Calvino's "Crisis of Reason" Revisited

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ABSTRACT: Italo Calvino's fiction has often been read as a literary critique of modern reason. His nonfiction has sometimes been understood as enthusiastic about the cognitive capacity of science. Both readings follow the author's self-conceptualization as a writer deeply interested in epistemological issues. A rereading of some of his essayistic and journalistic texts as well as the novel *Invisible Cities* shows that this epistemological pondering to some extent cloaks ethical concerns and Calvino's increasingly pessimistic conception of the leeway of human freedom in the social sphere.

Italo Calvino in his post-*Cosmicomics* period is often identified in secondary literature as a writer deeply interested in epistemological questions. He is depicted as an author whose works interrogate the limits of reason, mostly in a postmodern context, and as wholeheartedly or heavy-heartedly accepting the failure of reason.[2] His last long work, *Mr. Palomar*, consolidates this impression, and Calvino

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1. This article is based on my PhD thesis written under the supervision of Dr. Shlomy Mualem at the Department of Comparative Literature, Bar-Ilan University, Israel.

2. See especially Cannon's influential book on the crisis of reason in Calvino and other Italian writers: JoAnn Cannon, *Postmodern Italian Fiction: The Crisis of Reason in Calvino, Eco, Sciascia, Malerba* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1989). See also Kathryn Hume, *Calvino's Fictions: Cogito and Cosmos* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). More recently, and in the science-literature context, see Kerstin Pilz, *Mapping Complexity: Literature and Science in the Works of Italo Calvino* (Leicester, UK: Troubador Publishing, 2005).

himself, no doubt, actively cultivated this image.[3] Nevertheless, I think that an attentive reading of many of his nonfiction texts tells a different story, showing that the epistemological discussion is to a large extent a cover for issues of greater concern for him. Indeed, some critics who present Calvino as basically a materialist and favorable to science concentrate on his nonfiction.[4] But a good explanation of the gap between his fiction and his nonfiction has not yet appeared. In the first part of this essay, I offer a reading of some of Calvino's nonfiction, conceptualizing the process undergone by the author during and after his "turn" in the mid-1960s in a way that allows me to bridge this gap. In the second part, I focus on *Invisible Cities* as a fictional work representing a transitional phase, before the epistemological issues receive all the limelight in *Mr. Palomar*.[5] This discussion will clarify what Calvino left behind after *Invisible Cities*.

Much can be said on Calvino's literary response to some specific scientific theories or findings (mainly in the context of his *Cosmicomics*[6]). One can elaborate upon how he treats certain twentieth-century astronomical advances or the intricate way in which he handles ideas borrowed from complexity theory. That is not my intention here. The present essay deals with the more fundamental and general questions that obviously preoccupied Calvino. These relate mainly to how he perceived science's role in society and the extent to which scientific determinism and scientific conceptions of change have ethical consequences. It could be shown that even his more detailed and non-naïve treatment of complexity theory, for example, has mainly to do with the promise some have found in it for loosening the grip of classical science's determinism. But this is behind the scope of the present article.

3. Italo Calvino, *Mr. Palomar*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985).

4. See, for example, Pierpaolo Antonello, "The Myth of Science or the Science of Myth? Italo Calvino and the 'Hard Core of Being,'" *Italian Culture* 22:1 (2004): 71–92; and Massimo Bucciantini, *Italo Calvino e la scienza: Gli alfabeti del mondo* (Rome: Donzelli, 2007).

5. Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (London: Vintage Books, 1997). *Mr. Palomar* is therefore the toughest nut for an interpretation that accords a secondary role to epistemological issues. I am in the process of devoting a separate paper to this, tentatively titled "Mr. Palomar's Death—Another Autopsy Thirty Years Later."

6. Italo Calvino, *The Complete Cosmicomics*, trans. Martin McLaughlin, Tim Parks, and William Weaver (New York: Penguin, 2010).

Calvino's Conceptions of Reason and Science

In the twentieth century, criticism of modernity was often written as criticism of modern rationality, and the reason typical of science and technology was usually understood as highly representative of this rationality. This is true of the Frankfurt School criticisms as well as those by postmodern thinkers, two of the main intellectual sources of the New Left and the protest movements of the 1960s and '70s. As the young Calvino was a Communist—a leftist *all'antica*—many critics less familiar with his journalistic writing assumed that he went through the expected metamorphosis, adopting as a package the aesthetic preferences of postmodern literature (mainly metafictional writing), the ethical sensibilities of the New Left, and the criticism of modern reason. As to the aesthetic sphere, Calvino no doubt experimented with tools from the metafictional kit (though formal tools are not always closely wedded to ideas and values). As to sensibilities, there are admittedly not many signs that Calvino was eager to transfer his sympathies from the working class to other disadvantaged groups, though his direct remarks on these issues are usually quite prudent.[7] (Ironically, it was *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, with its aggressive feminist Lotaria and the mocking description of the budding field of postcolonial studies, that made Calvino famous internationally as a postmodern writer.)[8] And as to the critique of modern rationality, Calvino's nonfiction largely does not support the view that he endorsed it, as we shall see. That said, Calvino was not indifferent to the growing criticism of modern reason, and over the years something clearly changed in the way he understood rationality.

As expressed in his nonfiction, the attitude of the younger Calvino toward the modern world shaped by science and technology was basically positive, and he emphasized that this was not a common stance in the Italian Republic of Letters (echoing here his mentor Elio Vittorini).[9] As Calvino wrote in a 1960 essay, "For us as well as the rest of the world, the general theme of the literature and culture of our century has been the response to the problems posed by the

7. In his 1964 essay "L'antitesi operaia," for example, Calvino writes critically of the new type of leftist intellectual who no longer places his revolutionary hopes in the worker "inside the system" but in a variety of "outsiders." See Italo Calvino, *Saggi 1945–1985*, vol. 1, ed. Mario Barenghi (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), pp. 136–137.

8. Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).

