

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 306

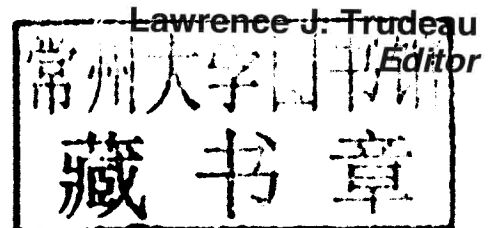
Volume 306

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short-Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**

Lawrence J. Trudeau

Editor



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Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. The great poets, novelists, short-story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey of an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Volumes 1 through 87 of TCLC featured authors who died between 1900 and 1959; beginning with Volume 88, the series expanded to include authors who died between 1900 and 1999. Beginning with Volume 26, every fourth volume of TCLC was devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers. With TCLC 285, the series returned to a standard author approach, with some entries devoted to a single important work of world literature and others devoted to literary topics.

TCLC is part of the survey of criticism and world literature that is contained in Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (NCLC), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (LC), *Shakespearean Criticism* (SC), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (CMLC).

Organization of the Book

A TCLC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the author's name (if applicable).
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication information of each work is given. In the case of works not published in English, a translation of the title is provided as an aid to the reader; the translation is a published translated title or a

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- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included. Criticism in topic entries is arranged chronologically under a variety of subheadings to facilitate the study of different aspects of the topic.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Citations conform to recommendations set forth in the Modern Language Association of America's *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. (2009).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** describing each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors who have appeared in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *TCLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in *TCLC* as well as in *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, *Drama Criticism*, *Poetry Criticism*, *Short Story Criticism*, and *Children's Literature Review*.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *TCLC* by nationality, followed by the numbers of the *TCLC* volumes in which their entries appear.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of titles published in other languages and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, plays, nonfiction books, and poetry, short-story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks. All titles reviewed in *TCLC* and in the other Literary Criticism Series can be found online in the *Gale Literary Index*.

Citing *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*

When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as Modern Language Association (MLA) style or University of Chicago Press style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a works cited list set forth in the Modern Language Association of America's *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. (New York: MLA, 2009. Print); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

Cardone, Resha. "Reappearing Acts: Effigies and the Resurrection of Chilean Collective Memory in Marco Antonio de la Parra's *La tierra insomne o La puta madre*." *Hispania* 88.2 (2005): 284-93. Rpt. in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 206. Detroit: Gale, 2008. 356-65. Print.

Kuester, Martin. "Myth and Postmodernist Turn in Canadian Short Fiction: Sheila Watson, 'Antigone' (1959)." *The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations*. Ed. Reginald M. Nischik. Rochester: Camden House, 2007. 163-74. Rpt. in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 206. Detroit: Gale, 2008. 227-32. Print.

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Invisible Cities

Italo Calvino

Italian novelist, novella writer, short-story writer, and essayist.

The following entry provides criticism of Calvino's novel *Le città invisibili* (1972; published as *Invisible Cities*). For additional information about Calvino, see *CLC*, Volumes 5, 8, 11, 22, 33, 39, and 73, and *TCLC*, Volume 183.

INTRODUCTION

Invisible Cities, by Italo Calvino (1923-1985), is a novel consisting of short sketches in which the explorer Marco Polo takes the aging emperor Kublai Khan on an imaginary tour of his empire, describing for him cities that range from utopian to infernal and from realistic to fantastic. Calvino modeled the work on a spiraling mathematical pattern, interspersing sketches of cities with philosophical discussions between Polo and Kublai, in which they explore such topics as the relationship between fact and fiction, the nature of experience, narrative and visual imagery, and the qualities of human society. Taking their cue from the novel's culminating chess match between the protagonists, critics have characterized *Invisible Cities* as a kind of game between the reader and the author. It has also been viewed as a collection of fables, with each city sketch providing an ironic commentary on modern life. The text reflects Calvino's engagement with structuralism and semiotics, as well as his interest in experimental narrative forms. Although it was written relatively late in Calvino's career, *Invisible Cities* brought the author a new level of international attention and is among his best-known and most critically acclaimed works.

