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Calvino and other measures of coherence, form and harmony: *Invisible Cities*, *If on a winter's night a traveler*, and *Mr. Palomar*

“The swimming ego of Mr. Palomar is immersed in a disembodied world, intersections of force fields, vectorial diagrams, bands of positions lines that converge, diverge, break up. But inside him there remains one point in which everything exists in another way, like a lump, like a clot, like a blockage; the sensation that you are here but could not be here, in a world that could not be but is.” -- Italo Calvino, *Mr. Palomar*

The formal composition of Italo Calvino's novels *Invisible Cities* and *If on a winter's night a traveler*, in addition to *Mr. Palomar*, intersect with thematic motifs of geometrical form, incongruity, inner coherence, and existence to signal at different ways of perceiving and being in the world. Each of these novels belonging Calvino's later work exhibits an apparent form and order of its own. Yet, in spite of the fragmentary structure shared by these texts, one discerns the complexity of *formal* design from an internal coherence. Calvino notes with *Invisible Cities*, that “it was only by providing the serial descriptions with a frame, and thus with a beginning, middle and end, that [the descriptions of cities] could be turned into a book” (cited in McLaughlin 100). Despite the semblance of the received form of the novel furnished by these texts, their textual compositions deviate from the conventions of the realist novel to supply new narrative forms. According to Milan Kundera in *The Art of the Novel*, “a profound transformation of the novel's form”, entails “marshaling all intellectual means and all poetic forms to illuminate ‘what only the novel can discover’: man's being” (64). Surpassing the conventional parameters of the novel's form, these texts demonstrate Calvino's exploration of the formal possibilities available to the novel. Yet, as Kundera suggests, “[the novel] cannot breach the limits of its own possibilities, and bringing those

limits to light is already an immense discovery, an immense triumph of cognition” (25).

Therefore, what possibilities for the novel do these postmodern texts enact?

Symmetrical form and inner coherence unfold alongside each other in *Mr. Palomar* as dissimilar orders of being, which suggest alternate forms of coherence: “in which everything exists in another way” (17). The engagement with the form and idea of the novel, to formulate unique articulations without submitting to received forms of expression, by giving it new shape is present not only in Calvino’s oeuvre, but also in the works of other European writers such as Vladimir Nabokov and Milan Kundera. Belonging to other, less recognizable and visible processes of organization, internal coherence imparts a quality of self-containment to the text. Nevertheless, internal coherence may be perceived from networks of poetic resonance, in which Kundera suggests that, “the coherence of the whole is created ... by the *unity* of a few themes (and motifs), which are developed in variations” (83). Moreover, narrative movement is observed from shifts of meaning induced by the “labile” nature of these thematic and formal patterns, which materialize from such networks of echoing motifs and themes. (*Cities* 22, *Palomar* 53).

Internal coherence thus supplants the order supplied by the apparent scaffolding of each text to evince Calvino’s artistic logic of “remov[ing] weight from the structure of stories and from language” (*Memos* 3). Apart from its referential meaning, I will employ the term *contiguity* to denote literal or symbolic proximity, from the interrelations and/or associations, between forms. Predicated on the differential relation, contiguity draws on the liminal space of the in-between manifest across narrative planes, and words to foreground the unspecified nature of the *relational*, understood in terms of the ‘relation-to’ that connects the tenor and vehicle of a metaphor. Contiguity, as a way of reading these texts will not furnish definitions, but rather, as a conceptual frame it will serve to gesture at the ineffable, from which narrative

possibilities and underlying meanings may proceed, in escaping the confining hold of interpretation afforded by literary analysis.

Resistant to the form of the ‘well-made’ narrative propelled by logical-chronological temporal sequencing, these narratives occupy an unfixated temporal space to evince a lack of narratorial progression. However, increasing internal coherence, intra-movement arises from the echoing of recurring images, and intertextual resonances traversing amid the “tissue of quotations” that unfold inwards (Barthes 146). Yet, a multiplicity of fluid patterns, from such echoing, reflects a quality of ‘formlessness’ in the textual composition of these works. As variations on a theme, the accumulation of textual layers afforded by each episodic section results in the development of themes and ideas. Likewise, from the epigraph, the verbs conjure images of movement from the actions that “converge, diverge, break up”, whereby the very presence of the word induces flux from pushing against each other, comma after comma, to secure visibility on the page (17). Yet, characterized “like a lump, like a clot, like a blockage”, this alternate order of being acquires a texture of density (17). The repetition of the word “like”, from the use of similes, heightens mediation insofar as one can only half-grasp its essence. Revealed in terms of contiguity, internal coherence serves as an impetus to incite narrative movement and density, whereby form and content closely entwine to convey the multiplicity of reality.

Calvino’s aesthetic employment of language resonates with the formal attributes of these novels, to enact multiple narrative possibilities for a profusion of meaning to issue from the invocation of the ineffable. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Calvino observes “a universe in which ... forms densely pack the allotted space, constantly exchanging qualities and dimensions, and the flux of time is filled with a proliferation of stories and cycles of stories” (*Uses* 147). The fluidity of language reflects the contiguous, interchangeable dimension of forms, as linguistic representation reveals. Yet, the contiguous relations between forms imply

a universal sameness resulting from the repeated use of outworn words to describe a multitude of objects and abstractions in stories. Extending beyond the referential function of language, these novels are rendered with eloquence, which Denis Donoghue describes as the “the dancing of speech ... to create and embody yet another form of life beyond the already known forms of it” (*Eloquence* 2). From Calvino’s exacting treatment of language arises the multiplicity of forms and expressive possibilities to heighten the beauty of the novel, wherefore “[w]hatever aspects of existence the novel discovers, it discovers as the beautiful” (Kundera 122).

Firstly, I will begin with positing underlying forms of coherence, while proposing possible significances of the apparent structure of each novel in relation to narrative structure and reading. Consequently, the paper will explore the different ways networks of poetic resonance occasion internal coherence by paying attention to contiguous connections. Lastly, I will return to the aesthetics of the novel to extend on the notion of the indefinable in relation to art, and the unspecified differential relation between words and forms in terms of verbal expression. Therefore, this paper will seek to examine the ways in which *Invisible Cities*, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, and *Mr. Palomar* circle around notions of the ineffable and the indeterminate to enact possibilities of the novel by way of their textual composition, from which formal coherence is precipitated despite their fragmentary form.

Ordering principles: Manifest order and inner coherence

A matrix, a preamble to *Invisible Cities*, lays bare the order of cities to follow a fluid sequence under the dictates of geometrical patterns – adding and removing a category from the intermediate sections with the exception of divergent sequences in the first and last chapters. Lawrence Breiner suggests that should “Calvino’s structure [seem] too complex to be merely an arbitrary convenience, it has so far resisted most attempts to demonstrate its

significance” (560). For even if its form should be of an inordinate construct it attends to an architectural figuration, which governs the formal organization of these novels. And yet, the matrix does not serve as a scaffold extraneous to the text for it provokes inquiry into the novel’s form, begetting questions that in his study of narrative structure, Roland Barthes poses: “is everything in a narrative functional? Does everything, down to the slightest detail, have a meaning? Can narrative be divided up entirely into functional units?” (89). Informed by self-parody, the novel’s over-wrought construction is an ironic gesture at sequential order; to signal at the impossibility of the putative coherence enacted by the temporal representation of realist narratives. Constructing this parody around a structure resistant to explication, Calvino calls the nature of meaning and processes from which we make meaning into question. Inasmuch as the semblance of order from fixed forms lends coherence to primary material reality such that the world may be made transparent, and thereby fathomable. However, the gravity and heaviness foisted upon by meaning, sought predominantly to fulfill and champion functionality, detracts from Calvino’s artistry. Perhaps contrived to perform the mere function of being without function, it is a seemingly contradictory undertaking not to be deemed arbitrary. Thereby, denying the discourse of critical theory the authority to decipher the significance of the text, to subvert the importance conferred on meaning.

