Upon hearing of Italo Calvino’s death in September of 1985, John Updike commented, “Calvino was a genial as well as brilliant writer. He took fiction into new places where it had never been before, and back into the fabulous and ancient sources of narrative.” At that time Calvino was the preeminent Italian writer, the influence of his fantastic novels and stories reaching far beyond the Mediterranean.

Two years before, The Paris Review had commissioned a Writers at Work interview with Calvino to be conducted by William Weaver, his longtime English translator. It was never completed, though Weaver later rewrote his introduction as a remembrance. Still later, The Paris Review purchased transcripts of a videotaped interview with Calvino (produced and directed by Damien Pettigrew and Gaspard Di Caro) and a memoir by Pietro Citati, the Italian critic. What follows—these three selections and a transcript of Calvino’s thoughts before being interviewed—is a collage, an oblique portrait.

—Rowan Gaither, 1992

Italo Calvino was born on October 15, 1923 in Santiago de Las Vegas, a suburb of Havana. His father Mario was an agronomist who had spent a number of years in tropical countries, mostly in Latin America. Calvino’s mother Eva, a native of Sardinia, was also a scientist, a botanist. Shortly after their son’s birth, the Calvinos returned to Italy and settled in Liguria, Professor Calvino’s native region. As Calvino grew up, he divided his time between the seaside town of San Remo, where his father directed an experimental floriculture station, and the family’s country house in the hills, where the senior Calvino pioneered the growing of grapefruit and avocados.

The future writer studied in San Remo and then enrolled in the agriculture department of the University of Turin, lasting there only until the first examinations. When the Germans occupied Liguria and the rest of northern Italy during World War II, Calvino and his sixteen-year-old brother evaded the Fascist draft and joined the partisans.

Afterward, Calvino began writing, chiefly about his wartime experiences. He published his first stories and at the same time resumed his university studies, transferring from agriculture to literature. During this time he wrote his first novel, The Path to the Nest of Spiders, which he submitted to a contest sponsored by the Mondadori publishing firm. The novel did not place in the competition, but the writer Cesare Pavese passed it on to the Turin publisher Giulio Einaudi who accepted it, establishing a relationship with Calvino that would continue throughout most of his life. When The Path to the Nest of Spiders appeared in 1947, the year that Calvino took his university degree, he had already started working for Einaudi.
In the postwar period the Italian literary world was deeply committed to politics, and Turin, an industrial capital, was a focal point. Calvino joined the Italian Communist Party and reported on the Fiat company for the party’s daily newspaper.

After the publication of his first novel, Calvino made several stabs at writing a second, but it was not until 1952, five years later, that he published a novella, *The Cloven Viscount*. Sponsored by Elio Vittorini and published in a series of books by new writers called Tokens, it was immediately praised by reviewers, though its departure from the more realistic style of his first novel resulted in criticism from the party, from which he resigned in 1956 when Hungary was invaded by the Soviet Union.

In 1956 Calvino published a seminal collection of Italian folktales. The following year he brought out *The Baron in the Trees*, and in 1959 *The Nonexistent Knight*. These two stories, with *The Cloven Viscount*, have been collected in the volume *Our Ancestors*. In 1965 he published *Cosmicomics*, and in 1979 his novel (or antinovel) *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* appeared. The last works published during his lifetime were *Mr. Palomar* (1983), a novel, and *Difficult Loves* (1984), a collection of stories.

Calvino died on September 19, 1985 in a hospital in Siena, thirteen days after suffering a stroke.

I first met Italo Calvino in a bookshop in Rome, sometime in the spring of 1965—my memory-picture has us both wearing light suits. I had been living in Rome for well over a decade. Calvino had returned to the city only a short time before, after a long period in Paris. He asked me abruptly—he was never a man for idle circumlocution—if I would like to translate his latest book, *Cosmicomics*. Though I hadn’t read it, I immediately said yes. I picked up a copy before leaving the store and we arranged to get together a few days later.

