Fall 1987

Language, the Other and God: On Italo Calvino's Last Novels

Richard Grigg
Sacred Heart University, griggr@sacredheart.edu

Recommended Citation

Grigg, R. (1987). Language, the Other and God: On Italo Calvino's last novels. *Religion & Literature, 19*(3), 49-65.

LANGUAGE, THE OTHER, AND GOD:
ON ITALO CALVINO'S LAST NOVELS

Richard Grigg

"*E pluribus unum* and its reverse might well sum up Calvino's approach to our condition," concludes Gore Vidal in his remembrance of Italian novelist Italo Calvino (3). But the manyness and oneness that are at issue in Calvino's fiction are not sociopolitical; they are, rather, onto-logical, a fact made evident by Calvino's response to the same obser-vation in an earlier essay of Vidal's:

> I don't know if it really refers to me, but it is true of an ideal literature for each one of us: the end being that every one of us must be, that the writer and reader become one, or One. And to close all of my discourse and yours in a perfect circle, let us say that this One is All. (qtd. in Vidal 8)

This quest for the One in the many, which can accurately be denoted with Paul Tillich's phrase, "the drive towards the unity of the separated" (*Love* 25), imparts a religious dynamic to Italo Calvino's novels. For while Calvino's quest may be motivated in large part by concern with literary-critical questions about authors, readers, and language, to talk about the One or All is to talk about an all-encompassing framework in terms of which human being must be understood. The One, if it is real, is ultimately determinative of the meaning of human being and nonbeing. Thus, to continue in a Tillichian vein, the One is the proper object of "ultimate concern" (*Theology* 1: 11-15). And ultimate concern is the very essence of religion.[1]

In Tillich's view, the One that grounds manyness — he calls it being-itself — can be identified with God, the God of Judaism and Christianity. What would Calvino say to this? The religious longing for the unity

of the separated is particularly evident in the last two novels that Cal-
vino published before his death, *If on a winter's night a traveler* and *Mr.
Palomar*. In these novels, despite the religious dynamic's central role,
Calvino never suggests that he is concerned with "God." That he ap-
parently feels comfortable with terms such as "One" or "All" and yet
steers clear of "God" may, of course, be due to relatively idiosyncratic
preferences; perhaps the notion of God as it has been developed in the
Judeo-Christian tradition does not, for Calvino, provide an appealing
image of the All. But there is a more fundamental reason for the ab-
sence of God-talk in these novels: Calvino appears to be fascinated,
if not dismayed, by the nihilism that has arisen in the modern period,
and the most powerful manifestation of this nihilism is precisely the
death of God. In modernity, the human subject, which is the center
of experience and hence the criterion for judging all that is, swallows
the reality around it. Eventually, even the subject itself disappears,
because there remains nothing over against the subject with respect
to which it can be a subject. As a writer, Calvino is particularly in-
trigued by the possibility of viewing this nihilism as a problem of lan-
guage and reading: "We live in a world where everything is already
read even before it starts to exist" ("Word" 39). In other words, there
appears to be no way to escape the tyranny of the human subject, for
the world outside the self must be interpreted or read by the self in
order for the self to be aware of it; it must be put into language. But
then no reality is finally independent of the self, for the world comes
to be, as it were, through the language employed by the self and the
reading in which the self engages.

In the James Lecture given in New York in 1983, Calvino casts his
quest for the One, the world or cosmos that provides the foundation
for manyness, in terms of current debates about language:

> Two contrasting conclusions to two philosophical currents haunt the writer's
> mind. The one says: The world doesn't exist, only language exists. The other
> says: The common language has no meaning; the world is literally unspeak-
> able. . . .
>   . . . The first current has its source in today's Paris; the second flows from
> the turn of the century in Vienna, but has gone through several revivals and
> is today widespread also in my country. Both philosophies have strong claims
> to being right. Both offer the writer a challenge: the first, to use a language
> responsible only to itself; the other, to use a language in order to reach the silence
> of the world. I'm fascinated and influenced by both. This means that I don't
> follow either, that I don't believe in either. ("Word" 38)[2]

Both currents point, at least potentially, beyond nihilism to Oneness:
the Parisian current suggests that the self which apparently devours

the cosmos in reading it is in fact itself a function of the All that is language, while the Viennese current holds to an unwritten One, a transcendent reality outside language. To the extent that these two currents or poles bound the religious quest in Calvino's novels, that quest will aim at a One that appears beyond the death of God, which was caused by the absorption of the world into the human subject via language and reading. Calvino cannot use God-talk because he wishes to reach something on the other side of nihilism and the death of God.