Capturing the difficulties of articulation, the attempt at conveyance regresses into an impossibility of communication. Yet, language made unfamiliar, also approaches, and conveys, the ineffable, from which uncommon combinations of words yield unexpected meaning. Attributed to the incongruence of perception, the attempt to speak of a bridge between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan forces the Khan to question: “‘Why do you speak to me of stones? It is only the arch that matters to me.’ Polo answers: ‘Without stones there is no arch’” (*Cities* 82). The interrelation between stone and arch, elements both integral to a bridge’s structure, recalls the architectural form of the text. An exacting formal organization

of the novel along with a scrupulous attention on “a language as precise as possible both in choice of words and in expression of the subtleties of thought and imagination” (*Memos* 56) is necessitated for “filigree cities to be seen through their opaque and fictitious thickness” (*Cities* 73). Evoking an inexplicable harmony by way of the confluence of precision and opacity from the clash of incongruous images, and inventiveness with words; the diaphanous quality of the cities, in the fracturing of familiar forms escapes the concretizing hold of language. Moreover, the depictions of the cities occupy a narrative form between prose and poetry, where boundaries collapse to accommodate the linguistic excess of Calvino’s poetic evocations. Barthes’ proposition of dividing a narrative into units reminds one that the fragmentary structure of these texts resonates also with the European tradition of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* and Lawrence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, as precursors of the postmodern narrative. Calvino inherits from this lineage the form of the episodic narrative, which well-accommodates the playful posture of disrupting literary conventions, to reveal the *construction*, within and of narrative. For the surface order of *Invisible Cities* belies an elliptical framework of underlying resonances reverberating throughout the text, to thereby heighten the intricacy of its formal construction.

Unfettered, and thus extending beyond the concerns of mimesis to speak in lightness without deferring to received forms of knowledge, Calvino frees himself “to concentrate all reflections, experiments, and conjectures on a single symbol” (*Memos* 71). An extended metaphor, the cities are independent of Venice, despite being the “first city that remains implicit”, for they are each imagined into being (*Cities* 86). Deemed as “[r]adically discontinuous and inconsistent, ... [from the juxtaposition of] worlds of incompatible structure”, Brian McHale regards the novel as an exemplification of Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia¹ (44). Yet, it is immaterial if Trude, from negating all distinctive attributes to which any city might lay claim, should be at variance with these other cities. As

an episodic section, each city introduces a fictive plane, which translates into one of the many narrative planes of the text. Lending resonance to the formal coherence of the novel, the textual density from the compression of echoing images reveals “the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termite’s gnawing” (*Cities* 6). However, surpassing the limits of verbal expression, it is of a complexity perhaps gestured at by the elaborate form of the matrix.

The attempt to locate form amid the “endless, formless ruin” (*Cities* 5) transcends perception to inhibit cognition of that which lies beneath the surface; wherein “it is our eyelids that separate [possible realities], but we cannot know which is inside and which outside” (*Cities* 104). However, “literature recognizes the *reality of the levels*, and this is a reality (or “Reality”) that it knows all the better, perhaps, for not having come to understand it by other cognitive processes” (*Uses* 121). When apprehending the novel, delimitations between objective and subjective realities are rendered indistinct, for if representation should be wholly circumscribed to primary material reality, the articulation and illumination of man’s being will fail. The reader ought to avail to “what can be revealed only by indirect vision” (*Memos* 4) so as to approach the “invisible order that sustains cities”, such that the “countless forms that the system of forms assembles and destroys” may find expression as submerged patterns of alternate order (*Cities* 122).

On the contrary, the ‘index’ of *Mr. Palomar* seemingly facilitates the novel’s exegesis from the consecutive sequence of numbered sections, in an attempt to make meaning of its organization. Assuming the function of a signifying system, the varying combinations of the numbers one to three denote the textual composition subtending each section, as the development of the novel segues “from description and narrative ... [to] meditation” (*Palomar* “Index”). Subscribing to mathematical logic, the numerical headings of these chapters demonstrate finite outcomes generated by permutation. However, gesturing at the

infinite possibilities of meanings contained within this finitude, in which the “surface of things is inexhaustible”, results in further surfaces to be addressed as depth recedes beyond the range perceptible within each section, for internal coherence to be perceived (*Palomar* 55). Apprehending *Invisible Cities* as “a many-faceted structure in which each brief text is close to the others in a series that does not imply logical sequence or a hierarchy, but a network in which one can follow multiple routes and draw multiple ramified conclusions”; and reading *Mr. Palomar* with a similar approach, brook possibilities from locating underlying networks of poetic resonance (*Memos* 71). The sequentiality from the numerical headings appended to each section extends only to the indexical organization, insofar as the episodic sections demonstrate a lack of temporal fixity and narrative progression. However, the text achieves narrative ‘development’ without the stimulus from conventional narrative devices employed in a linear causal trajectory. Nevertheless, the notion of a surface, as a veneer afforded by the ‘index’, heightens the opacity which surrounds the submerged labyrinthine² network of entry and departure points to the novel, in which order governed by sequentiality becomes undone.

Imperceptible but yet at moments half-glimpsed, the patterns of an underlying, concealed order, signal perhaps at a “secret filigree of the universe”, to gesture at the immensity of existence (*Uses* 48). Without recourse to a definitive encounter with the novel, Calvino likewise parodies the contrived fictions of realist novels conceived from the literary convention of a single, logical plot composed of ‘functional units’. In *Against Interpretation* Susan Sontag argues that, “interpretation, based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, violates art” (10). Moreover, the quality of self-containment in *Mr. Palomar* and *Invisible Cities* allows each episodic section to be apprehended as independent, stand-alone works of fiction; for inasmuch as contiguity furnishes narrative movement, it emphasizes also the economy of the episodic section. The

brevity of each section achieves a “particular density that, even if it can be attained in narratives of broader scope, nevertheless finds its proper dimension in the single page”, to thereby evoke depth to Calvino’s writing (*Memos* 49). Intra-textual depth is discerned from poetic resonance arising from the individual section, and traversing between episodic sections to form patterns of formal and thematic motifs, which reveal connections between disparate images and words from associations perceived or otherwise intuited, for formal harmony to materialize. Bordered by disorderliness and chaos in this entwined connection, the notion of symmetry is figured by the “aware[ness] of a complicated harmony that commands that unharmonious trampling, an inner proportion that links the most glaring anatomical disproportions, a natural grace that emerges from those ungraceful movements” (*Palomar* 80). Transfigured into an emblem, the embodiment of the giraffe serves as an expression of harmony borne from its opposite, and as an abstraction tethered to the material, only to overturn the heaviness of reification. Formal harmony defies the conventional notions of order and form rather, marshalling the formal and expressive possibilities present in language; it furnishes the novel with a formal distinction of its own.

Accommodating “a veil of minute particles of humours and sensations, a fine dust of atoms, like everything else that goes to make up the ultimate substance of the multiplicity of things”, the texture of the novel proceeds from a variegated and scrupulous gaze indirectly fixed upon the world, an artistic sensibility which is transposed onto, and reflected in Calvino’s language (*Memos* 20). However, multiplicity presupposes fracture in overturning homogeneity to problematize the notion of narrative coherence and progression.

