Optimism without Illusions

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Perhaps no modern writer shows a repertoire of creative works so varied, in terms of content and language, as Italo Calvino. The critics, in an effort to catch the most prominent aspect of his poetics, have often been tempted to focus on one particular novel. Depending on the novel—and on the inclination of the critic—any of such aspects as "the political commitment," "the truth of the fairy tale," "the non-human outlook of the world," "the violation of the text," or a combination of them has appeared to be the keystone of the writer's entire production. The problem is that you cannot have more than one real keystone; besides, Calvino has reappeared from time to time on the literary scene with poetical perspectives so new and unusual as to demand a reassessment of judgment even from his most acute readers. Because of this status of Calvino's criticism, it seems to me more productive to proceed with a synthetic but, because of the revealing point of the writer's work as evidenced in one of his most recent novels but rather concentrates on Calvino's most common ground, retracing throughout his entire production. Such a synthesis will, I hope, result in a coherent picture of the writer's work. I will proceed inductively, postulating a globalization hypothesis and trying its effectiveness in clarifying the essence of the writer's creative work.

The common underlying element of Calvino's quest seems to be a profound interest for "things" perceived with a sort of visceral and unshakable optimism. By "things" I mean everything upon which the author concentrates his narrative attention: in his writings the "thing" immediately becomes a protagonist claiming its right to exist without subordination of any kind, it demands full title of identity and respect for its essence, it rejects the manipulation of the contemporary man who (a "thing" himself) is increasingly less convinced of being the lord of the universe and yet fatalistically attached to a self-centered concept of history. So "things" are not only objects, unanimated beings, but also human beings or products of human imagination.

Despite having just said that I intend to proceed inductively, I feel compelled—now that the hypothesis has been stated—to contravene, albeit briefly, to indicate deductively the reason for the hypothesis itself. Calvino was immersed, as a writer, in the revolutionary atmosphere of two of the most dramatic crises that have developed in Italy in the last forty years, that of the postwar period and that of the sixties. The first of these generated a resetting of ideals and forms circumscribed by the boundaries of the Italian postwar condition. During the Fascist dictatorship, literature had been characterized by sophisticated reflections on the status of man, linguistically wrapped in the most unapproachable and convoluted manner. The movement has appropriately been named Ermetismo. But with the fall of Fascism, the situation changed radically: the newly found freedom generated a fresh start of literary activity, the community of writers grew enormously and so did that of readers since everybody had experiences to exchange, stories to recount and proposals to submit for the future, now viewed with hope. The second crisis, which today is still far from being resolved, exploded in the sixties within a social and cultural environment far wider than that of the preceding postwar one. Briefly, it is the crisis of contemporary man, while perceiving the inconsistency of his faith in history as an evolutionary process, nonetheless found nothing with which to substitute it. The word "progress" has become an embarrassing one, unfitted as it is to explain the chaos we have produced in our physical and social environment. In literature this profound crisis rapidly assumed wide proportions stimulating an international exchange of experimental experiences. Rereading of Proust, Kafka and Joyce was mingled with the lessons of Butor, Gass, Borges and Queneau. L'école du regard dictated the new rules of writing in France and the Gruppo '63 shook the foundations of all ideological literatures in Italy. The point of departure for the new culture is the undeniable chaos created by the "progressive" process of history; the object is the search of the "real truth," a truth to be sought without the filters of any naturalistic or antropocentric projection, a truth to be perceived with total objectivity. Calvino, as I have said, was acutely aware of what was happening and, although he accepted neither the poetics of Robbe-Grillet (L'école du regard) nor that of Guglielmo (Gruppo '63), he made the problems that had produced them his own. Having said this, I can now resume my basic hypothesis and begin to try its usefulness in describing Calvino's work.

His first novel, The Path to the Nest of Spiders (1947), shows the writer's obvious intention to demystify the image of the Resistenza (the struggle of the clandestine liberation army against Fascism) as an event of stereotyped heroism within a clearly perceived historical process and detached from the individual motives that had sent people into the battle. Calvino's heroes in the novel are the weak, the poor, the ignorant, the destitute, all those without authority but who have decided to fight against Fascism. The image of these heroes is epitomized by the protagonist of the story, a child. These characters are the "things" of the novel. Calvino assigns to them the dignity and the right to be part of the irreversible process of history. The Resistenza is only the immediate cause of their actions, the element that associates them temporarily in their private struggle. The struggle is more important than any
ideology and it starts with the sense of unbearable of the present. Surely, to read The Path to the Nest of Spiders in this way means to capitalize on later lessons by Calvino and to relegate to the background other important aspects of the book directly related to the Italian social and political situation of the time. The Path, however, means something to us now mainly because of its unhistorical and universal scope.

