

Calvino and the Value of Literature

Author(s): Lucia Re

Source: *MLN*, Vol. 113, No. 1, Italian Issue (Jan., 1998), pp. 121-137

Published by: [Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3251070>

Accessed: 16-11-2015 05:47 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



*Johns Hopkins University Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *MLN*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# Calvino and the Value of Literature



*Lucia Re*

## 1. The formal is moral is political

*Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, written in 1985 shortly before the author's death, may be considered Calvino's literary testament. The prefatory note to the book (conceived originally as a series of lectures to be delivered at Harvard University) situates it within the perspective of the new millennium, and highlights as its central concern the status of literature in contemporary discourse.

Barely fifteen years stand between us and the new millennium . . . The millennium about to end has seen the birth and development of the modern languages of the West, and of the literatures that have explored the expressive, cognitive, and imaginative possibilities of these languages. It has also been the millennium of the book, in that it has seen the object we call a book take on the form now familiar to us. Perhaps it is a sign of our millennium's end that we frequently wonder what will happen to literature and books in the so-called post-industrial era of technology. I don't much feel like indulging in this sort of speculation. My confidence in the future of literature consists in the knowledge that there are things that only literature can give us, by means specific to it. I would therefore like to devote these lectures to certain values, qualities, or peculiarities of literature that are very close to my heart, trying to situate them within the perspective of the new millennium. (*Six Memos* 1)<sup>1</sup>

I would like to use this text to address the question of the value of literature for Calvino and for us today. In the era of cultural studies,

<sup>1</sup> The Italian version was published as *Lezioni americane*. A carefully annotated edition can now be found in *Saggi*.

in which criticism has increasingly focused on mass culture along with or side by side with literature, taking as equally worthy objects of analysis films and novels, television, porno magazines and the Marquis De Sade, comic books and Shakespeare, graffiti, advertising, videogames, and Emily Dickinson, “Rimbaud and Rambo” (as I have heard someone say), it may be useful to explore the reasons why a writer like Calvino, so finely attuned to the cultural mutations of modernity, and with such a keen interest in a multiplicity of critical and intellectual products and kinds of discourse (including film, television and the new technologies), attributed throughout his entire life a special value to literature.

It is too simple (though not inaccurate) to answer: “because he was a writer and he loved literature.” Love and personal preference (I will come back to love later) do play a large role in Calvino’s consistent, stubborn reaffirmation of the value of literature through four decades, but Calvino had an exquisitely analytical mind, and besides reaffirming his love, he never ceased reflecting on the status of literary discourse as such and attempting to answer the questions “What is literature?” and, especially, “Why literature?”

We could say about Calvino—particularly his *Memos*—what Calvino said about Elio Vittorini in his 1967 essay, written shortly after the death of his friend: “It is useless to try to pin down a discourse that has always been open, fixing it at the point where it was broken off . . . But the outline of a method is clear, as is the basic line which Vittorini consistently adhered to.”<sup>2</sup>

Throughout his career Calvino—despite the multiple metamorphoses of his writing and the changes in his intellectual and political positions—adhered to a consistent vision of the value of literature, questioning it and scrutinizing it in many ways and from different points of view, but always returning to it once again. I would like to look at some key moments of Calvino’s intellectual development with an eye to what that development, with its moments of crisis and impasse, as well as *slancio* and enthusiasm, can tell us today in the current situation of literature’s devaluation and the crisis of literary studies.

I will start with a famous essay, the 1955 “Il midollo del leone” (“The Lion’s Marrow”). In that essay Calvino tries to answer a

<sup>2</sup> “Vittorini: Progettazione e letteratura,” originally in *Il Menabò* 10, now in *Saggi* 187. All references to Calvino’s essays will be to this edition and all translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

