

ITALO CALVINO: LETTERS 1941-1985
TRANSLATED BY MARTIN MCLAUGHLIN

Italo Calvino, Letters 1941–1985, translated by Martin McLaughlin, with an introduction by Michael Wood. Penguin Modern Classics, 2014. £14.99. ISBN: 9780141198323.

Reviewed by Matthew Reynolds, University of Oxford

Books change when they cross the threshold of translation and enter the bright halls of World Literature in English. Their sharp edges soften as the influences and disagreements that formed them drop away. They become harder to take issue with and more liable to be subjected to the bland tribute of technical admiration: prodigious, dazzling, inventive. Calvino, even more than Marquez or Kundera, comes bathed in this warm, soft-focus glow. It's rare to find an English reader who doesn't like him.

His books of historical fantasy *Il Visconte Dimezzato*, *Il Barone Rampante* and *Il Cavaliere Inesistente* shrug off their roots in Ariosto and the Ligurian countryside as they metamorphose into *The Cloven Viscount*, *The Baron in the Trees* and *The Non-Existent Knight*. The prose poetry of *Le Città Invisibili* doffs some of its poetry, downplays its origins in the *Travels* of Marco Polo, and, as *Invisible Cities*, joins the international order of postmodern narrative experimentation. *Marcovaldo* and *Palomar* subdue their element of social critique, and their reflections on Italian life and nature become ideal holiday reading.

Letters, 1941–1985 brings news of the land that has been left behind: it shows us Calvino in his 'field of combat' (392), as he called it. He thought of writing as being 'most of all [...] a collective enterprise' (337), a view which he made good through his work as editor for the publisher Einaudi, as anthologist of Italian folk tales, as translator of Queneau, as writer of many political and cultural essays, and as prolific correspondent. Letter-writing was, for him, not only an adjunct to the collective enterprise of culture, but its epitome. There are no unpleasant surprises nor gossipy delights in this collection, nothing of the Philip Larkin nor Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Instead, here is Calvino's side of discussions with Pavese, Pasolini, Morante, Primo Levi, Vittorini, Ginzburg, Sciascia – and indeed with many other literary types unknown to me (the notes could usefully be fuller). Here is his 'carefully pondered and painful decision' to resign from the Italian Communist Party in 1957 (134). And here is his growing disappointment at the congestion of Italian politics and culture after the promise of the late 40s and 50s, until, in 1969, he feels 'desperation caused by the unliveable nature of the contemporary world and of the impossibility of active participation, because all roads to a desirable future are closed off' (378).

And here are many reviews of his reviewers. His novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* is scratchy towards literary criticism: 'I didn't mean to discuss; I wanted to read...' says the book's protagonist at one point, before exiting a university seminar (tr. Weaver, 1981, p. 75). But his letters to critics reveal an intense participation in the reception of his work. They are long, responsive, and usually grateful – though there is also a strand of rudeness which, rather as with Benedict Cumberbatch's Sherlock, is made tolerable, even lovable, by Calvino's obvious dedication to the task in hand. 'You poets don't do anything useful,' he writes to a poet. And then: 'Perhaps you will decide that it is not exactly protocol to attack you like this without even knowing you. But for years now we've been doing nothing but treating each other with mutual politeness, of a formal and indifferent sort. It's really boring. That is why I am trying to establish and spread a new approach to human relations, to see if we can wake up a bit' (114).

The question of how writing can be 'useful' recurs across the decades. In the 40s and 50s Calvino was largely committed to the collective enterprise of neo-realism,

representing working-class people, their dialects and localities, documenting the war and the economic constraints of its aftermath, revealing social injustice. *Il Sentiero dei Nidi di Ragno* (1947), *Ultimo Viene il Corvo* (1949), *I Giovani del Po* (1951) and *La Speculazione Edilizia* (1957) are all more or less in this vein. But something wasn't right. Calvino seems not much to have liked *I Giovani del Po*, hearing in it an 'effusive rhetorical tone, which clearly isn't my own, it's not a tone I know how to use' (77). He found himself writing fantasy stories, with aristocratic protagonists living in a romantic past where it is possible to have your body split from top to bottom and live as two or construct a civilized existence in the trees and never set foot on earth or exist and not exist at the same time.

