

Invisible Empire: The Power of Language and Metaphor in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*

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Abstract

In this analysis of a single text, I mean to demonstrate that I have fulfilled three purposes in the study of literature: becoming a better reader, understanding and developing increasingly complex metaphors, and discovering a personal voice in writing. Through a discussion of the critical dialogue and the thematic, structural and linguistic elements of a text, I demonstrate a capacity for conversing with text – wrestling it if necessary – a clear understanding of metaphor, its use and its limitations, an ability to explicate complex metaphors and construct them myself, and exercised a style and voice particular to myself and not entirely unpleasant. I begin with a discussion on the critical dialogue concerning Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, followed by a brief description of my methodology for studying the text. What follows is my own analysis of the book, informed by critical dialogue and postmodern theory, but not steered by it. I conclude that the power of language and metaphor in this text exemplifies the power they signify in life, that they offer us, the constructors and users of signs and words space to know and hope that we can manage change rather than be destroyed by it.

“The poetry of the invisible, of infinite unexpected possibilities
– even the poetry of nothingness – issues from a poet who had
no doubts whatever about the physical reality of the world.”

– Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*

There is no shortage of critical dialogue concerning Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. It does not hurt, of course, that Calvino's writing is beautiful and terribly clever; critics revel in the study of such work. But the book is also extraordinarily complex, to the point of alluding classification, so to write about its elements necessitates covering a great deal of space – a critical “spreading out” as it were. Moreover, it is a text that leaves the reader with more questions than answers. Some critics have hailed it a masterpiece; one called it ““ a sensuous delight, a sophisticated literary puzzle”” (*Contemporary Authors Online*), another ““a work of unquestionable merit and enduring success”” (Ricci, “Italo Calvino”). Salman Rushdie had mixed feelings about the book. He appreciated its “jeweled sentences and glittering notions,” but said Calvino had incorporated into all that beauty “no story-telling worth a damn” (Rushdie 16). He suggests that *Invisible Cities* be kept for bedside reading “in small doses” (Rushdie 16). Whatever the individual reader's taste, one theme is echoed in throughout the scholarship on this novel: the evolving series found in *Invisible Cities* works as both a structural and rhetorical element, which, though it could leave the reader with an impression of pessimism, instead bolsters the story, infusing it with a constant renewal of scene, and in the end an impression of hope.

Rosetta Di Pace-Jordan is one of those critics who sees the serial structure of the novel as indicative of the author's purpose. She contends that, for Calvino, seriality represents possibility in story-telling, because it provides a network of choices, conclusions and themes, all of which can be seen at once, unlike a typical narrative, in which a character follows a path that he can choose to either follow or leave. Without seriality in fiction, narrative is trapped in a forward thrust; Calvino has circumvented this problem. This is not to say that *Invisible Cities* lacks movement. In her article, “Italo Calvino's

Legacy: The Constant and Consistent Vision,” Pace-Jordan explains how “description of the cities is framed by the dialogue between Marco Polo and the Kublai Khan, a dialogue that is intermittent and provides the story’s continuous movement” (Pace-Jordan). She goes on to examine the relationship between the importance of the conversations shared by Polo and Khan and Calvino’s position on Italian hermetics, claiming his “participatory attitude” marks the author as a “cartographer of contemporary consciousness” and a “representative of ‘a deep-rooted vocation in Italian literature, handed on from Dante to Galileo: the notion of the literary work as a map of the world and of the knowable...’” (Pace-Jordan). (While Dante’s and Calvino’s approaches to describing the inferno are wildly different, one can see that such comparisons are inevitable.) And, it is this mapping impulse that the critic cites as the source of optimism in Calvino’s ending, arguing that Polo’s insistence on continuing to explore new possibilities, yet to be discovered areas of the network constitutes his response to the skepticism and exhaustion Khan expresses.

Albert Sbragia, in “Italo Calvino's Ordering of Chaos,” approaches Calvino’s structure differently. Sbragia says, “Traditional Western science...has preferred to keep [chaos] offstage, focusing on the neat linear equations of Euclidean physics and ignoring...chaotic configurations of most natural phenomena.” The result of this circumstance has been a negative approach to chaos and an attempt to cast it as unimaginable confusion – complete with weeping and gnashing of teeth – and a threat to all existence. The entropic tendency of the universe, it was believed, would eventually lead to the universe being baked by its own energy as lost energy accumulates in the system – a cosmic “Dutch oven” of sorts. Only at the close of the twentieth century, with a boom in information sciences and technological development, have scientists begun to reframe

chaos. “Rather than poor in order,” Sbragia says, “chaotic systems are now seen as rich in information and complexity.” According to him, scientists have begun to stress two revolutionary tenets. First, that “the vast majority of nonlinear phenomena in the universe are not characterized by true randomness, but by an orderly disorder” (Sbragia). Secondly, “the interaction of order and disorder is not an irreversible dance with entropic death but the very source of life in the universe” (Sbragia).

Sbragia shows that this emergent science of chaos grounds Calvino’s thoughts on systems, organization and a writer’s work. In his essay “Exactitude,” found in his last book, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Calvino writes:

“The universe disintegrates into a cloud of heat, it falls inevitably into a vortex of entropy, but within this irreversible process there may be areas of order, portions of the existent that tend toward a form, privileged points in which we seem to discern a design or perspective. A work of literature is one of these minimal portions in which the existent crystallizes into a form, acquires a meaning--not fixed, not definitive, not hardened into a mineral immobility, but alive as an organism.” (*Six Memos* 69-70)

This thesis is essentially different from that of Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers in that the latter paints literature as the creation of order from chaos, where the former is concerned with creating pockets of order within chaos. Sbragia concludes that nearly all of Calvino’s characters “suffer from an acute hypersensitivity to the disorder of the world,” which may explain why much of *Invisible Cities* is devoted to exploiting the possibilities its structure provides while investigating the order and disorder of Khan’s empire.