He was living with his family in a small, recently modernized apartment in the medieval quarter of the city near the Tiber. Like Calvino houses that I was to know later, the apartment gave the impression of being sparsely furnished; I remember the stark white walls, the flooding sunlight. We talked about the book, which I had read in the meanwhile. I learned that he had already tried out—and flunked—one English translator, and I wanted to know the reason for my colleague’s dismissal. Indiscreetly, Calvino showed me the correspondence. One of the stories in the volume was called “Without Colors.” In an excess of misguided originality, the translator had entitled the piece “In Black and White.” Calvino’s letter of dismissal pointed out that black and white are colors. I signed on.

My first translation of Calvino had a difficult history. The American editor who commissioned it changed jobs just as I was finishing, and—on my unfortunate advice—Calvino followed him to his new firm. But then the editor committed suicide, the new house turned down *Cosmicomics*, the old house wouldn’t have us back, and the book was adrift. It was rejected by other publishers, until Helen Wolff at Harcourt Brace Jovanovich accepted it, beginning Calvino’s long association with that publishing house. The book received glowing reviews (and one fierce pan from, predictably, the first translator) and won the National Book Award for translation.

From 1966 until his death there was hardly a time when I wasn’t translating (or supposed to be translating) something by him. On occasion he would call up and ask me to translate a few pages of text at
top speed—a statement he had to make for a Canadian television program or a little introduction to a book on conduits. He loved strange assignments: the wondrous Castle of Crossed Destinies (1969) was born as a commentary on a Renaissance deck of tarot cards.

With Calvino every word had to be weighed. I would hesitate for whole minutes over the simplest word—bello (beautiful) or cattivo (bad). Every word had to be tried out. When I was translating Invisible Cities, my weekend guests in the country always were made to listen to a city or two read aloud.

Writers do not necessarily cherish their translators, and I occasionally had the feeling that Calvino would have preferred to translate his books himself. In later years he liked to see the galleys of the translation; he would make changes—in his English. The changes were not necessarily corrections of the translation; more often they were revisions, alterations of his own text. Calvino’s English was more theoretical than idiomatic. He also had a way of falling in love with foreign words. With the Mr. Palomar translation he developed a crush on the word feedback. He kept inserting it in the text and I kept tactfully removing it. I couldn’t make it clear to him that, like charisma and input and bottom line, feedback, however beautiful it may sound to the Italian ear, was not appropriate in an English-language literary work.

One August afternoon in 1982, I drove to Calvino’s summer house—a modern, roomy villa in a secluded residential complex at Roccamare on the Tuscan sea coast north of Grosseto. After exchanging greetings, we settled down in big comfortable chairs on the broad shaded terrace. The sea was not visible, but you could sense it through the pungent, pine-scented air.

Calvino most of the time was not a talkative man, never particularly sociable. He tended to see the same old friends, some of them associates from Einaudi. Though we had known each other for twenty years, went to each other’s houses, and worked together, we were never confidants. Indeed, until the early 1980s we addressed each other with the formal lei; I called him Signor Calvino and he called me Weaver, unaware how I hated being addressed by my surname, a reminder of my dread prep-school days. Even after we were on first-name terms, when he telephoned me I could sense a pause before his “Bill?” He was dying to call me Weaver as in the past.

I don’t want to give the impression that he couldn’t be friendly. Along with his silences, I remember his laughter, often sparked by some event in our work together. And I remember a present he gave me, an elegant little publication about a recently restored painting by Lorenzo Lotto of St. Jerome. Inside, Calvino wrote, “For Bill, the translator as saint.”

Still, thinking back on it, I always felt somewhat the intruder.

