The Uses of Literature and Six Memos for the Next Millennium by Italo Calvino

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Two by Italo Calvino

The Uses of Literature.
Tr. Patrick Creagh.
New York: Harcourt Brace
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Six Memos for the
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Tr. Patrick Creagh.
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Modern Italian literature has en-
joyed much popularity in the United
States over the past decade. Not only
have some writers been reintroduced
to the English-speaking world (e.g.,
Luigi Pirandello and his important *The
Late Mattia Pascal)*, but others have
appeared for the first time. The avant-
garde writer, painter, and musician Al-
berto Savinio (born Andrea De Chirico,
brother of Giorgio), Tommaso Lan-
dolfi, Giuseppe Pontiggia, and the
feminist activist Dacia Maraini are
some recent additions to the English-
reading world of Italian literature.
Moreover, in the realm of critical
theory and philosophy, Renato Barilli's
Rhetoric and Gianni Vattimo's *The End
of Modernity* have also recently ap-
peared in English.

Indeed no stranger to the American
reading public, Italo Calvino's fiction
has consistently appeared in English
over the past three decades. *The Uses
of Literature* is a collection of thirty-one
essays, sixteen of which have appeared
in the Italian edition *Una pietra sopra*
(Turin: Einaudi, 1980); the rest ap-
peared in newspapers, literary jour-
nals, some as introductions, and
others, still, delivered as lectures both
in Europe and here in the United
States.

The essays in *The Uses of Literature*
are divided into two distinct groups.
Except for the final two essays of Part
I—"Right and Wrong Political Uses of
Literature" (1976) and "Levels of Real-

ity in Literature" (1978)—this section
contains pieces written during the sec-
ond half of the 1960s. The act of reading
proves extremely important to Calvino
from the very first essay, "Cybernetics
and Ghosts" (1967). There, he lays
stress on the "unlimited combinations,
permutations, and transformations"
which can be constructed on the basis
of the operations of narrative (6). For
Calvino,

the decisive moment of literary life [is] that
of reading [by which] literature will con-
tinue to be a "place" of privilege within the
human consciousness, a way of exercising
the potentialities within the system of signs
belonging to all societies at all times. The
work will continue to be born, to be judged,
to be distorted or constantly renewed on
contact with the eye of the reader. (16)

The author no longer holds a privileged
position for Calvino, since "literature
is a combinatorial game that pursues
the possibilities implicit in its own mat-
erial" (22).[1] That is, "writing," for Cal-
vino, "is purely and simply a process
of combination among given elements"
(17), while reading, or better, "the
spirit in which one reads is decisive: it
is up to the reader to see to it that liter-
ature exerts its critical force, and this
can occur independently of the au-
thor's intentions" (26).

Similar notions are discussed in later
essays in this section. Questioning the
"established scale of values and codes
of meanings" ("Whom Do We Write
For?" 82) was very important for Cal-
vino. He saw the writer no longer con-
tent at satisfying the reader; rather, he
should be ready "to assume a reader
who does not yet exist, or a change in
the reader" (82), a reader who would
be *"more cultured than the writer himself"*
(85; Calvino's emphasis). That is, in
1967 Calvino foresaw a reader with
"epistemological, semantic, practical,
and methodological requirements he
[would] want to compare [as] examples
of symbolic procedures and the con-
struction of logical patterns" (84-85).

This reader, for Calvino, is at the same time highly political, if not chiefly so, in his reading of texts (85). Indeed, then, Calvino seems to suggest that there is a limit to the capabilities of what since then has come to be known as the *implied reader*, *model reader*, or any other type of ideal audience to whom the text might be directed. For this reader is always contemporary and equal, never superior to the author's capabilities.[2] For Calvino, instead, the reader should be *superior*—i.e., "more cultured," as cited above—to the author. In so stating, then, Calvino seems to refer to some sort of *super-* or *arch-reader* who is not limited by the literariness or, for that matter, a conscious antiliterariness (84), which, in themselves, are for Calvino limited in scope (84). With regard to the reader's *superiority* to the author, one might then speak in terms of contemporaneity and noncontemporaneity; that is, the noncontemporary reader would be the one *superior* to the author.[3] Accordingly, then, the work of literature exists insofar as it has certain potentialities vis-à-vis its rapport with the reader, who, in turn, deals with the work according to his/her intertextual reservoir of knowledge—a reading "process of anticipation and retrospection [which] leads to the formation of the virtual dimension (= 'the coming together of the text and the [reader's] imagination')," as Wolfgang Iser stated in his seminal work on the implied reader.[4] Such a notion, of course, echoes Calvino's earlier expression of the decisive moment of literary life as that of reading, for which literature holds—as was already apparent above—a " 'place' of privilege within the human consciousness" (16) from which the potentialities of a sign system may be/are eventually actualized.[5] For, as Calvino states:

It is not so much the book that is politically revolutionary as the *use that can be made of it*; even a work intended to be politically revolutionary does not become so except in the course of being used. (87; emphasis added)

Nine years after he published "Whom Do We Write For?" Calvino dealt more explicitly with the question of politics and literature in "Right and Wrong Uses of Literature." Literature should not "voice a truth already possessed by politics," nor should it be considered "an assortment of eternal human sentiments" (97). Instead, literature is "necessary to politics when it gives voice to whatever is without a voice . . . especially to what the language of politics excludes or attempts to exclude" (98). A more intentional use is the writer's "ability to impose patterns of language, of vision, of imagination, [. . .] and in short the creation of a model of values that is at the same time aesthetic and ethical" (99).

Other topics Calvino discusses in this first section include the relationship between science and literature, comedy, the fantastic, cinema and the novel, and others. He closes Part I with a lengthy essay, "Levels of Reality in Literature," in which he deals quite extensively with the relationship between author, text, and reader. And while this essay first appeared eleven years after the essays discussed above, Calvino continued to strike a consonant chord; his notions of literature and its possible functions—here Calvino speaks in terms of levels of reality—are still dependent on the relationship between the text and its reader. Calvino, in fact, tells us that the reader is obliged to believe only what s/he reads "is something that at some previous time someone has written"; that it takes place in the "world . . . of the written word," and that "within the world of the written word one can discern many levels of reality" (104). Namely, that the "credibility of what is written can

be understood in very different ways, each one corresponding to more than one level of reality" (105). Further on, we read:

> literature does not recognize Reality as such, but only *levels*. Whether there is such a thing as Reality, of which the various levels are only partial aspects, or whether there are only levels, is something that literature cannot decide. Literature recognizes the *reality of the levels*, and this is a reality (or "Reality") that it knows all the better, perhaps, for not having come to understand it by other cognitive processes. And that is already a great deal. (120-21; Calvino's emphasis)

The essays highlighted above clearly bring forth notions fundamental to Calvino's general literary and philosophical aesthetics. First and foremost, in a very [pre-]postmodern way, Calvino lay by the wayside any notion of universality of absoluteness. That is, any notion of a privileged status to the literary text, for example, is supplanted, as we have already seen above, by his concept of literature as a "combinatorial game" (22) whose "critical force" (26) is much more dependent on the reader than on the author. Thus, the interplay between reader and text becomes more important than the object (the text), for which any absolute value—in the case of a literary text, *the* meaning of the work—is keenly called into question. In this sense, then, one may easily equate such notions to the general notions associated with the postmodern.[6] For the various juxtapositions associated with *a* postmodern discourse—e.g., stability/subversion, hierarchy/anarchy, determinacy/indeterminacy, genital/polymorphous—have surely appeared at least in an anticipatory form in his earlier writings, as they then became more blatant in his later works. (With regard to his essays, this will become apparent as we look at his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*.)

Part II of *The Uses of Literature* consists of a series of essays ranging from Homer and Ovid to Ariosto and Voltaire, Montale, Steinberg, and Marianne Moore, many of which reflect the major concepts expressed in Part I. In "The Structure of *Orlando Furioso*" Calvino sees Ariosto's work as a "*game* of society" (173; Calvino's emphasis), a serious game, whose poem reflects in a certain sense the author's

perfect public, and at the same time a picture of his ideal society. By a kind of structural *volte-face*, the poem steps out of itself and looks at itself through the eyes of its readers, defining itself by means of a census to whom it is addressed. And in its turn it is the poem that does duty as a definition or an emblem of a society of readers present or future, of all those people who will take part in his game, and who will recognize themselves in it. (174)

A companion piece to *The Uses of Literature*, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* offers an opportunity to grasp a further understanding of the later Calvino. Prepared for the Norton Lecture Series at Harvard University, this collection is divided into five chapters: "Lightness," "Quickness," "Exactitude," "Visibility," and "Multiplicity." (Calvino had planned on writing a sixth, "Consistency," but he died before completing it.[7]) In opening this collection, Calvino wrote that he wanted to "situate [certain literary values] within the perspective of the new millennium" (1). While this is surely the case, he also engages in a type of intellectual autobiography, as he often makes reference both to his own works and those of his favorite authors. Thus, we find Cavalcanti, Dante, Ariosto, Leopardi, and Gadda, among the Italians; and Balzac, Flaubert, de Bergerac, Lucretius, Proust, Kafka, and, most important, Borges, among others.