9. And see Pierpaolo Antonello, "Un inglese in Italia: Charles Percy Snow, le due culture, e il dibattito degli anni sessanta," in *Pianeta Galileo. Atti 2009*, ed. A. Peruzzi (Florence: Consiglio Regionale della Toscana, 2010), pp. 515–529.

industrial and mechanical civilization. Our first battle was to oppose that large part of Italian culture that responded to these problems with pure rejection."[10]

Turning to Calvino's specific remarks on science, many of which were meant to protect its legitimacy from critiques in the context of the debates of the Cold War, we can see what changed in his concept of rationality. In a 1946 article on whether science in the postwar era could progress without regard for its applications, Calvino wrote:

> Science has greatly advanced recently, while society still lags behind and does not know how to accept scientific discoveries. One discovers atomic energy and society does not find a better use for it than bombs . . . It is society's primary duty to bring itself in line with science, and less science's duty to bring itself in line with society. Surely science has some responsibility . . . for leaving the application of its discoveries in perfidious hands like those of industry . . . It is now up to [the scientists] to work with others on constructing a society in which science has no purpose other than knowledge . . . in which there is no longer any reason to be afraid of knowing and discovering."[11]

Calvino's approach is that science should insulate itself from values other than pure knowledge seeking. Beyond that, scientists as human beings should cooperate with an extra-scientific effort to lead science in progressive directions, but they have no special responsibility qua scientists. In an interview from 1968 on the relationship between science and literature, Calvino responded to a question implying that science is immoral: "I do not think that modern science—and the theory of relativity in particular—provides us with any justification for moral relativity. On the contrary, our age is marked by a clear division between talk about science and talk about values."[12]

Calvino seems to maintain a traditional stance that sharply separates science and values. Yet such separation is double-edged: on the one hand, one cannot accuse science of being inherently biased toward serving foreign values and interests (this is the relevant aspect here); on the other hand, the assumption is implicit that science cannot validate values or explain how they came about, as they transcend its jurisdiction.

A similar view is expressed by Calvino in the context of the space race, a hallmark of the Cold War and Big Science era. One of his main

10. Translations from Calvino's writing not earlier translated into English are mine. See Calvino, *Saggi*, vol. 1 (above, n. 7), p. 65.

11. Italo Calvino, *Saggi 1945–1985*, vol. 2, ed. Mario Barenghi (Milan: Mondadori, 1999), pp. 2125–2126.

12. Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature: Essays*, trans. Patrick Creagh (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), pp. 35–36.

areas of scientific interest was, as is known, astronomy. In 1967 he publicly responded to an open letter addressed to him by another writer who criticized space exploration. Calvino distinguished between enthusiasm for the space race itself, motivated by a struggle for political supremacy on earth, and a positive regard for ". . . a true appropriation of space and the celestial bodies, meaning knowledge . . . To be sure, *exploits* in space are headed by people who do not care about this aspect, but they have to rely on the work of others who are actually interested in space and the moon . . . because they really want to know more about space and the moon."[13]

Similar in spirit is an article by Calvino in 1976 following the first color photographs from Mars. There he reflected on the lessons to be drawn from the fact that Mars was discovered to be a desert of red stones. Calvino objected to the argument that the resources devoted to space exploration had been spent on unworthy purposes, and underlined unexpected gains that might accompany this effort.[14]

Nonetheless, in a 1977 piece on the space race to mark the occasion of rocket scientist Wernher von Braun's death, Calvino is more skeptical of the arguments he himself had used in its favor: maybe the outlays really were socially unjustified, and, mainly, maybe the entanglement of scientific, industrial, and military interests typical of the space race was essentially pernicious. Calvino did not arrive at a complete denunciation, but concluded, ". . . certainly something does not work, something is missing for this new power of knowledge to become true knowledge, true power."[15]

A number of conclusions arise from our review thus far: Calvino thought that the purpose of scientific reason really is to understand the world, and he probably deemed it capable of fulfilling that purpose. Additionally, he assumed that scientific activity can insulate itself from other purposes. He held it necessary that science be guided to proper causes from without (to "true" knowledge, meaning knowledge in the service of noble purposes). These conclusions tell us that at earlier stages, Calvino had faith in another type of reason—the extra-scientific wisdom that should shepherd scientific progress. The belief in this kind of reason was the one to fissure, as was already evident in the late piece on von Braun, in which Calvino still seems to believe in the fundamental ability of science to achieve astronomical knowledge, but less so in having this knowledge serve good causes.

13. Calvino, *Saggi*, vol. 1 (above, n. 7), p. 227; emphasis in original.

14. Calvino, *Saggi*, vol. 2 (above, n. 11), pp. 2285–2289.

15. Ibid., p. 2318.

Explicit utterances testifying to Calvino's early belief in extra-scientific reason can be found in a 1964 essay meant to criticize systematically the arguments of the dawning Italian New Left against progress and reason. This essay, "L'antitesi operaia," is probably Calvino's last attempt to engage in a political critique of reason in a direct theoretical manner. His criticism is formulated as a response to arguments that reject the revolutionary role of the working class, but more fundamentally deny the ability to shape reality rationally and progressively, mainly because every action ends up serving the "system." To this, Calvino sets out his own opposing vision:

> Within the capitalist industrial system, a rationalizing thrust is manifested whenever science and technology, instead of being used as blind instruments, accommodate their plans to the interests of human society . . . this thrust does not augur well when relying solely on its own forces . . . there is a rationalizing thrust unique to the working class . . . The rationalizing thrust of the system stands in continual need of the rationalizing thrust of the workers' antithesis.[16]

Calvino's belief in this (not only the working class's) ability to shape and improve society was crumbling with time, even though, as we saw, it does not seem to have shaken his trust in science's ability to reach truth. As he wrote with reference to "L'antitesi operaia" upon publication of his 1980 essay collection *Una pietra sopra*,[17] "The trust I had in the long development of industrial society that has sustained me so far . . . proved itself indefensible, as has the possibility of planning beyond the short term to make it to the lesser evil."[18]

Putting Calvino's view in philosophical terms, we could say that what was shaken was his confidence in *practical reason*, in our ability to plan society and take action to achieve carefully chosen goals, a type of reason unique to mankind. Nonetheless, Calvino, at least most of the time, seems not to think that this has any bearing on our *theoretical reason*, our ability to learn about the world.[19]

16. Ibid., pp. 141–142.

17. Calvino, *Saggi*, vol. 1, pp. 9–405.

18. Ibid., p. 403. This description should be qualified: Calvino's earlier fiction attests to less confidence in the ability to change society radically. See Guido Bonsaver, *Il mondo scritto: Forme e ideologia nella narrativa di Italo Calvino* (Turin: Tirrenia stampatori, 1995), pp. 26–36.

