



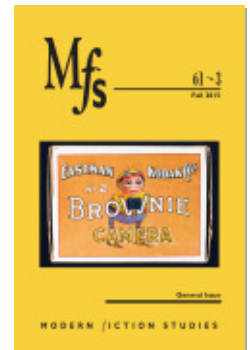
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Laurence A. Breiner

MFS Modern Fiction Studies, Volume 34, Number 4, Winter 1988, pp. 559-573 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/mfs.0.0893](https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.0.0893)



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ITALIC CALVINO: THE PLACE OF THE EMPEROR
IN *INVISIBLE CITIES*



Laurence A. Breiner

As if hesitating on some sort of threshold between the modern and the postmodern, the novel presents a double structure of narrativity and seriality. . . . The seriality of the cities defines the trait we shall treat as postmodern, while the framing device, the narrative of those cities which would put them into a certain perspective, relates to a modern, or in any case pre-postmodern, esthetic of a *mise-en-abyme* or "narrative context." (James, "Seriality" 144)

REPHRASE THAT. IN *INVISIBLE CITIES* Marco Polo's attitude to his descriptions of cities is postmodern; Kublai Khan's is "pre-postmodern." Well enough; we expect writers to be more avant-garde than their readers and almost anyone to be more avant-garde than an emperor. But Calvino, by authoring this Marco, thereby demonstrates that he is (or can be if he chooses) at least as up-to-date aesthetically as his character. So the question arises: Why is this old-fashioned emperor invited into the text? "Invited" is not too strong a word; Calvino has gone to some trouble to get him here. Yet his presence along with Marco within the frame

further complicates the book's relationship to issues of modernity and postmodernity.

Invisible Cities is first of all an imitation of Marco Polo's *Travels*, a loosely organized series of accounts of places in Asia. That model lacks even the chronological sequence of a travel diary. Instead it is the often haphazard recall of discrete bits of travel memory, a prison rumination, told to an amanuensis. It does for Polo's experience of cities what the *Essais* do for Montaigne's experience of books, or for that matter what Petrarch's *Canzoniere* do for his experience of Laura. Like Montaigne and Petrarch, Marco Polo wrote a thoroughly postmodern book. We would be happy with a parodic homage to Marco's *Travels* from the hand of Calvino, and indeed for many readers that is what *Invisible Cities* becomes after first reading. They (we) actually use the book in a way that ignores all formal issues: as a bedside book, read (after the first time) repeatedly but nearly at random, and perhaps never again straight through. It is treated in effect as a collection, with the same limited coherence as the *Travels*.

But in spite of the often explicit verbal imitation of the *Travels* with which most of the descriptions begin, Calvino makes a point of differentiating his book from its model by two formal innovations. The first is the imposition of an elaborate armature, compounded out of an arithmetic sequence, a series of proper names, and a series of thematic rubrics. Such a feature is in fact characteristic of bedside readers; texts of this kind may lack expressive form, but they do have to *stop*, for purely practical reasons, and so arbitrary shapes are imposed: days of the week, thematic categories, other formal armatures. But if Calvino's structure seems too complex to be merely an arbitrary convenience, it has so far resisted most attempts to demonstrate its significance. Laura Marellò offers several perspectives on the design of the armature, but they are purely descriptive. Heinz Riedt suggests possible numerological symbolism; Albrecht Ohly speculates about the possible value of a musical analysis of the armature's "dissonant" relations (66); and Teresa de Lauretis pursues a semiotic approach ("Models"); but no comprehensive account has yet been proposed.

No one has yet broken the code of the cities' names (if code there is). The elaborated numerical structure seems a red herring, no more meaningful than simple chapter numbers, because nothing is added in the way of significant subordinations. Yet it is a structure achieved at some cost; as Carol P. James has observed, "the arithmetic arrangement misplaces the thematics of the groups" ("Seriality" 147). However, the system of interlocking thematic rubrics often has little relation to its specific contents: it is rarely possible to decide on the basis of a city's description what rubric it is appearing under, and many cities would be equally