Nevertheless, multiplicity hinges on the notion of reality as inherently manifold, insofar as both these notions are bound up in, and predicated on, sustaining subjectivity. Multiplicity, in relation to the indeterminate, yet intricate form of the novel, complicates the conventional encounter with text. Though the ‘index’ – more of a content page consisting of chapter titles

with suggestions for reading that usually comes at the beginning of the text – may impel the reader to re-read the novel in the inclination to break down and explicate the constituents of each episodic section. Yet, inverting the conventional, and chronological – in terms of the immediate time of reading – order of the text, the very orientation of the ‘index’ gestures at the nadir of interpretation as the foremost preoccupation of reading. Referencing Musarra, Martin McLaughlin proposes “that the grid does not enmesh integrally with the text, but rather is there as a premise to future rereadings” (132). Nonetheless, the distinction between reading and re-reading is rendered insignificant, for according to Calvino, “whether we use the verb “read” or the verb “reread” is of little importance ... every reading of a classic is in fact a rereading” (*Uses* 127-8). Reading is thus more an inconclusive pursuit, in which an approximation of the text precedes only the next. Likewise, exemplifying diverse approaches to reading and engendering a multiplicity of encounters with text, the Reader from *If on a winter's night* finds himself in the company of other readers in a library, each with his particular way of reading directed towards a corresponding end. Supplanting the conclusive interpretations of definitive analysis, the ways of reading the novel concern a participative approach, in which the reader is invited to sustained reflections vis-à-vis the text.

Yet, Mr. Palomar’s predisposition towards constructing models alludes to the quality of lightness, which prevails even in the weighty presence of these ‘exterior’ structures; wherein “the model of models Mr. Palomar dreams of must serve to achieve transparent models, diaphanous, fine as cobwebs, or perhaps even to dissolve models, or indeed to dissolve itself” (*Palomar* 111). Escaping our vision by dissolving so light, the model to be sought is that which exceeds tangible representation. Realizing such lightness of form ultimately releases the structure from the reification of *formal* construction, to achieve rarefaction of some other form: to assume a quality of impalpability from acquiring the texture of almost not being there. Subverting the functional purposes ascribed to the standard

index, Calvino calls attention to the formal coherence inherent in these works: an internal coherence and formal harmony submerged in the nebulous and indefinable. Released from the heaviness of meaning, the quality of lightness present in the formal coherence of these works renders this alternate order of the text as “a thing ... happy to be looked at by other things only when it is convinced that it signifies itself and nothing else, amid things that signify themselves and nothing else” (*Palomar* 115). Furthermore, the undulating movement performed by the sequential numerical pattern of the ‘index’ results in a fluidity of patterning that is in some measure organic, to subvert and transcend the supposed posture of stasis from the fixed forms inhabited by the world.

On the other hand, the succession of chapter titles forms a coherent sentence – which reveals yet another opening to the novel – to demonstrate the novel’s self-contained form and evince formal coherence. Whilst an accompanying scaffold would submit to the superfluous, the text exhibits a distinct formal composition from its embodiment of “the essence of what a novel is by providing it in concentrated form ... each beginning develops in very different ways from a common nucleus, and each acts in a framework that both determines and is determined” (*Memos* 120). Unlike the architectural organization of *Invisible Cities* and *Mr. Palomar*, this particular framework is fundamentally bound up with the substance of the embedded narratives, whereby form is premised on story telling and reading. Paradigmatic to these texts is the overriding artistic rationale to construct “such structures ... [that] enable [Calvino] to unite density of invention and expression with a sense of infinite possibilities” (*Memos* 120). Nonetheless, postmodern narratives foreground the mediation of language and the constructed nature of literary devices, and in *Metafiction* Patricia Waugh argues that, “such infinities of texts within texts draw out the paradoxical relationship of ‘framed’ and ‘unframed’ and, in effect, of ‘form’ and ‘content’. There is ultimately no distinction between ‘framed’ and ‘unframed’. There are only levels of form.” (31). The inundation of stories and

narrative planes, intact or otherwise left incomplete from the premature ending of each story, does not merely furnish ‘content’, but rather engenders the formal composition of the text. The concepts of ‘form’ and ‘content’ conflate and meld, for the presence of each story-world contributes to a Chinese-box structure, which would not find construction without the interpolation of these narratives. Therefore, despite the heterogeneous *plots* of these stories, the *mélange* of narratives is cohered by a causal, and thus sequential trajectory enacted by the frame story of the Reader and Ludmilla, the Other Reader.

An apotheosis of postmodern play, the text is composed of “sly parodies of popular fictional genres, including sentimental love novels, convoluted spy thrillers, exotic oriental tales, and above all, detective capers – a natural target for much postmodern fiction” (Markey 117). Propelling the narrative along a course marked by heightened rationality, with the unlikely pushing the bounds of the plausible, the frame story is a farcical device that dismisses man’s conviction in systems of science by furnishing increasingly improbable motivations for the Reader’s efforts at locating these unfinished novels. Moreover, the parodic treatment of literary conventions and genres attests to the overt self-consciousness characterizing metafiction, in which Waugh suggests that, “the traditional fictional quest has thus been transformed into a quest for fictionality” (10). The text further acknowledges its textuality by way of self-reflexivity when explicit reference is made to the novel’s diegesis, as an internal replication of its own construction, by the character-author Silas Flannery. Moreover, reminiscent of Nabokov’s *Lolita*, Silas Flannery’s diary extract problematizes the ontological status of the text, as the authorial figure becomes obscured by his own fictional construct. With “[t]he death of the author”, as Barthes’ article is titled, Calvino subverts authorial authority to call the fundamental processes of writing, as the production of text, into question. The playfulness and overt claims of fictionality, from which the multitudinous realms of these story worlds are composed, distinguish the text from *Invisible Cities* and *Mr.*

Palomar, by participating in discursivity to engage in, and speak of the construction of fiction from the very construction of these works of fiction.

A spatial understanding of narratives from the invocations of space surrounding the text exhibits the capaciousness of the novel's form in *If on a winter's night*. With a spatial conception of text, the narrator of "Looks down in the gathering shadow", or rather Calvino makes apparent the particular narrative technique employed in the narrative, in which "[he is] producing too many stories at once because what [he] want is for [the reader] to feel, around the story, a saturation of the other stories that [he] could tell and maybe will tell ... a space full of stories ... where [the reader] can move in all directions, as in space" (*If* 109). The relationship between language, narratives and space allows one to envisage echoes and shapes of other stories, to discover connections between stories written and stories unwritten from the in-between spaces of the novel. Likewise, communication afforded by the use of emblems in *Invisible Cities* occasions a "space that remain[s] around [each emblem], a void not filled with words" to sustain evocations of unspecified nature (*Cities* 38). Accessing an undefined space as such privileges cognition of the ineffable, to distill from the ambiguous a sense of that which lie just beyond the boundaries of man's knowing.

