UNDERSTANDING

Italo CALVINO

BY BENO WEISS

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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA PRESS

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Published in Columbia, South Carolina, by the
University of South Carolina Press

Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Weiss, Beno, 1933–
Understanding Italo Calvino / Beno Weiss.
p. cm. — (Understanding modern European and Latin American literature)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0–87249–858–1
1. Calvino, Italo—Criticism and interpretation. I. Title.
II. Series.
PQ4809.A45Z89 1993
853'.914—dc20 92–40941

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

Understanding Modern European and Latin American Literature has been planned as a series of guides for undergraduate and graduate students and nonacademic readers. Like the volumes in its companion series, *Understanding Contemporary American Literature,* these books provide introductions to the lives and writings of prominent modern authors and explicate their most important works.

Modern literature makes special demands, and this is particularly true of foreign literature, in which the reader must contend not only with unfamiliar, often arcane artistic conventions and philosophical concepts, but also with the handicap of reading the literature in translation. It is a truism that the nuances of one language can be rendered in another only imperfectly (and this problem is especially acute in fiction), but the fact that the works of European and Latin American writers are situated in a historical and cultural setting quite different from our own can be as great a hindrance to the understanding of these works as the linguistic barrier. For this reason, the UMELL series emphasizes the sociological and historical backgrounds of the writers treated. The peculiar philosophical and cultural traditions of a given culture may be particularly important for an understanding of certain authors, and these are taken up in the introductory chapter and also in the discussion of those works to which this information is relevant. Beyond this, the books treat the specifically literary aspects of the author under discussion and attempt to explain the complexities of contemporary literature lucidly. The books are conceived as introductions to the authors covered, not as comprehensive analyses. They do not provide detailed summaries of plot because they are meant to be used in conjunction with the books they discuss, not as a substitute for study of the original works. The purpose of the books is to provide information and judicious literary assessment of the major works in the most compact, readable

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form. It is our hope that the UMELL series will help to increase knowledge and understanding of European and Latin American cultures and will serve to make the literature of those cultures more accessible.

J.H.

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PREFACE

The reader of *Understanding Italo Calvino* should bear in mind that it was not possible to avoid altogether the highly specialized language of current literary criticism, given the fact that Calvino himself consciously made use of it in many of his writings. I have tried therefore to keep this discourse at a minimum, sufficient to facilitate the reader's understanding of Calvino's works. Finally, because Calvino has been enormously prolific as journalist, editor, and essayist, I found it necessary to include only his own fiction and his writings dealing with literature and literary theory. Publication dates for works cited in the text refer to the original Italian and other foreign language editions. The dates of English translations appear in the Bibliography. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank the Institute for the Arts and Humanistic Studies, the Office of Research and Graduate Studies (College of the Liberal Arts, Pennsylvania State University) for grants that made possible research for this study. I also wish to express appreciation and gratitude to my department colleagues, especially Leon Lyday, for the invaluable support they have given me. I owe much to my friend Professor Louis C. Pérez for his encouragement and wise counsel in reading my manuscript, and to my colleagues and friends Alfred Triolo and Robert Lima for having patiently allowed me to use them as a sounding board for my ideas. I also wish to thank my son Alessandro for his wonderful editorial help and the University of South Carolina Press for their extraordinary patience and kindness.

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CHRONOLOGY

1923 Birth of Italo Calvino in Santiago de Las Vegas, near Havana, Cuba, October 15.

1925 The Calvino family returns to San Remo, Italy.

1927 Birth of his brother Florio.

1941 Enters the University of Turin, Faculty of Agriculture.

1943 He transfers to the University of Florence. He avoids military conscription by joining a communist group in the Italian Resistance; he serves until 1945.

1945 At the conclusion of the war, Calvino resumes his education and transfers back to the University of Turin, but moves to the Faculty of Letters. He joins the Communist Party and collaborates with the journal *Il Politecnico*, the party paper *L'Unità*, and other publications of the left.

1947 Gets his degree in letters from the University of Turin with a thesis on Joseph Conrad. Publication of his first novel, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (*The Path to the Nest of Spiders*), for which he receives the Riccione Prize.

1948 Finds a job in the publicity department of the Einaudi Publishing House; eventually he joins the editorial board on which he remains until 1984.

1949 Publication of *Ultimo viene il corvo*, a collection of short stories.

1952 Publication of his second novel *Il visconte dimezzato* (*The Cloven Viscount*) and the novella *La formica argentina* (''The Argentine Ant'').

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1954 Publication of *L'entrata in guerra* (Entrance Into War).

1956 Publication of *Fiabe italiane* (there are two English versions: *Italian Fables* and *Italian Folktales*) and *La panchina: Opera in un atto di Italo Calvino; Musica Sergio Liberovici* (The Bench: One-Act Opera by Italo Calvino with Music by Sergio Liberovici).

1957 Publication of *Il barone rampante* (*The Baron in the Trees*) and *La speculazione edilizia* ("A Plunge into Real Estate"). From 1957–58, the serialized publication of the novel *I giovani del Po* (The Young of the Po River). As a consequence of the Soviet repression of the 1956 Hungarian uprising, Calvino resigns from the Italian Communist Party.

1958 Publication of *La nuvola di smog* (*Smog*) and *I racconti* (most of these stories are in *Adam, One Afternoon, and Other Stories;* in *The Watcher and Other Stories;* and in *Difficult Loves*).

1959 Publication of *Il cavaliere inesistente* (*The Nonexistent Knight*). During 1959–60, makes his first visit to the U.S and to the USSR. Together with Elio Vittorini Calvino founds and directs the journal *Menabò* (1959–67) in which he publishes several significant essays.

1960 Publication of *I nostri antenati* (Our Ancestors); the volume, for which he receives the Salento Prize, includes: *The Cloven Viscount, The Baron in the Trees,* and *The Nonexistent Knight.*

1963 Publication of *La giornata d'uno scrutatore* ("The Watcher") and *Marcovaldo ovvero Le stagioni in città* (*Marcovaldo*).

1964 He marries Judith Esther Singer (affectionately called Chichita), a translator at UNESCO, and settles in Paris where he comes in close contact with leading French intellectuals; he becomes acquainted with Oulipo (Workshop of Potential Literature) and its leader Raymond Queneau. He continues his editorial work for Einaudi.

1965 Birth of their daughter Abigail. Publication of *Le cosmicomiche* (*Cosmicomics*); and *La nuvola di smog e La formica argentina* ("Smog" and "The Argentine Ant").

1967 Publication of *Ti con zero* (*t zero*).

1968 Publication of *La memoria del mondo e altre storie cosmicomiche* (The Memory of the World and Other Cosmicomic Stories).

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1969 Publication of Calvino's translation of *Les fleurs bleues* (*Blue Flowers*), a novel by Raymond Queneau; he publishes a deluxe Italian edition of "Il castello dei destini incrociati" in *Tarocchi: Il mazzo visconteo di Bergamo e di New York* ("The Castle of Crossed Destinies" in *Tarots: The Visconti Pack in Bergamo and New York*).

1970 Publication of *Gli amori difficili* (*Difficult Loves*) and *Orlando Furioso di Ludovico Ariosto raccontato da Italo Calvino, con una scelta del poema* (Calvino's Version of Ariosto's *Roland Mad,* and Selections from the Epic Poem).

1972 Publication of *Le città invisibili* (*Invisible Cities*), for which he receives the prestigious Feltrinelli Prize.

1973 Publication of *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (*The Castle of Crossed Destinies*) which includes also "La taverna dei destini incrociati" ("The Tavern of Crossed Destinies").

1979 Publication of *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (*If on a winter's night a traveler*).

1980 The Calvino family leaves Paris and settles in Rome. The author intensifies his collaboration with the daily *La Repubblica;* he publishes his first collection of essays: *Una pietra sopra* (*The Uses of Literature: Essays*).

1983 Publication of *Palomar* (*Mr. Palomar*).

1984 Changes publishers; leaves Einaudi for Garzanti which publishes *Cosmicomiche vecchie e nuove* (Old and New Cosmicomics) and a new volume of essays: *Collezione di sabbia* (Sand Collection).

1985 Calvino prepares the "Charles E. Norton Lectures" to be given at Harvard University. The author dies from the effects of a stroke on September 19.

1986 Posthumous publication of *Sotto il sole giaguaro* (*Under the Jaguar Sun*).

1988 Posthumous publication of Calvino's unfinished Charles E. Norton Lectures, *Lezioni Americane: Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* (*Six Memos for the Next Millennium*); and *Sulla fiaba* (On Fables), a collection of essays dealing with fables.

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1990	Posthumous publication of *La strada di San Giovanni* (The San Giovanni Road), a collection of short stories.
1991	Posthumous publication of *I libri degli altri 1947–1981* (Other People's Books), a collection of letters to writers; and *Perché leggere i classici* (Why Read the Classics), a collection of essays.

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UNDERSTANDING ITALO CALVINO

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Calvino's Life and Circumstances

Italo Calvino, a master of allegory and fantasy, continues to be perhaps the most original, imaginative, and appreciated writer of post–World War II Italy. Until his untimely death in 1985 he was among a handful of major novelists of international standing. Because of his merits as an innovator on the Italian and world literary scene and because of the political and ethical dimension of his writings, his name kept cropping up as a candidate for the Nobel Prize in literature. Calvino was attracted primarily to folktales, knights, chivalry, social and political allegories, and pseudo-scientific legends of our time. Indeed, he compiled, transcribed from numerous Italian dialects, and expressed artistically the most complete collection of Italian folktales.[1] He was endowed with a lucid intellect and inspired by a fervid imagination that spanned the chivalry of the Middle Ages to the modern fantasies of space and science fiction.

During his productive literary career Calvino was loath to discuss his private life and experiences. He was a timid, solitary person who stuttered, spoke haltingly, and felt ill at ease and awkward in society, though he was open and congenial with family and intimate friends. Although he gave numerous interviews, he always refrained from revealing his intimate feelings and often spoke ambiguously about his writings. He expected his readers to know him through his works and nothing else. The French critic Paul Fournel refers to him as "a man of few words" who nonetheless explains himself through his works.[2] Ernesto Ferrero, who was associated with Calvino at the Einaudi publishing house, tells us that his friend's "reticence and unsociability" were a defense mechanism for his "actions and his nature."[3] The outcome is that Calvino, the private man, remains somewhat of an enigma, notwithstanding the fact that so much has been written about him. Often personal experiences help to understand an author. In Calvino's case the only known concrete aspects of his life that left an indelible mark on the novelist

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were his scientific upbringing, his experiences under the Fascist puppet regime (1943–45) during the Nazi occupation of Italy, the many years spent in the editorial offices of Einaudi, and his long residence in Paris.