SUBJECT AND FORM

The structure of *Invisible Cities* is integral to its meaning. David Sheridan (2003) observed that the novel, "proceeding largely through elaboration, succeeds because the cities themselves are 'bright' and 'eye-catching,' like gift-wrapped Christmas presents." He suggested that Calvino uses "controlled variation" as a device "to solve the problems of formlessness and monotony, and ultimately of closure." *Invisible Cities* is composed of narrative fragments organized according to a multilevel structure, including the frame story, in which the relationship between Polo and Kublai is developed, and Polo's fifty-five city sketches from his travels throughout the empire. These sketches,

which range from three hundred to seven hundred words, are grouped into eleven categories: Cities and Memory, Cities and Desire, Cities and Signs, Thin Cities, Trading Cities, Cities and Eyes, Cities and Names, Cities and the Dead, Cities and the Sky, Continuous Cities, and Hidden Cities. In the course of the book, each city category appears a total of five times across nine chapters. The first and last chapters each contain ten sketches; the intervening chapters are composed of five sketches. Chapters begin and end with a portion of the frame story and feature city sketches from different categories that are ordered according to a numerical pattern. Chapter one, which introduces the first four city categories, includes the sketches "Cities and Memory 1," "Cities and Memory 2," "Cities and Desire 1," "Cities and Memory 3," "Cities and Desire 2," "Cities and Signs 1," "Cities and Memory 4," "Cities and Desire 3," "Cities and Signs 2," and "Thin Cities 1"; the numerical pattern of chapter one is thus 1 2 1 3 2 1 4 3 2 1. Chapters two through eight all follow the pattern 5 4 3 2 1, each beginning—after the frame narrative—with the fifth and final discussion of a city category and ending with the first instance of a new category. The pattern of chapter nine, which completes the cycle of five examples of each city category, is 5 4 3 2 5 4 3 5 4 5.

Polo and Kublai are the only named characters in *Invisible Cities*, representing, respectively, the creative imagination and the rational mind. In the course of their interactions, they progress from a wordless communication using symbolic objects, before Polo learns Kublai's language, to detailed verbal dialog and ultimately to the pattern-driven abstraction of a chess game. These two characters are also representations of their historical namesakes, whose relationship attained legendary status through the popularity of *The Travels of Marco Polo* (c. 1298). This work, which was based on stories told by Polo to a writer with whom he was imprisoned in 1298, purports to recount Polo's experiences as a traveler in the Far East and his observations of Kublai, who at one time ruled nearly a fifth of the world's inhabited land. In the same way that readers wondered if the exotic locations, adventures, and customs described in *The Travels of Marco Polo* were true reports or imaginary tales, Calvino's Kublai tries to separate truth from fiction in Polo's account of the "invisible" cities he has explored throughout the emperor's realm. The cities themselves can be considered characters, each having a feminine name and a distinctive personality. The people who inhabit the cities are rarely personalized, however, serving primarily to suggest or illustrate a city's particular quality.

MAJOR THEMES

The city sketches provide commentary on urban life, exploring its physical and social architectures and its possibilities and impossibilities. One city grows outward from its center in concentric circles, while another is built in a net stretched between two peaks. One city conforms so tightly to its intended pattern that growth becomes unnatural, while another continually changes and renews itself. Throughout the sketches, Calvino illuminates the relationship between architecture and people, order and freedom, past and future, and dream and conscious thought. Structure is provided by the city categories, each of which announces a particular focus—the City and Desire, for example. Each city sketch develops an aspect of that focus through descriptive details and evocative vignettes. The category of “Hidden Cities,” for example, includes Raissa, a sad city that always contains a hidden and unnoticed, happy city; and Berenice, an unjust city that contains a hidden, just city. As the final sketch of the work, Berenice highlights the complexity of Calvino’s urban visions, for hidden within the just city are the seeds of another unjust city, which will contain another just city, and so on, infinitely.

The sequencing of the city sketches lends *Invisible Cities* a kaleidoscopic effect that creates movement within the novel’s structure. At the same time, the discussions between Polo and Kublai surround and illuminate the city sketches, which become a medium for their exchange of ideas. Unlike traditional frame stories, which often function simply as a vehicle for the telling of tales, the dialog between Calvino’s characters has its own thematic logic. The aging Kublai has amassed a huge empire, but he sees little of it and has come to realize that he understands even less. His other representatives bring him reports of what is visible in his realm, but only Polo shows him what cannot be seen: the poetry of places and the fantastic visions that shape human civilization. Over time, Kublai realizes that Polo’s tales follow recurring patterns, and he confronts the storyteller; each time he does this, however, Polo expands or reshapes the emperor’s questions, avoiding the distinction between fact and fiction. For some critics, the two protagonists thus take on the respective roles of author and reader in a thematic exploration of textual construction. Considered from this perspective, *Invisible Cities* presents a dialog between the writer’s creative intent and the reader’s freedom to question, interpret, revise, and, in effect, rewrite the text.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Invisible Cities was well received in Europe, winning the prestigious Feltrinelli Prize in 1972. William Weaver translated the novel into English in 1974; since then it has enjoyed international popularity, in part because it is among the more accessible works of Postmodern fiction.