On the other hand, the textual composition of these works recalls the architectural design of the 'universal library' from Jorge Luis Borges' short story "The Library of Babel", wherein the "hexagonal rooms are a necessary form of absolute space or, at least our intuition of space" (*Labyrinths* 79). The linguistic representation of concepts intelligible only in terms of a critical framework ultimately exists as a shadow of such abstractions, insofar as these geometrical structures supply the reader with rudimentary outlines to half-grasp the magnitude of such forms. Compelling readers to envisage the extra-textual dimensions of the text from grasping at that which escapes the confines of language, the self-reflexivity of the novel calls attention to the limitations of representation. Nonetheless, according to Barthes:

to understand a narrative is not merely to follow the unfolding of a story, it is also to recognize its construction in ‘storeys’, to project the horizontal concatenations of the narrative ‘thread’ onto an implicitly vertical axis; to read ... a narrative is not merely to move from one word to the next, it is also to move from one level to another. (87)

Narrative linearity thus does not merely follow longitudinally, to reflect a teleological-bound path with a foreseeable denouement prefigured by its beginning, but encompasses narrative development from shifts in vertical planes to engender a multi-dimensional and textured reading. Extrapolating Barthes’ premise, *If on a winter’s night* is a literal enactment of the unfolding of such ‘storeys’, as a hypernovel. By dint of laying bare, and parodying the literary devices that engender the succession of textual levels as the reader moves between, and across disparate story-worlds. Narrative movement between horizontal and vertical levels allows for the discovery of intersections and trajectories across narrative planes, from which shifts of meaning come about. Nonetheless, engaging in combinatorial games, Calvino’s predisposition towards the geometrical nature of patterns unveils an intrinsically playful and artistic proclivity attendant to illuminating man’s being.

Patterns of poetic resonance and formal coherence

Formal coherence surpasses the structure of the ‘well-made’ narrative by way of parodying narrative linear progression, as propelled by causality, from the *plot* of the frame story in *If on a winter’s night*. According to his article “Story and Plot”, E. M Forster suggests that, “a story [is] a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality” (71). The parody of causality from the narrative devices driving the Reader’s actions pushes reason to a paroxysm, insofar as it borders on the untenable. However, with the entrance of each story-world, which transports

the external reader into alternate realms of time and space, the embedded narratives disrupt the novel's linear trajectory to facilitate narrative movement between textual planes. These in-between spaces, between frame story and 'incipit', constitute a liminal dimension amid shifts of narrative planes, in which "multiple, diverse worlds collide, creating a hybrid ontological province well outside traditional fictional realities" (Markey 117). As the narrative develops, the external reader becomes cognizant of the difference between the novel he is reading and the one read by the Reader, though they are of the same title and author. To exist in the fictional realm of the Reader as well, *If on a winter's night* is thus also a text installed beyond the ambit of accessibility for the external reader. According to Watts, "[w]e are faced with the conclusion that we have no access to [the Reader's] reading of *Traveler*, and he no access to ours; also, we have no means of establishing which is the original *Traveler*" (710). However, as magnified by parody, the novel suggests that *text* may only be apprehended in terms of *re-writing*, full of palimpsestic echoes of earlier preceding books, to accord with the Barthesian notion of *original* text as an impossibility.

The over-determined construction of the novel is pronounced from the contiguous parallels between Ludmilla's changing preferences for certain narratives articulated in each chapter, and the textual composition of the following story. With "an odor of frying wafts at the opening of the page, of onion in fact, of onion being fried ... each sliver of onion becomes black before golden" (*If* 34), the opening of "Outside the town of Malbork" demonstrates, as the preceding chapter states, Ludmilla's predisposition for novels "that bring [her] immediately into a world where everything is precise, concrete, specific" (*If* 30). Yet, almost foundering under the mounting construction of these stories, Calvino calls attention to the reverberations of poetic resonances underlying the text, in which as Kundera proposes, "[t]he novel's spirit is the spirit of continuity: each work is an answer to preceding ones, each work contains all the previous experience of the novel" (18-9). Calvino consistently

destabilizes the narrative planes constituting the text as *artefact*, to have these textual layers accumulate as *text*, for these stories compose the very novel they diverge from. The playfulness with the novel's form gives way to a conundrum as the stories are at once the same, but yet also wholly different, from each story world belongs to a 'book' of its own. From the analog of the Mobius strip Calvino weaves stories that may be posited both external to and within the novel's containment, insofar as the reader ultimately arrives at a same yet different novel, which prevails on the same textual surface, and is yet on a different narrative plane. Gesturing at the impossibility of "keep[ing] one book distinct from the other, each for what it has that is different and new", the contiguous relations between sections cohere the novel in recognition of the narrative continuity among texts that belong and contribute to the larger body of writing (*If* 256-7).

With each subsequent story performing a self-reflexive game, the orchestration of this metafictional ruse spans, and multiplies across textual levels to become increasingly elaborate. Following the trajectory undertaken by the Reader, the reader moves further away from the story world of the first chapter to circle back and find himself at an alternate opening to the novel, when the sixth reader in chapter eleven strings together a coherent sentence from the titles of these 'books', in which he reads: "[i]f on a winter's night a traveler, outside the town of Malbork, leaning from the steep slope ... he asks anxious to hear the story" (*If* 258). Pronounced from the presence of this additional narrative opening, the text is a contrived enactment of intertextuality, to be comprised of 'books' by fictional authors, ultimately of Calvino's construction. Illustrating thus, the "*creation/description paradox*" termed by Waugh, in which she argues that, "[d]escriptions of objects in fiction are simultaneously *creations* of that object...[therefore] the ontological status of fictional objects is determined by the fact that they exist by virtue of, whilst also forming, the fictional context which is finally the words on the page" (88). Collapsing form and substance of the text, both

notions are fundamentally inextricable for the *plot*, which constitutes of the search for the novel, becomes the very novel.

Furthermore, the self-reflexive references to its title in the first and last pages of the novel call attention to the constructed frame of the text. In his article “The Literary Frame”, John Frow asserts that the frame of a narrative, “conduct[s] the ‘trace’ of the excluded non-aesthetic area inwards, so that the delimited space of the text is structured by its limit and becomes significant because of the *selection* operated by the frame” (336). The narratives that compose the text presuppose not only unsaid, but also unsayable stories and worlds that though do not find presence in these pages, linger around the formal, and metaphorical margins of the novel. Belonging to the textual universe of the Reader and the world of the external reader, the ontology of novel multiplies and bifurcates to span across and accommodate levels of reality, encompassing stories written and unwritten, within and surrounding the text. Playing with the intersections of fictive and ‘real’ worlds, Calvino undermines the stability of primary material reality by introducing ambiguity from the development of possibilities in this text to refuse the unequivocal nature of a realist narrative.

The form of the embedded narrative, as the *incipit* of a ‘book’, furthers the resistance to causal progression by want for an ending – an integral component of the ‘well-made’ narrative as the definitive culmination, which narrative actions that determine plot progress towards. The parameters of the traditional novel extend to the indefinite with the incompleteness, or rather open-endedness of the *incipit* which gestures at textual possibilities left unwritten, and thus undefined. Overcoming the limitations of the novel, the reader’s imagination is called upon to furnish outcomes for the ‘completion’ of each book, and yet with each ‘ending’ foisted upon, one has to be cognizant of the multiplicity of other possible endings available. Distinguished by Kundera as “a period of repetition in which the novel keeps duplicating its form, emptied of its spirit” (15), the death of the novel is intimated by

the Reader when “[he finds himself] reading the same book [he has] read a hundred times” (*If* 197). Premised on the artistic logic of sustaining “the promise of a time of reading that extends before us and can comprise all developments”, this *hypernovel* demonstrates the infinite possibilities supplied by the novel’s form, nonetheless contingent upon the reader’s imagination before they may be realized (*If* 177).