19. Doubts about the ability of science to attain truth are expressed in Calvino's nonfiction almost exclusively, where he compares the vocation of science to that of literature and myth. In these contexts, Calvino sometimes uses skepticism to lower the status of science, e.g., ". . . we have no choice but to dwell on the available examples of a literature that breathes the air of philosophy and science but at the same time keeps its

It is important to understand that for Calvino, giving up on practical reason in a strong sense meant giving up on what really matters. This will become evident in the discussion of *Invisible Cities*, in which we see how much effort he spends on trying to avoid this conclusion. Indeed, in some spheres of action Calvino never truly despaired of strong practical reason. For the younger Calvino, practical reason had primacy over theoretical reason: the practical rationality of society should guide scientific work. The prominent model in modern philosophy of the primacy of practical reason was offered by Kant, and Calvino seems to have absorbed this tradition of the *Aufklärung* philosopher, as well as its derivative stance toward science and its contribution to progress (scientific progress does not automatically serve social progress, as can be understood from Descartes, for example).[20]

Kant proposed an elevated notion of autonomous practical reason, whose authority we accept freely; our behavior is not the last link in a causal chain leading back to our needs, as in a naturalistic conception. Some of his scattered remarks give the impression that when Calvino's confidence in a rational shaping of society had waned, he started looking for a more naturalistic notion of practical reason, though this remained fairly undeveloped.

The combination of weak practical reason and reliable theoretical reason present in the last texts cited earlier from Calvino's nonfiction is largely typical of a naturalistic conception of human beings: We are not moral creatures in a strong sense, meaning that we cannot steer our behavior and change our worlds according to deserving goals chosen independently of our needs and interests. Like animals, our goals are basically inscribed in our bodies, and reason serves these goals instrumentally. Reason is a slave. But this does not mean that we cannot achieve objective knowledge. Interests and emotions are not (or not necessarily) the falsifiers of knowledge; rather, they are the preconditions for seeking it.

In Calvino's journalistic description of *Una pietra sopra*, he wrote of the author character that emanates from the essay collection, "Over the years he notices that society around him . . . is something that responds less and less to plans and predictions, is something

distance, while with a gentle puff it blows away both theoretical abstractions and the apparent concreteness of reality." Calvino, *Uses* (above, n. 12), p. 46.

20. On the primacy of practical reason in Kant, see Sebastian Gardner, "The Primacy of Practical Reason," in *A Companion to Kant*, ed. Graham Bird (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 259–274; and Onora O'Neill, "Enlightenment as Autonomy: Kant's Vindication of Reason," in *The Enlightenment and Its Shadows*, ed. Peter Hulme and Ludmilla Jordanova (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 186–199.

less and less controllable."[21] But this does not mean that Calvino now thought of society as something that transcends human understanding. Rather, "he starts seeing the human world as something in which what matters develops through millennial processes or consists of minute, almost microscopic events."[22] This time scale and the mechanism of slow and undirected change fit a vision of human history as a special type of continuation of the evolution that shaped the rest of the living world. In the same vein, at the end of a particularly pessimistic article from 1977, Calvino wrote:

> . . . the world is fragile, a net of imperceptible and very slow processes, which are the only sites where the human capacity of guidance and rescuing can intervene, every catastrophe has already happened a long time before one notices that the earth is quaking . . . there exists no movement but the slowest, and no human action but that which stretches in time, all the revolutions have already occurred before the spectacular explosions that signal their date in history . . .[23]

With all the vagueness of the idea suggested here, what Calvino clearly had in mind is a model of practical reason that does not consist in the ability to make a verbally articulated, conscious, one-time decision that dictates all future behavior. No action worthy of the name is singular. Calvino seems to have been groping in the direction of a long-term cultivation of behavioral dispositions, minimally mediated by words. Over the generations, a new behavioral direction may take root.[24] I think that a similar idea stands behind the next paragraph, taken from a 1973 interview, in which Calvino speaks of his hope that one could find a mechanism of self-regulating, social betterment without the need for conscious deliberation or words: "We already know that socialism, the hundred or hundred thousand types of socialism . . . will be stages, none satisfying in itself . . . until a mechanism is found of uninterrupted revolution and recovery harmonious enough to function and adjust itself with natural rhythm and equilibrium, without a mystifying and irritating use of words."[25]

In a way, as we shall see, the cities of *Invisible Cities* are intended to reflect this stage of Calvino's thought, though these naturalistic

21. Calvino, *Saggi*, vol. 1 (above, n. 7), pp. 400–401.

22. Ibid., 401.

23. Calvino, *Saggi*, vol. 2 (above, n. 11), p. 2293.

24. As a reference point for this sort of naturalistic conception of self-change, see John Richardson, *Nietzsche's New Darwinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 101–103.