This returns us to Paul Tillich, for in Tillich's vocabulary, Calvino can be said to be seeking "the God above the God of theism" (*Courage* 182-90). The God of traditional theism was supposed to be transcendent, but, in fact, he could never transcend our own reading of the world. God was conceived as a personal being who revealed himself to humankind. Why was the theist confident that his or her notion of God was genuine and not simply a human concoction? Because that notion was based on a revelation given by God himself. But how did the theist know that the purported revelation was in fact a revelation? The theist had to judge that it was so. In other words, no appeal to revelation can outrun the tyranny of the self and its reading of the world.

In contrast to the God of traditional theism, the God above God is not a being but, rather, being-itself, the ground of the fact that there is anything at all, the goal of the drive toward the unity of the separated. To paraphrase Tillich, the God above God is the God who appears when the God of theism has disappeared into the abyss that is the human subject, when the God of theism has been unmasked as a projection created by our reading of the world (cf. *Courage* 190).

To discuss Calvino's novels in terms of a quest for God, even if it is the God above God, is of course to go beyond what is strictly evident in Calvino's work. Indeed, it is to undertake a constructive theological interpretation of Calvino. Yet this approach is not wholly without foundation. Such a constructive theological interpretation is a matter of plotting the trajectory and, hence, the eventual point of impact of the religious dynamic evident in Calvino's concern with the One. It is to go further than Calvino himself goes, but to go further on just that path that he himself has indicated.

A brief look at two earlier works, *Cosmicomics* and *Invisible Cities*, will serve to buttress the claim that a concern with the One is an integral component of Calvino's fiction. The Parisian and Viennese currents figure prominently in the earlier novels and in *If on a winter's night a*

traveler and *Mr. Palomar* as well. But in the latter two a crucial addi-
tional element enters the mix: the otherness of other persons. It is the
experience of this otherness that gives Calvino's quest a definite tra-
jectory, a trajectory that leads to the God above God.

Cosmicomics, published in 1965, is a set of stories about the evolu-
tion of the universe, narrated by a puzzling creature named Qfwfq,
who was present in one form or another at every stage. Each chapter
begins with a brief scientific account of a particular moment in the un-
folding of the cosmos. Then Qfwfq launches into his reminiscences
about what he and his companions — they include beings such as Mrs.
Vhd Vhd, Granny Bb'b, and several love interests for Qfwfq — were
doing at that point in (or before) time. Qfwfq can recall, for instance,
what it was like when all of the universe's matter was concentrated in
a single point, and he can describe his experiences as the last of the
dinosaurs.

In *Cosmicomics*, Calvino displays important devices for attempting
to get at the One outside our reading. First, and most obviously, he
explores moments in the development of the cosmos that are prior to
the advent of the human race. Indeed, he pushes back to moments
that stand outside the very structure of our language and our logic.
Calvino enters what might be termed a precategorical reality, a world
that is earlier than the one held together by the fundamental categories
through which we read our environment. Thinking back to one of his
earliest incarnations, Qfwfq recalls his brother playing with a thing:

> And then it was my brother Rwzfs, an infant at the time; at a certain point
> I felt him — who knows? — slamming or digging or writhing in some way, and
> I asked: "What are you doing?" And he said: "I'm playing."
> "Playing? With what?"
> "With a thing," he said.
> You understand? It was the first time. There had never been things to play
> with before. (*Cosmicomics* 20-21)

Later, Qfwfq tells us about falling in the void, but then reflects,

> Now that I think about it, there weren't even any proofs that I was really fall-
> ing: perhaps I had always remained immobile in the same place, or I was mov-
> ing in an upward direction; since there was no above or below these were only
> nominal questions so I might just as well go on thinking I was falling, as I was
> naturally led to think. (*Cosmicomics* 115)

Calvino has escaped the bounds of our categorical grid.

The sense of escape is heightened by the fact that Qfwfq, whatever
he may be, is not human. *Cosmicomics* is, in other words, not simply
a leap outside the categories of ordinary thinking; it is a narration from

the point of view of a non-human creature. In this way it imaginatively outstrips the attempt via scientific thinking, such as that found at the beginning of each chapter, to grasp a time before things or a place without an up or a down.

