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“The Redemption of Meaning in Three Novels by Italo Calvino”

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I. *Abstract*

In this thesis I present three readings of Italo Calvino's later novels: *Invisible Cities* (1972), *If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979), and *Mr. Palomar* (1983). My primary aim is to defend Calvino against dominant scholarly interpretations that position him as a Postmodern nihilist, a literary trickster interested solely in toying with the mechanics of language. My analysis of Calvino's work re-envisioning him as a special breed of Postmodernist concerned with humanity's ability to create spaces for meaning in spite of an indifferent cosmos. Drawing from psychoanalytic theory, cognitive science, analytic philosophy, and phenomenology, I synthesize my own critical lens to demonstrate Calvino's ecstatic faith in human creativity. I claim that Calvino's later novels contain a fundamentally ethical message: they call on us to live our lives with the intensity and vigilance of the artist, to see the world as a landscape for the collective life of our minds, to endure "the inferno of the living" through acts of creation.

II. *Introduction*

Italo Calvino was born on October 15th, 1923 in a suburb of Havana, Cuba. Two years after his birth, his family returned to San Remo, Italy—the birthplace of his father—and it was there he spent the remainder of his life as a journalist and novelist. Both as a thinker and a writer, Calvino underwent several metamorphoses. His early output in the 1940s predominantly comprises wartime stories hued with Communist sympathies, bearing little aesthetic relation to his later, experimental work. From the early 1970s until his death in 1985, Calvino produced, to my mind, his greatest literary accomplishments. My thesis examines three novels from this latter phase, *Invisible Cities* (1972), *If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979) and *Mr. Palomar* (1983).

Before beginning my analysis, I must first situate Calvino in his historico-philosophical genealogy, from the 1920s through the '80s. Constance Markey's biography, *Italo Calvino: A Journey Toward Postmodernism*, provides us with a good starting point for placing the author in the context of his era. A family of agricultural scientists, the Calvinos raised their son in a manner quite at odds with conservative Italian tradition. The young Calvino grew up without religion, fueled by a scientific skepticism that permeated his later years. When he was old enough to begin his university studies, Calvino planned to follow the path of scientific agricultural studies set for him by his family; at this time, writing was more of an outlet for his political anxieties than a lifelong commitment. But his family's liberal attitudes led the young Calvino to become a "clandestine Communist [enlisting as a *garibaldisti*] opposed to fighting for the Fascist cause" and Mussolini's reign, which hung like a storm cloud over WWII-era Italy (Markey 4). After joining the Italian army and bearing witness to the horrors of World War II, Calvino felt impelled to transition from scientific agricultural studies to the humanities.

Calvino graduated from the University of Turin in 1947, the same year he published his first novel, *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* (*Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*). Unsurprisingly, his literary efforts during this early period evoke a vital social consciousness. He contributed often to the leftist *neorealismo* school of Italian literature, composing stories that mostly recounted his experiences as a compulsory member of the Fascist Youth, his dissent from the dominant political discourse, and, in general, his “anguished memories” of the Fascist regime—for example, as a bystander during the “brutal beating of an elderly socialist by Mussolini’s musclemen or *squadristi*” (Markey 5). During this period his ties to Italian Communism held fast. He found companionship and artistic support in a number of well-known *neorealismo* authors, most notably Cesare Pavese, who published Calvino’s first story (“Angoscia”) and Elio Vittorini, who published most of his major works. The young writer then took a job at the Einaudi Publishing House in Turin, where he worked until 1984, less than a year before his death. But several years after his graduation, Calvino’s relationship with the Communist party and the *neorealismo* school grew tenuous. While he always maintained a “strong identity with Italy’s oppressed populace,” his early skepticism of dogmatic ideologies prevented him from ever giving himself fully to Communism (or any movement, as we will see). According to Markey, in the mid-1950s his ties to the Communists which shaped his political writings wore so thin as to be untenable:

[The] final blow to Calvino’s Communist allegiance probably came with the brutta Soviet takeover of Hungary in 1956. In an interview years after the incident, Calvino acknowledged that the news of the Hungarian invasion, which spelled the end of personal freedom in that country, also ended once and for all his Communist Party affiliation...

From this moment on, the author's politics took on an Italian flavor, in that (not unlike other Italian writers, including the great political poet Dante), he declared himself a party unto himself. Indeed, by the end of his life, the author fairly bristled at the mention of politics. (Markey 11)

"A party unto himself" suggests his singularity in a much wider sense than I think Markey intended. Almost a decade after Calvino's political self-liberation during the reconstruction period of Italy's post-WWII independence, the author attempted to fill the chasm left by his abandonment of politics with structuralist and poststructuralist theories of language. Markey notes that the 1960s were "the high point of his career," and while I argue his literary zenith occurred roughly a decade later, it makes intuitive sense that by liberating himself from ideology Calvino could commit himself to success in creative endeavors. Eschewing direct political fiction, Calvino "became interested in experiments in narrative technique and in scholarly research in both story structure and linguistics....Little by little, via these eclectic postmodern inquiries, the social writer Calvino inevitably gave way to the restless intellectual within" (Markey 18-19).

At the root of this sea change in Calvino's literary output is the skeptical social conscience of his youth. His progressive upbringing informed his penchant for philosophizing, and insured a resistance to toxic dogmatism. Calvino's lingering discomfort with any static ideological position kept him at a critical distance from the political trends that tried to engulf him, even when it put him at odds with the European literati. Even after the "restless intellectual" had awakened within him, Calvino established himself as a special breed of artist. He produced novels whose formal technique and experimentation never overshadow the human subjectivity at their core. Gore Vidal, one of the first American critics to realize Italo Calvino's literary genius,

praised the first English translation, writing in the *New York Review of Books*: “Italo Calvino has advanced far beyond his American and English contemporaries. As they continue to look for the place where the spiders make their nests, Calvino has not only found that special place but learned how himself to make fantastic webs of prose to which all things adhere” (Vidal). To see clearly Calvino’s singularity as an artist, we must break from our dependence on Markey’s biography and examine the theories Calvino explores as more than mere experimentation. If we do not, we risk reading in his work, like so many of his contemporary critics, “empty intellectualism” or judging it worthless without a “solid political message” (19). As Markey claims, “Such a narrow critical perception of the author was only indicative of Calvino’s separate place in Italian literature” (19).

There is an unquestionable dearth of thorough, accurate analyses of Calvino’s work. As Anna Botta has noted, Italian critics too often pan the “later Calvino,” the author of *Invisible Cities*, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, and *Mr. Palomar*, as a “hedonistic involution” of his earlier efforts (81). They tend to see in these novels nothing but an abandonment of former virtue in favor of postmodern acrobatics. Other scholars continually distill his later novels into pure nihilism, obsessing over the metafictional techniques he employs rather than the messages that give his literature purpose¹. Both criticisms stem from a common source: an apparent misinterpretation of Calvino’s intention not to dismantle, but to reaffirm our ability to generate meaning through creative manipulation of language. I argue in my thesis that his fundamental purpose is to transcend the limits imposed by postmodernism using the movement’s own

¹ Though not all of them enjoy direct mention in my thesis, scholars whose arguments I aim to criticize or qualify include: Stefano Franchi’s “Palomar, the Triviality of Modernity, and the Doctrine of the Void,” Charles S. Taylor’s “Calvino’s ‘Mr. Palomar’: of bread, specialites fromageres and watercress,” Sharon Wood’s “The Reflections of Mr Palomar and Mr Cogito: Italo Calvino and Zbigniew Herbert,” and Beno Weiss’s book-length study, *Understanding Italo Calvino*.

techniques. His later work, however entrenched in the literary avant garde, never loses sight of its vivifying humanism, the power of our imagination to sustain us against a chaotic universe. At the intersection of theory and life, Calvino's novels triumph.

I have chosen to read each novel under a different interpretive lens. The first refines Jacque Lacan's work on the human experience of reality and the creation of spaces for artistic meaning in *Invisible Cities*. The second overlays cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter's notion of "Strange Loops" and Kurt Gödel's Incompleteness Theorems with Calvino's musings on the nature of reading and writing in *If on a winter's night a traveler*. The third, final chapter investigates Brian O'Shaughnessy's theory of consciousness and Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and presents a reading of Calvino's last novel, *Mr. Palomar*, informed by phenomenology, mysticism, and ecstatic interpretations of human mortality. These three chapters explore seemingly disparate theoretical territories. But I posit that reading Calvino as a postmodernist concerned with the redemption of linguistic meaning is crucial if we are to understand the manifold paradoxes of the human condition, the burden of which can be made tolerable—even ecstatic—through the creative act.

III. Chapter I: “Ambiguous Miracle” (*Invisible Cities*)

Part I: Overview

Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* is a novel of concentric places, of departures and destinations bound together by language. In the broadest possible sense, the book is an ethereal dialogue between Kublai Khan, emperor of the Mongol Empire’s Yuan Dynasty², and Marco Polo, famed Italian merchant traveler. Polo’s assignment is to explore each city in Kublai’s empire, and familiarize the ruler with his territories before the end of his reign. Though it is a matter of history that Marco Polo did indeed become the Khan’s confidant, Calvino hardly concerns himself with the limitations of fact. We learn that Polo’s fantastical descriptions of Kublai’s cities are actually complex, symbolic hallucinations that spring forth from Polo’s love for the ineffable city of Venice. Their shared dialogue, too, reveals itself to be suspended above reality—while we read a verbal exchange, Polo and Khan never move from their seats or even open their mouths. They smoke opium and converse without speaking in the ruler’s silent garden. Eventually, the text of *Invisible Cities* becomes so unstable that Polo and Khan begin to distrust their own existence within the fictive superstructure. The kind of postmodern footwork Calvino employs may suggest an over-reliance on theory and the absence of a truly human element. But, I claim, this is not the case. Understanding the problem Calvino’s novel poses for us requires several layers of philosophical and theoretical placing: In the next section, I maneuver through these layers in an attempt to untangle *Invisible Cities*, a work that probes the nature of memory and desire and traces the interplay among people, places, and the words that give them substance.

Part II: Theory, Counterttheory, Synthesis

² Calvino dubs Kublai “the emperor of the Tartars” in his novel (5).

The essay I will most heavily rely on to place Calvino in the philosophical realm of the late 1960s and early 70s is Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan's collaborative "The Class of 1968—Post-Structuralism *par lui-meme*." They articulate the relationship between Structuralism and Poststructuralism:

Structuralism, which is best represented by the work of anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, literary critic Roland Barthes, and Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, uses linguistics to find order everywhere, from kinship systems to fashion. Its successor, Post-Structuralism, uses linguistics to argue that all such orders are founded on an essential endemic disorder in language and in the world that can never be mastered by any structure or semantic code that might assign it a meaning. (Rivkin & Ryan 334)

It's helpful to think of these two movements in terms of their literary analogues, Modernism and Postmodernism. Modernism loosely parallels Structuralism both in chronology and purpose. In the midst of the existential crises triggered by World War I, Modernist writers such as T.S. Eliot attempted to find purpose in the fragments, to shore them against the ruined world.

Postmodernism, like a bird of prey, picks apart any derivable literary structures. Its adherents prefer wordplay to logic, allusion to illusion. Calvino displayed an early, if unconscious, preference for Structuralism during his *neorealismo* phase. But World War II, the Holocaust, imminent nuclear threat, and a schism with the now-Totalitarian Communist party left him dangling between a search for meaning and a reluctant acknowledgement of that search's futility. That Calvino should choose to exploit these contradictory theoretical doctrines while pledging allegiance to neither makes perfect sense given his historical and personal contexts. Against theorists and critics alike, he did not regard Structuralism and Poststructuralism as incompatible; they commingle in the atmosphere of the strange, unnerving world his fiction occupies.

In the same way that Calvino drew from a theoretical well to give substance to *Invisible Cities*, I apply similarly abstract concepts to his work. But these claims and arguments cannot exist in a vacuum, and reading his novels decades after they were written requires some qualifications. At this juncture I'd like to address certain critiques of Structuralism and Poststructuralism that have been developing since the early 1990s. Reader-Response theory, which offers one of the most complex and convincing rebuttals to the prominent literary movements of the 1940s onward, seeks to refocus criticism on the reader and his/her role in the process of interacting with a text. Norman N. Holland, a pioneer of Reader-Response, argues in his 1992 book *The Critical I* against both the "New Critics" of the 1940s and 50s and the Postmodern/Poststructuralists of the 60s and 70s. He finds flaws in the notion of textual primacy, which dismisses "biography, historical background, evaluation, everything else, really, [except] the words-on-the-page themselves" (67). Holland's takedown of Structuralism/Poststructuralism revolves around dismantling the Saussurean linguistic schemata. Saussure developed what is now known as "signification theory." Its basic claim is that the human experience of language can be diagrammed using the simple algorithm s/S, the lowercase "s" standing for the signified (e.g., the animal, horse), and the uppercase for the signifier (e.g., the word/sound, "horse"). Together, they form the linguistic/semiotic notion of a sign, a concept of a horse that, according to Saussure, functions in context of a "sum of impressions [that have been] deposited in the brain of each member of a community, almost like a dictionary..." (Saussure, qtd in Holland 131). Each sign also functions within a "system of differences" that allows us to pick out one sign from the potentially infinite collection of others. Holland attacks this broad claim from two angles: psychological and linguistic. He argues that Saussure's theory rests upon the faulty "conduit metaphor for language, the old belief that words have an inside and an outside, [which

is] surely no better than a figure of speech” (131). Psychologically, Saussure falls short because he intentionally passes over the mind-body problem, talking of “differences” and “impressions” as if they are simply part of an active text, and not a loop of text and interpreter. Linguistically, Saussure falls short because, according to Holland, his notion of signification was invalidated by Chomsky’s 1957 revolution in grammar and syntax. It’s no coincidence that Holland himself, a psychoanalytic critic, would like that Chomsky, *contra* Saussure, “focused on language as a *psychological* phenomenon” (134). Chomsky’s notion of a generative grammar can, admittedly, deal with much more complicated strings of language than Saussure’s. But Holland fails to take into account that the Saussurean system still holds water in the interpretation of fiction—especially Calvino’s postmodern fiction of the 1970s which is consciously steeped in Saussurean theory, and, to be frank, would appear nonsensical under a Chomskyan syntactical analysis. So, outdated as they may be when dealing with psycholinguistics as a real-world phenomenon, Saussure’s basic premise—that there is a network of signs (or symbols, if you prefer) that contain meaning—is crucial to certain interpretive communities that deal with the nature of signification. Just because a theory fails to reflect current accepted definitions of reality doesn’t mean it cannot shed light on a fictional text.

Again, though I must spend quite a bit of time delineating these theories and their significance within my own theoretical framework, my priority is *understanding* Calvino’s work—not dicing it up into convenient little philosophical axioms for theory’s sake. The concept I find most helpful in bridging the canyon between theory and text lies in psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s version of Saussure’s algorithm. I have no interest in trying to parse Lacan’s notion of

the unconscious or his empirically disproven mirror stage and Oedipus Complex³. Lacan's own polemics on these matters breach the incomprehensible, but the benefit of his incomprehensibility is freedom of interpretation. Almost no one uses Lacan directly. They rely on (in Holland's terms) "explicators" to do the work, and within such an interpretive chain—like a game of telephone—the original intention erodes. I embrace this phenomenon, and view the theories with which I'll be working as indefinitely malleable. Thus, what strikes me as important to my purposes is Lacan's most abstract contribution to our understanding of language. Despite Holland's excellent critique of Saussurean linguistics, even he is forced to admit that "Lacan is quite right to foreground the role of language...in our experiencing" (199). That idea results in the Lacanian reversal of Saussure's algorithm s/S, in favor of one that prioritizes language and signifier: S/s.

In his comprehensive study, *Using Lacan, Reading Fiction* (1991), James M. Mellard describes the difference between Saussure's and Lacan's model:

Saussure shows the referential concept (signified) as taking precedence *over* the word (signifier), and this he posits that the word is subordinate to what Saussure calls the "concept"...By contrast, Lacan places his symbol for signifier (uppercase S) over the symbol for signified (lowercase s). Thus, not only by the inversion but also by the contrast of the upper- to the lowercase, Lacan connotes the subordination of the signified to signifier, and, what is more, thus suggests that in the relation of the sign to some presumed "reality," the sign or what is usually called the signifier is epistemologically dominant...He [Lacan] says... "the world of words...creates the world of things" (*Ecrits: A Selection* 65). (Mellard 9)

I don't intend to weigh Lacan's algorithm against our experience of reality as tested by Norman Holland's school of linguistics. Instead, I posit the algorithm's centrality to understanding a large

³ For a systematic attack on Lacan's mirror stage, see Norman N. Holland's *The Critical I* (1992).

swath of postmodern fiction, something which by definition uses linguistic techniques to create the (fictional) world of things. What's more, Mellard claims, "as Lacan writes S/s, we must also posit an R/r, a symbolized Real that veils—or is cut off from—a primordial unsymbolized and unsymbolizable real" (10). For Lacan's purposes the difference between the Real and the real is epistemological: entering into language, we are barred from unmediated contact with objects. Since thought is impossible without language, it follows that all experience becomes linguistic experience. That is, our desires and fears become functions of the words we use to articulate them. The failure of those words to satisfy the desires that remain unarticulated manifest themselves in unconscious anxiety, or fear. According to Lacanian theory, we are never allowed back into that "primordial unsymbolized" space of the real, and so the subject is doomed to be a psychical cripple. Holland notes in his book, though, that "Lacan... writes as though there were *only* the limitation [imposed by language], no enabling" (206). A consequence of this limitation is that Lacan ends up describing "the self wholly in the language of alienation and fragmentation" (207). I disagree. Lacan's algorithm may be read as not wholly incompatible with Holland's corrective. Lacan was a psychoanalyst—a medical doctor of the mind—so, his purpose was not to leave his patients to suffer in isolation, but to accept their condition through therapy, through an imperfect communion with the other. His methods stir up a comparison between the therapist and the Modernist/Postmodernist writer. But Holland's model, taken with the S/s or R/r structure, rewires the meaning of this alienation. He offers a useful amendment that regards identity as a feedback loop which "combines traditional and poststructuralist views of persons and texts. An identity-governing feedback not only makes sense of the old idea of persons and texts as organic unities, but it also fits our late twentieth-century skepticism about such certainties or essences" (56). This means that the *barre*, the "I" symbol between Real and

real becomes one of commutability. The loop occurs as we both act on and are acted upon by language; we are simultaneously the active, participating subject and the passive receiver of a text. It makes more sense to me to look at such an algorithm, *contra* Lacan, as both a linguistic *and* mathematical entity—as a fraction in both senses: Holistically incomplete, but with its significance determined by a certain interactive relationship with the (so to speak) numerator and denominator. In other words, once we enter into language, the baseline relation from word to referent is, of course, arbitrary. But that arbitrariness takes a backseat to its function within an interpretive community. Even abstract words, like “desire” and “fear” are able to be communicated, and at least partially understood.

