, the classic Calvinian ironic reversal occurs. The city is invaded by fantastic creatures, as if to say that the fruit of obsessive extremism is the neurotic haunting of the repressed in the imagination. This echoes Calvino's discussion of rationalism and the imagination in 'Cybernetics and Ghosts' - '*The more enlightened our houses, the more the walls ooze ghosts* .'¹⁹⁴

So the reverse of a magic liberation occurs here - instead of a lightening attitude producing joy, an overly prohibitive attitude produces torment. Neither happens in an external objective reality - both are phenomena of the consciousness, occurring in the realm which can be described but never scientifically verified.

In *HC5* (p. 161), the inhabitants inhabit either a hidden just city within to all appearances an objectively unjust city, or conversely a hidden unjust city within an objectively just city.

The point is that just and unjust are not stages within a kind of Hegelian dialectic of historically evolving justice or injustice. Instead they are bound together in an implicit tension which means they are mutually productive each of the other -

This is '*something (he) wanted to warn (us) about*' - a factor to be taken into any calculation on how to envisage a future society. So Calvino tells us that the just and the unjust like are '*already present in this instant, wrapped one within the other, confined, crammed, inextricable*' (p.163). Wisdom is, to summarise, '*a subtle pattern.*'¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ *Uses of Literature*, 19.

¹⁹⁵ *IC*, 6.

5 Chapter 5 - Polo as Counsellor

5.1.1 Introduction

In the Polo-Khan dialogues, Polo emerges as a kind of counsellor who enables the Khan to discover a more authentic level of truth about himself. Polo does this by withholding the expected formulaic answers from the Khan, and instead providing ‘reports’ which function as questions rather than answers. This journey is away from a reified or literal interpretation of reality to a ‘subtle’ one.

I am taking counselling as a model for how Polo and the Khan relate to each other, because the dialogues between them are similar to a partnership where Polo facilitates self-understanding in the Khan. This is a counselling model, because it does not impose an ideology or therapy for the Khan’s malaise, but explores his options by asking questions rather than providing answers.¹⁹⁶

The paradox of the ‘*subtle pattern ... which will survive*’¹⁹⁷ is that it escapes the decay of ‘*termites’ gnawing*’ because it lacks, and thereby in a sense circumvents, material existence. The city reports lead to ‘counselling session’ dialogues commenting on each section of reports. These progressively lead the Khan away from a series of reifications which all function as barriers to the goal of counselling - an authentic alignment of self with reality. One might even say, to enable the human subject - the Khan - to be, in a word which can be read in two senses, content. In the counselling framework which I am here using as a means to read the Khan-Polo dialogues,¹⁹⁸ I suggest that Polo poses a series of questions. These can form an implicit apologetic for the non-foundational theology of Jean-Luc Marion because the Khan-Polo partnership of question and answer is, in the terms discussed in the previous chapter, an embodiment of the issues Marion addresses in his work.

¹⁹⁶ Based on the counselling theory of Carl R. Rogers (1902-1987) - “American psychologist who originated the nondirective, or client-centred, approach to psychotherapy, emphasizing a person-to-person relationship between the therapist and the client (formerly known as the patient), who determines the course, speed, and duration of treatment” (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/506798/Carl-R-Rogers>).

¹⁹⁷ See *IC*, 6.

¹⁹⁸ One, I am convinced, of the numerous possible strategies envisaged in theory by Calvino in his description of *IC* as a *network*, within which one can trace multiple paths, and uncover diverse and ramified conclusions (6 *Memos*, 71).

5.1.2 Possession

Perhaps, Kublai thought, the empire is nothing but a zodiac of the mind's phantasms ... "On the day when I know all the emblems," he asked Marco, "shall I be able to possess my empire, at last?" And the Venetian answered: "Sire, do not believe it. On that day you will be an emblem among emblems." (p.23) ... "The traveller recognises the little that is his, discovering the much he has not had and will never have." (p.29) ... "Memory's images, one they are fixed in words, are erased, Polo said. "Perhaps I am afraid of losing Venice all at once, if I speak of it. Or perhaps, speaking of other cities, I have already lost it, little by little." (p.87)

(In the game of chess) - By disembodiment his conquests to reduce them to the essential, Kublai had arrived at the extreme operation; the definitive conquest, of which the empire's multiform treasures were only illusory envelopes. It was reduced to a square of planed wood: nothingness... (p.123).

These excerpts of *IC*'s interludes carry the thread of loss and failure which runs through the city chapters. The loss is, above all, that of the stable epistemology of a metaphysical foundation. How does this conversation lead to an engagement with Marion's theological thinking?

Marion's theological thinking pays attention to what the human subject can (or cannot) perceive, and *God Without Being* (GWB) begins with the figures of the idol and the icon as ways of human experience of the divine. This sits particularly well with the problem of the visible which preoccupies Calvino so consistently¹⁹⁹ and gives rise to the (in)visibility of *IC*'s title. Marion's reading of the idol and the icon makes clear that the difference between these two hinges on transcending human mastery -

The icon recognises no other measure than its own and infinite excessiveness (*démesure*); whereas the idol measures the divine to the scope of the gaze of he who then sculpts it, the icon affords in the visible only a face whose invisibility is given all the more to be envisaged that its revelation offers an abyss that the eyes of men never finish probing.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ See Belpoliti, *Storie del Visibile*; and Ricci, *Painting with Words, Writing with Pictures*, CR, pp. 189-206.

²⁰⁰ *GWB*, 21.

Marion is expressing the paradox of the human subject apprehending an awareness of the divine, and yet accepting that this knowledge is a non-knowledge. He follows a thread which Derrida has already expressed:

.. the allusion (to *your father who sees you in secret*, in Matthew's gospel) describes a relation to the wholly other, hence an absolute dyssymmetry ... God looks into me, he looks into me in secret, but I don't see him, I don't see him looking at me, even though he looks at me while facing me and not, like an analyst, from behind my back.²⁰¹

The Khan wants to '*know all the emblems*' in order to '*possess the empire*' but Polo (a counsellor, not a therapist) confronts him with the reality of this aim's impossibility. In the same way, Marion's idol can record only a human experience of the divine, not mediating the divine in itself, while the icon functions only by accepting paradox and incompleteness: it '*offers an abyss that the eyes of men never stop probing.*'

In the way that a counselling session functions as a conversation between partners rather than a hierarchical knower/professional vs. recipient/client relationship, Polo can offer his own experience of '*losing Venice*' (pp. 29, 87) as a basis for shared experience and exploration. In Derrida's terms, Polo is not a therapist 'behind the Khan's back' but a fellow human searcher, privileged only by the lessons of his travels. Polo does not possess a pathway over Marion's "*abyss*" - his only possession is his knowledge of non-possession.

5.1.3 Certainty

The Khan has hoped for mastery of his empire by *knowing all the emblems* (see above). The quest is doomed to failure, but it teaches another kind of understanding. It leads to a major preoccupation of Calvino's, particularly in *IC* and *WN*, namely, to the suspicion towards language (see *Cities and the Name*, above); in the Polo-Khan dialogues, similarly, '*what enhanced for Kublai every event or piece of news reported by his inarticulate informer was the space that remained around it, a void not filled with words*' (p.38).

Just as in the city reports the Khan is told that '*without falsehood there can be no language,*' and yet '*falsehood is never in words but in things,*'²⁰² the dialogues lead to a situation where it is Polo's inarticulateness, not his precision of language, which lead

²⁰¹ *The Gift of Death*, 91.

²⁰² *IC*, pp. 48, 61.

to the Khan's understanding.²⁰³ The failure of language to bring secure knowledge leads again to Marion's thinking. The rejection of a logocentric mastery is seen by Marion as crucial to an authentic and adequate expression of theological thinking - *'Theology can reach its authentically theological status only if it does not cease to break with all theology.'*²⁰⁴

For Marion this means two things. Firstly, the epistemology of faith is set on a ground of radical unknowing, rejecting all forms of conceptual idols - as discussed in connection with ontological stability below. Secondly, however, the status of language is questioned. Marion examines word and the Word in his chapter on the Eucharistic Site. He takes the place where the Khan has realised that *'the space around the words'* betrays their very inadequacy, and brings to this lack a Christology which exposes the human epistemological dilemma -

Christ calls himself the Word. He does not speak words inspired by G ~~Ø~~d concerning G ~~Ø~~d,²⁰⁵ but he abolishes in himself the gap between the speaker who states (prophet or scribe) and the sign (speech or text); he abolishes this first gap only in abolishing a second, more fundamental gap, in us, men: the gap between the sign and the referent ... To say that he says himself the Word already betrays that we stutter; for this "he says himself" already means to say the Word.²⁰⁶

Marion also confirms this more explicitly -

There is nothing surprising in the fact that we may not be able to speak of God; for if speaking is equivalent to stating a well-constructed proposition, then by definition that which is defined as ineffable, inconceivable, and unnameable escapes all speech.²⁰⁷

Calvino in the Khan's voice draws on the archetype of the primeval unspoiled garden to invoke an epistemology of the fallen world - *'Perhaps all that is left of the world is a wasteland covered with rubbish heaps, and the hanging garden of the Great Khan's palace. It is our eyelids that separate them, but we cannot know which is inside and which outside'* (p.104). This suspension of normal reference to allow for another possibility is not tied to a faith stance. A Platonic theological idealism would give

²⁰³ See also *IC* pp.38-39 - Polo's inarticulateness is more expressive than the use of language.

²⁰⁴ *GWB*, 39.

²⁰⁵ See section 5.1.7, "God under erasure."

²⁰⁶ *GWB*, 140.

²⁰⁷ *GWB*, 55.

priority to the garden as a heavenly archetype over against the earthly wasteland,²⁰⁸ but Calvino does not do this. He holds the two realities in tension.

The Khan states that '*we cannot know.*' As a Catholic theologian Marion sees the ultimate concentration of this dilemma between ideal and material worlds in the Eucharist, because the Word as previously defined, before which human speech is mere '*stuttering,*' is posited as mystically present in the consecrated host.