question that obsessed postwar Marxist intellectuals in Europe—think for example of Sartre’s famous 1947 pamphlet, “What is Literature?” Undaunted by the Marxist models of social realism and typicality which were then extremely strong in Italy, Calvino takes his own idiosyncratic approach to the question: how does literature act on or work on history? Only literature, Calvino says, or actually, *poetry*, through its multiple, contradictory work (*lavorio*), can and does shape human sensibility, giving form to the moral impulse (*scatto morale*) and the way one looks around oneself. “Only poetry can teach these things” (*Solo la poesia può insegnarle*) (*Saggi* 9). Literature presupposes, and proposes, “a certain kind of human being.” For example so-called “Hermetic Man” (*l’uomo ermetico*), Calvino says in referring to the poetry of Eugenio Montale (whose work he loved) and his school, *ermetismo*, is a typical case of how literature attempts to solve the problem of the individual’s relationship with his or her historical context—in the case of *ermetismo* through a kind of restrained and barely audible oppositionality. Literature is a kind of sentimental, moral and intellectual education which—Calvino says—is irreplaceable in terms of quality and value. “Literature (he goes on in the same essay) teaches us to find proportions in life, the place of love in it, the place of death—the hardness, the pity, the sadness, the irony, the humor” (21–22). In the age of neorealism, which tended like our own to devalue literature and to overvalue politics, Calvino makes an extraordinary claim for the value of literature. The value of literature is that of teaching us how to attribute a value to things. It is therefore eminently moral, yet devoid of a specific message, and intrinsic to the esthetic object. It consists in the rigor of language (*rigore del linguaggio*) itself, in the lesson of style (*lezione di uno stile*). “In every true poem—Calvino writes—there exists a lion’s marrow, nourishment for a rigorous moral, for an understanding of history” (25). Here therefore Calvino for the first time explicitly connects the esthetic with the ethic, opposing implicitly the Kantian principle of the esthetic disinterestedness of the work of art. It is a position that he will never substantially abandon, though he will rethink it and reformulate it in the light of changed historical and cultural circumstances.

At the beginning of the 1960s, as Italy found itself becoming more and more an industrial and consumer society caught in the contradictions of advanced capitalism in the north, and in a post-colonial crisis of sorts in the tension between north and south, Calvino attempts to rethink the value of literature from the point of view of the present crisis, restating the need for what in the 1963 essay “La sfida al

labirinto" ("The Challenge to the Labyrinth") he calls a "formal-moral choice" (*la scelta formal-morale*). The increased, labyrinth-like complexity of the times, he says, requires an even more complex stylistic choice—a style capable of grasping and expressing the epistemological multiplicity of the world in the late industrial and new technological and "cosmic" era of what we now call "globalism." There is a need for "cosmic" or global literature that must measure itself with the multiple levels of knowledge that historical development has foregrounded. Shortly thereafter, Calvino's own experimental answer to this need will appear in the form of his *Cosmicomiche* (*Cosmicomics* 1964–65) and in 1967 *Ti con zero (t zero)*. Formal research, however, is never mere formalism. It is never, in other words, art for art's sake. For Calvino, the choice of a literary form, what he calls a "style," is not only a moral choice, but also a political one. The formal complexity of style cannot limit itself to the imitation or duplication of the labyrinth, and above all it cannot, should not advocate resignation, surrender to the labyrinth. Attempting to master the labyrinth for Calvino means also attempting to find a way out of it.

This particular position of Calvino's became extremely controversial, and the essay "La sfida al labirinto" was followed by a polemic exchange with Angelo Guglielmi, one of the leaders of the Italian neo-avantgarde. For Guglielmi and a substantial portion of the neo-avantgarde (a movement which played a leading cultural role in Italy in the 1960s), the value of literature was altogether different. In the tradition of Nietzschean nihilism and Marxist theories of ideology, Guglielmi and the neo-avantgarde argued that the value of literature resides in its ability to unmask the falsity of all meanings and of all historical undertakings, without replacing them with new ones. For Guglielmi literature is demystification. This is its value and function. Anything we write today, he claims, is inherently in error or no longer true. Guglielmi's theoretical stand is compounded by the neo-avantgarde's tendency towards obscurity and unreadability—a tendency that it shares with much (though certainly not all) postmodern literature internationally, and a tendency that has contributed enormously to the devaluing of literature and the decline in readership in the last few decades.

In an open letter to Calvino which appeared in *Il Menabò* (6, 1963) following the publication of "La sfida al labirinto," Guglielmi stresses the negative function of literature for him. He writes: "The first step toward a new perspective of meaning (which in any case cannot be

established by literature or by literature alone, but belongs rather to philosophy, ethics, politics, etc.), is to get rid of the old perspectives which are no longer vital" (*Saggi* 1771–72). Calvino responds: "Guglielmi believes that we can wait peacefully for the end of all the old values, and consequently the revelation of new ones, [but] this is a pointless wait, for it is only in the constant search for new values that the old ones fall apart" (1774).