at home under some other rubric.¹ The two systems seem to nullify each other. Not surprisingly, the focus of critical attention with regard to *Invisible Cities* has been formal. Taking their cue from Calvino himself (1968), critics stress the book's relation to *ars combinatoria* and to the author's interest in the work of Propp, Levi-Strauss, and Todorov.² But the value of this critical emphasis seems to be lost on many readers, who are quite willing to use the text in a way that ignores the entire unifying apparatus, apparently without impoverishing their experience of the text. We will be returning to this implicit conflict of interest; it is primarily Calvino's second modification, however, that concerns us here: the *insertion* of interstitial material (the "frame," printed in italics) that is not accounted for in the armature and that substantially changes the nature of the book. It is as if Marco's own original book sometimes opened to disclose these domestic scenes with the Khan.

Petrarch's *Canzoniere* offers a particularly illuminating analogue for this aspect of *Invisible Cities*: some three hundred sonnets preoccupied with the single subject of love, and interspersed with longer *canzone* that (intentionally or not) provide a context by offering perspectives on the broader circumstances of Petrarch's intellectual life. So also the italic sections of *Invisible Cities* present the Marco Polo who produces these accounts of cities. And it is valuable to adduce a lyric analogue for the form of this prose work, because the book is too often carelessly described as if it had a narrative frame like Boccaccio's *Decameron*, although its frame does not constitute a narrative and seems curiously preemptive, an insert (almost an afterthought) with designs on its own contents. Indeed, although in such collections as *Decameron* and *The Arabian Nights* the frame stories are structured as narrative, the immediate framing of the storytelling is really a static situation, not a narrative: the group sitting in the garden, the king and his bride in the dark. It seems to be a decorum of the genre that narrative should actually be in progress only on one level at a time.

Invisible Cities is remarkable because true narration is for the most part absent from both the frame *and* the framed. The accounts of the cities are not stories and include only the most rudimentary narrative element in many cases (on the order of "After three days you come to . . ."). They are not even transcripts of Marco's monologues. Plausible as it is to take them in that way, the accounts of cities that we read do not correspond to the text's own description of the content of the dialogues between emperor and ambassador; the form in which the cities

¹It is odd, for example, that Zirma (27/19) is associated with signs rather than memory. Here and subsequently, parenthetical citations of the text give first the page number in the original and then that of William Weaver's translation.

²Jerry Varsava, Warren F. Motte, and JoAnn Cannon are useful for Calvino, although none addresses *Invisible Cities* directly; for a broad discussion of generative form, see Larry McCaffery.

are presented to us fits none of the methods by which Marco is said to communicate to the Khan. The descriptions are *not* what Marco tells Kublai. They are something else, some expression of his experiences as played upon by memory, arguably late pieces of writing (like the *Travels*), interleaved with a remote scene of origin.

The series of cities creates the illusion that the other business is a frame, and the first italicized section does pretend bravely to be the start of a frame-narrative. But that is part of the illusion. Taken alone, that material in italics hardly coheres at all, except as a situation in which among other things there is speculation about the ontology of the situation itself, (for example, when the characters themselves puzzle over where they exist and how they are constituted) (109-110/123, 103-104/117). At the same time there is no change in the frame situation as the book proceeds, to which the accumulation of accounts of cities might be seen to contribute. It is not quite a frame, just as the accounts of cities are not quite stories. Like Steinberg's well-known picture of two (drawn) hands each penning the other into existence, here the catalogue of cities encourages us to treat the interpolated italic sections as if they framed the elements of the catalogue, but they hardly do; they pursue their own course. The italic sections are not as much a structural element as an *addition* to the prior coherence of the book (without it, the arrangement of discrete descriptions in an armature would closely resemble the structure of *Palomar*). In *The Arabian Nights*, the humdrum of Scheherazade's days is interlarded with the high interest of her stories; the emphasis is reversed in *Invisible Cities*, where recounting cities is Polo's official "ambassadorial" function, and the record of its fulfillment is pierced with glimpses of something else: a relationship in which certain speculations are dramatized—in particular, speculations about the processes of telling and listening. We should read *Invisible Cities* in conjunction with John Barth's "Dunayaziad," another piece framed inside out.

