

CALVINISMO

Donald Heiney

The fascination of the modern intellectual consciousness with the irrational is not hard to understand. It is a consciousness—this consciousness of ours—haunted by a suspicion that, in spite of the keenness of science and the indefatigability of scholarship, there is a mystery somehow hidden and concealed in the objects around us that has yet to be explained. And since the modern intelligence is a verbal one it seeks a verbal and graphic expression for this mystery which is by its nature inexpressible. This has led it on the one hand to an interest in myth, from Fraser and Max Weber to Northrop Frye, and on the other hand toward a new metaphysical literature, the most obvious exponents of which are Hesse and Borges. What I propose to do is to fit the fiction of Italo Calvino into this pattern, and I shall argue that it fits in both categories—that is, that it involves simultaneously a return to, or reexpression of, the classic myths of the western consciousness, and the generation of new metaphysical hypotheses about the invisible world around us. A good deal of the confusion about the word myth—which probably should be banned from the critical vocabulary for a while, it has gotten so tattered—is due to a failure to distinguish between these two possible senses of the term. Such works as *Doktor Faustus*, *Ulysses*, Cocteau's *La machine infernale*, or Updike's *The Centaur* are conscious recastings of story patterns residual in the common memory and available, presumably, to both author and reader. The effect of such a narrative turns necessarily around this common awareness in the author and the reader. For archetype critics the recastings can be unconscious, but at the level of formalistic study the distinction is not a fundamental one. On the other hand writers like Borges—the story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” is a good example—project outward from a quite personal imagination to create frameworks that explain, or seem to explain, the world of the invisible. *Demian* and *Steppenwolf* represent similar attempts to create a body of synthetic myth. *Demian* is not a pure example, however, since Hesse borrowed Abraxis—little more than a name, and the notion of a metaphysical duality—from a preexisting system.

Unlike Borges and Hesse, whose work involves a metaphysical quality from the beginning, Calvino arrived at his mythical-fantastic fiction only through a long period of development in which he worked gradually away from the realistic. The book that gained him his first reputation, the Resistance novel *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1947), came out of his first-hand contact with the events of the war in northern Italy, and with his impressions of the seacoast town of San Remo where he had spent his boyhood. The narrative is mimetic in at least this sense, that it is written out of direct personal experience and supported with observed

detail. It is also "realistic" in its extraordinary—virtually unique in the fiction of the Resistance—refusal to glamorize the partisans or show their behavior as more selfless or heroic than it really was. But beyond this point it is thoroughly and frankly literary. A more precise term is "parodistic," in the sense, devoid of any humorous element, in which parody is simply a literary form aware of form itself, consciously modeling itself on anterior literary forms, and presuming an awareness of these forms in the reader. Calvino has called the novel "Stevensonian," or at least has accepted this label for it. Pin, the boy-protagonist, is able to participate psychologically in the events of the war only within the framework of his own immature mentality. It is not that he fails to see the events about him as they are; on the contrary he has an extraordinary clairvoyance about them. But he persists in imposing on them a pattern of fabulosity like the structures found by other children in books; he can grasp what is happening to him only as a story. In plot and tone the novel resembles *Treasure Island*, and Pin is Jim Hawkins. But at another level—in the differing kind of awareness of the two authors, and their readers—there is a difference. Pin has not read *Treasure Island*, but Calvino has, and he expects his reader to be aware of the earlier novel, or at least of the genre of boy-adventure fiction. In this way the author and reader share a complicity of awareness denied to the character. It is possible therefore to regard the novel as a romanticizing of the Resistance; not a sentimentalizing, but the conscious imposition on a body of historical material of a traditional literary apparatus. Although Calvino abandons this vein after his first novel, its fundamental premise—the application of synthetic frameworks to factual materials—underlies all his subsequent fiction.