—William Weaver

_Thoughts Before an Interview_

Every morning I tell myself, Today has to be productive—and then something happens that prevents me from writing. Today . . . what is there that I have to do today? Oh yes, they are supposed to come interview me. I am afraid my novel will not move one single step forward. Something always happens. Each morning I
already know I will be able to waste the whole day. There is always something to do: go to the bank, the post office, pay some bills . . . always some bureaucratic tangle I have to deal with. While I am out I also do errands such as the daily shopping: buying bread, meat, or fruit. First thing, I buy newspapers. Once one has bought them, one starts reading as soon as one is back home—or at least looking at the headlines to persuade oneself that there is nothing worth reading. Every day I tell myself that reading newspapers is a waste of time, but then . . . I cannot do without them. They are like a drug. In short, only in the afternoon do I sit at my desk, which is always submerged in letters that have been awaiting answers for I do not even know how long, and that is another obstacle to be overcome.

Eventually I get down to writing and then the real problems begin. If I start something from scratch, that is the most difficult moment, but even if it is something I started the day before, I always reach an impasse where a new obstacle needs to be overcome. And it is only in the late afternoon that I finally begin to write sentences, correct them, cover them with erasures, fill them with incidental clauses, and rewrite. At that very moment the telephone or doorbell usually rings and a friend, translator, or interviewer arrives. Speaking of which . . . this afternoon . . . the interviewers . . . I do not know if I will have the time to prepare. I could try to improvise but I believe an interview needs to be prepared ahead of time to sound spontaneous. Rarely does an interviewer ask questions you did not expect. I have given a lot of interviews and I have concluded that the questions always look alike. I could always give the same answers. But I believe I have to change my answers because with each interview something has changed either inside myself or in the world. An answer that was right the first time may not be right again the second. This could be the basis of a book. I am given a list of questions, always the same; every chapter would contain the answers I would give at different times. The changes would contain the answers I would give at different times. The changes would then become the itinerary, the story that the protagonist lives. Perhaps in this way I could discover some truths about myself.

But I must go home—the time approaches for the interviewers to arrive.

God help me!

—Italo Calvino

INTERVIEWER

What place, if any at all, does delirium have in your working life?

ITALO CALVINO

Delerium? . . . Let’s assume I answer, I am always rational. Whatever I say or write, everything is subject to reason, clarity, and logic. What would you think of me? You’d think I’m completely blind when it comes to myself, a sort of paranoiac. If on the other hand I were to answer, Oh, yes, I am really delirious; I always write as if I were in a trance, I don’t know how I write such crazy things, you’d think me a fake, playing a not-too-credible character. Maybe the question we should start from is what of myself do I put into what I write. My answer—I put my reason, my will, my taste, the culture I belong to, but at the same time I cannot control, shall we say, my neurosis or what we could call delirium.
INTERVIEWER

What is the nature of your dreams? Are you more interested in Jung than you are in Freud?

CALVINO

Once after reading Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, I went to bed. I dreamt. The following morning I could remember perfectly my dream, so I was able to apply Freud’s method to my dream and explain it to the very last detail. At that moment I believed that a new era for me was about to begin; from that moment on my dreams would no longer keep any secrets from me. It didn’t happen. That was the only time Freud had ever lit the darkness of my subconscious. Since that time I have continued to dream as I did before. But I forget them, or if I’m able to remember them I don’t understand even the first things about them. To explain the nature of my dreams wouldn’t satisfy a Freudian analyst any more than a Jungian. I read Freud because I find him an excellent writer . . . a writer of police thrillers that can be followed with great passion. I also read Jung, who’s interested in things of great interest to a writer such as symbols and myths. Jung is not as good a writer as Freud. But, anyhow, I am interested in both of them.

INTERVIEWER

The images of *fortuna* and chance recur quite frequently in your fiction, from the shuffling of the tarot cards to the random distribution of manuscripts. Does the notion of chance play a role in the composition of your works?

CALVINO

My tarot book, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, is the most calculated of all I have written. Nothing in it is left to chance. I don’t believe chance can play a role in my literature.

INTERVIEWER

How do you write? How do you perform the physical act of writing?