There are several layers to this phenomenon. Most broadly, there is that of the loop between fields of study. Peter Brooks, though he doesn't write in terms of loops, implies them in his analysis of Lacan's “dimension of dialogue” in literature (Lacan, qtd. in Brooks 343) and his emphasis on the “interplay” of the different critical lenses that examine literature. Brooks's goal through his paper is, like Holland's, to provide a corrective to psychoanalytic criticism, and suggest new methods that do more than just map literature onto the lexicon of psychoanalysis: “The conjunction [of ‘literature and psychoanalysis’] has almost always implied a relation of privilege of one term to the other, a use of psychoanalysis as a conceptual system in terms of which to analyze and explain literature, rather than an encounter and confrontation between the two” (336). It would be improper to read my theory as a way of “explaining” *Invisible Cities*. I intend it instead to be a methodology for confronting several problems within the text which cannot be analyzed with an imperial Freudian lens, but a lens that permits these problems their own contradictory motion. Brooks provides a vital psychoanalytic idea—*transference*—that needs unpacking if we are to understand how loops are a fundamental notion to dialogue *within* a

text, as well as inside and outside of it. In purely psychoanalytic terms, transference is “a realm of the *as-if*, where affects from the past become invested in the present, notably in the dynamics of the analysand-analyst relation, and the neurosis under treatment becomes a transference-neurosis, a present representation of the past” (Brooks 342). Brooks continues to explain that “the advantage of such a transferential model...is that it illuminates the difficult and productive encounter of the speaker and the listener, the text and the reader, and how their exchange takes place in an ‘artificial’ space—a symbolic and semiotic medium—that is nonetheless the place of real investments of desire from both sides of the dialogue” (344). On multiple levels, then, we have feedback loops: between fields of study, between levels of reality, between persons and texts, and between persons within texts.

To clarify this transference model, I also want to establish what is meant when I argue against Lacan for the commutability between the real and the Real in *Invisible Cities*. The real is the material world of objects unmediated by language; the Real is the world language-possessors immediately experience as a system of symbols that refer and have meaning. Though it’s not my concern here, Lacan seems intuitively correct to argue that, in a person’s phenomenal relationship to the world (such as my reading a stop sign, visiting an art museum, or looking at a tombstone), “the world of words engenders the world of things” (*Ecrits* xx). But analyzing fictional realms in this way is problematic—precisely because the engendered world of things do not actually “exist,” in the terms Lacan intended. The world fictional entities engage with is also a self-contained fictional universe; the world of words *is* the world of things, and vice versa. A large part of my argument relies on making the case that in *Invisible Cities*, Calvino himself is responsible for the creation of both worlds: the Real and the real, and thus exerts authority over their interaction in ways that are not quite possible outside the text. To summarize my theoretical

moves, I have taken Lacan's algorithm R/r and redefined the *barre* between the Rs to conform to Holland's notion of feedback loops and to suggest some sort of fundamental commutability (despite an arbitrary connection) between the dialectic of the real and the Real—the symbolized and the symbol. Secondly, I moved from Holland's admittedly vague notion of loops and clarified it *via* Peter Brooks's notion of transference-as-dialogue. What I aim to do next is dissect the algorithm and apply each piece to the loops present in *Invisible Cities*.

Part III: Theorizing Calvino

Overview:

As I've mentioned, the ultimate purpose of all this theorizing is to understand how desire and fear function in *Invisible Cities*, and to trace Calvino's own journey through Structuralism and Poststructuralism to arrive at what I call restructuralism. Through restructuralism, Calvino finds a way to transcend Structuralism's false formalism and master the void that attends Poststructuralism to redeem meaning through the engagement with and creation of art. Of course, this process occurs through a Hegelian movement of thesis (Structuralism) and antithesis (Poststructuralism) into a synthesis that involves elements of both precedents. Such a structure is mirrored in my modified R/r algorithm, and the relationship among the parts of the algorithm is delineated below. The most fundamental axiom of Calvino's movement is the symbol *city*. In "Literature as Projection of Desire," a lecture Calvino delivered in August, 1969, he hints at his purpose in creating the novel: "the way is still open for a study of the symbol *city* from the Industrial Revolution on, as a projection of the terrors and desires of contemporary man" (53). Summarizing Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, Calvino explains that "the city is the human equivalent of the *mineral* world, in its apocalyptic or paradisiacal aspects (City of God, Jerusalem, soaring architecture, seat of the king and the court) or in its demonic and infernal

aspects (City of Dis, City of Cain, labyrinth, modern metropolis)” (53). In its imagery, Calvino’s explication represents once again the order/disorder contradiction of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism. In his psychology, he argues that human beings contain a unique contradiction in their desires and fears. Calvino attempts to psychoanalyze Frye, but at a certain point he sounds like he himself is projecting: “It seems there is a conflict in him [Frye], between his passion for rigid compartments and his sensibility as a critic constantly aware of dimensions that elude every scheme and drive him on to add further schemes” (57). To my mind, the “passion for rigid compartments” suggests an affinity for the constraints of Structuralism, while the “dimensions that elude” are presumably the Poststructuralist awareness of the inexorable dissolving of the subject. Having found these binaries and contradictions, I feel it’s appropriate to move onto an application of this dense framework, towards an interaction with the book itself. The basic goal of the following sections is to use the R/r algorithm, with the city-symbol as its *barre*, as a roadmap for traversing the empire of the desires and fears that is *Invisible Cities*.

The City Symbol & R/r:

The first pages of *Invisible Cities* can be read as a lament to the fall of order and the opening of an existential abyss via the city-symbol:

In the lives of emperors there is a moment which follows pride in the boundless extension of the territories we have conquered, and the melancholy and relief of knowing we shall soon give up any thought of knowing and understanding them...It is the desperate moment when we discover that this empire, which had seemed to us the sum of all wonders, is an endless, formless ruin, that corruption’s gangrene has spread too far to be healed by our scepter, that the triumph over enemy sovereigns has made us the heirs of their long undoing. (6)

We must acknowledge that Calvino, living in post-WWII Europe, is commenting upon the fragility of power, the quickness with which it can be usurped and used for evil. The Holocaust,

the destruction of central Florence in 1943, the firebombing of Dresden and the atom bomb dropping on Hiroshima in 1945: these events informed Postmodern literature and form its backbone of existential despair. The passage also recalls the fall of Structuralism and the rise of Poststructuralism, a theoretical shift contemporaneous with a growing disgust at the consequences of Western Imperialism. But it is obvious that Calvino's concerns are no longer with the politics of history; the beginning of *Invisible Cities* establishes itself as a theory of the personal, made all the more evident in Calvino's use of the inclusive pronouns "we" and "us." In the world of the novel, we are both the emperors who reign over vast swaths of earth, as well as the "heirs to [our enemies'] long undoing." Calvino constructs his theory of the personal through the city-symbol as described in "Literature as Projection of Desire." Drawing on Biblical, Roman, and Greek mythology, he claims that the city contains both the "paradisiacal" and the "demonic." The paradisiacal aspects are those with divine order, a foundation much like the dicta of Structuralist thought. The demonic are chaotic and foundationless, resulting in the Poststructuralist "endemic disorder" described by Rivkin and Ryan. They are also analogous to the projections of human desire (for order)⁴ and fear (of chaos). And so, the city-symbol at its core represents the self, an edifice with all the contradictions of our condition contained within it.

One of the most important aspects of the city-symbol is its relationship to the Real/real dialectic. We come to understand later in the novel that Polo's descriptions in the City-Chapters ("Cities & Memory," "Hidden Cities," etc.) are not of cities within Calvino's fictional world that he claims to describe, but stand-ins for the undescribed and perhaps indescribable Venice, which

⁴ For all his interest in desire, there is a fascinating dearth of explicit and implicit sexuality in Calvino's work. This is especially true in *Invisible Cities*, in which Calvino uses "desire" not in the psychosexual sense relating to *jouissance*, but as a substitute for the traditional Western conception of order or structure.

exists just outside of language. Calvino introduces the realization so beautifully that I'll quote it at length:

Dawn had broke when [Polo] said: "Sire, now I have told you about all the cities I know."

"There is still one of which you never speak."

Marco Polo bowed his head.

"Venice," the Khan said.

Marco smiled. "What else do you believe I have been talking to you about?"

The emperor did not turn a hair. "And yet I have never heard you mention that name."

And Polo said: "Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice."

"When I ask you about other cities, I want to hear about them. And about Venice, when I ask you about Venice."

"To distinguish the other cities' qualities, I must speak of a first city that remains implicit. For me it is Venice."

"You should then begin each tale of your travels from the departure, describing Venice as it is, all of it, not omitting anything you remember of it."....

"Memory's images, once 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." (87)

Recall that, to Lacan, the basic problem of commutability between the real and the Real was epistemological: one cannot know the real simply because it remains outside language, and therefore, for all practical purposes, doesn't exist. Against this, I claim that in Calvino's novel the realms interact at a fundamental level, and that precisely because the book is a self-contained linguistic universe the author becomes the arbiter of the R/r algorithm. Seemingly in line with Lacan, Polo tells the Khan that he has described "all the cities [he] knows." Yet, paradoxically, there is one city, Venice, that he does know, but cannot speak of, for fear of losing its memory. In fact, Venice is the unseen informant of *all* the cities in the novel. Thus, the epistemic issue is

null. Knowledge of the spoken-of cities *requires* at least some knowledge of silent Venice.

What's more, if the real contains our unmediated desires and fears and the Real manifests them as symbols, then the city-symbol finds itself pulled between the two opposing registers.

But how does the city-symbol function within the modified R/r algorithm? To understand this, we must first depict the relations among each piece and its contents: the Real, the *barre*, and the real. I return briefly to James Mellard, who anticipates a potential misreading of Lacan's realms, or registers, of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real: "one must remember that *all* registers *always* interact, and so any separations such as proposed here are totally arbitrary" (141). Since I focus solely on the Real/real distinction, Mellard's emphasis on *interaction* rather than separation harmonizes with a broader claim: that although Calvino's novel is divided neatly into two "types" of chapters, the interplay of the R/r algorithm permeates the text without regard to structure. There are two proper sections to Calvino's narrative: framed sections (City-Chapters), which are descriptions of the cities as Polo relates them to Khan. In these chapters, the city-symbols exist as partial manifestations of the real through Polo's unmentionable Venice. The second section comprises the frames themselves (Dialogue Chapters)—third-person omniscient narrations of the dialogue between the two figures. They are more firmly rooted in the Real as reactions to the city-symbols which occur in the first section, where Polo and Khan can communicate. A third section, beneath the surface of the text, contains what I'll call the Venice-real, and is the source of Polo's desires, fears, and stories. The text proper, as Kathryn Hume notes, comprises "almost entirely the inner workings of one or of two minds, and 'exchanges' are sometimes completely imaginary or wordless" (133). What Hume seems to mean by this claim is that the novel draws attention to the unspoken, especially in the case of the city-symbol R/r interaction that occurs within the text. Early in *Invisible Cities*, Marco Polo

warns Khan of the risks of such fluidity: “No one, wise Kublai, knows better than you that the city must never be confused with the words that describe it” (61). Note that I am not arguing that there can be knowledge without language: the unsymbolized city is unknowable until it becomes a symbol through words and signs. What I mean is that the city-symbol itself functions as a modified *barre* throughout the three sections, which allows the real to inform the Real: Not only are the city-symbols the loci of Polo’s stories, they also are products of the desires and fears located in the Venice-real that cause both Polo’s impulse to relate the tales and Khan’s anxiety about the meanings they contain. Polo himself reminds Khan that although the word and its referent mustn’t be confused, “between the two there is a connection” (61). Moreover, he tells the Khan, “Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else” (44). *Invisible Cities*, then, is not just an account of Calvino’s progress through Structuralism and Poststructuralism into restructuralism, but also the redemption of meaning itself through understanding the way our desires and fears function within us.

Polo, Khan, Transference, & R/r:

Since we have already placed Calvino as arbiter of the Real/real loop and discussed how the city-symbol/Venice-real operate in terms of the Lacanian algorithm, let us next position Marco Polo and Kublai Khan within those realms. It would be difficult, however, to discuss Polo’s and Khan’s relationship to the R/r algorithm without first reading them in terms of transference as Peter Brooks presents it. The structure of Calvino’s novel is, we’ve seen, a dialogue between two pseudo-historical figures—Marco Polo and Kublai Khan. Polo is consumed by a desire to travel and tell stories. Khan is terrified of losing his empire, and has

enlisted Polo to traverse it and divert Khan from his imminent loss (and death) with tales from its cities. The way their dialogue functions mirrors that of a psychoanalytic therapy session. We become aware of that possibility when we recognize the “artificial space” the dialogue occurs in. Beno Weiss, in his essay “The Combinatorial Play of Narrative Possibilities,” writes of the setting of *Invisible Cities*: “Since there are no characters, no plots, no events, but only timeless patterns in these metafictional narratives, the world external to Kublai Khan’s court cannot live or become visible except through the conversations or meditations that constitute the text itself” (147). Though it was unintended by Weiss, his statement is a description of the ideal Lacanian psychoanalytic session. What this allows us to do is apply Peter Brooks’s notion of transference to Polo’s and Khan’s interaction. Recall the two main sections to Calvino’s narrative: framed sections, which are descriptions of the cities as Polo relates them to Khan (and us), as well as the frames themselves—third-person omniscient narrations of the dialogue, real or imagined, between the two figures. In both sections, according to Weiss, Polo attempts to “help his master understand the ‘invisible order’ that regulates human existence,” much like a psychoanalyst would try to uncover the hidden complexes or neuroses that influence one’s desires or fears (148). Though Polo slightly inverts the conventional analyst-analysand relationship by communicating at a frequency usually reserved for the patient, there is strong evidence for making this analogy. Those in power often seek psychoanalytic treatment. Polo attempts to locate Khan’s desires and fears and alleviate them so he may know himself through his empire. Khan “asks questions, discusses, contradicts, and tries to find a pattern that would allow him to make sense” out of Polo’s tales and wisdom (Weiss 146). Any complications that arise in the details of their relationship actually give weight to the argument of the commutability between the Real and the real via hazy interactions between Polo and the Khan. Polo, to show the unseen

structures that “cannot be understood by logic alone” (148), must symbolize the Venice-real through his tales, so that Khan may come to understand the order that escaped the destruction of meaning and the deterioration of Khan’s empire described in the first pages of the novel.

So not just the city-symbols or the Venice-real, but Polo’s and Kublai’s relationships to them become key to understanding the R/r and its inherent feedback loop. I have created a venn diagram to visualize the categorizations:

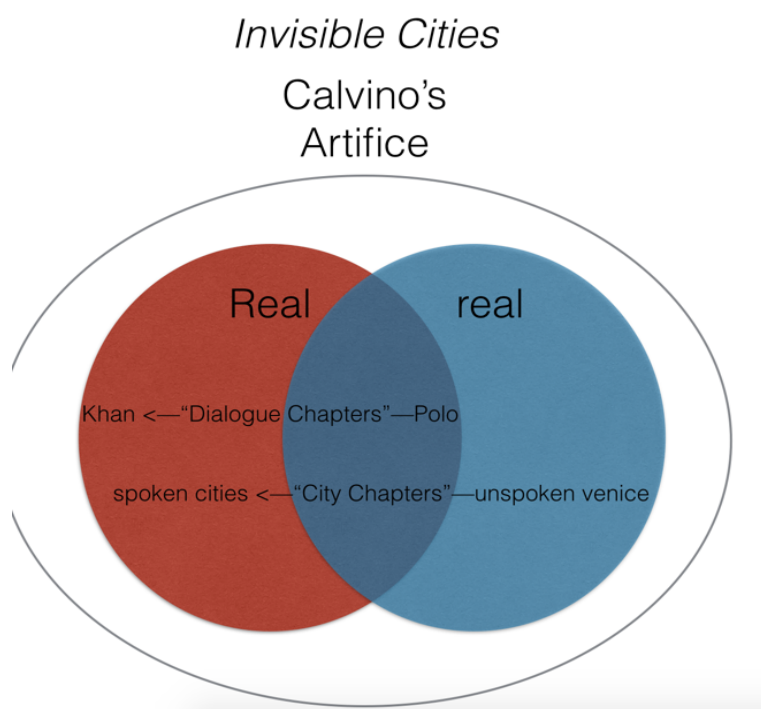


Figure 1. R/r Diagram

In *Figure 1*, I illustrate how the cities are inaccessible to Kublai Khan, analogous (for him) to the Lacanian real. To the Khan, his empire is a vast collection of cities, a network of selves seen from the vantage of remote authority. At this critical distance, the empire becomes a “formless ruin” and each city-symbol is indistinguishable from the next. He can interact with them only through Polo’s mediation, and thus remains firmly in the symbolized Real. Polo, however, has the ability through storytelling to access the real via unspoken Venice, and thus provides Kublai

with an occasional sense of wholeness during the twilight of his reign. For this reason Kublai enlists him to give new meaning to his territories, since only in Marco Polo's accounts was Kublai Khan "able to discern...the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termites' gnawing" (6). There are times, however, when glimpses of the real become too much for the Khan, when their therapy sessions shake the foundations of his beliefs. The fluidity with which the real and Real interact within Polo's stories disturb him: "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" (43). At this moment, Khan ceases listening to Polo, and reconstructs details from elements of past cities to form his own. Of course, the liminal space the two exist in forces Khan's creation to loop back into Polo's. Polo responds to Khan's description skeptically, telling him, "your mind has been wandering. This is precisely the city I was telling you about when you interrupted me" (43).