The very title of the book is suggestive: *Cosmicomics* explores the cosmos, the world taken as a whole, and it does so through the comic. The word "comic" signifies, first of all, the general notion of comedy. What does it mean to treat the evolution of the universe in terms of comedy? Calvino's own comments on comedy provide an answer:

> What I look for in the comic or ironic or grotesque or absurd transforma-
> tion of things is a way to escape from the limitations and one-sidedness of every
> representation and every judgment. A thing can be said in more than one way.
> . . . Ariosto's irony, Shakespeare's comedy, Cervantes's picaresque, Sterne's
> humor, or the fantasy of Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, Jarry, or Queneau, are
> all precious to me insofar as they help one attain that kind of detachment from
> the particular, that sense of the vastness of the whole. ("Comedy" 63)

The comic is apparently a mode particularly appropriate to the quest for detachment from nihilistic reading, a detachment that results in a sense of the whole or One.

The word "comic" calls to mind, secondly, the comic strip. The comic strip undoubtedly appeals to Calvino as a unique narrative form. This formal appeal is especially evident in "The Origin of the Birds," which is contained in *t zero*, a second collection of Qfwfq's tales that Calvino published in 1967. But the comic strip is also useful insofar as it is associated with fanciful, nonhuman beings, beings not unlike Qfwfq. The comic strip often suggests a vantage point other than the ordinary human one.

Lest one conclude, on the basis of what has been said thus far, that it is only the Viennese approach to the One with which Calvino toys in *Cosmicomics*, it is necessary to note that the Parisian approach defin- itely gets its due. In the chapter entitled "A Sign in Space," for instance, Calvino plays with signs, names, and thinking as an activity predicated upon difference. Indeed, Qfwfq concludes the tale with the observa- tion that "independent of signs, space didn't exist and perhaps had never existed" (*Cosmicomics* 39). Even the name Qfwfq is, after all, a sym- metrical structure composed of letters, a kind of crystal that is also a word.

Some critics have taken a decidedly less metaphysical approach to *Cosmicomics*. Anatole Broyard's review begins this way:

> Looking for a few fresh things to say about love, Italo Calvino has gone all
> the way back to the beginning of the universe, to a time when all matter, every

> impulse, was virgin. The trip, however, may have been unnecessary: it turns
> out that the familiar patterns are already there. Even the dinosaur, apparently,
> had his amatory difficulties. (4)

Similarly, Charles Simmons concludes that, while not all of the Qfwfq
stories work, "there are recurrent themes—particularly separation from
the beloved—that make the successful stories a touching and possibly
durable work" (35). Qfwfq is perhaps best viewed as a "cosmic Casa-
nova" (Broyard 4).

Michael Feingold moves a step closer to the heart of the book in
his review titled, significantly enough, "Doing the Universe Wrong."
Feingold understands that Calvino is concerned with grasping the
essence of the cosmos, but he judges that to make that attempt via an
anthropomorphized primordial entity like Qfwfq is to reduce the uni-
verse to a merely human perspective: ". . . Calvino cuts our cosmology
down" (36). *Cosmicomics* represents a "happy nihilism" (36). In short,
Feingold fails to recognize that Calvino's perspective is not reductive
but, in fact, the very opposite.

Francesco Guardiani provides the necessary corrective to Feingold:

> *Cosmicomics* is essentially a review of prehuman, prenatural images. Obviously
> they are depicted in a human and natural way (it is a man who is writing for
> a community of human readers), but the two terms *human* and *natural* assume
> meanings wider and more profound than those usually assigned them. The nar-
> rative style is that of the fairy tale, but the setting is not that of the fable, the
> *incipit* is not "once upon a time" but "once below a time." Calvino seeks to discover
> in the things an objective reliability, a matrix of reality not filtered by reduc-
> tive ideologies. The ideologies are nothing but the projections of man's desire
> to give an artificial order to the world. The chaos, he hints, has its own order,
> discontinuous and discrete (in the mathematical sense), which we have never
> understood because of our man-centered perspective. (58)

Kathryn Hume takes us farther, all the way to the One. Qfwfq has
shown us, says Hume, "how the relationship between man and universe
can be eroticized and lifted to mystic union" (76). Mysticism is, of
course, nothing other than the attempt to achieve an immediate rela-
tion to the One.

By the time *Invisible Cities* was published in 1972, Calvino's interest
in complex structural patterns and unlimited combinatory possibilities
was at full tilt. The following observation from a 1967 lecture entitled
"Cybernetics and Ghosts" is instructive:

> In the particular way today's culture looks at the world, one tendency is emerg-
> ing from several directions at once. The world in its various aspects is increas-
> ingly looked upon as *discrete* rather than *continuous*. I am using the term "discrete"

in the sense it bears in mathematics, a discrete quantity being one made up
of separate parts. (8)

The same lecture lets us in on Calvino's fascination with Oulipo, the
Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle (Workshop of Potential Literature),
a group that can be said to apply the cybernetic perspective to literature.
Calvino became an actual member of Oulipo by 1973.