The fundamental difference between Calvino and the neo-avantgarde is that the neo-avantgarde does not believe that literary research and literary discourse in and of themselves are capable of generating or uncovering values, while for Calvino literature's value is unique in that there is a particular *intelligenza del mondo* ("an understanding of the world") that literature and only literature can give us. "It is all a matter"—Calvino continues in his 1963 letter of response to Guglielmi—"of what one is looking for in literature. There are those who look for something they did not already know or did not understand, and there are those who look for confirmation of ideas they already have. The former value is what is commonly called 'poetry,' the latter is a bedwarmer for old professors."

Although in 1965 Calvino announced that he would no longer *dar fiato alle trombe* ("blow the trumpets")—or speak publicly about politics and art and make statements—he did continue to speak up for the value of literature throughout the rest of his life. For example, when Edoardo Sanguineti, the most influential and accomplished among the authors of the Italian neo-avantgarde, stated that "if there is a crisis of the novel it is because the attempt to make sense of reality by measuring it against a certain set of values is no longer valid" (*Saggi* 143),<sup>3</sup> Calvino responded that "rationality" and "values" may have to be understood in new ways, but that the search for them remained the proper one for literature. Calvino's emphasis on the pursuit of rationality as a fundamental value of literature (by which he means literature's attempt to map and make sense of the labyrinth in order to find a way out of it), repeatedly made him the object of abuse by the Italian neo-avantgarde—whose own project was, rather, the duplication of the labyrinth (hence the title of one of Sanguineti's most representative works, *Laborintus*), and the mimesis of chaos.

<sup>3</sup> Sanguineti's statement was part of a round-table discussion with Alberto Moravia, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Alberto Arbasino, and Francesco Leonetti, entitled "Requiem per il romanzo?" ("Requiem for the Novel?") published in *Paise Sera* on March 26, 1965. Calvino's response was published on April 9.

Calvino's emphasis on rationality, however, should also be understood in the context of the powerful influence of Benedetto Croce in Italian culture. Calvino sought a way to pursue an esthetic literary project, that is, a project rooted in the value of literature as such, without at the same time falling back into the rhetoric of Croce's idealist esthetics. For Croce esthetic intuition and truth are "pure," and they precede or come before any kind of conceptual knowledge, whereas for Calvino literary truth and conceptual knowledge are constructed and unfold at one and the same time.

The 1967 essay that I quoted briefly at the beginning, written by Calvino a year after Vittorini's death, entitled "Vittorini: Project and Literature," offers a further insight into Calvino's understanding of the specificity of literature. The portrait that Calvino gives us of Vittorini is, to a large degree, a self-portrait, and although Vittorini's death in 1966 served to a certain extent to put to rest Calvino's own obsession with *progettazione* and to start a new, more contemplative phase in his writing, culminating in the 1972 visionary masterpiece, *Invisible Cities*, Calvino deeply identifies with Vittorini's positive, affirmative vision of the value of literature in contrast to the negative vision espoused by the neo-avantgarde. "In a historical situation in which the consensus seemed to be—Calvino writes—that the only recognizable value of literature was negation, in Vittorini the notion of an affirmative literary value never vanishes . . . For Vittorini the poetic gist of the literary work never ceases to be decisive (I mean the gist of truth . . . beyond the ideologies of harmony and consolation . . . the gist of potential linguistic, psychological and historical knowledge" (*Saggi* 167). The truth-value of literature, however, Calvino continues, resides in the autonomous strength of the literary signs—their images and language (168).