Their interaction here is the first of several that suggest Polo's access to the real via Venice informs Khan's understanding of the Real via his empire. Yet Khan is confounded by the revelation that Polo's tales are fables and the cities he describes have no referent to his empire at all. Bursting with anger, he attacks Polo, yelling, "confess what you are smuggling: moods, states of grace, elegies!" (98). We never receive any such confession. Instead, Khan's knowledge of Polo's unspoken Venice destabilizes the novel's entire Real. During their next conversation, both emperor and traveler question their very existence within the artifice of the book. Kublai Khan notes that he "is not sure [he is] here...and not riding...at the head of [his] army, conquering the lands [Polo] will have to describe" (103). In response to this, Polo gives us his own metaphor for the R/r loop that finally surfaces within the very text of the novel: "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" (104). Alluding to the modernist Structuralism of T.S. Eliot, Calvino seems to make the beautiful image of the hanging garden a symbolic representation of the wasteland, the real. That they "cannot know" which realm exists in their minds and which in their material experience suggests that the epistemological issue I dealt with earlier lies not in reality's inherent unknowability, but in the instability of the division between Real and real.

The notion of a binary with a fluid *barre* is further echoed throughout the City-chapters. "Eusapia" from "Cities & the Dead," is a place where "the inhabitants have constructed an identical copy of their city underground" to "make the leap from life to death less abrupt" (109). The relation of living to dead is also inverted and looped, and "the dead...built the upper [living] Eusapia, in the image of their city. They say that in the twin cities there is no longer any way of knowing who is alive and who is dead" (11). It seems, as Beno Weiss argues, that "the invisible order that rules our existence, as well as that of cities, is like the logic (or illogic) that gives order to dreams" (148). While I agree with the beginning of Weiss's argument, I lose faith in it when he continues on to write that "Calvino seems to be indicating that thought and reason destroy reality at the very moment of thinking" (149). His theoretical moves here seem reductive, and don't take into account the intricate relationship between articulated and unarticulated desires/fears that occur within the R/r algorithm. He relies too heavily on a Platonic vs. phenomenological distinction, praising Polo and the Khan for not confusing "the Idea with the Particular" (151), or, in other words, the Real with the real. But, as Polo reminds the emperor earlier in the novel, "between the two there is a connection." That is what the algorithm explores: the loop between the paradox of a city built by the dead, a particularly salient articulation of the commingling of visible and invisible.

We also encounter one more kind of binary whose *barre* erodes within Polo and Khan's dialogue. It stands out from the rest of the novel because the contradiction attaches itself to a specific image system: the chessboard. While the two men play chess, Khan, "a keen...player," ruminates that "If each city is like a game of chess, the day when I have learned the rules, I shall finally possess my empire, even if I shall never succeed in knowing all the cities it contains" (121). What Khan desires here is the kind of Structuralist order mentioned in the contradiction of the city-symbol; he attempts to find some sort of fundamental axiom through which he can deduce a method for possessing the real through the Real. Of course, as soon as he attempts to do this, the Khan is overwhelmed by the arbitrariness of the rules, the meaninglessness of the game. In an almost Hegelian fashion, the order of the game contains its chaos, so the motion into meaninglessness happens without explicit prompting. Kublai Khan falls into a Poststructuralist despair, the antithesis of his former optimism.

the game's purpose...eluded him. Each game ends in a gain or a loss: but of what? What were the stakes?...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.... (123)

Khan, again, is looking in the wrong place for solace. The "extreme operation" is the annihilation of meaning distinctive of Poststructuralist thought. In forcing himself to choose between order and chaos, fundamental axioms and nothingness, he, like Weiss, ignores the importance of the reflexive paradox which contains both and permits movement beyond them.

Before moving onto the final part of my discussion of the chessboard image system, something must be mentioned about the nature of metafiction and narrative. Robert Scholes, in

his 1979 book *Fabulation and Metafiction*, gives us a definition of fabulation (for him, a word synonymous with metafiction) quite in line with the one outlined in my Lacanian algorithm: “Fabulation...means not a turning away from reality, but an attempt to find more subtle correspondences between the reality which is fiction and the fiction which is reality” (8). This notion is a radical challenge to the popular conception of Postmodern metafiction writers who have “turned [their] back[s] on reality to play in a purely verbal universe” (8). It is also very similar to the conception of the fabulistic Calvino I have been arguing for over the course of this chapter. In a later essay on Borges, one of Calvino’s greatest influences⁵, Scholes notes that:

Poems are made of words, and reality is not; yet there is something...between the words and reality which is important. In this case there are actually two things: a “scene” evoked by the words, and an “accent” that seems to inform them. This scene and this accent, then, are mediations between language and the world. Born of words, they have nevertheless moved beyond words toward experiences...Artful writing offers a key that can open the doors of the prison-house of language. (10)

It is exactly this sentiment that I wish to express in the final part of my analysis. This moving beyond of language evoked by Calvino is part of the “invisible order” that Polo has been attempting to describe to the Khan. It is the Hegelian synthesis of both order and disorder, “between language and the world.” What we arrive at is a loop, acting as a meaning-producing prism—the locus of artifice that necessitates a multiplicity of meaning. The chessboard, then, will become not a vessel for axioms or a plane of nothingness, but something more, a thing at once articulated and containing the ineffable.

⁵ For an excellent, if brief, study of Borges by Calvino, see “Quickness,” from *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*.

In a later dialogue-chapter, we see how Calvino's image system of the chessboard becomes a metaphor for the redemption of meaning through the creation of narrative. Much like Peter Brooks's notion of an "artificial space" in which therapy occurs, Calvino shapes a space in which we can reconstruct meaning in the wake of Poststructuralist despair. Khan is once again lamenting the uselessness of chess (and analogously of knowing his empire), when Marco Polo speaks, pointing out that the chessboard "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" (131). He is, in effect, asking Khan to look at the chessboard more closely and view it as a venue for potential narratives and meanings. By using the binary of the ebony and maple squares on the chessboard to arrive at a notion totally removed from the rules of chess, Polo's statement envelops both the Structuralist notion of order and the Poststruc transcendence of such limiting axioms. The theoretical movements examined here are also contiguous with my modified Lacanian algorithm. A second venn diagram illustrates their architectural similarities:

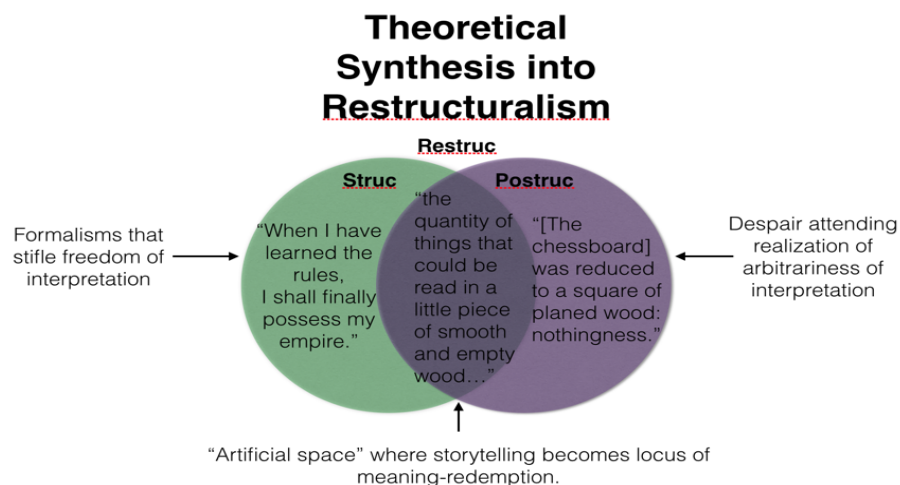


Figure 3. Restructuralism Visualized

Applied to Khan's empire, Polo's response speaks to the restructuralist conclusion contained in the R/r algorithm that, yes: the glorious empires of both city and symbol are "destined to crumble," but beyond the fleeting beauty and indeterminate wreckage of place and self there is the story of them. That is the binding relationship between them. The theoretical progression into restructuralism also mirrors the intersecting of the Real and the real through Polo's Venice and allows for the preservation of meaning in the fictional zone. Khan himself, having heard Polo's conclusion, is "overwhelmed" by "the quantity of things that could be read in a little piece of smooth and empty wood," let alone in the multiplicity of an empire—however rotted it may be.

But Polo's suggestion has further implications. It is not merely the awareness of the multiplicity of meaning that is important to its preservation, but active, conscientious choice and ascription, like the kind occurring in the creation of art. According to John Updike, *Invisible Cities* is both a "metaphor for the artistic experience" and a "riddle for communication" (Updike, qtd. in Weiss 160). Weiss ends his lengthy study of the novel with Updike's words, but still considers *Invisible Cities* a book that "offers far more questions than answers," and whose conclusion presents no "useful lesson, except, perhaps, that there is no lesson to learned" (159). This seems to me like an unfittingly Poststructuralist claim to arrive at, especially when we have seen that, both in the novel and his nonfiction, Calvino has expressed discomfort with such absolutism. Calvino, in his discussion of the book, admitted that his goal was to create "a network in which one can follow multiple routes and draw multiple, ramified conclusions" (*Uses of Literature* 73). This idea, whose claim seems at least indirectly opposed to Weiss's argument, leads us to a discussion of the final paragraph of the novel. Khan, admiring the atlas of his empire whose territories contain not a single named city, says to Polo: "You, who...see signs, can tell me toward which of these futures the favoring winds are driving us" (164). When Polo

fails to give an answer that is not “discontinuous in space and time,” and therefore useless to the materialist Khan, Kublai despairs further, lamenting that “It is all useless, if the last landing place can only be the infernal city, and it is there that, in ever-narrowing circles, the current is drawing us” (165). The “ever-narrowing circles” recall both the ouroboros-esque loops that we have been analyzing, as well as something more: Calvino here is forming a final intertextual analogue between his work and Dante’s *Inferno*, with the Khan/Dante and Polo/Virgil binaries in place. This analogy is brief and implicit, and so doesn’t necessitate a full treatment, but the essence of it is this: Polo has been leading Khan on a “journey through memory” (98) in an attempt to alleviate the wounds that power has marked upon his psyche. His intent has been to teach the Khan how to read meaning in the apparent abyss of his empire, and thus to teach us to do the same with the empires of our minds and our worlds. By the novel’s end, Calvino, through Polo, moves away from his abstract riddles and presents us with his most lucid answer to the questions of the book.

For the entirety of *Invisible Cities*, Polo has been offering the emperor opaque shards of wisdom, labyrinthine anecdotes shrouded in myth and mysticism. But the strengthening we’ve seen of the comparison between Calvino’s and Dante’s works also result in the answer to the questions raised by the R/r algorithm and its analogues. And while this answer contradicts Weiss’s claim that there is “no lesson to be learned,” it is surely not didactic, but strikingly simple and humane. At the apex of Khan’s fear about the imminent “infernal city,” Polo presents us with his most lucid response to erode away the *barre* between the city-symbol and self, real and Real, that binary of the “paradisiacal” and the “demonic”:

And Polo said: “The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it 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 such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.”
(165)

Here, Calvino is at his most metafictional and self-referential; Polo’s advice is directed at both reader and writer. The artist must be constantly vigilant in the midst of inferno, forging narratives and literally “giving them space” for meaning. The reader, too, engages with that space and participates actively in its manufacturing. For Polo, access to the Venice-real and his psychical exploration of the mind’s empire has given him the ability to respond to Khan’s (and our own) most self-destructive fears about the implications of meaninglessness. He calls on us not to reject the void that Poststructuralism uncovered, but to accept and use it as a vessel for the multiform potential kinesis of art. A third, final venn diagram illustrates the relationship of the inferno to its antithesis, and the liminal space where art and meaning arise:

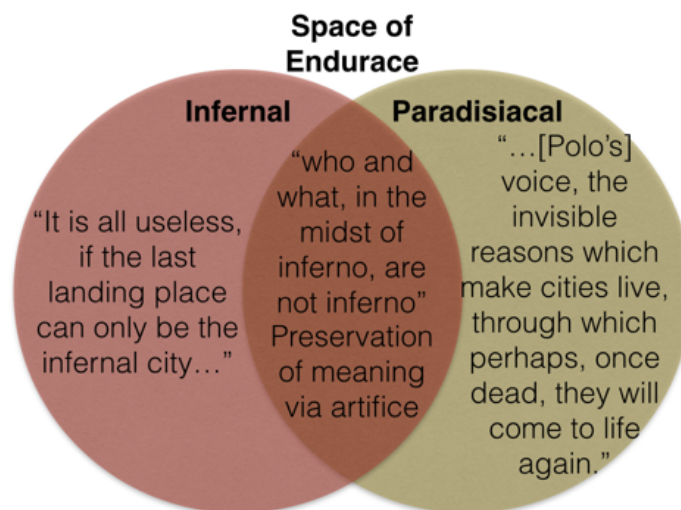


Figure 3. Locating the “Space of endurance.”

And so it is that those whose stories are told escape total damnation. It's important that we never read Khan's response to Polo, because we don't have to; the lesson Polo gives us is too powerful to warrant further dialogue. But that silence we experience at the end of *Invisible Cities* also feels as if Calvino is asking us—not just Khan—to participate in the novel's final movement.

Calvino's message that with enough "vigilance and apprehension" Khan may flourish in the paradisiacal aspects of the inferno, suggests that we, too, can erode the *barre* that restricts us from applying Polo's wisdom to our lives in a profoundly pragmatic way, through the creation and experience of meaningful space. And thus, what is most beautiful about *Invisible Cities* is not its preoccupation with theory, but with *practice*. The grandest aim of my R/r algorithm was to foster in readers of Calvino the realization that his penchant for theoretical musings results in a book that appears to resist theory—until the goal is no longer theory, but a basic acceptance of humanity's paradoxes of order and disorder, an acceptance that only attends the creative act and experience.

IV. Chapter 2: “Avoiding the Void” (*If on a winter’s night a traveler*)

Introduction: Two-Part Fugue on Calvino & Hofstadter:

If on a winter’s night a traveler (1979) is a mindbending, metafictional “hypernovel” written partly in the second-person, a linear detective story narrated to an unnamed “you” by an unnamed speaker, at once interrupted and echoed by the first chapters of ten allegedly unrelated novels constructed in the first-person “I.” The book concerns itself with a number of complex philosophical issues: the fragmentation of self in both the first and second person; the possibility of translating meaning between reader and writer, or reader and reader; and the connections between levels of reality in literature and in life. 1979 also saw the publication of a hugely influential work of philosophy, Douglas Hofstadter’s *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*. Awarded the 1980 Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction, Hofstadter’s book combines mathematics, philosophy, and cognitive science to explain consciousness and the human condition. My analysis of Calvino’s novel springs from the postmodern tradition of applying mathematical and scientific concepts to literary works, a process founded on the idea that “mathematics is metaphoric because it describes universals” (Stark qtd. in Koehler 81). My aim is to provide an analysis of *If on a winter’s night a traveler* that reveals a profound interconnectivity between Hofstadter’s work and Calvino’s novel. In this chapter of my thesis, I re-envision *Gödel, Escher, Bach*’s concept of Strange Loops and its attendant notions of self-reference, recursion, isomorphisms, and formal systems as a theoretical lens vital to understanding Calvino’s explorations into the nature of reading, writing, and language itself.

What is a Strange Loop?:

In *I Am a Strange Loop*, the memoir-esque counterpart to *Gödel, Escher, Bach*,

Hofstadter gives us one of his clearest definitions of a Strange Loop:

What I mean by ‘strange loop’ is...not a physical circuit but an abstract loop in which, in the series of stages that constitute the cycling-around, there is a shift from one level of abstraction (or structure) to another, which feels like an upwards movement in a hierarchy, and yet somehow the successive ‘upward’ shifts turn out to give rise to a closed cycle. That is, despite one’s sense of departing ever further from one’s origin, one winds up, to one’s shock, exactly where one had started out. In short, a strange loop is a paradoxical level-crossing feedback loop. (101-102)

This is as precise a definition as we can hope to get of a “genuine” Loop, such as those that emerge in the Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorems and (*GEB* argues) in human consciousness. Hofstadter himself knows that it is a frustratingly abstract description, and so he provides us with examples of “illusory” Loops, those which create apparent paradoxes (Escher’s *Drawing Hands*; Bach’s *A Musical Offering*) but upon further investigation turn out to be extraordinarily clever tricks: Escher himself drew the hands in *Drawing Hands*; they are not *actually* drawing each other. And Bach’s *Musical Offering* quite literally riffs on the fact that, for example, an ascending series of key changes starting on Bb eventually reach the next Bb, albeit an octave higher. Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night* can be counted among these “illusory” Loops; in fact, I find his work to be even more involved in the phenomenons of consciousness and identity, because his clever trick extends outside the text and actually attempts an implicit dialogue with the reader, using the first-person “I” and the second-person “you” to (de)construct assumptions about the relationship between writer, reader, and text.