In his next period—and his work falls quite neatly into periods—he produced a set of short novels that might be described as perverse fairy-tales for the mature. In *Il visconte dimezzato* (1952) the hero is blown in two by a cannon-ball and only half of him comes home to his Genoese estate. In the interim before he is reunited with his left half, which crawls home more or less on its own account, he, or his right half, endeavors to function as normally as possible considering his circumstance. In *Il barone rampante* (1957) the baron takes to the trees and stays there the rest of his life; in *Il cavaliere inesistente* (1959) the knight does not exist and there is nothing but air inside his armor. What comment can a serious critic make on this playful nonsense? To take the first of the three first, it is obvious that the theme of human duality and the archetype of the Double are familiar in literature (the two halves of the viscount come to be called the Good 'Un and the Bad 'Un, until eventually they are sewed together by a British doctor). But the tone of the narrative is far from—even diametrically opposed to—that of consciously allegorical fiction. Instead the tone is that of the "supposes" that are so delightful to children—"Suppose a knight were blown in two and his right side went one way and his left side went the other—what then?" The grave rationality of the development, its multiplication of detail, is exactly that of such childish fabulations, and Calvino, as a matter of fact, is also the editor of a volume of children's fables. Likewise, when we come to the other two novels, it would be banal and unnecessary to comment that modern man often feels like climbing a tree and not coming down, or that at other times he suffers from an identity crisis

which is at the bottom simply a fear that he may not exist. In fact the texture of the three tales is such that they succeed in making us forget these obvious correspondances; this is their curious and particular merit. They are so rich in plausible and circumstantial detail that we are distracted by the details and lose ourselves in observation of them, just as we do in life itself. The two halves of the viscount are not rejoined by magic; there is no magic in Calvino. Instead they are united by procedures that, given the initial and improbable premise that a man could survive at all after being cut in two, are perfectly consistent with the principles of modern physiology. In their climactic duel the Bad 'Un manages to strike the Good 'Un in such a way that the old wound of his dividing is reopened.

The Good 'Un swayed, but as he fell in a last wide, almost pitiful movement he too swung his sword very near his rival, from head to abdomen, between the point where the Bad 'Un's body was not and the point where it might have been. Now the Bad 'Un's body also spouted blood along the whole length of the huge old wound; the lungs of both had burst all their vein ends and reopened the wound which had divided them in two. Now they lay face to face and the blood which had once been one man's alone again mingled in the field.

It is the clever British doctor Trelawney who sees the possibilities here and quickly stitches the two halves together, taking "great care to get all the guts and arteries of both parts to correspond." If the Fact is improbable the facts are so circumstantial that they end by convincing us. In a like manner *Il barone rampante* wins us to believe that it is possible, arboreologically, psychologically, and acrobatically, to spend one's life in trees, and *Il cavaliere inesistente* almost convinces us that it is possible to function even though one does not exist. The *donnée* is implausible, but the authorial voice does not ask us to accept it. He only lowers it into the narrative, remarking, "Wait a minute and I will show you what happens." He then begins connecting up veins and arteries, nuts and bolts, with such a dextrous command of technology and such an offhand and plausible tirelessness that in the end he compels our belief even in the *donnée* itself; otherwise we would be obliged to reject all this copiousness of detail that has pleased us so much. The viscount *must* exist, since the doctor has stitched him together so cleverly.

These three tales share an element that at first, perhaps, does not strike the attention. They are examples of what I will call "generative myth," even though they involve some borrowed elements, e.g. the archetype of the Double. I mean by this that they are fresh and original efforts to concretize the world of the invisible, yet sharing certain qualities with the body of received myths; that is, they are verbal, graphic, and somewhat mysterious. To this I will oppose "imitative myth," the conscious recasting of some body of received materials in a more or less modern framework, for example the psychoanalytic in the case of *Mourning Becomes Electra*. In more complex systems like those of Blake, or of *The Waste Land*, the two elements are mingled; still I think it is important to identify them, when they are both present, and distinguish between them. Among the dif-

ferences between them is the fact that generative myth is personal and individual, whereas imitative myth is, at least by the time it comes to our attention, a folk expression. I frankly don't know whether the Medusa is some unknown poet's invention or the spontaneous and gradual creation of a people, although the second is more likely. But at least *for us* it is a pattern in the common consciousness, and a modern writer who alludes to it or recasts it is appealing to a mutual awareness in the reader. So one means of distinguishing between the two is the matter of personality and impersonality, and another is the question of whether the author assumes any foreknowledge of his story framework, or his form, on the part of the reader. It is the form that is parodistic or allusive in Calvino's fairy-tale novels. We are familiar with the fact that there can be fairy-tales, and we recognize these as such. The myth contained in the form is totally fresh; we do not know what is going to happen to the viscount or the baron or the knight. We have heard of faces that turn people to stone, but not of noblemen split apart or air that walks around in a suit of armor. Instead of the pleasure of recognition, therefore, we have the sense of being present at the birth of a new image, one that almost, but not quite, explains something about the forces that govern our own destiny.