Calvino struggles, first to accept and then to explain the value of this humorous crossover fiction. He is pleased that Vittorini likes *Il Visconte Dimezzato* (1952), but says: 'I am a bit reluctant to publish it as a book: would that not mean giving it too much importance?' (75) Yet soon he becomes more bullish, admitting that there is seriousness in this sort of writing, and saying that it operates via allegory: partying lepers are 'decadent artists'; a carpenter who makes beautifully intricate execution machines (he doesn't like it, but he still makes them) represents 'technology detached from humanity'; a settlement of Huguenots gives 'an image of the whole line of bourgeois idealist moralizing from the Reformation to Croce' (81). Calvino doesn't want to insist on these allegories, though: 'everyone can find what interests him' in the books, and 'can interpret them as they like' (151) – so long, it turns out, as they don't propose an interpretation he disagrees with. In response to a reviewer who found what interested him in *Il Cavaliere Inesistente*, Calvino patiently outlined some of the book's complexities and then exploded: 'WHAT THE HELL DOES COMMUNIST ALLEGORY HAVE TO DO WITH ALL THIS?' (199)

These wobbling explanations reveal a writer finding his bearings in a new mode, and they have echoes in the novels. If *Il Barone Rampante* is more compelling than *Il Visconte Dimezzato*, it is because it is less schematic. The 12-yr old Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò who, in 1757, takes to the trees in a strop at being asked to eat snails, and stays there all his life, becomes an image of several aspects of human life: the relationship between children and their parents, between the oddball and the group, between the enlightenment and the ancien régime (Cosimo is a great reader and corresponds with Diderot). From his eccentric elevation, he associates helpfully with peasants and vagabonds as well as with members of his own aristocratic class: this is a vision of the intellectual engaging in 'collective enterprise' while not losing himself in the mass. Yet it all remains the just-about plausible story of a stubborn boy growing into a stubborn man – unlike the frank impossibility of the Viscount sliced into two living halves. It is a challenge to the realistic imagination rather than a rejection of it.

One of the book's many charms is the precision with which it answers all the practical questions: how does he shower? Where does he shit? How can he cross between unadjacent trees? This boyish strand in Calvino's imagination was nourished by his love of Stevenson, and it runs throughout his work: *Invisible Cities* pays public homage to the *Travels of Marco Polo* but secretly owes as much to the intricate constructions children draw or build out of Lego. Like all Calvino's child characters, the young Cosimo is brilliantly imagined in his vulnerable, impetuous encounters with the band of kids from the local village and with the little Viola, daughter of the marquess who lives next door.

But things change when Viola and Cosimo meet again as adults. 'In the love sections I am only interested in the ideology', Calvino notes in a letter (129) – and it shows: the two of them are manipulated to act out contrasting theories of love as self-fulfilment and self-denial. Almost everywhere in Calvino's fiction women are forced to serve as vehicles of ideas or enablers of men's lives: it is the only major disappointment of his work. The relationships that really interest him are not between men and women but between people

and things. In an early letter he tells Natalia Ginzburg 'I've begun to draw shells. They're very difficult, especially the nautilus shells, and I'm not good at it'. But talent isn't needed, and might even be counterproductive, because the point of the exercise is 'not to lose contact with things' (63). The same commitment is everywhere in his writing: he is the great fiction-maker of phenomenology.

The scene recurs three decades later in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* where one of that book's array of tantalising young women also makes drawings of shells, though hers are 'of highly refined quality' (49) But when the male protagonist plucks up courage to speak to her she turns out to be drawing a sea urchin, making 'a study of the mollusk's soft pulp, as it dilated and contracted'. The creature repels him, with its obvious symbolism; but Miss Swida is either frank or uncomprehending: 'she answered that she was interested in drawing it because it was an image that recurred in her dreams, and she wanted to rid herself of it' (51).