Why this difference from the model? What is gained by inserting a scene of telling between groups of cities? The italicized material does not seem intended primarily to achieve a "modernist" distance, ironizing or historicizing the earlier text. Instead it is the means to achieve a more profound difference. What Calvino has changed through this formal modification is the *auditor* of Marco's travels, not only by making him present in the frame, but also by changing his identity: what is represented here is not Marco's privately motivated dictation to Rusticello, the writer of romances, under conditions of enforced leisure but the fictively prior, more official (almost compulsory) reports of a favorite ambassador to his emperor.

The rage for order that the presence of a frame is usually meant to satisfy is represented here in the person of Kublai, a "reader" of

Polo's words who, like most readers, has a hobbyhorse. His obsessive subject is empire (as we, reading Petrarch, generally have in mind not his Laura but one of our own). We may know how readers do in fact use this book. But even naive readers ask questions: what frames the book if the apparent frame is illusory? What holds these cities together? What is their unifying form, or principle, or entelechy? That is to say, what holds them together in our minds? And so, what attaches them *to us*? What is a textual unity? What will we take for a unity? If we are concerned to discover what readers take it to be, and to be for, we can best begin by asking: why is the Khan here?

Kublai Khan is the interior reader of this narration. That is suggested on the very first page by a strange use of the first-person plural that appears nowhere else in the book but repeatedly here in the passage beginning, "In the lives of emperors there is a moment which follows pride in the boundless extension of the territories *we* have conquered . . ." (13/5). The context makes it clear that this is not a simple royal plural, and in any case the Khan regularly refers to himself in the singular hereafter. By this device Calvino enforces an extreme implication of the reader throughout (and incidentally raises a question about whose voice it is that speaks the frame). The emperor is invited into the book because he is the one who keeps asking about unities, thanks to his preoccupation with the idea of empire. Through him, a figure of the old-fashioned reader most actual readers are, the strain between this particular text and the demand for textual unity is thus thematized.

Through him too, as will become apparent, we are eventually led to perceive some significant strains within the figure of Marco himself. The presence of the Khan helps us recognize that Marco is a merchant as well as a traveler. If Kublai Khan is the instrument of Imperium, Marco is ultimately the agent of what might be called Emporium—a mercantile (concrete, re-al) homogeneity potentially as inimical to the character of any city as the more overt political (conceptual) homogeneity advocated by the Khan.³ So Kublai, the interior reader, eventually directs us not only to reconsider the text but particularly to reread Marco.

At the center of the text, Polo describes a bridge stone by stone, and the intermittently officious Khan asks, "Which is the stone that holds up the bridge?" Polo replies: "No stone, but the line of the arch" [*Qual è la pietra che sostiene il ponte?*]"—"*Il ponte non è sostenuto da questa o quella pietra, . . . ma dalla linea dell' arco che esse formano.*"'] (89/82). Stone, bridge, arch, line of arch—this is terminology for a reading of the narrative. The stones correspond to the cities described, that is, to the cities or

³By thus sorting out economic, political, and cultural impulses, Calvino extends and refines the familiar poststructuralist critiques (typically deriving from Adorno via Jameson) of the homogenizing pressures of the modern state and its mass culture.

to their descriptions, depending on the nature of the reading. But like the Khan we are more interested to know what the bridge is and the arch. This emperor is asking a reader's question; he persists in wanting to know definitely what makes a bridge of these stones, a book of these bits.

What's odd is that he gets no answer. We readers are invited to assume that the armature is identical to the "tracery of a pattern" (*la filigrana d'un disegno*) that first distinguished for him the accounts of Marco Polo (14/6). Because the armature presents cities as *instances* of certain themes, Calvino himself seems to be authorizing this interpretation: if the text itself thinks like an emperor, it is probably representing the resident emperor's thoughts. Although it is true that "the cities do not combine to form a universe or nation or empire" (James, "Seriality" 149), this text has invested heavily in the *impression* that such combinations exist. It is important, however, that the Khan's invitation into the text is conditional; strictly speaking, he inhabits only the frame. He is unaware of the structure and relationships suggested by the armature (just as he does not actually hear the accounts of cities that we read). All this is in "another dimension" for an inhabitant of the frame, who remains to that extent unaware of the structure of his experience. Indeed, the problem touches Marco as well, who escapes similar confinement in the frame only to the extent that we accept him as the actual narrator of the accounts we are reading. Kublai attempts, from his place in the frame, to make Marco's accounts of cities add up to something—as every emperor, from his capital, attempts to make his diverse conquests add up to an empire.