Where Pace-Jordan’s and Sbragia’s analysis of the novel are generally holistic, exploring the book’s macro elements, Constance A. Pedoto’s “Game Playing in the Fiction of Italo Calvino” focuses on just one kind of metaphor in Calvino’s literature. She discusses at length the game of chess played by Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, asserting

that Calvino uses this activity to examine the building of new systems of language, and the processes by which out-dated words, symbols and signified objects re-enter a language. She writes, “Like Christ who raised Lazarus from the dead, Calvino aspires to save his audience from Adelma, the city or burial place for defunct linguistic methods and obsolete perceptions of life” (Pedoto). In agreement, Albert Carter observes that the effect of making the abstraction of Empire into a concrete item – a chess board – room is made in mental spaces to welcome the events and facts of history and geography; reality becomes thought. Polo revels in the Cartesian separation of mind and matter, elevating those things of the mind and construing the material facts and limits of life as a game board.

Franco Ricci’s article on Calvino in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* carries this idea farther. He says, “cities are metaphors for psychological states and poetic possibilities” (Ricci). This author is in agreement with Rushdie, acknowledging the book as a great success as a work of art but denying it a place among narratives, maintaining that in *Invisible Cities* Calvino does not tell a story. Like other critics, Ricci meditates for a while on Calvino’s structure, however, unlike those mentioned above, finds little significance in it. Perhaps, he and Rushdie belong to that school of writers who believe storytelling can only take place against the backdrop of structure but not through it. Paul Harris, author of “Italo Calvino: The Code, the Clinamen and the Cities,” would say that their thesis is only half true. He has found that the interplay between the dramatic dialogues and the city descriptions reveals a meta-language by which the details of each city are made irreducible. Such a language necessitates a prescription for representing objects as well as containing them, therefore, a determined structure for this novel is the key to creating the world in which Marco Polo live and communicate. He says, “Metaphor here is not the *issue*... it is

the premise. Metaphors are taken literally: instead of "bodying forth things unknown," metaphor *is* the body..." (Harris). That is, the material, mathematical nature of the story's structure signifies a changing relationship between subject and object, between author and audience. Ultimately, Ricci does not stray far from the critical pack; he, too, maintains Calvino's ending for the book is an optimistic one, because it provides for a "renewed faith in personal strength and courage."

Martin McLaughlin's book, *Italo Calvino*, may offer the most thorough analysis of *Invisible Cities*. His is a comprehensive, scholarly study of Calvino's fiction and *Six Memos*; it was written in English – not translated – and is accessible to an undergraduate audience. These factors have made it one of the more frequently cited texts in Calvino scholarship since its publication.

McLaughlin begins by outlining Calvino's writing process, explaining that the serial units (the cities) were written first and in no particular order, then later grouped together. Only by applying complex mathematical constraints, the result of which was to give the book a beginning, middle and end, could Calvino transform a series of interesting vignettes into a story. McLaughlin describes that rigid structure, then offers an overview of the cities described in each chapter, drawing the reader's attention to their similarities and differences, and focusing on one or two cities to exemplify the others. He says, "Despite the intricacy of the structural pattern of the book, and consequently the multiplicity of ways of reading this 'open text' (Martignoni, 1997), there is a clear progression of the cities described from visible to invisible elements" (McLaughlin 107). McLaughlin also notes a transition from simplicity to complexity on several levels. The cities nearer the beginning

of the book are described via lists of external features, while the cities later in the book are characterized by happiness or poverty as well as increasingly complex metaphors.

Stylistically, McLaughlin notes, *Invisible Cities* is more clipped than Calvino's earlier work, reminiscent of Borgesian *brevitas*, which is doubly appropriate when one considers that this "love poem to the city" is "written just when cities are becoming most uninhabitable" (108). He asserts that at least part of its appeal lies in the conciliation of opposites, notably the infinity encased in a novel of such brevity, the prose style bordering on verse, the substantive descriptions rather than adjectival ones, and the fact that this single work of only 165 pages boldly alludes to not only his earlier works and those to come but to other canonical texts.

Curiously, for all his exacting work on the novel, Calvino does not retain full ownership of its effects. In an earlier chapter, McLaughlin cites Calvino's essay, "Whom Do We Write For or The Hypothetical Bookshelf," in a discussion of the author's postmodern tendency toward the death of the author. In the essay, Calvino concludes that, because any text can be read by any person either in or outside of its intended audience, that the text itself is a less crucial factor than the reader. In concluding so, Calvino undermines Marxist literary theory wherein the author and the text are the agents working to effect change in the reader. If the author is dead, and the reader is the primary agent in the construction of meaning, Calvino, then, must attempt to "substitute language itself for the person who...had been supposed to be its owner," namely himself, which is not to say that the author is no longer present in the novel (Barthes). Rather, the author is conceived of as a former incarnation of the book, or as its mother, giving it life, nourishing the little bugger, helping it to grow and develop a character so that it can be sent out into the world

to stand on its own two feet. The author has influenced the book, but he is not the book. Nor is he the sole arbiter of meaning. According to Barthes, “In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered. . . .” That is, because the act of reading takes place between the text and the reader, and the reader constructs meaning for himself in response to the text, there can be no closed readings, no definitive “meaning” assigned to any given text. This suits *Invisible Cities*, with its multiplicitous readings and metaphors defining other metaphors, nicely. Moreover, it virtually begs for multiplicitous interpretations of text.