The internal coherence of *Invisible Cities* from the thematic progression of ideas encapsulated by the representation of time precipitates narrative movement from shifts between past, present and reflections of the future to overcome the linear trajectory of realist novels. Exhibiting a fluid quality of time, references to Marco Polo’s grasp of Kublai Khan’s native tongue serve as temporal markers, in which these unfixed references to time commingle to deny the limitations of a logical-chronological sequence. Nevertheless, the changing nature of the communication vehicles, which Polo and the Khan employ marks a progression of intellectual positions taken on the transparency and efficacy of language as a medium of expression. Rendering language an arbitrary signifying system, the dialogue between both men, at varying times, depend on speech, or physical objects as emblems, and when “words failed [Marco], ... he went back to relying on gestures, grimaces and glances”, to at one point remain “silent and immobile” in their conversations (*Cities* 39).

However, hardly taking place in sequential order, these means of communication engage with the significance of language in relation to this novel’s recurring motifs of silence, meaning, emblems and words. Communicating through the game of chess, the chessboard is an emblem for every city imagined by Polo. Rooted in symbolic proximity, in which “certain pieces implied or excluded the vicinity of other pieces and were shifted across certain lines”, the combinations of moves and the corresponding perceived, or imagined associations supply infinite possibilities and meanings (*Cities* 121). Each city finds form by way of divergence, from the unlimited deployment of chess pieces, despite the supposed

conflation imposed by the limitations of a single symbol. Narrative progression occurs thus from imaginative journeying, not unlike Kublai Khan's and Marco Polo's own meditative travels.

A coherent inquiry into the concept of time from a network of intersecting motifs reflecting notions of memory, desire, and the relationship between memory and signs, gives rise to thematic resonance. In Zirma, "[m]emory is redundant: it repeats signs so that the city can begin to exist", whereby memory is underpinned by the imagined dimension of recollection (*Cities* 19). Insofar as memories are in actuality distorted recollections, and thus fictive constructions of passed time, which will never be regained. On the contrary, desire and memory in Isidora overlap and meld to unmask the nature of time in relation to one's imagined past(s) and present, whereby "[t]he dreamed-of city contained him as a young man; he arrives at Isidora in his old age. In the square there is the wall where the old men sit and watch the young go by; he is seated in a row with them. Desires are already memories" (*Cities* 8). The thematic connections between cities and frame story are facilitated by the resonance of echoing motifs, for as Kundera proposes, "there is something deeper than guarantees a novel's coherence: thematic unity" (82).

Time is revealed to occupy multiple temporal planes that co-exist, and to undertake trajectories that demonstrate one postmodern representation of time as suggested by Heise, by "project[ing] into the narrative present and past an experience of time which normally is only available for the future: time dividing and subdividing, bifurcating and branching off continuously into multiple possibilities" (55). Marco Polo's past(s) and future(s) entwine, for his future does not simply imply a departure from his past but rather, "a journey through memory", in which past and future may not be separated as fully distinct from each other (*Cities* 98). Polo's past is underpinned by his future inasmuch as the meaning and shape of one's past is contingent upon, and subject to the unfolding future, in which "another of his

pasts awaits him, or something perhaps that had been a possible future of his and is now someone else's present. Futures not achieved are only branches of the past: dead branches" (*Cities* 29). The empirical linearity of time's arrow when apprehended in relation to memory is closer to non-linearity. Inverting the conventional representation of time-sequence, the interweaving of past, present and future accords with man's subjective relationship with time to encompass past selves lived, unfulfilled, or imagined.

A particular instance of repetition from the frame sections of the text demonstrates contiguous, or more precisely, spatial-literal proximity, insofar as 'contact' from overlapping seemingly collapses in-between space. Beginning with "[t]he Great Khan tried to concentrate on the game" (*Cities* 123, 131), the introduction of the closing frame section in chapter eight duplicates the last paragraph of the corresponding opening frame section. However, the exception of the last word 'nothingness', which appears only in the preceding section, serves as a marker of difference to signal an imaginative re-opening of the novel to sustain the narrative and release Kublai Khan from his disillusionment. Furthermore, the deployment of punctuation, from the ellipses following and opening the repeated paragraph in both frame sections, demonstrates a protraction, or rather retardation of narratorial time to signal at the continuance of narrative possibilities encapsulated within the text that proceed even from nothingness. A signifier of silence, the ellipsis indicates pause where words are submerged, or held back from the lack of verbal expression. Conjured by Marco Polo, the imaginative realm from "the quantity of the things that could be read in a little piece of smooth and empty wood overwhelmed Kublai Khan" resonates with the multiform surface of the text, whereby the underlying multiplicity of forms may be made visible should the novel be read with a sense of imaginative possibilities (*Cities* 132).

Built around imagined versions of Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, the composition of this novel abounds with intertextual resonance, from which textual density becomes manifest.

Teresa De Lauretis asserts that both textual figures are ultimately characters “deprived of all naturalistic attributes, . . . reduced to their mythical names and to the extracontextual resonance that their names evoke” (416-7). However, the resistance towards appearing remotely ‘real’ from the weak characterization of Kublai Khan and Marco Polo heightens the fictive dimension of the novel, thereby furthering the layers of ‘make-believe’, or more precisely alternate realities proceeding from the text. The uncertain historicity of both Marco Polo and Kublai Khan acquire an almost mythological quality and proportion. Furthermore, the invocation of the historical figure of Marco Polo recalls the historical conditions that led to the reproduction of his travels in *Il Milione*, to foreground the act of story telling. In her article “Spatialization: A Strategy for Reading Narrative” Friedman suggests that, “such spatialized readings also allow us as readers to construct a ‘story’ of the fluidly interactive relationship between the surface and palimpsestic depths of a given text – taking into account all the historical, literary and psychic resonances that are embedded within the horizontal narrative” (226). Introducing intertextual nuances to the descriptions of the cities and adding to them an oneiric texture further imbues the fictive planes of the narrative. Echoing textual universes of other narratives within its own story world to acquire textual density, the text is heightened by the multiplicity of recurring images from layered and subliminal resonances within literature, in spite of the brevity of each episodic section, to increase the textual patterning of motifs and themes.

Reflecting the “triumph of discontinuity, divisibility, and combination over all that is flux, or a series of minute nuances following one upon the other”, the textual composition of *Mr. Palomar* recalls this particular description of postmodern communication made by Calvino in his article “Cybernetics and Ghosts” (*Uses* 9). Yielding reverberations that ricochet off each other, these poetic nuances incite narrative flux and movement by way of intersections, convergences, reflections, juxtapositions, and contradictions of motifs and

themes across textual planes. Betraying a disregard for sequential progression, narrative development is induced by connecting seemingly disparate images and motifs to perform perpetual imbrication, in which “events are arranged in an order that is not chronological but, rather, corresponds to an inner architecture” (*Palomar* 124). Despite the absence of a frame story, unlike the other two novels, contiguity brooks rather discontinuous narrative trajectories to occasion a multiplicity of possibilities, and stories that may be woven into a compact tapestry.

Acquiring formal harmony from the precipitation of thematic coherence, narrative movement imparts a fluid non-static texture to the novel. Nevertheless, innumerable evocations of poetic resonances escape our perception, and one is left to intuit these connections while remaining equivocal towards defining the exact formation of patterns from these networks of echoing images. An intrinsic, unspecified connection coheres the dissimilar figures of Mr. Palomar and Copito de Nieve, the albino gorilla in which “[j]ust as the gorilla has his tire which serves as a tangible support for a raving wordless speech,’ he thinks, ‘so I have this image of a great, white ape” (*Palomar* 83). Yet, the emblematic potency of particular tangible things – might it be cheese, iguanas, or a wave – impressed upon Mr. Palomar stretch into the indefinable to sustain the quality of ineffability. Bearing no consistent or outward similarities, the varied objects under Mr. Palomar’s scrutiny, coalesce and exchange qualities to evince a series of visual images that betray an unspecified harmony.

