

Introduction

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ITALO CALVINO WAS DISCREET ABOUT HIS LIFE AND THE LIVES of others, and skeptical about the uses of biography. He understood that much of the world we inhabit is made up of signs, and that signs may speak more eloquently than facts. Was he born in San Remo, in Liguria? No, he was born in Santiago de las Vegas, in Cuba, but since “an exotic birth-place on its own is not informative of anything,” he allowed the phrase “born in San Remo” to appear repeatedly in biographical notes about him. Unlike the truth, he suggested, this falsehood said something about who he was as a writer, about his “creative world” (letter of November 21, 1967), “the landscape and environment that . . . shaped his life” (April 5, 1967).

This is to say that the best biography may be a considered fiction, and Calvino was also inclined to think that a writer’s work is all the biography anyone really requires. In his letters he returns again and again to the need for attention to the actual literary object rather than the imagined author. “For the critic, the author does not exist, only a certain number of writings exist” (November 24, 1967). “A text must be something that can be read and evaluated without reference to the existence or otherwise of a person whose name and surname appear on the cover” (July 9, 1971). “The public figure of the writer, the writer-character, the ‘personality-cult’ of the author, are all becoming for me more and more intolerable in others, and consequently in myself” (September 16, 1968).

Such assertions begin to conjure up what came to be known as the death of the author, although still only as a prospect or a principle, and in a lecture called “Cybernetics and Ghosts,” Calvino explored the

notion with great polemical and theoretical panache. This was in 1967, a year before Roland Barthes made the theme notorious in France and the English-speaking world. He also uses the specific metaphor of authorial death in a letter of that year (November 24, 1967), and in several other letters. “And so the author vanishes,” Calvino said in his lecture, “that spoiled child of ignorance—to give place to a more thoughtful person, a person who will know that the author is a machine, and will know how this machine works.” We note that a machine replaces a myth, but a real (thoughtful) person replaces an unthinking illusion, and Calvino adds that we shall get a “poetic result . . . only if the writing machine is surrounded by the hidden ghosts of the individual and of his society.”¹

This last sentence makes clear that Calvino is talking about a finished work and its life in the world, and not about some sort of unattainable impersonality: self and society may have become ghosts, but they are essential. The death of the grandee author in no way implies the disappearance of the writing person, and any appearance of contradiction vanishes as soon as we understand that for Calvino and many others, writing *is* life. “We are people, there is no doubt, who exist solely insofar as we write, otherwise we don’t exist at all” (August 24, 1959). The death of the author may indeed be the liberation of the writer, and for Calvino there is also an ethical element in this disposition. “Books,” he says, “in the end represent the best of our conscience” (July 22, 1958). They are not always what we wish they were, but they show us what we ourselves could be. Books are unavoidably personal for Calvino, but not confessional, and not only personal.

But then what are we to make of the letters of such a writer, and what are we doing reading them? In part we are, I’m afraid, ignoring his warnings and careful distinctions; peeping into his privacy. These letters were not written for us or to us. We see “that young man,” as Calvino later calls his earlier self (May 26, 1977), in all his unruly literary excitement, his half-hearted agricultural studies, his worries about conscription, followed by his departure to join the partisans. He returns from the war a declared Communist but still a diverse and witty stylist. The letters reflect his encounters with the writers Elio Vittorini and Cesare Pavese, both of whom meant a great deal to him, and record many of his exchanges of thoughts with friends and critics. He travels

to Russia and America, reporting in detail on his impressions; resigns from the Communist Party; continues to work at the Turin publishing house Einaudi. He marries the Argentinian Esther Singer and they have a daughter, Giovanna, who appears in the letters as happy, alert, and admirably resistant to education (“she speaks three languages . . . and has no wish to learn to read or write” [March 1, 1972]). Calvino moves to Paris; then Rome, a place “that young man” once swore he would never set foot in. There are kindly letters to scholars and schoolchildren, quarrelsome exchanges with figures like Pier Paolo Pasolini and Claudio Magris. Calvino “discovers” the Sicilian writer Leonardo Sciascia, makes clear his admiration for Carlo Emilio Gadda, thinks about film with Michelangelo Antonioni, and collaborates on opera with Berio.