GEB: A Brief Entry-point Gloss:

Gödel, Escher, Bach proposes that consciousness arises from a vast network of neural layers—of quantum, subatomic, atomic particles, of neurons, brain tissue, areas, and cortices operating in harmony⁶. He devotes large sections of his work to creating analogues in art, music and mathematics, via thorough analyses of M.C. Escher’s drawings and lithographs, J.S. Bach’s fugues and canons and Kurt Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorems. *GEB* posits that these creative figures illustrate his concept of a Strange Loop, and that looking for Strange Loops in the work of Gödel, Escher, and Bach affords us a more complete comprehension of their artistry. In addition, Strange Loops function as a metaphor for understanding how meaning, in whatever form it may come, arises from the passive symbols of musical notation, arithmetic, and texts.

Italo Calvino, Inter-Disciplinarian:

The early influence of mathematical and philosophical logic on Calvino’s writing, strikingly clear in *If on a winter’s night, can*, in part, be linked to his relations with the French Oulipo school. Founded in 1960 by novelist/poet Raymond Queneau and writer/chemical engineer François Le Lionnais, the school sought to combine mathematical and literary techniques to explore new threads of possibility in postmodern literature. Its aim was to define literature as “not the product of an exterior romantic inspiration, but instead the intentional, painstaking creation and invention of new structures or forms from the hidden potential of our everyday language” (Botta 83). Often, this discipline-blending took the form of systematic constraints on the members’ creative works—a paradigmatic example is Georges Perec’s 1969

⁶ This notion is further expanded in his memoir, *I Am a Strange Loop* (2007), which I will reference occasionally, since it was written to reiterate and clarify Hofstadter’s central theses.

novel *A Void (La Disparition)*, from which the letter “e” is conspicuously absent. Calvino, while never impelled to take his fiction quite to Perec’s level of constraint, did adopt a general strategy of employing a quasi-mathematical logic to his writing, and much of his non-fiction is dedicated to explicating this “*ménage à trois*: philosophy, literature, and science.” The unifying attribute among these three fields, he writes, is that they make “patterns of the world that are immediately called in question” (*Uses of Literature* 45). In a 1985 interview with BBC, Calvino suggests the integral role of the mathematical metaphor in *If on a winter’s night*: “I tried to give a symmetry, a geometry to my plot.” He then proceeds to show the British interviewer his systematic diagrams for each chapter of the novel, including one labeled “il romanzo logico-geometrico.”

The diagrams, which are also coupled with graphs, charts, and other things seemingly trivial in the literary ephemera of a novelist, are in fact illustrative of his philosophy of literature, and prove quite useful in finding preliminary connections between Calvino and Hofstadter. Calvino most fully explains his complex philosophy in “Levels of Reality in Literature,” a lecture first published in *The Uses of Literature*. Though the collection itself was published in 1980, “Levels” was presented in 1978, during the last phases of *If on a winter’s night a traveler*. Therefore, his arguments here are well-suited to my purposes. “In a work of literature,” he maintains, “various levels of reality...may melt and mingle and knit together, achieving a harmony among their contradictions or else forming an explosive mixture” (101). The way Calvino describes levels of fiction and reality is at its core directly analogous to Hofstadter’s Loops. They are closed cycles, patterns of empty or contradictory assertions in which every shift, from metachapter to subchapter, from one character to the next, even from the world the reader outside the text inhabits to the world of the Readers themselves, is both progression and

regression, and is suspended, as Calvino writes, “over a precipice... a bridge over the void,” while at the same time somehow producing meaning (*winter’s night* 82).

Hofstadter’s Isomorphic Meanings:

In chapter one of *GEB*, Hofstadter presents us with the first of several arguments concerning the isomorphic production of meaning in a formal system, and, as we will see, in *Strange Loops*. An “isomorphism,” or “information preserving transformation,” occurs “when two complex structures can be mapped onto each other, in such a way that to each part of one structure there is a corresponding part in the other structure, where ‘corresponding’ means that the two parts play similar roles in their respective structures.” Such phenomena result in a “significant advance in knowledge...and...*meanings* in the minds of people” (49). It would seem, then, that if isomorphisms are integral to meaning-production, and the overarching thesis of *GEB* is that the conscious ability to produce meaning arises from *Strange Loops*, that all three of these concepts—*isomorphisms*, *meaning*, and *Loops*—are too closely related to be discussed entirely separately. Eventually, we will see that the relatively simple idea of *isomorphisms* is the kernel from which we can understand the far more advanced notions of *self-reference*, *Strange Loops*, and *Incompleteness*. For now, it is enough to discuss Hofstadter’s notion of *meaning production* at a rudimentary level.

To clarify his thesis, Hofstadter creates and interprets a basic arithmetical system, “*p-q*,” which contains what he calls a “*symbol-word correspondence*” (50). *p-q* is the much simpler relative of *TNT* (*Topographical Number Theory*), a powerful formal system that demonstrates more intricately the ideas expressed here. The most basic aspect of *p-q*, and every mathematical system henceforth, is that it contains “*strings*,” some of which are *theorems*—strings that, when

well-formed and decoded properly, yield a true statement inside the system—and nontheorems—strings that yield false or uninterpretable decoding. For our current purposes, it is sufficient merely to illustrate the fact that an isomorphic interpretation of a true theorem of the p-q system generates meaning. A string of p-q may look like this: - - p - - - q - - - - -. The most obvious interpretation, Hofstadter suggests, is to see the symbols in our string as a simple addition problem: $2 + 3 = 5$. In that case, the symbol-word correspondence gives us a completely new and surprisingly familiar result: A ‘mapping’ between the two structures (p-q and English) would look like:

$p \iff \text{plus}$
 $q \iff \text{equals}$
 $- \iff \text{one}$
 $- - \iff \text{two}$
 etc.

Hofstadter is quick to caution that just because an isomorphism is found, that doesn’t mean it is the only one. He gives us a second interpretation of the p-q system involving subtraction, in which every well-formed string that yielded true in the first isomorphism also yields true in this one. Therefore, at the most fundamental level, Hofstadter’s system mapping “force[s] us into recognizing that symbols of a formal system, though initially without meaning, cannot avoid taking on “meaning” of sorts...if an isomorphism is found” (51).

The observer’s involvement in meaning production is one of the most important concepts *GEB* provides, especially for my later treatment of recursion and self-reference. Before I move onto Calvino’s relevance to Hofstadter’s isomorphisms, it seems beneficial to include an illuminating example from *GEB*. Hofstadter describes the art of M.C. Escher as frequently occupying multiples levels of reality/fantasy simultaneously. A piece like *Drawing Hands* (1948) involves a Strange Loop that contains several levels of isomorphic meaning production, both

inside and outside the frame of the work itself. The consequence is that “the mere presence [of multiple levels] invites the viewer to look upon himself as part of yet another level; and by taking that step, the view cannot help getting caught up in Escher’s implied chain of levels” (23). This theoretical relevance to interpreting art is fundamental to my analysis of Calvino’s novels, which exhibit an Escher-esque disregard for the boundaries of formal systems, while somehow maintaining the integrity of those systems.

Calvino’s Level-Crossing Isomorphisms:

If on a winter’s night a traveler blooms with isomorphic phenomena—in fact, the correspondences among isomorphisms are an integral part of Calvino’s artifice. At the broadest possible level, we must first acknowledge the work of William Weaver, who spent almost twenty years translating most of Calvino’s fiction from the original Italian. Weaver, writing on his relationship with the novelist, calls himself an “intruder”; he notes that “writers do not always translators, and I occasionally had the feeling that Calvino would have preferred to translate the books himself” (*Paris Review*). But Weaver was able to produce the novel under analysis precisely because acts of translation involve meaning-preservations from one set of symbols (Italian) to another (English). Once the initial and arguably most important isomorphism has allowed monolingualists to understand a noble approximation of Calvino’s writing, we may proceed into the text itself.

The central storyline of *If on a winter’s night* traces the dual quest of two readers, the Reader (“you”) and Other Reader (Ludmilla), to obtain a complete copy of a novel, after having

discovered that their original copies of “Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler*”⁷ are unfinished due to a seemingly innocent printing mishap. Talking to the bookstore owner, they discover the text contained in “*If on a winter’s night*” was actually from *Outside the town of Malbork*, a Polish novel (allegedly) by Tazio Bazakbal. Again, their attempts at moving beyond the first chapter of Bazakbal’s novel are interrupted by a second printing error. Impediments like these continually guillotine each of the stories embedded in the numbered chapters. Eventually, the Readers uncover a Japanese government conspiracy involving nine other novels published throughout the world, the novels-within-the-novel that comprise *If on a winter’s night*’s Scheherazadian⁸ structure. The head of this international publishing conspiracy is the malevolent translator Ermes Marana; its primary victim is Irish novelist Silas Flannery, whose artistic decline has caused Marana to enlist an army of “ghost writers, experts in imitating the master’s style in all its nuances and mannerisms,” to publish works under his name (121). Each of these ten fraudulent novels, the various mediating narrators claim, “has nothing to do with the one you were reading” (33). But this claim is cleverly misleading: while on the one hand the details of the plot and the names of the characters differ in each embedded story, themes, arcs and messages recur, establishing an intricate relationship among embedded stories and between the embedded and numbered chapters. Indeed, they suggest a catalogue of separate novel genres (the international thriller, Japanese erotica, neo-noir, etc.), furthering the implicit isolation of each one. As with Escher’s *Drawing Hands*, the apparently self-contained levels form a Strange Loop in which the containing levels and the levels contained intersect and map onto each other,

⁷ Quotations here are meant to indicate the fictional version of Calvino’s novel contained within the actual novel of the same name.

⁸ Scheherazade is the Arabic queen and primary storyteller in *One Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of Asian folktales employing framing devices that influenced Calvino’s style in *If on a winter’s night*. He makes explicit reference to *One Thousand and One Nights* numerous times throughout the novel.

isomorphically. For the purposes of analyzing Calvino in terms of Hofstadter's Strange Loops, I will employ a lexicon that is more appropriate to discussing the dense hierarchical meshwork of Calvino's novel: numbered chapters will be referred to as metachapters, and the titled chapters as subchapters, although, as we shall see, this dualistic relationship is much more complex and problematic than these labels suggest *prima facie*.

There are four distinct isomorphic levels that must be understood before I present a more complex analysis of the function of Strange Loops within these levels: Level 1: the character of the Reader mapped onto the human reader outside the text via the second person "you"; Level 2: the character of the Writer mapped onto the human author (implicitly, Calvino) via the first person "I"; Level 3: the character of the Reader mapped onto the character of the Female reader; Level 4: the characters of the metachapters mapped onto the characters of the subchapters. I will return to these level-distinctions continually in order to clarify them and show their intersections.

Level 1: The first word of the novel, "you," contains implicit system mapping, and is vital to understanding the particular Strangeness of Calvino's Loops. In creating a nameless character out of the reader⁹, Calvino maps his fiction onto reality in such a way that it both distances and engulfs. The act of reading therefore becomes a mediating level between the two structures of reader-in-the-world and Reader-in-the-novel. This is the most obvious isomorphism of the second person narration—that it seeks to generate meaning by imposing a blatant system of rules beyond the fourth wall, extending outside the boundaries of the text proper and refracting back the *imago* of the Reader who is holding *If on a winter's night* onto the reader who is holding *If on a winter's night*. The narrative provides a set of possible realities, recalling Hofstadter's multiple interpretations of symbols/words in the p-q system, that the Reader can inhabit:

⁹ From this point, "the reader" will refer to the human being, outside the text, who is reading; "The Reader" will refer to Calvino's character, addressed in the second person.

Find the most comfortable position: seated, stretched out, curled up, or lying flat. Flat on your back, on your side, on your stomach. In an easy chair, on the sofa, in the rocker, the deck chair, on the hassock. In the hammock, if you have a hammock. On top of your bed, of course, or in the bed. You can even stand on your hands, head down, in the yoga position. With the book upside down, naturally. (3)

Of course, a major difference between Calvino's fiction and Hofstadter's system is that the symbol-word correspondence in *If on a winter's night* is not concerned with a perfect mapping; it would be absurd to think if the reader does not actually begin reading *If on a winter's night* in any of the possible physical positions given to The Reader, his interpretation of the physical text is meaningless. Calvino's intent here is not to make the reader conform to the isomorphism between herself and The Reader, but rather to make her aware that a system is being imposed, and to look for the phenomenon throughout the text.

Level 2: Most obviously in the subchapter "*If on a winter's night a traveler,*" Calvino gives us the purpose of the unnamed narrator, "I": "the author, since he has no intention of telling about himself, decided to call the character 'I' as if to conceal him...still, by the very fact of writing 'I' the author feels driven to put into this 'I' a bit of himself, of what he feels or imagines he feels" (15). So, the same phenomenon that occurs with "you" occurs also with "I"—an imperfect isomorphism that allows for the fictionalization of those interacting with the text (human reader, author) into characters ("you," "I") and therefore, allows for the extraction of meaning outside the fourth wall, reimagined inside it.

Level 3: A third isomorphism occurs explicitly in Chapter two, after the female counterpart to The Reader (appropriately dubbed Other Reader) appears in a bookstore where the original subtext, a fictionalized version of "Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler,*" was

purchased. Calvino describes the Reader's inability to focus on the act of reading, distracted by the memory of his encounter: "Your reading is no longer solitary: you think of the other reader, who, at this moment, is also opening the book; and there to be superimposed by a possible novel to be lived..." (32). The superimposition of the Reader's life onto his reading of the novel is a direct analogue to the reader-in-the-world's relationship to the Reader-in-the-novel. When the text itself functions as a mediating vehicle between the two levels of reader and Reader, Calvino describes the book that has now bound the Reader to a metafictionalized correspondent in the novels he is about to read (and to the Other Reader, whose relevance we will discuss later on) as "an instrument, a channel of communication, a rendezvous" (32). Then, presciently: "something has been added" to the act of reading; precisely—another level has been mapped onto the fiction. When their passion is consummated in chapter seven, Calvino writes that it is not pure interpersonal attraction, but the force of the written (and unwritten) word that weaves together the male and female Readers into "the second person plural" (154): "the voice of that silent nobody made of ink and typographical spacing...a language, a code between the two of you, a means to exchange signals and recognize each other" (148). The Reader-lovers distill their zeal for literature into zeal for one another's bodies, and so, the phenomenon of language which has thus far mediated the reader-outside-the-text's experience entire also undergoes an isomorphic translation into the sex act: "Ludmilla, now you are being read...And you, too, O Reader, are meanwhile an object of reading" (155).

Level 4: The isomorphism between metachapter and subchapter characters is the *coup de grace* to any inkling of a traditional narrative in the text. In chapter seven, Ludmilla, the Female Reader, is asked, "if the book can succeed in drawing a true portrait of you, beginning with the frame and enclosing you from every side, establishing the outlines of your form" (142). The

question is put in such a way that it seems to resonate on multiple levels throughout the hierarchy of the novel, with Calvino punning on “frame” and “form” and “outlines” as both physical human characteristics as well as attributes of his hypernovel. Indeed, the metachapters serve as frames, or more appropriately, outlines for the subchapters. For instance, the subchapter following chapter seven, “In a network of lines that intersect” (whose very title speaks volumes on the matter) both describes and is part of the same process of stationary movement that recurs over and over again throughout all levels of the text, “in which the same elements converge in a dissimilar pattern” (161).

Though the metachapters contain a somewhat linear narrative (I use the phrase with caution), their focus is always on the subchapters, always chasing or concealing their meanings, and thus, the meanings of the metachapters as well. “Progress in reading,” an unnamed narrator notes in chapter three, “is preceded by an act that traverses the material solidity of the book to allow you access to its incorporeal substance” (42). That, I think, suffices to define one function of the metachapters useful for our purposes: what precedes the substance of the novel(s) to be read are the possible novels “to be lived” (32). The subchapters, too, address a similar realm of incorporeality; “each beginning [or subchapter] develops in very different ways from a common nucleus, and each acts within a framework [or the metachapters] that both determines and is determined,” Calvino writes in his essay “Multiplicity” (*Six Memos* 120) They are not stories that we read through our own subjective lenses as readers, but are mediated by a separate first-person narrator, dictating to you the details of the reading experience instead of displaying them outright as in a traditional narrative. “If on a winter’s night a traveler,” the first subchapter, opens isomorphically to its corresponding metachapter (“You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*” (1)): “The novel begins in a railway station, a

locomotive huffs, steam from a piston covers the opening of the chapter, a cloud of smoke hides part of the first paragraph” (10). Already, we have significant level-crossing—the story apprehended by the reader has first gone through a separate apprehension by a mysterious narrator, both distinct from and part of the narrator of the actual subchapter’s story. Calvino provides us with this first image of an obscuring cloud of smoke to heighten our awareness of his intrusive devices. In “outside the town of Malbork,” the second subchapter, we get another astonishing instance of isomorphic self-referentiality.