What follows is a critical and artistic examination of *Invisible Cities*, an in-depth reading of its progression, imagery and themes. The method of its creation involved reading the book *Invisible Cities* six times through before reading what scholars and critics had to say about it. I then read the book twice again, afterward seeking additional resources. Then, as I wrote the text presented to you, I read the book twice again. This is vital information, because it was very important to me from the outset that whatever ideas, whatever interpretations I offer here be of my own origin. They may not all be novel ideas; in fact, many of them are in utmost agreement with McLaughlin's critiques. The point is that I arrived at them on my own and used the additional resources only to help me explain more thoroughly or identify terms for ideas of which I had already conceived.

While *Invisible Cities* is notably lacking in what is referred to as “plot,” it is not devoid of narrative progression. This progression is two-fold. What is immediately apparent is the change in the nature of the cities described. As each of the cities is described, its character is exposed; that is, Marco Polo makes apparent each locale's contradictions, history, beauty and horrors, so that none may be called an entirely *sunny* description. To divide the cities into categories of either positive or negative, happy or unhappy here would not be a useful endeavor, for of such classifications Calvino writes, “It makes no sense to divide cities into these two species, but rather into another two: those that through the years and the changes continue to give their form to desires, and those in which desires either erase the city or are erased by it” (Calvino, *Invisible Cities* 35). The cities in the beginning of the novel are of the first sort and reflect a generally benign view of the empire as a whole, but, as the novel progresses, the character of the cities grows increasingly darker, reflecting a more generally pessimistic outlook, until, in the end, we can only arrive at the “infernal city.”

Superficially, *Invisible Cities* is a third person account of the explorer Marco Polo describing to the fictional emperor, Kublai Khan, the cities of his empire. Khan, frustrated by the knowledge that his empire is so large that he will never be able to visit its reaches, welcomes Polo’s account, although not without skepticism, of his territories.

Structurally, the book is divided into nine chapters, each of which is further divided into five subtitled sections, save for the first and last chapters, which are each ten subsections long. Each one of these subsections contains Marco Polo’s description of a particular city, told from his point of view. Each city is classified as a particular type of city; for example, there are Cities of Memory, Trading Cities and Thin Cities. Each city

type is represented five times, and each of these occurrences is numbered, creating a model onto which the story is hung and pinned. Within each chapter, save for the first and last, the first city presented is numbered “5,” meaning that it is that type of city’s last appearance, and the last city presented is numbered “1,” meaning that it is that type of city’s first appearance. In addition, each chapter is book-ended by two untitled sections written from the third person narrator’s point of view, relating the development of Polo and Khan’s relationship. This reductive structure can be illustrated as follows:

I: [....] [1] [2,1] [3,2,1] [4,3,2,1] [....]

II: [....] [5,4,3,2,1] [....]

III: [....] [5,4,3,2,1] [....]

....

IX: [....] [5,4,3,2] [5,4,3] [5,4] [5] [....]

This unique structure lends itself to a number of different reading sequences or “lines” to take through the book. Of the novel’s structure, Harris writes, “[Calvino] ‘built up a multi-faceted structure’ in which the cities emerge in ‘a series that does not imply logical sequence or hierarchy, but a network in which one can follow multiple routes and draw multiple ramified conclusions’” (Harris, “Italo Calvino: The Code, the Clinamen and the Cities”). One route is what I call a “straight reading,” that is, from the first page to the last, but this sort of reading introduces problems that can only be addressed through other, less traditional lines. Thus, it is unavoidable that the conscientious reader must approach the book through these sequences: the types of cities as a sequence, each number group as a sequence, the unnumbered narrative sections as a sequence.

There is a problem with the plot, or, rather, the seeming absence of one. The opening lines, “Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions, but the emperor of the Tartars does continue listening to the young Venetian with greater attention and curiosity than he shows any other messenger or explorer of his,” suggest to a reader that the story has begun *in medias res*, and so, if he is also a patient and faithful reader, he can and will discover the whole of the action (*Cities 5*). *Invisible Cities*, however progresses not in this fashion; it hardly progresses at all. You would do just as well to search for plot in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. There exists in this novel no temporal order, no chronology that’s been rearranged. I liken it to stories that begin, “Two guys walk into a bar...” only there is no more plot. That *is* what happens, only, when the reader joins in the action, it has already happened, so really, the plot is more along the lines of, “Two guys *have* walked into a bar.” All of the action, little that there is, revolves around Marco Polo and Kublai Khan having a conversation, one that has already begun when we begin listening and likely continues after the book is closed.

A second major issue is the relationship of the cities to one another. The book’s structure would suggest that they are not simply piled in one next to the other, but are carefully arranged. Types of cities are mentioned in multiple chapters and different types of cities are grouped together within chapters under certain unifying themes.

A third problem is that of the narrator. He is not Khan; he is not Marco Polo. He is a typical third person narrator, which is an interesting choice for a text in which so little else is “typical.”

The solutions to these do not begin to present themselves until the reader comes to recognize the collective body of the problems, and, furthermore, that the problems themselves represent a sort of solution.