Invisible Cities is an intricate and elegant exercise in combining discrete
units. The book is a framed narrative: Marco Polo describes to Kublai
Khan cities that he has visited throughout the Khan's empire. There
are fifty-five cities in all, and they can be divided into eleven categories:
cities and memory, cities and desire, cities and signs, thin cities, trading
cities, cities and eyes, cities and names, cities and the dead, cities and
the sky, continuous cities, and hidden cities. The table of contents
reveals that Calvino's juxtaposition of the fifty-five cities and the eleven
categories is carried out according to a precise mathematical scheme.
Invisible Cities is not simply about entities created by combining discrete
components; it is itself such an entity, and it is self-conscious about
being so in a way most novels are not.

The book is more, however, than a mere formal exercise. It is im-
possible to miss the implication that the Khan's empire, or perhaps
even each individual city, is a metaphor for the cosmos. For example,
Polo at one point considers the suggestion that "the true map of the
universe is the city of Eudoxia" (97). And we are treated to metaphysical
speculations such as this one: "Perhaps, Kublai thought, the empire
is nothing but a zodiac of the mind's phantasms" (22). Albert Carter's
succinct summary seems accurate: "Within the imperial gardens, Kublai
Khan and Marco Polo rest in their hammocks, smoke their pipes and
create reality" (30). And John Updike is surely correct in detecting a
species of "Berkeleyism" in the book (139).

But while Berkeley comes to mind, the Parisian philosophical cur-
rent seems an even stronger presence. As cities are the result of com-
bining discrete units, so too is the universe, and the units that make
it up are linguistic. The cosmos is a combination of signs such that,
just as when one enters the city of Tamara, "the eye does not see things
but images of things that mean other things" (13). Again, "Memory
is redundant: it repeats signs so that the city can begin to exist" (19).

At the same time, "the city must never be confused with the words
that describe it" (61). And at some points in his dialogue with the Khan,
Polo finds that words fail him in his attempt to uncover the essence
of the empire. Thus, he resorts to mute gestures, but even these prove
unsatisfactory: "In their conversations, most of the time, they remained

silent and immobile" (39). Perhaps there is, after all, an unwritten universe, a cosmos before which language must fall silent. In either case, *Invisible Cities* is, as Joseph McElroy has expressed it, "a dialogue between the imperial will to impose and possess and the power to rest in the contemplation of multiplicity" (35). That is, Kublai Khan and Marco Polo are exploring the relationship between the one and the many.

If on a winter's night a traveler, published in 1979, offers another framed narrative, a series of stories within a story. A Reader begins to read a new novel, but due to an error on the part of the printer, he cannot complete it. He then obtains what he believes is a sound copy of the same novel, but it turns out to be a wholly different work, both in style and in content. What is more, this second novel too breaks off soon after it has begun. This pattern repeats itself until the hapless protagonist has read the opening sections of ten different novels, none of which has an ending. The stories-within-a-story pattern of *If on a winter's night a traveler*, in addition to allowing Calvino to experiment with varying genres and with strict formal structures,[3] provides a device for exploring the Parisian philosophical current. One can interpret the book as not only suggesting but even effecting the identification of the world with language. As one reads *If on a winter's night a traveler*, one discovers that neither the author nor the reader stands outside of the novel; both are pulled into the novel so that there is no longer an unwritten or "real" world independent of the written, fictional world. How do I as reader find myself inside the novel rather than outside it on the secure soil of the unwritten world? Consider the opening sentence: "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*" (3). I as reader am the protagonist, the Reader who reads each of the ten incomplete works, the first of which is none other than *If on a winter's night a traveler*. The Reader-protagonist is continually addressed in the second person. And he is never given a name nor described in detail, thus making it possible for me to identify myself with him.

