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# Italo Calvino’s Lecture at Mount Holyoke College: Description and the Future of Literature

**Ombretta Frau**

*Italo Calvino with Professor of English Richard Johnson and Dean of the Faculty Joseph Ellis.*

**Fig. 1.** *Mount Holyoke College Alumnae Quarterly* (Winter 1985): 27.

In a 1981 interview with Italian public television, Italo Calvino was asked about his three keys for the new millennium. He replied that the three most important needs he could think of were, first of all, “imparare delle poesie a memoria, […] da bambini, da giovani, anche, anche da vecchi” (“learning poems by heart as children, as young people, and also as eldery people”); secondly, “fare dei calcoli a mano” (“doing calculations by hand”); and, finally, “combattere l’astrattezza del linguaggio che ci viene imposta, ormai, con delle cose molto precise” (“fighting language inaccuracy that is imposed on us, at this point, with very precise things”).[1] When reflecting on the future, Calvino consistently voiced what Lucia Re has called his “consistent, stubborn reaffirmation of the value of literature through four decades.”[2]

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[1] Italo Calvino, “Italo Calvino: le età dell’uomo,” interview by Alberto Sinigaglia, *RAI*, May 27, 1981.

[2] Lucia Re, “Calvino and the Value of Literature,” *MLN* 113, no. 1 (January 1998): 122.

Calvino died just four years later; before his untimely death, he left us with a poetic testament in the form of a series of five essays conceived for the Norton Lectures at Harvard University, which the author had been invited to give in the fall of 1985. Published in 1988 as *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*,[3] these five texts (a sixth was planned but never finished) testify to his passion for literature as a universal value. Additionally, they proclaim his faith in a carefully crafted literary language, a well-known and much studied style trait that is apparent, even to an inattentive reader, in every piece of his rich corpus.

In the chapter on "Esattezza" ("Exactitude"),[4] Calvino notes how exactitude should be about "immagini nitide, incisive, memorabili" ("clear, sharp, memorable images") and "un linguaggio il più preciso possible come lessico e come resa delle sfumature del pensiero dell'immaginazione" ("a language that is as precise as possible in its choice of words and in its expression of the nuances of thought and imagination").[5] He laments how, on the contrary, contemporary language had become vague, casual, inattentive,[6] and greatly deprived of form and meaning in part because of the "pioggia ininterrotta d'immagini" ("a continuous rain of images") from media outlets.[7] Calvino had expressed similar concerns many times before. During a lecture delivered at New York University in 1983, published as "Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto" ("The Written and the Unwritten World"), he said: "L'italiano sta diventando una lingua sempre più astratta, artificiale, ambigua; le cose più semplici non vengono mai dette direttamente, i sostantivi corretti vengono usati sempre più raramente" ("Italian is getting more and more abstract, artificial, ambiguous; the simplest things aren't ever said directly, concrete nouns are no longer used.").[8] Calvino's proposed solution to improve the connections between world and language was only apparently simple: "fissare l'attenzione su un oggetto qualsiasi, il più banale e familiare, e descriverlo minuziosamente come se fosse la cosa più nuova e più interessante dell'universo" ("fixing our attention on an object, any object, to the most trivial and familiar, and describing it minutely, as if it were the newest and most interesting thing in the world").[9] This statement reveals Calvino's belief in literary description as the necessary medium to see and understand the world, as the optimal device for a writer to unlock "windows in the reader's imagination."[10]

Between 1983 and his death in September 1985, Calvino traveled at least one more time to the United States, in the fall of 1984, to receive an honorary degree from Mount Holyoke College

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[3] Published in Italian as *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* (Milan: Garzanti, 1988). Now in *Saggi,* ed. Mario Barenghi (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), I: 631–753. I quote from *Saggi.*

[4] A note on translations: all translations from Italian are mine, with the exception of *Six Memos for the New Millennium.* trans. Geoff Brock. (New York: Marimer Books, 2016); "Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature," trans. Patrick Creagh in *The Uses of Literature* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 89-100, *Invisible cities*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), "The Written and the Unwritten Word (sic)" (*The New York Review of Books*, May 12, 1983). For the typo concerning this version see Anna Botta, "Introduzione," in *Italo Calvino newyorkese,* ed. Anna Botta and Domenico Scarpa (Rome: Avagliano, 2002), 10.

[5] Calvino, "Esattezza," 677 ("Exactitude," 68).

[6] Ibid., 678 (Ibid., 68).

[7] Ibid., 678 (Ibid., 69).

[8] Italo Calvino, "Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto," in *Saggi*, ed. Mario Barenghi (Milan: Mondadori, 1992), II:1870–71.

[9] Calvino, "Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto," 1872–73. Also see some earlier work, in particular Calvino's 1965 essay "L'italiano una lingua tra le altre lingue," in *Saggi* I:146–53. Additionally, see Paolo Zublena, "L'ultimo Calvino fra precisione e disastro," in *L'inquietante simmetria della lingua* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2002), 93–118.

[10] Michel Bonjour, "Some Paradoxes of Description," *Yale French Studies* 61 (1981): 47. Also see Marco Belpoliti, *L'occhio di Calvino* (Turin: Einaudi, 2006): 43–62. On the importance of "descrizione e riflessione" ("description and reflection"), see Sergio Bozzola and Chiara De Caprio, *Forme e figure della saggistica di Calvino* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2021), 64–85.

in Massachusetts, a significant event that somehow is not widely known.[11] For this occasion, he focused on the importance of literary descriptions in his work.[12] He accompanied his brief remarks with a selection of four readings: "Il bottone" ("The Button"), written for a volume about the painter Domenico Gnoli;[13] two of his best-known *Le città invisibili* (*Invisible Cities*), "Ottavia" ("Octavia") and "Bauci" ("Baucis");[14] and an excerpt from his last novel *Palomar*, "La pantofola spaiata" ("The Odd Slipper"), which had not yet been published in English translation.[15]

The Mount Holyoke degree conferral came at the end of an intense two-month-long festival of Italian culture to honor the memory of an iconic Italian professor, Valentine Giamatti (1911–1982).[16] The lecture series (with talks by Dudley Andrew, Peter Bondanella, Gian Piero Brunetta, Teresa De Lauretis, Dante Della Terza, and Peter Viereck) focused on Italo Calvino and Federico Fellini.[17] Held in Abbey Memorial Chapel, Calvino's and Agnelli's degree ceremony included musical entertainment by the Mount Holyoke Choir and an introduction by the college president, historian Elizabeth Kennan. In her remarks, Kennan stressed Calvino's ability to face both hope and disaster in his works, and his "Ariostean, exuberance of imagination." Judging from the

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[11] I provide a full transcript of Calvino's remarks is at the end of this article. The full recording can be found here: https://soundcloud.com/mountholyokecollege. The Special Convocation for the honorary degree was held on November 4, 1984. Together with Calvino—who received an honorary doctor of letters degree—then-Sottosegretaria agli Esteri Susanna Agnelli received an honorary doctor of law degree. The correspondence that led to Calvino's visit to Mount Holyoke is kept in the College's Archives and Special Collections. In a handwritten letter to President Elizabeth Kennan, Calvino wrote: "Dear Mrs. Kennan, I thank you very much for your invitation to receive an honorary degree at Mount Holyoke College. It will be for me a great pleasure to visit your college and be your guest with my wife; I'll be happy to give a reading to your students and to speak with them." Letter dated March 12, 1984, RG 4.07 Elizabeth T. Kennan Records, Sub-series 01, Correspondence, 1984, Box 14, Folder 12, Mount Holyoke College Archives and Special Collections. Between 1983 and 1984, Calvino embarked on several international trips to the Americas and elsewhere: "Ancora viaggi: nel 1983 a Parigi […] a New York per leggere la conferenza *Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto*. Nell'aprile 1984 è in Argentina […]; in settembre è a Siviglia per un convegno sulla letteratura fantastica, cui è stato invitato anche Borges." ("More travel: in 1983 [Calvino was] in Paris […], in New York to deliver his talk 'The Written and the Unwritten World.' In April 1984, he was in Argentina […]; in September in Seville for a conference on fantastic literature, to which Borges was also invited."). See Luca Baranelli and Ernesto Ferrero, eds., *Album Calvino* (Milan: Meridiani Mondadori, 1995), 310. On the degree ceremony, also see Edwin McDowell, "A Top Italian Writer is Making Inroads in US," *The New York Times*, November 26, 1984, 14.

[12] Calvino's remarks are preserved on an audiocassette kept in the Mount Holyoke Archives ("Giamatti Festival of Italian Culture," Fall 1984, LD7098.5, Mount Holyoke College Archives and Special Collections). See appendix here below for its written script

[13] Originally published in Vittorio Sgarbi, ed., *Gnoli* (Milan: Franco Maria Ricci, 1983), 12–19. Now in Germano Celant, ed., *Domenico Gnoli* (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 2021), 418–19 (in the same volume also in English translation: 351–53). Calvino wrote four pieces inspired by Domenico Gnoli'work: "Il bottone" ("The Button"), "La scarpa da donna" ("The Lady's Shoe"), "La camicia da uomo" ("The Man's Shirt"), and "Il guanciale" ("The Pillow").

