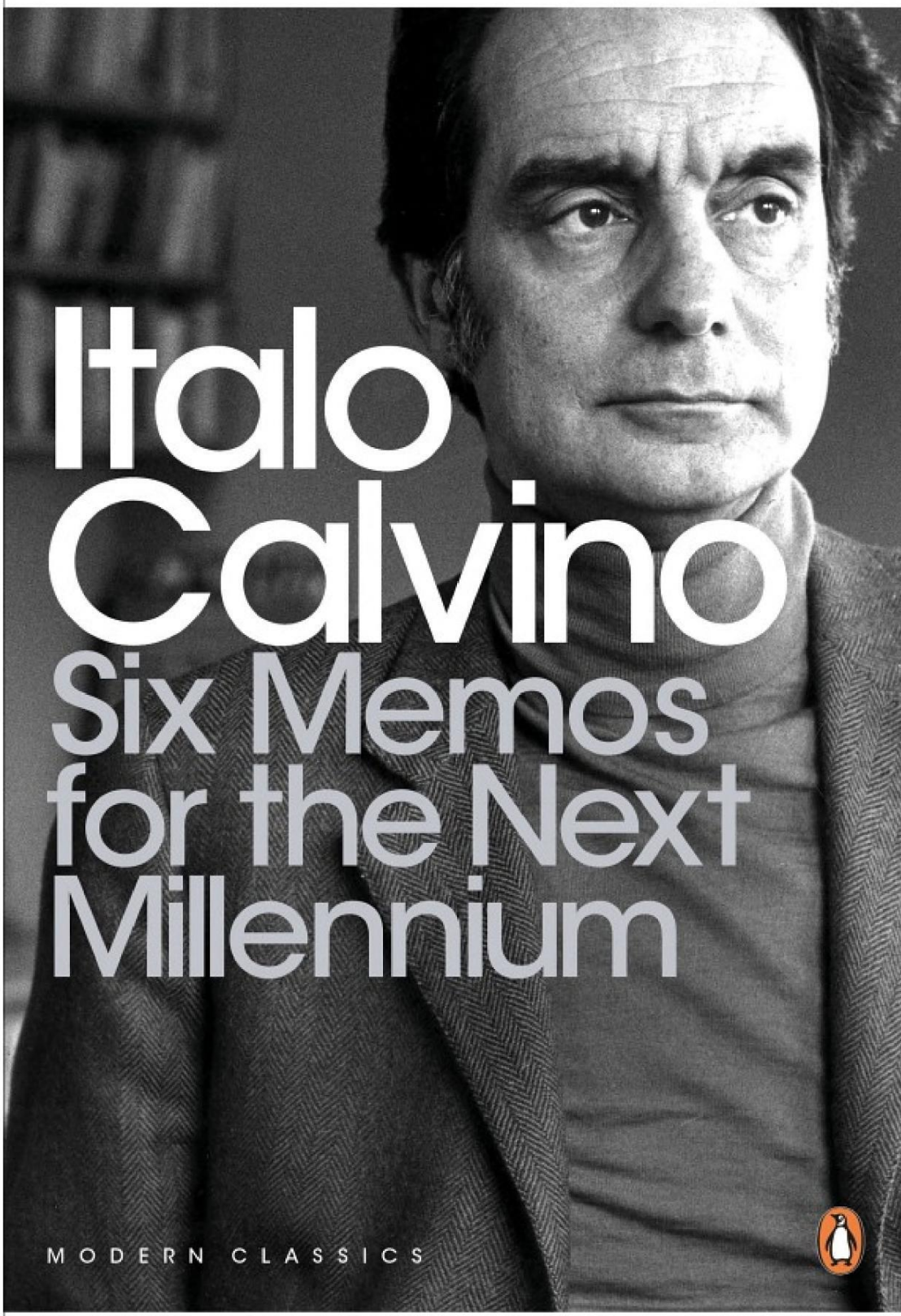

Contents

PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

SIX MEMOS FOR THE NEXT MILLENNIUM

Italo Calvino, one of Italy's finest postwar writers, has delighted readers around the world with his deceptively simple, fable-like stories. Calvino was born in Cuba in 1923 and raised in San Remo, Italy; he fought for the Italian Resistance from 1943-5. His major works include *Cosmicomics* (1968), *Invisible Cities* (1972), and *If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979). He died in Siena in 1985, of a brain haemorrhage.