Thus the tracery may refer only to a projection of the Khan's occupational thirst for order, unrelated to the structure of the text before us. To dismiss such a possibility, it is not necessary to establish that Marco himself produces the armature of rubrics but only that he recounts the cities in the order we have them (because a pattern is implicit in that sequence). Unfortunately this claim cannot be established. The relation of the pattern to the armature (that is, from the Khan's perspective, to the bridge) is distressingly parallel to that between the content of Marco's actual conversation with Khan, adumbrated in the frame, and the printed accounts of cities. Both are problematic in the same way (and there is perhaps another deeper analogy: between the actuality of any city and the thematized sketch that is Marco's printed account of it). They support one another without being able to verify one another.

A full-scale essay on the particular figure of the bridge would be about the structure of the book and its relation to Calvino's other books, especially *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* and *Palomar*. The figure of the arch has to do with methods of reading, with techniques of structure both generative and retrospective, and, more generally, with fictions about

literary production. But here I will set that aside to pursue three versions of the stone-bridge relation that are more directly pertinent to the role of the Khan, three ways of answering his readerly question: "What do these stones add up to?"

One answer is proposed at once: they are the stones of Venice, the city of Marco Polo (city in fact of two Marcos: one a secular tale-telling merchant traveler to the East, one a saintly gossamer and posthumous traveler from the East). This notion that Venice or some prototypical city unifies the text, a notion introduced at several points in both the frame and the accounts of particular cities, is of course explicitly rejected by Marco when he says, "No stone, but the line of the arch." But Marco is often perverse, and when he thus induces the Khan to change his mind ("It is only the arch that matters to me"), Marco impudently replies, "Without stones there is no arch." So we need to consider this answer before taking up two other answers to the Khan's question that yield to Marco's advice and seek their unities in equivalents of the line of the arch rather than of the keystone. These answers, to which we will turn shortly, can conveniently be identified as Imperium, the state into which a Khan tends to organize cities, and Emporium, the state into which a merchant like Marco tends to organize them.

VENICE

The Venetian describes one city after another, but Kublai, like a Platonic philosopher (or a Platonic tyrant), wants to know what Marco is *really* saying. In the next italicized section after the discussion of the bridge and arch, he insists that he has identified the keystone city of the discourse as Venice, when Marco unconvincingly fails to recognize an almost touristic evocation of his birthplace (93/85). It is the one city Marco refuses to describe, although he claims that he is always only talking about Venice (94/86).

Kublai seizes upon Venice almost instinctively; he is looking for the keystone whose thrust, whose weight of significance, radiates through the other stones and so unifies them. His quest exemplifies a reader's constant urge to *place* individual cities in relation to others, to ideal or model cities, to overarching principles of government, construction, or evolution. Where are these descriptions coming from, or to what are they tending? Of what are they the facets, reflections, types, avatars? The metaphysical nature of this interest is confirmed when we notice that he never expresses any curiosity about the *geographical* relations of the cities to one another. He wants to be able to know their life cycles, their morphology, the "invisible order" that rules them (128/122). He is driven to read the accounts for signs of some originating unity: an image or ideal conception of a city, or perhaps some single actual city, elaborately

diffracted. This reading leads him to pursue the idea of a prototypical city. His pursuit amounts to a "modernist" reading of *Invisible Cities* as a *cubist* book intent on refractions of "Venice" (or alternatively of some more generalized model city).

Marco seems to resist such a reading. When Kublai proposes that there must be some elements whose permutations produce different cities "through the work of the mind or of chance," Marco insists that "cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if . . . their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful" (50/44). When Kublai says that he has *constructed* a model of norms from which all cities can be deduced by foreseeing aberrations from the norm, Marco replies that he too has *thought of* a model (the shift of verb is eloquent), but it is made up only of exceptions (75/69).