Where Calvino says that '*only our eyelids separate*' an inner and outer reality of which we are incapable of deciding priority, Marion speaks of '*Our naturally blind gaze* (for which) *the bread and wine are real,*'²⁰⁹ but for theological thinking the gaze must be inverted so that '*The real is exclusively "that which the eye has not seen, that which the ear has not heard, that which has not risen to the heart of man"....all the rest has only a sacramental and indicative function.*'²¹⁰

Marion does here appear to be demoting matter to a subservient lesser reality by invoking an exclusive unseen real, but he is also careful to avoid falling into a conceptual idolatry which claims to know the unseen. He wishes to distance himself from such reification of the divine - with Nietzsche he '*denounces as a crepuscular idol the Kantian (and thereby "Platonic") identification of God with the "moral God."*'²¹¹

Like Calvino, Marion is aware of the gaze which has its eyes open and the gaze with eyes closed shut.²¹² Similarly, both face the aporia which this presents - the Khan *cannot tell which is inside and which outside* and Marion's Eucharistic theology remains (impossibly suspended) within both an ideal and a material world - *The mystical character of the Eucharistic present implies a full reality; ... the flesh, though becoming mystical, remains nonetheless really edible.*²¹³

²⁰⁸ *Realists and Nominalists*, Carré, 30

²⁰⁹ This compares to the necessary 'blindness' Paul de Man describes as part of the hermeneutical task – see *Blindness*, 27, quoted in Holub, 177.

²¹⁰ *GWB*, 180.

²¹¹ *GWB*, 32.

²¹² A parallel expression of this might be Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*, (1999) where Dr Harford (Tom Cruise) sees all the phenomena of the masked ball's moral and sexual dysfunction but wrongly interprets it due to his desire to see a reality which is less pedestrian than its actually more probable explanation.

²¹³ *GWB*, 180.

5.1.4 Totality

The Khan describes his dream of a city in the modality of a place where people are ‘frozen’ or ‘captured’ in an image of departure from its shore. He asks Polo to confirm to him that the image exists as he has dreamed it. He wants Polo to *‘come back and tell (him) if (his) dream corresponds to reality’* (p.55). Again the mastery of knowledge through certainty is denied by Polo’s reply, but on this occasion Polo’s reason is because of the fragmentary nature of human experience - *“Forgive me, my lord, there is no doubt that sooner or later I shall set sail from that dock,” Marco says, “but I shall not come back to tell you about it. The city exists and it has a simple secret: it knows only departures, not returns”* (pp. 55-56).

This image could be read as a figure of the departure from life in death, but even standing as an image of the phenomenon of departure, it remains a single phenomenon. The Khan’s desire for mastery wants to bring this experience into the totality which later will function as his atlas, but Polo strictly maintains the separation of this essence - departure - from a separate one, return. Similarly, the Khan’s atlas seeks to totalise - *‘The Khan owns an atlas whose drawings depict the terrestrial globe all at once and continent by continent... in which are gathered the maps of all the cities’* (pp. 136, 137).

And yet the totality, even by respecting the differences between cities, fails to capture their essence, reducing them (as in the figure of the game of chess) to mere representation - *‘Polo answers, “Travelling, you realise that differences are lost: each city takes to resembling all cities... the atlas preserves the differences intact: that assortment of qualities which are like the letters in a name”’* (p.137).

The ‘letters in a name’ is a loss of essence and merely a signification. But even by travelling and experiencing, Polo is unable to hold distinct in his mind the clear differences of fragmented experience - *‘each city takes to resembling all cities.’*

A totality of knowledge, then, is impossible.

Marion develops this idea of impossible totality in his theological reflections on the ‘vanity’ of the preacher in Ecclesiastes -

This gathering of “all,” beyond the powers of clear and common consciousness, finds confirmation in the very formula “vanity of vanities”... .. literally, the Hebrew offers no strict equivalent of “to

be,” and from this we will draw only one modest conclusion: that which boredom strikes with vanity is not expressed as a being.²¹⁴

The ‘boredom’ or *ennui* which Marion describes in speaking of the preacher is more than simply that of having arrived at a peak of earthly fulfilment and finding it wanting;²¹⁵ it is an expression of the human inability to transcend finitude and meaninglessness (hence, the ‘boredom’, as lack of meaning which is struck by vanity).

This is strikingly similar to the Khan’s position as emperor. For Marion’s theology of vanity, a totality if once assembled becomes vacuous, just as the Khan’s atlas in compiling all the city maps becomes a dead cipher which fails to capture the essence of fragmented, but real, experience which Polo brings in his subjective reports.

5.1.5 Substance

“I know well that my empire is rotting like a corpse in a swamp, whose contagion infects the crows who peck at it as well as the bamboo that grows, fertilised by its humors. Why do you not speak to me of this? Why do you lie to the emperor of the Tartars, foreigner? (p.59) ... “And yet I know,” (the Khan) would say, “that my empire is made of the stuff of crystals, its molecules arranged in a perfect pattern. Amid the surge of the elements, a splendid hard diamond takes shape, an immense, faceted, transparent mountain. Why do your travel impressions stop at disappointing appearances, never catching this implacable process? Why do you linger over inessential melancholies? Why do you hide from the emperor the grandeur of his destiny? (p.60)

The Khan, between his extremes of ‘*euphoria*’ and ‘*dark mood*’ (p.59), manages to alternate between extremes of optimism and pessimism, so that he perceives his empire as totally damned or totally blessed. In other words, he wants an absolute definition of substance, good or ill, for his empire.

Polo adapts his words accordingly, ‘*[knowing] that it [is] best to fall in with*’ the emperor’s mood (59). He provides a moderating counter balance to the Khan’s extremism - to the dark mood replying that ‘*examining the traces of happiness still to be glimpsed, [he gauges] its short supply*’ (59). To the euphoric excess, he explains the fragmentary imperfect nature of his reports by countering that he is ‘*collecting the ashes of the other possible cities that vanish to make room for it*’ (the perfect vision

²¹⁴ *GWB*, 121.

²¹⁵ *GWB*, 124.

the Khan holds of his empire) (p.60). The ‘founding’ of an empire of absolutes - either good or evil - is resisted.

Polo’s most precise definition of the genus *invisible city* occurs in the context of the Khan’s atlas, ie., his epistemology - ‘*The city towards which my journey tends is discontinuous in space and time, now scattered, now more condensed*’ (p.164).²¹⁶

Echoes of Hebrews 13.14 (‘*Here we have no continuing city*’) fuse in this statement with images of scattering and condensing.

5.1.5.1 The screen of fickle humours

In response to Kublai Khan’s accusation that he is ‘smuggling moods, states of grace, elegies,’ Marco Polo expresses what he knows and desires. He ‘*knows*’ that ‘*the answer [is] in that cloud*’ (of pipe smoke) and the narrator’s privileged view of Polo’s mind tells us that ‘*it [is] beyond that screen of fickle humours that his gaze wish[es] to arrive*’ (p.98).

The ‘*cloud of humours*’ is not an obstacle in the sense of what prevents sight, because ‘*the answer [is] in that cloud.*’ He thinks of ‘*the mists that cloud the expanse of the sea and the mountain ranges*’ not as barriers to perception but as an agent which enables better perception. When the mists are dispelled they are as if a cleansing agent, because they ‘*leave the air clear and diaphanous, revealing distant cities.*’

Polo feels that this is better than an immediate perception because ‘*the form of things can be discerned better at a distance.*’

In a reversal which is characteristic of Calvino’s technique, the metaphor is then inverted to convey an opposite interpretation. The narrative switches the metaphor’s use by continuing Marco Polo’s stream of consciousness to follow his meditative use of the image of the cloud. The phrase which marks the transition is ‘*or else the cloud ...*’ and this formula of ‘*or else*’ is a device which recurs to enable a doubling back of metaphor to express paradox. Here there are echoes of ‘*The Cloud of Unknowing.*’²¹⁷

²¹⁶ A similar statement occurs in Calvino’s essay *On Fourier, III – A Utopia of Fine Dust* – “*The utopia I am looking for today is less solid than gaseous; it is a utopia of fine dust, corpuscular, and in suspension*” (*Uses of Literature*, 255).

²¹⁷ The anonymous medieval author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* develops this metaphor extensively as an aid to religious devotion and contemplation: “*it is ... a cloude of unknowing, that is betwix thee and thi God*” (fifth chapter, 35).

As the expression of ‘*cleansing*’ or its reverse, the cloud becomes the expression of paradox. The cloud both allows better perception of a ‘cleansed’ distance through purified air and yet ‘*suggest[s] another vision*’ where ‘*opaque smoke that is not scattered ... blocks existences calcified in the illusion of movement.*’ In contrast to the ‘*reveal[ing] of distant cities ... discerned better at a distance*’, the cluster of ugly images (‘*charring of burned lives, scab, sponge swollen, jam ... of block[ed] existences, calcified*’) (p.99) turns the cloud to an agent of defilement and failure. This is the failure of Marco Polo’s desire: ‘*it was beyond that screen of fickle humours that his gaze wished to arrive,*’ but this gaze is unable to accomplish his desire.

This use of the images of cloud, sight, gaze and distance is very similar to the use of language of Jean-Luc Marion’s discussions on the icon. For Marion, the image of mist is used in his discussion of vanity.

...the term we traditionally render by “vanity,” the Hebrew term *hebhel*, cannot be translated by “nothingness” but suggests the image of steam, a condensation, a breath of air. A mist, as long as it remains immobile in the atmosphere, remains under the gaze like a genuine spectacle ... it presents itself to the gaze as a reality - that it *is*. But this reality, without destruction or annihilation, can nevertheless disappear in a light breeze. Disappear? In truth the word is not suitable, since that which constitutes the mist will not suffer any destruction ... A breath dissipates when the spirit breathes. The spirit undoes every reality in suspension, dissipates every suspension that that appeared before it and by rights, as a reality. “Vanity” therefore can define whatsoever may *be* only inasmuch as all that can dissipate, like a mist, under a powerful breath.²¹⁸

Calvino’s ‘*screen of fickle humours*’ leads to Marion’s ‘*steam (hebhel)*’ not merely by a coincidence of imagery. Both use the figure of an evanescent, indeterminate substance to convey an image of insubstantiality.