These tales overlap slightly with four more or less realistic narratives of Calvino's middle period: *La speculazione edilizia* (1957), *La nuvola di smog* (1958), *La formica argentina* (1958), and *La giornata d'uno scrutatore* (1963). I will pass over these rather slightly, since I am dealing mainly with the mythical or fabulous tendency in his fiction, except to comment that even in these tales the real is mixed up with the grotesque in ways that stick unexpected pins in our sense of the possible. A leftist election-worker goes to work at a poll set up in an asylum where the voters are paralytics, dwarfs, and mental defectives. People harrassed by ants turn monomaniacal and invent grotesque machines to drop them into gasoline; they become antlike themselves. A writer for an anti-pollution agency realizes, after a time, that his job is to generate a verbal smog under which the industrial establishment can continue to operate. The chief achievement of the modern mind, the tales suggest, is that it boggles itself. Calvino's work of this phase has attracted relatively little attention, probably because the superficial realism of the tales conceals or at least muffles the bizarre for the ordinary reader, so that what happens in them may seem a little odd to him but not inconsistent with his existence as he knows it. If his life is grotesque he has failed to notice it, and the tales delineate the grotesquery so flatly that he accepts it without surprise as he does the real grotesquery of his life.

The "fantascience" stories (to borrow the Italian term) of Calvino's more recent period, collected in *Le cosmicomiche* (1965) and *Ti con zero* (1967), represent a major break with his earlier fiction and are almost totally original in technique or literary mode, in spite of the fact that they are built on approximately the same premises as conventional science fiction. Each story, that is, begins with a scientific statement, either imaginative or authentic, which is then projected until it generates a narrative apparatus. The genre rests on the assumption that the story in all its details is a necessary or at least plausible extension once the premise is accepted. All of Calvino's premises are authentic or "scientific," and most of them

are drawn from modern astronomy. To take two as examples, there is the theory of Sir George H. Darwin that the Moon was once much closer to Earth than it is at present, or the calculations of Edwin P. Hubble which suggest that all the matter of the universe was once concentrated at a single point. Out of this the narrative is generated: if this were so, what then would have happened and what would it have been like? The consequences of the *donnée* are pursued with the same persevering and inexorable factuality of the mock fairy-tales. The stories of *Le cosmicomiche* and most of those of *Ti con zero* are recounted by a narrator named Qfwfq, whose consciousness goes back to the beginning of time and who thus recapitulates in his personal experience the whole history of the universe. But the effect of his tone, as a narrator, is not to astound or stupefy us with these infinities, but to present everything as perfectly natural and not very different, given the circumstances, from our own experiences. When all the matter in the universe was collected at one point "we were all there," he verifies matter-of-factly, "packed in like sardines," including the seductive Mrs. Ph(i)Nko and the rather obnoxious Mr. Pbert Pbert, even though he concedes that the image is a purely literary one, since in a single point there wasn't even space for them to be packed into. The social and psychological consequences that follow have their due analogy to certain problems encountered in modern urban societies, but this is not really the point. If Qfwfq falls into anachronism it is because concept is in the end verbal, because in transmitting his experience he is obliged to express it in our own language and communicate to us in the framework of our own psychology. Or, to take it from the authorial point of view, because Calvino doesn't have the slightest idea what it would be like to live in a universe contracted to one point and prefers to extrapolate from his own and our experience of urban overcrowding; because the texture of his narrative, in other words, is vernacular and contemporary no matter how fantastic his premises. For "vernacular and contemporary" we may read realistic, but it is a realism of a very special sort, a realism that almost totally transcends the mimetic. The contemporaneity includes not only the objects of our existence but the furniture of our minds, a complicated matter in the case of the educated mind.

Art, of course, can imitate other things than concrete reality. Imitative myth, insofar as it is latent in our consciousness, emerges as part of the fabric of a narrative which is in one sense fabulous and in another quite diurnal and prosaic. Qfwfq remembers when the Moon was so near that, going out in a boat near the Zinc Cliffs, you could elevate a ladder and climb up to it. In this way it was possible to fill buckets with Moon-milk . . .

. . . very thick, like a kind of cream cheese . . . formed in the crevices between one scale and the next, through the fermentation of the various bodies and substances of terrestrial origin which had flown up from the prairies and forests and lakes, as the Moon sailed over them . . . vegetal juices, tadpoles, bitumen, lentils, honey, starch crystals, sturgeon eggs, molds, pollens, gelatinous matter, worms, resins, pepper, mineral salts, combustion residue.