25. Calvino, *Saggi*, vol. 2 (above, n. 11), p. 2796.

notions are never really tried out in his fiction. And yet in a later work such as *Mr. Palomar*, Calvino's conclusion is more pessimistic. If human history unfolds by tiny, slow, and mostly blind changes, then perhaps no intervention is possible:

> [Mr. Palomar] was finally convinced that what really counts is what happens *despite* them [the models]: the form that society is assuming slowly, silently, anonymously, in people's habits, their way of thinking and acting, their scale of values. If this is how things stand, the model of models Mr. Palomar dreams of must serve to achieve transparent models, diaphanous, fine as cobwebs, perhaps even to dissolve models, or indeed to dissolve itself.[26]

Afterwards Palomar leaves behind all models, abandoning thinking about a systematic way to bring about a desired society. Calvino oscillates, then, between identifying the possibility of practical reason based on naturalistic insights and outright despair over practical reason as a tool for shaping society.

In sum, Calvino's intellectual turn, closely related to his distancing from Marxism, relates to his disappointment with strong practical reason in the social context. Far from thinking that neocapitalist Italy was the best of all worlds, he seems to have reached the conclusion that human behavior includes some destructive components stronger than any form of social order. For any change in the social order to succeed, it must be deeply rooted in changes in human behavior and mentality. But these may not be amenable to purposeful intervention. If so, the growing pessimism of Calvino has nothing really to do with theoretical reason.

Calvino's new conception of reason does not fit with the critique of modernity via the critique of reason that seems to inform his fiction. These critics are far from attributing the horrors of the twentieth century to a destructive human nature. They oppose the notion of human nature altogether, and think that before modernity, whether it began with Ulysses or Kant, "human nature" as well as our cognitive apparatus was radically different. In his nonfiction, Calvino referred explicitly only to the Frankfurt School (though *Invisible Cities* definitely attests to his acquaintance with the postmodern linguistic version). For example, in the aforementioned 1973 interview, after referring specifically to Adorno, Calvino said,

> . . . toward this whole German-American school that has had such importance in the ideological horizon of the "new left" I have always had strong reservations. It is really the concept of "system" that may turn out to be a trap . . . I have never wanted to believe in the capitalist rationalization, and it seems to

26. Calvino, *Mr. Palomar* (above, n. 3), p. 111; emphasis in original.

me that the facts are on my side: anything but rationalization! . . . I am more comfortable with the mode of thinking of old style Marxists, that capitalism, whatever it does, will always remain a jungle of incurable contradictions.[27]

Thus Calvino opposes the Frankfurt conception, which, crudely put, identifies modernity and capitalism with growing rationalization: that is, with the historical disappearance of strong practical reason and the rise to power of instrumental, technological reason that sanctifies optimization calculations and efficiency. That sort of reason creates a totally administered society in which no room is left for freedom.[28] However, according to Calvino, the problem does not lie with optimization calculations, so to speak. Capitalism does not really create an efficient and orderly reality, but a chaotic one (referring to Marx's claim that capitalism impedes economic efficiency and is therefore not even instrumentally rational).

In spite of everything said thus far, Calvino himself did not conceptualize the change he underwent as a process of waning confidence in a strong practical reason. He patently encouraged his readers to see him as a writer interested in epistemological issues, that is, in theoretical rationality. Many critics followed suit, attributing to him a growing awareness of the complexity of the reality we want to know. And many hurried to connect this "epistemological skepticism" to the critique of modernity.[29] Here are Calvino's words from the "Exactitude" lecture in *Six Memos*, which outline a narrative of his intellectual and literary path since writing a key text for *Invisible Cities* (the chess dialogue):

> From the moment I wrote that page it became clear to me that my search for exactitude was branching out in two 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 aspects of things as precisely as possible . . . These are two different drives toward exactitude that will never attain complete fulfillment, one because "natural" languages always say something *more* than formalized languages can . . . and the other because, in representing the density and continuity of the world . . . language is revealed as defective

27. Calvino, *Saggi*,vol. 2 (above, n. 11), p. 2795.

28. On the recurring theme (in the Frankfurt School and elsewhere) of instrumental reason as suitable for criticism, see Darrow Schecter, *The Critique of Instrumental Reason from Weber to Habermas* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010).

29. See, for example, Pilz, *Mapping Complexity* (above, n. 2), pp. 55–59.

and fragmentary, always saying something less with respect to the sum of what can be experienced.[30]

Calvino emphasized two writing directions in his work after *Invisible Cities*, and presented them as guided by a purely epistemological interest. Both are said to end in philosophical aporias due to the nature of language. The first is the abstract path, connected in the lecture to metafictional writing. It is aporetic because language cannot totally purify itself and leave behind everything that is concrete (just as literature cannot really tell only of literature). The second path aspires to reach concrete things with the aid of attentive language, as in the literature of description. This eventually fails because language is always somewhat abstract and cannot represent all the richness of experience and reality. Both paths hinge on the following question: What is it that knowledge and language represent—human products or the things out there?

Invisible Cities—A Transitional Phase

It is time to turn to Calvino's 1972 book, *Invisible Cities*, and see how it functions as a site where ethical issues are still explicit, but already partly cloaked as epistemological. My interpretation of this enigmatic book tries to do justice both to the ineluctable presence of the social context within it and to its theoretical character borrowed from structuralist quarters, while leaning on my conclusion regarding Calvino's changed conception of practical reason. In my judgment, the book reveals that Calvino was not yet ready to fully stand behind the growing pessimistic stance reflected in his nonfiction. But the alternative offered by the book is also not really acceptable to Calvino and so is drastically rephrased afterward, which amounts to its being abandoned.

The opening italicized text tells us that Kublai Khan is experiencing a crisis because his territorial conquests no longer satisfy him. Only Marco Polo's accounts manage to relieve him. What needs do these accounts fulfill? First, the Khan wants to understand his empire and know its cities, so the accounts satisfy an epistemological need. And as the Khan has given up "conventional" forms of knowledge, which contribute to the expansion of his earthly control of the empire, he recognizes in Polo's words an alternative kind of knowledge—"*the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termites' gnawing.*"[31]

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30. Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. Patrick Creagh (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 74–75; emphasis in original.

31. Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (above, n. 5), p. 5.