The author too dissolves into the novel, first of all, in that Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* is one of the unfinished stories within the story of the Reader and his quest. In addition, we discover that the unfinished novels that frustrate the Reader's desire to read have no authors in the usual sense. The confusion in the publishing world that results in ten incomplete books is largely the work of Ermes Marana, a counterfeiter of texts who seeks to turn all texts into authorless entities. The ten novels, while perhaps built upon genuine

works, are ultimately apocryphal novels whose attribution to real authors is a falsehood. Ermes Marana, then, is Hermes as Mara, as "serpent" (125); he is Hermes as trickster who, instead of bearing messages from the unwritten world, removes all traces of an unwritten reality behind the written.[4]

This is one possible answer to the quest to unify the many in the One. Language is the all-encompassing whole, and author and reader are both functions of the language of the text. This is a unity accomplished through the deconstruction of the independent reality of reader and author. The process of deconstruction is so thorough that it is not always possible to distinguish among author, reader (Reader), and the characters who populate the ten novels within the novel. One of those characters tells us, for instance,

> Your attention, as reader, is now completely concentrated on the woman, already for several pages you have been circling around her, I have—no, the author has—been circling around the feminine presence, for several pages you have been expecting this female shadow to take shape the way female shadows take shape on the written page, and it is your expectation, reader, that drives the author toward her. (*Traveler* 20)

Oneness arises out of manyness; the All is manifest, not through the many being taken up into a higher unity, not through an *Aufhebung*, but through erasure, and the word "erase" or some variant of it appears over twenty times in the English translation of the novel.

Here we see an explanation for the attractiveness of the philosophy of deconstruction: by moving in a direction that appears to be radically nihilistic, it paradoxically promises deliverance from nihilism. Modern nihilism results from the power that the human subject exerts over the world via language. But suppose that the subject itself becomes a function of language, a creation of the play of signifiers. Then the world is no longer swallowed up by subjectivity. Could it be that just when we acknowledge the world to be nothing other than language, surprisingly enough, we receive the world back again? And wouldn't such a world be characterized by Oneness, the unity that is language?

Calvino is apparently not convinced. He tells us in his James Lecture that he cannot align himself with the Parisian current in philosophy. Furthermore, Calvino's Mr. Palomar, far from being enticed by the possibility that the world is nothing other than language, will be anguished by it. For Palomar, nihilism is not transcended by dissolving the world into language.

So much for a deconstructive solution to the drive towards the unity of the separated. There remains the philosophy that finds its origin

in Vienna, a philosophy that hints at the existence of an unwritten
world beyond the grasp of language: "What we cannot speak about
we must pass over in silence" (Wittgenstein 74). Through a notable
sleight of hand, Calvino turns the erasure that seems to suggest world
is nothing other than language into a possible precondition for intuiting
an unwritten cosmos beyond language. Once erasure has been accom-
plished, the language of a text is no longer a tool at the disposal of
the author (or reader), through which the author expresses his or her
idiosyncratic perspective. But this need not mean that the author is
a function of language. Perhaps it means that the words of the text
have become the medium for a message from beyond both author and
language, a message from the unwritten One. Calvino introduces us
to Silas Flannery, a writer "who wants to annul himself in order to give
voice to what is outside him" (*Traveler* 181), an author who tells us,
"...my aim is to capture in the book the illegible world, without center,
without ego, without I" (*Traveler* 180). Flannery reflects upon his aim
via a most fascinating question:

> Will I ever be able to say, "Today it writes," just like "Today it rains," "To-
> day it is windy"? Only when it will come natural to me to use the verb "write"
> in the impersonal form will I be able to hope that through me is expressed
> something less limited than the personality of an individual. (*Traveler* 176)

The reality less limited than the personality of an individual is, of
course, nothing other than the One behind the many, the unwritten
cosmos. "The universe will express itself," says Flannery, "as long as
somebody will be able to say, 'I read, therefore *it* writes' " (*Traveler* 176).
If Flannery's project were to succeed, he would certainly have found
a road leading beyond the tryanny of the subject to the One that unifies
manyness. But how can it ever succeed? How would Flannery know
just when it was appropriate to say, "I read, therefore *it* writes"?[5] Cal-
vino toys with the Viennese philosophical current via Silas Flannery,
but he does not accept its claims.

There is in the novel a third element that plays a role in Calvino's
drive towards the unity of the separated. Over against the Reader,
Calvino places a woman named Ludmilla and designates her the Other
Reader. The Reader develops a romantic interest in this Other Reader,
and the story of his reading one incomplete novel after another is, at
the same time, the story of his pursuit of the Other Reader. It is pre-
cisely the irreducible otherness of the Other Reader that is of most
interest. This otherness cannot be erased through the dissolution of
the Other Reader into language, whether it be a subject's act of reading
or language itself conceived as the All. Of course the Other Reader

is a character within the novel that I read. And the Reader, with whom I am identified, attempts to read her by analyzing how she has arranged things in her home, and he "believes" that he can read her sexually (*Traveler* 155). But the Other Reader can never be reduced to the reading of the Reader nor dissolved into the text in which he reads himself, for she is herself a reader, a point other than his own from which reading sets out. Her reading is equiprimordial with the Reader's, and at the same time that he attempts to read the Other, the Other attempts to read him: "And you, too, O Reader, are meanwhile an object of reading: the Other Reader now is reviewing your body as if skimming the index . . ." (*Traveler* 155). The unity of Reader and Other Reader, then, cannot consist in the destruction of their independent identities, the dissolution of one into the reading of the other. Rather, their unity is that of parallel readings (*Traveler* 156, 260).