[14] Italo Calvino, "Ottavia," in *Le città invisibili*, in *Romanzi e racconti*, ed. Mario Barenghi and Bruno Falcetto (Milan: Meridiani Mondadori, 1992), II: 421; "Bauci," in *Le città invisibili*, in *Romanzi e racconti*, II:423.

[15] *Palomar* was published in English in 1985 as *Mr. Palomar* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich).

[16] On Valentine Giamatti, see Ombretta Frau, "Vagliami il lungo studio e il grande amore. Valentine Giamatti's Dante Collection at Mount Holyoke College," *CoSMo. Comparative Studies in Modernism,* 18 (Spring 2021), 231–48. A second-generation Italian-American, Giamatti taught at Mount Holyoke between 1940 and 1973.

[17] Federico Fellini and Giulietta Masina were expected to join Calvino at Mount Holyoke, but had to cancel at the last minute. In his regrets letter to President Elizabeth Kennan, Fellini wrote: "Unfortunately, at this point I see that at that time it would be impossible for me to leave Rome, even for one day. In fact, I will start shooting a film the first week of October, and it is unthinkable that I should ask the Production Company to stop the film for one week. […] Believe, dear Mrs. Kennan, in my great embarrassment and even greater regret in not being able to look forward to these few days which would surely have been wonderful" (Letter dated August 15, 1984, RG 4.07 Elizabeth T. Kennan Records, Sub-series 01, Correspondence, 1984, Box 14, Folder 13, Mount Holyoke College Archives and Special Collections). The film was *Ginger e Fred* (1986).

audience's enthusiastic reaction to Calvino's remarks, it was a successful evening. Calvino spoke in tentative but clear English, and read all the aforementioned works in English and the two 'invisible cities' in Italian.[18]

We know that Calvino firmly believed that mastery of written language could be attained through carefully crafted descriptions, precisely because the act of describing entails a continual recalibration of language itself. In 1998, Lucia Re speculated on "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 […] attributed throughout his entire life a special value to literature."[19] Re stressed that for Calvino "The value of literature is that of teaching us how to attribute a value to things. […] It consists in the rigor of language (*rigore del linguaggio*)."[20] Following Re's analysis, I argue that in literary description—paired with meticulous fine-tuning, balancing, and sharpening of language—Calvino found an ideal medium to maintain, reinvent, and renew literature so as to keep it relevant for the future.

Calvino's visit to the Pioneer Valley, where Mount Holyoke is located, in 1984 was not his first. Already a popular author in the United States and a great admirer of the country, he had traveled to Massachusetts several times before, starting in 1960.[21] Between February and March 1976, Calvino was a guest at nearby Amherst College where he delivered a paper, "Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature," later translated in Italian as "Usi politici giusti e sbagliati della letteratura," that shed light on his pessimism around politics and literature, and conveyed his frustration and sense of loss: "Oggi affrontando queste due problematiche provo due sensazioni separate, e sono entrambe sensazioni di vuoto: il vuoto d'un progetto politico in cui io possa credere, e il vuoto d'un progetto letterario in cui io possa credere" ("When I confront these two problematical areas today, I feel two quite separate sensations, and both are sensations of emptiness: the lack of a political programs that I can believe in and the lack of a literary program that I can believe in.").[22]

The same year, for his *Corriere della sera* column, Calvino wrote a ferocious portrait of Amherst, one of the three towns that, with Northampton and South Hadley, form the academic triangle of the Five College Consortium.[23] The piece, originally published as "Palomar nel paese degli indiani" ("Palomar in the Land of Indians") is a somber description of the small American college town, featuring its glorious past ("una delle più grandi poetesse del mondo passò oscuramente la sua giovinezza biancovestita tra severi uomini nerovestiti" ["one of the greatest

[18] All English translations were by William Weaver.
[19] Re, "Calvino and the Value of Literature," 122.
[20] Ibid., 123.
[21] In "Esattezza" (677), Calvino recalls his first visit to Massachussetts with Giorgio de Santillana as his guide. On Calvino's passion for the United States, see Botta and Scarpa, *Italo Calvino newyorkese*.
[22] Calvino, "Usi politici giusti e sbagliati della letteratura," in *Saggi* ed. Mario Barenghi (Milan: Meridiani Mondadori, 1992), I:352–53. Delivered at Amherst College on February 25, 1976: "Conferenza (scritta direttamente in inglese) letta ad Amherst (Massachusetts), il 25 febbraio 1976" ["A talk (written in English) read at Amherst, Massachusetts" in *Una pietra sopra* (Milan: Oscar Mondadori, 1995), 345]. In an April 21, 1976 letter to Franco Maria Ricci, Calvino mentions having recently been to the United States: "Il mese scorso sono stato negli Stati Uniti e ho fatto delle conferenze sui tarocchi" ("Last month, I have been to the United States and I delivered talks on tarots"). See Italo Calvino, *Lettere 1940-1985,* ed. Luca Baranelli (Milan: Meridiani Mondadori, 2000), 1297.
[23] The consortium comprises Amherst, Hampshire, Mount Holyoke, and Smith Colleges, as well as the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Calvino wrote a column, "L'osservatorio del signor Palomar" ("Mr. Palomar's Observatory"), for the Italian daily *Corriere della sera* between 1975 and 1977.

poets in the world spent her white-clad youth in obscurity among severe black-clad men"])[24] and its violent historical heritage: "Il lindo paesino del *college* […] porta il nome d'un generale che fu al fianco di Washington. Recentemente uno storico contestatore ha fatto […] una scoperta tanto sgradevole […]: il generale vendeva agli indiani coperte infette di vaiolo" ("this cute college town […] was named after a general who fought by Washington's side. Recently, a rebel historian made […] a very unpleasant discovery […]: the general sold smallpox-infected blankets to the indians").[25]

Calvino excluded this particular work (as well as several others) from the book version of *Mr. Palomar*, even though it is, technically speaking, a descriptive text. Most probably written *en plein air*, "Palomar nel Massachusetts" depicts Amherst and its surroundings, its *common* ("il grande prato che anticamente serviva da pascolo pubblico" ["the great meadow that used to serve as public pasture"]),[26] and its houses with "rettagoli di giardino anteriore e posteriore […] tutte pressapoco dello stesso ponderato decoro e insieme della stessa familiarità protettiva, ognuna col suo piccolo portico, […] le finestre con le tendine, l'attico a punta, il garage in fondo, la rete della pallacanestro […]" ("garden rectangles front and back […] all more or less with the same studied decorum and at the same time with the same protective familiarity, each with its own little porch, […], windows with courtains, a pointed attic, a garage at the back, a basketball hoop").[27] But by the time he decided to turn Palomar's *Corriere della sera* observations into a book, Calvino had refined his ideas on description with a preference for the particular, recognizing that "solo un piccolo numero di questi erano adatti a entrare nel libro, cioè quelli basati su un certo tipo d'attenzione a campi d'osservazione limitati […] che diventa racconto attraverso un'ossessione di completezza descrittiva" ("only a small number of them where suitable for the book, those based on a certain type of attention towards limited fields of observation […] that become a narrative through an obsession with descriptive integrity").[28]

It is also with this in mind that in his acceptance remarks at Mount Holyoke College, Calvino decided to focus on the importance of what he perceived as an "ancient art" and an endangered skill, the art of description: "I do not think that today anybody cares of description in school, and also in literature no modern writer, or very few, are interested in description."[29] Nonetheless, only a few years before, in 1981, *Yale French Studies* dedicated an entire issue to the theory of description.[30] Georges Perec contributed a piece to the collection.[31] The volume's wide scope covered "the qualities, tendencies and resistances of description, what our attitudes are towards it, […] how it works, […] and the strange kind of relationships it establishes with such concepts as

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[24] Italo Calvino, "Palomar nel Massachusetts," in *Saggi*, ed. Mario Barenghi (Milan: Meridiani Mondadori, 1992), II: 2697.

[25] Calvino, "Palomar nel Massachusetts," 2699. Calvino's close friend Natalia Ginzburg visited Amherst a few years before, in 1969, and had a similar reaction: "Amherst è un paese molto bello, tutto prati verdi, casette verniciate di bianco sparse fra le querce […]. Mi parve però che avesse, nella sua grazia, qualcosa di lezioso e professorale. Dietro a questo aspetto professorale e lezioso c'era una noia desolata e spettrale." ("Amherst is a very pretty town, all green fields, white-painted cottages scattered among the oaks […]. It seemed, however, that there was something affected and professorial about its grace. Behind this professorial and affected facade there was a desolate and ghostly boredom.") See "Il paese della Dickinson," in *Opere*, ed. Natalia Ginzburg and Cesare Garboli (Milan: Meridiani Mondadori, 1987), 34–38).

[26] Calvino, "Palomar nel Massachusetts," 2695.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Italo Calvino, "Note e notizie sui testi. *Palomar*," in *Romanzi e racconti*, II:1403.