But this need is not just epistemological, as the empire is declining: "*this empire . . . is an endless, formless ruin that corruption's gangrene has spread too far to be healed by our scepter . . .*"[32] Kublai, then, wants to regenerate the empire with Polo's assistance. In *Invisible Cities*, the epistemological question is clearly derived from the hope that humans will succeed in shaping social reality.

Invisible Cities is in dialogue with the tradition of utopian writing, as many interpreters have noticed. This is the book's way of expressing its ethical motivation. The names of utopian and dystopian cities are mentioned in the last cursive, and more implicit allusions are scattered throughout.[33] *Invisible Cities* aspires to demonstrate a new type of utopian writing after all the disappointments that had befallen attempts to realize utopias. In the years Calvino was writing *Invisible Cities*, he had dealt intensively with the nineteenth-century utopian Charles Fourier. One testimony to that effort is the three essays dedicated to Fourier and included in *Una pietra sopra*, in which Calvino discussed the possibility of writing a utopia today, a work conscious of not being a realizable recipe, of not describing a "visible" city.[34] In the context of Fourier, Calvino speaks directly of the possible connection between literature and social effect; *Invisible Cities*, however, does not actually point to the textual limitations on the way to materializing written utopias, but considers the reasons why utopian ideas in a less literal sense, with the great Marxist model in mind, could not affect reality in the way their originators envisioned.

The cities described by Polo are not drawn from our common reality, though splinters of modern urban life are everywhere to be found. Above all, Polo's cities are a spectacle of the imagination. Even on the literary level of reality, their ontological status is doubtful ("*Your cities do not exist. Perhaps they have never existed. It is sure they will never exist again*").[35] Indeed, as the title suggests, Polo's cities are invisible. But this invisibility can be understood in two different ways at different points in the book, both on the epistemological level, by asking how one can know the cities—which is principally a metaphor for the problem of understanding human society and its dynamic of change.

32. Ibid., p. 13.

33. See especially Peter Kuon, "Critica e progetto dell'utopia: 'Le città invisibili' di Italo Calvino," trans. Claudia Marinelli, in *La visione dell'invisibile: Saggi e materiali su Le città invisibili di Italo Calvino*, ed. Mario Barenghi, Gianni Canova, and Bruno Falcetto (Milan: Mondadori, 2002), pp. 24–41.

34. Calvino, *Uses* (above, n. 12), pp. 213–255.

35. Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (above, n. 5), p. 51.

But first, what is the conventional type of knowledge dismissed at the outset? As both a literary and social model, the visible cities are the classical utopias, many of which contained communistic ideals, which were reread in the twentieth century as excessively authoritarian and static, planned entirely in advance and blind to historical change. The one dominant literary model to be discussed here has to do with the "astrological" cities of the book's thematic series "Cities and the sky." These recall, above all, *The City of the Sun* by Tommaso Campanella (1602).[36]

The City of the Sun reflects a fierce belief in the ability of theoretical knowledge to guide the construction of a moral society with its overlap of the true, the good, and the beautiful. The science given prominence in informing the physical and social organization of the city is astrology. Astrological considerations, intended to obtain the optimal influence of the celestial bodies on the city and its inhabitants, guide, among other activities, urban planning and human mating. Astrology is deterministic, which is crucial to Calvino's use of it.

Calvino, of course, uses the utopian astrological idea primarily as a metaphor for modern social thinking. To understand this metaphor well, let us focus on two of the astrological cities that are presented in a way that invites comparison between them. The sharpest critique of deterministic rationality is embodied in Perinthia: "Summoned to lay down the rules for the foundation of Perinthia, the astronomers established the place and the day according to the position of the stars . . . Perinthia—they guaranteed—would reflect the harmony of the firmament."[37] But the result contradicted all expectations:

> In Perinthia's streets . . . today you encounter cripples, dwarfs, hunchbacks . . . guttural howls are heard from the cellars and lofts, where families hide children with three heads . . . Perinthia's astronomers are faced with a difficult choice. 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.[38]

Perinthia's description clearly hints at the critique of modern rationality: Behold the monsters that calculative reason produces, either because the world is devoid of an order that humans can grasp, or because a malicious rationality ("the gods") rules. I think the critical meaning is dominant in this text, but note that it is directed to

36. Tommaso Campanella, *La città del sole: dialogo poetico / The City of the Sun: A Poetical Dialogue*, trans. Daniel John Donno (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

37. Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (above, n. 5), p. 130.

38. Ibid.

a conception that can only partly serve as a metaphor for modern rationality, as Calvino himself suggests.

This turns up in the description of Andria, the last in the Sky series and the only "astrological city" to evade criticism. We are told only a few pages after the description of Perinthia that "Andria was built so artfully that its every street follows a planet's orbit . . . thus the days on earth and the nights in the sky reflect each other."[39] But Andria is not another city of monsters; it leads a harmonious life. Polo at first believes that this is due to the inhabitants' avoidance of change, but changes are indeed made. When asked whether the changes do not disrupt the earth-firmament correspondence, the inhabitants reply, "our city and the sky correspond so perfectly . . . that any change in Andria involves some novelty among the stars"[40]—a twist on the traditional direction of influence. Thus a happy and rational city would be possible if only it allowed for change. What distinguishes the Andrians' cosmological conception from the Perinthians' is the acknowledgment that celestial bodies themselves undergo change. Historically, this acknowledgment belongs to the "new astronomy," of which Galileo was one of the chief representatives, as Calvino knew well.[41]

The comparison of the two cities shows that by leaving the last word to Andria, Calvino partially undermines the criticism seemingly posed in Perinthia. As a metaphor for modern scientific reason, that criticism becomes anachronistic as the cosmological details hint at a knowledge system forsaken long ago. But this is intended primarily as a metaphor for a social theory that was once dear to Calvino: the Marxist notion that one can predict a perfectly just society, which reaches a desirable end state and stops changing.