Italo Calvino was born on 15 October 1923 in Santiago de Las Vegas, a suburb of Havana, Cuba, where his parents were conducting scientific experiments. His father, Mario, a tropical agronomist and botanist, had spent a number of years in Mexico and other Central American countries. His mother, Eva Mameli-Calvino, a native of the island of Sardinia, was a botanist and also a university professor. His parents chose for him the name Italo because they did not want him to forget his Italian roots. However, less than two years after their son's birth the Calvinos returned to Italy and settled permanently in San Remo, Mario's native town. Thus Italo grew up on the Italian Riviera in the midst of nature, dividing his time between his family's Villa Meridiana in San Remo, where his father directed an experimental floriculture station, and their country house in the hills, a small working farm where the elder Calvino pioneered in the growing of grapefruit and avocados. The experience of living in San Remo on the Ligurian coast among so many exotic plants and trees was to have a profound influence on the future novelist and to provide him with much inspiration for his narrative writings. Indeed, *Il barone rampante* (*The Baron in the Trees*) grew out of Italo's and his brother Florio's habit as children of climbing the numerous trees of Villa Meridiana and spending long periods of time perched among the branches. In an interview with Maria Corti, Calvino stated that "San Remo continues to pop out in my books, in the most diverse pieces of writing."[4]

San Remo, a Mediterranean seaport and popular Italian resort on the western Ligurian coast, is situated in the center of a large cove and sheltered by a natural amphitheater of green hills that slope down to the calm blue waters of the bay. East of Nice, it is located about ten miles from the French border and eighty-five miles from Genoa. The city is divided into two different parts. The old terraced town, called *la Pigna,* still characteristically medieval, developed in feudal times as a fortification when the coastal region was infested with Moorish pirates. It has steep, narrow, winding alleys called *carrugi,* often connected by arches sustaining the top of the lofty buildings, and dark vaulted arcades with flights of cobbled steps, typical of many old Italian hill towns.

The architecture of the old town contrasts sharply with the modern structures of the lower town, which is located along the sea and characterized by beautiful beaches, elegant villas and hotels, gardens, scenic promenades, and gambling casinos. For many years the annual San Remo Song Festival has

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taken place in the Casino Municipale. Begun in the 1700s, the modern part of the town quickly became a favorite resort for European nobility. Protected by the Ligurian Alps to the north, the region's mild winter climate and its natural beauty have made San Remo the exclusive year-round spa and tourist attraction of the Italian Riviera, vying even with Portofino and Rapallo.

Although the Calvinos were strongly anti-Fascist and freethinkers who did not give their children a religious upbringing, Italo attended nonetheless a Protestant elementary school run by the Waldensians. For his secondary schooling he attended the state-run Ginnasio-Liceo G. D. Cassini, where he followed the classical curriculum, receiving the esteemed Classical diploma. In high school, at his parents' request, he was exempted from the traditional religious training. In June 1940, after Italy's delayed entry into the Second World War, when the Nazis were approaching Paris and Mussolini wanted to take part in the spoils of victory, Calvino participated in the Italian occupation of the French Riviera as a compulsory member of the Young Fascists. In 1941 he enrolled at the University of Turin, where his father was teaching. Although he already had some inclination toward becoming a writer—his first passion was to write for the theater—he chose to study agriculture to please his parents, but quickly lost interest after the first examinations, turning his back on the scientific world of his family. Nevertheless, he always retained the benefits of having been nurtured in a liberal and enlightened scientific atmosphere.[5]

When the Germans occupied Liguria and the rest of northern Italy in 1943 (under the guise of protecting Mussolini, who after his downfall had established there a puppet Fascist Social republic), Italo Calvino first evaded the Fascist draft and then joined the Italian Resistance together with his younger brother Florio. He was a partisan for twenty months and fought in the Ligurian mountains with the "Garibaldi Brigades" until 1945, when the Germans and the Fascists surrendered. During the last part of the liberation struggle his parents were held hostage for some months by the Germans. The war experience with all its horror left an indelible mark on Calvino's social consciousness and provided him with the raw material for his first successful literary attempts. In fact, his first novel, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (*The Path to the Nest of Spiders*), is set among the partisans in the Ligurian mountains and depicts their activities as observed by a small boy named Pin.

At the end of the war he joined the Italian Communist Party and began contributing to *Il Politecnico*, whose mission was to fill the cultural void created by the extended Fascist rule and to bring Italy back into the European cultural mainstream; he also collaborated with other leftist journals,

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especially *l'Unità,* the official party newspaper. He joined the Party not merely for ideological reasons, but because he felt that the Communist Party seemed to have the most realistic program for remaking Italy and for opposing a resurgence of fascism. At the same time he resumed his university studies, changing from agriculture to English literature; he wrote a thesis on Joseph Conrad and graduated in 1947. That year he found a job in the publicity department of the Turin publishing house Giulio Einaudi, where he eventually became an editor and where virtually all his works were published. He remained with Einaudi until 1984.

During the late forties and early fifties, Calvino began writing and publishing stories dealing with his wartime experiences as a partisan and as an anti-Fascist. When he finished *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* at the end of 1946, he showed it to his friend Cesare Pavese, who was by then already well known as a writer, and who together with the novelist Natalia Ginsburg was trying to bring the Einaudi publishing house back to life. Pavese, though not too enthusiastic, recommended its publication. The book achieved a respectable success (6,000 volumes sold—quite a feat in postwar Italy) when it was published in 1947, and launched Calvino on his career as a writer. For his first novel he won the prestigious Premio Riccione.

Calvino's experiences in Turin, a vital industrial city and center of proletarian struggle, as well as in the offices of Einaudi Editore, were fundamental to the intellectual and artistic formation of the young writer. He was put in touch with the controversial ideological, political, and literary ideas that were being discussed in the recovering nation, and he became personally familiar with their leading exponents. But above all, the nature of his work as a consulting editor—reading manuscripts—not only gave him the opportunity of promoting the writings of the most significant authors of modern Italy,[6] but also conditioned him to become a reader of texts.[7] This experience would allow him to create great works of fiction as well as of metafiction, most notably *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (*If on a winter's night a traveler*), his most extensive analysis of the relationship between author, reader, and text. His first collection of short stories, *Ultimo viene il corvo* (The Crow Comes Last), published in 1949, deals with the Resistance and life in postwar Italy.

On the basis of his first publications, Calvino was associated with Pavese and with the novelist Elio Vittorini as a member of the Italian neorealist movement. Although the movement was not organized and did not have a specific artistic program, most writers of the period came under the influence

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of Herman Melville, Ernest Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Edgar Lee Masters, John Dos Passos, Theodore Dreiser, William Faulkner, and other American writers. Pavese and Vittorini were ardent promoters of these realistic writers, having translated into Italian many of their works; for the two anti-Fascist novelists America represented cultural and political freedom.

During the 1950s Calvino's narrative veered away from neorealism with his trilogy of novels: *Il visconte dimezzato*, 1952 (*The Cloven Viscount*), *Il barone rampante*, 1957 (*The Baron in the Trees*), and *Il cavaliere inesistente*, 1959 (*The Nonexistent Knight*). Although these highly fantastic novels, for which he received the Salento Prize in 1960, are not set in current society, they nevertheless offer allegorically a deep concern for contemporary social and political issues. In 1957 Calvino left the Communist Party, as did many Italians, as a result of the Russian intervention in the 1956 Hungarian revolution, his personal disillusionment with the socialist reforms in Italy, and his conviction that an artist should remain detached from politics. This political disinclination is best expressed in his satirical and allegorical novellas *La formica argentina*, 1952 (*The Argentine Ant*), *La speculazione edilizia*, 1957 (*A Plunge into Real Estate*), *La nuvola di smog*, 1958 (*Smog*), and many other stories, but most notably in the extremely realistic *La giornata d'uno scrutatore*, 1963 (*The Watcher*) where Amerigo Ormea, the disheartened "poll-watcher" of the story, muses: "Morality impels one to act; but what if the action is futile?"[8]

In 1959, together with Elio Vittorini, the leading left-wing intellectual of postwar Italy, Calvino founded *Il Menabò*, which published interesting and timely debates on the role of the intellectual vis-à-vis the ideological crises of the leftist political parties, bent on solving social, historical, and literary problems. The journal's most compelling program was to point out that the ever-increasing role of science in modern society is not necessarily in conflict with our humanistic values.

Under the influence of the Argentine author of exotic prose fiction Jorge Luis Borges, the Swiss founder of modern linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure, the modern critics Roland Barthes and Vladimir Propp, semiotics, structuralism—the entire spectrum of recent theories of narrative and even comic strips—Calvino once again changed course when he wrote *Le Cosmicomiche*, 1965 (*Cosmicomics*) and *Ti con zero*, 1967 (*t zero*). He abruptly pulled away from his familiar themes, making use of modern science as a means of creating illusory circumstances in order to communicate a new vision of reality.

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In essence, so to speak, his new stories are cosmogonic fairy tales constructed around scientific propositions that permit him to narrate tales of science fiction reaching all the way back to our primordial universe.

In 1964 Calvino moved to Paris, without giving up his work at Einaudi, and married the Argentine-born Esther Singer—nicknamed Chichita—who worked as a translator at UNESCO headquarters. One year later their daughter, Abigail, was born. Calvino liked living away from Italy: "The ideal place for me," he wrote, "is the one in which it is most natural to live as a foreigner."[9] In Paris he became acquainted with the activities of Oulipo (*Ouvroir de littérature potentielle:* Workshop of Potential Literature) led by Raymond Queneau, poet, novelist, mathematician, and by the mathematical historian François LeLionnais. The group's intentions were to explore all the potentialities of writing and to apply mathematical structures to writing. As a result of this, in 1969 Calvino published *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (*The Castle of Crossed Destinies*), in which he focused on narrative language and interpretation. In this work, stories are created via the magical reading of tarot cards, used not to predict the future, but to re-create the past. In 1969 he also translated into Italian Queneau's novel *Les fleurs bleues* (*Blue Flowers*). A subsequent significant work published in 1972, *Le città invisibili* (*Invisible Cities*), presents a mythical Marco Polo who entertains an aged Kublai Khan by describing to him various imaginary cities of his decaying empire.

In 1979 Calvino once again broke stride with the publication of *If on a winter's night a traveler*, a narrative tour de force, a self-referential literary game as in Borges's recursive labyrinths. A male and a female reader set out to read a new novel by Calvino; their task is constantly interrupted to the extent that they are maneuvered, almost perversely, to read ten unfinished novels written by different authors.

In 1980 the Calvino family moved back to Italy and settled in Rome, where the author intensified his collaboration with the daily *La Repubblica*. Also his first major collection of essays, *Una pietra sopra: Discorsi di letteratura e società* (*The Uses of Literature*) was published in 1980.[10] In *Palomar*, his last significant book, published in 1983, the protagonist observes and describes various aspects of nature, questioning via an inner dialogue the arcane similarities between man and the cosmos, nature and human communication.