In the city reports, Calvino suggests a Platonic idealism which he then repeatedly deconstructs (See ‘*Cities and the Sky*’). His purpose is not to convince the Khan/Reader of a materialist or idealist stance, but to open the question. Like a good counsellor, Polo respects the autonomy of his hearer/reader by asking the question and supporting the other to find a personal answer. He does, however, raise the Khan’s/Reader’s awareness of the possibility that Marion’s particular ‘*Cloud of Unknowing,*’ (vanity/*hebhel*) has some importance.

²¹⁸ *GWB*, 125.

5.1.5.2 Distance

Like Marion's 'vanity' which '*may be only inasmuch as all that can dissipate, like a mist, under a powerful breath,*' Calvino's cloud of '*umori*' (moods/vapours) is swept away so that things can be better perceived '*at a distance.*'

For Marion, distance is the gift of divine charity -

Distance lays out the intimate gap between the giver and the gift ...
Distance opens the intangible gap wherein circulate the two terms
that accomplish giving in inverse directions.²¹⁹

Calvino's aim in the '*distance ... beyond the screen of fickle humours*' is similar to Marion's distance which '*implies an irreducible gap,*'²²⁰ but nevertheless is the space in which the Gift of human subjectivity and relationship is made possible.

5.1.6 Ontological Stability

Marco Polo describes a bridge, stone by stone. "But which is the stone that supports the bridge?" Kublai Khan asks. "The bridge is not supported by one stone or another," Marco answers, "but by the line of the arch that they form.

Kublai Khan remains silent, reflecting. Then he adds: "Why do you speak to me of the stones? It is the arch that matters to me." Polo answers: "Without stones there is no arch."

In this dialogue the argument is played out over whether matter or form is of greater fundamental importance. The lack of objective definition which pervades the city reports is mirrored by a number of dialogues where Khan and Polo play games to probe the instability of ontology²²¹.

Marion's concern with ontological stability regarding the icon depends on his use of Heidegger's term, ontological difference -

Since metaphysics thinks beings as such as a whole, it represents beings in respect of what differs in the difference, and without heeding the difference as difference.²²²

²¹⁹ *GWB*, 104.

²²⁰ *GWB*, 104.

²²¹ *IC* pp. 117-118, 103-04.

²²² M. Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz*, Pfullingen 1957 p.62, trans Stambaugh, quoted in *GWB* 70.

This concern leads Marion to follow Derrida, invoking the use of erasure to express a paradoxical entity which cannot be adequately expressed nor unexpressed.²²³

5.1.7 God “under erasure”

Marion follows Heidegger in distinguishing between the “God” of onto-theology as first cause, and what he calls G ⓧ d (God “under erasure”), specifically the crucified God of the Christian revelation, who is ‘freed from his quotation marks’ by escaping the (Heideggerean concept of) Enframing (*Gestell*) of conceptual idolatry, and even from Being. To avoid the human failing of conceptual idolatry, Marion wishes to escape utterly from onto-theology. He follows Heidegger’s remark here - *Faith does not need the thought of Being. When faith has recourse to this thought, it is no longer faith*²²⁴.

The transcendent is expressed further by Heidegger as beyond being -

Being can never be thought as the ground and essence of God, but ... nevertheless the experience of God and of his manifestedness, to the extent that the latter can indeed meet man, flashes in the dimension of Being, which in no way signifies that Being might be regarded as a possible predicate for God.²²⁵

And so Marion can follow this thought logically to its startling conclusion - *to free “God” from his quotation marks would require nothing less than to free him from metaphysics, hence from the Being of beings.*²²⁶

The ‘play of being freed from Being’ which ensues in Marion’s thought has relevance to Calvino’s invisible cities which float indeterminately in what Calvino has described as (unspecified) ‘levels of reality’. It offers to theological thinking a participation in creative freedom.

5.1.8 The Gift

Calvino’s fictions have exercised the reader to look for the *aporia*, the paradoxical self-opening fissure in her epistemology. When this experience of reading has opened this space, the reader appreciates why Marion’s *God Without Being* has the power of meeting this crisis, not as reasoned apologetic, but as bold assertion and response.

²²³ Following Derrida’s use of erasure - ... the sign is that ill-named thing, the only one, that escapes the instituting question of philosophy: “what is ...” (*Of Grammatology*, 19).

²²⁴ *Aussprache mit Martin Heidegger an 06/XI/1951*, in *Seminare*, G.A. 15 quoted in *GWB*, 61.

²²⁵ *GWB*, 61.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

Marion says '*The gift delivers Being/being ... puts it into play, opens it to its sending ... liberates being from Being.*'²²⁷

Calvino's project to educate the reader towards recognising and nurturing '*what is not inferno*' (IC p. 165) is, quite rightly, as Stanley Fish says of deconstruction generally, '*without content.*'²²⁸ The point of Calvino's deconstruction is to raise the question of ontological *perplexità*.²²⁹ To offer a 'content' which resolves the issue is merely to miss the point of the existential problem. The reader *may* see Marion's divine gift as a way to speak about faith in this space of radical uncertainty beyond ontology - but this answer is a non-answer, a proposition which deliberately lacks the status of Being.

²²⁷ GWB, 101.

²²⁸ Fish, 446.

²²⁹ Quoted in Franke, 40 – *Relinquishing the sure commitment of the "intellettuale impegnato" (engaged intellectual), Calvino was forced to acknowledge the "dissolversi della pretesa d'interpretare e guidare un processo storico" (the end of claiming to interpret and guide a historical process) ... not a motive for discouragement, but "il senso del complicato e del molteplice e del relativo e dello sfaccettato che determina un'attitudine di perplessità sistematica" (the sense of the complicated, the multiple, the relative and the shattered which determine an outlook of systematic perplexity).*

6 Chapter 6 - Conclusion

6.1 Calvino and Blanchot

To show how Calvino's project addresses the border line on which theology and art meet, this section looks at points of contact between Calvino, Blanchot and atheistic non-foundational theologies. The image of free-fall as abyss, which was outlined in chapter 2, invites elucidation from the theorist-novelist Maurice Blanchot.

In his book 'The Space of Literature,' Blanchot says that the solitude of the work of literature '*expresses nothing except the word being: the word which language shelters by hiding it, or causes to appear when language itself disappears into silent void of the work*' (p.22). The silent void of being within the work is the object of the work, towards which the text takes reader and writer. It is a 'void' because the subjective reception of the text cannot be objectified.

Blanchot describes the act of reading as an entering into an affirmation of this solitude, and the act of writing as a '*belonging to the risk of this solitude*' (p.22). The solitude of being, for the reader, parallels the ultimately solitary autonomous act of faith in a postmodernist setting where faith cannot hide its ultimate ground in a logocentric narrative.

6.2 Calvino, Tillich, Altizer.

6.2.1 Grigg's reading of Calvino and Tillich

In his sermons, the theologian Paul Tillich states that '*theology takes as its explicit object that which is the implicit presupposition of all knowledge.*'²³⁰

Is the 'world soul' of the abyss Calvino's aesthetic has demonstrated in this thesis, the same abyss Tillich describes, arising from the combination of historical crisis and epistemological instability?

Richard Grigg's paper argues that Calvino's *IC* can indeed be read as Tillichian abyss. Grigg discerns ontological and epistemological concerns in *Palomar*, *IC* and *WN*. In his article *Language, the Other and God: On Italo Calvino's last novels*, his starting point is Calvino's remark describing an *ideal literature.. the end being.. that the writer and reader become one, or One.*²³¹

Grigg views this quest for oneness as ontological rather than socio-political. He quotes Calvino's discussion of the 'Parisian' view of immanent presence within language as opposed to the 'Viennese' theory of extralinguistic transcendental signified, and argues that both would present a pointer beyond nihilism towards Oneness.²³² For Grigg this (perceived) quest in Calvino's later works is for the Tillichian concept of God Above God, or God as Being. Grigg observes that Calvino is sensitive to the dilemma of the observing subject as *abyss* (into which, in Grigg's words) *the God of theism has disappeared.. unmasked as a projection created by our reading of the world.*²³³

It is true that a sympathetic reading of Calvino emerges from a Tillichian viewpoint, in the following ways.

IC's rejection of Western metaphysical possession and mastery finds an echo in Tillich's essay 'Between Theology and Philosophy' -

...Not only human acts but human thinking as well stand under the divine 'No.' No-one, not even a believer or a church, can boast of possessing truth, just as no-one can boast of possessing love. Orthodoxy is intellectual pharisaism. The justification of the doubter

²³⁰ *Between theology and philosophy*, in *The Boundaries of our Being*, 324.

²³¹ Vidal 8, quoted in Grigg 49.

²³² Grigg, 50.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 51.

corresponds to the justification of the sinner. Revelation is just as paradoxical as the forgiveness of sins. Neither can become an object of possession.²³⁴

Similarly, the abyss which resists closure, and which means the Khan cannot possess his empire, is viewed as a theological truth by Tillich -

The experience of ...war revealed ... an abyss in human experience that could not be ignored. If a reunion of theology and philosophy is ever to be possible it will be achieved only in a synthesis that does justice to this experience of the abyss in our lives.²³⁵

... thought itself is rooted in the Absolute as the ground and abyss of meaning. Theology takes as its explicit object that which is the implicit presupposition of all knowledge.²³⁶

Tillich, like Calvino, advocates an indirection which recognises the nuances of form and substance between culture and theology. For Calvino, political allegiance - ideology - cannot master art, as Franke (below) demonstrates. Similarly, Tillich's view of theology and culture remains sensitive to the need for artistic autonomy. In the essay 'On religion and Culture' Tillich says that

Culture is religious wherever human existence is subjected to ultimate questions and thus transcended...As religion is the substance of culture, so culture is the form of religion. ...the substance, representing unconditioned meaning, can be glimpsed only indirectly through the medium of the autonomous form granted by culture.²³⁷

Similarly, where the Khan-Polo dialogues and the non-objectivity of the city reports challenge ideas of a stable fixed historicity, Tillich also sees religious truth as residing not in historical record but in existential, and even literary space. In the essay 'Between theology and philosophy' Tillich argues that

'The foundation of Christian belief is the biblical picture of Christ, not the historical Jesus. The criterion of human thought and action is the picture of Christ as it is rooted in ecclesiastical belief and human

²³⁴ *Between Theology and Philosophy* in *The Boundaries of our Being*, 321.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid., 324.