CALVINO

I write by hand, making many, many corrections. I would say I cross out more than I write. I have to hunt for words when I speak, and I have the same difficulty when writing. Then I make a number of additions, interpolations, that I write in a very tiny hand. There comes a moment when I myself can’t read my handwriting, so I use a magnifying glass to figure out what I’ve written. I have two different handwritings. One is large with fairly big letters—the os and as have a big hole in the center. This is the hand I use when I’m copying or when I’m rather sure of what I’m writing. My other hand corresponds to a less confident mental state and is very small—the os are like dots. This is very hard to decipher, even for me.

My pages are always covered with canceling lines and revisions. There was a time when I made a number of handwritten drafts. Now, after the first draft, written by hand and completely scrawled over, I start typing it out, deciphering as I go. When I finally reread the typescript, I discover an entirely different text that I often revise further. Then I make more corrections. On each page I try first to make my corrections with a
typewriter; I then correct some more by hand. Often the page becomes so unreadable that I type it over a
second time. I envy those writers who can proceed without correcting.

INTERVIEWER

Do you work every day or only on certain days and at certain hours?

CALVINO

In theory I would like to work every day. But in the morning I invent every possible excuse not to work: I
have to go out, make some purchases, buy the newspaper. As a rule, I manage to waste the morning, so I end
up sitting down to write in the afternoon. I’m a daytime writer, but since I waste the morning I’ve become an
afternoon writer. I could write at night, but when I do, I don’t sleep. So I try to avoid that.

INTERVIEWER

Do you always have a set task, something specific you decide to work on? Or do you have various things
going on at once?

CALVINO

I always have a number of projects. I have a list of about twenty books I’d like to write, but then the
moment comes when I decide I’m going to write that book. I’m only a novelist on occasion. Many of my
books are made up of brief texts collected together, short stories, or else they are books that have an overall
structure but are composed of various texts. Building a book around an idea is very important for me. I
spend a lot of time constructing a book, making outlines that eventually prove to be of no use to me
whatsoever. I throw them away. What determines the book is the writing, the material that’s actually on the
page.

I’m very slow getting started. If I have an idea for a novel, I find every conceivable pretext to not work on
it. If I’m doing a book of stories, short texts, each one has its own starting time. Even with articles I’m a slow
starter. Even with articles for newspapers, every time I have the same trouble getting under way. Once I
have started, then I can be quite fast. In other words, I write fast but I have huge blank periods. It’s a bit like
the story of the great Chinese artist—the emperor asked him to draw a crab, and the artist answered, I need
ten years, a great house, and twenty servants. The ten years went by, and the emperor asked him for the
drawing of the crab. I need another two years, he said. Then he asked for a further week. And finally he
picked up his pen and drew the crab in a moment, with a single, rapid gesture.

INTERVIEWER

Do you begin with a small group of unrelated ideas or a larger conception that you gradually fill in?

CALVINO

I start with a small, single image and then I enlarge it.
Turgenev said, “I would rather have too little architecture than too much because that might interfere with the truth of what I say.” Could you comment on this with reference to your writing?

CALVINO

It is true that in the past, say over the past ten years, the architecture of my books has had a very important place, perhaps too important. But only when I feel I have achieved a rigorous structure do I believe I have something that stands on its own two feet, a complete work. For example, when I began writing *Invisible Cities* I had only a vague idea of what the frame, the architecture of the book would be. But then, little by little, the design became so important that it carried the entire book; it became the plot of a book that had no plot. With *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* we can say the same—the architecture is the book itself. By then I had reached a level of obsession with structure such that I almost became crazy about it. It can be said about *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* that it could not have existed without a very precise, very articulated structure. I believe I have succeeded in this, which gives me a great satisfaction. Of course, all this kind of effort should not concern the reader at all. The important thing is to enjoy reading my book, independently of the work I have put into it.

INTERVIEWER

You live in several cities, moving fairly frequently from Rome to Paris to Turin and also to this house near the sea. Does the place where you are influence the work you’re doing?