Every moment you discover there is a new character, you don’t know how many people there are in this immense kitchen of ours, it’s no use counting, there were always many of us...the sum never works out properly because different names can belong to the same character, indicated according to the circumstances.... (35)

Calvino toys with his readers here, using the inclusive pronoun “us” and allowing the second person “you” to lure the audience into the sub- not just the metachapters. He also hints at a Hofstadterian level-crossing, mentioning the fluidity of names, and resultant the conflation of identity—what the narrator calls “the vertigo of dissolution” (37).

Both the differences and the similarities between meta-and sub-chapters invite a discussion about the text itself, which seems to be a discoverable entity wedged somewhere between meta- and sub-; all this complication and we are still left to deal with the liminal realm in which the action of the shapeshifting text occurs, free from any narrator mediating apprehension. I claim that no such realm exists, and any illusion of an unmediated storyline is a psychological phenomenon, a Strange Loop, emerging from Calvino’s devices occurring in both sub- and metachapters. The apparent dualism of meta- and subchapters is a false one: there are three levels which interact in a tripartite model of sub-text, meta-text, and imagined ‘text.’ Yet

precisely because the middle level is illusory, the kinship between Hofstadter's notions and Calvino's artifice are finalized. Writing of M.C. Escher's *Metamorphosis* series (1940), Hofstadter explains that "for any one level, there is always another level above it of greater 'reality,' and likewise, there is always a level below, 'more imaginary' than it is" (*GEB* 15). In Calvino's case, the reality/irreality of such "above" and "below" distinctions becomes muddled—there is an implied middle ground which corresponds to the text itself, the thing that the reader apprehends in spite of the "you" protagonist and the "I" narration. Hofstadter, borrowing from popular linguistic lexicon, calls this level the "object language," the language which is being talked about in the metalanguage (*GEB* 22). Calvino addresses this phenomenon when he writes, "literature does not recognize Reality as such, but only levels" (*Uses of Literature* 120). The external reader's attempt to locate the unified storyline is replicated isomorphically in the Reader's original quest to obtain a copy of "*If on a winter's night a traveler*"; no such "text" exists in the capital-R Reality of the novel¹⁰, nor can it exist, since as soon as it is defined, it morphs into something else, something no longer definable in terms of its previous definition. Each act of trying to assign a singular meaning to any level of *winter's night* forces the reader into:

a space full of stories...where you can move in all directions, as in space, always finding stories that cannot be told until other stories are told first, and so, setting out from any moment or place, you encounter always the same density of material to be told. (109)

The account of this "level of reality" occurs in a subchapter, but can be transposed onto many different levels at once via a Hofstadterian isomorphic process. Below I will refer to the

¹⁰ For a longer study of the way "capital-R Reality" functions in Calvino's postmodern novels, see chapter one of this thesis, "Ambiguous Miracle."

spatial level discussed here as the ‘object’ level, so that it refers to the illusory experience of reading the version *If on a winter’s night* without Calvino’s mediating trickery. While it would be foolish to suggest that no physical incarnation of *If on a winter’s night* exists (unless we are to question, trivially, our most basic sensory capabilities), Calvino does invite us to question whether or not there is a “text,” a story beneath the mediated “I” in the subchapters which prevents a true narrative experience from occurring, and above the “you” in the metachapters, whose imperfect isomorphism to the reader creates a self-referential tension. In an Escher woodcut such as *Metamorphosis II*, one can easily see the transformation of bee into fish, fish into bird, because the observer, the external “I,” is not trapped inside the Loop. *If on a winter’s night*, however, is merciless in its self-reference. The stories contained in the novel thus attempt to become *our* stories—the novels “to be lived,” but, as I claimed in my section on isomorphisms, the lives of the reader and the Reader are fundamentally incongruous. A novel simply cannot contain the infinite “combinatoria of experiences...[and] things imagined” that comprise the multitude addressed by the second person “you” (“Multiplicity” 124). To cope with this fact, Calvino must swing back and forth like a pendulum between “you” and “I,” writing instead of a “text” a “dialogue constructed on the void” (83).

An important digression: The word “void” appears more than thirty times in *If on a winter’s night*, and much of the dazzling pyrotechnics of the novel depend upon understanding its implications. In my reading of Calvino, the void is analogous to the lurking lack of meaning behind the written word that would invalidate such gorgeous concepts like the language-body-mapping of Level 3. It is this multiplicity, so evident in the novel’s overwhelming levels and mappings, that becomes the cavalry of Calvino’s crusade against “the summons of the void, the temptation to fall, the join the darkness that is beckoning” (87). Such reminders about the void

often lead to “vertigo,” another frequently used word that seems to contain galaxies full of interpretative fodder. In chapter five, Mr. Cavadegna, a publisher and an unwitting slave to the publishing conspiracy, laments of his condition, “When I think about it I have an attack of vertigo” (98). But the wider cause of his anxiety becomes evident in the next line, an anxiety that plagues anyone who has profoundly experienced language, reader and writer, even text, equally: “he covers his eyes, as if pursued by the sight of billions of pages, lines, words, whirling in a dust storm” (98). But Calvino is not a cynic; if he were, he would not have written such a complex homage to the written word. He battles the void by avoiding it (“avoid” also appears around a dozen times throughout the novel), hiding, not behind the passive symbol-word correspondence or in the abyss of meaning, but in his innumerable constructions of reality levels and their crossings and impositions. It seems appropriate to borrow a passage from the narrator of “In a network of lines that intersect” as a mission statement on behalf of Calvino: “It is my image that I want to multiply, but not out of narcissism or megalomania, as could all too easily be believed: on the contrary, I want to conceal, in the midst of so many illusory ghosts of myself, the true me, who makes them move” (161-62). This is the “object” text, always on the precipice of meaninglessness, Calvino’s own “incorporeal substance” that blooms from the Strange Loop among reader, Reader, writer, and word.

Unbraiding the Braid: Russell’s Attempt to Banish Loops:

Vital to understanding how Strange Loops work in Calvino is the origin story of what Hofstadter deems the most important Loop in Western philosophy. A significant portion of *Gödel, Escher, Bach* is dedicated to explaining the unsuccessful attempt of Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead, in their *Principia Mathematica*, to create a logico-mathematical system

that was both complete (all true statements could be contained inside of it) and consistent (no paradoxes; a thing and its opposite could not exist within the same system). The primary issue they sought to eliminate was “Russell’s paradox,” a contradiction in logician Georg Cantor’s theory of sets. Cantor’s set theory deals with managing different sizes of infinities. There is not enough time or space to give a detailed summary of set theory up until the 1880s, when Cantor developed his ideas, but suffice it to say that a set is a grouping of any objects sharing a quality: for instance, all things that are blue would fall into a “blue” set; all objects that have two legs would fall into a “bipedal” set, etc. Cantor’s work, in Hofstadter’s words, was “powerful and beautiful, but intuition-defying,” and this basic push against intuition led Russell to search for contradictions buried in Cantor’s conceptualization. Russell’s paradox, put simply, is this: in Cantor’s set theory, one would have to allow for “self-swallowing” sets as well as “run-of-the-mill” sets. The difference between the two can be illustrated as follows: “run-of-the-mill” sets are so named because, for example, the set of all blue things isn’t itself a thing that is blue. “Self-swallowing” sets, however, are far more complicated, and acknowledging them created the tremor that culminated in Gödel’s earth-shattering paradox. A “self-swallowing” set “contains itself,” e.g. “the set of all sets that do not contain themselves.” The paradox lies in the fact that this “set of all ‘run-of-the-mill’ (non-self-containing) sets” becomes a member of itself only if it is *not* a member of itself.

This disturbed Russell and Whitehead immensely. So, as an addendum to Cantor’s “theory of sets,” they formulated a “theory of types” in the *Principia Mathematica*. Hofstadter calls the work “a mammoth exercise in exorcising Strange Loops [self-containment, and therefore self-reference] from logic” (21). Put as simply as possible, Russell & Whitehead’s theory divides all objects, sets, and sets of sets, etc. into “stratifications” that would eliminate

Russell's paradox. The whole system was thought to be perfect, and took years of ingenious philosophical footwork. Yet, as his life's task was being sent to the press, or so the story goes, the intellectual juggernaut Russell hears of Kurt Gödel's revolutionary Incompleteness Theorems—in which he renders Russell's *opus* not only incorrect, but philosophically uninteresting—and runs to the printer to add a caveat to the text. Gödel destabilized centuries of philosophical pursuit using an extremely complicated application of self-reference to number theory via the ancient Epimenides paradox. This paradox, far more dangerous to logic than Russell's, occurs (in layman's terms) when one reads or utters the sentence: "This sentence is false." As Hofstadter puts it, the consequence of the utterance "rudely violates the usually assumed dichotomy of statements into true and false, because if you tentatively think it is true, then it immediately backfires on you and makes you think it is false. But once you've decided it is false, a similar backfiring returns you to the idea that it must be true" (*GEB* 20). Gödel found a way to code number theory in order to make it talk about itself like the Epimenides paradox does, in such a way that the statement, 'I am not a provable statement of number theory in the *Principia Mathematica*' is both "unprovable in *PM*...and...true" (*I Am a Strange Loop* 165). What this means for Russell and Whitehead is that, because a true statement is unprovable in their system—one of the most powerful logical systems the world has seen—their ultimate thesis has been undermined: the *Principia Mathematica* is neither consistent nor complete, because, if one hole in a system is found, there exists an infinite number of them (165). Earth-shattering, most definitely.

Calvino's Parody of a Perfect System:

The tale of Russell v. Gödel is an important one if we are to understand Hofstadter's work—what he calls "thinking bout thinking" (*Strange Loop* 25)—in terms of Calvino, whose *If*

on a winter's night is a “novel about novels” (Weiss 167). A persistent narrative motif of *If on a winter's night* is the struggle to make order out of chaos, to compartmentalize systemic relations among readers, writers and texts—in essence, to banish Strange Loops, in which all levels of a system act upon and are acted upon, interdependently. Beno Weiss’s essay, “Calvino’s Ultimate Hypernovel: *If on a winter's night a traveler*,” addresses the novel’s order/chaos dichotomy as well. Though we draw largely different conclusions, I will rely on and respond to Weiss’s insights into Calvino’s artifice to scaffold my argument.

As *If on a winter's night* progresses, early instances of isomorphic meaning-production are expanded and given shape, since each character (inside and outside the text of *If on a winter's night*, as well as inside and outside the meta- and subchapters, as well as the very “text” itself) tries to find a meaningful way to escape the “void,” Calvino’s elusive anxiety about meaninglessness. Whereas Weiss tries to locate Calvino’s authoritative voice behind the characters in *If on a winter's night*, my analysis begins from the premise that Calvino is a chameleon, a true postmodernist whose “authority” lies in pastiche, in the Strange Loop of relationships among the characters. In chapter eight, there exists an analogue to Russell’s philosophy in what I call Calvino’s “theory of types.” Calvino describes three separate kinds of meaning-creation, which I will characterize in Hofstadter’s lexicon: the Russellian, represented by Lotaria, who attempts to impose rigid systems on texts; the Gödelian, represented by Ermes Marana, whose meaning exists in the destruction of such systems; and the nouveau-artistic, a kind of reader represented by Ludmilla, who revels in the “tendency to explore the capacity of...art to *not* express anything—just to *be*” (*GEB* 699).

Importantly, chapter eight is sub-headed “From the diary of Silas Flannery”—another layer of narrative interposed between the reader, the Reader, and the author. Flannery, a novelist

in an artistic slump, meets Lotaria, the sister of Ludmilla (Other Reader). Lotaria's method of reading is analogous to Russell's method of logical analysis. It involves running books through a computer that "can read a novel in a few minutes and record the list of all words contained in the text, in order of frequency," thus giving her a "fairly precise notion" of the text (Calvino 186). Lotaria's method sends Flannery spiraling into of self-doubt, painfully aware of his artistic impotence, because it removes the author from his work and therefore his participation in the generation of meaning:

The idea that Lotaria reads my books in this way creates some problems for me. Now, every time I write a word, I see it spun around by the electronic brain, ranked according to its frequency, next to other words whose identity I cannot know, and so I wonder how many times I have used it, I feel the whole responsibility of writing weigh on those isolated syllables, I try to imagine what conclusions can be drawn from the fact that I have used this word once or fifty times. Maybe it would be better for me to erase it....But whatever other word I try to use seems unable to withstand the test....perhaps instead of a book I could write lists of words, in alphabetical order, an avalanche of isolated words which expresses that truth which I still do not know, and from which the computer, reversing its program, could construct the book, my book. (189)

To Flannery, here, once the work has been deconstructed, there is no hope of putting it back together and still preserving its integrity—even the destructive act gives one only a 'fairly precise notion,' not the exactitude that any kind of system aims for.

Calvino then presses Lotaria's method of generating textual meaning against that of her most obvious counterpart, her sister Ludmilla. 'I have read all your novels,' Ludmilla says to Flannery with a kind of urgency that leads us, as readers, to believe her interest in reading is

diametrically opposed to her sister's mechanisms, since she has herself actually *read* them. In fact, Flannery relates a direct metaphorical opposition: "[Ludmilla's] ideal model...is the author who produces books 'as a pumpkin vine produces pumpkins,'" (189). The simile is in line with several other summations of Ludmilla's reading style throughout the novel, which Weiss gives us in his analysis of Chapter eight: "For her, reading 'is going toward something that is about to be, and no one yet knows what it will be...' (72); and the novel should have 'as its driving force only the desire to narrate, to pile stories upon stories' (92) and 'make you feel uneasy from the very first page' (126)" (Weiss 177). Her way of reading, in other words, is unnervingly similar and dissimilar to her sister's: both remove the author from the Loop of meaning-creation, the reader interacting solely with the (however mangled) text. So, *contra* Weiss, I claim that Ludmilla creates problems for Flannery as well: the broken novelist is distressed that Ludmilla's dualistic separation of writer and text makes him "nothing but an impersonal graphic energy, ready to shift from the unexpressed unto writing an imaginary world that exists independently of [him]" (190). He reels, desperate to reestablish "the physicality of existing," feeling "jealousy...of that me made of ink and periods and commas...separated from her by the immense distance of a keyboard and a white page on the roller" (*winter's night* 191).

I turn now to Weiss's conclusion on the subject of the relationship between Calvino and Flannery/Ludmilla: Weiss argues that Flannery's character "is revealing because it allows us to penetrate Calvino's most intimate ideas pertaining to the relationship between writer, reader, and text...Calvino lays bare his artistic spirit [in these] meditations" (176-177). Flannery, if he is to be conceived as Calvino's alter-ego, notes that a text "will continue to have a meaning only when it is read by a single person and passes through his mental circuits" (176). Similarly, Weiss also argues that Flannery's conception of Ludmilla allows her to become the "powerful reader

who controls the outcome of the narrative texts' because she 'can never be satisfied with the books she is reading" (Weiss 177). But this all seems oddly incongruent with the nature of Calvino's novel and his examination of interacting with texts. Despite the superficial similarities between Calvino and Flannery, the fictional novelist is riddled with doubt, too obsessed with his potential readers' reactions to produce anything of value: "Why not admit that my dissatisfaction reveals an excessive ambition, perhaps a megalomaniac delirium?" (181). It also doesn't follow that Ludmilla's own dissatisfaction is enough to endow her with power over text, even if that satisfaction destabilizes Flannery's notion of his own identity. Let us recall that the novel in which Ludmilla is a character would infuriate her as a reader—*If on a winter's night* makes evasion a priority, and the complex, overlapping systems of *Loops* seems like less the product of a pumpkin vine than the ineluctable refractions of an infinite hall of mirrors.

The kind of rigid formality evident in Russell's struggle also appears in Lotaria's use of a computer; his theory of types in Lotaria's division of frequencies; even her extraction of meaning from her division of word-frequency parallels Russell's inclination to use a fewest possible number of axioms to arrive at philosophical conclusions. And while Lotaria's method seems hopelessly opposed to her sister's Zen-like approach to reading, Ludmilla, too, enacts a similar destruction of the author's place in the Strange Loop of reader, writer, and text. For this very reason, in terms of my Hofstadterian analysis, Lotaria and Ludmilla are actually two sides of the same coin in Russell/Gödel problem. Ludmilla, though, serves to locate for Silas Flannery the novel's true Gödel-analogue, Ermes Marana. Marana is the rogue translator whose aim is to create a "literature made entirely of apocrypha, of false attributions, of imitations and counterfeits and pastiches," and who tellingly chooses Flannery, the stifled novelist whose method of writing is transcendently natural, as his target. Marana's sworn duty is to find holes in

systems, and, as Ludmilla laments, “whatever he touches, if it isn’t false already, becomes false” (152). He is a personified Epimenides paradox who never appears in the text of *If on a winter’s night*, much like Gödel’s Incompleteness formulae never “appear” in the *Principia Mathematica*. He is a phantom terror, a trickster and a forger who thrives on a kind of uncertainty that haunts Flannery, in his effort to create some truth out of his writing. Eventually, after having seen the failure of his readers’ (Lotaria’s and Ludmilla’s) ability to connect with him, Flannery resolves to work with Marana. “I would like to find Ermes Marana again to propose we go into partnership and flood the world with apocrypha,” Flannery thinks, “because writing always means hiding something in such a way that it then is discovered...because there is no certitude outside falsification” (193).

