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Italo Calvino on Invisible Cities

The following is a lecture given by Italo Calvino to the students of the Graduate Writing Division at Columbia University on March 29, 1983.

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Invisible Cities does not deal with recognizable cities. These cities are all inventions, and all bear women's names. The book is made up of a number of short chapters, each of which is intended to give rise to a reflection which holds good for all cities or for the city in general.

The book was born a little at a time, with considerable intervals between one piece and the next, rather as if I were writing poems, one by one, following up varying inspirations. Indeed, in my writing I tend to work in series: I keep a whole range of files in which I put the pages I happen to write (following the ideas which come into my head), or mere notes for things I would like to write some day. In one file I put the odd individuals I bump into, in another the heroes of myth; I have a file for the trades I would like to have followed instead of being a writer, and another for the books I would like to have written had they not already been written by somebody else; in one file I collect pages on the towns and landscapes of my own life, and in another imaginary cities, outside of space and time. When one of these files begins to fill up, I start to think of the book that I can work it into.

This is how I carried on the *Invisible Cities* book over the years, writing a piece every now and then, passing through a number of different phases. At one stage I could only write about sad cities, and at another only about happy ones. There was one period when I compared the cities to the starry sky, to the signs of the zodiac; and another when I kept writing about the garbage which spreads outside the city day by day.

In short, what emerged was a sort of diary which kept closely to my moods and reflections: everything ended up being trans-

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formed into images of cities—the books I read, the art exhibitions I visited, and discussions with friends.

And yet, all these pages put together did not make a book: for a book (I think) is something which has a beginning and an end (even if it's not a novel, in the strict sense of the word). It is a space which the reader must enter, wander round, maybe lose his way in, and then eventually find an exit, or perhaps even several exits, or maybe a way of breaking out on his own. It may be objected that this definition holds good for a novel with a plot, not for a book such as mine, which is meant to be read as one would read a book of poems, or essays, or at most short stories. But the point I am trying to make is that a book of this sort, if it is to be a real book, must have a structure of some kind. To put it another way, one must be able to find a plot, a route, a "solution".

I have never written a book of poems, but I am no stranger to books of short stories; and I can safely say that the ordering of the various stories is always a brain-racking task. In this case, I set out writing the title of a series at the top of each page: *Cities and Memory*, *Cities and Desire*, *Cities and Signs*; there was also a fourth category which I started off by calling *Cities and Form*; but this title turned out to be too generic, and the pieces ended up under other headings. For a while, as I carried on writing city after city, I was not sure whether to step up the number of categories, to cut them down to the bare minimum (the first two, *Cities and Memory* and *Cities and Desire*, were fundamental), or to do away with them altogether. There were many pieces which I was unable to classify—which meant that I had to hunt for new definitions, new categories. A number of cities, for example, were rather abstract, airy creations, and in the end I grouped them as *Thin Cities*. Others could be classified as *Twofold Cities*; but then I found it was better to redistribute them among other groups. Other series, *Trading Cities*, which were characterized by various kinds of exchange—of memories, desires, routes, and destinies—and *Cities and Eyes*, characterized by visual properties—I had not provided for to start with. They sprang into being at the last moment, as the result of a reallocation of pieces which I had previously assigned elsewhere, especially under the headings of *Memory* and *Desire*. The *Continuous Cities* and the *Hidden Cities*, on the other hand, were two

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series which I wrote with a special purpose in mind, once I had begun to see the form and the meaning which I wanted to give to the book. I tried to work out the best structure on the basis of the materials I had collected, as I wanted these series to alternate, to interlace one another, while trying to keep fairly close to the chronological order in which the various pieces had been written. In the end I determined to write eleven series of five cities each, grouped in chapters comprising pieces from different series which had a common climate. The system of alternation is the simplest possible, though some people have not found it so.

I still have not mentioned something which I should have declared at the outset: *Invisible Cities* is in the form of a series of verbal reports which the traveller Marco Polo makes to Kubla Khan, Emperor of the Tartars. (In fact, the historical Kubla, a descendant of Genghiz Khan, was Emperor of the Mongols; but in his book Marco Polo referred to him as Great Khan of the Tartars, and thus he has remained in literary tradition.) Not that I had any intention of following the itinerary of the thirteenth century Venetian merchant who travelled as far as China and who, as ambassador for the Great Khan, visited much of the Far East. For the Orient is nowadays a topic which is best left to experts; and I am not one. But throughout the centuries there have been poets and writers who have drawn their inspiration from *Il Milione*, as an exotic and fantastic stage setting: Coleridge in his famous poem, Kafka in *The Emperor's Message*, Dino Buzzati in his novel *The Desert of Tartars*. Only the *Thousand and One Nights* can boast a similar success—that of an imaginary continent in which other literary works find space for their own particular worlds: continents of the “elsewhere,” now that there is no longer any “elsewhere” in the world, and the whole world is becoming more and more uniform (and for the worse).