SIX MEMOS

FOR THE NEXT MILLENNIUM

1 - Lightness
2 - Quickness
3 - Exactitude
4. Visibility
5. Multiplicity
6 - Consistency

Note on the Text

On June 6, 1984, Italo Calvino was officially invited by Harvard University to give the Charles Eliot Norton Poetry Lectures, a series of six talks meant to take place over the course of an academic year. (For Calvino, it was to have been 1985-1986.) The term *poetry* here refers to any type of poetic communication—literary, musical, visual—and the choice of topic is entirely free.

That freedom was the first problem Calvino faced, convinced as he was of the importance of constraints in writing. By January 1985 he had clearly defined his topic—certain literary values to recommend to the next millennium—and from that point on he devoted nearly all his time to preparing these talks. They soon became an obsession, and one day he told me he had ideas and material for at least eight lectures, not just the expected six. I know the title of what might have been the eighth: "On Beginning and Ending" (with regard to novels), but I have yet to find a draft—only notes.

By September 1985, the time of his scheduled departure for Massachusetts, he had written five of the lectures. The sixth, "Consistency"—of which I know only that he planned to refer to Melville's Bartleby—was to have been written in Cambridge.

Of course, these are the talks Calvino would have delivered orally; they would certainly have been revised again prior to publication. I don't think, however, that he would have made significant changes. The differences between the first versions I saw and the last had to do with structure, not content.

About the title: Although I carefully considered the fact that the title he chose, "Six Memos for the Next Millennium," does not correspond to the manuscript as I found it, I have felt it necessary to keep it. He was delighted by the word *memos*, having thought of and dismissed titles such as "Some Literary Values," "A Choice of Literary Values," "Six Literary Legacies"—all followed by "for the Next Millennium."

I'll add only that I found the typescript on his desk, in perfect order, each individual talk in its own transparent folder, ready to be placed in his suitcase.

Esther Calvino

It's 1985: just fifteen years separate us from the beginning of a new millennium. For now the approach of this date does not stir in me any particular emotion. In any case I am here to speak not of futurology but of literature. The millennium that is winding down has seen the birth and spread of the modern languages of the West and the literatures that have explored the expressive, cognitive, and imaginative possibilities of these languages. It was also the millennium of the book, in that it saw the book-object take the form we know it by today. Perhaps one sign that the millennium is winding down is the frequency with which the fate of literature and the book in the so-called postindustrial age is being questioned. I'm not inclined to weigh in on such matters. My faith in the future of literature rests on the knowledge that there are things that only literature, with its particular capacities, can give us. I would like then to devote these talks of mine to certain values or qualities or peculiarities of literature that are especially close to my heart, in an effort to situate them with a view to the new millennium.

1

Lightness

I will devote my first talk to the opposition between lightness and weight, and I will make the case for lightness. This is not to say that I regard the case for weight as weaker, only that I think I have more to say about lightness.

After four decades of writing fiction, after exploring many avenues and undertaking various experiments, the time has come for me to seek a general definition of my work. I propose this one: my method has entailed, more often than not, the subtraction of weight. I have tried to remove weight from human figures, from celestial bodies, from cities. Above all I have tried to remove weight from the structure of the story and from language.

In this talk I will try to explain—to myself as well as to you—why I have come to regard lightness as a virtue rather than a fault, where among the works of the past I find examples of my ideal of lightness, and how I locate this quality in the present and project it into the future.