CALVINO

I don’t think so. The experience of everyday life in a given place may influence what you are writing but not the fact that you are writing here or there. At present I’m writing a book that to some extent is connected with this house in Tuscany where I’ve been spending the summer for several years. But I could go on with what I’m writing in some other place.

INTERVIEWER

Could you write in a hotel room?

CALVINO

I used to say that a hotel room was the ideal space—empty, anonymous. There’s not a stack of letters to answer (or the remorse of not answering them); I don’t have a lot of other tasks. In that sense, a hotel room really is ideal. But I find I need a space of my own, a lair, though I suppose if something is really clear in my mind I could write it even in a hotel room.

INTERVIEWER

Do you travel with notes and papers?

CALVINO
Yes, I often carry notes around with me, and outlines. In the past ten years or so of my life outlines have become something of an obsession.

INTERVIEWER

Your parents were both scientists. Didn’t they want to make a scientist of you too?

CALVINO

My father was an agronomist; my mother, a botanist. They were profoundly concerned with the vegetable world, with nature, the natural sciences. But they became aware very early that I had no inclination in that direction—the usual reaction of children towards their parents. Now I regret that I didn’t assimilate as much of their knowledge as I could have. My reaction may also have been partly due to the fact that my parents were older. I was born when my mother was forty and my father nearly fifty, so there was a great distance between us.

INTERVIEWER

When did you begin writing?

CALVINO

As an adolescent I had no idea what I wanted to be. I began writing fairly early. But before I had done any writing at all, my passion was drawing; I drew caricatures of my classmates, my teachers. Fanciful drawings, but with no training. When I was a little boy, my mother enrolled me in a correspondence drawing course; the first thing of mine ever published—I don’t have a copy now and have been unable to find one—was a drawing. I was eleven years old. It appeared in a magazine published by this correspondence school; I was their youngest pupil. I wrote poems when I was very young. When I was around sixteen I tried to write pieces for the theater; it was my first passion, perhaps because during that period one of my links to the outside world was the radio, and I used to listen to many plays on the radio. So I started by writing—by trying to write—plays. Actually, for my plays and also some stories I was the illustrator as well as the author. But when I began writing in earnest I felt my drawing lacked any sort of style; I hadn’t developed one. So I gave up drawing. Some people—during a meeting, for example—will doodle and make little drawings on a sheet of paper. I have trained myself not even to do that.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you abandon the theater?

CALVINO

After the war the theater in Italy offered no models. Italian fiction was booming, and so I started writing fiction. I got to know a number of writers. Then I began to write novels. It is a matter of mental mechanisms. If one gets used to translating into a novel one’s experiences, one’s ideas, what one has to say becomes a novel; one is left with no raw materials for another form of literary expression. My way of writing prose is rather closer to the way a poet composes a poem. I am not a novelist who writes long novels.
concentrate an idea or an experience into a short synthetic text that goes side by side with other texts to form a series. I pay particular attention to expressions and words both with regard to their rhythms, their sounds, and the images they evoke. I believe, for example, that *Invisible Cities* is a book whose place is between poetry and novel. If I were to write it completely in verse, it would be a prosaic, narrative type of poetry . . . or perhaps lyric poetry, because lyric poetry is the one I love the most and the kind I read from the great poets.

INTERVIEWER

How did you enter the literary world of Turin, the group that centered around the publishing firm of Giulio Einaudi and his authors like Cesare Pavese and Natalia Ginzburg? You were very young at the time.