[29] Italo Calvino, speech delivered at Special Convocation, Mount Holyoke College, November 4, 1984.

[30] For a comprehensive history of literary description see Pierluigi Pellini, *La descrizione* (Bari: Laterza, 1998).

[31] Georges Perec, "Still Life/ Style Leaf," *Yale French Studies* 61 (1981): 299–305.

space and time and action, perception and cognition, writing and meaning."[32] The contributors reaffirmed their faith in the power of literary description: "Description can open up to possibilities, explore, include what somehow does not belong, what is inessential, but that accidence is essential, is essence. Literature gives way to such descriptive *sorties*, and yet contains them and draws its strength from them."[33]

This issue of *Yale French Studies* became relevant in the literary panorama of the early 1980s. Usually associated with realist and naturalist nineteenth-century narratives, from a scholarly standpoint, description had suffered considerable neglect in part because, to borrow Ansgar Nünning's words, "theory for a long time displayed a strong normative bias towards narrative, regarding description as merely ornamental and relegating it to the margins of scholarly enquiry."[34] In the first half of the twentieth century, authors rejected nineteenth-century literary modes and styles to the detriment of description, a phenomenon that Georg Lukács analyzed in his influential paper "Narrate or Describe?" (1936), in which the critic provocatively declared narration superior to description.[35] Indeed, until the experiments of the *école du regard*, description was considered merely as a "filler" for narrative "action."[36] As a consequence, "Narratological research concerned with description"[37] would not be an obvious component of the literary equipment of a twentieth century author with a taste for the eclectic and the experimental like Calvino. However, after Calvino's move to Paris, and after his shift towards more experimental modes of narration—which began with the publications of *Cosmicomiche* (*Cosmicomics*) in 1965—description became crucial in his writing.

The authors who played the biggest role in Calvino's developing interest in literary description were Georges Perec (1936–1982) and Francis Ponge (1899–1989). In particular, in Ponge's original poetic descriptions of humble things (a potato, a piece of soap, an orange), Calvino detected a way to understand "qualcosa di più su di sé o sul mondo" ("something more about himself or the world"),[38] as well as the realization that "sono proprio le cose più semplici che sono le più difficili a rappresentare per scritto. […] provate a mettervi a guardare una cosa qualsiasi, un orologio, una bicicletta, […]: vi accorgerete che se si vuol rendere conto anche del più piccolo particolare, e poi dei particolari d'ogni particolare, bisognerebbe scrivere pagine e

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[32] Jeffrey Kittay, "Introduction," in "Towards a Theory of Description," *Yale French Studies* 61 (1981): i–v. i.

[33] Kittay, "Introduction," iv. While we do not know for sure if Calvino read this issue, he was familiar with the work of several of its contributors, from Georges Perec to Philippe Hamon.

[34] Ansgar Nünning, "*Towards a Typology, Poetics and History of Description in Fiction*," in *Description in Literature and Other Media*, ed. Werner Wolf and Walter Bernhart (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 93.

[35] Georg Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?" in *Writer and Critic*, ed. Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin Press, 1970), 110–48.

[36] See Cannon Schmitt, "Interpret or Describe?" *Representations*, no. 135 (Summer 2016): 104. For Calvino's occasionally skeptical attitude towards Alain Robbe-Grillet and the Nouveau Roman see, among others, Beno Weiss' classic *Understanding Italo Calvino* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993) and Elio Attilio Baldi's recent *The Author in Criticism. Italo Calvino's Authorial Image in Italy, the United States, and the United Kingdom* (Lanham, MD: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2020).

[37] Nünning, "*Towards a Typology, Poetics and History of Description in Fiction*," 93.

[38] Italo Calvino, "Osservare e descrivere," in *Italo Calvino. Enciclopedia: arte, scienza e letteratura*, ed. Marco Belpoliti (Milan: Marcos y Marcos, 1995), 89. We should also remember Pier Paolo Pasolini's interesting take on writing, what he—in the same years Calvino became interested in description—in his anthology of book reviews, defined as "descrizioni di descrizioni:" "Ho fatto delle 'descrizioni.' Ecco tutto quello che so della mia critica in quanto critica. E 'descrizioni' di che cosa? Di altre 'descrizioni,' ché altro i libri non sono" ("I created 'descriptions.' Here is all I know of my criticism as criticism. 'Descriptions' of what? Of other 'descriptions,' which is what books are"). See Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Descrizioni di descrizioni*, ed. Graziella Chiarcossi and Paolo Mauri (Milan: Garzanti, 2014), 2.

pagine" ("the simplest things are the most difficult to represent in writing. […] try to look at a random thing, a clock, a bicycle, […]; you'll realize that if you wanted to report the tiniest detail, and the details of each detail, you'd have to write pages and pages").[39] Many years later, in "Visibilità" ("Visibility") Calvino analyzed the nature of imagination while observing the complex web that feeds the imaginative process: "Attorno a ogni immagine ne nascono delle altre, si forma un campo di analogie, di simmetrie, di contrapposizioni" ("around each image others come into being, creating a field of analogies, symmetries, juxtapositions").[40] Imagination, Calvino concluded, had to be disciplined and guided by writing:

> Nello stesso tempo la scrittura, la resa verbale, assume sempre più importanza; direi che dal momento in cui comincio a mettere nero su bianco, è la parola scritta che conta […]. Sarà la scrittura a guidare il racconto nella direzione in cui l'espressione verbale scorre più felicemente, e all'immaginazione visuale non resta che tenerle dietro.
>
> (At the same time writing, the verbal rendering, assumes ever-greater importance. I would say that as soon as I begin to put black on white, the written word begins to take over […]. Then it is the writing that must guide the story toward its most felicitous verbal expression, and all that's left for the visual imagination is to keep up.)[41]

Thus, for Calvino, it was only through writing that imagination could take flight: "tutte le 'realtà' e le 'fantasie' possono prendere forma solo attraverso la scrittura" ("all 'realities' and 'fantasies' can take shape only through writing").[42]

Ponge's influence on Calvino's work is noticeable already in *Le città invisibili* (*Invisible Cities*,1972), in particular in the exchanges between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan. More than a decade later, Calvino retrieved one of their most meaningful conversations—held in front of a chess board—for his chapter on "Esattezza" ("Exactitude"):

> Allora Marco Polo parlò: – La tua scacchiera, sire, è un intarsio di due legni: ebano e acero. Il tassello sul quale si fissa il tuo sguardo illuminato fu tagliato in uno strato del tronco che crebbe in un anno di siccità: vedi come si dispongono le fibre? Qui si scorge un nodo appena accennato: una gemma tentò di spuntare in un giorno di primavera precoce, ma la brina della notte l'obbligò a desistere. […] Ecco un poro più grosso: forse è stato il nido d'una larva; non d'un tarlo, perché appena nato avrebbe continuato a scavare, ma d'un bruco che rosicchiò le foglie e fu la causa per cui l'albero fu scelto per essere abbattuto […]. La quantità di cose che si potevano leggere in un pezzetto di legno liscio e vuoto sommergeva Kublai; già

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[39] Calvino, "Osservare e descrivere," 88. Also see Domenico Scarpa's considerations on description and on the importance of Ponge for Calvino, and on the idea that "de-scrivere" actually means to write, beginning with "oggetti più comuni, delineandone i contorni e delimitandone i confini." ("ordinary objects, sketching out their outlines and defining their borders"). See Scarpa, *Italo Calvino* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 1999), 112. Scarpa's discussion in full can be read on pages 109–13.
[40] Calvino, "Visibilità," 704. ("Visibility," 109).
[41] Ibid., 704–05. (Ibid., 109-10).
[42] Ibid., 714. (Ibid., 121).