On 19 September 1985 Calvino died in a hospital in Siena from the effects of a stroke suffered twelve days earlier. At the time of his death he was almost sixty-two years old and on the point of departing for Harvard University, where he was supposed to deliver the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures for 1985. Although the last of the projected six lectures was never completed, five were

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published posthumously in 1988 under the title *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. The loss of Calvino's creativity and talent was not Italy's alone, but also the world's.[11]

Throughout his career Calvino, like Mr. Palomar, the protagonist of his last novel, tried to defy with his technical virtuosity and fantastic characters the malaise of daily life in a dehumanizing, modern world controlled by science. He was a seeker of knowledge, and like Ariosto a visionary in a sublime and absurd world. His quest was to grasp the entire universe, to gain a cosmic sense of harmony and inner tranquility for himself and for his readers—all this through a continuous interplay between fantasy and reality and in a language that never changed.[12] In the final chapter of *Mr. Palomar,* properly called "Learning to be Dead," the protagonist, wondering what it means to be dead, realizes that it "is less easy than it might seem," and that it constitutes "himself plus the world minus him."[13]

NOTES

1. *Fiabe Italiane* (Turin: Einaudi, 1956). There are two English versions: *Italian Fables* (1961) and *Italian Folktales* (1980).
2. Paul Fournel, "Italo Calvino: cahiers d'exercice," *Magazine Littéraire* (June 1985): 84.
3. Ernesto Ferrero, "Edizioni Calvino," *L'Espresso* (19 May 1991): 109.
4. Maria Corti, "Intervista: Italo Calvino," *Autografo* 2 (Oct. 1985): 51.
5. In a 1960 interview Calvino stated that he hid his literary aspirations "from his intimate friends . . . and almost even from himself" (Contardo Calligaris, *Italo Calvino* [Milan: Mursia, 1985] 171). In a more recent interview (1985) with his English translator William Weaver, Calvino added: "I began writing fairly early. When I was around sixteen I tried to write pieces for the theater; the theater was my first passion, perhaps because at that time one of the links with the outside world was radio. And so I started writing—by trying to write—plays. When I was eighteen, something I wrote won a mention in a student competition" (William Weaver, "Calvino: An Interview and its Story," *Calvino Revisited*, ed. Franco Ricci [Toronto: Dovehouse, 1989], 25).
6. Among others, Calvino signed up for the Einaudi publishing house Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, and Julio Cortázar.
7. In his "By Way of an Autobiography," Calvino states: "Working in a publishing house, I spent more time with the books of others than with my own" (*The Uses of Literature* [New York: Harcourt Brace, 1986] 341).
8. *The Watcher and Other Stories* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971) 37.
9. "By Way of an Autobiography" 341.
10. His other collection of essays, *Collezione di sabbia* (Collection of Sand; Milan: Garzanti, 1984), was written mostly in the 1980s and published in *La Repubblica*.
11. Two collections of Calvino's narrative works were also published posthumously: *Sotto il sole giaguaro* (*Under the Jaguar Sun*, 1988); and *La strada di San Giovanni* (*The San Giovanni Road*, 1990). *I libri degli altri: Lettere 1947–1981* (a collection of letters written by Calvino to various authors while working for Einaudi) and *Perché leggere i classici* (Why Read the Classics) were published in 1991.

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12. In "By Way of an Autobiography" Calvino writes: "Everything can change, but not the language that we carry inside us, like a world more exclusive and final than one's mother's womb" (341).
13. *Mr. Palomar* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1985) 121, 122.

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CHAPTER TWO

A Neorealistic Path to Literary Exordium: *The Path to the Nest of Spiders*

Even though my natural tendency would be toward fantasy and invention, the first things I wrote were realistic.[1]

Calvino wrote his first novel during the postwar period marked by not only a remarkable resurgence in Italian fiction, but also by turmoil, unrest, desperation, hunger, revenge, and profound economic, social, and political instability. The Second World War changed the moral life of the nation; as Salvatore Quasimodo, the 1959 Nobel Prize winner for literature, said in 1953, the "individual, upon his return, no longer found any measure of conviction within his inner self because it had been diminished and ironically undermined during his confrontations with death."[2] Although American audiences are not well versed in Italian literature, they nevertheless know, on the whole, that postwar Italy was extraordinarily rich in imaginative and courageous realistic films that brought about a much-needed and better understanding of the country and its problems. When we consider that period we inevitably think of film directors such as Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, and Luchino Visconti, among others, whose great films were categorized as neorealistic because their principal characteristic was a representation of life in its immediate reality. The films, imbued with a clear social and political commitment, not only represented realistic situations in contemporary Italy but also were filmed on location, in popular settings, with nonprofessional actors who, more often than not, spoke their local dialect instead of standard Italian. These films had a documentary quality which, according to Peter Bondanella, "contained a message of fundamental human solidarity fostered by the anti-Fascist Resistance within which most of the greatest Italian directors came of age."[3]

Similarly, in literature the compelling motives that urged Italian neorealist authors to write were a deep-felt need and obligation to present in a realistic mode their narrative testimonies of the recent war, as well as its calamitous consequences to the nation. Neorealism, however, was not really a well-defined

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movement, but rather a meeting of different artistic personalities who had various aspirations in common. It was an attempt to replace old literary narrative materials with others containing democratic, social, and historical values, and whose subject matter would be the people and the events of recent and current history: workers, farmers, partisans, and city dwellers presented in their struggle for survival. This was to be done in a new and practical language, untouched by traditional aesthetic considerations, almost akin to the spoken language of the country, and in some cases in sheer dialect. In a very significant and enlightening essay written by Calvino as a preface to the 1964 edition of *The Path to the Nest of Spiders,* we see his own hesitancy regarding the definition of neorealism:

> Having emerged from an experience, a war and a civil war that had spared no one, made communication between the writer and his audience immediate. . . . With our renewed freedom of speech, all at first felt a rage to narrate . . . [the] stories we had personally enacted or had witnessed mingled with those we had already heard as tales, with a voice, an accent, a mimed expression. . . . But the secret of how one wrote then did not lie only in this elementary universality of content . . . [but primarily] in a desire to *express.* . . . We knew all too well that what counted was the music and not the libretto. . . . "Neorealism" was not a school. . . . It was a collection of voices, largely marginal, a multiple discovery of the various Italys, even—or particularly—the Italys previously unknown to literature.[4]

In short, neorealism had no formal, structural, or thematic limitations for the authors whose main concern was above all to be witnesses to the ills of fascism and to the recent conflagration that had virtually destroyed their country.[5] What all neorealist Italian writers *did* have in common was not only a disgust for the moral emptiness prevalent in fascist culture and its bombastic rhetoric, but above all a compelling desire to relate their experiences under the tyranny of fascism and to promote objectively the idea of a reformed and better society in a clear, simple language, unconcerned with aesthetic literary standards.

The Path to the Nest of Spiders clearly reflects Calvino's experiences as a young partisan fighting in a communist brigade against the Fascist and German occupation of Italy. It narrates the war adventures of a young street urchin, a boy of about twelve or thirteen, mischievously wicked and at the same time naïve. He lives in the slums of a war-torn Ligurian town with his sister Rina, a young prostitute. Their mother is dead and their father has long abandoned them. Pin, who has no friends of his own age, fends for himself, working as a cobbler's apprentice, stealing and getting free drinks from the men at

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the local tavern whom he entertains with bawdy songs and, at the same time, mocks with his biting tongue. When he is enticed by one of the men to steal a pistol from a German sailor, one of Rina's customers, he is questioned, beaten, and put in jail by the Germans. In prison Pin meets an older boy, a communist member of the underground by the name of Lupo Rosso (Red Wolf). They both escape, and Pin joins a group of Resistance fighters in the Ligurian mountains. His detachment, however, instead of being typically composed of valiant, patriotic fighters, is made up of a sorrowful pack of misfits, including their leader Dritto (Straight or Righteous), who do not fully understand why they are fighting the enemy. Although the boy continues to face the same loneliness as before, he is nevertheless fascinated by the colorful existence of the group and, for the first time in his life, enjoys a sense of belonging. When Pin's unit is ordered into combat, Dritto, claiming to be ill, refuses to join his men, preferring instead to remain at the encampment where he goes to bed with the wife of one of the fighters. This takes place virtually in the presence of Pin who, because of his age, has also remained behind. When the partisans have to clear out of the area, Pin is once again on his own. He returns to the spider's nest where he had hidden the sailor's pistol for safekeeping, but it is no longer there. He surmises that it was stolen by Pelle, a former partisan who has joined the Fascists, and to whom Pin had revealed his secret. Eventually Pin recovers the weapon from his sister, who had gotten it from Pelle during a sexual encounter. Alone again, the distraught Pin runs into Cousin, the partisan who had first introduced him to the Resistance movement. As the novel comes to an end, the protective man and the boy walk hand in hand toward an unknown destiny, looking forward to a time when nature will heal all the horrors of war.

While postwar Italian art and letters typically dwelled on positive heroes,[6] dedicated to fighting social and political evils, Calvino, in his first short stories and in *The Path to the Nest of Spiders,* partially broke away from this stance. Instead, he presented his protagonists in a negative light, degraded and living on the margins of society—thieves, swindlers, unsavory characters—rebellious not only against the Fascists but also against the economic and social ills resulting from capitalistic bourgeois society. Artistically he presented his protagonists in an expressionistically distorted manner, making them negative because he "found a poetic meaning only in 'negativity' " (xi). Unlike his more engagé writer friends, who believed that their work had to contribute primarily to the betterment of society, Calvino was unwilling to overlook in his art the factionalism and the ill-feelings that were gripping the nation, not even for the sake of the country's need for brotherhood,

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redemption,and reconstruction. His aim was to challenge "the Resistance's detractors and, at the same time, those high priests of a hagiographic and edulcorated Resistance" (xiii), as he himself was to state years later.

In selecting Pin as his hero Calvino purposely eschewed the traditional pattern of contemporary Italian writers, who invariably selected heroic characters as representative of their political, social, and literary ideas. Pin possesses none of these admirable qualities and is too young to fully comprehend the reality of the situation during the 1943–45 oppression; he does not even "know the difference between when there's war and when there isn't" (87). For Pin, a truly pathetic reject from society, all adults are the same whether they are the Germans who go to bed with his sister or the local people whom he despises and yet defiantly entertains with bawdy songs. Pin joins the Ligurian partisans in order to escape from jail, and not because of conviction. In fact, several other partisans as well are totally devoid of any ideology or understanding and do not seem to know why they are participating in the struggle against tyranny. Pelle offers a good example of this opportunism when he leaves the partisans, joins the Blackshirts, and then betrays his former companions. "Calvino does not idealize his partisans," writes Frank Rosengarten; "they are not stalwart Sir Galahads, but ordinary flesh-and-blood people who are quite prone to vulgarity, lust, and cowardice."[7] However, unlike the men of the tavern, the partisans despite their failings treat Pin kindly, with genuine affection and generosity—sentiments he has never known before.

The title of the novel is intriguing and magically mysterious. The path symbolizes movement, transition, expression of an urgent desire or need for discovery and change that underlies the adolescent's life. It also presages Pin's escape from his dreadful life and entry into a different one where he will live new experiences intensively. The spiders, on the other hand, with their ceaseless weaving and killing, building and destroying, symbolize the continual alternation of forces on which the stability of Pin's universe depends. The idea of spinning a web implies fostering life. The Parcae in classical mythology were spinners who spun the thread of life and cut it short as they presided over the destiny of human beings. Pin's destiny revolves around this mysterious and magical place where he hides the pistol stolen from the German sailor. For him it symbolizes power, authority: "A real pistol. A real pistol. Pin tries to excite himself with the thought. Someone who has a real pistol can do anything, he's like a grownup. He can threaten to kill men and women and do whatever he likes with them" (14–15). Indeed, the weapon and its hiding place have all the qualities of a rite of passage practiced in

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primitive societies. The evocation of the secret event (stealing the pistol) and of the sacred place (spiders' nest) allow Calvino to dissolve the realistic elements of the novel—the Nazis, the Fascists, the war and all its consequences—into fabulous tones, and enchantment. Like the Latin American practitioners of magic realism, Calvino converts reality into fantasy without distorting the former. The magical effect is realized by juxtaposing scenes and details of great realism with fantastic and magical situations. This he does very artfully through the dislocation of time, place, and identity, and by zooming in on and fading out from reality.

The first critic to have captured the essence of Calvino's narrative was the novelist Cesare Pavese, who, in his review of *The Path to the Nest of Spiders,* underscored the fairy-tale quality of his writing and praised him as a *scoiattolo della penna* (squirrel of the pen) because, unlike other writers of the Resistance, he astutely "climbed into the trees, more for fun than fear, to observe partisan life as a fable of the forest, clamorous, multicolored, different."[8] Pavese also singled out the author's *sapore ariostesco* (Ariostoesque flavor) inasmuch as Calvino, too, used in his novel a kaleidoscope of episodes based on fact, magic, and fantasy. Ludovico Ariosto (1474–1533) had done so in his great epic, *Orlando Furioso,* as a means of escaping from the turbulent times in which he was living into a world of fantasy and freedom. However, adds Pavese, the "counterparts of our modern-day Ariosto are Stevenson, Kipling, Dickens and Nievo, successfully disguised as a young boy."