CALVINO

I went to Turin almost by chance. My whole life really began after the war. Before that I lived in San Remo, which is far removed from literary and cultural circles. When deciding to move, I hesitated between Turin and Milan; the two writers—both of them a decade older than I—who first read my things were Pavese, who lived in Turin, and Elio Vittorini, who lived in Milan. For a long time I couldn’t choose between the two cities. Perhaps if I had chosen Milan, which is a more active, livelier city, things would have been different. Turin is a more serious, more austere place. The choice of Turin was, to some extent, an ethical one—I identified with its cultural and political tradition. Turin had been the city of the anti-Fascist intellectuals, and this appealed to that part of me fascinated by a kind of Protestant severity. It is the most Protestant city of Italy, an Italian Boston. Perhaps because of my surname [Calvino is Italian for Calvin], and perhaps because I come from a very austere family, I was predestined to make moralistic choices. When I was six, in San Remo, my very first elementary school was a private Protestant institution. The teachers stuffed me full of scripture. So I have a certain internal conflict: I feel a kind of opposition toward the more carefree, slipshod Italy, which has made me identify with those Italian thinkers who believe that the country’s misfortunes come from having missed the Protestant Reformation. On the other hand, my disposition is not at all that of a puritan. My surname is Calvino but my given name, after all, is Italo.

INTERVIEWER

Do you find that today’s youth has different characteristics from those of your youth? As you grow older do you find yourself more inclined to dislike what young people do?

CALVINO

From time to time I get mad at young people; I think of long sermons that I then never deliver, first because I don’t like to preach, and secondly, nobody would listen to me. So there is not much left for me to do but continue to reflect on the difficulties of communicating with young people. Something happened between my generation and theirs. A continuity of experience has been interrupted; perhaps we lack common points of reference. But if I think back to my youth, the truth of the matter is that I didn’t pay any attention to criticisms, reproaches, and suggestions either. So I have no authority to speak today.

INTERVIEWER
You finally chose Turin and moved there. Did you immediately start working for Einaudi, the publishing firm?

CALVINO

Fairly soon. After Pavese introduced me to Giulio Einaudi and made him hire me, I was put in the advertising office. Einaudi had been a center of opposition to Fascism. It had a background I was ready to make my own, even though I hadn’t actually experienced it. It’s hard for a foreigner to understand the way Italy is made up of a number of different centers, each with different traditions in their cultural history. I came from a nearby region, Liguria, that had almost no literary tradition; there wasn’t a literary center. The writer who has no local literary tradition behind him feels himself a bit of an outsider. The big literary centers in Italy during the first part of the century were chiefly Florence, Rome, and Milan. The intellectual milieu in Turin, especially at Einaudi, was centered more on history and social problems than on literature. But all these things are important only in Italy. In subsequent years an international environment has always meant more to me—being Italian in the context of an international literature. Even in my tastes as a reader before I became a writer at all, I was interested in literature within a worldwide frame.

INTERVIEWER

Who were the writers you read with the greatest pleasure and the ones who made the greatest impression on you?

CALVINO

From time to time, when I reread books from my adolescence and young manhood, I am surprised to rediscover a part of myself that I seemed to have forgotten, though it has gone on acting inside of me. A while ago, for example, I reread *Saint Julien l'Hospitalier*, and I recalled how much it—with its view of the world of animals like a Gothic tapestry— Influenced my early fiction. Certain writers I read as a boy, like Stevenson, have remained models of style for me, of lightness, narrative impetus, and energy. The authors of my childhood reading, like Kipling and Stevenson, remain my models. Next to them I would place the Stendhal of *La Chartreuse de Parme*.

INTERVIEWER

With Pavese and the other writers of the house of Einaudi you had also a literary comradeship, didn’t you? You gave them your manuscripts to read and comment on.

CALVINO

Yes. At that time I was writing a lot of short stories and I showed them to Pavese, to Natalia Ginzburg, who was a young writer also working there. Or else I took them to Vittorini in Milan, which is only two hours away from Turin. I paid attention to their opinions. At a certain point, Pavese said to me, We know now that you can write short stories; you have to take the plunge and write a novel. I don’t know whether this was good advice or not, because I was a short-story writer. If I had said everything I had to say in the form of stories I would have written a number of stories that I never actually did. Anyway, my first novel was
published and it was a success. For several years I tried to write another. But the literary climate was already being defined as neo-realism, and it wasn’t for me. In the end I went back to fantasy and I managed to write *The Cloven Viscount* in which I really expressed myself. I say “went back” because that was probably my true nature. It was only the fact that I had experienced the war and the vicissitudes of the Italy of those years that allowed me, for a while, to work fairly happily in another direction until I “went back” and found a kind of invention that belonged to me.