Polo era venuto a parlare dei boschi d'ebano, delle zattere di tronchi che discendono i fiumi, degli approdi, delle donne alle finestre…

(Then Marco Polo spoke: "Your chessboard, sire, is an inlay of two woods: ebony and maple. The tile on which your enlightened gaze is fixed was cut from the cross-section of a trunk that grew in a year of drought: do you see how its fibers are arranged? Here we can make out the faint hint of a knot: a bud tried to sprout one day in early spring, but the night's frost obliged it to desist." […] "Here is a larger pore: perhaps it was the nest of a larva. Not a woodworm, which would have continued digging after it was born, but a caterpillar that nibbled on leaves and was the reason the tree was chosen to be felled […].That so much could be read in a bit of smooth and empty wood overwhelmed Kublai. Now Polo was speaking about forests of ebony, about rafts of timber floating down rivers, about landings, about women at their windows…)[43]

Calvino's extreme attention to detail, what he called his "vertigine, quella del dettaglio del dettaglio del dettaglio" ("vertigo, that of the detail of the detail of the detail")[44] is evident in this passage where a chessboard becomes the stage of potentially infinite narrative sparks. Later, in "Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto," referring to his latest book *Palomar,* he explained his approach to narrative descriptions: "Cerco di fare in modo che la descrizione diventi racconto, pur restando descrizione. In ognuno di questi miei brevi racconti, un personaggio pensa solo in base a ciò che vede e diffida d'ogni pensiero che gli venga per altre vie" ("I try to make a description turn into a story while remaining just a description. In every story of this book, there is a character who thinks only insofar as he sees, and mistrusts every thought coming to him by any other means.").[45]

For his Mount Holyoke remarks, Calvino selected four texts with three different types of description, both from direct object observation and from imagination. Taken together, they provide a comprehensive panorama of description styles in Calvino's corpus, and a succinct literary model of his description theory. In the pages that follow, I offer a brief analysis of each text, according to Calvino's own sequence, which follows a thematic rather than a chronological order. Before probing each piece in detail, however, it is paramount to highlight the texts' shared attributes. Several common features are immediately obvious:

a. they are all descriptions
b. they are brief
c. they focus on objects and places, not on people
d. they are written in the present tense

Following Ansgar Nünning, we should add that they are all "internally focalized" descriptions "given by an overt narrator who provides reliable information."[46] Moreover, Calvino intended each work to be a descriptive narrative without a formal storyline.[47] The preference for short texts—

[43] Calvino, "Esattezza," 690–91. ("Exactitude," 88-9).
[44] Ibid., 687. (Ibid., 84).
[45] Calvino, "Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto," 1873.
[46] Nünning, "Towards a Typology, Poetics and History of Description in Fiction," 121.
[47] On this point, I disagree with Michele Maiolani's recent statement that "al di là di alcune traduzioni di Ponge (1969) e di una raccolta di racconti mai completata […] non si può definire nessuno dei suoi testi completamente descrittivo." See Maiolani, "Italo Calvino e gli strumenti del geografo," *Scaffale Aperto* 10 (2019): 66–67.

usually a page or less—and for the present tense is a fundamental characteristic of this type of work. The present tense, as used in mathematics and physics writing, suggests a certain timelessness, a "permanent present" that Calvino was striving for in his descriptive writing. Indeed, philosopher Edward Casey stressed how the "present tense is not even the historical present of fiction […] but we may term [it] a philosophical quasi-present, a permanent present which is essentially tenseless."[48]

At Mount Holyoke, Calvino opened his remarks with his magnificent description of a button—"The Button"—written for a 1983 volume on the painter Domenico Gnoli:

> What is more difficult than describing a button? I did this for an art book, collecting the paintings of a remarkable Italian artist who died too young, a few years ago, Domenico Gnoli […] I am going to read you now […] my description of a button, because I think that it is the thing I have written in the last times I am most proud of.[49]

Half a century after his premature death, Domenico Gnoli (1933–1970) enjoyed a significant revival when the Fondazione Prada organized a comprehensive retrospective comprising over one hundred of his paintings and drawings.[50] Hyperrealist Gnoli's best known paintings depict enlarged details of clothing, hair, accessories, furniture, and textiles. Gnoli portrays everyday objects in extraordinary detail, and "provides the viewer with more visual information than is normally apparent or semantically relevant."[51] The effect is that of a visionary landscape, of a "visual potential at the limit of sensory perception."[52] Gnoli often painted buttons, sometimes as "characters" in a painting where a shirt collar, a sleeve, or a dress were protagonists, other times as the main object in his canvas.[53] Together with its companion pieces ("The Lady's Shoe," "The Man's Shirt," and "The Pillow"), "The Button" could be considered the climax in Calvino's efforts in description as it reveals the flow of descriptive, ekphrastic writing inspired by Gnoli's art and probably derived from direct observation—together with the ensuing imaginative flow—in a manner similar to Giacomo Leopardi's approach in his poem *L'infinito*—a favorite of Calvino's—where a hedge blocking the viewer's gaze ("questa siepe, che da tanta parte dell'ultimo orizzonte il guardo esclude" ["this hedge that excludes the view of much of the farthest horizon"]) prompts the imaginative process ("io nel pensier mi fingo" ["I pretend in my thoughts"]).[54]

Calvino's writing places him in a perfect niche between Ponge and Gnoli, the two being a considerable source of inspiration for his descriptions, the former with paint, the latter with words. Similarities between Gnoli and Ponge had been already noticed by André Pieyre de Mandiargues:

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[48] Edward S. Casey, "Literary Description and Phenomenological Method," *Yale French Studies* 61 (1981): 179.

[49] Calvino, speech delivered at Special Convocation, Mount Holyoke College, November 4, 1984.

[50] The show dates were October 28, 2021– February 27, 2022. It is also worth remembering that Domenico Gnoli designed the 1959 cover of the English translation of Calvino's novel *Il barone rampante* (*The Baron in the Trees*). See Salvatore Settis, "Domenico Gnoli's Tales and Details," in *Domenico Gnoli*, ed. Germano Celant (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 2021), 16.

[51] Franco Ricci, "Painted Stories and Novel Spaces," in *Painting with Words, Writing with Pictures. Word and Image Relations in the Work of Italo Calvino* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 248.

[52] Celant, Germano, "Pop Realism: Domenico Gnoli," in *Domenico Gnoli*, 8.

[53] See, for instance, *Bouton* (1967) and *Bouton n. 2* (1967) in *Domenico Gnoli*, 278. *Unbuttoned Button* (1969) in Celant, *Domenico Gnoli*, 331 and *Button n. 4*, in Celant, *Domenico Gnoli*, 331.

[54] See Calvino, "Esattezza," 682: "Protetto da una siepe oltre la quale si vede solo il cielo, il poeta prova insieme paura e piacere a immaginarsi gli spazi infiniti" ("Shielded by a hedge beyond which he sees only the sky, the poet feels both fear and pleasure at the thought of infinite spaces." "Exactitude," 77).

> Like Francis Ponge, Domenico Gnoli is fervently attentive to the most ordinary things that make up the backdrop of human life […] With respect to human figures, whether male or female, his gaze stops at their clothing accessories, and if sometimes (rarely), he exceeds that limit, it is only to go as far as their hair style, which is generally shown from behind […]. For Gnoli's manner of painting, like Francis Ponge's manner of writing, illuminates as much as it describes the mundane objects by which man is surrounded.[55]

"The Button" is structured around two opposites: horizontal vs. vertical and light vs. dark. In Calvino's writing light is often "l'agente rivelatore, l'evento temporale che 'illuminando,' 'ritagliando,' 'accendendo' e 'battendo' collega le immagini e stabilisce un potenziale espressivo" ("the revealing agent, the temporal event that 'brightening,' 'cutting,' 'lighting' and 'beating' connects all images and establishes an expressive potential").[56] The viewer/narrator observes the button's surface at different times of the day—starting at twilight—and studies how it changes with the alternating shifts in light and shadow, which inspire reflections on the button's imagined ambition beyond its useful but modest function ("the button's illusion of being a mirror able to receive within its imperturbable circumference the brawling image of the world").[57] Calvino invites the reader to engage in this verbal visual observation, "to *look* and by looking, to travel along with him, to find the detail in the visual field that accompanies the narration."[58] Similarly, in his reading of "L'origine degli uccelli" ("The Origin of the Birds"), Franco Ricci reminds us how Calvino "coaches the reader to draw or imagine the scene as if it were being drawn in the mind's eye."[59]

The button as an object is the *locus* of direct observation. Quoting Jeffrey Kittay, we could say that it "may suggest to the spectator a trip behind an object represented upon it, to see the other side of the object, but it does not invite the spectator behind it."[60] By way of the holes on the button's face, which Calvino compares to "caverns, cliffs, volcano craters, the orifices of the human body,"[61] the viewer's gaze then moves downwards to explore the connections between the button and the fabric it is sewn into by means of thread, the "pipeline" that holds it all together. This is when the viewer's imagination really takes off: the thread morphs into a "double bridge of fibers […] with the pliant obstinacy of lianas in the jungle or the coils of snakes."[62] Thanks to the viewer's imagination, the button becomes alive—like a human body with orifices—and is enmeshed with other life forms (lianas and snakes) and the environment itself (caverns, cliffs, and volcanoes). Calvino moves from what can be seen, from the visible (the button's surface and its thread holes) to the invisible, the hidden connection between the button, the buttonhole, and the fabric it is attached to. The closing paragraph is a sensual and powerful vision of the button breathing in the essence emanating from the damp cloth in the fall season, with its wide, round nostrils dilated to absorb the earth's "pungent vapors."[63] In "The Button," Calvino's reader happily

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[55] André Pieyre de Mandiargues, "Gnoli, or the Love and Illustration of Everyday Life," in *Domenico Gnoli*, 347–48.
[56] Franco Ricci, "Il visivo in Calvino," in *Italo Calvino. Enciclopedia: arte, scienza e letteratura*, 284.
[57] Calvino, speech delivered at Special Convocation, Mount Holyoke College, November 4, 1984.
[58] Kittay, "Descriptive Limits," 226.
[59] Franco Ricci, "From Image to Word," in *Painting with Words*, 87.
[60] Kittay, "Descriptive Limits," 228.
[61] Calvino, speech delivered at Special Convocation, Mount Holyoke College, November 4, 1984.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.