But Marco's coyness about Venice irritates critics as much as it does the emperor and, above all, those who resist the Khan's modernist interpretation of the text. Thus James, for example, is technically correct in insisting that "the seriality of the cities ruins any claim Venice or the Inferno have to being models for any or all the cities" ("Seriality" 160).⁴ This observation is true of the descriptions in themselves, but one of the things that Calvino's minimalist structure can do with great economy is to suggest such interactions. The Khan may insist that Marco speaks only of Venice, and Marco may deny it, but after that brief exchange most readers will have an eye cocked for glimpses of Venice in the cities described—and they will not be disappointed, however illicit their pleasure may be from a theoretical point of view.

Even so, Calvino's book plainly *looks* postmodern; its organization makes the presence of any central keystone extremely unlikely. If in fact no one stone holds up the bridge, Kublai's next option is to trace out the arch. Thus questions about the relation to Venice lead to other lines of speculation about how things cohere.

EMPIRE

The Khan's second line of investigation is more practical (at least for an emperor); it is the question of empire: what is the entity, the line of arch, *in the world* that can make sense for him of a series of cities (for Empire is the name of what emperors are born to do to cities)? At the very beginning of the book we see Kublai, in a "desperate moment," turning his attention from the unreliable possession of physical objects (rivers, cities, mountains) to what strikes him as the surer satisfaction of grasping abstract pattern, steady coherence. "Empire" is a way of asserting that all this diversity is one thing. In support of this idea

⁴In a more recent essay, James offers a more subtle view: "a different final image of Venice arises: no longer a nostalgia for origin, it represents the forgetting that permits the mind to function allegorically. Venice clears out the space to be given to the non-inferno" ("Allegory" 93).

the Khan seeks underlying unities, the “tracery of a pattern.” He constantly generates images through which to grasp his realm: “a corpse in a swamp” (65/59), a diamond, a bridge, a chessboard, an atlas.

The great bureaucratic empires (the Roman, the Spanish, the British) are quintessentially modern; ramshackle empires are postmodern. We hear (from the real Marco Polo, among others) that in fact Kublai’s empire was bureaucratic. But in the text we are to imagine also an empire close to dissolution, a questionable empire of heterogeneities that resists Khan’s idea of a coherent modern mechanism. When Khan hears from Marco about the diverse cities of his empire, he seeks their secret unity. If the fact that they belong to his empire proves to be extraneous to their description (that is, if there is no trace of that entity in the descriptions), then Empire may be a delusion. Marco experienced one unique city after another; the Khan exists to assert that they are all part of one thing and that that fact is patent in them. Empire asserts a uniformity that starts with mailboxes, flags, gauges of railways, and extends to essences. Marco is interested in the value of the discrete, the collectible; he is adept at “reading” the value of a city, its peculiar articulation and difference, whereas the Khan is interested in the empire, the arch, assimilation.

The book ends like a fugue, with a stretto on this theme, a compressed repetition of its own shape: the group of sections all beginning “The Great Khan owns an atlas . . .” formally resembles the grouping of several cities in the middle of any chapter, but it occurs within the italic context. It is not interrupted by descriptions of cities (although previously any repeated passages in italics were separated by descriptions) because it contains them more exhaustively than ever before. The atlases are catalogues not of cities but of empires of cities, an exponential ordering of orderings, a wealth (precisely that) of higher order abstractions that Kublai “owns.” In this way the question, “Shall I be able to possess my empire at last?” seems to be answered. What is it, though, to possess a *city*? In particular, what is the value of a city that finally cannot be held in hand like ivory, peacocks’ feathers, or gold but can be yours only invisibly, in recounting? Does the Khan possess the cities his conception has grouped into an empire any more fully than Marco Polo possesses the cities he remembers; does he possess them, for that matter, in a way at all different? To answer these questions we need to consider how *Marco* possesses things.