But where exactly does this value come from? Calvino is far from the estheticist ideology of the Anglo-American new critics, just as he maintains his distance from the deconstructionist theories of textuality which were then beginning to surface in Europe. Commenting on Vittorini's interest in the "workers" of literature, Calvino reminds us in this same essay that value is the product of labor, "tiring labor" as Pavese said. Calvino draws an analogy between Marxism and stylistic criticism (from Spitzer to Contini), pointing out that it was stylistic criticism which first called attention to that *labor* which is literature. Later on he was to insist on this theme and on structuralism's role in understanding how a text is constructed, the hard work that goes into it—far removed from Croce' "pure intuition" and from the miracu-

lous conjunction of beauty with truth. As late as 1985, in his last interview, he told Maria Corti that writing prose requires as much work—an investment of all one’s verbal resources—as poetry does: “scatto e precisione . . . economia e pregnanza . . . slancio e mobilità . . . ritmo” (*Saggi* 2923).<sup>4</sup> So the value of literature is the result of this investment, this hard labor with language and through language.

## 2. Reading and Cultural (In)equality

A text that is the product of this complex labor of language is most likely not only difficult to produce, but also to read. Writing literature may be hard work, but reading it may be just as demanding. The question of who reads what, the politics of readership, cultural inequality, and the opposition between “high” and “low” culture, are central to the current debate in cultural studies and the crisis in literary studies. It is a question to which Calvino was very sensitive and he began to address it—although in a different context—as early as the early sixties, but especially in the mid-to-late-sixties, before and during the great crisis of 1968, and finally, in a postmodern and self-conscious, ironic key, in his 1979 metanovel, *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore* (*If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*). Who exactly does Calvino have in mind when he thinks about the readers of literature and of his own texts? A notorious book of the period, entitled *Scrittori e popolo* (“Writers and the People”) by Alberto Asor Rosa, accused Italian writers of suffering from a chronic form of populism, that is, a paternalistic tendency to preach to the masses, while being at the same time unable to really speak of or to the Italian lower classes. For Calvino this was a false problem, and he believed that to find readers one must create them by inventing an ideal reader. Before Umberto Eco took hold of the concept and made it so to speak a “technical” construct in his book *Lector in Fabula* (*The Role of the Reader*), Calvino theorized that the reader—whoever he or she may be and wherever he or she may come from—must be seduced by the text into becoming what the text wants them to be. In Calvino’s case, this ideal reader is someone with a project for the future (which may also, however, be a project of memory or recollection, as long as it is neither destructive nor nihilistic). His reader, the reader he desires and wants to construct through his texts, will be someone who can

<sup>4</sup> The interview appeared originally in *Autografo* 2–6 (1985): 47–53.



find in poetic form the inspiration in turn to give form to his or her project in a different kind of discourse. “As ideal readers”—he writes in his 1963 letter to Guglielmi—“I think of the only persons who count for me, that is, those committed to projects for the future (that is, those who care about the reciprocal influence between a poetic project and a political or technical or scientific project)” (*Saggi* 1773).

In the 1967 essay “Per chi si scrive?” (“Whom Do We Write For?”), Calvino acknowledged that the problem of uneven cultural levels among readers, and uneven cultural development, is pressing both in advanced societies and in post-colonial or semicolonial societies. Yet this is a problem that must be confronted pedagogically and politically, while literature can contribute only indirectly to its solution, for example by refusing any paternalistic approach. If the writer presupposes a reader who is culturally less prepared than the writer, then s/he takes on a pedagogical, reassuring attitude which only reconfirms and reinforces cultural unevenness. Although literature is inherently a form of intellectual and sentimental education, Calvino says, literature is not a school. The writer must speak to the reader assuming that he or she knows more than the writer does, for “la letteratura non può che giocare al rialzo, puntare al rincaro” (“Literature has no choice but to keep the stakes high, keep the bidding going”) (*Saggi* 202). As sometimes happens on the stock market, literature must gamble on the expectation that its value will increase, and that its stock will rise.

Much as he welcomed and even contributed to the advent of structuralism in European culture, that great adventure whose leading figures included Saussure, Propp, Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Greimas and Eco, in the mid-to-late 1960s Calvino was faced with the structuralist reduction of all literature to a set of linguistic functions, oppositions, and permutations, and with the placing of literature by semiotic and structuralist analysis on the same level with other codes and systems of signs, such as advertising, spy thrillers, and fashion. All texts, whether an advertisement for Chanel, a James Bond movie, or a novella by Balzac, could in principle be placed on the same level and be seen simply as texts or, in other words, linguistic constructs or cultural artifacts that could be taken apart and analyzed by using the same structuralist tools. Calvino welcomed this momentous levelling by what we may call structuralist textuality, a levelling which did a lot to open the way for the current flood of cultural studies. Although practitioners of cultural studies today might not like to invoke this particular genealogy as their own, their work would not have been

possible without the contributions of Propp, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, and Eco.