The special status of the Other Reader as a point outside the written world is reenforced by her juxtaposition to a character whom Calvino designates the Nonreader (Cf. "Word" 39). This Nonreader, Irnerio by name, disavows reading in order to undo the conventions of language that separate us from the unwritten world, and he is a companion of the Other Reader. From the perspective of the Reader, the Nonreader and the Other Reader have complementary roles. Both stand, in one way or another, outside language.

There is perhaps one more observation that ought to be made about the special role of the Other Reader: it is the Reader's relationship with the Other Reader that forces Calvino into specifying that the Reader is male. Thus, if I am a woman, I cannot completely identify myself with the Reader, I cannot slip wholly inside the written world of the novel, and this is due, above all, to the Other Reader.[6]

Modern nihilism results from the absorption of the world into the self, for the world must always be read by the self. Where can I expect to find an escape from nihilism if nihilism is caused by the autonomy of my own subjectivity? Perhaps precisely in an *other subject*, one who is autonomous over against my autonomy. This may explain the contemporary interest in the human other.[7] Is the otherness of other persons the key, then, to the God above the God who died with the advent of modern nihilism? Not exactly. *If on a winter's night a traveler* shows me a reality beyond my own reading — this is a prerequisite for satisfying the drive towards the unity of the separated — but that reality, i.e., the human other, is not the One; it is not God. Indeed, manyness still prevails at this point, for there are many others. Where, then, does the God above God appear? It will surely not do to say that, while

others are many, the otherness of others can be used as a reliable model for conceiving the God above God. For why should this model be anything but a projection, a conception of God reducible to my own world-absorbing reading? If I am to avoid this difficulty, the God above God must actually appear at the very point that I escape the tyranny of my own reading, i.e., in the other himself or herself.

It seems that we must push our observation of the other further, and this need brings us to *Mr. Palomar*. *Mr. Palomar* offers the possibility that the other is in reality a barrier to our desire to grasp a Oneness behind manyness. Perhaps the same autonomy over against myself that prevents the other from being dissolved into my reading of the world gets in the way of my drive toward the Oneness that is God.

The restless protagonist of Calvino's last novel is driven by the urge to grasp "the true substance of the world beyond sensory and mental habits" (*Palomar* 7). This drive seems to be as much a source of anxiety as of exhiliration for the eccentric Palomar:

> Mr. Palomar always hopes that silence contains something more than language can say. But what if language were really the goal toward which everything in existence tends? Or what if everything that exists were language, and has been since the beginning of time? Here Mr. Palomar is again gripped by anguish. (*Palomar* 27)

But despite his doubts and anxieties, Calvino's Palomar does have a plan for piercing through sensory and mental habits, including the conventions of language, to the unwritten world. Palomar will attempt, in a kind of phenomenological reduction, to see things as if for the first time, as the things show themselves to him. Like the astronomical observatory his name calls to mind, Mr. Palomar will engage in an egoless, detailed investigation of the realities he encounters. Calvino's fascination with the possibility of such a relationship to the world and with the metaphor of the observatory surfaces already in one of the unfinished novels contained in *If on a winter's night a traveler* (54-67). And he provides a clear account of the mindset behind *Mr. Palomar* in his James Lecture:

> The world I see, the one we ordinarily recognize as *the* world, presents itself to my eyes — at least to a large extent — already defined, labeled, catalogued. . . . We live in a world where everything is already read even before it starts to exist. ("Word" 39)

The proposed solution:

> To renew a relationship between language and world perhaps the first operation is the simplest: fixing our attention on an object, any object, to the most

trivial and familiar, and describing it minutely, as if it were the newest and
most interesting thing in the world.

    One of the lessons we can derive from the poetry of our century is the in-
vestment of all our attention, all our love for details, in something very far
from any human image, an object, a plant, an animal, then identifying in it
our sense of reality, our morals, our self, as William Carlos Williams did with
a cyclamen, Marianne Moore with a nautilus, Eugenio Montale with an eel.
("Word" 39)[8]

Thus it is that Calvino decides to send Mr. Palomar off on a series
of observational adventures. As the detailed table of contents at the
end of the book points out, these adventures represent a systematic
progression from the investigation of natural objects, to anthropological-
cultural exploration, to the contemplation of issues of metaphysical im-
port; Palomar's attention ranges over everything from two tortoises
mating on his patio to the possibility that his observation of the uni-
verse is equivalent to the universe observing itself.