In a straight reading of *Invisible Cities*, the reader will not find a great deal of action. What she will discover is a good deal of history concerning the relationship between the characters, Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, and a strict structure to inform the organization of the cities.

In the beginning, the reader is introduced first to Khan and his empire – a sprawling, prosperous “formless ruin” (*Cities* 5). The empire that Khan had expected to go on forever has already begun to decay, and Marco Polo is present at court to describe the cities of the empire to him, that they might discern a pattern among them, one so subtle that it may continue into eternity. Polo’s descriptions of the cities from this section explore the relationships between signs or signification, memory and desire. At the end of this first chapter is a narrative rehashing of these terms, the cities being used to define them so that their novelistic meanings could be appropriated for use in the narrative. The Great Khan desires to possess his empire, to say that he knows it and owns it. Marco Polo, though, has visited its every corner, has made it his own, has made memories of it his own. Now, Polo must use the signs of nonverbal language to communicate these memories to the emperor, since neither of them speaks the language of the other.

In time, Khan grows frustrated with Polo’s cities. He says:

The other ambassadors warn me of famines, extortions, conspiracies, or else they inform me of newly discovered turquoise mines, advantageous prices on marten furs, suggestions for supplying damascened blades. And you... you return from lands equally distant

and you can tell me only of the thoughts that come to a man who sits on his doorstep at evening.... (*Cities* 27)

It is probably true that the cities Marco Polo describes are of his imagination, but Polo does not answer Khan. Rather, they sit in silence, imagining the conversation they could be having. The cities of the second chapter raise the notion of convergence. Polo implies that a city is not one thing but many things to many people. Nevertheless, the essence of a city remains unchanged, immutable. This is in response to Khan's line of questioning: perhaps Marco Polo has visited each of these places or perhaps he has dreamt of them on some stoop, but either way the essence of their discovery is the same.

In the third chapter, Khan's mind begins to wander. He notices that Polo's cities frequently resemble one another, "...as if the passage from one to another involved not a journey but a change of elements" (*Cities* 43). The emperor believes that he is beginning to understand the essence of discovery. He interrupts the traveler's tale to tell him of a city; he wants Marco Polo to name it. Khan describes a city, but Polo tells him that it is the very city he had been describing when he was interrupted. He says,

I shall repeat the reason I was describing it to you: from the number of imaginable cities we must exclude those whose elements are assembled without a connecting thread, an inner rule, a perspective, a discourse. With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. (*Cities* 43-44)

By doing this he implies that the cities indeed are of his imagination. That is, there are cities and then there are cities, and there are no limits in imagining either, but there are limits to the value of a city. We exclude from consideration those cities that are not formed of desire or fear. Can this be because, in the end, these are our masters? Without desire or

fear to form their foundations, can our great works be of use to us? The cities described in this chapter would suggest that the answer is “no.” Each of these cities is highly sexualized and frightening. They represent traps, worlds without walls, without supports to hold up fixtures, worlds in which the signs we have learned signify entirely different things, where neighbors live as strangers. At the end of these descriptions, Khan describes to Marco Polo a second city, a city that has surrendered, and charges the traveler to seek it out, and then return to report on how similar it is to the description. Marco says that in time he will surely encounter the city, but that when he does he will not be able to return from it, implying that it is an antechamber to death.

The relationship here is between desire and fear, and the result is death? A city needs either one or the other, right? If a city (or a man’s life) is founded upon desire, the eventual result is death. The same would be true if it were founded upon fear. This would imply that desire and fear come from the same place, the same necessity. Fear can be healthy; it keeps us from harm, keeps us alive. Or, it can be unhealthy, crippling us, keeping us from acting altogether. The question raised here is whether or not the same is true of desire. Does desire keep us healthy? Alive? It can. Desire provides us with a reason to keep moving, to keep acting, and at times a reason to ignore/overcome fear. In healthy doses, anticipating the fulfilling of a desire provides the human animal with a glee of a kind. We seek out this sensation; some of us find that we need it with ever-increasing frequency. Overwhelming desire, however, can be all-consuming, and the joy that was once derived from anticipation turns sour, becomes an agonizing pain situated beneath the heart and behind the belly. It is probably not inevitable that either one or the other of these will kill each of us. Moreover, both are necessary in becoming a whole person or a whole,

thriving city. Marco Polo has told Khan of signs and desire and fear. Khan, in his translation of these, has rooted his desire for possessing his empire, of knowing it, in the fear that he never will. He will die an emperor without any memory of an empire.

Chapter four's cities are all cities with surprises. The opening narrative is from a time nearer the end of Kublai Khan's life; it illustrates the emperor's competing attitudes towards the health of his people. In the first passage, he confronts Marco Polo, chastising him for telling him so many "fables" (*Cities* 59). The emperor knows that as he is in the autumn of his life; his empire is also. The traveler acquiesces, telling him that it is true, "...the empire is sick, and, what is worse, it is becoming accustomed to its sores" (*Cities* 59). Polo, though, has not traveled throughout it only to see its misery, but also to seek its joy, and he tells Khan as much. Immediately following, it is Khan who is overjoyed by the empire, and chastises Polo for dwelling too much on "inessential melancholies" (*Cities* 60). It is in these times that Marco tells him that he must do these things; someone must collect the ashes of the cities that are destroyed in the building of the final city. Without them, the emperor cannot know the measure of perfection toward which that city must strive in order to compensate for what has been lost.