EMPORIUM

The presence of the Khan also brings to light a third line of speculation, the “tracery” of a meditation on global economics that is not much developed in the text, perhaps because it reflects an impulse embodied

in Marco himself. The Venetian plays more than one role here. As traveler and as raconteur, Marco is interested in peculiarities, collectibles, "narratables." Even as a merchant he seeks out unique sources of supply: where can one get vegetable asbestos, onyx, imitation pygmies, saleables? The goal is to find things where they are in abundance and sell them where they are rare. True to his calling, Marco prizes the quirky discrete object. Against the invisible order of empire Marco seems associated with a diversity that survives even in assemblage: the souk, the bazaar, the mall of *specialty* shops, precisely the "multiform treasures" that the emperor finds "illusory" (129/123).

Paradoxically, however, although Marco's success as a merchant depends on persistent difference, its consequence is homogeneity. At the same time, too, he acts as an agent of that other empire, the Venetian. Thus Marco embodies a set of cross-purposes that parallels the conflict between the interests of a city and an empire that we find figured in the Khan (Ricoeur initiates the now extensive theoretical discussion of this inherent dilemma). Just as the conqueror galloping across the plains becomes the emperor in his garden, so the merchant too ends up sedentary; and although we see Marco resting in the emperor's garden (109/103), his "natural" place is behind his counter, supervising (like an emperor) the achievement of a final homogeneity: everything available everywhere, universal distribution—a situation already described as a consequence of *Empire* in the account of Euphemia: "the exchange of wares which you could find, everywhere the same, in all the bazaars inside and outside the Great Khan's empire, scattered at your feet on the same yellow mats . . ." (43/36). The merchant dreams of a time when within a few steps of any house in the world you can have, for a price, a Coke, a Toyota, a goat-skin drum. The emperor aims for cities to share the signatures of his empire, to share his mark; the merchant aims for them to share *each others'* signatures. The emperor finds this leveling impulse inconceivable, so he imagines the merchant to have in mind an ideal city. But the merchant is thinking in terms of an accumulation of experiences, rather than of an ideal. The merchant's mind is fundamentally additive: he wants everything to be everything, whereas emperors want everything to be *one* thing.

In this respect both merchant and emperor ultimately oppose the identity and uniqueness of any city, although there is a *difference*: the merchant tends in the long run to *make* all cities similar with the enthusiastic complicity of their inhabitants; the emperor *decrees* that all this apparent heterogeneity is "in fact," "secretly," "really," one thing: his possession, or rather his conception, his grasp, of his possession. A merchant believes he facilitates the wishes of the people (even if he also maneuvers to inspire those wishes). Where merchants battle other merchants, this

emperor is presented as at war not with rival emperors but with the cities themselves, their "city-state" integrity. But if the merchant's goal is more remote and less likely to be realized than even an emperor's, it is finally more destructive of the identity of cities. And that is to say, also, of their inhabitants.

There are actually two empires in the novel. Antithetical to the emperor's China is an unvoiced Venice, which is economic, "emporial," and pieced together out of alien treasures; mosaic is its essence. The Chinese empire of the Khan is above all a matter of space, of extent, of captured territory. It is physical. Hardly alluded to in *Invisible Cities*, the actual Venetian empire is quite different, an "invisible" empire of hegemony, not of land and peoples, embodied only in one crowded city and its loot. Yet it would be difficult to locate China in this book of Marco Polo's reports; he acts for Venice, and into it, in some sense, his descriptions transform the emperor's China in a subtle act of conquest.

Marco Polo and Kublai Khan represent different cultures as well as different professional praxes. They are rival emperors (rival readers) meeting over a continent, a text, a chessboard. In chess, two visions of the board confront each other, and when chess is (inevitably) invoked in *Invisible Cities*, the confrontation is patent. The Khan's eye is on the game of conquest and aggrandizement, the play of forces that imposes orderly empire on a field of cities and subjugates their variety. For the Venetian the chessboard is instead the orderly plenum of a mosaic, pieced together from diverse alien bits that must retain their strangeness. Within the context of the chess game the oft-quoted passages describing their respective meditations on an individual square of the board provide the most famous instance of their differences (127-129/139-140, 121-123/131-132). But this is not an isolated set-piece. Other episodes similarly contrast their characteristic ways of treating any observation; Marco plays Aristotle to his Platonic master, always patiently enumerating while the Khan goes global. When the emperor declares the empire a diamond-in-progress, for example, Marco speaks of collecting ashes and calculating carats (66/60). Their final visions differ in the same way. Marco describes as perfect a city "made of fragments . . . discontinuous in space and time" (169/164); the emperor foresees enormous shapeless cities fused into an empire even more vast than his own (146/138).⁵