In fact, from the very beginning of the novel we are introduced into a romantic world of fantasy replete with echoes of Stevenson's *Treasure Island,* where Pin, like Jim Hawkins, experiences his adventure into the adult world in which he finally is accepted because of his displayed competence; Calvino's choice of the name Kim reminds us of Kipling's novel in which the protagonist, an orphan fending for himself in the slums of Lahore, swirls through the exotic beauty and squalor of India and its people, and the principal theme focuses on the chasm between the world of action and the world of spirit.[9] Likewise, Dickens's Pip of *Great Expectations* and his adventures in overcoming obstacles in life, as well as Ippolito Nievo's patriotic and romantic fervor, dramatized in his famous novel *Confessions of an Italian,* set in the period of Italian unification, resonate in Calvino's novel.[10] Moreover, the selection of monosyllabic names in *The Path to the Nest of Spiders,* like Kim and Pin, clearly is determined by other well-known literary names, such as Pip, Kim, Jim, Tom, Tim, Huck, Joe, Nick, found in English and American fiction.[11]

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Calvino modulates the novel on two distinct tones: on the one hand we have Pin's wretched life inserted into the Nazi–Fascist oppression and the civil war; on the other hand we have a lyrical evocative tone that emerges from the Ligurian landscape and mountains where the boy's spiders operate in their secret hiding places. From the very beginning the Ligurian background—Calvino says "My landscape was something jealously mine" (viii)—sets the tone of the novel, and it becomes an essential part of the story, providing a sense of focus and continuity. Whenever described, it is always in luminous terms and presented as a bucolic sylvan garden profaned only by the ugliness of war. It is in the second tone that Calvino's poetic qualities are used in showing off the knowledge of the Ligurian flora and fauna acquired from his scientist parents. In modulating the two tones Calvino mingles realism, poetic feeling, social conviction, and sympathy in a dialogue between Pin's symbolic and evasive world and the war's actuality.

Like his literary archetypes Pin, too, is a picaresque character—though lacking compared to the shrewd talents of the classical picaro, Lazarillo de Tormes. Just as the Spanish picaro uses his wits and native intelligence as a defense against society as a whole, Pin—who has good qualities yet often is wicked, deceitful, crafty, sly, mischievous, though always winning in his innocence—uses his sarcasm and acerbic wit whenever he strikes back at those who have mistreated him, first against the taunting habitués of the local tavern and then against his comrades in the mountains. Everybody is afraid of him because he can be ruthless and "hurt them without any pity" (131). Only Cousin, who first introduced him to the partisans and then at the end becomes his guide and mentor, escapes somewhat unscathed from Pin's sadistic ill-will.

Pin, through whose innocent eyes we see the unfolding of the narrative events, has been shaped by the environment he has been condemned to live in. More than all the other characters in the novel he truly is an outcast and suffers from a sense of abandonment and isolation; his greatest urgency is for human fellowship and understanding, which he will partly find among the partisans and more fully with Cousin. He desperately longs to be with children of his own age with whom he could play and even show where spiders make their nests. "But Pin is not liked by boys of his own age; he is the friend of grown-ups, [and] he can say things to grown-ups that make them laugh or get angry, while other boys can't even understand what grown-ups say to each other." And so, "in order to disperse the cloud of loneliness which settles around his heart" (6–7), Pin is forced to be with adults who are friends and enemies at the same time, "turn their backs on him and are as incomprehen-

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sible and far-removed from him'' (7) as they are from the other rascals of the neighborhood. No matter how hard he tries, he does not know how to take part in games either of children or grown-ups. The only game he *does* play is with the stolen pistol and with the spiders.

Most intriguing is Cousin, a loner and Pin's affectionate mentor, who is always ready to undertake all by himself the dangerous task of killing collaborators, traitors, and spies. Because of his wife's infidelity, which he blames on the war, he now hates all women to the extent of blaming them for having started the war: ''Women, women I tell you, they're behind everything. Mussolini got the idea of the war from the Petacci sisters'' (93).[12] Cousin is the only one who shows affection to the boy. As his ''Great Friend'' he represents the boy's salvation, and ''is the last person Pin has left in all the world'' (144). At the end of the novel, amidst the flickering fireflies around the nest of spiders, ''they walk off into the country, with Pin holding Cousin's big soft calming hand'' (145). Cousin and the spiders' nest represent hope and redemption both for Pin and for Italy, which will be rebuilt into a progressive nation based on humanitarian ideals, just as the spiders have always rebuilt when their nest is destroyed.

Calvino originally began to write the novel without a precise plot in mind, save for the character of Pin. In order to give it a fictional base he added the sister, the pistol, and the partisans. Eventually from a projected picaresque tale he found himself compelled to turn it into a ''collective epic'' (xv). Calvino wanted to show that even the most fierce and primitive people, such as the misfits of Pin's group, who fought without any political conviction and were driven by ''an elementary impulse of human rescue'' (xiii), could be indoctrinated into becoming class-conscious. The Resistance movement provided the people of Italy a reason for being that went beyond their struggle in the civil war; and ultimately, because of the conflict, goodwill and trust could overcome hatred and deceit. As Rosengarten puts it, ''A messianic fervor permeates this novel: great hope for redemption animates its humble characters.''[13] In fact, Commissar Kim, Calvino's eloquent spokesman to whom the novel is dedicated[14] and the only intellectual in the novel, is portrayed as a medical student who yearns for logic and has a great interest in humanity. He is not well liked by the men because with his logic he forces them to come to terms with their own beliefs. He sees behind all human beings a ''great machine of class movement.'' Unlike the other commander of the partisans, Kim defends his idea of having put together a detachment of misfits who cannot be trusted, because they present him with a laboratory for political work where he can turn them into proletarians with a new class

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consciousness; for in spite of their shortcomings, they all fight against the enemy "with the same sort of urge in them. . . . Each has a an urge of his own . . . but they're all fighting in unison now, each as much as the other. . . . That's what political work is . . . to give them a sense" (100). Above all, they fight because of a deep-seated "resentment" that comes from

> the squalor of their lives, the filth of their homes, the obscenities they've known ever since babyhood, the strain of having to be bad. . . . An elementary, anonymous urge to vindicate all our humiliations; the worker from his exploitation, the peasant from his ignorance, the petty bourgeois from his inhibitions, the outcast from his corruption. This is what I believe our political work is, to use human misery against itself, for our own redemption, as the Fascists use misery to perpetuate misery and man fighting man. (102, 104)

In spite of his own reservations about the novel being too political, as well as severe criticism from some of his literary friends, Calvino nonetheless felt compelled to "satisfy the necessity of the ideological insertion," arbitrarily placing it in chapter 9, which, by his own admission, is the least felicitous of the novel.[15]

The novel is constructed as a series of episodes consisting of restrained events that never lead up to a powerful climax. There are no big scenes except for the uplifting account of the final episode that takes place in Pin's magical and emblematic path and which leads to a sort of resurrection. Calvino's language is colloquial and dialectal inasmuch as it is "clotted into patches of color" and includes a "documentary-like repertory (sayings, songs) which almost arrives at folklore" (x). The entire narrative, written in the present tense and told with "extraordinary lightness,"[16] is replete with repetitions and, except for the political parts, reflects the mentality of a child through whose innocent eyes everything is perceived. According to John Gatt-Rutter, "The boy protagonist, Pin, knows everything—that men fornicate and kill—but understands nothing."[17] The omniscient point of view allows the author to shift freely from the external to the internal worlds of Pin; the only time the point shifts from that of the omniscient narrator is in the case of Kim.

It is difficult to classify *The Path to the Nest of Spiders.* The author, who wrote it at the young age of twenty-three, did not yet have a precise idea of what he was doing and consequently did not follow rigorously any literary trend. He seems to have been intuitively led toward certain themes and forms that already foreshadowed his subsequent works: a certain inventiveness and mystification, a fablelike fantasy, a keen interest in nature, in the cosmos and mankind's place in it, as well as a propensity to be free from traditional lit-

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erary schemes and structures. Calvino himself recognized the importance of his first novel, stating in the preface that his story as a writer was already contained in that beginning: "Your first book already defines you, while you are really far from being defined. And this definition is something you may then carry with you for the rest of your life, trying to confirm it or extend or correct or deny it; but you can never eliminate it" (xxiii). Calvino's originality is to be found in his inspired manner of presenting his vision of life, in the force of the expression and perspicacity of his observations on human nature and suffering, and in an almost absolute control of language.

NOTES

1. Alexander Stille, "An Interview with Italo Calvino," *Saturday Review* Mar.-Apr. 1985: 39.

2. Salvatore Quasimodo, *Poesie e discorsi sulla poesia*, ed. G. Finzi (Milan: Mondadori, 1971) 281.

3. Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present* (New York: Continuum, 1983) 66.

4. *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* (New York: Ecco Press, 1987) v-vii. All quotations from the novel come from this edition. Page numbers referring to this edition are shown in the text in parentheses.

5. Rosengarten uses the term "The Italian Resistance Novel" in grouping the authors who dealt with the theme of resistance against Fascism and Nazism from different points of view and styles of method, and worked independently of each other. See Frank Rosengarten, "The Italian Resistance Novel (1945–1962)" in *From Verismo to Experimentalism*, ed. Sergio Pacifici (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969) 212–16.

6. In the preface, Calvino writes: "You want 'revolutionary Romanticism,' do you? Well, I'll write a partisan story in which nobody is a hero, nobody has any class consciousness" (xiv).

7. Rosengarten 225.

8. Cesare Pavese, review of *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, *L'Unità* 26 Sept. 1947.

9. "Our heads are still full of magic and miracles, thinks Kim. Sometimes he feels he is walking amid a world of symbols, like his namesake, little Kim in the middle of India, in that book of Kipling's which he had so often re-read as a boy" (105). At the end of the chapter we find out that Kim "feels like the hero of that novel read in his childhood; the half-English half-Indian boy who travels across India looking for the river of purification" (108).

10. In the preface, Calvino points out the similarity of the encounter between Pin and Cousin with that of Carlino and Spaccafumo in Nievo's novel. *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (Milan: Garzanti, 1987) 18. Weaver's English translation of the preface fails to include this reference.

11. As far as Pelle is concerned, I would suggest that Calvino must have been familiar with Martin Andersen Nexos's novel *Pelle the Conqueror*, where a picaresque peasant boy becomes a trade unionist and strike leader. Like Pin, he starts out as an apprentice to a shoemaker and is made the butt of all sorts of heartless practical jokes by his elders. I should also point out the significance of Red Wolf, whose name not only stands in contrast to the Fascist Black Wolf, but contains allusions to the wolf in the story of Little Red Ridinghood.

12. Claretta Petacci was Mussolini's mistress. The two were captured by the partisans and shot on 28 April 1945.

13. Rosengarten 224–25.

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14. It is somewhat puzzling that Calvino's dedication "A Kim, e a tutti gli altri" [to Kim, and to all the others] should have been left out of the English translation.

15. Calvino's writer friends advised him to eliminate the entire chapter. But, as he wrote in the preface, "I held out: the book had been born like this, with this composite, illegitimate element" (x).

16. Sergio Pacifici, "Italian Novels of the Fifties," *On Contemporary Literature*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Avon, 1964) 171.