**INTERVIEWER**

Are novelists liars? And if they are not, what kind of truth do they tell?

**CALVINO**

Novelists tell that piece of truth hidden at the bottom of every lie. To a psychoanalyst it is not so important whether you tell the truth or a lie because lies are as interesting, eloquent, and revealing as any claimed truth.

I feel suspicious about writers who claim to tell the whole truth about themselves, about life, or about the world. I prefer to stay with the truths I find in writers who present themselves as the most bold-faced liars. My goal in writing *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, a novel entirely based on fantasy, was to find in this way a truth that I would have not been able to find otherwise.

**INTERVIEWER**

Do you believe that writers write what they can or rather what they should?

**CALVINO**

Writers write what they can. The act of writing is a function that becomes effective only if it allows one to express one’s inner self. A writer feels several kinds of constraints—literary constraints such as the number of lines in a sonnet or the rules of classical tragedy. These are part of the structure of the work within which the personality of the writer is free to express itself. But then there are social constraints such as religious, ethical, philosophical, and political duties. These cannot be imposed directly on the work but must be filtered through the writer’s inner self. Only if they are part of the innermost personality of the writer can they find their place in the work without suffocating it.

**INTERVIEWER**

You once said that you would like to have written a story by Henry James. Are there any others you’d like to claim as your own?

**CALVINO**

Yes, I did mention *The Jolly Corner* once. What would I say now? I’ll make quite a different answer: Adelbert von Chamisso’s *Peter Schlemihl*.
Were you influenced by Joyce or any of the modernists?

CALVINO

My author is Kafka and my favorite novel is *Amerika*.

INTERVIEWER

You seem to feel closer to writers in English—Conrad, James, even Stevenson—than anyone in the Italian prose tradition. Is this the case?

CALVINO

I have always felt very attached to Giacomo Leopardi. Besides being a marvelous poet, he was also an extraordinary writer of prose of great style, humor, imagination, and profundity.

INTERVIEWER

You've discussed the difference in the social status of American and Italian writers—Italian writers are more intimately connected with the publishing industry, whereas American ones are usually tied to academic institutions.

CALVINO

As the setting for a novel, the university—so frequent in American novels—is very dull (Nabokov is the one great exception), even duller than the publishing-firm setting in some Italian fiction.

INTERVIEWER

What about your work for Einaudi? Did that impinge on your creative activity?

CALVINO

Einaudi is a publisher who specializes in history, science, art, sociology, philosophy, and classics. Fiction occupies the last place. Working there is like living in an encyclopedic world.

INTERVIEWER

The struggle between the man trying to be organized amidst randomness seems to be a theme that pervades much of your work. I'm thinking especially of *If on a Winter's Night* and the Reader, who keeps trying to find the next chapter of the book he's reading.

CALVINO

The conflict between the world’s choices and man’s obsession with making sense of them is a recurrent pattern in what I've written.
In your writing you have switched back and forth between realistic and fantastical modes of writing. Do you enjoy both equally?

CALVINO

When I write a book that is all invention, I feel a longing for writing that deals directly with daily life, my activities, and my thoughts. At that moment the book I would like to be writing is the one that I am not. On the other hand, when I am writing something very autobiographical, tied to the particularities of everyday life, then my longing goes in the opposite direction. The book turns into the one of invention with no apparent ties to myself and perhaps, for this very reason, is more sincere.

INTERVIEWER

How have your novels fared in America?