Despite the novel’s complex mathematical structure, the individual city sketches are short and evocative enough to be appreciated as individual prose poems or allegorical fantasies. The characterizations of Polo and Kublai are enriched by their historical associations, and the ideas woven through their dialog are both timely and universal. As Martin McLaughlin (2008) observed, *Invisible Cities* has “achieved cult status . . . being enthusiastically read and quoted not just by the literary public but also by artists and architects.” An international, multidisciplinary arts exhibition was held in Milan in 2002 to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the work’s publication.

Many scholars have analyzed the relationship between *Invisible Cities* and Calvino’s larger body of work. As Kim Roberts (2008) noted, Calvino described the novel as the work in which he “managed to say the most.” Considered as the most completely realized example of his thought, *Invisible Cities* features thematic connections that illuminate his other works. Marilyn Schneider (1989) explored “the problematic of eros/subjectivity and reason/objectivity” in *Invisible Cities* and *Palomar* (1983; published as *Mr. Palomar*). Beno Weiss (1993) examined “the combinatorial play of narrative possibilities” in *Invisible Cities* and *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (1973; published as *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*). All three of these novels reflect Calvino’s interest in French structuralism and semiotics during the 1960s and 1970s—a topic that has attracted considerable attention from commentators.

Scholars have examined *Invisible Cities* in a wide variety of critical contexts. McLaughlin focused on history, discussing Calvino’s “rewriting” of *The Travels of Marco Polo*, and Michael J. Palmore (1990) analyzed the novel’s architectural motifs and qualities. Dani Cavallaro (2010) explored the “sense of a journey, route or trajectory” that “gradually emerges from Polo’s seemingly disjointed fiction.” Like many commentators, Cavallaro called attention to the essentially masculinist viewpoint of the text, as established by its protagonists, and its feminized, frequently eroticized visions of cities. Taking a different approach to matters of gender, Franco Ricci (1995) characterized *Invisible Cities* as a “healing” fiction that testifies to Calvino’s “spiritual reconciliation with the father.” As Ricci noted, however, “[m]ost critics have chosen to ignore the psychological implications of Calvino’s writings,” which—if present—can be discovered not at the level of content but in the “latent strategies that we appreciate as Calvino’s style.” Sheridan considered Calvino’s narrative strategies, studying how he and other writers create and contain the infinite potential of their fantasy worlds. Along more broadly theoretical lines, Roberts analyzed Calvino’s use of “relational space and spatial relations” in *Invisible Cities*. She also considered the methods Calvino employs to address the “intervals” he opens between ideas and objects and between author and reader.