17. John Gatt-Rutter, *Writers and Politics in Modern Italy* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1978) 47.

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CHAPTER THREE

Fantastic and Realistic Webs of Prose

The art of writing tales consists in an ability to draw the rest of life from the nothing one has understood of it, but life begins again at the end of the page when one realizes that one knew nothing whatsoever.[1]

Between the summer of 1945, only a few months after the end of the war, and the spring of 1949, the period encompassing the writing and publication of *The Path to the Nest of Spiders,* Calvino wrote many short stories dealing with the war and its aftermath. Some appeared in the Turin and Genoa editions of *l'Unità,* the official newspaper of the Italian Communist Party. In 1949 thirty of these stories were published by Einaudi in a volume bearing the title *Ultimo viene il corvo* (The Crow Comes Last; most of the content appears in *Adam, One Afternoon, and Other Stories*).[2] Written "with a deep distrust and a deeper faith,"[3] as were the works of his contemporary Beppe Fenoglio, the narratives reflect on the whole Calvino's anguish and hope for a better society. As a result of the war, most of Italy lay in ruins; the economy was destroyed, and the nation suffered the loss of 440,000 people, among them soldiers, partisans, and civilians.[4] Consequently, during the postwar period Calvino was concerned with the lack of progress toward a truly democratic system, and was somewhat taken aback by the Italian Communist Party's dogmatic insistence that writers should toe the party line, represent positive heroes, and proclaim the intellectual and moral superiority of socialism.[5] In an article "Ingegneri e demolitori" (Engineers and Destroyers), he categorically made it known to his comrades that he was unwilling to become an "engineer of souls" as required by socialist realism: "We love more the ruins than the trusses and the bridges, the awareness of our society's ills has affected us down to the bone but has remained stagnant, the zealous study of these ills has bound us to them with either a secret or open attachment."[6]

In addition to his concern with the relations between writers and politics, he was disheartened by the lack of a viable political program he could believe in. He was weary—as becomes clear in the stories "Chi ha messo la mina nel mare?" ("Who Put the Mine in the Sea?") and "Impiccagione di

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un giudice'' (''A Judgment'')—that in spite of the collapse of fascism, its ideology continued to deeply influence Italian consciousness. He feared also that Italy's problems would continue to be more or less the same as they were before. In fact, due to national dissension and the unfulfilled promises of the political parties, the country was suffering from rampant unemployment, an economy in shambles, a high number of homeless and displaced people, political corruption, illiteracy, severe poverty, unequal distribution of wealth, labor unrest, self-destructive tendencies of rival parties, and finally the incipient Cold War.

Ultimo viene il corvo

The thirty stories brought together in *Ultimo viene il corvo* once again reflect the author's own experiences during the last phases of the war as well as describing the panorama of postwar Italy. Although they do not appear in chronological order, they seem to provide an overview of Calvino's political and artistic progress during a crucial period. In them we hear echoes of shouting Germans banging their fists against doors; we see the Blackshirts committing cruel deeds with no shame or remorse; we experience life in the mountains among the persecuted peasants and the disorganized partisans; we witness revenge and retaliation, hunger, survival, and acts of heroism. Indeed, although the collection contains diverse stories, unity is provided by shared temporality. The backdrop is still San Remo and Liguria, as was the case with *The Path to the Nest of Spiders,* and the protagonists, other than the ubiquitous proletarian partisans, are mainly the homeless, the unemployed, the peasants, laborers, children, and smugglers. Occasionally, as in ''I fratelli Bagnasco (Dopo un po' si riparte)'' (''Leaving Again Shortly'') and ''Pranzo con un pastore'' (''A Goatherd at Luncheon''), we find bourgeois types with their typical class foibles. The characters weave out of one story and into another in a satisfying way, reminiscent of children's fables in which the protagonists reappear but in different situations. Of course, as has already been shown in the analysis of his first novel, Calvino's great appeal is inextricably bound to the fablelike quality of his works, in which he offers vivid and realistic portraits of life that operate, at the same time, on the very edge of fantasy. He does this in the manner of a fugue, arranging contrapuntally within each story the realistic/fabulous elements of his vision; also, the sequence of the stories forms a texture which consists of different individual voices that ultimately blend into a polyphonic sound.

''Un pomeriggio, Adamo'' (''Adam, One Afternoon'') and ''Il giardino incantato'' (''The Enchanted Garden'') present an idyllic world of fantasy

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and adventure, but it is always underscored by a realistic awareness. In the first story, set in an Edenlike garden, we find an anarchist lad by the name of Libereso (which in Esperanto means "liberty") who works as a gardener and introduces a young servant girl to the fantastic world of nature; he showers her with gifts ranging from a pair of mating frogs to a hedgehog. On Sunday, instead of going to church, he tells Maria-nunziata,

> my father reads out loud from Kropotkin.[7] My father has hair down to his shoulders and a beard right down to his chest. And he wears shorts in summer and winter. And I do drawings for the Anarchist Federation windows. The figures in top hats are businessmen, those in caps are generals, and those in round hats are priests; then I paint them in water colors. (15)

In "The Enchanted Garden" two young children, Giovannino and Senerella, accidentally enter the garden of what they think is an abandoned villa where they frolic amidst the opulent surroundings. They do so with the apprehension of one who enters an unknown and enchanted forbidden world. As they play Ping-Pong, the ball hits a gong. At once two servants appear carrying trays filled with delicacies. The children uneasily partake of the food but cannot enjoy it because nothing seems to have any taste. "Everything in the garden was like that: lovely but impossible to enjoy properly" (22). When they peer through a window of the villa, they see a pale little boy who is looking into a book, "sitting there and turning the pages and glancing around with more anxiety and worry than their own" (22). They realize that all this wealth cannot be enjoyed by the sick boy, and so they flee because the realistic scene has disturbed their carefree life, and they fear that a spell, "the residue of some injustice committed long ago" (23), is hanging over the mysterious villa and its garden. The beauty of the story is that even when evil seems to be lurking in the background—i.e., the war and the foreboding garden—the fablelike quality of the narrative continues to work its magic, as nature with its regenerative capacity represents the positive in life. As Calvino himself has pointed out, the fantastic shows that the world is complicated beyond our comprehension.[8]

In "La stessa cosa del sangue" (The Identity of Blood Ties), "Attesa della morte in un albergo" (Awaiting Death in a Hotel Room), and "Angoscia in caserma" (Anguish in the Barracks), written immediately after the war's end, Calvino dwells on reprisals, deportations, hostages, betrayals,[9] and escape from forced military service. In the first story we recognize autobiographical elements when the mother of two teenagers is taken hostage by the German SS, as had actually happened to Calvino's own parents.[10] Although

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the story is powerful in depicting the dilemma of the Resistance in trying to prevent the taking of hostages, Calvino borders on propaganda as he extols the virtues of communism. The same is true in the second story when he hails the partisans as "Titans who are generating new laws," and men "who walk, go hungry, shoot, not for pay or because they are forced to do so, or because it amuses them, for they are men who have become evil by dint of being good."[11]

From a structural point of view, "Uno dei tre è ancora vivo" (One of the Three Is Still Alive) is a good example of Calvino's approach to narrative point of view. James Gardner comments that in these stories Calvino indulges "in those tricks that would later make him famous. One of these is the inverted perspective, whereby he, the author, adopts the point of view of the character who is narrating the tale, even when that viewpoint is diametrically opposed to his own."[12] In this narrative three naked soldiers are about to be executed by several peasants whose relatives have been brutally killed by the enemy and whose village has been destroyed. Their plan is to lead the prisoners up to a high ledge and shoot them. As the first two are shot and fall down the precipice, the third one leaps into the abyss before being shot. He survives, because his fall is cushioned by the bodies of his companions. Before the execution the narrative point of view is that of the Italian peasants as they debate the correctness of their actions, but then we suddenly are compelled to look through the eyes of the condemned men as they confront death. We know that the narrator and the reader agree with the action of the avengers, but we eagerly take the side of the surviving naked man when he refuses to believe the peasants' promise not to harm him if he climbs up the rope they have thrown him. He rightly refuses, knowing that "they wanted to save him at all costs so as to be able to shoot him all over again; but at that moment they just wanted to save him, and their voices had a tone of affection, of human brotherhood" (79). In the end he escapes through an underground passage, and we find ourselves rooting for him as he emerges from the darkness and beholds a valley of woods and shrub-covered slopes. In the distance he sees white smoke coming from a house: "Life, thought the naked man, was a hell, with rare moments recalling some ancient paradise" (82). Calvino waves a wand, and dares the reader to follow his magical sleight of hand as he finds refuge, once more, in the regenerative powers of nature.

The title story, "Ultimo viene il corvo" ("The Crow Comes Last"), could easily have become a chapter of *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* in view of similarities in character and circumstance. A band of hungry partisans, stopped at a trout stream, debate whether to use hand grenades as a way of

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killing the fish so they can have a good meal. A young boy, who has been watching, approaches the men, borrows a rifle, carefully takes aim, and in rapid succession kills several trout without missing a shot. The partisans praise his marksmanship and ask him to join their unit. He accepts, provided he is allowed to keep the rifle. On their way to camp he is told not to shoot unless it is absolutely necessary, in order to conserve ammunition and hide their position from the enemy. However, the boy starts shooting at different animals that come into his sight, and the men take back the gun. At daybreak he steals away from camp, taking their best rifle and filling his haversack with cartridges. Then, we see him shooting birds, squirrels, snails, lizards, frogs, and even mushrooms, never missing his mark. As he wanders among "unknown fields," he sees German soldiers coming toward him with arms at the ready; but upon seeing the smiling boy, they shout at him as if they want to greet him. He shoots at one of them aiming at one of his uniform buttons. Eventually the partisans hear the guns and come to the boy's rescue. In the skirmish one German soldier manages to reach a position above the boy, who with the first shot puts the soldier's rifle out of order, and with another tears off a shoulder strap from his uniform. The boy plays with his prey, pursuing it with accurate and deadly aim, until he corners him behind a big rock in the glade. At this point we have another inversion of perspective when the narrative point of view becomes that of the German soldier as he confronts the situation he is in. In spite of several failed escape attempts, he still feels safe hidden behind the rock because he has several grenades left. Suddenly as birds appear in the sky, the boy brings them all down with his rifle. Thinking that he is now distracted by the birds, the German throws a hand grenade, but quickly a shot explodes it in midair. As the German dives for cover, he notices a crow wheeling in the sky above him. The boy starts to shoot at pine cones, and the soldier thinks that he may not have noticed the bird. As the crow is circling with impunity lower and lower, he wonders if it is not a hallucination, and that perhaps the crow's appearance portends that one's time has come. The man feels that he must warn the boy, who keeps firing at the pine cones. He jumps up and points to the bird, shouting in his language. He is immediately struck "in the middle of an eagle with spread wings embroidered on his tunic," while "slowly the crow came circling down" (73).