In the background of the astrological cities is also a classical philosophical view that lost its power of conviction for us centuries ago, but which was still alive for Campanella: the belief in an intimate relationship between theoretical rationality, especially the mathematical, and proper human character and behavior. In this view, the good amounts to the right proportions—among celestial bodies, the components of the soul, and social classes. According to this belief, only ignorance of the good (the right proportions) stands in the way of man doing good. This is a conception that does not distinguish theoretical from practical reason, and may have its source in Plato's late dialogues. Particularly in *Timaeus*, the cosmos is presented as a

39. Ibid., p. 135.

40. Ibid., p. 136.

41. See Calvino, *Saggi*, vol. 2 (above, n. 11), p. 2032.

model for the well-built soul.[42] That is, although Calvino's nonfiction shows that it was his confidence in practical reason that was shaken, the metaphor he uses does not distinguish between theoretical and practical reason, and creates the impression that he has important criticism of theoretical bodies of knowledge such as astrology or any deterministic science it represents.

So far, we have dealt with the visible cities rejected in *Invisible Cities*. (Andria is an exception, but its solution to the problem of change, mutual earth-sky influence, makes the metaphor no longer fruitful.) The two ways of being invisible explored in the book leave room for chance, thereby limiting the possibility of planning ahead. The first way is that of structuralist inspiration, some aspects of which fascinated Calvino well into the 1980s, although, as interpreters noticed long ago, his treatment of structuralism in *Invisible Cities* was mainly critical.[43] From a structuralist perspective, the cities (or the elusive cities within the cities Polo describes) are possibilities within a system having a closed set of discrete elements. These elements can combine to create numerous combinations. The cities are then unrealized combinations and therefore invisible, but they do have a sort of potential existence. The most interesting of these cities is Clarice. In it the structuralist model is presented as a tool for understanding human history:

> Clarice, the glorious city, has a tormented history. Several times it decayed, then burgeoned again, always keeping the first Clarice as an unparalleled model of every splendor . . . In its centuries of decadence . . . the city slowly became populated again as the survivors emerged from the basements and lairs . . . driven by their fury to rummage and gnaw, and yet also to collect and patch . . . They grabbed everything that could be taken from where it was and put it in another place to serve a different use: brocade curtains ended up as sheets; in marble funerary urns they planted basil . . . Put together with odd bits of the useless Clarice, a survivors' Clarice was taking shape . . . it was all there, merely arranged in a different order . . . More decadences, more burgeonings have followed one another in Clarice. Population and costumes have changed several times; the name, the site, and the objects hardest to break

42. On the ethics of the late dialogues, see Dorothea Frede, "Plato's Ethics: An Overview," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, May 16, 2009, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/plato-ethics/. On the overlapping of theoretical and practical reason in Plato, see Onora O'Neill, "Four Models of Practical Reasoning," in *Bounds of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 13–14.

43. See, for example, Claudio Milanini, *L'utopia discontinua: Saggio su Italo Calvino* (Milan: Garzanti, 1990), pp. 135–138.

remain . . . The order of the eras' succession has been lost; that a first Clarice existed is a widespread belief, but there are no proofs to support it.[44]

Clarice illustrates a history lacking any sort of significant continuity, where a final set of elements (the things) enables varied combinations. The structuralist model presents a historical development, all of whose ramifications exist ahead as possibilities, but in which the different combinations, the eras, succeed one another without purpose or other connective logic. Does Calvino accept this historical approach? No reservations are expressed in Clarice's description, but alternatives exist in the text; together with the book's criticism of structuralism in other contexts, one could say that Clarice is a marginal possibility in *Invisible Cities*.[45]

So far, I have treated Clarice as a descriptive model of historical change. But the invisible cities are supposed to represent alternatives to outright utopias. Therefore, they have a prescriptive aspect, and we should ask how this conception allows for attempting to steer history; it is clear, however, that this structuralist model does not allow it at all, as there is no connection between the present and any future state. Obviously, Calvino considered this idea to be a wild alternative for his early declared confidence that history is amenable to purposeful human intervention. But here the restriction is not placed by human behavior resistant to deliberate shaping, as in his conclusion in the nonfiction. Here, to exaggerate a bit, the problem lies in a senseless world that occasionally shakes up its contents to create new kaleidoscopic combinations with no room for human agency, naturalistic or otherwise.

The most comprehensive structuralist system in *Invisible Cities* exists above the level of individual cities, at the level of empire. On several occasions, the empire is treated as amenable to comprehension and prediction based on a structuralist approach. Thus, for example, the opening italicized text of the third chapter begins: "*Kublai Khan had noticed that Marco Polo's cities resembled one another, as if the passage from one to another involved not a journey but a change of elements. Now, from each city Marco described to him, the Great Khan's mind set out on its own, and after dismantling the city . . . he reconstructed it in other ways.*"[46]

44. Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (above, n. 5), pp. 96–97.

45. The city of Zaira, for example, offers a model of a totally contingent development, which is nevertheless reasonable due to cause-effect ties (ibid., p. 9). Therefore, its present urban face enables both a reading of its past and some palm reading into the future.

46. Ibid., p. 37.

We will now consider two of the criticisms of structuralism manifested in the dialogues. The first, and in my opinion the one more important to Calvino, has been overlooked in the secondary literature. It is a humanist critique.

In both dialogues of the final chapter, we are told for the first time that the Khan has a unique atlas containing the maps of all past, present, and future cities as well as literary utopian and dystopian ones. It contains all the possible combinations of urban forms. If the Khan has had this structuralist device all along, why are Marco's accounts needed at all? It is becoming clear that the Khan has not actually been looking for descriptive knowledge. He wants to know what will be the actual fate of his empire and, implicitly, how to lead it toward a welcome future. In the last italicized text he asks Polo, "*You . . . can tell me toward which of these futures the favoring winds are driving us*."[47] And Polo replies with his vision of the second type of invisible utopia. The atlas and theoretical combinatorial reason are not enough, then. What the Khan expects from Polo is ethical guidance, which the structuralist model cannot provide. Thus says Calvino in his 1972 essay *Lo sguardo dell'archeologo*: "The structuralist or semiotic method . . . is more valuable to us the less it sees itself as 'philosophical' and 'literary,' that is, the more it remains algebraic and impassive (it is beyond its horizon that the philosophical or poetic options of each of us, that is, the prescientific motivations, may drive us wildly to consider their realization)."[48] Structuralism should be strictly scientific, and therefore should have no claim to "options"—to choices, autonomy. This is the other side of Calvino's separation between science and values: values are outside science's jurisdiction. If Calvino were anything like a consistent naturalist, he should have avoided this stance, which accords morality a special, unnatural status. But Calvino held to it all along.[49] As I have said, Calvino's drift toward a naturalistic approach regarding normative aspects of human life was slow and eventually confined to the social sphere.