There are dramatic moments, albeit quietly evoked. He dates a letter to his friend Eugenio Scalfari “the first night of the curfew imposed by the Germans” (September 12–13, 1943); sends a message on a notepad to his parents from a partisan hiding place; in another letter mentions his parents’ being taken hostage and then released (“my father was on the point of being shot before my mother’s eyes”) (July 6, 1945). Calvino is constantly exercised by Italian politics. We have his letter of resignation from the Italian Communist Party (August 1, 1957). He witnesses the events of May 1968 in Paris. He thinks about Brazilian prisons, Palestinian poets, the war in Vietnam. In Cuba he meets Che Guevara.

And again and again, we encounter Calvino the voracious reader: as a young man catching up with Ibsen and Rilke and what seems to be the whole of western literature, paying attention to contemporary Italian writers of all stripes; as a prolific reviewer “reading books to review immediately,” as he says (January 16, 1950); as a man who spent most of his adult life working as an editor in a publishing house. A collection of his letters in Italian is called *I libri degli altri* (*Other People’s Books*), a phrase itself taken from a casual, generous remark of Calvino’s: “I have spent more time with other people’s books than with my own.” He added, “I do not regret it.”² Perhaps not coincidentally, this avid reader sometimes halts as a writer, wonders whether he is finished, whether his present pause will become permanent. He is always discreet, but the distress is palpable as he evokes, for instance,

a “period of depression and writer’s block which . . . has gone on for some time now and maybe won’t ever unblock” (January 11, 1976), or tells a correspondent that he has “only progressed towards rarefaction and silence.” “In recent years,” “he says wryly, “I was very satisfied playing the dead man for a bit: how clever I am at not publishing! . . . Whereas now I am starting again to realize that the one thing I would like is to write . . . but . . . I have managed to lose all love for images of contemporary life” (May 6, 1972). He regains this love, but the loss was real while it lasted. All the late work, beautifully written as it is, shows a greater and greater attention to what cannot be said.

The selection of letters in this volume—a little less than one third of those that appear in Luca Baranelli’s magnificent *Lettere* (2000)—seeks to reflect this history and Calvino’s place in it. We have not scanted the Italian dimension but have taken care to retain letters that have an international dimension. The focus is on literary and political matters rather than family—although we have just seen there is no safe way of keeping these elements separate—but even the complete *Lettere*, which especially in the early years represents family life more roundly, does not give us access to a secret, second Calvino, a person concealed behind the writer, so to speak. It is true that Baranelli’s collection, containing close to a thousand items, presents as he says only “a modest percentage” of the letters Calvino wrote, and “obvious reasons” of reserve and privacy must take some letters off the table (something Calvino himself thought was right in the cases of Pavese and Vittorini). But a private life, whatever our current eagerness for gossip may suggest, is not necessarily a buried life.

What is more striking, perhaps, is that the creative writer doesn’t dominate this correspondence as we might expect. There are interesting exceptions—occasional sketches and descriptions, an outline for “The Motel of Crossed Destinies,” which Calvino never wrote (August 20, 1973), the letter on paradise I mention later, which appeared as an article—but on the whole the letters are not being used as practice for fiction or essays. And finally, since he is not thinking of us, Calvino does not have any sort of eye on posterity, as André Gide and so many other modern letter writers do. He is living in the present, not constructing a future monument.

These aspects of the letters may therefore offer something of a surprise to the reader who comes to them from the fiction and who may at first miss the expected intricacy and play. It's not that there is no fun in the letters (there are plenty of humorous and ironic moments) or that Calvino is ever solemn or pompous; nor am I suggesting that the letters are serious while the fiction is not. But the sense of direct communication, of a man being as clear as he can about a host of matters, complex and simple, is quite different from that created by the artistic density of Calvino's prose fiction and indeed of many of his essays. In his art, the wit and the irony are ways of reflecting the difficulties of the world while hanging on to his sanity—instruments of reason in a world of madness. "I am in favor," Calvino says in one letter, "of a clown-like mimesis of contemporary reality" (January 18, 1957). Clowns are often sad and all too sane; but their relation to reality is oblique. Calvino's writing is part of a great literary project of hinting and suggesting, making memorable shapes and images, rather than giving information or offering explanations. In his letters, Calvino tells rather than shows his correspondents what he means—with great and often moving success.