Calvino welcomed this structuralist democratization (as I would like to call it) of textuality because it made a clean sweep of the esthetic theories which, on the basis of dubious idealist assumptions, exalted the unique and superior value of literature. In the 1967 essay “Cibernetica e fantasmi” (“Cybernetics and Ghosts”), he alluded briefly to some of the most well-known of these, such as the theory that poetry is a matter of inspiration, or pure intuition, or a crucial moment in the development of the life of the spirit, or (alluding to Lukàcs) a privileged reflection of the social structure, or else a disclosure of the life of the unconscious or the collective imaginary. What was lacking in all these theories, Calvino pointed out, was the dark zone that always remained unexplored, i. e. how one has gone from here to there. How do you get to the written page? Literature as he knew it and practised it—according to Calvino—was the labor of putting one word next to another, inventing rules and scenarios, fragmenting oneself into different figures and personae. It is this process, namely the labor of writing, of producing a text, that structuralism and semiotics have helped us to see and value, continuing in many ways in the path of stylistic criticism. Yet, Calvino continues, once one has constructed a text and reconstructed the process of literary production, what finally endows literature with its decisive value is the act of reading. The value of literature does not therefore reside exclusively in the labor which goes into its production but, one might say, unlike most commodities, literature is endowed with an added value, a surplus value of sorts, which develops in the very act—the labor—of reading.

Calvino’s creative works of the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (*The Castle of Crossed Destinies*), were very much about the construction of the work of literature as the product of the reader’s and the author’s joint labor. It is through that labor which is the work of reading, according to Calvino, that literature will continue to be a privileged and productive site of human consciousness and human freedom, a making explicit of the potentialities inherent in the sign systems of a society or an era. The work of literature will continue to be born, to be read and evaluated, to be destroyed and continually recreated through contact with the eyes of the reader. Just like any simple commodity, then, literature is capable of generating a surplus value which, however, goes beyond the profits that publishers and booksellers can reap from the sale of literary

texts, and is at the same time of a less tangible if more enduring sort. For Calvino the surplus value of literature has to do with literature's uncanny ability, described in "Cybernetics and Ghosts," to use language (its raw material) to produce something that goes beyond language, something that it does not know how to say, something that it does not know yet. Yet, Calvino adds, paradoxically a thing cannot be known before the words and concepts to say it have been found. Thus literature traces itineraries which border on or trespass into the unknown and the forbidden, leading us to say what could not be said before, and to invent or reinvent stories which had been repressed or removed in collective and individual memory.

Calvino is well aware that this particular "pioneering" "exploring" and "adventurous" value which he attributes to literature is far from universal or universally valid, and he is quick to point out that literature in other times and other places can function quite differently and be valued for opposite reasons; for example the ways in which it works to reinforce established values and to sanction authority. Yet, for Calvino there always comes a time in the phases of literary production when something clicks and literature begins to work in the opposite direction, in the sense of refusing to say and see things the way they had been seen and said up to that moment (*Saggi* 222).

### 3. The Value of Literature in a Postmodern World

A little more than a decade later, at the beginning of the second half of the 1970s, we find that Calvino's tone, the emphasis in his critical reflection have changed substantially. The occasion for examining once more the meaning and value of literature was provided—as later again with the *Memos*—by an invitation to speak at an American university. Outside of Italy and Europe, Calvino felt compelled to make sense for his audience and for himself of the ways in which his views on literature had changed in response to the shifting circumstances and cultural developments of the times. The particular angle he was asked to adopt for the lecture he delivered at Amherst college in 1976, entitled "Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature," was one that has become familiar to us once again in American college and university campuses twenty years later—namely that of the relationship between literature and politics. This was always for Calvino a privileged, perhaps *the* privileged terrain for reflection, to the point that his generation could be defined as the one that began