The ethical criticism of structuralism is quite implicit in *Invisible Cities*. The kind of criticism that has attracted the most attention is utterly different. Its most concentrated form is to be found in the

47. Ibid., p. 147.

48. Calvino, *Saggi*, vol. 1 (above, n. 7), pp. 326–327.

49. See his similar remark from 1980 as to the scientific status of anthropology: Calvino, *Uses* (above, n. 12), p. 326. This issue is further discussed in my paper on *Palomar* (above, n. 5).

chess dialogue—the one mentioned in the "Exactitude" lecture as the point of departure for Calvino's self-conceptualization as an epistemological writer.

We are told in the italicized texts that before Polo learned the Khan's language, the two had communicated with the aid of objects and gestures. Already at an early stage it is hinted that the objects were laid on the black-and-white majolica pavement as in a chess game. In the italicized texts of the eighth chapter, the hint is developed: the Khan now wants to understand his empire using a structuralist approach in which the objects lose all their unique features, become mere pawns, and derive their meaning from their relations with the other pawns. Here the structuralist approach is presented as a failure:

> The Great Khan tried to concentrate on the game: but now it was the game's reason that eluded him . . . At checkmate, beneath the foot of the king . . . nothingness remains: a black square, or a white one. By disembodying 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.[50]

Polo opposes this tendency toward abstraction:

> Your chessboard, sire, is inlaid with two woods: ebony and maple. The square on which your enlightened gaze is fixed was cut from the ring of a trunk that grew in a year of drought: you see how its fibers are arranged? Here a barely hinted knot can be made out: a bud tried to burgeon on a premature spring day, but the night's frost forced it to desist.[51]

Unlike the "Exactitude" lecture, which presents this solution as aporetic like the Khan's, here Polo clearly prevails: "*The quantity of things that could be read in a little piece of smooth and empty wood overwhelmed Kublai.*"[52] But what stance does Polo represent? Some interpreters have read this text as favoring plurality over oneness, mainly as a postmodern sanction of interpretative pluralism closely tied to ethical overtones of preferring social and cultural pluralism over universalizing tendencies.[53] But closer attention to Polo's words reveals that he views that piece of wood not from many perspectives, but only as a concrete and natural object. This is the same type of

50. Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (above, n. 5), p. 118.

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid., pp. 118–119.

53. See, for example, Carol P. James, "Seriality and Narrativity in Calvino's 'Le città invisibili,'" *MLN* 97:1 (1982): 144–161.

attention Mr. Palomar is struggling to adopt toward natural objects. The criticism of structuralism expressed here identifies it with an idealistic approach that prefers man-made, formal rules creating a closed system exempt from any comparison to reality. In either case, whether according to my or the postmodern reading, the flaw of structuralism here is mainly epistemological—a false representation of reality.

In my interpretation, then, the chess dialogue speaks of favoring the world over human mental products, and recommends a more realistic approach to knowledge. I have a similar reading of another key text in the book—the description of Baucis. (Calvino himself mentioned interpretations that gave this city pride of place due to its location at the very center of the book.)[54] But the great impression these two texts leave on the reader notwithstanding, I think they poorly represent the spirit of the book, and are the only arrows in it pointing toward the direction developed in *Mr. Palomar*. The attitude to nature that Polo represents in the rest of the book is blatantly indifferent and calls to mind the narrator of the autobiographical *The Road to San Giovanni*[55]—an attitude of fundamental foreignness, of a person interested solely in human culture, in the city.[56] This stance, in my opinion, reflects Calvino's distance at this point from true identification with the more naturalistic approach to human behavior to which he professed in his nonfiction. When Calvino has given in to it more deeply (with some lingering reservations), he has gone further in the direction of *Mr. Palomar*.

If a dim impression arises that the "concrete" direction is the one that prevails in *Invisible Cities*, it is probably because one thinks that this is what the "pulviscular utopias" stand for—that is, the second type of invisible cities. These incarnate the book's great hope, having rejected the structuralist approach. This idea is mentioned both

54. See Italo Calvino, *Presentazione per "Le città invisibili"* (Milan: Mondadori, 1993), p. x. In Baucis, a city on stilts, the inhabitants live high above the ground although no natural constraints force them to do so. They live on high due to "lov[ing] [earth] 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" (Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, above, n. 5, p. 69). The inhabitants closely watch the natural objects on the ground because they foster a non-anthropocentric worldview. Their absence is peculiar to "effacement" of the subject in striving for objectivity.

55. Italo Calvino, "The Road to San Giovanni," in *The Road to San Giovanni*, trans. Tim Parks (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), pp. 1–34.