Although the protagonist of this story is a young "Apple Face" boy, the point of view is no longer that of the picaresque but innocent Pin, because, as Contardo Calligaris points out, in all the stories of *Ultimo viene il corvo* we no longer find "the essential formal quality of fables: the infantile perspective."[13] The boy is intriguing because of his riflery, but remains a

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mystery to the reader. We know only that he is glad to leave his home, "a blotch of slate, straw, and cow dung at the bottom of the valley," and venture into the world "because there were new things to be seen at every turn, . . . false distances . . . that could be filled by a shot swallowing the air in between" (69). The weapon and the boy's deadly accuracy are paradigmatic of how in wartime soldiers become callous to killing, while at the same time they are fascinated by the deadly instruments of war, losing all touch with human qualities. The machines of destruction become toys to be played with, the way "Apple Face" plays with his gun and targets. Like Pin's stolen pistol, the rifle allows the boy to enter the world of adults, where he surpasses them in courage and marksmanship; above all, it allows him to escape from his hovel, as the poor have historically done by joining the military, because by going "from one target to another, perhaps he could go around the world doing it" (70). Since he seems to be totally taken with his superhuman marksmanship, and so are we as readers, the war is almost forgotten in this game for targets—animal, vegetable, and human. Ironically and tragically, at the end of the drama, the German asks the boy to kill the circling crow, thus providing with his body a final target for the deadly aim of the shooter. As Giorgio Baroni points out, "The entire scene seems to be really more a shooting party than a war action."[14] Nevertheless, one should note that until this moment the boy has killed only animals, and that the soldier in uniform becomes the first human casualty of his marksmanship when he stops being a mere target and, as Giovanna Cerina observes, the killing "sanctions" the hero's ultimate recognition "of the soldier as the enemy."[15]

In his close psychological reading of "The Crow Comes Last," A. H. Carter finds that "the realistic and fantastic elements interrelate, mutually supporting each other in the development of the narrative." Calvino takes us from "a realistic texture to a mixture of realism and fantasy," and he extends the boy's skill as a rifleman to "superhuman proportions."[16] Indeed, there is something cold and logical in this Kafkaesque story and in the boy's superhuman abilities which put him on a parallel with the encircling and approaching bird. The crow unquestionably senses and announces death with its flight pattern,[17] undisturbed by the loud sound of the rifle. Death is the last thing that happens to us. We are all born into a pattern where life itself is a game, which is how the boy sees life when he shoots at targets. His function, however, is to interfere with the pattern of life by eliminating all existing things that come into view. The only thing he cannot interfere with is the black crow, which symbolically represents death, and therefore cannot be eliminated. This explains, perhaps, why he does not shoot the crow. But why does

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the German soldier make himself a target by indicating to the boy the bird's presence above him? Is it to distract him, so that he can kill him with one of the remaining hand grenades? Or is it to warn him about death's presence? Furthermore, whose death does the bird foreshadow? The text is ambiguous in this regard, since it tells us that the crow was circling "over him" without specifying over whom—the boy, the soldier, or possibly both.

Ironically, by killing the soldier, the boy unwittingly becomes next in line for the crow's ritualistic prophecy. It is even possible that the soldier may be sacrificing his own life for that of the boy when he thinks, moments before being shot: "Perhaps when one is about to die one sees every kind of bird pass; when one sees the crow it means one's time has come. He must warn the boy" (73). But then, we don't really know if the German is actually having these thoughts or if they are part of his imagined hallucination. Even the open-ended finale of the story—"Slowly the crow came circling down"—is full of ambiguity. Is the bird going to feed on the soldier's body, or is it choosing its next victim? The crow could be hovering over the boy because they both strike indiscriminately. Perhaps the boy does not see the German as the enemy but as a target, much like the crow. Is life senseless? Are the enemies on our side as well as the other? Are there sides? Or only circumstances?

And finally, not only do we have once more in "The Crow Comes Last" the paradox of violence set against a backdrop of an almost idyllic nature—"The current was a network of light ripples with the water flowing in the middle"—but in this instance nature seems to be a willing accomplice in the art of destruction and death. According to Carter, the thematic power of the story is the presentation of death as the ultimate force: "Nature appears to cooperate with the force, sending over birds, providing unknown meadows and valleys, and sending the scavenger crow as a messenger of death. The boy may be the agent of the shooting, but his skill seems mysteriously a part of some larger order."[18]

"The Crow Comes Last," only five pages long, is more complex and ambiguous than the other stories of the collection; it is densely packed with metaphors and allusions that clearly suggest something straight out of Kafka. Calvino approaches everything in the spirit of play, but his phrasing of the story is in a language that brings us extremely close to reality.[19]

I giovani del Po

In the last phase of his so-called social neorealistic period. Calvino wrote a novelette, *I giovani del Po* (The Young of the Po River), which appeared

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serially during 1957–58 in the periodical *Officina.*[20] The first draft dated back to 1947 and the actual writing was done in 1950 and 1951. Dissatisfied with the work, Calvino refused to let it come out in book form. In his introduction to the first installment, Calvino points out that in writing it, "I was aiming to provide an image of human disintegration; but it resulted in an unusually grey book, in which the fullness of life, even though much is said about it, is barely felt: therefore I have never wanted to publish it as a volume."

Clearly a bildungsroman, it is also an epistolary novel set in the neorealistic period. The predominant first-person narrative voice alternates with the third. The plot unravels from a correspondence between the protagonist, Nino, and his friend Nanin, who has remained home in his village. Nino has left his native Ligurian town for Turin, in search of work in an industrial factory, which he regards as the matrix for social change. He finds a job as a machinist and eventually participates in the class struggle of the labor movement, hoping to help fulfill the ideals and dreams of postwar Italy. Nino meets Giovanna, a student, and her parasitic bourgeois friends, and falls in love. Because of their class differences—her jealous Fascist friends resent her involvement with a proletarian—Nino must reconcile his love for the girl, whose family is strongly anticommunist, and his obligations as a militant worker. Concurrently he is also torn between his need to be in touch with nature and the dreary life in the industrial city. Confused about his own political ideas, he wishes to clarify them, and the act of writing the letters permits him to do so. In the factory he attains a certain notoriety with his fellow workers, though he is admired more for his character than for his sociopolitical ideas. Eventually his commitment to the struggle helps him overcome his sentiments for the girl, and the relationship ends in failure. During a labor dispute led by Nino, Giovanna is accidentally killed, and her death brings about the successful resolution of the strike. In spite of this, and unlike Calvino's position in *The Path to the Nest of Spiders,* Nino remains a positive hero as required, at that time, by the Italian Communist Party.

I giovani del Po is patently autobiographical; it parallels Calvino's own experiences when he left San Remo and went to work for the Einaudi publishing house in Turin. It also describes his longings for his idyllic San Remo, the political involvement in the city, his doubts and search for identity, as well as his existentialistic wistfulness for the unfulfilled promises of the Resistance movement. This is best described by Nino, when he writes to his friend:[21]

> I don't seem to be able to have a life without it being in pieces: in my hometown I felt the absence of the working class, here I miss the sea and the woods; with my

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> girl I don't have the kind of intellectual exchange I have with my companions; with them I don't have that sense of amazement I experience with my girl.[22]

Because the major part of the novel is in the first person, the language is close to colloquial Italian and often shows little regard for proper grammatical structure. Prior to the writing of this novel, Calvino had often expressed in newspaper articles and essays his concerns and experiences regarding "the city, industrial civilization, the workers" and above all "an arduous search for natural happiness." Yet when he tried to express in narrative form the same concerns, he was totally dissatisfied with *I giovani del Po* because he felt that it had turned out to be "a rather muddled neorealist grotesque" novel.[23] Alas, Calvino was quite right. However, as has been pointed out, the usefulness of this narrative is "as a document to Calvino's attempts, between 1950 and 1951, to find a follow-up" to his first novel.[24] The artificiality and failure of the novel is best summed up by Cristina Benussi when she points out that Calvino lacked a true understanding of the worker's plight; that his disguise as the proletarian Nino is immediately undone, "because working at Einaudi or at Fiat, was not, is not, the same thing."[25] Be that as it may, after Nino has become a minor shop union leader, he speculates on the role of the worker in the larger scheme of world problems. He writes to his friend: "I feel that the story of the world depends also on what I do. Only remotely, you understand. Nonetheless, it does depend on me somewhat."[26] Ernesto Ferrero, who also worked for many years at Einaudi and was closely associated with the author, notes that Nino's concerns and ideas express the core of Calvino's ethical and methodological principle, both as man and writer. These are

> his total concentration in the apparent insignificance of a small industrial craftsman, with the full awareness that the world can change only through the concomitance of so many loving and precise small gestures; and at the same time knowing that it takes only a bit of wind to upset any project, that the inevitable setbacks, and any attempt to overcome them, are the only stoic, desperate, proud and subdued privilege that twentieth-century man can afford to do.[27]

I racconti

In 1958 Calvino published his second collection of stories, *I racconti* (The Stories). The anthology, consisting of forty-nine short stories and three novelettes, is divided into four parts: "Gli idilli difficili" (Difficult Idylls), "Le memorie difficili" (Difficult Memories), "Gli amori difficili" (Difficult Loves), and "La vita difficile" (Difficult Life). There are nineteen stories

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previously included in the 1949 edition of *Ultimo viene il corvo,* and many of the other narratives had appeared earlier in various Italian newspapers and periodicals. Calvino knew very well the art of recycling his material and getting as much advantage as possible out of it. The following may shed some light on Calvino's recycling of previously published material and shifting styles. Asked by Maria Corti if he followed a process of coherent development in his narrative activity, Calvino replied:

> I change track in order to say something I would not have been able to express with a previous conceptualization. That does not mean that I have exhausted a previous line of approach: it can happen that I may go on for years in planning other texts to add to the ones I have already written, even though I might already be interested in something quite different; in fact, I do not consider an undertaking completed until I have given it a meaning and a structure that I deem definitive.[28]

Indeed, the three novelettes constituting Part 4 had already been published in two separate volumes (*La speculazione edilizia,* and *La formica argentina* which includes *La nuvola di smog*), as well as in prominent journals. The short stories "L'entrata in guerra" (Entrance into War), "Gli avanguardisti a Mentone" (The *Avanguardisti* in Menton), and "Le notti dell'UNPA" (The Nights at UNPA),[29] were previously published in 1954 in a separate volume, *L'entrata in guerra.*

In the three war stories, written in a still pronounced neorealistic manner, Calvino goes back to 10 June 1940, when Italy finally decided to join Nazi Germany and enter World War II, in order to explore the recent past and "trace the itineraries of the individual and collective conscience" of the people during the Fascist regime.[30] The teenage protagonist is patently Calvino himself who, as a member of a Fascist militia composed of high school students, underwent similar war experiences on the French–Italian border. At first the young man of the title story sees only the ceremonial and exhilarating aspects of war—adventure, the excitement of danger, parades, shining uniforms, a visit by Mussolini—as he moves through various vicissitudes, totally detached from the events and the consequences of war. However, when he finally takes off his uniform, he becomes again aware of his bourgeois nature and loses the apathy with which he had been viewing the horrors of war. In "Le notti dell'UNPA," the protagonist has a far more dramatic and emotional change of heart as he struggles with a guilty conscience brought about by his carefree attitude toward the cruelties of war:

> The city with its uncertain lights lay before me. I was sleepy and unhappy. The night was rejecting me. And I expected nothing from the day. What was I to do?