In discussing each "value," Calvino also brings into play its opposite. So, while he extols the value of lightness, he also discusses weightiness. Calvino

considers Cavalcanti and Leopardi two true "poet[s] of lightness"; yet he also recognizes that when even "Dante wants to express lightness . . . no one can do it better than he does." But Dante's "real genius lies in the opposite direction [. . .] in transmitting the sense that the world is organized into a system, an order, or a hierarchy where everything has its place" (16). Lightness, on the other hand, implies the absence of a hierarchy for Calvino, and he refers back to Ovid (the *Metamorphoses*) as one who saw an "essential parity between everything that exists" (9). In addition, lightness and parity constitute literature's underlying *raison d'être* for Calvino: he sees in literature "an essential function, the search for lightness as a reaction to the weight of the world" (26). More precisely, literature constitutes, for Calvino, "a search for knowledge . . . extended to anthropology and ethnology and mythology" (26-27); it is the notion of knowledge as encyclopedic, "a network of connections between the events, the people, and the things of the world" (105).

Quickness (*Memo* 2) is not a value in itself for Calvino. Narration "is carried out on the length of time involved, an enchantment that acts on the passing of time, either contracting or dilating it" (35). In fact, after a brief discussion of De Quincey, Leopardi, and Galileo, Calvino tells us that quickness means

above all agility, mobility, and ease, all qualities . . . where it is natural to digress, to jump from one subject to another, to lose the thread . . . and find it again after a hundred more twists and turns. (46)

As weight was important to lightness, so too is lingering important to quickness. Repetition and digression are two qualities pertinent to lingering: and Laurence Sterne's greatest invention, according to Calvino, was the novel "composed of digressions," "a strategy for putting off the endings" (46).

Quickness as mobility and agility also implies searching for the "unique expression, one that is concise, concentrated, and memorable" (49). In fact, Calvino now extols the virtues of the short form and its master, Jorge Luis Borges. It was Borges, Calvino tells us, who gave us the "last great invention," that "of himself as narrator" (50), as first found in his *Ficciones*.

In "Exactitude," his third and central *Memo*, Calvino briefly discusses the Italian word *vago*. Vague in English, in Italian *vago* also means "lovely, attractive," which associates the original idea of "movement and mutability . . . both with uncertainty and indefiniteness and with gracefulness and pleasure" (57). "A work of literature is one of these minimal portions in which the existent crystallizes into a form, acquires *a* meaning—not fixed, not definite, not hardened into a mineral immobility" (69-70; emphasis added). His own *Invisible Cities* constitutes a series of brief texts which do not "imply logical sequence or a hierarchy, but a network in which one can follow *multiple* routes and draw *multiple*, ramified conclusions" (71; emphasis added). It is significant that Calvino underscores his own rejection of any notion of "hierarchy," or better, universality or absoluteness. What he also does—not only here but elsewhere in both his critical and creative works—is ally himself willy-nilly with those who became, to paraphrase Lyotard, "incredul[ous] toward [grand or] metanarratives,"[8] for whom, since meaning is "not fixed, not definite, not hardened into a mineral immobility," as Calvino stated above, theirs is not a "business . . . to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented."[9]

"Visibility" (*Memo* 4) deals with the imaginative process of which Calvino distinguishes between two types: "the one that starts with the mental image

and arrives at the visual image, and the one that starts at the visual image and arrives at its verbal expression" (83). The first is the reading process, the second is the emotional/intellectual stimuli of an image through which the observer grasps the meaning of a verbal expression. In explaining his own art, Calvino tells us that his goal is to unite "the spontaneous generation of images and the intentionality of discursive thought" (90). For him, the writer's mind

works according to a process of association of images . . . to choose between the infinite forms of the possible and the impossible [, taking] account of all possible combinations . . . that are appropriate . . . or . . . simply the most interesting, pleasing, or amusing. (91)

In "Multiplicity" (*Memo* 5) we see that Carlo Emilio Gadda's "'system of systems,' where each system conditions the others" (106; Calvino's emphasis), reflects Calvino's notion of knowledge as network. In fact, after a lengthy discussion on Gadda, Musil, and Queneau, Calvino states that "[k]nowledge as multiplicity is the thread that binds together the major works both of what is called modernism and of what goes by the name of *postmodernism*" (116; Calvino's emphasis). In contrast to medieval literature, "modern books . . . are the outcome of a confluence and a clash of a multiplicity of interpretive methods" (116).