²³⁷ Ibid., 332.

experience, not the shifting and artificial construct of historical research.²³⁸

So there is sympathy between Calvino's vision of literature and Tillich's religious stance. However the question is ultimately not whether this reading can be sustained - I believe it can if, as Grigg makes clear, he is '*consciously going beyond what is strictly evident in Calvino's work.. to undertake a constructive theological interpretation of Calvino.*'²³⁹ Grigg observes that '*Calvino is fascinated, if not dismayed, by the nihilism (of) the modern period*' (p.50) but it is Grigg as theologian, not Calvino as novelist, who asserts that the most powerful manifestation of nihilism is precisely the death of God so that '*this will account for the absence of God-talk in these novels*' (ibid).

While there is a genuine resonance for the Tillichian theologian reading Calvino's novels, the more fundamental question remains whether the novels embody any theological statements, rather than a bank of metaphors which support theological constructs supplied from an external theology.

Grigg highlights Calvino's interest in the immanence-versus-transcendence linguistic debate; he does not however respond to the playful way in which Calvino concludes - '*I'm fascinated and influenced by both. This means that I don't follow either, that I don't believe in either*' (ibid).

This lack of commitment and decision does not fit with the fixed purpose of quest which Grigg alleges. The God of Tillich's search, which Grigg discerns in the motifs of Calvino's work, is an existentialist concept rather than a dogmatic or systematically defined one. Even so, there is an element of religious belief and commitment which I am not convinced that, in the end, the texts warrant. Rather, there is a sense of unending play in which repeated patterns of self-deconstructive logic disrupt the texts' own constructs. This is an utter resistance to closure.

Grigg disavows the reification of more foundationalist theologies in his appropriation of Calvino's godless writing. Nonetheless his claim that Calvino's fiction can be resolved into a quest for the Other, that Other being a Tillichian Absolute, is one I would dispute. The feature of Grigg's reading that jars is the sense of closure. True, the search for the One is not one he posits as being completed, but closure lies in the

²³⁸ Ibid., 320.

²³⁹ Grigg, 51.

conclusion that the reader identifies a precise theological project at work on the novels.

For Tillich, there is a resolution in the transcendence of the Absolute. In the Sermon 'Forgetting and Being Forgotten,' Tillich says that '*there is no absolute, no completely forgotten past, because the past, like the future, is rooted in the divine life ... Nothing real is completely lost and forgotten.*'²⁴⁰

Calvino offers no such reassurances, merely tempering his '*perplexità*'²⁴¹ with the recommendation that we nurture the non-inferno within our own existential infernos - the rest, the reader assumes, in a very colloquial sense, God only knows. For this reason I would go further, in Mark C Taylor's phrase, '*Erring*,' than Grigg's existentialist theology does in engaging with the later Calvino. The relevance of Calvino's later fiction theologically is in asking questions of theology, not concurring or disputing with their answers.

A second encounter between the later Calvino and theological thinking occurs in William Franke's article 'The Deconstructive anti-logic of Invisible Cities.' Here the point is that logocentric thinking itself is the idol Calvino wants to overthrow. Franke's argument is as godless as Calvino's texts, precisely because in Franke's reading, what Marion would call the conceptual idol is radically rejected.

6.2.2 Franke's Reading of Calvino as postmodernist

William Franke views *IC* as the scene for the contemporary undoing of Western metaphysics of power and possession.²⁴² He identifies the issues of ontological concern and the epistemological dilemma of the classic Western subject -

The ontological atmosphere, with its feel of substanceless yet allusive invention, closely resembles that of the system of signs, likewise laden with subtextual messages about an aggressive West, though not supposed to correspond to any geographical or national entity, christened "Japon" by Roland Barthes in 'L'empire des Signes.'²⁴³

Franke adds that '*... his limited channels of access to his own empire make of the*

²⁴⁰ *The Boundaries of our Being*, 30.

²⁴¹ Franke, 40.

²⁴² *The Deconstructive Anti-logic of Invisible Cities*, William Franke, 32.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

Khan a sort of classical subject' (p.32). He reads *IC* as an allegory for the way in which a non-western alternative seeks to outwit the 'mastery' of western metaphysical totalising of reality - '*Marco holds the key not for possessing the world but for deconstructing the metaphysical categories that had lost it for the West.*'²⁴⁴

Franke then argues that *IC* combats western ideological control and domination through paradox and humour - '*the city represents an extreme antithesis to anything that might be considered an originary or natural object ... [cities in *IC* are] through and through products of symbolic and linguistic activity,*'²⁴⁵ and that Calvino achieves this through a '*deconstructive anti-logic*' -

Deconstructive logic works by sticking to propositions which in an absolutely rigorous yet surface sense are undeniable and so coerce our assent to a paradox ... incontrovertibly, literally true, ... they miss the point, which is exactly what they are supposed to do, since they are motivated by a conviction that the point is an illusion, a false centering on a significance. (p.35)

The Other which, for Grigg, represents the Absent God of Tillich's theological enterprise, is here akin to a state of non-being -

In general, what is not there is what really counts - eg., the memory of a city or the desire of a city that is not and perhaps never will be, or the signs or the name(s) of a city which have no referent in reality ...

There is no closure for this project -

... Since the cities are known only by their adventitious aspects, their essences being absent or escaped, they are without stable identity ... For Calvino's cities (in contrast to metaphysical essentialism) there is no reality underlying and unifying the plurality of perspectives.²⁴⁶

For Franke, *IC* has an importance for both political and religious power structures, which lies in its challenge to their authority -

The mentality with which the real has been sought in our civilisation has always been imperial; it is always only with designs of possessing

²⁴⁴ Ibid, 33 - An interesting parallel exists in Vincent Cronin's historical novel *The Wise Man from the West* about the work of Matteo Ricci, the C16th Jesuit missionary pioneer in China. (Harvill Press, 1955).

²⁴⁵ Franke, 34.

²⁴⁶ Franke, 36.

comprehensively and controlling the real that we have been interested in it at all. To seize possession of things Western thought has identified them with univocal essences, insisting that there was some real, true being underlying their manifold phenomenal manifestations as a substrate. Polo's cities, with a will to frustrate this imperialistic enterprise, are ingeniously fugitive; their reality dissolves into their many appearances.²⁴⁷

6.2.3 *Calvino Engagé: Reading as Resistance*

In this application of an anti-ideological agenda, Franke is supported by Linda C. Badley in her essay 'Calvino Engagé: Reading as Resistance.'

Badley sets the scene for a discussion of *WN*, by summarising critical responses to Calvino's political stance -

Italo Calvino's first novel, *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* (1947) came out of his formative experience in the anti-fascist resistance. According to some critics, his fiction has subsequently alienated itself....John Barth may have sealed his reputation in America in "*The Literature of Replenishment*" (1980), an essay which in effect damns him as an exemplary postmodernist.²⁴⁸

She gives an example of the way critics have dismissed Calvino as a political force -

Anything seems possible except that Calvino, 57, now an editor of the Turin house Giulio Einaudi Editore, was once a Marxist, a veteran of World War II resistance, who believed, in his youth, that literature should be dedicated to 'political engagement,' to 'social battle'"(*Mirror Writing* in *Time*).

In response to this, Badley then addresses the political issues which emerge from a reading of *WN* - '*(WN) engaged, to be sure, with politics ... the politics of print*' (70).

Badley explores the structures within *WN* which lead her to conclude that

in fact an agenda of political liberation lies at the heart of it. She develops this argument by suggesting that the deconstructive strategies in *WN* are a means of almost suggesting a template through and in reading, for personal intellectual autonomy -

(In questions of the manipulation of authorial absence and presence) '*...reading is thus made comparable to existential becoming*' (p.74).

²⁴⁷ Ibid, pp.36-37.

²⁴⁸ Badley, pp.69 -70.

This is achieved by the way in which “Calvino,” the author-figure is manipulated in the book -

WN is really about the act of reading ... In a gesture of resignation of authorial presence ... “Calvino” allows “you” to note the absence of his “unmistakeable tone”: “No. *Don’t recognise it at all. But now that you think about it, who ever said that this author had an unmistakeable tone?*” (p.72)

By resisting political ideology, the book becomes not only a fable of autonomy but also an offer to the (actual) reader to reflect on the hazardous position of the “You”/”Reader”. In this sense, the romance between Reader and Other Reader functions as a figure representing a community of actual readers. Badley sees this figure as a model for political resistance which is based on a community of readers -

[Calvino’s existentialism in *WN* has] its emphasis on contingency as opposed to solipsism... the phenomenology of reading must be extended to include the sharing of reader responses, or the context that interacting readers create... because reading, however solitary when taking place, as finally realized as a transaction, a social act ²⁴⁹ ... [The marriage of Reader and Other Reader)] refers the individual reader to the community that partly determines it. It is this community of individual, parallel readers “out there” or underground, that resists, however passively and privately, formulation and system...the reading resistance takes shape out of the play of dialogue among readers, out of their incessant transformation of signs into new signifiers, an exchange which in its infinite variety defeats what Barthes calls “the exchange,” the collective economy which “our modernity makes a constant effort to defeat.”²⁵⁰

Does this anarchistic resistance to political structures of power work equally as a model for creative thinking theologically? The radical theology of God Without Being is certainly echoed in Franke’s appropriation of de Laurentis - crediting Calvino with wanting ‘*to deconstruct all ready-made patterns of meaning, with “no presence, no origin, no moment of plenitude.”*’²⁵¹ Franke in fact goes further, and challenges de Laurentis’ view of Calvino’s project as a dialectical synthesis : ‘*The metaphysical notion of an essential, underlying reality which serves to reconcile theses with their antitheses, by providing a common ground in which they are really “aspects” of the*

²⁴⁹ Badley, 75.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 76.