Marana’s existence in opposition to Flannery’s “organic” style of writing leads the struggling Irish novelist to a central paradox of the text. Marana at first appears to Flannery “as a serpent who injects his malice into the paradise of reading” (125) but, as we have seen, the ripple effects of his forgeries eventually cause Flannery to reconsider his position. Marana represents for Flannery the death-rattle of the author’s role in meaning-production, reducing him to a timid ghost trapped in ink splotches, each sentence a pale effigy of the author’s identity. Such a metonymic obstacle is echoed earlier in the Reader’s desire to destroy the unfinished copy of *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, to “let [the Venetian blinds] shred its incongruous quires, let sentences, words, morphemes, phonemes gush forth, beyond recomposition into discourse” (*winter’s night* 26). Flannery maintains a crippling anxiety about reductionism, or deconstructionism, with the destruction of meaning into “not-being... lost in the most absolutely guaranteed undeniable negativity” (26-27). But the issue of Marana’s role branches into two

opposed camps, illustrated by the competing factions of his Organization of Apocryphal Power, a locus of the publishing conspiracy and the headquarters where Flannery's novels are forged:

Apocryphal Power, riven by internecine battles and eluding the control of its founder...has broken into two groups: a sect of enlightened followers of the Archangel of Light and a sect of nihilist followers of the Archon of Shadow. The former are convinced that among the false books flooding the world they can track down the few that bear a truth perhaps extrahuman or extraterrestrial. The latter believe that only counterfeiting, mystification, intentional falsehood can represent absolute value in a book, a truth not contaminated by the dominant pseudo truths. (129)

Even here in this subplot, the Lotaria-Marana issue emerges: The followers of the Archangel of Light want to locate core truths that will bring objective knowledge about the universe, much like Russell's quest for immutable logical axioms; the followers of the Archon of Shadow seem to know that by finding holes in systems, by inverting the truth value of the subjective experience of interacting with a text, they will banish such notions as objectivity or completeness, like Gödel's theorems ruining Russell's life's work.

Where does Calvino stand in relation to these issues of meaning-production? He doesn't; he loops. That these opposing factions of light and shadow cohabit the same novel, and that neither one is particularly victorious over the other, speaks to Calvino's embracing of both traditional storytelling and postmodern fragmentation represented by the characters of Flannery and Marana, respectively. Flannery is horrified at the prospect of fragmentation, a basic tenet of postmodern literature and a total negation of the circuitual unity he praises above. Calvino embraces discontinuity to the point of creating a "hypernovel" consisting solely of looping fragments. The crucial event at the end of chapter eight fortifies my assertion, when Flannery

resolves to write the novel that we read him in: “I have had the idea of writing a novel composed only of beginnings of novels...I could write it all in the second person: you Reader...” (198). Of course, the obvious result of such games is that Calvino, the author, controls the outcome—his characters are pawns in a superstructure of self-reference and recursion, concepts addressed and applied below.

This Title ‘This Title Precedes Recursion & Self-Reference in GEB’ Precedes Recursion & Self-Reference in GEB:

Self-reference has thus far in my project only received a contingent analysis, but it is at the heart of the Epimenides paradox (“This sentence is false”), Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorems, and *If on a winter’s night a traveler*. In a discussion of TNT, Hofstadter’s formal system which suffered an analogous Gödelian fate to the one in Russell’s *Principia*, Hofstadter notes, “The essence of [TNT’s] vulnerability was that it was capable of expressing statements about itself...” (465). Accepting self-reference as intrinsic to logic means that linear methods no longer yield the most precise analyses of even the most powerful systems, and asserts their “essential incompleteness.” The fate of Russell’s *Principia* was undoubtedly a crushing blow to early 20th century philosophical logic, but it is my aim not to mourn but to celebrate his failure. Without it, all the profound complications revealed by Gödel’s self-referring statements of number theory would have gone unnoticed, and Strange Loops would still lurk underneath feeble axioms, and you would not be reading this sentence.

At its most basic, self-reference in language occurs when a phrase or sentence talks about itself in such a way that it seems to occupy both levels of “object” language and meta-language¹¹ simultaneously. In chapter sixteen of *GEB*, “Self-Ref and Self-Rep,” Hofstadter provides us with a drawing that illuminates basic linguistic self-reference, and the Strange Loopings of the Epimenides Paradox:

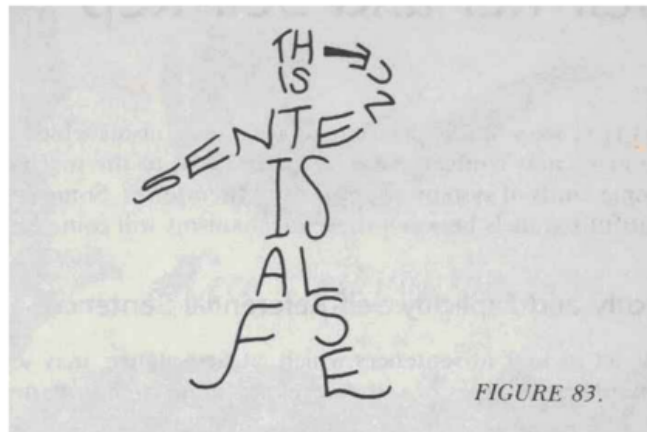


Figure 4. Epimenides Paradox Visualized

“On one level,” writes Hofstadter, “it is a sentence pointing at itself; on the other level, it is a picture of Epimenides executing his own death sentence” (496). In addition to the chapter’s aim to link self-reference and self-replication, Hofstadter also seems to point out at a correlation between self-reference and self-destruction. A paradox of this kind will reveal itself as paramount in my final discussion of Calvino below.

¹¹ The term ‘Meta-language’ here is only tangentially related to my concept of *winter’s night’s* metachapters discussed earlier; in the above context it means the language that is talking about the object language. E.g., In the sentence “The sentence ‘Stai per cominciare a leggere il nuovo romanzo *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore* di Italo Calvino’ is the first sentence of Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler*.” the English is the metalanguage and the Italian is the object language. When both object and meta- are the same language, things get complicated very quickly, as the English translation of *winter’s night* demonstrates.

Recursion is a notion in many ways linked to self-reference, though these connections are not immediately apparent. There are many different forms of recursion—general recursivity, primitive recursivity, recursive functions—but the form examined here is much less daunting than those others, though just as rich in philosophical potential. Hofstadter notes in chapter five of *GEB*, “Recursive Structures and Processes,” that “The concept is very broad. (Stories inside stories, movies inside movies, paintings inside paintings, Russian dolls inside Russian dolls (even parenthetical comments inside parenthetical comments!))—these are just a few of the charms of recursion.” (127). He then gives us two deceptively simple terms that will recur in my final discussion of Calvino below: “pushing” and “popping.” Pushing “means to suspend operations...and to take up a new task...on a lower level”; popping is “the reverse—it means to close operations on one level, and to resume operations...one level higher” (128). In *Strange Loops* there is constant interplay between pushing and popping, as we have seen in the multilevel-crossing isomorphisms of *If on a winter’s night*. The metachapters “push” into the sub-s, and the subchapters “pop” back out into the meta-s, and in the process each level “determines and is determined” by the others.

But *If on a winter’s night a traveler* is fundamentally a different creation than, to use one of Hofstadter’s examples, a “fancy telephone” capable of pushing into and popping out of levels by putting callers on hold (*GEB* 127). Calvino’s novel, like Gödel’s Theorems or Escher’s *Print Gallery* (lithograph, 1956), combines self-reference and recursion to form a Strange Loop capable of engaging the external observer in its tangles, taunting him to ask: “[Have] I been kidnapped by myself?” (*winter’s night* 168).

Gödel's All the Way Down: Recursion & Self-Reference:

Calvino's concealed identity swaying above the void takes refuge like a shadow reflected, bouncing from level to level, between meta- and subchapters of *If on a winter's night*. The result is an intricate Strange Loop from which emerges what I called the 'object' text. A more precise look into how this Loop functions involves applying the theories of recursion and self-reference summarized above on the three primary levels of meta-, sub- and "object"-levels—a step beyond acknowledging that they intersect. It at first may seem trivial to analyze recursion in *If on a winter's night a traveler*, since we have already examined at length the functions of the meta- and subchapters: it is hardly an epiphany that our entrance into an embedded story of any given subchapter is a "push," our exit back into metachapter a "pop." But inside both meta- and subchapters, certain webs of relations recur, self-refer, and destabilize each other. Like the isomorphisms discussed earlier, recursion maps symbols to generate meanings on different levels of a system. But when a system recurs self-referentially, it takes on an almost mystical quality to it, calling out from the verge of infinity. We have already examined Calvino's anxiety that the "void continues into the void," a notion that suggests he's highly invested in humanity's relationship to the infinite in the negative sense. But let us focus again on the cavalry of his crusade against meaninglessness, the most important Loop in *If on a winter's night a traveler*.

Near the end of *Gödel, Escher, Bach* Hofstadter makes an important claim:

Where language [creates] strange loops is when it talks about itself, whether directly or indirectly. Here, something *in* the system jumps out and acts *on* the system, as if it were *outside* the system. What bothers us is perhaps an ill-defined sense of topological wrongness: the inside-outside distinction is being blurred....(691)

“Topological wrongness” is a phrase vital to understanding the dilemma. Topology is the mathematical study of shapes, space and their properties. In a number of senses, *If on a winter’s night* is indeed prone to an apparent “wrongness” of form because its self-referentiality warps “what you presume are clean hierarchical levels...and folds [them] back in a hierarchy-violating way” (*GEB* 691). The self-reference which occurs through such a topological warping of meta- and subchapters creates the illusion of an unmediated reading of a single “object” text; Calvino tricks us into forgetting his myriad tricks. Hofstadter, again writing of Escher, comments on *Drawing Hands* (lithograph, 1948): “we seem to see a self-drawn picture if we look at *Drawing Hands* and somehow fall for the illusion, by forgetting the existence of Escher” (*GEB* 691). The same can be said of Calvino, because if we fall for his illusion and let ourselves be woven into the text, it refracts back onto us, reflecting our actual absence from both the meta- and subchapters, and thus, the absent presence of an “object” text: “the images try to reoccupy these voids but achieve nothing except to assume the hue of dreams forgotten the instant they appear” (*winter’s night* 225). But the rub is the resolution. The illusion of wholeness tries to decouple itself from the illusion of completeness, but both, in turn, form a loop, a hierarchy in which they are indistinguishable from one another. Even this very analysis isn’t spared from the cyclone of Calvino’s near-omnipotent self-referring recursion: in chapter two, we, the readers, *vis a vis* the Reader, notice upon reading the subchapter “*If on a winter’s night a traveler* by Italo Calvino,” “themes that recur, [that the] the text is interwoven with these reprises...” (25).

In broader terms, the phenomenon of self-referential recursion is demonstrated by the apparent paradoxical “completeness” of the narrative arc in the metachapters coupled with the “essential incompleteness” of the ten beginnings that comprise the subchapters. You, the Reader, decide to marry Ludmilla, and a “great double bed receives your parallel readings” (260), while

in the subchapters each protagonist “sense[s]...that in the perfect order of the universe a breach had opened, an irreparable rent” (67). As we have seen, it is vital to acknowledge that each pushed-in subchapter in some way alters the nature of the popped-out metachapter. After all, they are contained within a single novel, and, veiled as it may be, Calvino intended *winter’s night* to exist in all its paradoxes: even the last sentence of the novel contains several contradictions of sorts. The Reader, in bed with his counterpart Ludmilla, delays the imminent lapse into dream, telling her to wait “Just a moment, I’ve almost finished *If on a winter’s night a traveler* by Italo Calvino” (260). The sentence, which appears to pull together so many of the novel’s thematic strands into a clean series of parallel lines, actually leaves us with a tangle of incompleteness; “almost finished” even has the same abrupt resonance as Lotaria’s “fairly precise notions” of Silas Flannery’s novels. The chapter is indisputably a cheery one, but Calvino does not adopt his tone because he has triumphed over the fragmentation of his stories. On the contrary, it is the very paradoxes of his novel, the fact that “literature does not recognize Reality [as a whole]...but only *levels*” that lets him sublimate joy out of the “essential incompleteness” of *winter’s night* and the murky boundaries of its levels.

Especially important to Calvino appears to be the paradox of life and its own perpetual incompleteness, an alternating sequence of creation and destruction that seemingly stretches through history and space into the infinite. In this way, the Loop of reader, writer, and text within the novel extends outwardly as metaphor for an even larger Strange Loop, most fully realized in the coupling of the last subchapter, “What story down there awaits its end?” and chapter eleven. Recall that this is the same seeming contradiction Hofstadter points out in his visual interpretation of the Epimenides Paradox: the unification of self-replication and self-destruction, whose recursive impetus is self-reference.

Avoiding the Void: Calvino's Final Loop:

In “What story down there awaits its end?,” Calvino presents his most comprehensive and frightening depiction of the void *via* the efforts of the unnamed “I” to “mentally erase the elements I have decided not to take into consideration” (244). The narrator’s arrogance, which recalls Bertrand Russell’s desire to reduce the world to its most basic axioms, resonates throughout the narrative as he complains: “The world is so complicated, tangled, and overloaded that to see into it with any clarity you must prune and prune” (244). Amid erasures of his coworkers and office buildings, a single desire begins to emerge: “Franziska is a friend,” he says, and right away we must pick up on both the order/chaos motif as well as the attempted love story on the verge of unfolding. “When I run into her, I feel a great joy” (245). Events become more surreal as he continues to mentally erase his environs; when he is about to reach Franziska, men from the mysterious “Section D” appear between them and thank him for erasing so much of his surroundings—“now everything is clean” (249). The consequences of this conceptual genocide then wax apocalyptic. It no longer matters whether the destruction is pure projected metaphor or true surrealist narrative. The narrator, now impotent, tries to reverse the erasures, but he is caught in “logic of projections...The line of development starts again from zero,”; as his psyche spills over into reality, the ground beneath him yawns open, and he sees “no bottom, only nothingness which continues down to infinity; I run across pieces of world scattered in the void; the world is crumbling” (251). By the end of the chapter there is nothing but the narrator and Franziska discussing the possibility of a date at a café “all lined with mirrors,” their reflections trivial and ironic in the wake of erasure.

But this annihilation contains a seed of renewal. Though the mirror imagery in “What story down there awaits its end?” feels like wry humor, Calvino preserves the essence of the

imagery beyond the limits of the chapter. All the attendant notions of self-referentiality reflect the self-destruction depicted in the subchapter into the self-replicating events of meta-chapter eleven, in which the Reader meets seven other readers, each defined only by their method of consuming language. Instead of “mental erasures,” we get an overload of interpretation; Calvino explores different, often eccentric styles of reading, and it feels as if the whole book has transformed into the “mirrored tube” mentioned in “In a network of lines that intersect” (163). Out of the preceding devolution into nothingness, each separate reader has become an amalgam of all other readers. This communion of Readership incurs the most direct imposition of the subchapters into the metachapters in the connection of their titles. As the readers continue to talk about reading, they confuse the titles of the fraudulent novels that have interjected themselves through *If on a winter's night* with the beginning of a totally new narrative; their presence even ends up contributing the last phrase to the interwoven network of beginnings that becomes, at last, a grammatically coherent sentence:

If on a winter's night a traveler, outside the town of Malbork, leaning from the steep slope without fear of wind or vertigo, looks down in the gathering shadow in a network of lines that enlase, in a network of lines that intersect, on a carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon around an empty grave—What story down there awaits its end?—he asks, anxious to hear the story. (258)

The compendium of titles appears to be an indirect address to the reader *via* the Reader, a summary and almost a parody of his condition: Anxious to hear the story, we never get the whole thing, only countless paradoxes, Loops around an empty center. While the Reader complains that this sentence is not the story itself, but the titles of the stories he searches for, a mysterious “seventh reader” interrupts him, and therefore, us:

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 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. (259)

The Reader, the “absolute protagonist” of the novel, reaffirms life through his decision to marry the Other Reader (219); but even then, there is a sense of level-crossing in the Reader’s reluctance to “turn off [his] light,” to experience the dark before completing, finally, the novel (260). And so that “ultimate meaning,” the impossible cohabitation of life and death recurs self-referentially in the final subchapter, the seventh reader’s interruption of the Reader, and the last interaction between the two apparently complete Readers. That paradox is the kernel of the Strange Loop that reaches outside of the novel, universalizing the fragments by having them refer beyond the limits of the ink-splattered page and beyond the confines of time and space. Each ‘face’ of that meaning—life and death—refers to the other in addition to itself, and allows the Strangest Loop of *If on a winter’s night*, the Loop-of-all-Loops, to concentrate “the totality of things...into a single mirror,” reflecting back at “you” and “I” and at us, the true readers and storytellers, the immense truth unfolding that there is joy, not in spite of, but *because* of our essential incompleteness (*winter’s night* 166).