For this reason, although we invade Calvino's privacy by the mere fact of looking at these letters, it is a very special privacy that appears: not the writer's real self—why wouldn't his writing represent this self, as he thought it did—but his plain self. We eavesdrop not on his secrets but on his devotion to clarity. Of course Calvino is too thoughtful not to register the possibility that the very idea of a plain self is a fiction. But it could be a truth-telling fiction, like the story of being born in San Remo. Consider sentences like these. "I am not a passionate person," Calvino writes in a letter when he is manifestly very angry. He insists, I'm sure rightly, that "hatred, resentment at insults, wounded dignity" are not his "cup of tea" [literally bread for my teeth]. "I think one ought to feel mortally offended. . . . I can't do it." But he is still angry, and needs both to keep calm and to let his feelings show. "Maybe diligence is my way of being passionate," he says finally. "That is why I manage to be diligent only in odd, very brief moments" (March 20, 1964). There: he's found the right tone, and a faint touch of self-mockery helps to maintain the balance.

Calvino's clarifications cover many diverse topics—he has no unified theory of literature or anything else—but they often converge in their effect. We now understand what we half-understood before; we see that what looked like a quirk was a policy; we realize that our puzzlement and Calvino's are one and the same. There is an excellent example of this effect in the cluster of closely related questions concerning the representation of reality in literature, the notion of paradise, and the travails of Italian Communism. Perhaps surprisingly, each of these questions turns out to be in part a version of the others.

A “clown-like mimesis” of reality will picture the world as sad and laughable, perhaps scarcely to be lived in—“always in the background,” Calvino says in one letter (November 13, 1979), “there remains the impossibility of accepting the world as it is.” But we are living in it, and that is why the laughter is essential. It is a sign that we are not mere victims, that we are still thinking. This is how we attempt to get the starkest sort of grasp on the real—“in order to hate the Tower of Babel we have to have the Tower of Babel totally tangible in front of us” (March 3, 1958)—while recognizing that only indirection will work. This is how literature becomes at times a “kind of game, which does not require allegories to be looked for, though at the same time suggesting them” (August 7, 1952), and this is why closure in Calvino is always ironic, a neat simulation of what is not available. “The conclusion has to seem meaningful while still remaining a purely formal element” (December 16, 1967). “For me . . . writing has always meant setting out in one direction, staking everything on one card, yet with the awareness that there are others” (March 2, 1950).

All this is part of what Calvino calls his Enlightenment mentality, belated, self-conscious, aware of the troubles reason has got itself into but faithful to lucidity all the same. “Enlightenment rationalism has for two centuries done nothing but be beaten about the head and been on the receiving end of denials, and yet it continues to co-exist in the face of all its critiques: and perhaps I express this co-existence” (October 26, 1964). Here's an old/new Enlightenment idea: “Man is simply the best chance we know of that matter has had of providing itself with information about itself” (July 7, 1970). We may also think of Calvino's epigram in a list of writers he likes: “I like Chesterton because he

wanted to be the Catholic Voltaire and I wanted to be the Communist Chesterton.”³

Clowns and rationalists do not—cannot—believe in paradise, and more important perhaps, are endlessly troubled by the fact that everyone around them does. The left, the middle, and the right are as bad as each other in this respect. What chance is there for those “who have always wanted people no longer to think in terms of hell and paradise” (March 2, 1969)? Well, they can argue their case, as Calvino does in 1950 in a long letter to Mario Motta, later published in the short-lived magazine *Cultura e realtà*. Responding to Motta’s suggestion that “each one of us can hope for a supernatural paradise,” Calvino says that the very term “paradise,” let alone “supernatural,” is “totally foreign” to his “usual way of thinking.” This doesn’t mean he won’t try an unusual way of thinking, but it doesn’t help. The thought of paradise for Calvino, however he takes it, gets in the way of the work that needs doing on earth: “a host of things to do, of responsibilities, of ‘troubles’ . . . What pushes me in this direction is not, it seems to me, a ‘paradise’ to be reached, but the satisfaction of seeing things gradually starting to go the right way, feeling in a better position for solving problems as they emerge.” Even Dante, Calvino says, in spite of the otherworldly locations of his great poem, is concerned with “men as they are, on the ‘earth’” (July 1950).

But will anyone listen to such arguments, if even Calvino talks about hell in what are perhaps his most famous sentences? The answer will depend on how we read those sentences. *Invisible Cities* ends in this way:

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.

It’s clear that we have not left the earth even if the imagery has, and Calvino’s language is in an important sense more direct than that of

the translation. “Apprendimento,” as Martin McLaughlin reminds us, means “learning” rather than “apprehension,” and so suggests work and persistence rather than fear combined with conceptual grasp. We are still very close to the unmystified Enlightenment.