joins in this fantasy, his language being, to quote Franco Ricci, "so palpable, the effect so entertaining that the reader readily succumbs to the author's mesmerizing dance."[64]

In his extensive investigations of Calvino's writings on art, including his work on Domenico Gnoli, Ricci also stresses how, between 1976 and 1985, Calvino "embraces painting as a long-lost love, and indeed, as an investigative mode or method of observation; painting seems to fulfil the author's ekphrastic desire with contemplative harmony."[65] "The Button" is a good example of a painting translated into words. It is an example of Ricci's "tales of a seeing […] generating contemplations about seeing,"[66] and demonstrates Calvino's intense interest in accurate language, which he considered close to the act of drawing.[67]

At Mount Holyoke, Calvino followed "The Button" with two readings, in Italian, from *Le città invisibili*, which remains one of his most successful books outside of Italy. Salman Rushdie aptly called it "a sort of fugue on the nature of the City" whose "true star is Calvino's descriptive prose." Rushdie's opinion of *Invisible Cities*, which is essentially ambivalent, points to its true nature: "You will notice I'm in two minds about this book: […] even though I wasn't convinced by the whole, I'm bound to admit that the separate parts are pretty dazzling."[68] As a matter of fact, Calvino's poetic descriptions of imaginary cities can stand alone as well as within the fictional frame of Marco Polo's travels.[69] They are not landscape descriptions *per se*, but short poetic writings derived from imagination, rather than from direct *seeing*.[70] I agree with Martin McLaughlin when he notes how "Calvino is never interested in the description of an idyllic landscape […] landscape is always secondary to the human events unfolding."[71] Indeed, over the course of his career, Calvino's landscape descriptions changed dramatically, with natural landscapes progressively fading away, from the neorealist, autobiographical landscapes of *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (*The Path to the Nest of Spiders*) to the essential spatial outlines of *T con zero* (*t zero).* As Natalia Ginzburg famously wrote: "A poco a poco sono scomparsi dai suoi libri i paesaggi verdi e frondosi, le nevi scintillanti, l'alta luce del giorno. Si è alzata nel suo scrivere una luce diversa, una luce più radiosa ma bianca, non fredda ma totalmente deserta" ("Little by little the green and leafy landscapes, the sparkling snow, the high light of the day disappeared from his books. A different light arose in his writing, a more radiant but white light, not cold but completely deserted.").[72] This process is evident in *Invisible Cities*.

The two cities Calvino selected for his Mount Holyoke reading are "Ottavia" and "Bauci." Ottavia is suspended between two valleys, held by ropes and walkway bridges: "C'è un precipizio in mezzo a due montagne scoscese: la città è sul vuoto, legata alle due creste con funi e catene e passerelle" ("There is a precipice between two steep mountains: the city is over the void, bound to

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[64] Ricci, "Painted Stories and Novel Spaces," *Painting with Words* 257–58.
[65] Ibid., 223.
[66] Ibid., 225.
[67] Also see Marco Belpoliti, "L.A.C. (Laboratorio Artigiano Calvino)," in *Italo Calvino. Enciclopedia: arte, scienza e letteratura*, 66: "[È] nota l'attenzione che Calvino, alla pari di Queneau e di Perec, dedicava all'atto materiale dello scrivere, per lui assai vicino a quello del disegnare." ("the attention that Calvino, similar to Queneau and Perec, used to dedicate to the material act of writing, which was for him very close to the act of drawing, is well-known.")
[68] Salman Rushdie, "Calvino," *London Review of Books*, September 17, 1981.
[69] On the problem of a literary frame that could hold together "il materiale che avevo accumulato" ("the material I had accumulated") for the *Le città invisibili*, see Francesca Serra, *Calvino* (Rome: Salerno, 2006), 325–29.
[70] Kittay suggests comparisons with dreams in the Freudian sense. See "Descriptive Limits", 227.
[71] Martin McLaughlin, "Colours, Landscapes and the senses in *Difficult Loves,*" in *Image, Eye and Art in Calvino. Writing Visiblity*, ed. Birgitte Grundtvig, Martin McLaughlin, and Lene Waage Petersen (Oxford: Legenda, 2007), 35.
[72] As quoted in McLaughlin, "Colours, Landscapes and the senses in *Difficult Loves*," 44.

the two crests with ropes and chains and catwalks").[73] At the very center of Calvino's book is Bauci, literally an invisible city, built on stilts and hidden in the clouds: "Chi va a Bauci non riesce a vederla ed è arrivato" ("the traveler directed towards Baucis cannot see the city and yet he has arrived.").[74] Ottavia and Bauci's inhabitants lead only apparently perilous lives away from the earth's surface.

For Ottavia's description, Calvino begins with a panorama of the cityscape, imagining the city suspended between two mountains. The author then shifts his focus to the cities myriad of details: "scale di corda, amache, case fatte a sacco, attaccapanni, terrazzi come navicelle, otri d'acqua, becchi del gas, girarrosti, cesti appesi a spaghi, montacarichi, docce, trapezi e anelli per i giochi, teleferiche, lampadari, vasi con piante dal fogliame pendulo" ("rope hangers, hammocks, houses made like sacks, clothes hangers, terraces like gondolas, skins of water, gas jets, spits, baskets on strings, dumb-waiters, showers, trapezes and rings for children's games, cable cars, chandeliers, pots with trailing plants").[75] Ottavia resembles a spiderweb: all of its parts (houses, terraces, showers, plants, gas pipes) dangle below the "base" of bridges and walkways. Ever aware of their precarious state, Ottavia's residents are, in the eyes of today's reader, a model of sustainability. Conscious that the ropes supporting the city could break under excessive strain, the citizens of Ottavia accept the limits of their fragile city and its mountainous surroundings and seek to live in equilibrium with their delicate environment.

Both Ottavia and Bauci are far away from the earth's surface and their growth is limited by their respective locations. Bauci's only connections with earth are the ladders one needs to climb to reach it. Built atop slender, delicate flamingo legs, no one can see it. Its mysterious dwellers are aloof, distant, detached or, perhaps, they respect their planet to such an extent that they want to avoid any contamination, preferring instead to observe it from afar: "con cannocchiali e telescopi puntati in giù non si stancano di passarla in rassegna, foglia a foglia, sasso a sasso, formica per formica, contemplando affascinati la propria assenza" ("with spyglasses and telescopes aimed downward they never tire of examining it, leaf by leaf, stone by stone, ant by ant, contemplating with fascination their own absence.").[76] Calvino included Bauci in the "Città e gli occhi" ("Cities and Eyes") category: for reasons that remain unclear, detached but detailed close observation is how Bauci's inhabitants chose to engage with the earth's surface below.

As a whole, *Le città invisibili* presents itself as a mosaic of descriptions, its architecture resembling "a many-faceted structure in which a complex human symbol, such as the city, can be expressed without sacrificing 'the tensions between geometric rationality and the entanglements of human life.'"[77] Calvino's cities present different points-of-view, different perspectives from which the viewer-narrator can observe the world. In particular, Bauci's inhabitants privileged and private perspective on the earth below recall the same privileged point-of-view that Calvino held from his higher floor apartments in Paris and Rome. In a 1978 interview with Daniele Del Giudice, Calvino compared himself to one of Bauci's inhabitants: "Tra le Città invisibili ce n'è una sui trampoli, e gli abitanti guardano dall'alto la propria assenza. Forse per capire chi sono devo

[73] Calvino, "Ottavia," 421 ("Octavia," 75).
[74] Calvino, "Bauci," 423 ("Baucis," 77). On the significance of the cities' names, see Martin McLaughlin, "Experimental Signs: *Invisible Cities* and *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*," *Italo Calvino* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 105.
[75] Calvino, "Ottavia," 421 ("Octavia," 75).
[76] Calvino, "Bauci," 423 ("Baucis," 77). On the possible connections with Walter Benjamin, see Guido Bonsaver, "Città senza tempo: cronologia 'debole' e tracce benjaminiane nelle *Città invisibili* di Italo Calvino," *Italianistica: rivista di letteratura italiana* 31 (2002): 51–62, 60.
[77] Anna Botta, "Calvino and the Oulipo: An Italian Ghost in the Combinatory Machine?" *MLN* 112, no. 1 (1997): 86.

osservare un punto nel quale potrei essere e non sto" ("Among the invisible cities, there is one on stilts; its inhabitants observe their absence from above. Perhaps, to understand who I am, I have to observe a place where I could be but I am not."). Here, as in his posthumous "Ipotesi di descrizione di un paesaggio" ("Hypothesis of a Landscape Description"),[78] Calvino stressed the importance of landscape descriptions relative to his point-of-view in space ("poter dire quello che vedo da punti diversi" ["being able to say that I see from different points of view"])[79] and in time ("naturalmente è anche nel tempo che scorre, cioè descrivo il paesaggio come risulta nei diversi momenti del tempo che impiego spostandomi" ["it is of course also in the passing of time, that is, I describe the landscape as it appears during the different moments of time I spend moving around"])[80] and concluded that every landscape description (or, every description, we could add) is also a narration ("una descrizione di paesaggio, essendo carica di temporalità, è sempre racconto" ["being heavy with temporality, a landscape description is always a narration"]) as it is "un'operazione di movimento di per sé. […] ogni elemento del paesaggio è carico di una sua temporalità cioè della possibilità d'essere descritto in un altro momento presente o futuro" ("a movement operation in itself. […] Every landcape element is full of its own temporality, that is of the possibility of being described in another present or future moment").[81]

Calvino concluded his Mount Holyoke reading with "La pantofola spaiata" ("The Odd Slipper"), first published in *Corriere della sera* on September 18, 1975, and then included in *Mr. Palomar*. Similar to *Invisible Cities,* the chapters that make this unusual novel could stand independently. When reading "The Odd Slipper," one of the first things we notice is that the object at the center of the narration, the slipper, is not described.[82] In fact, "The Odd Slipper" is a combinatory problem and a meditation on an impossible-to-correct mistake across space and across time. In his remarks, Calvino reminds us that he created Palomar as "a character who in spite of his name recalling the astronomical observatory, observes just what is most close to him. Also, in the book there are some descriptions from life, but especially reflections."[83] Once in Palomar's possession, the mismatched slipper works as a trigger for these reflections.