CALVINO

_Invisible Cities_ is the one that has found the most admirers in the U.S.—surprisingly, as it is certainly not one of my easiest books. It isn’t a novel but rather a collection of poems in prose. _Italian Folktales_ was another success—once the book appeared in a complete translation, twenty-five years after it was first published in Italy. While _Invisible Cities_ was more successful with connoisseurs, men of letters, cultured people, _Italian Folktales_ was what we could define as a public success. In the U.S. my image is that of a writer of fantasy, a writer of tales.

INTERVIEWER

Do you believe that Europe is overwhelmed by British and American culture?

CALVINO

No. I share no chauvinistic reactions. The knowledge of foreign cultures is a vital element of any culture; I don’t believe we can ever have enough of it. A culture must be open to foreign influences if it wants to keep its own creative power alive. In Italy the most important cultural component has always been French literature. American literature, too, certainly left an imprint on me for life. Poe was one of my first interests; he taught me what a novel was. Later I discovered that Hawthorne was sometimes greater than Poe. Sometimes, not always. Melville. A perfect novel, _Benito Cereno_, was even more valuable than _Moby-Dick_. After all, my first apprenticeship was in the shadow of Cesare Pavese, the first Italian translator of Melville. Also among my first literary models have been such minor American writers of the end of the nineteenth century as Stephen Crane and Ambrose Bierce. The years of my literary development, the early forties, were dominated above all by Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald. At that time we experienced here in Italy a sort of infatuation with American literature. Even very minor authors like Saroyan, Caldwell, and Cain were considered models of style. Then there was Nabokov, of whom I have become and still am a fan. I must admit that my interest in American literature is somewhat driven by the desire to follow what occurs in a society that in some ways anticipates what will occur in Europe a few years later. In this sense, writers like Saul Bellow, Mary McCarthy, Gore Vidal are important because of their contact with society that is
expressed in the production of essays of quality. At the same time I am always looking for new literary voices—the discovery of John Updike’s novels in the mid-fifties.

INTERVIEWER

In the first, crucial postwar years, you lived almost continuously in Italy. And yet, with the exception of your novella *The Watcher*, your stories reflect little of the political situation of the country at the time though personally you were much involved in politics.

CALVINO

*The Watcher* was to have been part of a trilogy, never completed, entitled “A Chronicle of the 1950s.” My formative years were the Second World War. In the years immediately following I tried to grasp the meaning of the terrible traumas I had lived through, especially the German occupation. So politics in the first phase of my adult life had great importance. In fact, I joined the Communist Party, though the party in Italy was quite different from the communist parties of other countries. I still felt obliged to accept many things far removed from my way of feeling. Later, I began to feel increasingly that the idea of constructing a true democracy in Italy using the model—or myth—of Russia became harder and harder to reconcile. The contradiction grew to such an extent that I felt totally cut off from the communist world and, in the end, from politics. That was fortunate. The idea of putting literature in second place, after politics, is an enormous mistake, because politics almost never achieves its ideals. Literature, on the other hand, in its own field can achieve something and in the very long run can also have some practical effect. By now I have come to believe that important things are achieved only through very slow processes.

INTERVIEWER

In a country where nearly every major writer has written for the movies or even directed them, you seem to have resisted the lure of the cinema. Why and how?

CALVINO

As a young man I was a great cinema fan, a great moviegoer. But I was always a spectator. The idea of moving to the other side of the screen has never attracted me much. Knowing how it’s done removes a bit of the childish fascination that cinema has for me. I like Japanese and Swedish films precisely because they are so remote.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever been bored?

CALVINO

Yes, in my childhood. But it must be pointed out that childhood boredom is a special kind of boredom. It is a boredom full of dreams, a sort of projection into another place, into another reality. In adulthood boredom is made of repetition, it is the continuation of something from which we are no longer expecting any surprise. And I—would that I had time to get bored today! What I do have is the fear of repeating myself.
in my literary work. This is the reason that every time I must come up with a new challenge to face. I must find something to do that will look like a novelty, something a little beyond my capabilities.

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