> I wanted to lose myself into the night, empty my body and soul into its darkness, to rebel, but I understood that what drew me to it was only the deaf, desperate negation of the day.[31]

In "Gli avanguardisti a Mentone," Calvino not only shows the protagonist's disgust in seeing the Fascists pillage the French town, but above all he parodies Mussolini's dream of enlarging continental Italy at the expense of the French. Ironically, unlike the rapidly sweeping German military forces, Italy was too late and managed to gain only a tiny, insignificant strip of land near the French border. In these remembrances of the momentous war events during the summer of 1940, Calvino presents himself as an antiheroic character opposed to the regime but incapable of taking any decisive action—Franco Ricci characterizes him well as "an immature spectator gnawed by anxiety."[32]

Marcovaldo

Ten narratives from *I racconti* dealing with the protagonist Marcovaldo were eventually augmented with a number of similar stories and published in 1963 in a separate volume intended for Italian secondary school children: *Marcovaldo ovvero Le stagioni in città* (*Marcovaldo or the Seasons in the City*).[33] In a note accompanying the English version of the collection, Calvino writes that the first ten stories were written in the early 1950s and "thus are set in a very poor Italy, the Italy of neorealistic movies," and the additional ten "date from the mid-60s, when the illusions of an economic boom flourished" (v). In addition to the chronological, social, and economic differences, Maria Corti finds that the earlier tales are ideologically simple, Cinderella-like fables—*racconti-favole*—where Marcovaldo struggles for the most basic needs for survival, and where the city with all its negative aspects is pitted against the idyllic countryside. The second series of stories, those written in the 60s, grow in sophistication, are more surreal, and present more conflicting values where "the antithesis city–countryside has become archaic," yielding to "technological reality vs power of invention." This is so because Calvino's ideological motivation has become "less contingent, more universal, subtle and complex."[34]

The stories take place in an unnamed northern Italian industrial city—very likely Turin; each is dedicated to a season, and all follow five cycles of the four yearly seasons. Marcovaldo, who apparently has become a stock character in Italian letters in the manner of Sancho Panza, Don Abbondio, Don Camillo, or Charlie Chaplin's little tramp, is a manual laborer who works in

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a warehouse, lives with a nagging wife and six children in crowded quarters, barely earns their keep, and always longs for life in the country, which he abandoned by coming to the inhospitable city. He bears a high-sounding medieval chivalric name (Marcovaldo was the giant slain by Orlando in Luigi Pulci's *Morgante*) just like all the other adult characters appearing in the stories—Domitilla, Amadigi, Tornaquinci, Guendolina, Sigismondo, Astolfo, Fiordaligi,—whereas the children have simple, normal names. He is best described in the first story:

> This Marcovaldo possessed an eye ill-suited to city life: billboards, traffic-lights, shop-windows, neon signs, posters, no matter how carefully devised to catch the attention, never arrested his gaze, which might have been running over the desert sands. Instead, he would never miss a leaf yellowing on a branch, a feather trapped by a roof-tile; there was no horsefly on a horse's back, no worm-hole in a plank, or fig-peel squashed on the sidewalk that Marcovaldo didn't remark and ponder over, discovering the changes of season, the yearnings of his heart, and the woes of his existence. (1)

Marcovaldo expresses our uneasiness in a constantly and rapidly changing society that makes us outcasts by marring our existence. He stands for the plight of the individual who, paradoxically, though repelled by this way of life, at the same time knows that he is an integral part of the very system he so abhors. In his preface to the 1963 school edition of Marcovaldo, Calvino states that the protagonist is a "Man of Nature," exiled to an industrial city where he is an "immigrant" in an "estranged world from which there is no escape."

Typically, the *Marcovaldo* stories adhere to the following structure: (1) Marcovaldo notices the coming and going of the seasons by observing both the animal and the vegetal kingdoms; (2) he dreams of return to a natural state; (3) he faces inevitable disappointment because it is impossible to turn back to an idyllic condition which exists only as an illusion, as Calvino explains:

> The book certainly does not invite us to lull ourselves into an attitude of superficial optimism: contemporary man has lost the harmony between himself and the environment in which he lives, and the overcoming of this disharmony is an arduous task, because expectations that are too easy and too idyllic always turn out to be illusory.[35]

Despite "the woes of existence," Marcovaldo succeeds in preserving the pristine qualities of his nature: innocence, modesty, frankness, goodness, resignation to his fate, vivid fantasy, and hope that springs eternal. As an im-

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migrant to a both technological and more culturally sophisticated society, he hasn't fully grown up and therefore, just like our contemporary consumer-oriented society so ready to abuse the environment and deplete our scarce natural resources, Marcovaldo too is incapable of measuring his actions or foreseeing their often dangerous consequences.

In "The Poisonous Rabbit," while being discharged from a hospital, Marcovaldo steals a rabbit from a laboratory not knowing that it has been injected with a dreaded illness. He brings it home and thinks it will make a good meal. But first the animal must be fattened up. Unbeknownst to him, his wife, Domitilla, decides to have it killed the same day because all their money has been spent on medicines and there is no food left in the house. The children take the rabbit to Signora Diomira to have it killed and skinned, but instead they let it go free. For the poor animal this is an entirely new experience: "It was an animal born prisoner: its yearning for liberty did not have broad horizons. The greatest gift it had known in life was the ability to have a few moments free of fear. Now, now it could move, with nothing around to frighten it, perhaps for the first time in its life" (57).[36] At work Marcovaldo is suddenly surrounded by a multitude of orderlies, doctors, and policemen anxious to reclaim the stolen rabbit. Eventually, the animal is rushed back to the hospital in an ambulance, together with Marcovaldo and his family who are going "to be interned for observation and for a series of vaccine tests" (59). The fact is, the rabbit would certainly be better off dying a quick death rather than having to suffer the agonies resulting from further painful scientific experiments. But it is not the only creature to exist in a system aptly characterized by John Updike as "a world of deferred disaster."[37] Both man and animal are victims, yet the victimizer is always man.

Although the narratives are set in the 50s and early 60s, they have a characteristic fablelike quality that manifests itself in the simplicity of language and structure, in the poetic and fantastic aura of the situations, and primarily in the stories' indeterminate localities and situations. The city is not identified, Marcovaldo's job is not well defined, and his place of work is not determined. Calvino explains that the city is nameless because it represents *all* industrial cities, and Sbav & Co., the establishment where his character is employed—we never find out what it produces—is "*the* company, the firm, the symbol of all the firms, the enterprises, and the corporations that today control people and events."[38] In short, the calculated abstractions convey the feeling that modern life has become too abstract, and that we have lost the precious human contact with things and nature that is crucial for even a relatively minimal but satisfying existence.

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This is why Marcovaldo always seeks the presence of nature even in the difficult and disfigured world of an industrialized metropolis. Just like children, who because of their innocence and fantastic abilities are capable of seeing and believing certain realities that adults no longer perceive, so only Marcovaldo notices even the slightest traces of nature in the asphalt and concrete jungles of the city. In the first tale, "Mushrooms in the City," the wind blows spores in from the countryside. Marcovaldo spots sprouting mushrooms near his trolley stop, and to him "the gray wretched world surrounding him seemed suddenly generous with hidden riches; something could still be expected of life, beyond the hourly wage of his stipulated salary, with inflation index, family grant, and cost-of-living allowance" (2). He bides his time, waiting for the mushrooms to mature, and refuses to divulge the location of the patch even to his family, fearing that they might tell others. After a downpour, together with his children he runs to the patch and they begin to gather the full-grown mushrooms. When he notices the local street cleaner with a basket full of mushrooms, momentarily he gets angry; but then he quickly succumbs to "a generous impulse" and tells the passersby to partake in the harvest. That evening all the mushroom gatherers meet again in the same hospital ward where they are being treated for food poisoning. Fortunately, "it was not serious, because the number of mushrooms eaten by each person was quite small" (4). Clearly, Calvino is trying to tell us that nature is still powerful enough to break through the barriers created by man and penetrate into the heart of the city. At the same time, he is warning us that nature too has its dangerous side, and that we face today the potential of both natural and man-made disasters.

In "A Journey with the Cows," one hot summer night, while the whole family is asleep, Marcovaldo hears a distant clank of bells and the sound "of hundreds and hundreds of steps, slow, scattered, hollow" (46). He instinctively knows that a herd of cattle is passing through the city on its way to pasture in the mountains. The herd evokes for him "the odor of dung, wild flowers, and milk," and the animals do not seem to be touched by the city because they are "already absorbed into their world of damp meadows, mountain mists and the fords of streams" (46–47). Marcovaldo's children, born and raised in the city and totally unfamiliar with their father's rustic beginnings, ask him: "Are cows like trams? Do they have stops? Where's the beginning of the cow's line?" When he tells them that the cows are going to the mountains, to eat grass, they inquire: "Can they wear skis?" and "Don't they get fined if they trample the lawns?" (47). This idyllic scene, however, backfires on Marcovaldo because his eldest son, Michelino, follows the herd

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to the mountains without telling his parents. Weeks later, when the boy returns home, he complains that he worked like a mule and that he never had a chance to do what he had wanted more than anything else: to enjoy the green meadows. And so we learn that like the city, even the irresistible country has its drawbacks.

Marcovaldo has the vital language and inventiveness of plot that characterize Calvino's other fiction, but it also has a sharper focus of intention and a deeper level of understanding and compassion. Marcovaldo, the Italian little tramp, is clearly a favorite of Calvino, who always presents him wittily, with great affection, commiseration, and admiration. The author always inserts a note of pathos that makes the hero not only amusing but endearing to younger and older readers alike: "A book for children? A book for teenagers? A book for grownups?" asks Calvino in his preface, and then rhetorically replies by wondering, "Is it rather a book in which the Author through the screen of simple narrative structures expresses his perplexed and questioning relationship with the world? Perhaps even this."[39] Indeed, the stories of his Marcovaldo cycle can be viewed as parables about both the vulnerability and the resiliency of human dignity. That we find ourselves laughing at Marcovaldo's miseries and mishaps does not in any way diminish their impact, for ours is the laughter of recognition and empathy, melancholy yet cathartic.

In Calvino's view, "A background of melancholy colors the book from beginning to end."[40] In "The City Lost in the Snow," Marcovaldo is awakened one morning by silence. He finds the city gone and replaced "by a white sheet of paper." Walking to work in the fresh snow, he feels "free as he had never felt before. In the city all differences between sidewalk and street had vanished; vehicles could not pass" (16). He feels unshackled because he can freely walk in the middle of the street, trample on flower beds, and cross wherever it pleases him. At work he is told to clear the snow from the sidewalk. He shovels with gusto because he "felt the snow was a friend, an element that erased the cage of walls which imprisoned his life" (17). As he contemplates a snowman, he suddenly finds himself buried by a mass of snow that has fallen off the roof. The children, who had made the snowman, marvel at the presence of a second snowman. When they stick a carrot into its head, Marcovaldo, who has not eaten all day, chews on it and makes it disappear. And when they try to give him a nose made out of coal, he spits it out, causing them to run away thinking the snowman is alive. Because of the frigid temperature Marcovaldo sneezes so powerfully that he causes "a genuine tornado" that completely clears the courtyard, and "the things of every day" reappear to him "sharp and hostile" (20).

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Despite the comical and hard-to-swallow plot situations of these stories, Calvino is always striving for a meaningful realism: "But in presenting this book to the schools, we wish to offer to the young a writing in which the themes of contemporary life are treated with a pungent spirit, without rhetorical indulgences, and with a constant invitation for reflection."[41] In "Santa's Children," the concluding story of the collection, the author presents a bitter and sarcastic indictment of the commercial exploitation of Christmas and a parody of our consumer-oriented capitalistic society that will stop at nothing in order to make a profit. One winter the Public Relations Office at Sbav & Co. decides that the Christmas presents for the most important persons associated with the firm should be home-delivered by someone dressed as Santa Claus. Marcovaldo is chosen and promised a bonus if he makes fifty deliveries per day. His first trip is to his home, wanting to surprise his children. But they easily recognize him and barely look up because they have become accustomed to seeing Santa Clauses: it seems that many other firms have also recruited a large number of jobless people to dress as Santa Claus, and these have been roaming the city streets delivering packages. When they tell their father that they are preparing presents for poor children, he remarks that "poor children don't exist any more!" But Michelino inquires: "Is that why you don't bring us presents, Papà?" (115). Feeling guilty, Marcovaldo takes Michelino along on his round of deliveries. Although he is getting nice tips, Marcovaldo regrets that the recipients of the gifts show no excitement, curiosity, or gratitude. At a luxurious house they meet a nine-year-old boy who is totally bored and unconcerned about getting a present from Santa. The governess explains that he has already received three hundred and twelve presents. Outside, Michelino asks, "Papà is that little boy a poor child?" (117), and Marcovaldo tells him that he is the son of the president of the Society for the Implementation of Christmas Consumption. Hearing this, Michelino runs away. That evening Michelino explains to his father that he had run away in order to go home and fetch presents for the poor boy, "the one that was so sad . . . the one in the villa, with the Christmas tree" (118). He gave the boy three presents that made him very happy: a hammer with which he broke all the toys and the glassware; a slingshot with which he broke the balls on the Christmas tree; and a box of kitchen matches that "made him the happiest of all," with which he destroyed everything by burning down the house (119).