Formal coherence allows for poetic resonance to permeate the text freely, for “even if the overall design has been minutely planned, what matters is not the enclosure of the work within a harmonious figure, but the centrifugal force produced by it” (*Memos* 116-7). Running beneath the episodic sections is a space, which Philip Larkin calls ‘the solving emptiness / That lies just under all we do” (104). The silences seeping through, as an

accompanying undercurrent, are invoked and distilled by the very words that make the text, in which “the meaning of this silence-speech lies in its interruptions in what is, from time to time, actually said, giving a meaning to what is left unsaid” (*Palomar* 103). An extended evocation of silence resonates beneath the diverse, yet interconnected motifs of symmetry, harmony, language, and “the relationship between the self and the world”, which are developed in variation to cohere the text (*Palomar* “Index”). Nevertheless, the movement “from one language to another, from concrete figures to abstract words, to weave and reweave a network of analogies” foregrounds the differential relation between words, and also the differential gap between signifier and signified to give rise to indeterminate spaces within the text (*Palomar* 98). Consequently, shifts of meanings reveal potential dimensions that converge, for manifold layers of meaning to infuse the novel with the indefinite. For how should one speak of silence when each enunciation disqualifies, and negates the very thing one seeks to convey? Nonetheless, perhaps only revealed by the poetic resonance from these effusions of eloquence, is one closer to approximating formal coherence.

Resembling the form of a catalogue, *Mr. Palomar* is an exercise of accumulation that precipitates narrative movement from the layering of poetic resonance and connections from the echoing of motifs and themes, to occasion a multi-textured density to the novel. As variations on a theme, each episodic account increases the introspective dimensions of Mr. Palomar’s reflections. Moreover, the profusion of narrative planes, and variations of thematic motifs brook multiple trajectories of narrative ‘development’, which reflect Kundera’s notion that “digression enhances the discipline of the composition rather than weakening it” (84). Entitled “Mr. Palomar's Vacation”, “Mr. Palomar in the City” and “The Silences of Mr. Palomar”, the categorization delineated by these headings is arbitrary. Mr. Palomar’s preoccupations with observing a Japanese sand garden amid a crowd, studying the starlings, or even the encounter with the naked bosom intersect to form a multi-dimensional, composite

experience of the world, from which the figure of Mr. Palomar is reflected, or rather, refracted. Encapsulating “the constant pursuit of a precision in defining the modulating, the shifting, the composite”, narrative movement hinges upon the formal and thematic variation of Mr. Palomar’s solitary activities, to capture the exactitude of expression from his disorderly, and tangential thoughts surrounding man’s being (*Palomar* 23).

Subverting the significance ascribed to unambiguous endings, the nonlinear narrative movement performed by these texts, in particular *Mr. Palomar*, recalls Barthes’ argument that “meaning is not ‘at the end’ of the narrative, it runs across it ... meaning eludes all unilateral investigation” (87). Effected by the last sentence in which “at that moment he dies”, it is only apposite that Mr. Palomar’s existence, as a fictional construct, should cease as the novel concludes (*Palomar* 126). Conflating the textual figure of Mr. Palomar with Calvino, Constance Markey deems *Mr. Palomar* as “an emphatically personal book, its autobiographical basis barely concealed” (120). However, the narrative overturns any depiction of primary material reality for the novel is a work of metafiction, and as Waugh asserts, “[t]he fictional *content* of the story is continually reflected by its *formal* existence as text, and the existence of that text within a world viewed in terms of ‘textuality’” (15).

Despite his seemingly realistic dimensions, the inherent *fictionality* of Mr. Palomar subverts linguistic stability. The ending of *Mr. Palomar* intimates that meaning sought from such an investigative approach ultimately results in the deferral of meaning. Denied its referential function, language ultimately refers to itself. As Kundera elucidates, “[a] novel examines not reality, but existence ... [and] existence is the realm of human possibilities ... *both* the character *and* his world must be understood as *possibilities*” (43). The virtue of the novel lies not in its capacity for mimesis, but rather, its generation of new and imaginative ways of perceiving the world from the possibilities it offers man to discover his existence. The ego of Mr. Palomar yields to the mechanical eye of the text, as his name invokes, to perform the

duty of a telescope as a lens held up against the world and the levels of reality, for Calvino to arrive at reflections on man's being by way of a mediated, indirect gaze.

Eloquence and the beauty of the novel

In *Mr. Palomar*, the describing of things in the effort to capture and verbally depict forms is managed both by direct, straightforward descriptions, and figurative language employed by metaphors and similes. Tending towards abstraction, the descriptions in the section "Reading a Wave" attend to the inherent difficulties of both depicting a wave, and reading descriptive language so relentlessly specific in detail, it becomes almost indistinguishable. The opacity surrounding the text from the very start foreshadows the text's engagement with the ambiguous nature of linguistic representation, as language is a construct that founders in its ability to elucidate meaning. On the contrary, an inexplicable connection surfaces from the juxtaposition of disparate forms, despite the clash of discordant images. For "what was the first simile that occurred to him, and which he dismissed because it was incongruous? He had seen the planet sway, with its satellites in line like air bubbles rising from the gills of a round fish of the depths, luminescent and striped" (*Palomar* 41). Retaining the foremost image of the planet, and juxtaposing it in direct comparison with the air bubbles of a fish, the pronounced polarity of both images is sustained by the differential gap enacted by the word 'like', despite the drawn connection. When a form assumes qualities and dimensions other to itself, the fluidity of linguistic utterance is heightened by "labile" associations to occasion an intensified, multi-textured perception of the world incited by unfamiliar forms of expression (*Cities* 22, *Palomar* 53).

The language of indirection, by way of figurative description, affords "a means of grasping, through instantaneous revelation, the ungraspable essence of things, situations, characters. The metaphor-revelation" (Kundera 140). The exactitude of conveyance, captured

thus, introduces new ways of cognition to reveal the qualities and dimensions of things and existence that may otherwise remain muted, or undiscovered by conventional forms of expression. Nevertheless, “to support the weakness of vision”, the quickness of imagination conjures involuntary, but no less visual and poignant images that appeal to, and are impressed on our unconscious, despite connections perhaps obscure to one (*Palomar* 41). The subjectivity of one’s emotions when *experiencing* art, whether it be the “aesthetic emotion” (286) according to Bell, or “a new art emotion” (209) in T.S Eliot’s words, is exactly the freedom and pleasure one seeks in art. Unconcerned with the representation of verisimilitude, art offers its audience with a moment to “inhabit a world with an intense and peculiar significance of its own [whereby] that significance is unrelated to the significance of life” (Bell 288). A defining quality of art proposed by Bell, this an experience encapsulated by these texts, in which the reader withdraws from what Nabokov calls the “domain of average reality” with its forms of knowledge, which pin down the defined, and specified (118). Entering thus, into a world of one’s spontaneous cognitive and bodily senses, where meaning is accompanied by a dearth of absolute knowledge, in which shadowy uncertainty attends to the sharpness of feeling induced by the artful arrangement of words.