V. Chapter 3: “Forms of Silence”

“Then the moment of ecstatic freedom came. The peace, the end of the quest, the last harbor, the joy of belonging to a fulfillment beyond men's lousy, pitiful, greedy fears and hopes and dreams! And several other times in my life, when I was swimming far out, or lying alone on the beach, I have had the same experience. Became the sun, the hot sand, green seaweed anchored to a rock, swaying in the tide. Like a saint's vision of beatitude. Like the veil of things as they seem drawn back by an unseen hand. For a second you see—and seeing the secret, are the secret. For a second there is meaning!” — Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*

“It's nothing...much...Nothing but...a tenth of a second appearing...Wait...At certain moments my body is illuminated...It is very curious. Suddenly I see into myself...I can make out the depths of the layers of my flesh; and I feel zones of pain...rings, poles, plumes of pain. Do you see these living forms, this geometry of my suffering? Some of these flashes are exactly like ideas. They make me understand—from here, to here...” —Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften (The Man Without Properties)*

“Man cannot endure his own littleness unless he can translate it into meaningfulness on the largest possible level.” —Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*

Over the course of this thesis I have argued that Italo Calvino's later novels redeem the capacity for artistic meaning as our most vital defense against an indifferent cosmos: In *Invisible Cities*, we encounter fantastical descriptions of imaginary places that double as reflections on the creative act's ability to generate something of value from within the “inferno of the living.” Similarly, *If on a winter's night a traveler* retools the existential despair at humanity's “essential incompleteness” as a cause for joy, its self-referential narrative pulling us away from despondency towards artistic communion. But while *winter's night* and *Invisible Cities* appropriate Postmodern metafictional techniques that direct our attention to language itself, *Mr. Palomar* confronts, without embellishment or distraction, the problem of human experience. The quotidian observations and reflections of the eponymous protagonist, “a nervous man who lives in a frenzied and congested world,” unfold over twenty-seven chapters (5). These shifts in form

and style indicate that Calvino's artistic concern has evolved beyond language's ability to generate meaning for humanity. And although the underlying order of the universe often eludes him, gradually Palomar comes to understand the ethical imperative first outlined in *Invisible Cities*: "seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space" (*Invisible Cities* 165). The novel, tracing Palomar's struggle to understand his role as a subjective agent in the world, also demonstrates Calvino's redemption of our ability to distill and articulate the mystery of experience.

Throughout my critique of Calvino's novel, I will defend the notion that the character of Mr. Palomar exemplifies what I call "experiential ethics"—a mode of being rooted in vigilant reflection on one's phenomenological and linguistic relations to the world. My argument hinges upon the claim that an understanding of oneself through experience and language functions as the basis for all ethical decisions. Though certain aspects of experience remain outside articulation, the effort to describe them with precision is an ethical imperative. This chapter is divided into two sections. Beginning with "The Failures of Mr. Palomar," I recount two ways in which Palomar's efforts to understand himself during the first two-thirds of the novel threaten existential despair. His scientific "procedure...developed by physicists and astronomers" nearly drive him to a solipsistic conclusion that risks undermining the totality of his attempts to reconcile his own consciousness with the world around him (108). At his worst moments, "he tries in vain to escape subjectivity by taking refuge among the celestial bodies" (38). Thus, for Palomar, succumbing to solipsism would mean an absolute rejection of this world with which he feels a primitive, spiritual kinship. However faint or ephemeral Palomar's kinship with the world may seem, his various solipsistic crises prove necessary to understand his later development.

I have chosen to examine the first two-thirds of the novel through Brian O'Shaughnessy's phenomenological studies in *Consciousness and the World* (2003). O'Shaughnessy's work foregrounds my analysis of Mr. Palomar's conscious experience by emphasizing the primacy of time in our minds' attachment to the spatio-temporal realms. O'Shaughnessy's sophisticated understanding of consciousness, unfettered by an obsession with pure scientific analysis, acts as a foil to Palomar's method of self-understanding. Next, I engage with several interpretations of the "unutterable" and "mystical" in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921). These two concepts clarify Palomar's other, related failure: his reluctance to accept the boundaries of language and the uses of silence in articulating experience. In the second section, "The Triumphs of Mr. Palomar," I take up the final third of the novel, in which Palomar reconstitutes his subjectivity as a force of creative communion. Again, I invoke Wittgenstein's complex beliefs about the nature of language to illuminate Palomar's gradual apprehension of his linguistic limits and the possibility of his transcending them. Lastly, I address the novel's paradoxical ending, which culminates in Palomar's epiphanic death. Here, my analysis employs a combinatory approach, fusing O'Shaughnessy and Wittgenstein with Ernest Becker's anthropological account of human transience in *The Denial of Death* (1973). Becker's investigation into mortality's cultural significance enables me to read the end of *Mr. Palomar* as Calvino's grandest creative offering and most powerful ethical demonstration: that within the artistic ordering of the novel, Palomar's vigilant examination of his consciousness, his language, and his world exudes its fullest meaning through his death.

The Failures of Mr. Palomar:

Palomar, whose name recalls that of the famous CalTech observatory, can be thought of as an eye steadily opening over the course of the novel: The book cover designed by James

Kaczman depicts Palomar with a telescope for a head, a single eye peering out from the lens across a shore littered with different objects: a wedge of cheese, an absurdly small giraffe, an even smaller and more absurd mountain range, a snake—and a gravestone. It is an apt image. These objects derive their significance from their presence within the novel, by which I mean: from Palomar's having the experience of observing them, they each gain a specific phenomenological and symbolic purpose. Brian O'Shaughnessy's *Consciousness and the World* illustrates the mysterious birth of conscious experience with a complementary description: "An eye opened upon the World: here we have a familiar and natural image for this momentous occurrence. It can be no coincidence that the image takes the form of an experience" (O'Shaughnessy 37). And so we, following O'Shaughnessy, must begin by studying the nature of Palomar's conscious experiences if we hope to discuss the relationship between his mind and its foci.

In an early chapter entitled "The Sword of the Sun," Palomar observes during his evening swim "the sun's reflection...a shining sword in the water stretching from the shore to him" (Calvino 12). The paradoxical motion of this blade of sunlight alarms him. He can never quite touch it—"the sword remains always before him"—and yet he becomes "the vertex of that sharp, gilded triangle" (12). O'Shaughnessy's distinction between the contents of experience and experience itself explains Palomar's vexation at this moment: "Characteristically," he argues, "the contents of experience are in flux, and necessarily experience itself is in flux, being essentially occurrent in nature" (43). The difference lies in the "necessary" vs. "characteristic" description of *flux*. A concept vital to O'Shaughnessy's theory of consciousness, *flux* is the quality of a certain psychological process to "[continue] in existence from instant to instant... at each instant *occurently renewed*" (43). In the case of experience, the process *necessarily* renews

at each instant, and even its most infinitesimal “process part,” if we could isolate one, contains a proportional micro-renewal. In short, no consciousness without experience; no experience without flux; no flux without renewal. On the other hand, the *contents* of a certain experience are only *characteristically* in flux. For example, more often than not, the things we see in our visual field—leaves moving on their trees, cars zooming down a freeway, a crowd chattering outside a movie theater—are changing more or less constantly. But it is possible to have an experience that is necessarily in flux while its content is not. O’Shaughnessy’s provides us with the instance of “looking steadily at a painting for ninety seconds”: a “processive activity” that occurs in spite of its apparent stasis because *flux* necessarily resides inside the occurrent experience of the conscious mind. It is, in other words, a necessarily internal process. Similarly, what unnerves Palomar about the “sword of the sun” is that the contents of his experience give the simultaneous appearance of external stasis and internal flux. Both fixed in front of him and unreachable, the glinting reflection sends Palomar reeling back inside himself: “I am swimming in my mind; this sword of light exists only there; and this is precisely what attracts me” (15). So long as Palomar remains in the water he also remains the “vertex” of the arrow-shaped sunlight. His consciousness makes him, a human being, the apex of experience. The natural world, rearranging its fluid geometry, has picked him out as a creature of a higher mental order; he recognizes the primacy of this designation as experiencing subject, and his language bears striking resemblance to the beginning of *Consciousness and the World*—“One day an eye emerged from the sea, and the sword, already there waiting for it, could finally display its fine, sharp tip and its gleaming splendor. They were made for each other, sword and eye...” (18). Indeed, it seems if we wed Palomar’s mental image to O’Shaughnessy’s theory of consciousness we may glean Palomar’s basic intuition that experience forms a crucial bond between his mind and the world.

But though he notices himself in a special relation to the natural world via experience, Palomar first fails in his inability to link consciousness with time. By factoring in only the spatial dimension of his experience, he stunts his interpretation of the world and reaches no acceptable conclusion: “The last shivering swimmer,” Palomar abandons his thoughts, “convinced that the sword will exist without him,” and goes home (18). Chapter one of Calvino’s novel, entitled “Reading a Wave,” demonstrates Palomar’s inadequate procedure. It recounts his attempts to “see a wave—that is, to perceive all its simultaneous components without overlooking any of them” (4). But Palomar cannot “bear all the aspects [of the wave] in mind at once,” his primary frustration being a lack of “patience,” the “vigilant apprehension” called for in *Invisible Cities* (8). We, too, cannot quite achieve a satisfactory understanding of consciousness— especially Mr. Palomar’s—until we grapple with the concept of time. In *Consciousness and the World*, O’Shaughnessy argues for time’s primacy over space as an ordering system for experiences. “The great temporal novelty,” writes O’Shaughnessy, “is the irreducible ‘co-presence’ of the other two temporal dimensions in the experiential instant: it is the meeting of past and/or future in the present” (55). He demonstrates the nature of this temporal phenomenon in *Consciousness and the World* through a diagram of a wave moving across space and time. Here arises another fortuitous resemblance between O’Shaughnessy’s work and *Mr. Palomar*. The similarities between their objects of analysis highlights a crucial difference in their procedure: whereas Palomar attempts to dissect the wave’s *spatial* dimensions, O’Shaughnessy homes in on the *temporal*. We must also recognize from the outset that Palomar fails to pinpoint a single wave among the diffuse rush of other waves in their various relational stages of formation, cresting and decay. *Contra* Palomar, I take O’Shaughnessy’s emphasis on time to be the starting point for a

correct method of describing experience, the key factor that explains Palomar's initial existential frustration. Note Palomar's procedure, in which the silent observer:

sees a wave rise in the distance, grow, approach, change form and color, fold over itself, break, vanish and flow again. At this point he could convince himself that he has concluded the operation he had set out to achieve, and he could go away. But isolating one wave is not easy, separating it from the wave immediately following, which seems to push it and at times overtakes it and sweeps it away; and it is no easier to separate that one wave from the preceding wave, which seems to drag it toward the shore, unless it turns against the following wave, as if to arrest it. Then, if you consider the breadth of the wave, parallel to the shore, it is hard to decide where the advancing front extends regularly and where it is separated and segmented into independent waves, distinguished by their speed, shape, force, direction. (Calvino 4)

The waves' spatial relationships to one another grip him most immediately: their motion across the surface of the water—their birth and erosion within the fluctuating physical matrix (speed, shape, force, direction). Palomar recognizes the “co-presence” of waves across space, and how difficult it is to define a field of analysis limited to a singular instance. He does not take into account, however, what O'Shaughnessy calls “the perception of change across time” (57).

O'Shaughnessy clarifies his position in a later passage, explaining that, “experiences do not just *inhabit* time, take up positions in time...time is their very *stuff*, insofar as they are constituted of the essentially temporal constituents, process and event, and of nothing else—being pure flux” (O'Shaughnessy 66). If we allow time, not space, to become the fundamental ordering system that begets experience, Palomar's frustration at his lack of “patience” suggests he has not yet developed a cohesive method of describing himself as an experiencing subject.

In stark contrast to Palomar’s failure to grasp the temporal dimension of his experiences, O’Shaughnessy provides us with a corrective insight, “One could put it this way: that consciousness is possible only if it is akin all the time to the perception of shape across time” (61). Let us arrive at this conclusion by summarizing O’Shaughnessy’s method for reading his own “wave,” which gives greater weight to temporal over spatial dimensions:

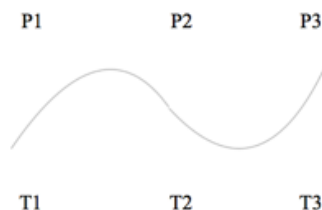


Figure 5. O’Shaughnessy’s representation of the “perception of change across time”

In this diagram O’Shaughnessy determines the logical relations among the distinct temporal/spatial locations of the wave’s changing motion.¹² Vital to our purposes is his verdict that each sector of the wave that has just past *informs across time* our notion of the present sector of the wave: Thus, “the very essence of the experience of the moment is such that it points determinately backwards in time and elsewhere in space, from an indexically given ‘now’ and ‘here’ spatio-temporal origin-point” (59). Mr. Palomar’s inability to understand the co-presence of temporal realms as intuitively as he does the spatial blurs his analytic ability; he begins making fundamental mistakes about the waves’ motion, citing the “reflux of every wave [as having] a power of its own to hinder the oncoming waves. And if you concentrate your attention on these backward thrusts, it seems that the true movement is the one that begins from the shore and goes out to sea” (7). Moreover, such mistakes imprison him in solipsism which denies him

¹² P=Position, T=Time. Numbers 1-3 indicate spatio-temporal chronology.

his proper role as an experiencing subject caught in a network of external relationships. Instead of experiencing the world, Palomar, in a temporary fit of arrogance, desires to control it, to “make the waves run in the opposite direction, *to overturn time*, to perceive the true substance of the world beyond sensory and mental habits” (7, emphasis added). If a “true substance of the world” really exists, Palomar will never perceive it by overturning time. Time necessarily constitutes our perceptions and orders our experiences. O’Shaughnessy reminds us that when you “[c]lose up the past, wall off the future...you cover over the present too”; unfortunately for Palomar, “there is simply no such thing as ‘the solipsistic fruits of the instant’” (62). So Palomar’s conclusion, although wishfully poetic, smacks of his resistance to account for the temporal realm as codependent with the spatial. However, O’Shaughnessy invites us to assert something ever bolder: “the proper image for consciousness is...the sight of a swallow in flight, or of a meteor crossing the night sky”—in other words, a wave that operates under time’s ordering strictures (63). We can infer from this claim that in misreading the motion of the waves Palomar misreads himself. Until he comes to terms with time, he risks slippage into solipsistic delusions.

But what does coming to terms with time—and thus, consciousness itself—entail? The spatio-temporal process seems to occur at a high level of abstraction in spite of our concern with immediate experience. We must keep in mind Palomar’s (and Calvino’s) primary concern: language’s ability or inability to convey experience. The poet and Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney makes a striking claim in his review of the novel: “the very first movement is entitled ‘Reading a Wave’ and here Mr. Palomar attempts to see and describe and kidnap into language the exact nature of a single wave. His precisions, which he must keep revising, are constantly accurate and constantly inadequate; yet it is these very frustrations which constitute the reader’s pleasure” (Heaney 1). That the reader finds pleasure in Palomar’s frustrations suggests that,

though inadequate, Palomar's vying to understand his consciousness's relation to the world around him has great instructive significance. His "lacks" or deficiencies mirror our own failures to understand ourselves. To arrive at the thesis of this paper, to explicate *Mr. Palomar's* fundamentally ethical nature through acts of vigilant observation, we must trace Palomar's second failure as he endeavors to reconcile the "pleasure" of self-analysis with a comprehensive conclusion about the nature of his mind and the universe. I ground my initial arguments by moving from O'Shaughnessy's phenomenological studies onto Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language—emphasizing the mystical, cathartic elements that bind consciousness to both world and word.

Palomar's second failure involves his anxiety in conceding language's essential inadequacy to capture the nature of experience. But it may at first seem difficult to display the consequences of this failure in terms of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Both he and Palomar sought to boil down "the expression of thoughts...in order to draw a limit to thinking" (Wittgenstein 2). Indeed, Wittgenstein often treated the language we use to learn about the world as an exercise in architecture, each observed object arranged in an exact spatial or temporal (but always *logical*) relation with the others, echoing O'Shaughnessy's analysis of consciousness. Observations form logical pictures in the mind and our words re-present the objects in those pictures as expressions of thought. Mr. Palomar, who in the first chapter attempts to isolate and "read" a single wave in the infinite flux of sea, "establishes for his every action a limited and precise object" (Calvino 3). Each object thus individuated from its system of logical relations could then (ideally) serve Palomar as a synecdoche for sea, for world, for universe. One can even imagine Wittgenstein standing next to him on the shore, the two of them sharing the same thought: "[It] could be the key to mastering the world's complexity by reducing it to its simplest mechanism" (Calvino 6).

However, their philosophies diverge when Palomar rejects the notion that any experience of world's complexity evades expression. Unlike Wittgenstein, Palomar believes that he must break down his environment into bits and reconstruct it through the language of science. Although Wittgenstein's own work has been appropriated by scientific philosophers, he himself held a contradictory view of his subject: "I think I summed up my attitude towards philosophy when I said: philosophy ought really to be written only as a *poetic composition*" (*Culture and Value* 24). Despite Wittgenstein's concerns with logical propositions, his most basic aim was not to take language as a scientific tool, but to use it to attain an artistic union of self and world. His conception of his own place in Western philosophy was a conscious reaction against the "scientism" of the 20th century, a credo that still holds today in our reverence toward scientific answers. Ray Monk, a preeminent Wittgenstein scholar, explains that questions without these answers "include questions about love, art, history, culture, music—all questions, in fact, that relate to the attempt to understand ourselves better" (Monk 1). Such questions trouble Mr. Palomar as he attempts to understand himself and his role as an experiencing subject. But his method, I argue, closely resembles the "scientism" Wittgenstein opposed. Monk describes Wittgenstein's alternative approach as "non-theoretical," a form of understanding that arises when one has, say, derived meaning from a poem or painting. It is an "understanding which consists in seeing connections" on an artistic level, without a generalized formula (Wittgenstein, qtd. in Monk 1). In his early work, Wittgenstein claims that kind of understanding is fundamentally inexpressible—hardly in line with the Logical Positivist school that appropriated his work (to his dismay). These Logical Positivists obsessed over turning philosophy into a "science." They valued only conclusions that could be verified empirically, and such constrictions obviously conflict with Wittgenstein's notion of philosophy as a form of "poetry."

Palomar, in the first two-thirds of the novel, engages with the world quite like a Positivist; his method of self-analysis requires constant verification, lest he plunge into despair. In a chapter entitled “The Infinite Lawn,” he distinguishes the flora surrounding his home like a botanist (“dichondra, darnel, and clover” (29)), and even attempts to count each blade of grass in his yard, a process admittedly “futile” (31). His compulsion for naming as an individuating practice curbs his ability to interact with the world non-theoretically or see its various, integrated networks.