I'll start with the last point. When I began my career, the duty of every young writer, the categorical imperative, was to represent our times. Full of good intentions, I tried to become one with the ruthless energy that, collectively and individually, was driving the events of our century. I tried to find some harmony between the bustling spectacle of the world, by turns dramatic and grotesque, and the picaresque, adventurous inner rhythm that spurred me to

write. I soon realized that the gap between the realities of life that were supposed to be my raw materials and the sharp, darting nimbleness that I wanted to animate my writing was becoming harder and harder for me to bridge. Perhaps I was only then becoming aware of the heaviness, the inertia, the opacity of the world—qualities that quickly adhere to writing if one doesn't find a way to give them the slip.

I sometimes felt that the whole world was turning to stone: a slow petrifaction, more advanced in some people and places than in others, but from which no aspect of life was spared. It was as if no one could escape Medusa's inexorable gaze.

The only hero capable of cutting off Medusa's head is Perseus, who flies on winged sandals, Perseus, who looks not upon the Gorgon's face but only upon her image reflected in his bronze shield. And so it is that Perseus comes to my aid even now, as I begin to feel caught in a grip of stone, as happens whenever I try to mix the historical and the autobiographical. Better to make my argument using images from mythology. In order to cut off Medusa's head without being turned to stone, Perseus supports himself on the lightest of stuff—wind and clouds—and turns his gaze toward that which can be revealed to him only indirectly, by an image caught in a mirror. I am immediately tempted to find in this myth an allegory of the relationship between the poet and the world, a lesson about how to write. But I know that every interpretation of a myth impoverishes and suffocates it; with myths, it's better not to rush things, better to let them settle in memory, pausing to consider their details, to ponder them without moving beyond the language of their images. The lesson we can draw from a myth lies within the literality of its story, not in what we add to it from without.

The relationship between Perseus and the Gorgon is complex, and it doesn't end with the beheading of the monster. From Medusa's blood a winged horse, Pegasus, is born; the heaviness of stone is transformed into its opposite, and with the stamp of a single hoof on Mount Helicon, a fountain springs forth from which the Muses drink. In some versions of the myth, it is Perseus who rides this marvelous horse, so dear to the Muses, born from the cursed blood of Medusa. (The winged sandals, by the way, also come from the world of monsters: Perseus got them from

Medusa's sisters, the Graeae, who shared a single eye.) As for the severed head, rather than abandoning it, Perseus takes it with him, hidden in a sack. When in danger of defeat, he has only to show it to his enemies, lifting it by its mane of snakes, and in the hero's hand the bloody prize becomes an invincible weapon—a weapon he uses only in dire need and only against those who deserve the punishment of being turned into statues of themselves. Here, certainly, the myth is telling me something, something that is implicit in its images and can't be explained by other means. Perseus masters that terrible face by keeping it hidden, just as he had earlier defeated it by looking at its reflection. In each case his power derives from refusing to look directly while not denying the reality of the world of monsters in which he must live, a reality he carries with him and bears as his personal burden.

We can learn more about the relationship between Perseus and Medusa by reading Ovid's *Metamorphoses.* Perseus has won another battle, has hacked a sea monster to death with his sword, freeing Andromeda. And now he wants to do what any of us would do after such a nasty job: he wants to wash his hands. At such times he must decide what to do with Medusa's head. And here I find Ovid's verses (IV, 740-752) extraordinary for the way they show how much delicacy of spirit is required to be a Perseus, a slayer of monsters: "That the rough sand not harm the snake-haired head [*anguiferumque caput dura ne laedat harem*], he makes the ground soft with a bed of leaves, and over that spreads sprigs that grew in water, and there he sets Medusa's head, face-down." I can think of no better way to represent the lightness of which Perseus is the hero than with his refreshingly tender gesture toward that being who, though monstrous and terrifying, is also somehow perishable, fragile. But the most surprising part is the miracle that follows: when the marine plants come into contact with Medusa, they are transformed into coral, and the nymphs, wanting to adorn themselves with coral, rush to bring more sprigs and seaweed to the terrible head.