During one of his travels, Palomar purchases a pair of slippers in an ancient bazaar. Back home, he realizes that the two do not match. This complication stimulates his imagination ("he sees a slender shadow moving over the desert with a limp, a slipper falling off his foot at every step")[84] which, in turn, prompts a meditation on space ("Perhaps he, too, at this moment is thinking of me, hoping to run into me and make the trade")[85] and on time ("The unknown companion was limping perhaps in another period in another time").[86] Comforted by his thoughts, Palomar decides to continue to wear his slippers, as he is now feeling a particular affinity with his (presumably) forever unknown companion. As mentioned before, *Palomar* (*Mr. Palomar*) was conceived

[78] Italo Calvino, "Situazione 1978," in *Saggi*, II:2832–33. Also see Botta, "Calvino and the Oulipo," 88. For the point-of view in Calvino see, among others, Marco Belpoliti, *L'occhio di Calvino* (Turin: Einaudi, 2006). For a philosophical perspective on the point-of-view, see Casey, "Literary Description and Phenomenological Method," 183.
[79] Ibid., 2693.
[80] Ibid., 2694. For the relationship between space and time in Calvino, especially in *Collezione di sabbia*, see Chiara De Caprio's detailed analysis: "Posture autoriali e modelli macrotestuali," in *Forme e figure della saggistica di Calvino*, 50–57.
[81] Calvino, "Ipotesi di descrizione di un paesaggio," 2694.
[82] See Pellini, *La descrizione,* 39. Similarly, in the *Iliad* there is no actual portrait of Helen, even though the poem is based on her unrivaled beauty.
[83] Calvino, speech delivered at Special Convocation, Mount Holyoke College, November 4, 1984.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.

several years before its 1983 publication, as a column for the *Corriere della sera*.[87] For his book, a *sui generis* novel, Calvino followed a selective criterion, the connection between observation and reflection,[88] which forced him to leave out, as we already know, several previously published potential chapters that did not pass his selection. *Mr. Palomar* is organized according to a grid system which, as Anna Botta points out, "displays a pattern of formal logic which makes the book's table of contents a place of textual production."[89] In "The Odd Slipper" we detect a variety of visual and natural experiences that flow into the narrative fabric of Calvino's last work of fiction. In *Mr. Palomar*, there is

> "il prevalere in ognuna delle parti del libro, d'un tipo specifico d'esperienza: un'esperienza visiva, che ha come oggetto le forme della natura, e organizza i testi in descrizioni; 2. un'esperienza antropologica, il cui oggetto è il linguaggio […]; e le esperienze speculative, che hanno per oggetto il cosmo, il tempo, l'infinito, i rapporti tra io e il mondo, e la dimensione della mente, che trovano espressione in un testo *meditativo*."
>
> (the prevalence in each part of the book of a specific type of experience: a visual experience, which has the forms of nature as its object, and organizes texts into descriptions; 2. an anthropological experience, the object of which is language […]; and speculative experiences, which have, as their object, the cosmos, time, infinity, the relationship between the world and the self, and the mind's dimension, which find expression in a meditative text.)[90]

We could then conclude that *Mr. Palomar* is a compendium of the descriptive and of the meditative, a book where Calvino merged descriptions and reflections within an almost imperceptible narrative frame. Within this frame, "The Odd Slipper" is a mini compendium, as it offers a visual descriptive experience (the old bazaar with its vendor and the piles of slippers), an anthropological experience and, finally, a meditation on space and time.

Calvino's explorations of the connections between words and images have attracted the attention of many scholars (Belpoliti, McLaughlin, and Ricci, to mention just a few) who analyzed his efforts to render images through words. Franco Ricci noted that "Sembra dunque che per Calvino l'immagine preceda le parole e che sia inoltre assoluta nella sua unicità e inalterabilità di significato. A differenza della parola, il cui significato può mutare nel tempo […], l'immagine difende il suo significato attraverso l'immobilità del manufatto che la rappresenta. […] Un'immagine è ciò che rappresenta o non lo è. Calvino auspicava di raggiungere la stessa euforia attraverso la scrittura" ("Therefore, it seems that for Calvino the image precedes the words and that it is also absolute in its uniqueness and inalterable meaning. Unlike words, whose meaning can change over time […], images defend their meaning through the immobility of the artifact that represents them. […] An image is what it represents or it is not. Calvino hoped to achieve the same euphoria through his writing.").[91] Aside from these considerations, Ricci's words capture

[87] See note 25. For the list of Palomar writings published in *Corriere della sera*, see Italo Calvino, *Romanzi e racconti,* II:1407–08.
[88] Italo Calvino*, Palomar,* in *Romanzi e racconti,* II:1410.
[89] Botta, "Calvino and the Oulipo," 86. *The Odd Slipper* is in the third section of the book (*I viaggi di Palomar*) and bears the number 3.1.3.
[90] Marco Belpoliti, *Storie del visibile. Lettura di Italo Calvino* (Rimini: Luisè, 1990), 72.
[91] Ricci, "Il visivo in Calvino," *Painting with Words,* 286.

Calvino's ideas about the spoken and written word in the years preceding his death and his concerns about the growing prevalence (in politics as well as in everyday society) of imperfect language choices:

> Quanto al linguaggio, è stato colpito da una specie di peste. L'italiano sta diventando una lingua sempre più astratta, artificiale, ambigua; le cose più semplici non vengono mai dette direttamente, i sostantivi concreti vengono usati sempre più raramente. Questa epidemia ha colpito per primi i politici, i burocrati, gli intellettuali, poi si è generalizzata, con l'estendersi a masse sempre più larghe d'una conscienza politica e intellettuale. Il compito dello scrittore è combattere questa peste, far sopravvivere un linguaggio diretto e concreto, ma il problema è che il linguaggio quotidiano che fino a ieri era la fonte viva a cui gli scrittori potevano ricorrere, adesso non sfugge all'infezione.
>
> (As for language, a sort of plague has struck it. Italian is getting more and more abstract, artificial, ambiguous; the simplest things aren't ever said directly, concrete nouns are no longer used. First the politicians, the bureaucrats, the intellectuals were struck by this disease, then it became a general epidemic, as a political and intellectual consciousness spread over the larger masses. The task of the writer is to fight against this plague, to make a direct, concrete language survive, but everyday language, which used to be the living source writers could draw from, now doesn't escape the infection.)[92]

Towards the end of his life, the role that Calvino envisioned for a writer was similar to that of a rescuer, of a defender of language. And literature for him became the "Promised Land." As we learn reading "Esattezza": "se preferisco scrivere è perché scrivendo posso correggere ogni frase per arrivare almeno a eliminare le ragioni d'insoddisfazione di cui posso rendermi conto. La letteratura—dico la letteratura che risponde a queste esigenze—è la Terra Promessa in cui il linguaggio diventa quello che veramente dovrebbe essere" ("If I prefer to write, it's because when writing I can revise every phrase as many times as necessary, if not to achieve satisfaction with my words, at least to eliminate those reasons I can see for dissatisfaction. Literature—by which I mean literature that responds to to these demands—is the Promised Land in which language becomes what it truly ought to be").[93] In descriptions he found the perfect medium to explore and achieve the clarity and precision necessary to save language. Even though he modestly claimed not to be a good observer, Calvino's writing draws its strength from his descriptive impulse and from the challenges connected with it. For instance, when commenting on *Mr. Palomar*, he stated:

> Il mio problema nello scrivere questo libro è stato che io non sono mai stato quello che si dice un osservatore; dunque la prima operazione che dovevo fare era concentrare la mia attenzione su qualcosa e poi descriverla, o meglio fare le due cose allo stesso tempo, perché non essendo un osservatore, se per esempio osservo una iguana allo zoo e non scrivo subito tutto quello che ho visto, me lo dimentico.