In this chapter we are shown that a city is not the words that describe it. For every city there are two identities: one which is prosperous and beautiful and one which is not. Both are true. This from the trader of language: "Falsehood is never in words; it is in things" (*Cities* 62). We can change a city's description, but we cannot, by doing so, change the city. Nor can we change it by refusing to see it. we cannot pass through a thing, staring at the ground, and hope to make the city into only that which we have observed. Likewise, we may change our jobs, our geography and our friends, but these changes will not change

our essential selves. Only the circumstances are rearranged, but not what is inherent in our beings. Nor can we hope to make our perception into the truth, into the essence of our selves. What we want to be truth has nothing to do with what is central in Truth, and not by changing our description of it when it is unchanged, nor by refusing to change our description of it when it does change, can we hope to control it. This is why, in the closing narrative of this chapter, Kublai Khan's descriptions of cities are always different from the cities Marco Polo had visited. Such an interpretation echoes the rise of the power of metaphor over the course of the book and the simultaneous decline in the power of empire. As the reader acknowledges his grip on the interpretation of metaphor and the creation of meaning, the power of the author and the critic to define perception and therefore define an element of the reader's selfhood decreases.

Here, Khan has created a model from which all possible cities can be deduced by adding exceptions to the norm. He believes that he has discovered the essence of cities, the Truth of cities, and can, by adding to that truth discover new, actual cities. Marco Polo, however, knows this will not work. His model city is made up entirely of the "exceptions, exclusions, incongruities, contradictions," and from this he removes characteristics until he has discovered a city (*Cities* 69). That is, he has combined for himself all of the possibilities for Truth, and whittles away at that mass until he finds something which is useful, knowing that it is folly to say that one can begin at the Truth. This is inductive logic. "But," he says, "I cannot force my operation beyond a certain limit: I would achieve cities too probable to be real" (*Cities* 69). This suggests that if the traveler were to continue removing possible exceptions, possible truths, he would eventually come to one that is not useful, a Truth that he cannot use, one that might as well not be, and, to its intended effect,

is not. In readerly terms, this act translates to the attempts of some readers to create meanings for texts which are not founded or situated in texts.

The fifth chapter's stories reflect Calvino's notions of weight and lightness, and also the idea of impermanence. It is at the physical center of the book's structure, and McLaughlin calls it the "central arch" (105). The opening narrative situates Kublai Khan on the balustrade of his palace, watching the empire grow. First, it grows out, pressing hard upon itself. Then, it grows in, filling in all the dry places with lush ones, all the deserted places with inhabited ones. His slaves have moved mountains to build monuments and the Great Khan is now contemplating his empire, filled with cities that "weigh upon the earth and upon mankind, crammed with wealth and traffic, overladen with ornaments and offices, complicated with mechanisms and hierarchies, swollen tense ponderous" (*Cities* 73). Now he imagines an empire of lighter cities, "cities like laces," and believes that these are to be preferred (*Cities* 73). The great irony here is that Khan has moved mountains of stone in order to build a monument to his strength, but is not his strength but the strength of his slaves that built the monument.

Calvino discusses the values of lightness and weight explicitly in his lecture "Lightness" – one of six lectures he written just before his death in 1985. He writes,

We might say that throughout the centuries two opposite tendencies have competed in literature: one tries to make language into a weightless element that hovers above things like a cloud or better, perhaps, the finest dust or, better still, a field of magnetic impulses. The other tries to give language the weight, density and concreteness of things, bodies, and sensations. (Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* 15)

The value of weight is demonstrated in attempts to capture the world's millions of facets and attributes, in communicating the sense that our world is an organized system, and that

it adheres to a discernable hierarchy. The presence of an organized system in *Invisible Cities* may seem elusive, but even chaos is not without order. Sbragia examines this problem in depth, concluding that Calvino is primarily concerned with describing the kinds of order already present within ‘the vortex of entropy’” (“Italo Calvino's Ordering of Chaos”). Weight “gives solidarity even to the most abstract intellectual speculation” (*Memos* 16). Calvino cites Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* as exemplifying the relationship between lightness and weight. For Kundera, Calvino says, the weight of living is derived chiefly from constrictions, both public and private, that bind us in our thoughts, desires and actions. Lightness, however, “dissolves the concreteness of tangible experience” (*Memos* 16). This value is exemplified by Guido’s facile leap over the walls of a tomb in the *Decameron*. The Averroistic poet-philosopher’s leap raises him above the weight of his world, the gravity of his own seriousness, and the aggression of the society in which he lives. When Kublai Khan announces his preference for light cities to weighty cities, he is reflecting Calvino’s preference for language to dance above the heads of the world, to carry literature away from the stony, constrictive weight of living and into a space where it can shimmer and drift where it will.

All of these cities are concerned with impermanence – endings and absences. The idea here is that many things change, but human nature does not. We are aware that our end is near, and yet we accept it and continue living. We seek, desperately, to form relationships, even though these necessarily complicate our lives. Sometimes, even, we find it best to abandon them wholesale and begin again, but then new ones take their places. We are very concerned about our own absence and what it will mean in the lives of others. We look forward to improvement, but rarely do we agree on the best way to do it. And,

ultimately, we are far too involved in our own time and in our own lives to have any perspective on their significance in the course of history. As in Kundera's novel, "everything we choose and value in life for its lightness soon reveals its true, unbearable weight" (*Memos* 7).