The next day, returning to work, Marcovaldo thinks that he is going to be fired. But instead he is told to change all the packages because the Society for the Implementation of Christmas Consumption has launched a new campaign to push the "Destructive Gift." He learns that the president's son had re-

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ceived some "ultramodern gift-articles, Japanese, and for the first time the child was obviously enjoying himself" (119). This reversal in company policy, however, is not determined by the child's happiness, but by a more practical business consideration: "the Destructive Gift serves to destroy articles of every sort: just what's needed to speed up the pace of consumption and give the market a boost" (119–20). With this story Calvino dramatizes the ills of our society where all our values can be bought and sold and everything is valued in terms of production and consumption. The aim of the powers that control the economic system is not to provide the consumer with useful and necessary goods, but rather to manufacture only what will result in greater profits. Calvino seems to be saying also that if the system continues in this manner, it will eventually self-destruct, the way the villa was demolished by the boy's Destructive Gift. In fact, "Santa's Children" reminds us of the goose that laid the golden egg, another fable where greed resulted in a needless loss.

Laden with a bag of Destructive Gifts, Marcovaldo returns to the streets filled with shoppers, bright lights, Christmas trees, Santa Clauses; but then, abruptly, both he and the city disappear from the text. The narrative transports us to a snow-covered field near a black forest, where a white hare is made invisible by the snow and a wolf by the dark forest. The victim's presence is seen only by his footprints, while that of the victimizer can be seen from his white teeth when he opens his mouth. The wolf chases the hare, who seems to escape; but we are not sure: " 'Is he here? There? Is he a bit farther on?' Only the expanse of snow could be seen, white as this page" (121).

"Santa's Children," like many of the other Marcovaldo stories, starts with reality and then shifts to fantasy once the meaning emerges. The Author typically pulls back with his characteristic elusiveness, confident that the important meaning of a story is the one the reader gets on his own; at this juncture, adds Calvino, the Author "hastens to remember that it has all been a game." This clarification allows us to understand why this story more than the others—with the exception of "The Wrong Stop," where Marcovaldo thinks he is getting on a bus but then finds himself on a plane headed for India—ends with a surrealistic scene and why the concrete images of the city and Marcovaldo dissolve; and like Russian dolls or Chinese boxes "the detailed grotesque sketch turns out to be inserted in another design, a drawing of snow and animals that we find in children's books, which then transforms itself into an abstract design, then into a white page."[42] The conscious display of coloristic effects, the fact that the narrative richness is visual, and the repeated use of *disegno* (a drawing, design, sketch), are clear references to

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Calvino's strong interest in cartoons and comic books that dates back to his youth. Indeed, he informs us that his Marcovaldo stories follow the classical narrative structure of children's comic books.

In *Marcovaldo,* Calvino has artfully created a preposterous but endearing antihero who struggles farcically against the caprices of fate and the irrational abuses of capitalistic and technological society where the normal relationships between cause and effect disintegrate. Marcovaldo, the lost soul often shown in the context of the wealthy—especially in "Marcovaldo at the Supermarket"—is not a rebel or a dissident but only a misfit, a nonconformist, who shows only natural human responses to the situations he is in. He is an urban pícaro who meets and pits his wits against a variety of people—bosses, his wife, children, policemen, doctors, maids—and his naïve approach to life entangles him in risky situations from which he removes himself effortlessly, ingeniously, and by goodwill and good luck. He never gets a real chance in life, and like Chaplin's wistful little tramp he too is perpetually and mercilessly knocked about by modern times. But Marcovaldo does not despair or look for an easy way out, because he represents the mass of poor immigrants who leave the impoverished South and come to the industrialized North in search of a better life. He tries very hard to "adapt and conform," writes Ilene T. Olken, "but will never succeed, as his children may do; he is too divided between the two worlds, ill-prepared and therefore victimized."[43] And yet, though Marcovaldo is always confused and clobbered in the collection's twenty amusing satires, he is never totally beaten, and the reader is always rooting for him.

NOTES

1. *The Nonexistent Knight and The Cloven Viscount* (New York: Random House, 1962) 61.

2. *Adam, One Afternoon, and Other Stories* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1983). The English edition, first published by Collins in 1957, contains only twenty of the thirty stories found in the Italian edition, plus "The Argentine Ant." Page numbers referring to the 1983 edition are given in the text in parentheses.

Of the thirty original stories, only nineteen were included by the author in his collection *I racconti,* published in 1958. In 1969, Calvino published a new edition of *Ultimo viene il corvo,* in which twenty-five stories from the original printing were included, plus five other ones written after 1949. *Difficult Loves,* the English translation of *I racconti* published in 1984, presents a total of twenty-eight stories, but only fourteen come from *Adam, One Afternoon, and Other Stories.*

3. Quoted from Walter Mauro, *Realtà mito e favola nella narrativa italiana del Novecento* (Milan: Sugar Co Edizioni, 1974) 152.

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4. For a detailed account of the war's devastation, see Alberto Traldi, *Fascism and Fiction* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1987).

5. In his story "Isabella e Fioravanti," Calvino satirizes the Party's sense of superiority. The narrative appeared in *L'Unità*, 31 Oct. 1948: 3.

6. Italo Calvino, "Ingegneri e demolitori. Il compito di 'ingegnere delle anime' che la società socialista dà allo scrittore," *Rinascita* 11 Nov. 1948: 400.

7. Prince Peter Alekseevich Kropotkin (1842–1921), Russian anarchist, who after 1917 rejected bolshevism. He is best known for *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* and *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*.

8. Introduzione, *Racconti fantastici dell'Ottocento* [Nineteenth-Century Fantastic Short Stories] (Milan: Mondadori, 1983).

9. In "Attesa della morte in un albergo" the traitor is once again Pelle. However, unlike in *Il sentiero*, here he is called Pelle-di-biscia, Snake-Skin. To the best of my knowledge, the three stories have not been translated into English.

10. Calvino has stated that when he deserted the Fascist army and joined the partisans, his "father and mother were arrested by the Fascists and for several months were the hostages of the SS." Alexander Stille, "An Interview with Italo Calvino," *Saturday Review* Mar.-Apr. 1985: 37.

11. *Ultimo viene il corvo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1949) 106, 104.

12. James Gardner, "Italo Calvino 1923–1985," *The New Criterion* 4 (Dec. 1985): 7–8.

13. Contardo Calligaris, *Italo Calvino* (Milan: Mursia, 1985) 20.

14. Giorgio Baroni, *Italo Calvino: Introduzione e guida allo studio dell'opera calviniana* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1988) 31.

15. Giovanna Cerina, "L'eroe, lo spazio narrativo e la costruzione del significato. Lettura di 'Ultimo viene il corvo,' " in *Dalla novella rusticale al racconto neorealista*, ed. Sandro Maxia and Giovanni Pirodda (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1979) 138.

16. Albert Howard Carter III, *Italo Calvino: Metamorphoses of Fantasy* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987) 16.

17. According to Cirlot, the crow has "certain mystic powers and in particular the ability to foresee the future" (J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* [New York, Philosophical Library, 1962] 68–69).

18. Carter 23.

19. In his interview with Maria Corti, Calvino informs us that "Ultimo viene il corvo" was inspired by one of Gustave Flaubert's stories: "Recently, re-reading the scene of the hunt in the 'Légende de saint Julien l'Hôpitalier' I relived profoundly the moment in which I became aware of my fondness for the gothic and animalistic, which surfaces in a story such as 'Ultimo viene il corvo' as well as in other stories written at that time and after" (Corti, "Intervista: Italo Calvino," *Autografo*, 2 [Oct. 1985]: 48). For a detailed comparison of Calvino's and Flaubert's stories, see Lucia Re, *Calvino and the Age of Neorealism: Fables of Estrangement* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990) 164–69, 378. According to Re, "Calvino's 'deconstruction' of Flaubert's story implies in turn a deconstruction of the Resistance mystique" (166).

20. *I giovani del Po* appeared in *Officina* 8 (Feb. 1957), 9–10 (June 1957), 11 (Nov. 1957), and 12 (Apr. 1958). It has not been translated into English.

21. Typically, Calvino and his narrator are the same. See Giovanni Falaschi, "Ritratti critici di contemporanei: Italo Calvino," *Belfagor* 27 (1972): 547, and Calligaris 84.

22. *Officina* 12 (Apr. 1958): 547.

23. *Officina* 8 (Feb. 1957): 331.

24. J. R. Woodhouse, *Italo Calvino: A Reappraisal and an Appreciation of the Trilogy* (Hull: University of Hull, 1968) 91.

25. Cristina Benussi, *Introduzione a Calvino* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1989) 24.

26. *Officina*, 9–10 (June 1957): 407.

27. Ernesto Ferrero, "Edizioni Calvino," *L'Espresso* (19 May 1991): 108–09.

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Literary Criticism

Understanding Italo Calvino

A master of allegory and fantasy, Italo Calvino is perhaps the most original, imaginative, and appreciated writer of post-World War II Italy. In *Understanding Italo Calvino* Beno Weiss analyzes the fiction and literary essays produced by this prolific writer and Calvino's role in the global literary scene. Weiss, a long-time Calvino scholar, looks closely at the artist whose continuous interplay between fantasy and reality earned him an international reputation as a literary innovator.

Folk tales, knights, social and political allegories, and science fiction fascinated Calvino. In fact, he compiled and transcribed Italy's most complete collection of folktales from numerous Italian dialects. His fervid imagination drew inspiration from the chivalry of the Middle Ages as well as from the futuristic fantasies of science fiction. Continually seeking to redefine both writing and reality, Calvino employed the entire spectrum of narrative theories including semiotics, structuralism, post-modernism, and post-structuralism. Also he frequently diverged from the fashionable literary movements of his day. In the 1950s Calvino abandoned the neorealism of his contemporaries with the publication of his trilogy *The Cloven Viscount, The Baron in the Trees,* and *The Nonexistent Knight*. Calvino repeatedly broke stride both with his familiar themes and with his peers in such later works as *Invisible Cities, If on a Winter's Night a Traveller,* and *Palomar*. Weiss identifies Calvino's early experiences—exposure to his parents' botany careers, participation in the Italian Resistance during World War II, an extended residence in Paris—that were to influence this very private, solitary man. Through careful readings of Calvino's fiction and literary essays, Weiss identifies a quest to defy the malaise of life in a dehumanizing modern world and a desire to gain a cosmic sense of harmony as the driving forces behind this esteemed man of letters.

University of South Carolina Press
Columbia, South Carolina 29208

ISBN 0-87249-858-1

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