²⁵¹ Franke, 37.

same thing, or in which at least they finally become such through transforming interaction, is precisely what is being deconstructed. ²⁵²

Franke does not believe Calvino deconstructs purely from a radical nihilism, but instead recognises that there is a vision of transformation at work. Franke describes how Calvino is motivated to find a way in which literature can influence society, and this he feels must be achieved through writing style. Influence cannot be direct but only indirect -

‘ literature’s efficacy is described in terms of a general attitudinal changes, ie. Of helping people “a essere sempre più intelligenti, sensibili, forti” (to be always more intelligent, more sensitive, stronger), recalling Calvino’s words in *Why Read the Classics* - only by seeking the realization of its own specificity as literature could writing contribute socially(p.39).

Theologically, this does not and cannot endorse any systematic theological statement. What it can and does achieve, however, is utter the challenge to the theological thinker, to strive ‘*to be always more intelligent, more sensitive, stronger,*’ in reading, thinking, acting and being. The indirection which Franke detects in Calvino’s stance can be compared to the non-violence of grace as a theological concept. Like the grace of the gift, his ‘indirection’ is stressed as a non-violent form of communication which offers but does not coerce -

It was by differing from this “reality” (the reality sanctioned and imposed by society’s great powers) rather than by combating (and to that extent confirming) it that the usurping forces which arrogate to themselves the status of arbiters of human fate could be effectively subverted. Any resort to even literary or rhetorical force ie. protest, inscribes itself within a dialectic of power and can only transform an underlying reality which fundamentally remains the same. ²⁵³

Calvino’s essays also illuminate his concern for literary theory and practice to offer the gifts of an artistic space of diversity to society -

But unlike force, caught up in the dialectic of action and reaction, theory, or what Calvino might call form, has the potential of being a genuinely new departure. Calvino’s fictions initiate a new discourse. The consequent change in history that such theoretical movement can engender is the destiny of theory, as Calvino reveals it... Calvino’s predilection for indirection in the encouraging of change was destined to culminate in an opting for the affirmation of difference over dialectical modes of producing reform.

²⁵² Ibid., 39.

²⁵³ Ibid., 40.

The repercussions of Calvino's model of non-violent difference affect both the political and the theological. Calvino's essays, explored by Franke, also make clear that it is within the realm of literature purely as literature, not as propagandist tool, that the writer can only strive to steer clear of an ideological abuse of power. The emphasis on diversity, and the artistic freedom which results, produce a 'richness' of diversity which offers the reader challenges and possibilities -

By the end of the essays Calvino arrives at a deconstruction of the notion (at least in literature) of a reality (*la letteratura non conosce la realtà ma solo i livelli* (323, *Una Pietra Sopra*), which makes way for an unprecedented richness of multiple meanings and consequent freeing from structures of power enfolding a single order.²⁵⁴

This echoes Badley's remarks on Readers as a community of resistance, and offers to theology the challenge to develop a response to an aesthetic which takes seriously the claim of the imaginative where in Franke's words, *what is not there is what really counts* (36). This refusal to 'do' theology as closed dogmatic statement, but instead to remain open to plurality and to non-being as well as to being, sits well alongside Mark C. Taylor's vision of a (post)Christian enterprise in *After God*.

In particular, the affinity for complex systems rather than totalising ideologies is a theme of Taylor's work²⁵⁵ which champions the type of 'resistance' these critics have commented on.

6.2.4 Obremski's response to Calvino

Similarly, Obremski and Bauman see in *Cosmicomics* and *t zero* a 'labyrinthine schematic' which "posits the world as a system of systems, where each system contains the others and is contained by them" (Bauman 339 quoted in Obremski 91).

This leads Obremski, like Grigg, to discern the transcendent within Calvino's work -

Calvino is "Inspired to fashion transcendent beauty on the brink of the void (where) imagination participates in the truth of the world (and literature) gives speech to that which has no language" (Bauman 340, 341, quoted in Obremski 92).

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ *After God* ch. 7, pp 313 ff.

‘...Calvino/Qfwfq [in ‘Cosmicomics’] would seem to have wagered and won transcendence - the simplicity and purity of an unbounded eternity shared with the Transcendent One’ (Obremski 93).

Consequently, for Obremski there is a point of contact between Calvino and mysticism: *Lovelock, who proposed the Gaia principle with its feedback systems for healing the whole Earth, and Chardin, who envisioned an Omega point as the origin and destiny of all created beings, would feel comfortable with Calvino (Obremski 92).*

I would argue that in fact the reverse is more pertinent. By definition, Calvino has been at pains to stress that he is most definitely not ‘comfortable’ within any ideological framework. The journey of deconstruction is made in order to refuse any stable point of closure, under however an open-ended and mystical umbrella.

What is more fruitful is to examine the ways in which, conversely, Lovelock or Chardin might be - perhaps not comfortable, but glad, to be within Calvino’s texts, as an exercise in mystical or transformative imagination. The theological task I am undertaking here similarly does not appropriate Calvino to fit a theological framework, but asks of Calvino’s texts if the questions they ask can prepare the reader better to appreciate the thinking of theologians such as Marion. In this respect, perhaps the most useful input from the critics I have discussed comes from Obremski, who concludes that Calvino’s work, rather than imposing a solution, *‘leads.. the reader to ask the big questions’ (93).*

The crucial question however, is the nature of the *‘taking’* (as explicit object) which theology performs. The moment religion converts the *‘implicit presupposition’* into an *‘explicit object,’*²⁵⁶ a kind of violation and distortion has already occurred. This is why I have chosen Calvino’s fictions as a statement which theology must reckon with.

Tillich also says in the same essay that *we must understand that thought itself is rooted in the Absolute as the ground and abyss of meaning.*²⁵⁷ I have argued in Chapter Five that the abyss here can be seen as the virtual, as matrix of possibility. The difference between Calvino’s ‘abyss’ and Tillich’s is that Tillich asks the reader to presuppose *“The theonomous character of knowledge itself.”*²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ *Between Theology and Philosophy in The Boundaries of our Being*, 324.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ *Between theology and philosophy*, pp. 323-24.

Grigg and Vidal have both tried to assume a theonomous ground for Calvino's phenomenology of reading by citing his remark that reader and writer become One,²⁵⁹ but have omitted to add that this ontological unity is for Calvino merely a hypothetical ideal, and one which he discusses only in terms of the act of reading, rather than as a wider existential possibility. However, as Calvino says of 'levels of reality in literature', perhaps '*questo è già molto*' (that is in itself quite something).²⁶⁰

It is 'quite something' (or '*già molto*', literally 'already a lot') because by using Calvino's aesthetic, theology can perhaps benefit more radically by being better attuned to the value of the poetic. 'Why Read the Classics' has already offered to the reader an appreciation of why literature matters;²⁶¹ the task for theology here is to exercise the kind of self-criticism of its own discourse which Calvino's works have demonstrated.

Non-foundational theologies such as Altizer and Taylor have offered over the past decades are of value precisely because they recognise that in speaking of Tillich's 'implicit made explicit' they are acting a transgression and operating in an aporia which is both insoluble and necessary.

6.3 A Protestant Calvino?

Despite the model of Invisible Cities as Eucharistic poesis, this chapter in conclusion argues that there is much to suggest that Calvino's temperament is in fact more Protestant theologically than Catholic.

The Reformed tradition's emphasis is the sacrament of the Word - surely no celebration of any transcendent, however mystical, could be more appropriate to Calvino.

6.3.1 Altizer

When Thomas J.J. Altizer constructs a radical non-foundational theology of the abyss, he does so by reminding the reader of Karl Barth's radical theology of transcendence.

²⁵⁹ Vidal 8, quoted in Grigg 49.

²⁶⁰ *Levels of reality in literature* in *Uses of Literature*, 121.

²⁶¹ 'Barth's emphasis on divine transcendence brought to light in a forceful way the profound obstacles to any human talk of God. The human relationship to God is essentially one of crisis and judgement. Even the best human efforts at religious piety and morality fall ultimately under the resounding "No" of the biblical God. Consequently, human talk about God can never be more than fragmentary' (Musser/Price, 1996, 52).

He speaks about the ‘*krisis*’ which Barth has described as the human condition of fallen-ness standing in need of the grace of redemption.²⁶²

Altizer equates this *krisis* with the epistemological crisis of postmodernity.²⁶³

Altizer assesses the aesthetic and intellectual legacy of modernism in terms of the emergence of the autonomous, critically and self-critically aware human subject. This intellectual achievement of modernity is for Altizer an interpretation of a biblical narrative of prophecy as critical rhetoric *par excellence* -

From our uniquely modern historical perspective, we can know a history of (the) subject, and one with both an historical beginning and an historical ending, and the prophetic revelation is a deep site of that beginning. Only here does an individual faith first appear in history, one demanding an individual enactment.²⁶⁴

From this there follows a radical awareness which equates the ‘judgement’ of rhetorical criticism with a theological tradition of judgement as lapsarian concept - so this modern subject is rhetorically, inescapably divorced from a ‘world’ of historical objectivity - *only possible by way of moving outside of or away from an encompassing society and world, a world now known to be under total judgement.*²⁶⁵

The consequence of this ‘judgement’ which conflates the rhetorical awareness of “*the destruction of ... the signification of truth*” (Derrida)²⁶⁶ and the biblical prophetic judgement of human sinfulness is paradoxically both apocalyptic ending and in Christian terms, the *felix culpa* of an authentic aesthetic of autonomy founded in faith:

Accordingly, only an ultimate epiphany of the abyss of the world itself makes possible such an individual enactment; only thereby does a truly individual faith and enactment become possible.²⁶⁷

The thesis I have argued, that Calvino’s work functions as an apologetic for non-foundational theology, hinges on this radical paradox of Altizer’s theology of the death of God.