The closing frame in this chapter is interesting both structurally and substantively. The description of the last city to come before it involves the use of an extended metaphor for dialogue. This frame is written as a dialogue:

Marco Polo describes a bridge, stone by stone.
"But which is the stone that supports the bridge" Kublai Khan asks.
"The bridge is not supported by one stone or another," Marco answers, "but by the line of the arch that they form."
Kublai Khan remains silent, reflecting. Then he adds: "Why do you speak to me of the stones? It is only the arch that matters to me."
Polo answers: "Without stones there is no arch." (*Cities* 82)

The description of the city which preceded it, Melania, ends: "If you look into the square in successive moments, you hear how from act to act the dialogue changes, even if the lives of Melania's inhabitants are too short for them to realize it" (*Cities* 81). These seem to me to be one in the same. The bridge is made of individual stones, but is supported by the invisible force of the arch. Without the stones there would be no arch, without which there would be no bridge. The history of Melania is made up of single days in single lives, but, combined, their lives become significant as we are able to see their seemingly inconsequential daily activities take on meaning in the passage of time. Without these citizens and their dreary lives, the ocean of time would not have a shore upon which to splash itself, and without the habits of time there would be no history from which we could draw meaning. The empire needs all of its cities in order to maintain its identity as an

empire. The individual needs each of the aspects of her personality to maintain her identity. If no individuals serve the end, there can be no end.

The opening narrative of chapter six begins with Kublai Khan describing yet another city to Marco Polo. This time it is a physical city and one that Khan has visited that he describes: Ken-sai, an ancient city known as the capital of deposed dynasties. Polo tells him that he has never seen the city, that he “should never have imagined a city like this” could exist, but even as he says this he averts his eyes and becomes withdrawn and quiet (*Cities* 85).

Then the narrator goes into some detail concerning the ritual of Khan’s and Polo’s discussions, only this time there is an anomaly. The emperor does not become sleepy but stays awake all night, demanding Marco Polo “tell” him one city after another, as if he were asking for “just one more” bedtime story. After dawn Marco Polo has to tell Khan that he has run out of cities, but he is rebuffed; the emperor insists on being told of Venice, Polo’s home city. Marco replies, “What else do you believe I have been telling you about,” implying that in each of his descriptions of a city there is something of Venice; it is inherent; it is “implicit” (*Cities* 86). For him, the essence of Venice is his idea of “city;” therefore, he cannot speak the word without speaking of Venice. This does not satisfy Khan, who insists on a description of Venice itself, but he will not hear one. Polo says, “Memory’s images, once fixed in words, are erased.... Perhaps I am afraid of losing Venice all at one if I speak of it. Or perhaps, speaking of other cities, I have already lost it, little by little” (*Cities* 87). That is, the essence of memory is destroyed when forced to conform to utterances.

This problem is one that any speaker would have in describing a specific object. Each individual holds in his mind, for example, an image of a book. That image represents a memory or knowledge of the essence of a book. If one were to describe that book, something would be lost in the translation, because, even though one could describe the book's size shape, color heft, smell, texture and condition, one could not communicate its soul or its *bookness*. However, so long as one's imagined book remains in one's mind, it remains whole. Marco Polo's fear is that by speaking of matters in which Venice, by its very *citi-ness*, is implied, he has chipped away at and inadvertently destroyed this memory, this essence. This understanding is frustrated by the triumvirate relationship between object, utterance, and essence. If I hold in my hand a book (the object), and I have an understanding of *bookness* (the essence) but do not make an utterance, I cannot be said to have made meaning. Likewise, if I hold the book, and say the word "book," and yet do not understand the essence of a book, my understanding of the book is not meaningful. Nor can I claim a thorough understanding of a book if I have never seen or held a book. None of these elements is prime. One must have all three, simultaneously, to make meaning. Marco Polo has been speaking in utterances of cities, and his worry is that these utterances have, through implication, destroyed his memory of Venice, ergo, himself, where the utterance (metaphor) is "city" and the object and the essence are ambiguous. Is Venice the object, the thing being described, and Marco Polo's understanding of self the essence, since we cannot speak without revealing ourselves? Or, is Marco's self the object, Venice the essence, making that which is inherent in Venice also inherent in Polo? We already know that both Marco's selfhood and Venice's essence have been destroyed in the talking about cities. He has ended his former idea of self, his memory of Venice, and the reader's conception of the

word “city.” They die together. They are also resurrected and live and grow and change together, so that each new experience with a given utterance or object necessarily influences our understanding of its essence, which changes our understanding of the object, which in turn changes our conception of the utterance, and on and on.

The life of empire is also circular. It cannot be said to have a beginning or end. Only the names change. More specifically, the utterances change, and our understanding of the impetus behind each empire project causes an evolution in our idea of the essence of empire.

These concerns are echoed in Polo’s city descriptions that follow. Pyrrha, for example, is a city that he had always imagined in one way, but, when he visited the city, he found that it was nothing like he had imagined, and this new image of Pyrrha, one which its name or utterance signifies, has taken the place of the former. The old city image is retained, but Polo concedes that it clearly could not be Pyrrha. That utterance, now associated with the new image, cannot describe the old one.