The verbal representation of concrete forms and abstractions alike allows Calvino to draw upon the “indistinct borderlands between diverse worlds”, otherwise known as the differential relation, to accentuate the boundaries, yet also shared, or contiguous connections between forms (*Uses* 147). The proliferation of variegated images from the “rise and fall of roofs, old tiles and new, curved and flat, slender or squat chimneys, arbors of reed matting and sheds of corrugated iron”, and the rhythm from cadences and modulations performed by the order of the words rouse the reader’s aesthetic sensibility to take delight in the musicality of these sentences (*Palomar* 54). When reading poetry, Donoghue proposes to “[discover] in ... language possibilities internal to itself; not by miming emotions deemed to be already

there but by divining possibilities of language that precede their correlations in life” (*Beauty* 117). One finds the same possibilities internal to language in Calvino’s prose, in which deliberately conceived or fortuitously stumbled upon, the formulation of new articulations attends to his predisposition for combinatorial games, which extends to the permutations of words.

As an extension of this notion from Donoghue, particular expressions and images acquire momentousness, and are remembered by the reader simply due to the manner of its utterance, which yields a separate layer of meaning that transcends the possible referential meanings from such poetic evocations. Inasmuch as these descriptions reflect the physical dimensions of the panorama, however one should think of “the use of the word as an unceasing pursuit of things, an approach not to their substance but to their infinite variety, touching on their inexhaustibly multiform surface” (*Memos* 77). Transfigured by Calvino’s eloquence, the depiction of the city’s façade surpasses the conventional prosaic descriptions of landscape. The *word* acquires visibility from the surging of verbs, “rusting”, “growing”, “peeling” and “spill[ing]”, which clamours against the things of inanimate nouns, such as “railings, balustrades, little columns supporting plants, metal water tanks” (*Palomar* 54). The free-flowing sentences worded with fastidious care, from which the word achieves perspicacity, overwhelm and empty language of its referential significance, for meaning shrinks in the expressive presence of beauty.

The collapsing of boundaries between fiction and non-fiction problematizes the literary genre of fiction, and the novel, whereby sections of *Mr. Palomar* were specifically edited for the novel, as original pieces of editorial, non-fiction writing published in newspapers³. As a repository of man’s reflections, the novel is a fictional narrative and fundamentally a written document, whereby “all ‘realities’ and ‘fantasies’ can take on form only by means of writing, in which outwardness and innerness, the world and I, experience

and fantasy, appear composed of the same verbal material” (*Memos* 99). Sharing the same patterns of language, the distinction between ‘realities’ and ‘fantasies’ is immaterial as the novel’s form encompasses the possibilities of man’s being. However, the aesthetic treatment of language is what transforms the novel into a work of art. Clive Bell offers one notion of form in relation to the aesthetics of art: “[t]hese relations and combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, [he calls] ‘Significant Form’; and ‘Significant Form’ is the one quality common to all works of visual art” (286). However in terms of the novel, one might consider the patterns of echoing images, and the scrupulousness with the choice and combination of words as “Significant Form” to effect formal harmony. Yet, the difficulty of speaking of beauty and art is plagued by the uncertainty of what we mean by these words when one employ such terms, a difficulty embodied by art as a defense against the grasp of knowledge. For art follows logic other to the reason of the everyday, to refuse the prosaic understanding of primary material reality.

The beauty of works of art exceed the boundaries of knowledge to elude the rationality of logic and definition, whereby in the encounter with art, “we can *try* to define them, to describe them as they are, and no more than that; whether, besides the face they show us, they also have a hidden face, is not for us to *know* (emphases mine)” (*Palomar* 97). The hidden layers of a work of art should always remain open to the attempts of locating possible meaning, whereby one should refrain from knowing, for knowledge is a word compromised by its close associations with the logic of reason and rationality. Moreover, the limitations of language to speak of abstractions beyond the threshold of the concrete and the known, such as the notion of the beautiful, is intimated by the word: “[p]ensiveness ... [employed by Barthes], for this sense of expressive limitation; it indicates that one knows there is more to be said though it can’t be fully said” (*Eloquence* 95). The approximation of knowledge is sustained only by respecting the inscrutable nature of forms and the opacity of

language to acquire a keener appreciation of beauty – a quality which itself is submerged in the approximate.

Yet, the ‘never-before-said’ in a moment of epiphany lays bare the inner essence of existence, in which the connections between the verbal expression and the thing enunciated suddenly become transparent, even if only for an instant. Apprehending beauty, the expressive possibilities of language from the startling combination and permutation of words and images are more fascinating to one than referential meaning. Calvino’s linguistic virtuosity gives way to the sublime by way of wondrous descriptions to simply there for the gratification of both writer and reader. Gracing the text with images of “cheeses on their platters [that] seem to proffer themselves as if on the divans of a brothel” (*Palomar* 72), or when his fancy should be “the thick beauty spots of black truffle [that] stand out, aligned like buttons on a Pierrot’s tunic, like the notes on a score, dotting the roseate” (*Palomar* 68). The unrestrained lyricism issuing from Calvino’s linguistic artistry coaxes the reader to take pleasure in the play of words, for faithful representation ceases to be as pertinent as the imaginative construction of images and verbal expressions. Transfigured into poetic evocations, Calvino’s eloquence washes over the very forms he writes of, insofar as they are removed from primary material reality to belong to the realm of textual, and imagined constructions as aestheticized visions of the world.

As a communication vehicle, the employment of emblems is premised on the ambiguity of meaning, whereby “[t]he Great Khan deciphered the signs, but the connection between them and the places visited remained uncertain” (*Cities* 22). Interpretation only takes the Khan thus far, for meaning is plural, and the unspecified differential relations between the signifier and signified in language systems, and the gap between *representation* and the forms or abstractions enunciated give way to indeterminacy. The inherent otherness of these cities, from their very construction as imaginative possibilities of the novel, countermands the

prescription of received forms of knowledge. Sunk in the imagined, the essence of the city takes no other form except from words employed by Calvino and multiplicity of images conjured forth. According to Beno Weiss, “the meaning of the invisible cities is to be found not merely in Polo’s words, but between words; not in things, but between things. Meaning, therefore, results from differential relations, from signifying relations” (151). Nonetheless, “[t]he new fact receive[s] a meaning from that emblem and also add[s] to the emblem a new meaning” (*Cities* 22) to overcome the static form of “closed, stable” (*Cities* 39) languages; for submerged nuances of meaning to surface from contextual difference. The polysemous nature of emblems and words as signifying systems corresponds to the polymorphous cast of these imagined cities to be reflective of the voluminous, and varied dimensions of the worlds within the text, in which the space surrounding the word begins to acquire density.

Nonetheless, extending Weiss’ notion of the novel as a text which “remains in a state of production”, the ambiguity surrounding, and embodied by each emblem calls upon the reader’s imagination, to realize and thus sustain the imaginative possibilities of the novel; insofar as the reader insofar as the reader contributes to the formation of the cities, whilst inhabiting an imaginative space from moving between story-worlds (151). Seeking to undo the construction of the cities to arrive at conclusive meaning negates the imagined dimensions of these cities, to inflict violence on art.