I find two critical appropriations of the *Tractatus* particularly representative of Wittgenstein’s own complex beliefs about philosophy as an “activity” both “mystical” and “poetic” in nature: B.F. McGuinness’s “The Mysticism of the *Tractatus*” and David Rozema’s “Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus: A ‘Poem’ by Ludwig Wittgenstein.” McGuinness argues that the mystical goal of Wittgenstein’s work is to teach its reader to “identify oneself with the world” in a way that closely resembles O’Shaughnessy’s phenomenology: “For Wittgenstein’s mystic...the phenomenal world is very far from unreal: indeed it is a kind of dwelling on its reality or *Istigkeit* that is the most important part of the mystical experience” (323). From this idea we gather not only that Palomar’s grappling with his consciousness’s relation to reality is a crucial step to epiphany, but also that, when the catharsis occurs, the experiencer does not—cannot—transcend *the world*, but undergoes a mystical union with it by transcending the *language* used to describe it. On the other hand, Rozema’s essay supplies something of an analytical frame, contending that the *Tractatus* is “most helpful and best read as a poem”—quite in line with Wittgenstein’s own opinion of his subject (346). Rozema also expands on a point which I have thus far left untouched, but will be of critical importance: Wittgenstein’s distinction

between showing and saying, the latter being the stuff of “nonsense” and the former being the key to understanding the mystical:

the poem’s meaning—if you want to call it that—is to be found not in the “propositions” of the poem nor in any interpretive statements about it but in its demonstration. You could not, in the language of propositions, say what makes a poem a poem. A great poem simply is. It shows itself. (363)

Palomar, by relying on the scientific “language of propositions” to describe his experiences, can never manage to “show himself” in the non-theoretical manner Wittgenstein and Rozema endorse. Yet this demonstration of inner poetry seems to provide the only viable route for Palomar to identify his consciousness with reality, even though it requires a significant transformation in his conception of language.

In “The Albino Gorilla” chapter, Palomar flounders to articulate an intimacy he feels with a primate ancestor. He sees the gorilla caged up and playing with an old tire, “an artifact of human production...lacking any symbolic potentiality [for the gorilla]” (83). Palomar wishes that the gorilla with his inert toy would somehow “reach...the springs from which language burst forth...[and] establish a flow of relationships between his thoughts and the unyielding, deaf evidence of the facts that determine his life” (83). In other words, he feels as though he can only “identify himself” with his world when equipped with the proper descriptive language. To Palomar, the gorilla, a language-less creature not concerned with describing anything at all, remains elusive until it expresses itself in a manner he can comprehend. Much in the same way that Palomar could only understand experience in spatial (not temporal) terms, he now mistakenly believes that he may commune with the gorilla if it could obtain the language to describe its experiences. The creature triggers the mystical, however, through his utter *lack* of

language; not what he says, but what he shows, merely by existing, causes Palomar's anxiety. His wish for the gorilla somehow to achieve language recalls his previous desire to "overturn time"—both are conscious, misguided rejections of the world that undermine Palomar's larger desire to reconcile his position as subject with an apparently uncooperative universe. The dissonance is not lost on Calvino: "[Palomar] tries to talk about [the gorilla] with people he meets," Calvino writes, "but he cannot make anyone listen" (83). Of course, no one can "listen" to an experience that cannot be articulated. They can only understand it *during* the mystical experience. Later, Palomar abstracts the situation even further, musing that "We all turn in our hands an old, empty tire through which we try to reach some final meaning, which words cannot achieve" (83). If in the earliest chapters of the novel Palomar was unable to comprehend the internal connection between time and space in his consciousness, we now see his unsuccessful attempt to understand the function of language as an expression of conscious experience. Taken in light of the *Tractatus*, "The Albino Gorilla" provides a second initial failure, one parallel to Palomar's first attempt to "read" a wave. The events of this chapter, along with "Reading a Wave," demonstrate Palomar's inflexibility when reconciling the world and his consciousness—the Wittgensteinian "conditions of the world," the foundations for mystical experience, consistently resist his interpretations. Since he has learned neither the importance of time (in the form of vigilant apprehension) nor of silence, the "final meaning" Palomar pines for has not yet become clear to him.

The Triumphs of Mr. Palomar:

During the first two-thirds of the novel, we have seen Palomar endeavor to understand the world through his intellect. He has attempted to reduce the world to its "simplest mechanism"

and reassemble it according to a complex but deficient interpretive process. His method could not represent the nature of time nor the limits of language. The final third of the novel, aptly titled “The Silences of Mr. Palomar,” records the amending of his personal philosophy to include notions much like O’Shaughnessy’s conceptual emphasis on time and Wittgenstein’s mystical account of silence. His character arc is most broadly and abstractly depicted in “The Model of Models,” in which Palomar undergoes a distinctly Wittgensteinian transformation, grounding himself not in his convictions about the world, but in the world itself and its various object-relations. We may read this chapter under the thesis: “That the world is *my* world, shows itself in the fact that the limits of the language...means the limits of *my* world...The world and life are one” (Wittgenstein 5.62-5.621). Indeed, Palomar’s “rule had gradually been changing” since the beginning of the novel (110). He calls experience, which is rooted in observation, “elusive,” yet he knows that his experiences have the ability to restructure the models he used previously, if the world (as it often does) fails to bend to one’s will: “if the model does not succeed in transforming reality, reality must succeed in transforming the model” (110). The essence of his claim bears strikingly similarity to Wittgenstein’s diary entry in his *Notebooks*, which formed the basis for the *Tractatus*: “The world is independent of my will” (73). Recognizing this, Palomar concludes, “What really counts is what happens *despite* [the models],” and so he sets out to destroy the failed interpretations he has so far constructed (111). I read this declaration as Palomar’s pre-epiphany, a command to himself to become vigilant in adjusting his ordering of the world—to recognize that, despite his best efforts, the models he constructed, like the buildings of a city under reality’s siege, are doomed to crumble. But in abandoning the notion of his models’ immortality he does not altogether stop constructing *some* axioms to live by. Rather, he resolves to make each observation or experience “the implicit rule of his own everyday behavior, in

doing or not doing, in choosing or rejecting, in speaking or remaining silent” (112). Here we encounter a Palomar fundamentally transformed from the one paralyzed by analysis in “Reading a Wave.” His choices have become fluid—he has begun to learn the “patience” necessary to be “in flux,” and the courage to be silent. In other words, he has set himself up to become an ethical being, concerned with his own behavior and capable of mystical experience. The final third of *Mr. Palomar* illustrates the ways in which he applies his transfigured philosophy.

Let us begin with silence. As I’ve noted before, Wittgenstein posits that the mystical cannot be expressed. The famous last line of the *Tractatus* admits “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (7). One way to read that final proposition is as a directive not to make assertions about things of which we are ignorant. We find a similar sentiment in “On Biting the Tongue,” the first chapter to demonstrate Palomar’s radical departure from “scientific” analysis to an ethical mode of “vigilant apprehension”:

In a time and in a country where everyone goes out of his way to announce opinions or hand down judgements, Mr. Palomar has made a habit of biting his tongue three times before asserting anything. After the third bite, if he is still convinced of what he was going to say, he says it. If not, he keep his mouth shut. In fact, he spends whole weeks, months in silence. (102)

Compare this passage to the “pleonastic utterance[s]” of “The Blackbird’s Whistle,” an early chapter that, like “The Albino Gorilla,” testifies to Palomar’s uncertain handling of language as a scientific tool in which “a meaning does not result,” only “the chiaroscuro of a mood” (26). The silence that follows his words in this chapter is a “puzzled” one, full of anxiety (27). In “On Biting the Tongue,” Palomar has by no means found existential peace, but he appears to revel in silence, to think of it as a “type of speech” that gives “meaning to what is unsaid” (103). Another

way to read Wittgenstein's proposition is to interpret the things "whereof one cannot speak" as so important that they may only be expressed in silence—or at least, through a kind of indirectness that is "silent" on its subject. Wittgenstein himself, in a correspondence with Paul Engelmann, praised a poem by Ludwig Uhland, "Count Eberhard's Hawthorn," for its ability to show the mystical element of existence without "saying" anything about it. The content of the poem is of little importance here—it relates the story of a young Count Eberhard planting a hawthorn sprig and, years later, sitting under the fully grown bush's shade in his old age. What is important is the poem's ability to address the mystical through indirect language, through a kind of silence. Rozema describes how such a process can occur in the poetry of the *Tractatus*, and his conclusions may be reapplied to the "poetry" of *Mr. Palomar*. Poetry can address the mystical in a way that prose cannot, because it "can do so indirectly—not through the language of propositions...but through the language of description, imagery, and metaphor...[P]oetry itself can be poeticized, with the result being not an exposition nor a proposition nor an explication but a description that can serve as an image of itself" (356). The "poeticization" of poetry, much like the "model of models" is a kind of representation that binds the world to one's conscious experience through transcendent language. The mystical nature lies in its ability to mirror a sentiment that cannot be articulated directly, but only "shown" through an image of the world meant to represent a thought. Propositions cannot capture such things, because they approach the problem of experience head-on, and thus encounter language's inherent inadequacy. So the triumphant Mr. Palomar embraces the Wittgensteinian paradox of transcending language through various silences, and, having established the sea change in Palomar's analysis of self and the world, we may move onto his most valiant silence and communion with consciousness and the universe.

In the preceding sections I traced Mr. Palomar's development as he learned to come to grips with his ability to transcend language and access the mystical aspect of conscious experience. Before addressing the several interwoven layers to the ecstatic death-event, I will offer my corrective to a dominant scholarly argument that interprets *Mr. Palomar* as an exercise in existential submission, instead of a triumph of experiential ethics. Stefano Franchi's "Palomar, the Triviality of Modernity, and the Doctrine of the Void" encapsulates the nihilistic sentiments I have confronted throughout my thesis. Franchi contends that "All twenty-seven [chapters] end in failure and disarray, documenting the inability of Mr. Palomar, the main character, to enter into a meaningful relationship with the world and bridge the abyss that separates him from reality and from his fellow men. Mr. Palomar's experience is totally negative" (758). Such an interpretation appears *prima facie* reasonable. Palomar admits that he often feels "impelled by uncoordinated movements of the mind, which seem to have nothing to do with one another and are increasingly difficult to fit into any pattern of inner harmony" (Calvino 80). Even in the last third of the novel, which I argue displays a series of "triumphs" leading up to an ecstatic death, Palomar combats existential dread, questions his own progress, and labors to live out his own wisdom. But Franchi's reading loses traction when he dismisses Palomar's sensing of a "harmony in the subtle movements of the moon in the afternoon sky, or in the delicate geometries of sidereal spaces which, he feels, are based on a regularity much deeper than the disordered succession of human events" (758). Though he proposes to offer a way out of nihilism through Indian philosopher Nagarjuna's "doctrine of the void," Franchi adopts a distinctly nihilistic view of Palomar's efforts. The void, to Nagarjuna, cannot be represented symbolically; to "treat the void as a thing" is to deny it proper status as "the end of representation" (757). The "void," this omnipresent nothingness imbued into all experience, evades representation in direct language,

much like Wittgenstein's mystical. But, taking these notions as at least superficially similar, I claim that the void acts as a kind of obverse reflection of the mystical, its massive emptiness a complement to mystic fullness. If a mystical experience consists in a cathartic communion between world and mind, experiencing the void means a complete isolation from the contents of meaningful experience. In short, the void and its attendant nihilism seem deeply connected to the inferno of *Invisible Cities* or the looming solipsism that threatens Palomar. Only the mystical offers Palomar respite from crippling uncertainty about his subjective agency. Therefore, poetic language and poetic silence, activities fundamentally both creative and mystical, transcend the ordinary language of propositions and allow us to represent what initially seemed beyond expression.

We have now arrived at the moment of *ekstasis*, the fleeting "vision of beatitude" described in the epigraphs, that functions, paraphrasing Ernest Becker, to translate humanity's littleness onto the "largest possible level." I mean, of course, Palomar's death. To Franchi, Palomar fails variously and completely through the first twenty-six chapters until the "supreme deceit" of having death "deferred indefinitely" that causes him to die (762). Franchi's reading of *Mr. Palomar's* final pages, in which the protagonist "learn[s] to be dead," seemingly derives from this passage:

This is the most difficult step in learning how to be dead: to become convinced that your own life is a closed whole, all in the past, to which you can add nothing and can alter none of the relationships among the various elements...Each individual is made up of what he has lived and the way he lived it, and no one can take this away from him. Anyone who has lived in suffering is always made of that suffering; if they try to take it away from him, he is no longer himself. (125)

Again, Calvino's language in isolation lends credence to Franchi's argument. Palomar here seems to be relinquishing his autonomy, submitting to the unrepresentable void. For several pages before he reaches a conclusion, Palomar ruminates on the many ways of "being dead." At one point he even adopts a Postmodern sense of apathy that borders on black humor, claiming that death "is the relief of knowing that all those problems are other people's problems, their business. The dead should no longer give a damn about anything" (123). But if we have learned anything from Calvino's other Postmodern novels, we trust that Palomar will avoid the void, like the inferno before it, and remain vigilant in his efforts. Indeed, he ultimately rejects the threat of apathy by applying the Wittgensteinian method of indirectness—which Franchi incorrectly labels a cowardly "detering"—to his own mortality. The final paragraph of *Mr. Palomar* rejects the void, too, finally demonstrating the protagonist's union of O'Shaughnessy's conception of time, essential to a full account of one's conscious experience:

"If time has to end, it can be described, instant by instant," Mr. Palomar thinks, "and each instant, when described, expands so that its end can no longer be seen." He decides that he will set himself to describing every instant of his life, and until he has described them all he will no longer think of being dead. At that moment he dies. (126)

Here, Palomar carries out the message contained in *Invisible Cities*. He understands the command to "make [things that are not inferno] endure, give them space" as the confluence of temporal and spatial realms in one's consciousness. What's more, this sudden death at the end of the novel also embodies the notion of "Wittgenstein's ladder." For Wittgenstein, philosophy's primary concern was not answering philosophical questions, but clarifying the problems until they disappeared. "My propositions are elucidatory in this way," he writes on the last page on the *Tractatus*, "he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless...He must so to speak

throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it" (6.54). Palomar's death, informed by Wittgenstein's ladder, signifies a "disappearance" of the problem of life; his crises dissolve not because he has found some mystical answer, but because his physical becoming of the mystic unifies consciousness and reality. In describing the "miracle of naked existence" Wittgenstein longed for, B.F. McGuinness cites Aldous Huxley's mescaline-induced encounter with the mystical: "My actual experience had been, was still, of an indefinite duration or alternatively of a perpetual present made up of one continually changing apocalypse" (Huxley, qtd. in McGuinness 323). Note the emphasis on the "perpetual present" that contains a "continually changing apocalypse." Both Huxley's mystical experience as well as our own experience of Palomar's death evoke a triumphant unity between O'Shaughnessy's co-presence of the present and Wittgenstein's destructive and instructive collapsing ladder.

But where in all this do we locate the ethical? In *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker's treatise on managing the terror of facing oblivion, Becker concedes that humans are "doomed to live in an overwhelmingly tragic and demonic world," full of frustrations and punctuated by death (281). He also offers hope, however, in the form of creative acts, moments of ecstasy, expressed first in the epigraphs by Eugene O'Neill and Robert Musil—in "seeing the secret" of meaning you "are the secret." These are communions of consciousness and world that constitute Wittgenstein's mystical, functioning, in Rozema's words, "to shape, through catharsis, the passions" (346). Palomar's endeavor to describe his conscious interaction with time, "every instant of his life," indicates that he understands through existential conflict the ethical implications of vigilant apprehension within the inferno of the living. That his ethics are creative cannot be overstated: Palomar, in effect, wants to tell the story of time so that others may learn from it. That his creative efforts end in death suggests a starting point for the interpreting novel's

broader message. The last words of Becker's treatise summarize Wittgenstein's, O'Shaughnessy's, and finally, Calvino's entangled wisdoms:

We can conclude that a project as grand as the...construction of victory over human limitation...comes from the vital energies of masses of men sweating within the nightmare of creation. The most that any one of us can seem to do is to fashion something—an object or ourselves—and drop it into the confusion, make an offering of it, so to speak, to the life force. (285)

With *Mr. Palomar*, Calvino has offered his ultimate *something* to the life force that will destroy him, and whose destruction is mirrored in Palomar's death. Indeed, Calvino's presence appears after the events of the novel have ended, "like the veil of things as they seem drawn back by an unseen hand." He gets the final "meta-word" in the paratextual index. All along there has been a structure to Palomar's seemingly arbitrary experiences, revealed *only after* Palomar dies. We can conclude from this that Palomar's death is not tragic, but revelatory, intentional—artistic. A creative structure punctuates Palomar's death; through the Wittgensteinian "disappearance" of the problem of life, Calvino calls on us, by way of his freshly deceased protagonist, to contemplate the novel's ethical implications: "from description and narrative" of Palomar's earthly existence, we move into a "meditation" on his death (128). Thus, Calvino reveals that the telling of the struggle gives form to the struggle itself. We find what Palomar has spent all his energy searching for—the locus of order, meaning, and redemption—most clearly articulated after he has lived and died. Only then do we become aware of Calvino's artistic intentions that have existed from the outset. And so I find it inappropriate to read this paratextual inscription as Palomar's epitaph. Rather, imagine Calvino, standing at the shore beside Palomar, offering his

own final creative act up to the life force and into the sea of creation which stretches in all directions, infinitely, through space and time.

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