thinking about literature and about politics at one and the same time. Yet, Calvino said in 1976, these two things not only no longer seem to go together, but in thinking about them he felt a sensation of emptiness or lack— of a political project in which to believe, and lack of a literary project as well. 1976. Italy was about to enter a period which will become known as “the lead years” (*gli anni di piombo*) with the spreading of terrorist activities among university students and other groups of young people. Terrorist groups—Brigate Rosse, Prima Linea, Unità Comuniste Combattenti—killed or wounded journalists, policemen, judges, industrialists, union leaders, and even factory workers. The Christian Democrat minister Aldo Moro was kidnapped and assassinated by the Red Brigades in the spring of 1978. Although Calvino makes no reference in his lecture to the terrorist upsurge in Italy, the extent of which was then still hardly foreseeable, he does touch on a number of factors which account for the cultural vacuum and the confusion of those years. They are factors that deeply influenced the ways in which Calvino perceived the function and value of literature. They are also factors that continue to play a large role in the present cultural context and therefore cannot yet be fully historicized. In other words, Calvino’s project-oriented, positive (some would say “utopian” but I prefer to call it *constructive*) vision of the link between literature and politics belongs to an era which is no longer our own, that is, to an intellectual period of about three decades from post-World War II Reconstruction to the mid-seventies. Yet, this 1976 lecture describes a situation which, twenty years later, is still in many ways our own and foresees problems and developments which we are facing today.

In brief, Calvino’s argument is as follows. An intellectual shift has occurred, a revolution of the mind, whereby the idea of “man” as the subject of history has ended, and the antagonist who has dethroned him is still man, but in a totally different sense. It is the humankind of the “large numbers” in exponential growth all over the planet, it is the explosion of the giant metropolis, the ungovernability of society and economics no matter which system they belong to, the emergence of neo-colonial and post-colonial peoples with their special problems and claims and, especially, the end of Eurocentrism in both economic and ideological terms.

The end of Eurocentrism means also that all the parameters, the categories, the oppositions which were used to define, classify and formulate projects in the world are being challenged. These include not only the intellectual categories linked to particular historical

moments, but even those that had appeared universal, such as male and female, myth and reason, nature and culture, and even seemingly more elementary polarities—affirmation and negation, above and below, subject and object.

Far from considering this intellectual situation a disaster for literature, Calvino remarks that in fact the intellectual turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s, this revolution of the mind, constituted a great, stimulating challenge for literature, but unfortunately, at least in Italy, nothing really came out of it. Why? The very fact that Calvino could pose this question in this way tells us a lot about the high value he continued to place on literature. For him, all intellectual categories may be called into question, including the very categories that organize and differentiate human discourse, but without abandoning the same, very high expectation of literature and as a consequence of himself. For Calvino literature as a kind of discourse cannot just disappear, reabsorbed into the undifferentiated babble of postmodern textuality. Yet, at the same time, he agrees with the sixties radicals' rejection of literature as a "waste of time," and points out that what was being contested was not literature but a mediocre kind of writing. It was because literature in his view had failed to meet the challenges of the era that it failed as literature. What then is the place, or value of literature—assuming we can still call it that—in the postmodern world? Those who feel that literature is the repository of eternal human feelings and truths, those deeper truths that other kinds of discourse (such as politics) tend to forget or hide, miss the point, according to Calvino. This view of literature means to limit literature to a conservative, consolatory, and effectively reactionary function. On the contrary, according to Calvino, literature's true political value is visible when it gives a name to what is still nameless, a voice to those still voiceless. The writer is an *explorer* who travels in areas nobody has been to before, discovering things which sooner or later will become part of a collective consciousness. Literature has the ability—which is often neither direct nor intentional—to impose models of language, of vision, of imagination, of thinking, in other words "the creation . . . of a model of values that is at the same time esthetic and ethical, essential to any plan of action, especially in political life" (*Uses of Literature* 99).

Once again then, Calvino comes back to a sort of educational value of literature, a kind of education that can be effective only "if it is difficult and indirect," and if it is pursued through a rigorous literary practice. The task is "the construction of a mental order solid and

complex enough to contain the disorder of the world within itself; . . . a method subtle and flexible enough to be the same thing as an absence of any method whatever" (99).