Cynthia Giles

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* [published as *The Path to the Nest of Spiders*]. Turin: Einaudi, 1947. (Novel)
- Ultimo viene il corvo* [may be translated as *The Crow Comes Last*]. Turin: Einaudi, 1949. (Short stories)
- Il visconte dimezzato* [published as *The Cloven Viscount*]. Turin: Einaudi, 1952. (Novel)
- L'entrata in guerra* [published as *Into the War*]. Turin: Einaudi, 1954. (Short stories)
- Fiabe italiane* [published as *Italian Fables*]. Trans. and ed. Italo Calvino. Turin: Einaudi, 1956. (Fables)
- La panchina: Opera in un atto di Italo Calvino; musica di Sergio Liberovici* [may be translated as *The Bench: Opera in One Act by Italo Calvino; Music by Sergio Liberovici*]. Turin: Einaudi, 1956. (Libretto)
- Il barone rampante* [published as *The Baron in the Trees*]. Turin: Einaudi, 1957. (Novel)
- La speculazione edilizia* [published as *A Plunge into Real Estate*]. Turin: Einaudi, 1957. (Novella)
- La nuvola di smog e La formica argentina* [may be translated as *The Cloud of Smog and The Argentine Ant*]. Turin: Einaudi, 1958. (Novellas)
- I racconti* [may be translated as *Short Stories*]. Turin: Einaudi, 1958. (Novellas and short stories)
- Il cavaliere inesistente* [published as *The Nonexistent Knight*]. Turin: Einaudi, 1959. (Novel)
- La giornata d'uno scrutatore* [may be translated as *The Day of the Watcher*]. Turin: Einaudi, 1963. (Novella)
- Marcavaldo, ovvero Le stagioni in città* [published as *Marcavaldo; or, The Seasons in the City*]. Turin: Einaudi, 1963. (Short stories)
- Le cosmicomiche* [published as *Cosmicomics*]. Turin: Einaudi, 1965. (Short stories)
- Ti con zero* [published as *t zero*]. Turin: Einaudi, 1967. (Short stories)
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- Tarocchi: Il mazzo visconteo di Bergamo e di New York* [published as *Tarots: The Visconti Pack in Bergamo and New York*]. With Sergio Samek Ludovici. Parma: Ricci, 1969. (Novel)
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- Il castello dei destini incrociati* [published as *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*]. Turin: Einaudi, 1973. (Novel)
- Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* [published as *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*]. Turin: Einaudi, 1979. (Novel)
- Una pietra sopra. Discorsi di letteratura e società* [published as *The Uses of Literature*]. Turin: Einaudi, 1980. (Essays)
- Palomar* [published as *Mr. Palomar*]. Turin: Einaudi, 1983. (Novel)
- Racconti fantastici dell'Ottocento* [published as *Fantastic Tales: Visionary and Everyday*]. Ed. Calvino. 2 vols. Milan: Mondadori, 1983. (Fables)
- Collezione di sabbia* [published as *Collection of Sand*]. Milan: Garzanti, 1984. (Essays)
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- Sotto il sole giaguaro* [published as *Under the Jaguar Sun*]. Milan: Garzanti, 1986. (Short stories)
- Lezioni americane: Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* [published as *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*]. Milan: Garzanti, 1988. (Essays)
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- Eremita a Parigi: Pagine autobiografiche* [published as *The Hermit in Paris: Autobiographical Writings*]. Milan: Mondadori, 1994. (Autobiography)
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- Under the Jaguar Sun*. Trans. Weaver. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988. Print. Trans. of *Sotto il sole giaguaro*.
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*Includes the short story "La strada di San Giovanni" [published as "The Road to San Giovanni"].

†Includes the short story "The Road to San Giovanni."

CRITICISM

Carolyn Springer (essay date 1985)

SOURCE: Springer, Carolyn. "Textual Geography: The Role of the Reader in *Invisible Cities*." *Modern Language Studies* 15.4 (1985): 289-99. Print.

[In the following essay, Springer studies *Invisible Cities* as a "dramatization of the role of the reader in contemporary fiction." She focuses on the novel's multilevel structure, arguing that Calvino "invites the collaboration of the reader" and illustrates the fundamental concepts of semiology.]

Even if he were a less gifted writer, Calvino's popularity with critics would be almost assured by the regularity with which he bears out our claims about literature. *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (1969) is a case in point.¹ Praised as a "shrewd and diverting exercise in practical narratology,"² *Castello* was an ingenious textbook illustration of structuralist poetics, and specifically of Propp's pioneering study of the *Morphology of the Folktale*, which served as point of departure for much of the structuralist study of plot.³

Calvino's most recent novel, *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (1979), performs a similar service for reader-response criticism, illustrating many of its claims and assumptions about the process of reading with a precision that borders on parody.⁴ The "Lettore" who critics had argued was the true protagonist of the narrative process here takes center stage. He is addressed throughout in the second person and, like Adam, obligingly granted a companion, a "Lettrice" with whom to exchange views on his reading.

But theirs is a fallen world. Modern fiction has reached such heights of self-reflexivity that the Lettore and Lettrice discover, to their chagrin, that there are no more novels to read, only fragments of novels: ten in this case, each with a different "author," plot, cast of characters, ambience, and style.

By postulating a pair of naive readers who work their way empirically through a labyrinth of interlocking texts, Calvino playfully rehearses our own struggle as empirical readers to disambiguate the text in which we become entangled. *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* is both a giallo (*The Case of the Disappearing Text*) and a *mise-en-abîme* of the very concept of metafiction.