²⁶² Barth’s ‘was the first theology created in full response to the historical realization of the death of God’ (Altizer, *Genesis and Apocalypse*, 1990, quoted in Jasper, *In the Wasteland*, in McCullough/Schroeder, 2004).

²⁶³ Similarly, Carl Raschke refers to a Barthian “dialectics of *Krisis*” in his response to postmodern decentering of logocentric philosophy /theology : ‘The *Krisis* will surely and quite soon befall us’ (Raschke, 1988).

²⁶⁴ Altizer 2003, 132.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ *Of Grammatology*, 10.

²⁶⁷ Altizer 2003, 132.

If theology is able to rest secure in a stable, untroubled epistemology, there is no necessity for what Altizer calls an ‘*apocalyptic enactment*.’²⁶⁸ My thesis is that by the strength of Calvino’s rhetoric, and an understanding of its self-deconstructive strategy, the theological reader is provoked into a response which can ignore Altizer’s theology only at the expense of intellectual integrity.

6.3.2 Taylor on Responsibility

The parallels between the imagery of Calvino’s *Città sottili* (*thin/subtle cities*) and Mark C. Taylor’s model of theological ethics as “*fluid dynamics*” was discussed earlier²⁶⁹. Taylor’s work concludes with an imperative for transformative social justice. Fish’s chapters on rhetorical criticism point out the agenda similarly for a socialist vision of the transformation of society. My argument is ultimately that Calvino, too, participates in this critical enterprise from an ethic of social responsibility. He chose literature above politics, it must be remembered, not from a disillusionment with political ideals, but because ‘*Politics never achieves its goals ... but literature can accomplish something*.’²⁷⁰

Obremski and Bauman see in *Cosmicomics* and *t zero* a ‘*labyrinthine schematic*’ which “*posits the world as a system of systems, where each system contains the others and is contained by them*” (Bauman 339 quoted in Obremski 91). This Calvinian ‘*subtlety*’ and ‘*difficulty*’²⁷¹ is capable of appreciating the concept of a complex adaptive system,²⁷² which Taylor brings to his analysis of religion and society. Taylor, like Calvino, discerns dialectical tensions - he describes them as ‘*stabilising*’ and ‘*destabilising*’ - and in a close echo of Calvino’s *Invisible City Marozia*,²⁷³ they do not reach a stable point of synthetic closure, but interact perpetually. Taylor explains that

The true Infinite is neither dualistic nor monistic but is the creative interplay in which identity and difference are codependent and coevolve. As such, the Infinite is an emergent self-organising network

²⁶⁸ ‘*But this very enactment is finally an enacting of its own ending, as enacted throughout this history, and here an apocalyptic enactment is manifest as a profoundly individual and interior enactment, even if that enactment inevitably brings all individuality to an end*’; Altizer, *ibid*.

²⁶⁹ *Thin Cities*, see above, section 4.11.4.

²⁷⁰ *CR*, 29.

²⁷¹ *IC*, 6; *CR*, 29.

²⁷² Taylor pp.12ff.

²⁷³ *IC*, pp.154-55.

of networks that extends from the natural and social to the technological and cultural dimensions of life.²⁷⁴

Taylor's claim to be situated "*After God*" rests on his statement that

'On the one hand, to come after is to be subsequent to what previously has been, and on the other hand, to be after is to be in pursuit of what lies ahead,'²⁷⁵ which echoes IC's interplay of memory and desire as intentional states. The cities as intentional objects, as argued in Chapter Five, resonate with Taylor's use of the concept of virtuality - like the glass globe models of possible cities in IC's city of Fedora, which are either 'accepted as necessary when it is not yet so (or) imagined as possible and ... possible no longer,' Taylor's virtuality is 'never present as such ... present by that which arrives by not arriving ... not simply the possible, but ... the fluid matrix in which all possibility and actuality arise and pass away ... like an immanent transcendence.'²⁷⁶

This virtual presence is vital to the complex adaptive system of religion and society - *'... (it is) the source of the endless disruption that interrupts all forms of religiosity by keeping complex systems open and making them subject to endless transformation.'²⁷⁷*

6.3.3 Spectral Hermeneutics

John D. Caputo writes similarly about a virtual presence which might equally be evoked by a reading of Calvino's work. In 'Spectral Hermeneutics - On the weakness of God and the Theology of the Event,'²⁷⁸ Caputo expresses this as a theology of the event -

One way to put what postmodernism means is to say that it is a philosophy of the event, and one way to put what a radical or postmodern theology means is to say that it is a theology of the event. ...An event is not precisely what happens ... but something going on *in* what happens, something that is being expressed or realised or

²⁷⁴ Taylor, 346.

²⁷⁵ Ibid, 345.

²⁷⁶ Ibid, 311.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Caputo, pp.47ff.

given shape in what happens; it is not something present, but something seeking to make itself felt in what is present.²⁷⁹

Caputo explains that what Taylor calls a disruptive '*interior exterior and exterior interior*'²⁸⁰ are '*... events,*²⁸¹ *... which are the stuff of what I am calling here a spectral hermeneutics,*'²⁸² and he defines events as follows -

An event is not a *thing* but something astir in a thing. Events get realised in things, take on actuality and presence there, but always in a way that is provisional and revisable, while the restlessness and flux of things is explained by the events that they harbour.²⁸³

Caputo avoids the Platonic dualism which would fix event into a reified object -

What happens, be it a thing or a word, is always *deconstructible* just in virtue of events, which are not deconstructible. That does not mean that events are eternally true like a Platonic *eidos*; far from being eternally true or present, events are never present, never finished or formed, realised or constructed, whereas only what is constructed is deconstructible.²⁸⁴

Among the critics who have commented on Calvino²⁸⁵, there is a consensus that the closing line of *Invisible Cities* holds the manifesto for Calvino's '*modest and doubtful*'²⁸⁶ agenda. This thesis has argued that when Calvino tells his reader that we must '*seek and recognise who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space,*'²⁸⁷ a theological response can be made most authentically by refusing the foundationalist stance of too rigid an objectification or reification. Caputo's imagery reflects Calvino's, for a similar reason which rejects ideological closure -

Events are tender shoots and saplings, the most vulnerable growths, a nascent and incipient stirring, which postmodern thinking must exert every effort to cultivate and keep safe. Postmodernism is the gardening of the event, the thinking of the event, offering events

²⁷⁹ Caputo, 47.

²⁸⁰ Taylor, 311.

²⁸¹ 'Event' here is used by Caputo in the sense given by Gadamer's aesthetic philosophy; see footnotes 85 and 87, pp. 23-24.

²⁸² Caputo, 50-51.

²⁸³ Caputo, 48.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ eg., De Laurentis, in *Modern Critical Views*, 51; Franke, 41; Vidal, 23; Jeannet, 36.

²⁸⁶ *Uses of Literature*, 95.

²⁸⁷ *IC*, 165.

shelter and safe harbour. Events are menaced by great monsters who feed on their tender pulp, by large and overarching theories that would catch them in their sweep, organise them, make them march in step to some metaphysical tune or other, right or left, theistic or atheistic, idealist or materialist, realist or antirealist.²⁸⁸

Caputo, writing as a postmodern theologian, sees in the name of God a rallying point for the potency of creative freedom - '*the crucial move lies in treating the event as something that is going on in words and things, as a potency that stirs in within them and makes them restless with the event.*'²⁸⁹ This event is present, as virtual presence, in the abyss which Taylor has described -

God is not the ground of being that forms the foundation of all beings but the figure constructed to hide the originary abyss from which everything emerges and to which everything returns. While this abyss is no thing, it is not nothing - neither being nor nonbeing, it is the anticipatory wake of the unfigurable that disfigures every figure as if from within.²⁹⁰

Consequently, the ethical concern in Calvino's nurture for "*what is not inferno*" (which the reader has learned through a careful reading of the city reports) is one which Taylor's ethics of 'Fluid Dynamics'²⁹¹ shares with the nurturing imagery of Caputo's 'Spectral Hermeneutics' -

in postmodern theology what happens to us is the *event* that is harboured in the name of God, which is why we want to cultivate the resources in this name, to nurture and shelter them, and to let ourselves be nourished by their force, made warm by their glow, charged by their intensities.²⁹²

The subjectivity of Montaigne's essays was compared earlier to Calvino's project. Montaigne's goal in his essays is a form of wisdom which can live wisely. Auerbach describes as the 'ultimate goal of [Montaigne's] quest the quote from essay 3.13 - '*Le grand et glorieux chef d'oeuvre de l'homme, c'est vivre a propos.*'²⁹³ Calvino's project invites the reader to become aware of the rhetorical strategies implicit not only in his own writing, but by extension, in the reader's thinking. It is this challenge, if accepted, which can perhaps produce an intellectual integrity so that theology can celebrate, rather than fear, the abyss of postmodernism's challenge. It can do this, by living in the endless deferment that is faith.

²⁸⁸ Caputo, pp.48-49.

²⁸⁹ Ibid, pp.50-51.

²⁹⁰ *After God*, 345.

²⁹¹ Ibid, pp. 359ff.

²⁹² Caputo, 51.

²⁹³ Montaigne, *Of Solitude*, Dover edition 3.13 quoted in Auerbach 294-95.

6.4 The Influence of Anxiety ; a speculative post-script

6.4.1 *The Anxiety of Palomar*

A funny thing happened...

I will start this section with a short anecdote to illustrate the principle I wish to discuss.

An adolescent who has an autistic spectrum disorder walks into a friend's mother's kitchen to help himself to a snack. *I don't mean to cause offence*, he says, *but your kitchen is really messy*.

The mother, a little offended, explains that she has just returned from holiday, her son has not been washing up while she was away, her computer has been infected with a virus, and she has the beginnings of a migraine, so the kitchen is low on her priority list.

Thinking about it afterwards, she smiles. A neurotypical teenager ('normal', if such things exist) would not have made that comment, but would have had the sense to say nothing. And yet the communication that followed was actually fairly therapeutic, and meant the mother had not only clarified the situation to the boy, but also to herself. It also meant the boy was perhaps a little less ready to criticise unfairly, because he knew the facts a little better.