Calvino says he has noticed that “critics dwell on the final sentence . . . as if that were the conclusion.” It is the conclusion, but faithful to the idea of there always being another card to play, Calvino adds that his book “has two conclusions, both of the same order of importance: one on the ideal city . . . and the other on the infernal city” (January 20, 1973). The irony is that the ideal city does sound like a paradise, however tentative and disjointed its appearance. Marco Polo says:

I will put together, piece by piece, the perfect city, made of fragments mixed with the rest, of instants separated by intervals . . . If I tell you that the city toward which my journey tends is discontinuous in space and time, now scattered, now more condensed, you must not believe the search for it can stop.⁴

Still, we get the point. We can (just about) talk of paradise as long as we realize we must not give up looking for it, and too many people take the invitation as heading in precisely the opposite direction: toward the end of all searches.

What provoked Calvino’s long initial reflection on paradise was Motta’s review of a book called *The God That Failed*, and this is where the paths of writing and paradise cross with Communism. The God in question was either Marx or Revolution, and Calvino can’t bear the thought that politics is a matter of faith, or has any relation to religion. Such an assumption “has always been at the farthest pole from everything I have written done said thought” (March 21, 1960). Politics, as in the above quotation regarding “things to do,” is about making conditions better on earth (or trying to), or it is nothing. The very idea of an ex-Communist in this theological sense (as distinct from the mundane sense of no longer being a member of a Communist Party) seems shabby to Calvino, a proof only of delusion.

The “ex-Communist” is one of the dreariest figures of the postwar period: with behind him that sad air of wasted time, and ahead of him the squalid existence of someone redeemed by the Salvation Army,

going around the streets with the band and its choir, shouting out that he's been a drunkard and a cheat. (July 1950)

It's not that Communism itself doesn't have its dreary sides and worse. Calvino himself is willing to say that "a witty and communicative Communist" is "a rare thing" (April 10, 1954), and to admit that "the Party card (along with all the contradictory network of relations it brought with it) often took the place of my conscience" (August 9, 1957). But it didn't take its place often, and "in fact the very poverty of Communism's official literature acted as a spur to me to try to bring a touch of creative felicity to my work as a writer; I believe I have always managed to be, inside the Party, a free man" (August 1, 1957).

In order to understand Italy (and indeed many other countries) in the twentieth century, we need to see how a Communist Party could be a representative progressive force in its intentions and sometimes its achievements; and also fatally flawed by its dependence on Moscow. It was not a God that failed but a deified dictator called Stalin—or more precisely, an unquestioning allegiance to Stalin's success was the ruin of European Communism. Calvino does not deny this allegiance, which he came to see as "schizophrenic," the split adherence of well-intentioned persons to a "tragic and ferocious system."⁵ But he never becomes an ex-Communist except in the narrowest sense. Or perhaps we should say he never becomes an anti-Communist. It is possible, and Calvino does this very delicately in his letters and in his essays, to get a clear view of one's errors without believing that one's former life was nothing but a mistake. It is in this sense that the contemplation of the Tower of Babel rather than the Garden of Eden is instructive for a writer.

For an instance of how the clarity of these letters relates to the transposed, ironic clarity of a fable, we could look at one of Calvino's earliest stories, "Making Do." The location is a town where everything is forbidden except playing the game of tip-cat. No one complains, everyone enjoys the game. Then a thaw comes, or a moment of liberalization, and the constables of the town decide "there was no longer any reason why everything should be forbidden." Now the people are allowed to do whatever they want. What they want, however, is to go on playing tip-cat, and when the constables try to prevent this, we are

told, “the people rebelled and killed the lot of them.” The last words of the story are, “Then without wasting time, they got back to playing tip-cat.”⁶

This tale, with its respect for a hostility to change and its implied invitation to do better nevertheless, has a close resemblance to the much later story “Becalmed in the Antilles,” where Donald Duck, who once sailed with Francis Drake, is pestered by his nephews for his account of the time when the crews of an English and a Spanish ship, rather than fighting each other, just watched and waited—for the wind or perhaps the invention of the steam engine. That’s all that happened: nothing. Calvino was thinking of the Italian Communist Party in the mid-1950s, but also more generally of the Cold War, and the antagonism between Russia and China. And both of these stories, of course, can be taken as alluding to a range of realities Calvino himself could not have known, because as with his birth in San Remo, the instances are fictitious but their echoes in the world are actual. Calvino’s objection to the French translation of the title of his *Non-existent Knight* as *Le chevalier irréel* makes this point impeccably: “I never say that the knight is unreal. I say that he does not exist. That is very different” (June 9, 1961).