The question one can pose in response to this admirable, even stoic defense of literature is, to put it crudely, something like this: in the postmodern, postcolonial era, who or what gives the writer—any writer, but particularly someone like Calvino, a white European male, the authority to give a voice to the voiceless, to name the nameless? In the name of what can someone like Calvino claim to educate through literature, or to formulate models of thinking and imagination?

It is precisely the loss of authority in the age of suspicion of which, for example, Hannah Arendt speaks, which has made it increasingly difficult to know what "real" literature is, and what real value literature might have. And while the authority of so-called canonical works is, at least in some cultures, increasingly challenged, and the canon itself is increasingly subject to scrutiny and revision, maybe even to elimination, there is at the same time a confusing, bewildering proliferation of writers and texts claiming literary authority in the name of a new multi-ethnic and multi-cultural consciousness.

Calvino tackled this question in the 1976 lecture, and his approach is an example of his unending optimism, and tendency to look for ways out of the labyrinth rather than retrench inside it.

Today, he remarks, it is impossible for anyone to feel innocent. In anything we do we can find a hidden agenda, for example that of the European man, or of the male, or of the beneficiary of a certain income and class status, or the victim of a certain situation, of a certain economic system, or of a particular neurosis. This should not lead to a universal feeling of guilt or to a universal accusatory attitude. When we begin to see our sickness, our secret motives, we have already started calling them into question. What matters is the way in which we grasp our motivations and experience their crisis. This is the only chance we have to become other than what we are, "the only way of starting to invent a new way of being" (100).

There is no question that Calvino as a writer displayed throughout the many phases of his career a prodigious ability to reinvent himself, to give himself new challenges and to meet them in always new ways. I should mention at this point that in 1972, four years before, he had published *Invisible Cities*, an extraordinary text which met many of the challenges described in this lecture. The works that followed were *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979) and *Palomar (Mr. Palomar)*, 1983), *Collezione di Sabbia* (1984), and *Memos for The Next Millennium* (1988).

Maria Corti pointed out that in Calvino's literary production one never finds repetition.

#### 4. The Value of the Classics

If for Calvino the value of literature in the postmodern world continues to be that of a simultaneously esthetic, ethic and epistemic exploration, and the challenge to literature that of pursuing ever-new paths of linguistic discovery (formal, moral and intellectual), the question that remains and that continues to preoccupy the practitioners of canon revision and the defenders of tradition alike is: what is the value of the literature of the past for us? What do we or should we value in the so-called "classics"? Why should we read them today if they address moral and intellectual issues that are removed from those of the contemporary world? Calvino addresses this issue in a 1981 article called "Perché leggere i classici" ("Why Read The Classics?"). Written in a light, ironic, almost humorous vein, this article is constructed as a series of apparent "definitions," axiomatic statements as to what constitutes "a classic," except that each statement either reverses or contradicts the preceding one. For example: every re-reading of a classic is a first reading, a discovery. Every first reading of a classic is in actuality a re-reading, and so on. The impossibility emerges of providing an exact, single description of what makes a classic a classic. We have, instead, a series of approximations, ways of circling around the question and attempting to answer it. Throughout the article, however, some constants do emerge, elements which seem to Calvino to be essential for a work to assume the value of a classic. Once again for Calvino a work of literature cannot be said to take on its full value except in the act of reading. It is in the particular heritage of readings and in the continued and varied adventures of reading that a classic takes or loses its value. This is true both in a macro- (so to speak) dimension and a micro-one, for if a classic comes to us (often through literature classes at school) as a work "encrusted" (as Calvino says) with readings and interpretations, a classic can also be a personal classic, a work we read as young women and men and re-read later under different circumstances, finding different things and different pleasures in it. Calvino uses the term "classic" without distinction of age, style, or authority. What gives a work the value of a classic for him is the effect of its resonance, its power of dissemination: "A classic is a work to which you cannot be



indifferent, whichever the age to which it belongs, and which helps you to define yourself in relation to it. Classics are books which, the more you think you know them for having heard about them, the more (when you really read them) you find them new, unexpected, surprising" (*Saggi* 1820).