It struck me later that something similar happens when Calvino writes. Gore Vidal comments that reading Calvino he '*has the feeling it is as if he had written it himself*',²⁹⁴ possibly because Calvino uncovers and exposes themes that are universal. The difference is, that others might have *had the sense to say nothing*.

I don't wish to create a retrospective hagiography of Calvino as autistic savant in the manner Fitzgerald has done for Irish writers²⁹⁵ although that is a tempting idea. Rather, I wish to comment on the autistic trait - present to some extent as a matter of degree across the entire spectrum of human personalities - of not having the sense to say nothing.

²⁹⁴ *Modern Critical Views*, 23.

²⁹⁵ *Unstoppable Genius* (2006), Walker/Fitzgerald.

‘Not having the sense to say nothing,’ or ‘stating the obvious,’ almost paraphrases one critic’s objection to Derridean deconstruction, when David Novitz remarks that ‘[to say] *‘we cannot experience an object apart from our mental constructs’ ... is ‘just another way of saying that we cannot experience an object apart from our experience of it.*’²⁹⁶

Deconstructive play is, then, perhaps a statement of the obvious, which could be tactfully set aside in order to preserve a status quo. This tactful quality which passes over difficult subjects with social grace is one which allays much anxiety. The risk of saying something, and facing the consequences of its reception, generates huge anxieties for even the most courageous or thick-skinned. For the autistic subject who is aware of poor skills in interpreting social responses, the anxiety becomes intense.

It intrigues me that the anxieties suffered by Mr Palomar resemble so closely the issues faced by the autistic personality. Like the autistic person,²⁹⁷ Palomar (and, one cannot but add, Calvino²⁹⁸) is fascinated by the visual, and has an endless curiosity to the point of obsession which wants to make sense of what he sees.²⁹⁹ I have stated already that I see Calvino’s greatest gift to the theological thinker in the questions his work poses. A striking example occurs here. If reading Palomar one asks, *what is the nature of this anxiety and how can I manage it*, a fitting answer emerges in Marion’s ‘The Erotic Phenomenon.’

Clearly, the need for ontological and epistemological certainty which drive Palomar to obsessive introspection is severe. Marion makes clear his view of such a grounding in certainty - it is ‘*autistic*.’³⁰⁰

²⁹⁶ David Noritz, “*Rage*”, 53, quoted in Holub, 174.

²⁹⁷ “the autism umbrella is vast ... social interaction impairments, narrow interests, an insistence on repetitive routines, speech and language peculiarities, non-verbal communication problems, motor clumsiness ... eccentrics who wow us with their unusual habits and stream-of-conscious creativity, the inventors ... geniuses who discover new mathematical equations, the great musicians and artists and writers ... loners ... aloof ... non-conformists”, Willey 1999, pp. 13-14.

²⁹⁸ From Calvino’s essays : *Visibility (6 Memos)*, *The Pen in the First person (Uses of Literature)* among others.

²⁹⁹ CR, 30.

³⁰⁰ Assurance “breaks the autism of the certainty of self by self alone”, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, 24; Reader-response criticism too, addresses an autistic self-containment in the reader’s reception of the text – “your experience of me is invisible to me and my experience of you is invisible to you ... we are both invisible men. All men are invisible to one another.’... (so that) the gaps (the unspoken dialogue or the unwritten text) are that which induces communication. (see footnotes 162, 163, p.68).

Marion's response to this predicament is relation to the other. Despite suffering from the autism which means the Reader's intimacy is merely the '*Poor alphabet by which we try to read each other*' in *WN*, the attempt to relate and to love is the resolution to that novel. Palomar's marriage is described in terms that alert the reader of communication difficulties in 'The Song of the Blackbird,'³⁰¹ and his sexual behaviour is unwittingly self-deluded into voyeurism.³⁰²

The anxiety of Palomar's failure to break out of his ego as prison into the possibility of security in relationship is exaggerated in the extreme profile of autism, but is also by degrees, as Marion says, a universal condition. Marion, like Calvino, outwits the *sense to say nothing* to break through a taboo of silence on emotional insecurity. It hardly need be said that this is a profoundly theological act. For Christian thinking, it is all too easy to say that *God is love*, and leave the exploration of that statement unattempted. The '*solitude of the work*' which Blanchot describes (see section 6.1, above) is, like the '*invisible man*' of the individual of R.D Laing's lived experience (chapter 4.9), underscores the element of autism inherent in all human experience, and made more patently an issue by postmodernism's critique of any assumptions of consensual epistemology.

"Lacking the sense to say nothing" about this may appear as simply - naïvely, even - merely 'stating the obvious.' Calvino clearly is not naïve, using self-irony and rhetorical craft to great effect as Sbraglia demonstrates,³⁰³ but the appearance of naïveté lies in the determination to remain faithful - as faithful as possible - to the truth of the "things in themselves."³⁰⁴ It is exactly this drive for certainty as accuracy which drives Palomar's obsession.³⁰⁵ Calvino is also not naïve in the sense of lacking an agenda - his life's work has been a consideration of the social and political role of literature. However the appearance of naïveté lies in the doctrine of indirection which grants

³⁰¹ *The Blackbird's Whistle, Mr Palomar* pp.20-25 – Palomar and his wife are compared to the blackbirds singing in the garden, in that sounds are repeated but not decoded into meaning.

³⁰² *The Naked Bosom, Mr Palomar* pp.8-10 - Perhaps one of Calvino's funniest stories, where Palomar is so neurotic about wishing to avoid offending the topless sunbather that he ineptly offends her by staring at her in the process.

³⁰³ Sbraglia, *Italo Calvino*, Bloom 2001, 31.

³⁰⁴ Paul Ricœur coined the term "second naïveté" to describe this phenomenon which informs post-confessional faiths eg., "*The move is from a pre-critical faith through a period of hyper-critical reflection to a postcritical faith. Or, as the French Philosopher Paul Ricœur described it – the move from a naivety of faith through a 'desert of criticism' and into a second naivety of faith*" ([www.spiritedexchanges.org.nz/store/doc/Issue 36](http://www.spiritedexchanges.org.nz/store/doc/Issue%2036), editor, Jenny McIntosh).

³⁰⁵ Similarly, regarding an apparent naïveté in Calvino's work - (for Pasolini, *Invisible Cities*) " ... seems to have been written by a boy. Only a boy, Pasolini declares, could be so radiant and crystalline, and have such patience in crafting and perfecting his work" (Schneider, *CR*, 180).

utter respect to the reader and deliberately deconstructs its own rhetoric to present the choice of interpretation and appropriation to the reader as explicitly as possible. The obsession for truth is demonstrated in the autistic quest of Mr Palomar. *La Spada del Sole (The Sword of the Sun)*³⁰⁶ reads as the ultimate parable of the obsessively self-analytical seeing subject, acutely aware of his unique perspective to the point where the setting sun's reflection '*follows him*' as he swims, (p.12); but not content with this egocentric view, he is compelled to analyse the phenomenon, tortured that '*he cannot reach it*' (ibid); philosophising continues until he is returned to the comfort of less troubling sensory data, and is dried '*with a soft towel*' (p.15).

Mr Palomar is named after the giant American telescope of the same name (the text reminds us of this on p.34); yet ironically he is '*nearsighted and astigmatic*' (ibid).

He is caught in the kind of 'blindness' Paul de Man describes as paradoxically inherent in the human experience of any human self-awareness, inevitably enmeshed in a conscious hermeneutic.³⁰⁷ The limit of his search lies not in relationship and play, as does the Readers' in *WN*; Palomar's obsessive need to know leads him towards *Learning to be Dead*. Even this quest fails him, trailing away from certainty into infinity (*each instant, when described, expands so that its end can no longer be seen*", p.113). On the same page, it seems a merciful deliverance for the tortured obsessive, the only possible outcome in fact, that '*At that moment he dies*' (ibid).³⁰⁸

Palomar has fallen victim to the indeterminacy that Carl Raschke has described in 'Theological Thinking.'

Its most succinct expression is stated here in a quotation from David Tracy -

For there is today in every text, every image, every act of interpretation, indeed every act, no origin, no center, no end. No correct, no right, not even a determinate meaning. There is, rather, the incessant play of signs in the labyrinth, the web, the whirlpool
...³⁰⁹

Palomar, by his autistic obsession with the truth, has reached the point of unknowing.

Faithfulness to the image leads to the abyss.

³⁰⁶ *Mr Palomar* pp. 11-15.

³⁰⁷ Holub, 177.

³⁰⁸ Palomar's "learning to be dead" is mock-Platonic (see also *Cities and the Sky*, above); "In the *Phaedo*, Plato vigorously stresses that to achieve grasp of the Forms, the philosopher must "practise dying" (64a); he must detach himself from the everyday way in which we identify with our beliefs, and, especially, our desires" (Annas, *Plato's Ethics*, in Fine, OUP 2008, 278).

³⁰⁹ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* 360, quoted in Raschke 13.

Palomar's apparent naïveté has led him to the place Raschke describes as 'holy':

*"Human experience and human perception end where God begins ..."*³¹⁰

And, as part of Calvino's deconstruction of Western metaphysics, with unceasing childlike questioning Palomar partakes in this sacred moment by embodying the absurdity of his predicament. Raschke describes it as the *'full expression of ... the contradictions of experience'* -

The moment of deconstruction announces the arrival of the holy. And by the "holy" we mean simply the presence that is concurrently present and absent, that is not a mystical obliteration of the various contradictions of experience, but their full expression.³¹¹

6.4.2 The Influence of (Palomar's) Anxiety

Calvino states in his essays that the function of literature is to influence society, but indirectly. His faithfulness to the things in themselves, not unlike Palomar's obsessive scrutiny, is described as *seeing an image and enlarging it*³¹² - in other words, being dictated to, in as pure a way as is possible, and transparently as a subjective interpreter, by the phenomenon. There is an honesty and an integrity in this approach which rejects the acceptance of any rhetoric which repeats sacred truths as givens without the genuine assent of a thorough personal engagement. I believe it is legitimate to explore possible ways in which Calvino's anxiety has indeed exerted the kind of influence he hoped for. In the essay on political uses of literature, he hopes that literature might help people to become *more intelligent, more sensitive, stronger*³¹³.