Eudoxian citizens share a common concern for the relationship between objects and utterances. A carpet in Eudoxia is said to preserve the city’s “true form” or essence (*Cities* 96). Upon even a superficial inspection one cannot help but notice that the city, with all its winding streets, dead ends, steps and slums, is undisciplined in its form, while the carpet is perfectly symmetrical and repeats straight and circular lines with perfect repetition. However, further study of the carpet reveals to the viewer that each part of the city is, in fact, represented therein. According to Polo, an oracle once said of the two: “One... has the form the gods gave the starry sky and the orbits in which the worlds revolve; the other is an approximate reflection, like every human creation” (*Cities* 97). In other words, one of these

things – the city and the carpet – is an object, and the other is a sign or an utterance. In this case, neither the carpet nor the city may be excluded as a human creation, and the ambiguities which arise from attempts to interpret the oracle's meaning are amusing. For, either it is the carpet that represents divine order, and the tangled, gnarly city is an imperfect attempt to approximate the essence of the carpet; or, it is the city that represents divine order, and the perfectly ordered pattern of the carpet is man's attempt to approximate, in nonverbal utterance, the essence of the city. Polo leaves the question of which is which open-ended in order to prepare the reader for the chapter's closing narrative passage.

In the narrative passage, Khan asserts that Marco Polo has been describing not cities but other kinds of memories. Then, both Khan's and Polo's voices disappear and we are addressed by Calvino's narrator. He says, "It was beyond that screen of fickle humors that his gaze wished to arrive: the form of things can be discerned better at a distance" and goes on to describe the horror and ugliness that may await an adventurer upon his arrival in a city (*Cities* 98). That is to say, there is much to see, to discover, but arriving at a destination is not always the best way to go about it. Form and grandeur are better appreciated at a distance, just as a mountain range is more impressive than the rock beneath my feet when I am on one of the mountains. If one arrives in the center of a place, one will find that the elegance and beauty so apparent from afar are tarnished by reality. Do it again and one will find that every new place is as bloody, as horrifying as the last – even if it did not appear so at a distance.

A problem that arises from the confluence of object essences and utterances is determining which is more valuable, and it is this problem Calvino addresses in the seventh

chapter. In the narrative dialogue that precedes the city descriptions, Kublai and Marco discuss the likelihood that they are not, in fact, sitting in a garden together. Khan suggests that he is actually fighting alongside his army, Polo that he is in some eastern bazaar bargaining for pepper, and that each of them has closed his eyes in quiet contemplation and been transported to a shared space. Khan suggests it is possible that they are not, in fact, an emperor and explorer, but two beggars amid a trash heap. Polo carries these suggestions one step further to say “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 is outside” (*Cities* 104). Here, Polo is concerned with the character of human perception and reliability. This duality, this concern with the pairing of the filthy and horrifying with the beautiful and serene is repeated throughout chapter seen.

The case of Beersheba is particularly illustrative. The inhabitants of this city believe that there are actually three Beershebas. Above, in the heavens, a nearly perfect Beersheba hangs; this is “where the city’s most elevated virtues and sentiments are poised” (*Cities* 111). It is believed that this is a jeweled city, every surface inset, inlaid and gilded, and below, underground, exists a Beersheba that is “the receptacle of everything base and unworthy...” and is believed to be built of trash and dung (*Cities* 111). Between the two is the earthly city, which is constantly trying to emulate the celestial city and reject its ties to the baser one. The people of Beersheba accumulate precious metals and stones, and they adopt an ascetic lifestyle. But, as we are told, Beersheba is in error concerning the properties of the cities above and below. In actuality, it is not the celestial city that is covered in gold, encrusted with jewels and designed by famous architects, but the one

beneath the ground. Therefore, Beersheba, in its hoarding of carats “takes for virtue what is now a grim mania to fill the empty vessel of itself...” (*Cities* 112) and “only when it shits, is not miserly, calculating, greedy” (*Cities* 113). The citizenry are able to see that their world exists between the two extremes of virtue and vice, or artistry and filth, but they are not able to determine which city, either above or below, is the more accurate metaphor for their own.

This raises concerns about which of the cities is the originator and which is the projection or reflection. It is possible that the Beersheba or the middle state is the originator and that the upper and lower cities are reflective of the virtue and vice of that city. Or, it may be that the celestial and base Beershebas are the originators, and that they have met in a meditative space as Khan suggests he and Polo have, and projected the middle Beersheba together, reflecting the imperfect understanding each city has of the other. The emperor and the explorer address this concern in the narrative passage to follow when they elaborate on the possibility that the world outside the garden exists only because they think that it does. But, as Polo says, this assertion must be rejected because both of them fail to think of many things, and yet those things exist. They then consider that the two of them exist in the garden as they are only as a collective projection of the beings outside of the garden, finding no basis upon which to reject such a hypothesis.

The eighth chapter is framed by narrative passages in which the cities are conceived of as games of chess. Each game and therefore each city is won or lost, but Khan struggles with the implications of his own metaphor. In the opening passage, Khan arrives at the conclusion that conquering new territories is the same as playing a game of chess. Calvino writes, “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..." (Cities 123). Finally Khan is beginning to see that his empire is, in many ways, an illusion. He has never seen his empire, and has only stories told to him by which to conceive of it, constructing the image in his mind. There is something darker here, though, and, I think, more central to Polo's cities to follow this episode: the notion that all things, all cities, all empires, all chess boards, all beings eventually fall into ruin, are abandoned and eventually unmade.

Argia is described as a graphic example of this principle. This city has earth where it ought to have air – in the streets, in the shops, in the stairwells. Polo says he is not sure whether or not the people of Argia can move about the city, but that he is sure they are likely to spend most of the time lying still on their backs. The imagery is haunting as it evokes comparisons to graveyards and the fashion in which the dead are interred. This effect is only amplified when we consider a whole city, buried alive, a whole city crowded out by the earth and forgotten in time.