[92] Calvino, "Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto," 1870–71 ("The Written and the Unwritten Word.")
[93] Calvino, "Esattezza," 678. ("Exactitude," 68).

> (My problem in writing this book is that I'm not what can be called an observer; I am very absent-minded, so the first thing I have to do is to concentrate my visual attention on something and then describe it, or rather do both at the same time because, not being an observer, if I observe, for instance, an iguana at the zoo and I don't write about it at once, I forget it.)[94]

Descriptions in *Mr. Palomar*, in *Invisible Cities* and, even more, in his Gnoli-inspired work, show that Calvino was very much nurtured and stimulated by exercises in direct observation and that his writing was greatly enriched by this disciplined practice.

Calvino's 1984 visit to Mount Holyoke gave him an opportunity to reflect on descriptions, on language, and on literature at a time when he was most probably already sketching his *Lezioni americane,* as the Norton Lectures for Harvard. As we know, for his Mount Holyoke readings Calvino did not follow a chronological order, but rearranged his selection from the most recent piece, "The Button" (1983), to the oldest ("Ottavia" and "Bauci") to conclude with the middle one, "The Odd Slipper" (1975). When read in a sequence, these short narratives reveal a trajectory that flows from a "tale of a seeing,"[95] -–"The Button"—towards the narratives of pure imaginary description of landscapes and travels in *Invisible Cities* and *Mr. Palomar*. With the possible exception of the character Palomar, human presence in these writings is secondary, if not inessential. This suggests that descriptions of things, of imaginary places, and meditations triggered by objects were among the last occupants of Calvino's desk. With Pierluigi Pellini we could say that, by the end of the twentieth century, "L'espansione dello spazio occupato dagli oggetti manda in crisi il mito antropocentrico del personaggio, alimentato dall'hegelismo marxista di Lukács non meno che dal classicismo di Valéry, e ambiguamente riproposto dall'ossessione strutturalista per la coerenza dell'insieme (che ha per modello l'organismo umano)" ("The expansion of the space that objects occupy—fueled by Lukács' Hegelian Marxism and Valéry's classicism and ambiguously reproposed by the Structuralist obsession with a coherence of the whole (which has the human organism as a model)—threw the anthropocentric myth of the character into crisis,").[96]

With his 1983 paper against an abstract, artificial, and ambiguous language—"Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto"—Calvino confirmed his longing for an accurate use of language in literature as well as in everyday life. This longing had to satisfy several other needs, as Calvino eloquently explained in the same paper: the need to communicate ("are the words I'm thinking the same ones I'm saying and the same the listener will receive?")[97] and to understand the world ("quello che succede nel mondo che mi circonda non finisce di sorprendermi, di spaventarmi, di disorientarmi" ["what happens around me surprises me every time, scares me, leaves me puzzled"]).[98] The illusion of an existing wisdom in literature, Calvino realized, was no longer sufficient ("mi rendo conto di quanto oggi ogni idea di saggezza sia irraggiungibile" ["I realize how much the very idea of wisdom is unattainable today"]).[99] At the same time, a life of isolated literary and philosophical contemplation was also not adequate ("Quello che ci si aspetta da me è che mi guardi intorno e catturi delle rapide immagini di quello che succede" ["I am supposed to cast exploring looks

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[94] Calvino, "Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto," 1874. Like Calvino himself, Palomar needs to wear glasses.
[95] Ricci, "Painted Stories and Novel Spaces," *Painting with Words,* 225.
[96] Pellini, *La descrizione,* 94.
[97] Calvino, "The Written and the Unwritten Word." This question does not appear in the published Italian version.
[98] Calvino, "Mondo scritto e mondo non scritto," 1866 ("The Written and the Unwritten Word").
[99] Ibid., 1867.

around, catch glimpses of what is going on”]).[100] Calvino knew he needed to “estrarre nuovo combustibile dai pozzi del non scritto” (“draw new fuel form the wells of the unwritten”)[101] but he could not find this much needed fuel in the world of words (“il giornale”) (“the newspaper”) nor in the world of images (“la televisione”) (“television”). Instead, he found it in the experiential: “l’approccio fenomenologico in filosofia […] ci spinge a rompere lo schermo di parole e concetti e a vedere il mondo come se si presentasse per la prima volta al nostro sguardo” (“the phenomenological approach in philosophy […] urges us to break through the screen of words and concepts and see the world as if it appeared for the first time to our sight”).[102] He discovered a solution in description. It is worth repeating once more: “Forse la prima operazione per rinnovare un rapporto tra linguaggio e mondo è la più semplice: fissare l’attenzione su un oggetto qualsiasi, il più banale e familiare, e descriverlo minuziosamente come se fosse la cosa più nuova e più interessante dell’universo” (“perhaps the first operation is the simplest: fixing our attention on an object, any object, to the most trivial and familiar, and describing it minutely, as if it were the newest and most interesting thing in the world”).[103] It is through description that Calvino’s “spinta a scrivere” (“the urge for writing”)[104] satisfied his ever-present “mancanza di qualcosa che si vorrebbe conoscere e possedere, qualcosa che ci sfugge” (“longing for something one would like to possess and master, something that escapes us”)[105] in his constant quest for the perfect, most exact word.

## Appendix
## Italo Calvino, Mount Holyoke College, November 4, 1984[106]

### Remarks by President Elizabeth Topham Kennan:

Italo Calvino, you came of age during fascism’s desperate parody of Roman grandeur, and as a young writer, you made your way through the ruins of ancient cities across profound political abysses, in the shadow of a nervous, spiritually arid materialism, and your turned to fable, fantasy, fairytale, and science fiction, not to escape the post-war desolation, but to reassert the urbane power of human inventiveness to discern and to build new cities. You are a restless mental traveler, whose novels map territories hitherto known only by rumor and misinformation. You have an Ariostean exuberance of imagination, a Boccaccian love of story, and a Dantesque sense of spiritual crisis and possibility. You are a maker of labyrinths, but a spinner of threads by which we can escape them. You shrink neither from disaster, nor hope. Through your Marco Polo you have said: “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.” We recognize you as one who has given us courage and shown a way to take a second path, and therefore by the authority of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts,

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[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid.,1871.
[103] Ibid., 1872–73.
[104] Ibid., 1874.
[105] Ibid., 1874.
[106] This is a word-for-word transcription of Kennan’s and Calvino’s remarks.

vested in the Trustees of Mount Holyoke College, I confer upon you the degree of Doctor of Letters Honoris Causa, together with its customary rights and privileges.

**Remarks by Italo Calvino:**

It is an extraordinary emotion I feel in thinking that I am here in Massachusetts receiving a degree at your college. In my mind, in my memory, a degree is always connected with examinations, and crossing the ocean to join you I felt as if I had to pass some difficult test, a part of my mind went on wondering: if they want me to prove that I really deserve the degree, if they asked me "show us what you are able to do," what could I do? What are the subjects I am more prepared to be tested in? I reflected and I decided: I would be examined in description. When I was a schoolboy, descriptions were a very usual subject for composition. I do not think that today anybody cares for description in school, and also in literature no modern writer, or very few, are interested in description. That is the reason why I recently tried to revive this ancient art and started describing the most usual objects, a shoe, a button, a shirt. What's more difficult than describing a button? I did this for an art book, collecting the paintings of a remarkable Italian artist who died too young, a few years ago, Domenico Gnoli. Gnoli painted enormous details of garments as if they were landscapes. I am going to read you now, translated by William Weaver, my description of a button, because I think that it is the thing I have written in the last times, I am most proud of, and that it is the most difficult text I could afford to be examined by you:

> The button, at sunset, collects the last sunlight on its smooth surface but cannot prevent it from spilling down the slight convexity towards the raised rim where a line of shadow lies in wait ready to swallow it. During the day, the sparkling glints have indulged the button's illusion of being a mirror, able to receive within its imperturbable circumference the brawling image of the world. But, at evening, those glances are dulled and the disk returns to its opaque solidity. At this hour, a rediscovered certitude might repay the button for the loss of those evanescent, deceitful splendors. If there cannot be a world, there could be a button, as it always has been and is, formed in an eternal present. But another ambition has already seized it: to display the grain of its horny substance and imperceptible trace left by the spinning of the lathe. The evidence, in other words, of its nobility as one with living nature for its mother, not a mold for an unresponsive inanimate plastic. There is a moment for perceiving these details when the light no longer falls on the disk itself, but it is still defused in the twilight air. Yes, now perhaps not too late, darkness falls. The apertures of nature—caverns, cliffs, volcano craters, the orifices of the human body—preserve the mystery of paths opening into the dark forces of existence. The holes in the button are different: precise, regular, symmetrical, central. They stand for reason—in the most usual definition: practical reason, sufficient reason—and they make a button a button, conditioning its function and its existence. This thread that runs through them should share the same singleness of meaning, the same absoluteness, but instead the contrast between its way of life and the button's is insuperable. In the midst of the polished expanse, without the slightest wrinkle, rises a double bridge of fibers, which at a closer look prove of filamentous and flocky: bonds that press the sharp walls of the holes with the pliant obstinacy of lianas in the jungle or the coils of snakes. In the heart of the impassive