Nonetheless, the diaphanous quality of the text assumes a crystalline dimension, whereby “[a]mid the surge of the elements, a splendid hard diamond takes shape, an immense, faceted, transparent mountain” (*Cities* 60). The coalescing of textual density and lightness of expression – though incongruous qualities – gives way to “meaning ... conveyed through a verbal texture that seems weightless, until the meaning itself takes on the same rarefied consistency” (*Memos* 16). Evoking a texture of suspension from the brief advent and swift conclusion of each city and conversation, coupled with the pellucidity of condensed

description, the musicality of Calvino's language enfolds the worlds inhabited by Polo and the Khan. The communication of information is superseded by the poetics of language, and a variation of this notion is offered by Lacan in which "the function of language is not to inform but to evoke" (64), whereby the depictions of the cities are bound up with "smuggling ... moods, states of grace, elegies" (*Cities* 98). Eloquence, being the virtue of their construction, conveys a luxuriant, yet melancholic texture from austere descriptions, in which meaning hardly reveals itself plainly, leaving the reader to half-grasp its possible significance. The obscure ending, to "seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space" simply confounds, and denies our comprehension (*Cities* 165). The sense of the sublime, however, does not pass unnoticed. The invocation of inferno and space, both abstractions only known to us as concepts, or images and evocations from art, for which there is no commensurate object, finds expression from the poetics of eloquence. Coming together to form an arresting visual image, the reader is comforted only by the feeling of aesthetic wonderment amid the struggle to take in its profundity.

Conversely, beauty from the invention of textual universes in *If on a winter's* attends to the written page, in which the aesthetics of language from the construction of sentences or turns of phrase, tussle with the desire to tell stories. However, "[in] ... [his] stor[ies], the bridge is not finished: beneath every word there is nothingness" (*If* 83), in which the poetic ministrations on the word "[create] a rapport between diverse levels of reality in writing, and even between things written and things not written" (*Uses* 104), to invoke the ineffable from these unbridged gaps underlying the narrative to enact expressive and formal possibilities for the novel. Not once cohered in an absolute manner, the formal coherence of the text resonates with the imperfect forms prevailing in art. The unrelenting self-reflexivity may detract from the beauty of the novel, however the differential gap between the form itself and its

representation, from the transposition of ‘reality’ into fiction, reminds one of works of art from the ways that they perceived as *other* to, and distinct from ‘reality’. Apprehending the text leaves us with,

[r]eading ... a thing made of writing, a solid material object, which cannot be changed, ... and through this thing we measure ourselves against something else that is not present ... that belongs to the immaterial, invisible world, because it can only be thought, imagined, or because it was once and is no longer, past, lost, unattainable, in the land of the dead... (*If* 72)

Bypassing our cognitive faculties, to simply take in the gracefulness of words harmoniously strung together; on and on it runs to sweep us along with its cadences and meandering, snaking form. The elegance of Calvino’s linguistic utterances invokes the sublime to suffuse the text with a sense of the immense; a palpable quality despite the relatively compact proportions of the text.

Yet taking pause, the sophistication of the implicit idea lingers, to confer upon the reader an encounter with the undefined, in which the materiality of writing and reading both serve as an address to the ungraspable. An almost intellectual kind of beauty, a beauty of ideas, emerges from the recurring motifs of the unsaid and nothingness to gesture at the “almost being said” (*Eloquence* 70). Exhibiting “a kind of eloquence that seems to issue from under the words and nearly apart from them and yet in the event is helplessly verbal”, Calvino’s language persuades us to apprehend his writing on aesthetic terms, even as it is simultaneously playful, or wrought with veins of intellectual discourse (*Eloquence* 70). To approach his works as one would with poetry by spending time on trying to figure its possible meanings without arriving at definitive interpretation.

Form and beauty are bound up with each other, in which literary works of art may be distinguished as “particular forms to be apprehended, achievements of invention and style,

the right words in the right order, proprieties of cadence and invention” (*Beauty* 114). The formal composition of these novels begets questions for readers: “what is art in literature?” and “what is the value of aesthetics in literature?” Concluding with an appreciation of the beauty of these novels, this paper has sought to preserve the quality of the ineffable in Calvino’s work without imposing meaning on these texts too often by positing interpretations as adjudications of knowing its significations. Encountering *text*, in which “everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed ... but there is nothing beneath”, I have attempted to disentangle the notion of formal coherence and harmony from each text, without making any claims of knowledge from having deciphered (Barthes 147). Thus, if the reading of these novels should be perceived as rife with approximations, a tenuous understanding of the texts is not implied, but rather, this paper has aimed to propose and demonstrate that Calvino’s textual universes ought to remain resistant to definition.

Redolent with meaning, one is offered the pleasure of reading and luxuriating in the play of words, in the acknowledgement that we are unable to exactly know what its meaning may be. This paper has been structured in a manner to evince recurring motifs and themes of its own, in an effort to emulate Calvino’s sense of narrative movement and density in his work. The close-reading of each text under each section refrains from a strict, consistent order, rather they have been arranged according to the development of my argument, in which one might also think of contiguity as a way to reading this paper. Yet, inasmuch as these novels appear to undertake similar trajectories as this paper has sought to reveal patterns and networks of resonating images and ideas, they each enact different possibilities for the novel. For each text enacts a distinct and singular variation of the novel from marshalling the novel’s inherent potential for invention and formal possibilities.

Having begun this paper with approaching the possibilities offered by the novel, and engaging with the patterns of internal coherence and formal harmony, this trajectory diverts

to the amorphous, or rather polymorphous forms inhabited by these texts, owing to the indefinite nature of the possibilities arising from the formal compositions of these novels. Yet, the formal coherence of each text remains intact, despite eluding rationalization. Bearing a consistency of formal design, these texts, as postmodern narratives, undertake forms and *order* of its own organization by breaking away from the ones which precede it. Overwrought, and yet thoroughly open-ended, these incompatible qualities give way to formal harmony that refuses to make its configuration known, though it is implied. Though paradoxical, the notion of wholeness from the unity of themes and motifs, apprehended in terms of multiplicity and divergence, allows for formal harmony to emerge amid the incongruous and inconsistent. Perhaps, a notion of harmony from *Mr. Palomar* will offer some insight, in which “there is a sense of possible harmony, as if between two nonhomogenous harmonies: that of the nonhuman in a balance of forces that seems not to correspond to any pattern, and that of human structures, which aspires to the rationality of a geometrical or musical composition, never definitive ...” (*Palomar* 94). And, it is with this certain irresolution from reading these novels that one approaches their inherent formal coherence and complexity.

Compelling the reader “to look at the world from a different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification”, these texts desist from propounding unequivocal, or didactic messages or meaning (*Memos* 7). Rather, the novel allows for other forms of cognition and perception that the world of primary reality disregards or overlooks, for “human existence is perpetually being forgotten by man, and thus the novelists’ discoveries, however old they may be, will never cease to astonish us” (Kundera 123). For *Invisible Cities*, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, and *Mr. Palomar* are works of art constructed from Calvino’s constant struggle with devising new articulations, to

enunciate the never-before-said, an expression that will perhaps renew the understanding of the world and man's being.

(11283 words)

End Notes

1. Brian McHale elaborates on Michel Foucault's concept of *heterotopia*, and cites from *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Science*. The description of the conditions surrounding heterotopias invokes the notion of incongruity and connection, in which "[t]here is a worse kind of disorder than that of the incongruous, the linking together of things that are inappropriate"(Foucault 19).
2. The notion of the labyrinth is a dominant influence in Calvino's writing according to Beno Weiss, in which he argues, "Calvino was fascinated with the image of the labyrinth, the challenges it poses and the various means of escaping from it. He saw it as representative of the multiple aspects of literature" (133). Calvino also makes reference to the labyrinth, as a motif for the construction of narrative games, in his essay "Cybernetics and Ghosts" (*Uses* 25).
3. The genesis of the novel is widely known and acknowledged by critics of Italo Calvino's work, and both McLaughlin and Markey refer to this aspect of the novel in their analyses.

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