This is the kind of vertiginous intellectual game in which Calvino has come to excel. The "sophisticated" reader, doubled against the naive reader within the text, is bound to enjoy the hero's long and difficult pursuit of Ludmilla; but he will also be amused and gratified by the dénouement, when boy finally gets girl and settles down beside her in a double bed to finish his copy of Calvino (only then will he consummate the desire long mediated by the elusive

text!) In a sense the naive Lettore has prevailed over the group of sophisticated readers whom he confronted in the public library; by demanding a traditional novelistic resolution, he has arrested the constant slippage of Calvino's text, imposing a form of closure that can only come to us too as a relief.

Yet the dynamics of reader response are also the focus of an earlier novel of Calvino. Like all of Calvino's fictions, *Le città invisibili* (1972) is an intricate epistemological puzzle.⁵ An imaginary Marco Polo converses with an imaginary Kublai Khan, describing the distant, "invisible" cities that make up his empire. Marco Polo, the obliging narrator at the service of the Khan, is a direct descendent of Scheherazade as well as of the real Marco Polo, narrator of *Il Milione*: Calvino's technique of genre pastiche is by now familiar to all his readers, and the overall framed structure of the tales recalls countless collections of fairy tales, adventure stories, and travel narratives as well as the entire tradition of Italian *novellistica*.

Apart from its complex literary resonances, *Invisible Cities* deserves new attention from students of reader response precisely because it anticipates the main concerns of their discourse—concerns dialectically reelaborated in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*. In this essay I propose to reread *Invisible Cities* as a dramatization of the role of the reader in contemporary fiction. In order to clarify the reader's relationship with the text, I have found it essential to distinguish, as previous studies of this novel have neglected to do, between the diegetic and extra-diegetic components of the frame structure.⁶ Using the term "diegetic" to refer in a semiotic sense to all that occurs within the apparent world of the narrative, we can identify as the diegetic component the eighteen italicized dialogues between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan which frame the nine chapters of the book. The extra-diegetic component includes all the remaining signs (and spaces) which comprise the external apparatus of the text: the table of contents, the chapter headings, numbers, and classifications, and the blank pages separating the individual chapters. Only by enforcing and duly exploring the distinction between the double components of the frame can we appreciate the complex relationship between this text and its readers.

It is the extra-diegetic architecture of the book that presents the most immediate challenge to the careful reader. Accustomed to the convention of a numerically ordered frame, he brings to the text a series of informed assumptions which prove to be of little help in understanding the scheme. Here, as in any other book, the Table of Contents (cf. Appendix I) functions as a map or spatial model to enable the reader to synthesize and survey the overall structure of the work, thus compensating for the inherent dispersion of the narrative (what Wolfgang Iser calls the "wandering viewpoint" of the Reader).⁷ But the frame seems governed by no external logic or necessity; it is entirely without precedent; it is both intricate and gratuitous.

The fifty-five profiles or *récits* of cities are divided into nine chapters, each consisting of five cities (except for the first and last chapters, consisting of ten). Each chapter is framed by two dialogues between Marco Polo and the Kublai Khan. The fifty-five cities are subdivided in turn into eleven categories: “Le città e la memoria,” (Cities and memory) “Le città e il desiderio,” (Cities and desire) “Le città e i segni,” (Cities and signs) “Le città sottili,” (Thin cities) “Le città e gli scambi,” (Trading cities) “Le città e gli occhi,” (Cities and eyes) “Le città e il nome,” (Cities and names) “Le città e i morti,” (Cities and the dead) “Le città e il cielo,” (Cities and the sky) “Le città continue,” (Continuous cities) “Le città nascoste” (Hidden cities). But these categories do not correspond to the chapter divisions. The cities are not grouped thematically as they would be in a classical framed collection of *novelle*, but instead are distributed throughout the chapters in mathematical series.