56. See, for example, Polo's attitude toward nature vis-à-vis the goatherd in the city of Cecilia: Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (above, n. 5), pp. 137–138.

in the first and last italicized texts as an alternative to "stronger" systems (the classical and, as it turns out, the structuralist utopia). As mentioned, Polo's accounts should provide "*the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termites' gnawing.*"[57] In the last italicized text, we are forcefully reminded that the alternatives are less descriptive and more concerned with the question of how to bring about the desired state. Thus Polo lays down his idea of the attainable better society:

> *At times all I need is a brief glimpse, an opening in the midst of an incongruous landscape . . . the dialogue of two passers-by meeting in the crowd, and I think that, setting out from there, I will put together, piece by piece, the perfect city, made of fragments mixed with the rest . . . If I tell you that the city toward which my story tends is discontinuous in space and time . . . you must not believe the search for it can stop.*[58]

And how can a better city be created from these scattered pieces? The concrete splinters are not enough. Thus the resounding final lines of *Invisible Cities*:

> *The inferno of the living is . . . what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become . . . part of it . . . The second is risky . . . seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.*[59]

We now look at two cities that seem to embody the fragmentary vision:

> Phyllis is a space in which routes are drawn between points suspended in the void: the shortest way to reach that certain merchant's tent, avoiding that certain creditor's window . . . If of two arcades, one continues to seem more joyous, it is because thirty years ago a girl went by there, with broad, embroidered sleeves . . . Millions of eyes look up at windows, bridges . . . and they may be scanning a blank page. Many are the cities like Phyllis, which elude the gaze of all, except the man who catches them by surprise.[60]

Cities like Phyllis are invisible in the sense that they hide splinters of beauty or kindness that are not only potential—they really are there. But in order for them to be identified, a gifted observer is required. Here the structuralist stance that turns the city into a blank

57. Ibid., p. 5.

58. Ibid., p. 147.

59. Ibid., p. 148.

60. Ibid., pp. 81–82.

page is dismissed in favor of the ability to see things: what matters are not relations between things, the routes in the void, but things themselves. In Phyllis, however, the things are not concrete objects as in the chess text, and emphasis is placed on the special observer.

More closely related to the social context is Raissa, where the splinters are presented as moments of human kindness:

> In Raissa, life is not happy. People wring their hands as they walk in the streets, curse the crying children . . . And yet, in Raissa, at every moment there is a child . . . who laughs seeing a dog that has jumped on a shed to bite into a piece of polenta dropped by a stonemason who has shouted . . . "Darling, let me dip into it," to a young serving-maid who holds up a dish . . . the philosopher says: "Also in Raissa, city of sadness, there runs an invisible thread that binds one living being to another for a moment, then unravels, then is stretched again between moving points as it draws new and rapid patterns so that at every second the unhappy city contains a happy city unaware of its own existence."[61]

In Raissa, then, the invisible utopian city is composed of scattered splinters of kindness. The "pulviscular" perspective views human history as motivated by accidents that are not contained in advance in a system (as in the structuralist case). Can these positive accidents be harnessed to methodical social progress? The final text in italics tells us that a special observer is crucial to recognize them and to "*give them space.*" It seems that not theoretical but evaluative reason is called for here, which knows to recognize the good and the beautiful. But what reason can "give them space"? One must admit that the nature of the splinters in *Invisible Cities* is obscure, mostly presented as embodiments of aesthetic or ethic grace, and therefore it seems impossible to intervene at that level.

In the paragraph quoted from *Mr. Palomar*, the accidents are presented as the slow, unintended changes in human behavior and mentality that Palomar tries to capture by models "fine as cobwebs," eventually giving up even these models. This is supposedly a retrospective moment alluding to *Invisible Cities*. In the latter, the conclusion is positive—somehow one can empower the positive accidents; but these accidents are actually not the same as the more naturalistic ones Calvino discussed elsewhere. If the pulviscular cities are a metaphor for those natural, slow changes, then it is a misleading metaphor. Palomar learns, at least theoretically, to acknowledge the value of unplanned accidents (what happens despite the models). The idea subtly implied derives from the scientific theory of complexity. It is

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61. Ibid., pp. 133–134.

the idea of order out of chaos, the spontaneous emergence of complex structures owing to random behavior of simpler elements in a system exposed to "noise," to unexpected outside influences. Calvino knew this idea well, as some interpreters have noted. But I think his evaluation of it was more intricate than is usually assumed.[62] In any event, the pulviscular cities are far from representing it. They are far from relying on accidents and avoiding purposeful intervention. The splinters must be recognized and empowered by someone equipped with strong, practical reason. If Calvino distanced himself from this solution later on, it was because what waned within him was the confidence that social reality could be influenced in this way.

To conclude, I believe that the primary motivation behind *Invisible Cities* is an investigation of the prospects of utopian thinking and writing, and this precedes the theoretical interest in alternative ways to describe society and history. But in *Invisible Cities* Calvino treats practical reason to some extent as if it were theoretical reason, and this creates the impression that the epistemological pondering over the ability to represent reality is at the heart of the work. Three models are investigated in the book: the classical utopian model of perfect order; the structuralist model of random combinations among pre-given elements; and the model of hopeful "splinters" or accidents outside the system. These models are presented mainly as theoretical. The main problem in most astrological cities is presented as a lack of correspondence between the heavenly reality and our means of representation in the earthly city. More precisely, they function as a metaphor of undifferentiated reason that simply equates knowledge and goodness. Similarly, the problem made most prominent in the structuralist model is its fondness for man-made abstractions, which cannot represent the richness of concrete things.

Nevertheless, in a utopian book such as *Invisible Cities* it is obvious that these three models are not only descriptive, but are also related to the question of how to bring about social change. Should we rely on a detailed plan that strives to bring us to the end of history? No, as this approach has never succeeded and indeed has turned out to imperil freedom. Can we rely on random combinations of existing elements? The structuralist approach is presented as lacking as well, due to its inability to guide behavior normatively. Should we dedicate ourselves to elusive splinters of kindness? Yes, says the grand finale, but the vagueness of this idea, with its over-reliance on intuitive, private, practical reason, foretells its failure. It is too dissonant

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62. On Calvino and complexity theory, see, for example, Albert Sbragia, "Italo Calvino's Ordering of Chaos," *Modern Fiction Studies* 39:2 (1993): 283–306.

with Calvino's more pessimistic conclusions being consolidated at the same time. In *Mr. Palomar*, Calvino seems to have completed his farewell to utopian aspirations. However, acutely aware of the attacks on freedom coming from both postmodern and naturalistic quarters, he concealed behind seven veils the spheres of human autonomy to which he still adhered.