    Sad to say, however, Mr. Palomar never quite succeeds in satisfy-
ing his drive towards the unity of the separated. His glimpses at a
Oneness between himself and the unwritten world turn out to be, in
his own estimation, momentary illusions. And here we must return
to the reality of the other. Surely much of Mr. Palomar's difficulty is
caused, as he would tell us himself, by his own recalcitrant ego. But,
in addition, the otherness of other persons crops up time and again
to wreck Mr. Palomar's attempts at effecting an awareness of the All.

    While strolling along the beach, Mr. Palomar spies the naked breast
of a sunbather and, through careful observation, tries to apprehend
its place in the whole. But the woman upon whose bosom Mr. Palomar
has so firmly fixed his attention misunderstands his philosophical in-
terest, jumps to her feet, and marches off in irritation.

    In his attempt to grasp the meaning of the whistling of blackbirds
on his lawn, Mr. Palomar unhappily hypothesizes,

. . . perhaps no one can understand anyone: each blackbird believes that he
has put into his whistle a meaning fundamental for him, but only he under-
stands it; the other gives him a reply that has no connection with what he said;
it is a dialogue between the deaf, a conversation without head or tail. (*Palomar* 25)

Palomar wonders if human dialogue is really any different.

    Mr. Palomar attempts to perceive a privileged relationship between
himself and the gifts of nature and culture arrayed before him in a
gourmet food shop. The obstinate presence of the other patrons un-
does this project, however.

    Mr. Palomar wants to effect a harmony with the universe:

> When he is convinced that he has precisely outlined his own place in the midst of the silent expanse of things. . . . Mr. Palomar decides the moment has come to apply this cosmic wisdom to relations with his fellows. . . . He expects to see, extending before him, a human landscape that is finally distinct, clear, without mists, where he will be able to move with precise and confident gestures. Is this what happens? Not at all. (*Palomar* 117-18)

It seems that the otherness of other persons continually interrupts Mr. Palomar's drive to unify the manyness around him. This disruptive power of the other even provides the metaphorical framework within which Mr. Palomar ponders the resistance that inanimate objects display toward his desire to understand them. In observing Mars, Mr. Palomar discovers "the difficulty of establishing relations with the planet, as with a person of difficult character" (*Palomar* 38). Or perhaps, we are told, it is like the difficulty Palomar's own character presents in attempting to relate to other persons.

The Other Reader in *If on a winter's night a traveler* represented an otherness that opposed dissolution into language, whether it be my own act of reading or language itself conceived as the All. As a starting point outside the written world, the other might appear to be the key which unlocks the unwritten cosmos that embraces the manyness of our experience. But the otherness of other persons seems only to destroy Mr. Palomar's hold on that cosmos. Does the quest for the unwritten One behind manyness, perhaps because it imposes a unity on things from the perspective of one's own particular place in the universe, necessarily founder upon the otherness of others? I believe that Palomar leaves us with this question. Does he, thereby, also leave us with a clue as to the identity of the God above God? Can we, in other words, plot a theological trajectory in the musings of Palomar, especially when they are attached to *If on a winter's night a traveler*? Consider this possibility: Calvino's last two novels may point us toward a God who transcends not only the God of traditional theism, the God who has died, but even Tillich's being-itself and Calvino's own object of longing, the One. The otherness of other persons confronts me with a reality that escapes my own reading of the world. As a result, I might hope that the other will help me find the unwritten One beyond manyness. However, the very autonomy of the other over against my autonomy disrupts my search for the One, since my ability to perceive Oneness is, in the end, predicated upon my ability to unify everything within my own consciousness. Otherness rends this undertaking, which is "egocentric" in the literal sense of that word. But it may be at just this point, i.e., in the moment of this disruption, that we find a trace

of the real God above God. This God would transcend even Oneness, even being-itself, to the extent that Oneness and being-itself are a function of the ability of consciousness to thematize the world, to unify reality within the single horizon of my "I think." The God who leaves its trace in my encounter with the otherness of the other person is a God somehow "beyond" or "otherwise than" Being.[9]