After a few years of Neorealismo, the Italian literary production more or less directly connected with the experience of the war, the common themes were losing their appeal. Calvino was one of the first writers to steer away from the current. It was a decisive moment for his career: he began to question his newly acquired status of writer, and although he recognized the limitations of the subjects developed up to that point and did not feel like pursuing them any further, he did not have a new path to follow. Had the past experience been only the result of a youthfully enthusiastic need to be in the middle of the action? Frustrated, and in spite of himself and everything around him as he confessed in the introduction to Our Ancestors (1960), he began to work on a novel with no apparent link with his previous efforts, The Cloven Viscount (1952), a fantastic story of a man cut in half by a cannon ball during the Turkish-Christian war. The two physical halves remain alive after the blow, each one the embodiment of one half of the viscount’s personality: his good and his bad one respectively. The atmosphere pervading this novel is more relaxed than that of The Path; the situations portrayed are hypothetical and vague, not realistic as before. The “things” of the new novel are the characters whom the writer treats with detached curiosity. “Let’s see what he will do now,” he seems to ask himself after laying out the basic image of the divided man. Calvino, it might be noted, admitted to writing his novels without a clear idea of what his characters would do (introduction to Our Ancestors). He starts with an image and lets the “things” acquire their own life along the way. The conclusion, to which the story of the viscount comes by itself, is the reuniﬁcation of the halves and the reshaping of the whole person. It indicates that man has to ﬁnd in his complex entity the way to overcome the problems afﬂicting his life.

This meditation on the human condition takes the writer in his following book, The Baron in the Trees (1957), to conclude that the most appropriate and desirable attitude of man facing nature and history is that of courage and determination. The root of such an attitude is to be found in the consciousness of being a force among other forces, of being a potential cause of positive changes. Calvino’s new hero, the Baron Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò, is so convinced of this that he does not hesitate to invest his entire life in the “idea,” without accepting the slightest compromise. Stated in this fashion, it might appear as though the protagonist of the story acts on the basis of preconceived thoughts, but this is not so: the idea matures with the action and the action springs from his rejection of the present, obsolete order of things. The story begins with the baron as a child disobeying his parents, who have ordered him to eat snails. He walks away from the table and takes refuge in a tree. The narrator, the baron’s younger brother, recounts that when his father tells him that he will come down when he changes his mind, the boy replies that he will never change his mind, and he keeps his word. Despite the fact that the baron ﬁnds ways to adapt to his new environment and to live comfortably in it, he does not live in a fantastic world. In effect, he keeps (metaphorically) his feet on the ground and is reported to say, “If you want to understand the world, you have to detach yourself from it and observe it with adequate perspective.” The rampant baron is the most powerful symbol of Calvino’s optimism without illusions. The optimism which characterized the heroes of the Resistenza was that of people who had nothing else to lose, people forced by uncontrollable events to enter the action. Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò, instead, is a baron with a “name” and a social position; his optimism is more radical, he creates a new human condition to overcome the stagnation of the present order.

With The Nonexistent Knight (1959), Calvino returns to the meditation of the kind already undertaken with The Cloven Viscount; this time, however, he is not interested in portraying human nature in general (the good and the bad), but the functioning of man in society. He observes that man is often not only divided by his good and bad instincts but is also immersed so meaninglessly into his reality that he may either cease to exist or cease to be. In the ﬁrst case he may follow principles, codes and rules without understanding the sense of them; in the other case he could identify himself with objects and substances of the world, thus losing his own identity. These two concepts are the “things” of this novel as symbolized by the two chief characters, the cavalier Agihul, and his groom Guruduloo. Calvino depicts these characters with such detachment that, eventually, the stream of the story takes them to a point where they disappear and new heroes come into the foreground, men and women in ﬂesh and blood with principles as well as senses. The world is for them, with all their contradictions of thought and feeling.