The first chapter sets up the series by introducing *four* times “Le città e la memoria,” *three* times “Le città e il desiderio,” *twice* “Le città e i segni,” and *one* time “Le città sottili.” Each of the following chapters begins with the completion of one category and ends with the introduction of another, thus establishing the descending numerical pattern of 5-4-3-2-1 and creating the illusion of an autonomous narrative machine, capable of generating new combinations in a potentially infinite mathematical series.⁸

Formal closure is possible only by arresting the series and framing the internal chapters through the introduction of a final chapter which is a mirror-image of the first, symmetrical yet inverted. The categories play themselves out, this time repeatedly descending from “5” instead of ascending from “1” as in the opening chapter. It is a structure which is chiasmic, specular, and perfectly reversible: it implies no privileged direction, since the series which it generates moves in *descending* numerical order, hence the internal numbering of each chapter is 5-4-3-2-1. Perhaps this is intended as an iconic clue to Kublai Khan’s insight into the circular, even regressive nature of Marco Polo’s travels, when in the Introduction to the second chapter he interrupts the merchant:

o immaginava d’interromperlo, o Marco Polo immaginava d’essere interrotto, con una domanda come:—Avanzi col capo voltato sempre all’indietro?—oppure: Ciò che vedi è sempre alle tue spalle? o meglio: Il tuo viaggio si svolge solo nel passato? ... E la risposta di Marco:—L’altrove è uno specchio in negativo. Il viaggiatore riconosce il poco che è suo, scoprendo il molto che non ha avuto e non avrà

(or imagined interrupting him, or Marco Polo imagined himself interrupted, with a question such as: “You advance always with your head turned back?” or “Is what you see always behind you?” or rather, “Does your journey take place only in the past?” ... And Marco’s answer was: “Elsewhere is a negative mirror. The traveler recognizes the little that is his, discovering the much he has not had and will never have.”)

(p. 34)

The formidable symmetries of *Invisible Cities* resist verbal description. Instead they invite other codes of representation: graphic (cf. Appendix II, Fig. A) or even musical (cf. Fig. B). In the first sketch one is tempted to see an iconic sign of the very mountains that Marco Polo traversed on his journey—the gradual ascent, the return to the heights of the Kublai Khan’s court on the far side ... These schemes may seem fanciful; but they are faithful to the spirit of Calvino, who repeatedly challenges us to trace the “invisible thread” of his discourse, the filigree of his design.⁹ By superimposing such visual models on our own critical discourse, we can more adequately represent the syntagmatic shape of the narrative.

Calvino’s own experimentation with iconic and musical modes of textual organization, both in *Invisible Cities* and in other works arises from an informed interest in semiotics and (as De Lauretis notes) surely amounts to more than “formalist fun-and-games in the ivory tower.”¹⁰ But whatever the degree of ideological intent we can attribute to his formal experiments,¹¹ it is clear that no map of our own devising will be sufficient to order this strange universe if we persist in looking for an external referent or scale of values against which it may be measured and upon which we can presume it to be based. Unlike the numerology of the *Divine Comedy* or the *Decameron*, also based on multiples of a given number, these numbers have no intrinsic allegorical meaning. Even the categories themselves seem both chosen and assigned arbitrarily (Sophronia, a “città sottile,” might more logically be associated with memory, while Esmeralda, listed under “Le città e gli scambi,” has more in common with the cluster of “città sottili”). We can also easily imagine new criteria by which to classify the cities (“Doubled cities,” for example), that would require a reshuffling of the entire structure.

In an essay which preceded by four years the publication of *Invisible Cities*, Calvino offered the following insight into his use of arbitrary mathematical models in literary composition:

... se mi dicono che lo scrivere è solo un processo combinatorio tra elementi dati, la prima mia reazione è un senso di sollievo, di sicurezza. Lo stesso sollievo e senso di sicurezza lo provo ogni volta che una estensione dai contorni indeterminati e sfumati mi si rivela invece come una forma geometrica precisa, ogni volta che in una valanga informe di avvenimenti riesco a distinguere delle serie di fatti, delle scelte tra un numero finito di possibilità. Di fronte alla vertigine dell’innunerevole, dell’inclassificabile, del continuo mi sento rassicurato dal finito, dal sistematizzato, dal discreto. Perché? Non c’è in questa mia attitudine un fondo di paura per l’ignoto, un desiderio di limitare il mio mondo, di rinserarmi nel mio guscio? Ecco che una presa di posizione che poteva passare per spavalda e dissacratoria lascia adito al sospetto che sia invece dettata da una specie d’agorafobia intellettuale, quasi un esorcismo per difendermi dai vortici che la letteratura continuamente sfida.¹²

We could dismiss this statement as a predictable disclaimer of both ideological commitment and conscious aesthetic