Distracted by these catalogs, and by things like the complicated techniques prac-

ticed by the narrator's deaf cousin for passing from one planet to the other through utilizing their differential magnetic attractions, we hardly notice that the three-cornered romance involving Mrs. Vhd Vhd, Qfwfq, and the Deaf One has coalesced gradually into a retelling of the Endymion myth.

I still look for her as soon as the first sliver appears in the sky, and the more it waxes, the more clearly I imagine I can see her, her or something of her, but only her, in a hundred, a thousand different vistas, she who makes the Moon the Moon and, whenever she is full, sets the dogs to howling all night long, and me with them.

But the classic myth has been contemporized at the same time that the scientific premise has been spread out and absorbed, like butter under a butter-knife, into myth; the myth and all the details and catalogs blur into a single point of time which, if we are to take the tone of the narrative as an index—the only index we have—is our own. The three elements, in short, are the scientific premise, the myth, and the prosaic of daily existence; and in the end the last term subsumes the others. The end result, or total effect of the story, is something which did not exist before, myth at the generative level.

It goes without saying that a narrative that attempts such feats must do extraordinary things with time; extraordinary, that is, in the context of daily life, although familiar enough in the conventions of science fiction and in the theory of modern physics. Even here, however, Calvino approaches from a fresh direction. The ordinary treatment of time in conventional science fiction is to begin with the present and then to create an effect of strangeness or distortion through fracturing our grasp on chronology. "Time machines" begin with us where we are, in the contemporary epoch, and startle us by transporting us to the year 2001 or to the Cro-Magnon cave. Calvino's narrative per se begins, so to speak, after the startling is over. The chronological dislocation is included in the axiom that precedes the story, one on which the author and reader, for the purposes of the story, have agreed to suspend their disbelief. Paradoxically it is the only part of the story that is true. In "Sul far del giorno" it takes the form of a paragraph we might read any day in the newspaper.

The planets of the solar system, G. P. Kuiper explains, began to solidify in the darkness, through the condensation of a fluid, shapeless nebula. All was cold and dark. Later the Sun began to become more concentrated until it was reduced to almost its present dimensions, and in this process the temperature rose and rose, to thousands of degrees, and the Sun started emitting radiations in space.

I will leave it to the cosmologist how much time these three sentences cover, but I would imagine several hundred million years. But Qfwfq's recollections cover the span effortlessly, almost absent-mindedly. "Pitch-dark it was," he agrees, "I was only a child, I can barely remember it." Psychologically we have the impression that we are spanning two generations, perhaps, in the culture of a rapidly

developing nation. Just as we might note with interest the first telephone in a Calabrian village, we note with interest the appearance of the first *thing* in the universe: a blob of slight coagulated nebula that the narrator's brother Rwfzfs is found playing with one day. Certainly this is a milestone in history, but so was the Calabrian telephone; we are duly impressed but no more. It is only shortly after this—psychologically about a decade, to judge from the tone of the narrative—that the first metals appear in the universe, and Rwfzfs, hearing everybody talk about nickel, decides, “That’s it: it was nickel. I was playing with some nickell” On behavior evidence we can estimate his age in the first of these episodes at five, in the second at fifteen. The acceleration leaves us mildly bewildered, but no more than we were at the theory of G. P. Kuiper.

It is characteristic of our contemporary existence, in short, that we have lost our capacity for astonishment. Last year a man walked on the moon, this year a machine lands on Mars, next year the doctors may transplant a brain; or was that in the quite improbable movie we saw last week? The humble citizen’s organ of astonishment is worn out; excessive demands have been made on it. After a time we hardly bother to raise our eyebrows at the sweep of progress, whether it is cosmic or merely technological. Rwfzfs, who has always been “a bit colloidal,” marries an alga and disappears from the story. Granny Bb’b, like a Calabrian grandmother living on into a technological age, “clung to her habits of the old days, often did embarrassing things: she continued to believe that matter was in uniform expansion and, for example, that it was enough to throw refuse anywhere and it would rarefy and disappear into the distance.” She is alienated from her progeny; the generation gap is wider than the gulf stretching back to infinity. The narrator’s sister G’d(w)ⁿ, an introvert with artistic inclinations, messes about with the primordial ooze, making something she describes as “an outside with an inside in it.” Later, as the Sun takes fire and the Earth solidifies, she inadvertently sinks under the surface and is trapped in the coalescing planet. Then follows a sentence worth examining: “My sister had remained there, and I never found out whether she had stayed buried in those depths or whether she had reached safety on the other side until I met her, much later, at Canberra in 1912, married to a certain Sullivan, a retired railroad man, so changed that I hardly recognized her.” Syntactically the sentence hangs together fairly well and seems to be all about one thing, but somewhere in the middle of it we are translated from fantascience to the commonplace so deftly we hardly notice the transition. Our feeling is that this is what often happens to vaguely artistic young women with no particular talent. And yet our atrophied organ of astonishment is jolted into life again by its very failure to feel astonishment at something it knows it should be astonished by.