In my *Invisible Cities*, Kubla Khan is a melancholy ruler who realizes that his boundless power is of little worth because the world is going rapidly downhill. Marco Polo is a visionary traveller who tells the Khan tales of impossible cities—for example, a cobweb-city suspended over the abyss, or a microscopic city which gradually spreads out until one realizes that it is made up of lots and lots of concentric cities which are all expanding. Each of the

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chapters which make up the book is preceded and followed by a sort of commentary from Marco Polo and the Khan. In point of fact, the first of these introductory episodes was written before I started on the cities; and it was only later, as I went on with the cities themselves, that I thought of writing some other short introductions or epilogues for them. To be more precise, I had put a lot of work into the first piece, and had a lot of material left over; and as time went on I went ahead with some variants of these left-over pieces (the languages of the ambassadors, Marco's gesticulations) and found that new reflections were emerging. The more cities I wrote about, the more I developed my thoughts on the work in the form of comments from Marco and Kubla. Each of these reflections tended to pull things in a particular direction; and I tried to let them have their own way. Thus I ended up with another collection of material which I tried to let run parallel to the rest (that is, the cities proper). I did also a certain amount of cutting and mounting work, in the sense that some of the conversations are interrupted and then resumed. In short the book was discussing and questioning itself at the same time as it was being composed.

I feel that the idea of the city which the book conjures up is not outside time; there is also (at times implicit, at others explicit) a discussion on the city in general. I have heard from a number of friends in town planning that the book touches on some of the questions that they are faced with in their work; and this is no coincidence, as the background from which the book springs is the same as theirs. And it is not only towards the end of the book that the "big number" metropolis appears; for even the pieces which seem to evoke ancient cities only make sense insofar as they have been thought out and written with the city of today in mind.

What is the city today, for us? I believe that I have written something like a last love poem addressed to the city, at a time when it is becoming increasingly difficult to live there. It looks, indeed, as if we are approaching a period of crisis in urban life; and *Invisible Cities* is like a dream born out of the heart of the unlivable cities we know. Nowadays people talk with equal insistence of the destruction of the natural environment and of the fragility of the large-scale technological systems (which may cause a sort of chain reaction of breakdowns, paralyzing entire metropolises). The crisis

of the overgrown city is the other side of the crisis of the natural world. The image of "megalopolis" – the unending, undifferentiated city which is steadily covering the surface of the earth – dominates my book, too. But there are already numerous books which prophecy catastrophes and apocalypses: to write another would be superfluous, and anyway it would be contrary to my temperament. The desire of my Marco Polo is to find the hidden reasons which bring men to live in cities: reasons which remain valid over and above any crisis. A city is a combination of many things: memory, desires, signs of a language; it is a place of exchange, as any textbook of economic history will tell you – only, these exchanges are not just trade in goods, they also involve words, desires, and memories. My book opens and closes with images of happy cities which constantly take shape and then fade away, in the midst of unhappy cities.

Almost all critics have stopped to comment on the closing sentence of the book: "seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, and make them endure, give them space." For given that these are the last lines, everybody has taken them as the conclusion, the "moral." But this is a many-faceted book, and there are conclusions throughout its length, on each of the faces and along each of the edges; and there are others, no less epigrammatic or epigraphic than the final one. Certainly, if that sentence is to be found at the end of the book rather than elsewhere, there is a reason; but we ought to begin by saying that the last little chapter has a double conclusion, both parts of which are equally necessary: on the utopian city (which even if we do not catch sight of it we cannot stop looking for); and on the infernal city. And again; this is only the last bit of the section on the Great Khan's atlases, which has been somewhat neglected by the critics, and which from start to finish does nothing but propose various possible "conclusions" to be drawn from the entire book. But there is also the other thesis, which says that the meaning of a symmetrical book should be sought in the middle: thus there are psychoanalytical critics who have found the deep roots of the book in Marco Polo's evocations of Venice, his native city, as a return to the first archetypes of the memory; while scholars of structural semiology maintain that one must seek at the very centre of the

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book – and by doing so have found an image of absence, the city called Baucis. Here it becomes clear that the author's view no longer counts: it is as if the book, as I have explained, wrote itself, and it is only the text as it stands which can authorize or rule out this or that reading of it. As one reader among others, I may say that in chapter five, which in the heart of the book develops a theme of lightness that is strangely associated with the theme of the city, there are some of the pages I consider the best as visionary evidence; and perhaps these more "slender" parts, the *Thin Cities* or others, are the most luminous areas in the book. There is no more I can say.