button larks a sinuous and scheming spirit capable of laying into symmetrical and uniform parenthesis in the exposed stretch of its itinerary, but also of hiding in the gap between button and clothes as a twisted knobby tangle. And it is on this twisted and knobby trunk tangle that the unruffled serenity of the button rests. The firmest ties among the things of the world are based in heterogeneousness so long as it allows the elasticity necessary to a mobile and articulated link, like the hawser between ship and dock and like the thread between button and clothes. If the center of the button houses the organs most vital to the function of fastening, precise as gears and at the same time responsive as viscera, the circumference can be permitted a show of ornamental luxury, however austere, such as the raised ring. This finishing touch is not without meaning. It rightly underlines the decisive property of the object, the extent of its frontiers. In fact, a button of an unlimited extension would be useless for fastening because it could do not fit any buttonhole, just as a button of scant or no surface could exercise no hold; so there exist a golden norm, the proper caliber which the relief of the rim crowns to recall that the world is a network of relations where nothing is an end to itself, and every button presupposes a buttonhole and vice versa. Once the borders are crossed, we return towards the center along the lower face of the button flared like the bottom of a dish or bowl. To study its characteristics, it is best to wait until the moon rises. Button and satellite will both shine in a reflected glow on the sides that reciprocally face each other, whereas the hidden sides will remain shrouded in shadow. But with this difference, whereas the reverse of the moon looks out on empty abysses of distance, the reverse of the button flattens its shadow on the fields of cloth from which it is separated only by a stalk of thread shorter than the stem of a mushroom, if it does not actually adhere to the leap of the buttonhole in the long kiss of fastening as it accepts the titillating caress of the fabric. The relations between the button and the soft expanse of cloth into which it sinks its roots—a grassy meadow if the stuff is wool, or a tight mat if it is synthetic fiber—cannot be defined categorically as is always the case with unreconcilable entities. Insensitive to heat, cold, drought, dampness, the button can well boast for its stable temperament. But not infrequently the richness of reaction from the clothes, its burgeoning and its wear, its sensitivity to weather, to storms seem enviable aspects to the button, or else they arouse a yearning desire. Reciprocal intolerance and amorous complement, alternate and mingle as in all long-term cohabitations. Autumn is the season when these feelings reach their peak. From the cloth that absorbs the dampness of the earth a pungent vapor rises. The button never tires of bracing it widening its round nostrils.

There are descriptions from life and there are descriptions from imagination. President Elizabeth Kennan told about my book *Invisible Cities* in which every chapter is a description of an imaginary city. I would now read in Italian some pages of this book that perhaps you have already read in translation.

Se volete credermi, bene. Ora dirò come è fatta Ottavia, città-ragnatela. C'è un precipizio in mezzo a due montagne scoscese: la città è sul vuoto, legata alle due creste con funi e catene e passerelle. Si cammina sulle traversine di legno, attenti a non mettere il piede negli intervalli, o ci si aggrappa alle maglie di canapa. Sotto

> non c'è niente per centinaia e centinaia di metri: qualche nuvola scorre; s'intravede più in basso il fondo del burrone.
>
> Questa è la base della città: una rete che serve da passaggio e da sostegno. Tutto il resto, invece d'elevarsi sopra, sta appeso sotto: scale di corda, amache, case fatte a sacco, attaccapanni, terrazzi come navicelle, otri d'acqua, becchi del gas, girarrosti, cesti appesi a spaghi, montacarichi, docce, trapezi e anelli per i giochi, teleferiche, lampadari, vasi con piante dal fogliame pendulo. Sospesa sull'abisso, la vita degli abitanti d'Ottavia è meno incerta che in altre città. Sanno che più di tanto la rete non regge.[107]
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> Dopo aver marciato sette giorni attraverso boscaglie, chi va a Bauci non riesce a vederla ed è arrivato. I sottili trampoli che s'alzano dal suolo a gran distanza l'uno dall'altro e si perdono sopra le nubi sostengono la città. Ci si sale con scalette. A terra gli abitanti si mostrano di rado: hanno già tutto l'occorrente lassù e preferiscono non scendere. Nulla della città tocca il suolo tranne quelle lunghe gambe da fenicottero a cui si appoggia e, nelle giornate luminose, un'ombra traforata e angolosa che si disegna sul fogliame.
>
> Tre ipotesi si dànno sugli abitanti di Bauci: che odino la Terra; che la rispettino al punto d'evitare ogni contatto; che la amino com'era prima di loro e con cannocchiali e telescopi puntati in giù non si stanchino di passarla in rassegna, foglia a foglia, sasso a sasso, formica per formica, contemplando affascinati la propria assenza.[108]

The last book I have published in Italy, a book that will appear in this country next spring, translated by William Weaver, is called *Mr. Palomar.* Mr. Palomar is a character who in spite of his name recalling the astronomical observatory, observes just what is most close to him. Also, in this book there are some descriptions from life, but especially reflections. As an example of reflections, I will read you a short chapter.

"The Odd Slipper"

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[107] "If you choose to believe me, good. Now I will tell how Octavia, the spider-web city, is made. There is a precipice between two steep mountains: the city is over the void, bound to the two crests with ropes and chains and catwalks. You walk on the little wooden ties, careful not to set your foot in the open spaces, or you cling to the hempen strands. Below there is nothing for hundreds and hundreds of feet: a few clouds glide past; farther down you can glimpse the chasm's bed. This is the foundation of the city: a net which serves as passage and as support. All the rest, instead of rising up, is hung below: rope hangers, hammocks, houses made like sacks, clothes hangers, terraces like gondolas, skins of water, gas jets, spits, baskets on strings, dumb-waiters, showers, trapezes and rings for children's games, cable cars, chandeliers, pots with trailing plants. Suspended over the abyss, the life of Octavia's inhabitants is less uncertain than in other cities. They know the net will last only so long." (75)

[108] "After a seven days' march through woodland, the traveler directed towards Baucis cannot see the city and yet he has arrived. The slender stilts that rise from the ground at a great distance from one another and are lost above the clouds support the city. You climb them with ladders. On the ground the inhabitants rarely show themselves: having already everything they need up there, they prefer not to come down. Nothing of the city touches the earth except those long flamingo legs on which it rests and, when the days are sunny, a pierced, angular shadow that falls on the foliage. There are hypotheses about the inhabitants of Baucis: that they hate the earth; that they respect it so much they avoid all contact; that they love it as it was before they existed and with spyglasses and telescopes aimed downward they never tire of examining it, leaf by leaf, stone by stone, ant by ant, contemplating with fascination their own absence." (77)

While traveling in an eastern country, Mr. Palomar bought a pair of slippers in a bazaar. Returning home, he tries to put them on; he realizes that one slipper is wider than the other and will not stay on his foot. He recalls the old vendor crouched on his heels in a niche of the bazaar in front of a random pile of slippers of every size; he sees the man as he rummages in the pile to find a slipper suited to the customer's foot, makes him try it on, then starts rummaging again to hand him the presumed mate, which Mr. Palomar accepts without trying it on.

"Perhaps now," Mr. Palomar thinks, "another man is walking around that country with a mismatched pair of slippers." And he sees a slender shadow moving over the desert with a limp, a slipper falling off his foot at every step, or else, too tight, imprisoning a twisted foot. "Perhaps he, too, at this moment is thinking of me hoping to run into me and make the trade. The relationship binding us is more concrete and clear than many of the relationships established between human beings. And yet we will never meet." He decides to go on wearing these odd slippers out of solidarity with his unknown companion in misfortune, to keep alive this complementary relationship that is so rare, this mirroring of limping steps from one continent to another.

He lingers over this image, but he knows it does not correspond to the truth. An avalanche of slippers sewn on an assembly line comes periodically to top up the old merchant's pile in that bazaar. At the bottom of the pile there will always remain two odd slippers, but until the old merchant exhausts his supply (and perhaps he will never exhaust it, and at his death the shop with all its merchandise will pass to his heirs and to the heirs of his heirs), it would suffice to search in the pile and one slipper will always be found to match another slipper. A mistake can occur only with an absent-minded customer like himself, but centuries can go by before the consequence of his mistake affect another visitor to that ancient bazaar. Every process of disintegration in the order of the world is irreversible; the effects, however, are hidden and delayed in the dust cloud of the big numbers, which contains virtually limitless possibilities of new symmetries, combinations, pairings.

But what if his mistake had simply erased an earlier mistake? What if his absentmindedness had been the bearer not of disorder but of order? "Perhaps the merchant knew what he was doing," Mr. Palomar thinks, "in giving me the mismatched slipper, he was righting a disparity that had been hidden for centuries in that pile of slippers, handed down from generation to generation in the bazaar." The unknown companion was limping perhaps in another period, in another time, the symmetry of their steps responded not only from one continent to another but over a distance of centuries. This does not make Mr. Palomar feel less solidarity with him. He goes on shuffling awkwardly, to afford relief to his shadow.