These stories of *Le cosmicomiche* and *Ti con zero*, in borrowing the voice and manner of the mythic folktale, the Hesiodic manner, and in their whimsical half-parodies of archetypes like that of Pygmalion, remind the reader in a non-mythical age of the continuing presence of the genre. But they are mythical in another and more central sense, in that they set out to generate new images that connect the objects of daily existence with the invisible forces that permeate and impel them. In this at least, although not in other aspects, they depart fundamentally from the concept of story as mimesis. They deal instead with the kind of myth

described by Northrop Frye, that “like art, and unlike science . . . deals, not with the world that man contemplates, but with the world that man creates.” Calvino is not satisfied with reminding the reader that the myth is timeless, and then imposing on it some more or less modern psychology, as Gide does in his *Thésée*; a rather unsatisfactory book, in my opinion. Instead he offers a *technical* correlative to the timelessness; the style and tone are vernacular in the reader’s own terms, and moreover the whole system of references projected into the narrative come from the author’s, and reader’s, own epoch and not from a historicity only half understood. What Zola intended, or ought to have intended, by the expression “the experimental novel,” and only unsatisfactorily achieved in his own work, has been reformulated in our own time by Michel Butor.

Whereas non-fictional narrative has always the support and sustenance of external evidence, the novel must be content with eliciting for us what the novel itself contains. This is why it is *par excellence* the domain of phenomenology, *par excellence* the place to study the ways in which reality appears to us or may appear to us; this is why the novel is the laboratory of narrative.

One literary mode, that of conventional or mimetic narrative, gathers the external world inward, rearranges it and gives it artistic form; another literary mode projects the constructs of the imagination outward to influence and rearrange the external world, or at least our phenomenological grasp of it. Myths as Calvino treats them are therefore not so much timeless as synthetic—imaginative constructs that strike us as timeless because they are free from mimetic representation of any particular point in time. And yet, in their successive rejections, the images are familiar or even banal: chariots and winecups for the Greeks, guitars, motorcycles, and popular science for the moderns. Thus the modernity strikes us as not flashy or “up to date” but translated out of its universality, so to speak, into the vernacular of our own terms and objects. It is possible that this is the literature of the future; at any rate it is the most promising path open to it in an age of industrialized mimesis far more efficient than that of literature. It offers the possibility of an experience beyond the capability of technology either to create or to mimic; a world, as Qfwfq puts it, “past the semiliquid sphere of the irises, in the darkness of the pupils, the mirrored hall of the retinas, in our true element which extends without shores, without boundaries.”



Italo Calvino

A Summary Bibliography

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The Other Eurydice

Italo Calvino

Translated by Donald Heiney

You've won, you outsiders, you've rewritten the stories to suit yourselves, condemning us to the role it pleases you to assign to us, that of the powers of shadow and death, and the name you assign to us, the Underworld Beings, you burden with funereal accents. It's true that if everybody really forgets what happened among us—Eurydice and Orpheus and me, Pluto—this story which is just the other way around from the way you tell it—if the day comes when nobody really remembers that Eurydice was one of us and had never lived on the surface of the Earth before Orpheus ravished her from me with his lying songs—then our old dream of making the Earth a living sphere will be lost forever.

Even now almost nobody remembers what it meant to bring the Earth to life—not what you think, you who are content with this left-over dust of life that collects at the boundary where land, water, and air meet. I wanted life to spread out from the center of the Earth, suffuse the concentric spheres of its design, circulate among its flowing and solid metals. This was the dream of Pluto. Only thus would the Earth have become an enormous living organism, only thus could it have escaped this condition of precarious exile that life has been reduced to, the opaque weight of a dead stone ball under it, and over it the void.