The description of Thekla differs somewhat in that the inhabitants of this city are taking precautions to ensure that their city is not destroyed. The people of Thekla continue to build upward and outward with plans to continue into infinity, citing the night sky as their blueprint for the city, believe that as long as it is not finished, its destruction cannot begin. The proposition is ridiculous, but the Theklans cling fervently to it.

Olinda, also in chapter eight, further complicates this idea. This city grows as a tree grows, with new buildings and new objects at the center that are continually pushed outward, growing the whole time in order to maintain their proportions. In this case, growth

and change are neither constructive nor destructive. The city simply changes, the virtue of that circumstance never being drawn into question.

In the closing passage, Marco Polo responds to Khan's assertion that "[the empire] was reduced to a plane of square wood" by explaining that each of the squares on the chess board was made from a tree that had once lived and grown and is now dead but serves a new purpose (*Cities* 131). Thus, as a city or empire is destroyed, the materials from which it was composed are used in the creation of a new thing, a new city, a new empire.

To be sure, the destruction of cities is a certainty, as we are told by Calvino's narrator in the introductory narrative to chapter nine, in which Marco Polo peruses Kublai Khan's atlas of all the cities and empires that ever were, are or ever shall be, saying, "...until every shape has found a city, new cities will continue to be born. When the forms exhaust their variety and come apart, the end of cities begins" (*Cities* 139). The narrator goes on to say that the last maps in the atlas are of cities that are formless, shapeless networks of cities without end: Los Angeles, Kyōto-Ōsaka. Because there are existent cities that are without shape, and this signifies the beginning of the unmaking of cities, the reader can conclude that the destruction of cities has already begun. This idea is congruous with the mechanics of entropy – the degree of disorder within a system. The Second Law of Thermodynamics states that entropy increases over time within a closed system. That is, the degree of disorder within a system will increase over time, approaching chaos, unless work is done to minimize entropy. In context, this would mean that cities will grow increasingly disorganized and less stable over time unless work is done to counteract the effects of entropy. Maximum entropy would mean a state of maximum disorder, and it is reasonable to believe that such a place would be unlivable. A city that had reached

maximum entropy would either be destroyed or dismantled, signifying the death of the city. In a more abstract sense, metaphors may also be considered entropic systems, subject to the caprices of individuals who manipulate them until they have either lost their original meanings entirely or become cliché and are abandoned. This parallels the structure of the novel and adds a humorous overtone for the observant reader, who will notice that in chapter nine the last of the cities is “counted down,” following in the reductive pattern outlined in the table of contents.

I have mentioned before the basic development in the character of the cities in this novel is from benign to increasingly pessimistic. These final cities support this assertion. In Perinthia, designed by astronomers to be reflective of the “harmony of the firmament,” the children of each generation grow more and more deformed, and the citizens regard themselves as monsters (*Cities* 144). In the city of Procopia, a place Polo visits often, he observes that the landscape is becoming crowded until, finally, looking out of the window of an inn, the traveler sees nothing but faces. As he turns to leave the window, the room in which he is standing is filled to the point that he must excuse himself several times before he reaches the door. This is significant because it is one of two times Polo finds himself sensually disturbed by what he encounters in a city. The people, the empire are crowding in around him, and soon there will be nowhere to move, no air to breath. The city of Raissa, an “unhappy city” is said to contain “a happy city unaware of its own existence” (*Cities* 149). Andrians, by virtue of being perfectly correspondent to the sky, must carefully consider every change they make to their city, because for every change they make the stars’ pattern changes. Therefore, with every change made to the city, the Andrians risk destroying their own or other worlds.

The descriptions of these cities leads to Kublai Khan asking Marco Polo to tell him in which way he believes the empire is headed. He would like to know if it will be a New Atlantis, a Utopia, an Icaria, but he is made anxious by the likelihood that it will be an Enoch, a Yahoooland, a Brave New World. Khan says, ““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”” (*Cities* 165). Polo responds to his fears of being sucked into the “infernal city” by suggesting that it is not a location that we are approaching but one we form simply by being together. He suggests that we either “accept the inferno and become such a part of it that [we] can no longer see it, “ or “seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno are not the inferno, then make them endure, give them space” (*Cities* 165). Martin McLaughlin has this to say about Calvino’s closing:

...the inferno in which we now live, is not to be seen as unequivocally pessimistic; instead the passage is, predictably more nuanced: the present and the future will, like the past, contain a mixture of good and evil, justice and injustice.it is only the latter approach that conserves the spirit of challenge to the labyrinth, the sea of objects, the inferno. (McLaughlin 107)

Kublai Khan sits at the center of this blazing inferno, this empire he cannot possess, the most powerful and least powerful within it. Marco Polo, as author of stories and metaphors, acknowledges the stake he possess in language and the making of meaning, but even he cannot control Khan’s reception to his “text.” Khan possess the power to interpret and make meaning from Polo’s metaphors but does not recognize this, rendering the power useless, and the traveler knows this. In his closing, then, he encourages the emperor to leave the cities and their inhabitants well enough alone, for in those individuals who recognize their role in metaphor and the construction of language is he may place his hope

in the continuance of the empire. Without them, it would smolder. Thus is the power of language and metaphor in invisible cities: it “make[s] them endure, give[s] them space” to continue as beacons of hope in a world being destroyed by entropy (*Cities* 165).

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