Moving beyond Calvino's explicit reflections about the ultimate, we have constructed a theological interpretation of his novels. But if this interpretation has in fact been guided by the clues that Calvino offers, it is evident that his work provides fertile ground for theological speculation. To the extent that Italo Calvino's novels point us toward a God beyond the God who died with the advent of modern nihilism, they are an important resource for constructing just that kind of notion of the divine that is required by the contemporary cultural situation: a notion that is an alternative to both theism and atheism. While theism cannot withstand the corrosive forces integral to the modern world view, atheism makes the fatal mistake of supposing that there is no longer any dimension of ultimacy available to contemporary persons. The God we have been led to by Calvino's last novels escapes the dilemma that the God of theism cannot escape, but not at the price of jettisoning the ultimacy associated with the divine. Instead, we have discovered a God who transcends God as traditionally conceived. This genuinely transcendent deity suggests, as does the comedy in which we have glimpsed him, "a way to escape from the limitations and one-sidedness of every representation" ("Comedy" 63).

Sacred Heart University

NOTES

1. While Tillich usually identifies ultimate concern with faith, he also identifies it with religion. See *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York: Columbia UP, 1963) 4.

2. *The New York Review of Books* prints the title of Calvino's lecture as "The Written and the Unwritten Word," but the lecture itself has to do with the written and unwritten *world*. Cf. *Traveler* 171-72 where Calvino also speaks of the "unwritten world."

3. On the latter, see Warren F. Motte, Jr.'s "Calvino's Combinatorics," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 6 (Summer 1986): 81-87.

4. The association of the name Ermes with Hermes is made explicit when Ermes introduces himself as the representative of the Mercury and the Muses Agency (*Traveler* 120). Mara is a Satan-like figure in the Buddhist tradition.

5. Robert P. Scharlemann in *The Being of God: Theology and the Experience of Truth*

(New York: Seabury, 1981) provides the theological tools with which to analyze this issue (64-78, 111-34).

6. If there is another reason that the Reader must be male, it is that Calvino wishes to merge the Reader with himself as author. The Reader is "a general male you, perhaps brother and double of a hypocrite I" (*Traveler* 141).

7. One of the most impressive examples of this recent interest is Michael Theunissen's *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Buber*, (trans. Christopher Macann (Cambridge: MIT, 1984).

8. It is worth noting that J. Hillis Miller in *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth Century Writers* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1965) treats William Carlos Williams as a crucial figure in the transcendence of that modern nihilism that is of concern to us.

9. I am drawing here upon the thought of the contemporary Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1981). Note, however, that Levinas understands the transcendence that belongs to the other in terms of the infinity of my moral responsibility to the other, while Calvino leads us to focus on the other's position beyond my reading of the world.

WORKS CITED

Broyard, Anatole. "Qfwfq Through the Ages." *The New York Times Book Review* August 25, 1968:4.

Calvino, Italo. *Cosmicomics*. Trans. William Weaver. San Diego: Harcourt, 1968.

―――. "Cybernetics and Ghosts." *The Uses of Literature*. Trans. Patrick Creagh. San Diego: Harcourt, 1986. 3-27.

―――. "Definition of Territories: Comedy." *The Uses of Literature*. 62-64.

―――. *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Trans. William Weaver. San Diego: Harcourt, 1981.

―――. *Invisible Cities*. Trans. William Weaver. San Diego: Harcourt, 1974.

―――. *Mr. Palomar*. Trans. William Weaver. San Diego: Harcourt, 1985.

―――. *t zero*. Trans. William Weaver. San Diego: Harcourt, 1969.

―――. "The Written and the Unwritten Word." *The New York Review of Books* May 12, 1983: 38-39.

Carter, Albert H. III. Review of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. *The New Republic* December 28, 1974: 30-31.

Feingold, Michael. "Doing the Universe Wrong." *The New Republic* November 2, 1968: 34-36.

Guardiani, Francesco. "Optimism without Illusions." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 6 (Summer 1986): 54-61.

Hume, Kathryn. "Calvino's Framed Narratives: Writers, Readers, and Reality." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 6 (Summer 1986): 71-80.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1981.

McElroy, Joseph. Review of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. *The New York Times Book Review* November 17, 1974: 35-36.

Simmons, Charles. Review of Italo Calvino's *Cosmicomics*. *The New York Times* August 6, 1968: 35.

Tillich, Paul. *Courage to Be*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1952.

———. *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications*. London: Oxford UP, 1954.

———. *Systematic Theology*. 3 vols. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1951-1963.

Updike, John. "Metropolises of the Mind." *The New Yorker* February 24, 1975: 137-40.

Vidal, Gore. "On Italo Calvino." *The New York Review of Books* November 21, 1985: 3-10.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961.