We must treat both characters, not just the Khan, as readers. Although the Khan is figured as a listener, he wants to organize what he takes in; he wants to possess what he reads in a fixed, orderly way, in a memory

⁵The contrast figured here arises as a central ideological problem in the era of exploration that the real Marco's book initiated. Thus Montaigne (in "Of Cannibals" and elsewhere) offers cultural relativism as his response to economically motivated exploration. And although Francis Bacon analyzes the imperializing habits of intellect under the rubrics of the Idols, his own grandiose scientific program subsumes resolutely empirical observation under global imperial organization.

theater or a museum without walls.⁶ Marco takes pleasure in bits and lavishes as much attention on the plain unpromising square of wood as on any of his cities. He spreads them out and fingers them when he can or settles for opulent lists when he cannot. But this is not a matter of possession. What pleases him is their passage through his hands, through his perceptions. They are rarities, narratables. He *reads* them, but his *method* is quite different from the Khan's. For him, tallying is telling. For Marco reading is exchange rather than accumulation. He is content with passage—his account of a city is not the city, nor his memory of it, nor part of a structure but a verbal event. Should we consider the accounts of cities prose *passages* or prose *pieces*? He tallies more than he can possibly carry away on his camels; the rest he possesses in a memory that is not systematic but associative. What he does possess is chaotic, like experience, or a curiosity shop. Marco takes pleasure in objects and lists of objects.

So why is the Khan here? Marco Polo at one point slyly repeats a platitude: "it is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear" (143/135)—in other words, the reader is king. *Invisible Cities* forces us to ask, "which reader?"⁷ On its largest scale the text itself sides with the emperor. The elaborate armature would satisfy his needs (if he were aware of it), and the presence of that structure further suggests imperial leanings on the part of the author who has, after all, produced more than one book in which short, discrete prose pieces are arrayed in conceptually complex structures.⁸

But in its details the text sides with Marco the traveler. Like him, it takes pleasure in physical objects; and although we say regretfully that it cannot possess them except at the remove of language, we forget that a verbal text can embrace the names of objects with a passionate kinship because they are of one flesh. This difference between the pleasures of the Khan and those of the text is apparent at the outset: the very first page holds wonderful objects that exist for the Khan only at a remove. So the text has "elephants," "rain," "sandalwood," whereas for the emperor the rain is over, the sandalwood has burned away, and only the odor of the elephants lingers. The text has—and proffers to the imagination—"precious metals, tanned hides, and tortoise shell," whereas for the Khan these are only the empty promises of kings no one has ever heard of ("re mai sentiti nominare").⁹ This kind of play with use/mention

⁶Marco describes the city of Zora, which, once seen, is so memorable in its continuous details that it provides the *loci* for a comprehensive memory theater; then characteristically he tells us he has not been able to see Zora, because "the earth has forgotten her" (24/16).

⁷Kathryn Hume speculates that "Calvino has been exercising his dialogical imagination on a kind of *questione d'amore* or Tiresian determination as to which party enjoys the finest pleasures—author, interpreter, or non-professional reader" (76).

⁸See Hume for a good discussion of the accumulation of small units as a feature of Calvino's work.

⁹For a pertinent discussion of self-referentiality and use/mention distinctions in statements of this

distinctions is also characteristic of the bizarre charades by which, we are told, Marco actually communicates to the Khan, and the same distinctions are at the heart of the characters' contrasting notions of possession.