An intriguing theory emerges from reading Calvino's memoirs. In New York in 1960, Calvino attends the funeral of Spencer Irwin, a prominent American journalist. Calvino comments -

Irwin was a Quaker but the pastors of all the Protestant churches were there along with the rabbi, and each of them said something, and there were also black intellectuals as well as purple-faced alcoholics. Irwin was an ex-alcoholic who had recovered and was one of the heads of Alcoholics Anonymous, a self-help group for alcoholics of all classes.³¹⁴

³¹⁰ Karl Barth, (citation not provided) quoted in Raschke 11.

³¹¹ Raschke, 109.

³¹² *Visibility*, in *6 Memos* pp. 88-89.

³¹³ Franke, 39..

³¹⁴ *Hermit in Paris*, 65

It is interesting to speculate on how much of the ethos of Irwin's funeral service might have resonated with the young Calvino, newly arrived in the USA. In particular, the 12-step recovery movement's insistence on non-affiliation to religious or political ideology and its emphasis on developing a subjective spiritual framework for personal growth reflect Calvino's insistence on the ideological indirection of literature.

Calvino later comments on widespread alcoholism in American cities as '*a kind of obscure religion of self-annihilation*'³¹⁵ and says that '*in America the man who leaves his family and job and ends up an alcoholic and on the streets is a widespread phenomenon*'.³¹⁶

It is tempting to wonder about the identity of Calvino's hosts in Detroit where these words were written, since the unnamed philosophy-professor-turned-disc-jockey is described under the diary heading *Keep It Easy* - a strange reworking of 12-step recovery slogans *Keep it Simple* and *Easy Does It*. Most interesting of all, the 'something wise in the Calvino canon' which Gore Vidal identified in *IC* sits very easily alongside spiritual pragmatism of the recovering alcoholics' Serenity Prayer (adopted from Reinhold Niebuhr into the AA movement as early as 1942)³¹⁷

*God grant me serenity
To accept things I cannot change
Courage to change things I can
And wisdom to know the difference.*

I feel it is inappropriate to suggest an influence on Calvino from this direction. More usefully, Calvino's anxiety shares the prayer's sense of personal pragmatic authenticity. The influence of Calvino's anxiety lies in the integrity of its appeal to the things in themselves and refusal of ideological manipulation. This does prepare the question of how one's attitude can equip the individual to live in the 'inferno' of a contingent world. The contribution of *IC* might be to equip the class '*enemies*'

³¹⁵ *Hermit in Paris*, 72.

³¹⁶ "Millions of men and women have heard or read about the unique Fellowship called Alcoholics Anonymous since its founding in 1935. Of these, more than 2,000,000 now call themselves members. People who once drank to excess, they finally acknowledged that they could not handle alcohol, and now live a new way of life without it." - <http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/geninfo/index.shtml>.

³¹⁷ <http://www.aahistory.com/prayer.html>.

populating this '*inferno*' which Calvino observes in Western society³¹⁸ to find the right questions to ask, in order to respond - as many clearly have done - to Niebuhr's secular prayer.

This all the more so, because, when one looks at Marion's response to the anxiety of personal doubt in 'The Erotic Phenomenon,' the loving Other is most convincingly described as *anonymous*³¹⁹.

6.5 Keeping it Light

Spontaneity is the destination, not the starting point, Calvino remarked to his friend Maria Conti, on the craft of writing. The seriousness of content this thesis has argued for, does not in any way diminish Calvino's insistence on Lightness as a literary priority, nor dismiss the delicate humour of his work.

There are indeed elements of a Barthian "krisis" in Calvino's embodiment of the abyss. However, balanced against this source of perplexity is the delight of acceptance of the moments of grace which transcend temporality as finitude, in which a Barthesian *jouissance* does offer a non-absolutist stance of acceptance of the abyss. Perhaps he is a Barthesian Barthian. Perhaps he was right to point out to William Weaver that he is an embodiment of paradox- an Italian Calvinist - *Italo Calvino*. His responsibility to challenge, encourage and (en)lighten the reader in all seriousness, is in this way fulfilled.

6.1 Kublai Khan, the Ascent of Man and the return to the Nomadic.

There is an interesting parallel between Calvino's project and that of Jacob Bronowski. Bronowski's 1973 BBC documentary production *The Ascent of Man* was a ground-breaking history of ideas and human civilisation. Like Calvino, Bronowski responded to

³¹⁸ "Chicago is the genuine big American city: productive, violent, tough. Here the social classes face each other like enemy forces, the wealthy people in the strip of skyscrapers along the magnificent lakeside, and immediately beyond them is the vast inferno of the poor neighbourhoods" (*Hermit in Paris*, 73).

³¹⁹ *The Erotic Phenomenon*, 24.

his experience of war in Europe.³²⁰ Also like Calvino, he “refused to regard the arts and science as mutually exclusive”³²¹ and most importantly, Bronowski also displayed a genuine concern, like Calvino, to offer a wise reflection on the legacy he explored. So Bronowski’s documentaries were produced to enable him “to round off each one with a personal reflection; “My own view and philosophy of the contemporary world.” ”³²²

In *The Harvest of the Seasons*, the second part of the thirteen-part *The Ascent of Man*, Bronowski traces the rise of the city in human development as a dialectic of agricultural settlement versus the material acquisitions through plunder of resulting (agricultural) surplus. The example he cites, juxtaposing it against footage of World War Two tank warfare, is the technological advance of Genghis Khan’s nomadic tribes in using horses in warfare. The interplay between nomadic and settled societies, peaceful productivity and military conquest, is shown as what enables Kublai Khan to build the pleasure dome (foster leisure, creativity and innovation) which Coleridge famously celebrated in his poem *Kubla Khan*.

Bronowski’s view is clear, that the transition from nomadic animal herding to agricultural settlement and the growth of settlements is a progression advancing an intellectually developing civilisation. He is equally clear, as he states on camera, that “war is theft.”

The relationship between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan in Calvino’s *IC* hinges on this tension; the Khan’s settled civilisation rests upon both the spoils of war and the rejection of nomadic culture. The criticisms implicit in Calvino’s picture of the Polo-Khan mutually reflective meeting-point between East and West, have been explored in some depth in this thesis. Bronowski has stated clearly that intellectual and technological development requires Kublai to settle and consolidate the military conquests he has inherited.

In the wake of secularisation and the ‘death of God’ described in Chapter Six, the return to nomadic culture is an interesting development. Elizabeth Chloe Erdman has written about a “nomadic theology” which reacts against excesses of dogmatic

³²⁰ “Jacob Bronowski was born in Poland in 1908, but he and his family moved to Germany three years later to escape the Russian occupation” (*Viewing Notes, The Ascent of Man, BBC, p.7*); he worked on reporting the effects of the Nagasaki and Hiroshima bombs in WWII (*ibid., p.8*).

³²¹ *Ibid.*, p.7.

³²² *Ibid.*, p.12.

domination and embraces a pragmatic flexibility of conscious religious syncretism.

Erdman writes:

So what happens when a theologian or a spiritually curious person does not feel harboured in one—or even two—religions? If one is a little bit of everything does that make one nothing? What happens when such a person practices comparative theology without returning to one? They may be blessed with theological vertigo and engage ‘Nomadic Theology’. To some such an unmooring from one traditional model seems radical, confusing or impossible. But it is not only possible—it is happening, almost everywhere. Many not comfortable in an established tradition, even atheistic or agnostic ones, understand that this approach well reflects their own perspective.³²³

Erdman’s approach sits well with Calvino’s project to ‘trace a subtle pattern which escapes the termites’ gnawing’ (*Invisible Cities*, p.7). Marco Polo, the traveller, has lost his archetypal home city, Venice. However, a Christian theology which exists in the kind of ‘free-fall’ celebrated by Calvino’s *Tromba delle Scale* and is willing to embrace the nomadic lifestyle advocated by Erdman, might find itself closer to an authentic faith than might be feared. Jesus in John’s gospel describes the Christian life not as static entity but as “Way”³²⁴; the writer of Hebrews reminds readers that “Here, we have no continuing city.”³²⁵

Calvino’s vision of literature’s function fits well with this nomadic stance, also accommodating Mark C. Taylor’s view of diversity. In the fifth (and last) of his posthumously published *6 Memos for the Next Millenium, Multiplicity*, (Calvino died before writing the sixth, and last of these Norton lectures), Calvino states -

Overambitious projects may be objectionable in many fields, but not in literature. Literature remains alive only if we set ourselves immeasurable goals, far beyond all hope of achievement. Only if poets and writers set themselves tasks that no one else dares imagine will literature continue to have a function. Since science has begun to distrust general explanations and solutions that are not sectorial and specialised, the grand challenge for literature is to be capable of weaving together the various “codes,” into a manifold and multifaceted vision of the world.³²⁶

³²³ *Nomadic Theology: Crossing The Lines Of Traditions In Theology*, Elizabeth Chloe Erdmann [School of Languages, Cultures and Religions, University of Stirling, Scotland].

³²⁴ John 4.16; see also Acts 9.2, Acts 24.14.

³²⁵ Hebrews 13.14.

³²⁶ *6 memos*, 112.

He adds that

Today we can no longer think in terms of a totality that is not potential, conjectural, and manifold.³²⁷

The '*potential, conjectural and manifold*' here proposed by Calvino is not only the diversity of the cities. It is also the nature of the space opened by the text which self-deconstructs. It offers a means by which the thinking human subject can stand back, as it were, from the process of thinking, and consider what limitations and assumptions are involved in a personal epistemology.

The freedom of the individual subject is what is advocated. This is possible by inviting a creative reading in order to inhabit the '*potential, conjectural, and manifold*' through the use of an enriched critical and imaginative thinking.

³²⁷ Ibid, p.116.

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