The work that, of all Calvino’s production, seems to me the most innovative and meaningful, was published in 1965: Cosmicomics. It presents a deep and total rethinking of nature, history and man. The writer redefines with caution and disenchantment his basic optimism. Since this point is an important one, let us approach it by ﬁrst reconsidering the situation. In the last two novels of the trilogy I nostri antenati (Our Ancestors)—The Cloven Viscount, The Baron in the Trees and The Nonexistent Knight—were regrouped with this title by the author himself—Calvino had explored the possibilities of man’s meaningful participation in the process of history. But the attempt to pursue the same objective with two more realistic novels, The Watcher (1963) and La speculazione editizia (Building Speculation) (1958), revealed itself to be a failure: his optimism had been shaken, the “things” had revolted against his constructive intentions. In The Watcher,
the day of the observer at the electoral polls ends with frustration and disillusion; in *La spezzazione edilizia* Calvino is forced to consider the uncontrollable exploitation of the natural environment. However, as I have pointed out in the case of *The Cloven Viscount*, Calvino does not accept defeat passively. In the case of *The Viscount*, after having clarified that the optimism of the *Resistenza*‘s heroes was after all only wishful thinking, he had moved into a more theoretical context: he discovered man’s nature and realized that contemporary man is a man of all times who is immersed in situations from which he wishes, by virtue of courageous actions, to extricate himself. Calvino then put his heroes in action only to realize that the possibilities of defeat are always higher than those of victory. With *Cosmicomics* he returns to the philosophical speculations of his less realistic works, widening the context within which man is to be situated and understood. He brings directly into the action the things (this time without quotation marks), the materials that compose the living universe of which man is part. These things are the prehistorical substances and forces of the world: organic and inorganic materials, time and space, energy and inertia. *Cosmicomics* is essentially a review of prehuman, prenatal images. Obviously they are depicted in a human and natural way (it is a man who is writing for a community of human readers), but the two terms human and natural assume meanings wider and more profound than those usually assigned them. The narrative style is that of the fairy tale, but the setting is not that of the fable, the *incipit* is not “once upon a time” but “once below a time.” Calvino seeks to discover in the things an objective reliability, a matrix of reality not filtered by reductive ideologies. The ideologies are nothing but the projections of man’s desire to give an artificial order to the world. The chaos, he hints, has its own order, discontinuous and discreet (in the mathematical sense), which we have never understood because of our man-centered perspective. Calvino’s quest for objectivity is emphasized by the introductions to each chapter, printed in italics, they present scientific data pertaining to a time far away from our daily reality. The horizon is stretched to its limits, and with this newly acquired view Calvino depicts man entangled with the living things that have caused his actual presence in the world. The human level, the human reality, is no more transcendent; it is immanent: man is part of the things that make and surround him. The rationalizing simplifications of *The Cloven Viscount* or of *The Nonexistent Knight* are remote and irrelevant, there is no more good and bad, right or wrong, there is what is. At this point, one can legitimately ask what has happened to the optimism, the spring for action. It is still there, more refined and sophisticated than ever, evident in the fact that the “things” are not ignored, that they are there in the book, and that both author and reader assess their variety and realize that they too are contained with them in the amalgam. The optimism, without the slightest illusion, is evident in the desire to know; it does not drive towards an action here but towards an understanding of man’s condition in order that he may later become an active and conscious component of reality. *The zero* (1967), the book that follows *Cosmicomics*, contains a description of this intent to become active. It indicates the path to follow in the attempt to untangle the plot of the chaos that surrounds us. Clearly, to understand it will mean to overcome it and to become free. Here is how, in the last chapter of *The zero* titled “The Count of Monte Cristo,” Calvino-Dantes plans the evasion from the existential labyrinth-fortress of If:

If I succeed in mentally constructing a fortress from which it is impossible to escape, this conceived fortress either will be the same as the real one—and in this case it is certain we shall never escape from here, but at least we will achieve the serenity of one who knows he is here because he could be nowhere else—or it will be a fortress from which escape is even more impossible than from here—and this, then, is a sign that here an opportunity of escape exists: we have only to identify the point where the imagined fortress does not coincide with the real one and then find it.

The optimism of Calvino consists, then, in thinking that since there might be a way out after all, it is one’s duty to pursue an understanding of the chaos here symbolized by the labyrinth. In order to do so, he feels, one has to start with the assessment of the “things” that make up the chaos. In *Cosmicomics* he had noted that the “things” do not exist as independent beings, detached from everything, in isolation from the rest of the world, but that they acquire their identity because they are perceivable, touchable, thinkable. Therefore, the existence of some “thing” is characterized by its relationship with other “things” which in turn will be characterized by other self-centered networks of relationships. The chaos is explored, then, through the study of the relationships determining the existence of what exists. This is the general perspective in which Calvino’s two following books, *Invisible Cities* (1972) and *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1973), are to be embraced. A “city” is for Calvino, first of all, a place of encounters and exchanges. The writer lists fifty-five cities and in each one exposes the intersection of lines of a specific point. The points are indicated by the titles of each segment, “Cities and Memory,” “Cities and Desire,” “Cities and Signs,” etc. One might think the list endless (not the one of the book but that of the conceivable points of relevance), but it is not: our universe is a whole thing and as such it has a dimension, impossible to measure perhaps, but not to conceive in its structure of recurring citylike patterns. Every description of a city functions, fictionally, as a story narrated by Marco Polo to the Kublai Khan. To speak of story, however, is to stretch to the utmost the common meaning (ambiguous as it is) assigned to the word. The narration is, in fact, a continuous listing of objects and of the relationships that define them. Here is an example:

Finally the journey leads to the city of Tamara. You penetrate it along streets thick with signboards jutting from the walls. The eye does not see things but images of things that mean other things: pincers point out the tooth-drawer’s house; a tankard,
the tavern: halberds, the barracks; scales, the grocer’s. Statues and shields depict lions, dolphins, towers, stars: a sign that something—who knows what?—has as its sign a lion or a dolphin or a tower or a star. Other signals warn of what is forbidden in a given place (to enter the alley with wagons, to urinate behind the kiosk, to fish with your pole from the bridge) and what is allowed (watering zebras, playing bowls, burning relatives’ corpses).

The sense of these listings can be caught in a fragment of the dialogue between Polo and the Khan, the only characters of the novel:

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 only the arch that matters to me.”

Polo answers: “Without stones there is no arch.”

In the following book, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, the theme of the intersection relationship is amplified. The “things” that we encounter are not the simple objects found in the invisible cities but are rather clusters of meanings. Every playing card laid down on the table by the mute customers of a tavern to narrate their stories contains a wide set of possible meanings. And the great abundance of meanings that each card can assume in countless (albeit finite) combinations ends up dismaying the writer himself: the cards are words, their combination language, every grouping of cards generates a story to be deciphered. What is left is the writer’s role, Calvino asks himself, when it is established that the center of the literary activity is not the writing but the reading? The meditation on this theme forced Calvino into a long period of silence that ended in 1979 with *If on a winter’s night a traveler*.

The escape from the new labyrinth, the labyrinth of the writer, was made possible again by the active and irreducible optimism that never abandoned him, not even in the most desperate situations. And there is no doubt that the situation appeared to be really desperate: not only was the poetic aspect of the writer demystified but his own presence questioned. Here is how he planned to escape from the labyrinth: if the writing of novels were impossible, he would write the novel of the impossibility of writing novels; if what is relevant is the act of reading, he would write the novel of the act of reading. The “things” demanding the recognition of their own self-centered life, away from any historical-naturalistic projection of the old “contemporary” man, are therefore the following: the literary work and the act of reading. These two “things” regulate, also structurally, the writing of the novel which, in fact, is made up of segments dedicated alternately to the two themes. The narration reveals itself fragmented and discontinuous for what concerns the literary work, but progressive and continuous in regard to the act of reading. The ten “sub-novels,” composing the literary work part, are all interrupted at the end of their corresponding first chapters; what should follow is negated for the readers because it could only be the predictable result of the combinatory play set up at the beginning of the story. The suspense created by the first chapters is “a trick of the devil,” an illusory distraction that could only lead to a mirage of the truth. The act of reading, in fact, in spite of many interruptions and obstacles, goes on coherently and constructively. The two readers, protagonists of the act of novel-reading in the novel, end up getting married. Reading, therefore, generates action. It also makes possible an understanding of the reality of the literary work: once married, one of the two readers can finally read the impossible-to-read book of Calvino.

The conclusions Calvino has reached with *If on a winter’s night a traveler* open a new stimulating perspective. The new point of view is that reading is all; it gives shape and meaning to reality and, consequently, to the literary work itself. The act of reading, so expanded, becomes a giant metaphor indicating man’s constructive reaction to whatever falls under his perception. The literary work becomes, then, a written act of reading, and reading a book the reading of reading that is continuously building. But what is man constructing? Where is he going to end? History, Calvino has shown since his earliest works, does not “proceed”; progress and development are false objectives. History is here and now. Man’s constructive attitude, then, can only be directed internally, to man’s growth in the understanding of himself. The act of reading that stimulates this growth takes place with an interaction between two “things” equally alive, the reader and the text. We see, therefore, that reading is, essentially, an act of sharing. What is to be shared is a total and common knowledge, All the “things” to which knowledge pertains form a universal community that contains the total knowledge itself, such a community is, therefore, a living organism, a person or, better, a Person. It seems to me that the pieces of the puzzle are all there and that they will give shape to the ultimate Shape.