Calvino produces a text that shares his own habitual taste for treasures, inventories, catalogues innocent of taxonomy (de Lauretis, "Discourse" 417); into this text he invites a surrogate reader (this one no king but an emperor) who favors order, unifying structure, closure. Within this arrangement we readers are free to make our own alliances. But there is something of a trick being played on the critic who takes up a position outside the text in order to resolve the views of travel, aggrandizement, and possession embodied in Kublai Khan, Marco-traveler, and Marco-merchant. Revealing light is shed on the impulse to closure in *critical* discourse by its resemblance to the conservative impulses of the Khan, the reader with whom no critic wants to be associated.¹⁰

Such a resolution or reconciliation of terms is a requisite feature of what might be called *tonal* composition in fiction, the sort of narrative that cadences on marriage, conquest, happy returns of prodigals, abjurations of vengeance, and piles of money. *Invisible Cities*, marked by firm closure of its numeric rhythm but none at all of the thematic pattern or of the illusory narrative, is not a tonal composition; it needs no such harmonized close because it is not played by those rules. Making a similar point in different terms, James praises the "masterful false closure" provided by the nature of the armature ("Allegory" 89). Critical discussion of the text imports its own tonal inclinations, but there is no inherent need for a dialectical resolution or for a critical fantasia about authorial ambivalence: the emperor, the traveler, and the merchant can coexist without being "framed."

The space of this fiction is not tonal or harmonic, but a Steinbergian space such as Calvino himself describes in an essay on the artist: "it is the universe of drawing that draws itself, explores, tests, and redefines itself each time (The physical universe proceeds in the same fashion, I believe)" ("Pen" 293).¹¹ Marco's accounts are rapid, impressionistic line drawings of cities; the frame is a sketch of the full intercourse between Marco and Kublai; the armature is a diagram of the forces implicit in a realized structure. Again, Calvino's comments on Steinberg are suggestive, if we are free to take the word "styles" in the following passage as applying to the diverse elements of *Invisible Cities*:

kind (for example, "This is a sentence with 'onions,' 'lettuce,' 'tomato,' and 'a side of fries to go.'"), see Douglas R. Hofstadter.

¹⁰Calvino's exposure of the critic's position here supports Andreas Huyssen's argument that poststructural criticism is not in fact homologous to postmodernism but rather "a discourse of and about modernism" (see especially 206-216).

¹¹This valuable essay plays with unresolved alternatives as fluently as Marco does and in the process sheds light on many aspects of *Invisible Cities*, for example in its remarks on analogies between line drawing and travel.

the universes are multiplied by the number of instruments and techniques and styles that can be used to give form to figures and signs. But perhaps, deep down, the styles know they are not self-sufficient; perhaps each of them knows it exists only in contrast with every other possible style. The geometry-book cubes dream of the thickness of matter that has lived and suffered as "artist's cubes" have. And these, in their turn, dream of the diaphanous impassiveness of geometrical diagrams. ("Pen" 294)

Taken together, the cities, accounts of cities, dialogical frame, and atonal armature manage to support one another by something like a will to appear substantial (just as abstract syntax can appear to contain real elephants, rain, and sandalwood). The apparent structure of this text is never what it seems; as with certain optical illusions, under scrutiny the "object" is always elsewhere. Characteristically, we are tricked into seeing substantial structures where Calvino has in fact only suggested or alluded to them.¹² We have a criticism that can delineate in detail the structures that are *almost* present in this book; we have another that can establish their absence. We seem to lack a criticism that can address directly the play of illusion itself, which is the particular art of *Invisible Cities*.

Under these circumstances it is almost foolhardy to make a suggestion that implies any symmetry, but perhaps we need to envision one more role: the emperor as *emptor*. For all his impulses to closure, his actual performance in the text depicts reading as a negotiation pursued with enormous, almost Levantine leisure. The buyer's plane may be leaving, the seller's children may be hungry, but these pressures somehow only sharpen the stolen pleasure of business while the business lasts: carpet after carpet is brought out, its pattern traced, its history told, while the protagonists sip and smoke. Even at the end of *Invisible Cities* Kublai Khan has not yet made a purchase. He may, finally, be in the text to project this liberating image of the most conservative common reader. Only the critic, with his own sentences to end, has to make a deal.¹³

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¹²There are excellent analogues to this particular effect in such paintings by Salvador Dali as "The Maximum Speed of Raphael's Madonna" (1954) or "Paranoic-Critical Study of Vermeer's Lace-maker" (1955).

¹³I wish to thank Mary Campbell, Jack Matthews, and Carolyn Williams for their thoughtful responses to an early version of this essay.

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