Again, this juxtaposition of images, in which the delicate grace of the coral brushes up against the fierce horror of the Gorgon, is so richly suggestive that I hesitate to spoil it with commentary or interpretation. What I can do is place these lines of Ovid alongside

those of a modern poet, Eugenio Montale, in whose 1953 poem "Piccolo testamento" ("Little Testament") we also find the subtlest of elements, which could stand as emblems of his poetry —"mother-of-pearl snail's track / or emery of trampled glass" (*traccia madreperlacea di lumaca / o smeriglio di vetro calpestato*) —set against a frightening infernal monster, a Lucifer with wings of pitch descending on the capitals of the West. Nowhere else does Montale conjure such an apocalyptic vision, and yet what he foregrounds are those tiny, luminous traces that counterpoint the dark catastrophe: "Keep its powder in your compact / when after every lamp's gone out / the circle dance becomes infernal" (*Conservane la cipria nello specchietto / quando spenta ogni lampada / la sardana si farà infernale*). But how can we hope to find salvation in that which is most fragile? Montale's poem is a profession of faith in the perseverance of what seems most doomed to perish, and in the moral values that imbue the faintest traces: "the faint flare down below / was not the striking of a match" (*il tenue bagliore strofinato / laggiù non era quello d'un fiammifero*).

And so it is that in order to speak of our own times, I have had to make a long detour, by way of Ovid's fragile Medusa and Montale's pitch-black Lucifer. It's hard for a novelist to convey his idea of lightness with examples drawn from the events of contemporary life without making it the unattainable object of an endless quest. Yet Milan Kundera has done just that, with clarity and immediacy. His novel *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí* (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 1981) is in fact a bitter declaration of the Ineluctable Weight of Living—living not only with the desperate and all-pervading state of oppression that was the fate of his unlucky country, but with the human condition shared also by us, however much luckier we may be. For Kundera, the weight of living is found in all types of restriction, in the dense network of public and private restrictions that ultimately envelops every life in ever-tighter bonds. His novel shows us how everything in life that we choose and value for its lightness quickly reveals its own unbearable heaviness. Perhaps nothing escapes this fate but the liveliness and nimbleness of the mind—the very qualities with

which the novel is written, qualities that belong to a universe other than the one we live in.

When the human realm seems doomed to heaviness, I feel the need to fly like Perseus into some other space. I am not talking about escaping into dreams or into the irrational. I mean that I feel the need to change my approach, to look at the world from a different angle, with different logic, different methods of knowing and proving. The images of lightness I'm looking for shouldn't let themselves dissolve as dreams do in the reality of the present and future . . .

In the infinite universe of literature there are always other avenues to explore, some brand-new and some exceedingly ancient, styles and forms that can change our image of the world. And when literature fails to assure me that I'm not merely chasing dreams, I look to science to sustain my visions in which all heaviness dissolves . . .

Today every branch of science seems intent on demonstrating that the world rests upon the most minute of entities: DNA messages, the pulses of neurons, quarks and neutrinos that have wandered through space since the beginning of time . . .

And then there are computers. It's true that software cannot exert the power of its lightness except through the heaviness of hardware, but it's the software that's in charge, acting on the outside world and on machines that exist solely as functions of their software and that evolve in order to run ever-more-complex programs. The second industrial revolution doesn't present us, as the first did, with overwhelming images of rolling mills or molten steel, but rather with *bits* of information that flow, as electrical impulses, through circuits. We still have machines made of steel, but they now obey bits that are weightless.

Is it legitimate to extrapolate from the discourse of science an image of the world that corresponds to my desires? If what I'm undertaking here appeals to me, it's because I feel it may be tied to a very old thread in the history of poetry.