In the final analysis, Calvino's formula is "Keep It Short," stating that the network of possibilities may be contained in the few pages of a Borges story, as it may also be the "supporting structure" (individual parts) of a longer novel (120). In either case, the "unicum which is the *self* of the writer" is always present; this *self*, for Calvino, is a "combinatoria of experiences, information, books . . . read, things imagined . . . [which] can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable"

(124; Calvino's emphasis). We can say, then, to conclude, that the

texts he writes, the works he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*.[10]

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1. Indeed, here Calvino echoes notions similar to his ideological confrere, Roland Barthes. One need only think back to the French critic's notion of the death of the author and his concept of text divided into the categories of readerly and writerly.

2. Eco, for instance, tells us that his model reader is "supposedly able to deal interpretively with the expressions in the *same way* as the author deals generatively with them" (emphasis added); the same information, that is, in an analogous manner. See Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana UP), 7.

3. For an analogous notion vis-à-vis the reader's noncontemporaneity, see my "Aldo Palazzeschi's :*riflessi*: Retrospective Reading and Reverse Intertextuality," in *Semiotics 1988*, ed. Terry Prewitt (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989).

4. See his *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974), 279-81.

5. Indeed, one might consider some analogy with Charles Sanders Peirce's notion of potentiality vis-à-vis his concepts of phenomenology and the phaneron. See his "The Principles of Phenomenology," *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justice Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955), 76-97.

6. For an excellent treatment of Calvino's later fiction as postmodern, see Teresa de Lauretis, "Reading the (Post)Modern Text: *If on a winter's night a traveler*," in *Calvino Revisited*, ed. Franco Ricci (Ottawa: Doverhouse Editions, 1989), 131-45.

7. An intriguing aside is that Calvino had obviously planned on writing at least six memos; in the English edition the frontispiece is a photocopy of the six titles. A coincidental irony is that the title of the sixth memo he never completed, "Consistency," is barely visible. Given Calvino's penchant for *playing games* with his reader, perhaps one need not read Calvino's thoughts on this "value"; being the *arch/super*reader Calvino envisioned, s/he could surely recognize, to borrow from Calvino himself, "the potentialities within [his] system of signs" (*The Uses of Literature* 16).

8. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi with a foreword by Frederic Jameson (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1984), xxiv

9. Lyotard 81. Lest we forget what we have already seen above, in Calvino's "Levels of Reality in Literature": "literature does not recognize Reality as such, but only *levels*."

10. Lyotard 81; his emphasis.

**Off Screen: Women and
   Film in Italy**
*Ed. by Giuliana Bruno and
   Maria Nadotti*
Foreword by Laura Mulvey
New York: Routledge, 1988

The dissemination of English-language translations of Italian critical theory has been lamentably slow. *Off Screen* helps to speed that process for some of the contemporary film criticism produced by Italian women. Bruno and Nadotti's project "stems from the desire to examine aspects of Italian thought and make them known to a broader audience in an attempt to stimulate deeper and more permanent cultural exchange" (2). The book results from two conferences organized to examine women's contributions to film practice and theory in Italy and the United States. The editors point out differences and similarities in the development of women's cinema studies in the two countries, specifying that no Italian entity has power equal to that of American feminist studies, which are now autonomous disciplines in most major U. S. universities. However, after the societal upheaval of 1968, many "gruppi dell'inconscio" and other psychoanalytically oriented research/interest associations formed to study women's issues. As a consequence, the editors point out, while Lacanian thought is privileged in the United States, in Italy it is the Freudian tradition that holds sway. Semiotics and poststructuralism form important bases for feminist film theory in both nations.

All of the contributors to this volume are active in charting directions for Italian thought and filmmaking. The writers of the first part of the book largely influenced the "150 Hours Courses," a continuing-education project organized in cooperation with industry in Milan. The script of the film resulting from that project, *Scuola senza fine*, and a description of the experiences of women involved, appear in this volume. Paola Melchiori explores the uniquely female experience of the cinema—which often co-opts the male look and the feminine "dream of total fusion"—through the study of theorists such as Kierkegaard and Freud. Giulia Alberti conducts an excellent examination of the process whereby cinema fascinates woman as spectator/ subject by studying fifteen-minute cropped segments of movies selected from the traditions of classical Hollywood, French *nouvelle vague*, and women directors' films. Lea Melandri attempts to clarify the dream of love by means of an approach different from that of theorists such as Kristeva and Irigaray. As the editors note, she "articulates her own discourse through