Of course, Calvino says, this happens only when a classic does its thing, that is, when it establishes a personal rapport with the reader. If there is no spark, all is in vain—classics cannot be read out of duty or respect but only out of love (1820). Here we come to the second element which reappears as a constant along with the act of reading and re-reading in Calvino's approach to the value of the classics: love. It is not surprising that he sees Boccaccio as one of his most important and influential predecessors. His, like Boccaccio's, is an erotics of reading—a true classic wants to be desired and loved again and again. In a later essay, written in English in 1983, "The Written and the Unwritten World," Calvino speaks of how in his experience the urge to write is always linked to the lack of something one would like to know or to own or to grasp—something that escapes us. The secret of the great writer is the ability to keep intact and to convey the strength of this desire.

What about those classics—Homer, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Manzoni and so on, shoved down our throats in school? That kind of forced diet is hardly conducive to love. Calvino acknowledges that school is not always the place necessarily to encourage love for the classics, but—and here he puts his finger on a sore point of the current educational system in Italy and even more in the United States—schools should for better or for worse introduce you to a certain number of classics among which or with reference to which one can then "choose" one's own classics. School should give you the opportunity and means to make choices, but the choices that matter are eventually those made outside of school.

Clearly, Calvino argues, our contemporary life with its frantic rhythms and the eclectic, complex and contradictory nature of postmodern culture are not conducive to the leisurely reading and re-reading of the classics (the old ideal of the humanist *otium*). In fact, the very reassuring notion of a patrimony of classic works, a library of familiar titles, has become unthinkable. The old library has exploded. The old titles have been decimated and new ones have proliferated in all the literatures and the many cultures of the modern world. "There is nothing left for us to do but to invent our own ideal libraries of



classics. I would say that such a library ought to be composed half of books we have read and that have really counted for us, and half of books we propose to read and presume will come to count—leaving a section of empty shelves for surprises and occasional discoveries” (*Uses of Literature* 133). Once more Calvino invites us to orient ourselves and to challenge the labyrinth—which has grown into the postmodern equivalent of Borges’ library of Babel, and therefore now contains, along with old-fashioned books, virtual reality worlds and electronic hypertexts and websites—rather than surrender to it.

In conclusion, let me return briefly to the *Memos for the Next Millennium*. Sometimes readers of this book forget that this is a book specifically about literature, which gives us Calvino’s highly personal reflections and a cavalcade across many classic texts and many traditions, ranging from Ovid to Boccaccio, Cavalcanti, Cervantes, Kafka, Borges, Marianne Moore, Proust, Perec, the Tao Te Ching, and many others. The famous memos or *proposte* are indeed each centered on a specific value of literature for Calvino, values that Calvino feels literature—his literature and the literature he loves—both embody and pursue. They are lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility and multiplicity. These values are a concentrate of the qualities Calvino has consistently admired in literary discourse from the very beginning, from at least as early as *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (*The Path to The Nest of Spiders*), when Pavese said of him that he was “a squirrel of the pen.” Lightness is the intellectual agility with which literature must be endowed—the ability of the text to elevate the reader’s mind to a higher intellectual dimension. Quickness is the movement of desire—that rushing towards something or someone we lack and love, without which there would be no dynamism in literary discourse. Exactitude is meticulous linguistic precision. Visibility is the ability of literature to make the reader vividly see things through images as if they were in front of his or her eyes. Multiplicity is the capacity of the literary text to function simultaneously as an encyclopedia and a map; a method of knowledge and a way of connecting facts, people and things in the world.

There was also a sixth memo planned around the value of consistency (*coerenza*), but it was never written. We may only speculate as to what that memo may have contained; all we know is that it was apparently supposed to be a meditation on Herman Melville’s *Bartleby*. Seen from the perspective of this unfinished book at the end of a millennium and on the threshold of a new one, Calvino leaves us, like

Melville's tireless and mysterious scrivener, with an uncanny, disturbing sense of how precarious the status of literature is, and yet infinitely precious and worth preserving.

*University of California, Los Angeles*

#### WORKS CITED

- Calvino, Italo. *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio*. Milan: Garzanti, 1988.
- . *Saggi 1945–1985*. Ed. Mario Barenghi. Turin: Einaudi, 1995.
- . *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. Tr. Patrick Creagh. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- . *The Uses of Literature*. Tr. Patrick Creagh. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986.
- . "The Written and Unwritten World." *The New York Review of Books* May 12 (1983): 38–39.