Lucretius's *De rerum natura* is the first great poetic work in which knowledge of the world leads to a dissolution of the world's solidity and to a perception of that which is infinitely small and nimble and light. Lucretius wants to write the poem of matter, but he warns us from the start that the reality of matter is that it's

made of invisible particles. He is the poet of physical concreteness, seen in its permanent, unchanging substance, but he begins by telling us that empty space is just as concrete as solid bodies. His greatest concern seems to be preventing the weight of matter from crushing us. As soon as he lays out the rigorous mechanical laws that govern every event, he feels the need to allow atoms to deviate unpredictably from the straight line, thereby ensuring the freedom both of matter and of human beings. The poetry of the invisible, the poetry of infinite unpredictable potentialities, even the poetry of nothingness, originate in this poet who has no doubts about the physical reality of the world.

This atomization of reality also extends to its visible aspects, and it's there that Lucretius shines as a poet: the dust particles that churn in a shaft of sunlight in a dark room (II, 114-124); the tiny shells, all similar yet each distinct, that a wave pushes gently onto the *bibula harena*, the thirsty sand (II, 374-376); or the spiderwebs that wind around us without our noticing them as we walk along (III, 381-390).

I have already mentioned Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, another encyclopedic poem (written half a century after Lucretius's), one rooted however not in physical reality but in the fables of mythology. For Ovid too everything can be transformed into new forms; for Ovid too knowledge of the world entails dissolving the solidity of the world; for Ovid too there is among everything that exists an essential equality that runs counter to all hierarchies of power and value. If Lucretius's world is composed of unalterable atoms, Ovid's is composed of the qualities, attributes, and forms that reveal the distinctiveness of every object and plant and animal and person but that are merely thin sheaths over a common substance which—when stirred by profound emotion—can change itself into radically different forms.

It is in tracking the change from one form to another that Ovid displays his incomparable gifts, as when he describes a woman as she realizes she is changing into a lotus tree: her feet become rooted to the ground, soft bark slowly rises to cover her groin, and she tries to tear at her hair but finds her hands full of leaves. Or when he describes Arachne's fingers, their deftness in gathering and unraveling wool, in turning a spindle, in working her

conjunction *e* (“and”) puts the snow on the same level as the other visions that come before and after it: a cascade of images, like a sample book of the world’s beauties. In Dante the word *come* (“like”) encloses the entire scene within the framework of metaphor, but within that framework it has its own concrete reality, just as the landscape of Hell beneath a rain of fire (which is illustrated by means of that comparison to snow) possesses a no less concrete and dramatic reality. In Cavalcanti everything moves so swiftly that we’re not aware of its substance but only of its effects; in Dante everything takes on substance and stability: the weight of things is established with exactitude. Even when speaking of light things, Dante seems to want to measure the exact weight of their lightness: “like snow on mountains on a windless day.” In another, very similar line, the weight of something sinking in the water and disappearing seems held back or slowed down: “like some heavy thing in dark water” (*come per acqua cupa cosa grave; Paradiso* III, 123).

At this point we must remind ourselves that the idea that the world is made up of weightless atoms surprises us because we have experienced the weight of things. Similarly, we could not admire the lightness of language if we had not also learned to admire language endowed with weight.

It might be said that two opposing literary tendencies have competed over the centuries: one that seeks to make language a weightless element that hovers over things like a cloud, or, better, a fine dust, or, better still, a magnetic field; another that seeks to imbue language with the weight and thickness and concreteness of objects and bodies and sensations.

These two paths are blazed at the beginning of Italian—and European—literature by Cavalcanti and Dante. This opposition holds true in general terms, though of course countless exceptions would have to be made, given Dante’s vast wealth of resources and his extraordinary versatility. It’s no coincidence that the Dante sonnet most felicitously suffused with lightness (*“Guido, i’ vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io”;* “Guido, I wish that you, Lapo, and I”) is dedicated to Cavalcanti. In his *Vita Nuova*, Dante treats the same subject matter as his mentor and friend, and the two poets share many words, motifs, and ideas. And when Dante wants to express