The scene reveals something fundamental about Calvino too. 'The human is the trace that man leaves in things,' he writes in *Collection of Sand* (tr. McLaughlin, 2013, p. 112)), trying to explain why the visionary literary critic Mario Praz should have been so interested in collecting furniture. People are all a bit like the cloven Viscount who slices everything in half around him as he goes. Calvino's imagination makes subjectivities visible through their collaboration with the non-human world: this is a new side to the collective enterprise of writing. There are some lovely early stories, set on the Ligurian coastline of Calvino's childhood, where impulses that mingle mind and body reveal themselves (more subtly than in Miss Zwida's case) in an inarticulate language made from sea creatures: a girl invites a boy to look at a jellyfish, then throws it in his face; another boy and girl comfort each other after a disturbing adventure by playing catch with seaweed; a teenage gardener piles snakes, snails, toads and lizards into the kitchen sink of a teenage housemaid because (he says) he finds them beautiful.

In the letters, Calvino's imaginative alliance with reptiles and molluscs is rationalized as a visionary ecology, in which humanity is an instrument through which matter can achieve knowledge of itself: 'if the objective of man is the humanization of nature, the total mastery of the forces of matter, etc., this objective will be reached only when it is understood that these are rhetorical formulae and that in reality it is the memory of matter that organizes itself through man [...] it is in the work of the universe that man must of necessity collaborate' (385). Once the capacity for knowledge has been fully realised and transferred to other species, humanity will cease to exist, and there will be 'a world of electronic calculators and butterflies' (404).

Such whimsy puts Calvino at risk of being undervalued, of being mistaken for Oulipo-lite, or the friendly face of the Nouveau Roman. As he wrote in a letter of 1964: 'I don't have the temperament of the great rigorous writers' (264). He tends rather to think of his fictions as possessing an 'essayistic dimension': because they are brief, because they are experimental and also because they have something to argue. He says that this essayistic impulse calls out a countervailing, lighter-hearted imaginativeness, 'an active movement of the writing' which 'underplays, understates, ironizes, and renders everything comic'. In the end, perhaps only 'chipped fragments' of the initial 'essay' remain (272). But the idea of it lingers, discernible throughout the story precisely because of the steps that have been taken to conceal it.

This dialectic of essay-idea and humorous writing is what generates the electronic calculators and butterflies. It is as though the argument about the 'space of matter' weighs down on Calvino until the perky phrase with its funny contrast pops up and starts to erase the 'essay' with a charming fictional scene. The same happens when an essay from *A Collection of Sand*, about the Zen gardens in Kyoto, is made over into a vignette for

Palomar (1983). As essayist, Calvino regrets that the ‘swarm of tourists’ makes it impossible to maintain ‘the distance necessary for contemplation’ (164). But the whimsical, indomitable Mr Palomar re interprets the gardens for a democratic age, seeing the raked sand as humanity and the rocks as indifferent nature.

In *Cosmicomics* (1997), the trend becomes a system as essayistic knowledge about the formation of the universe is overwritten (too much so, for my taste) in the language of domestic comedy. But all Calvino’s writing shares something of the same double movement, charming readers into enjoying imaginative possibilities which otherwise might seem rebarbative or abstruse. In his most brilliant works – *Invisible Cities* above all – the intellectual commitment of the hidden ‘essay’ and the enchantment of the writing mix in an incomparable alchemy, the quintessence of *docere delectando*.

Hence the particular difficulty of representing Calvino in English. When he was organising the translation of Queneau into Italian, Calvino urged *Petite cosmogonie portatile* on Franco Quadri, the translator of Beckett’s *Comment c'est*, saying that it is ‘more translatable than other poems by Queneau [...] because the essay element in the poem is every bit as important as the verbal texture’ (292) (Calvino himself opted to translate the punning prose of *Les fleurs bleues*, relishing the opportunity for ‘reinvention’ which it gave him). The essay element is uppermost in *Collection of Sand* and the *Letters* too, so they don’t pose the same challenge as the fictional prose. And Martin McLaughlin is a sensitive, adept translator, as the phrases I have been quoting from him throughout reveal: all are both accurate and alive.

Yet even with these essayistic texts, and even in the hands of McLaughlin, the writing softens and blurs as it is ushered into the realms of World Literature in English. ‘Porcamiseria quante palle son riuscito a scrivere!’ exclaims the young Calvino in 1942, venting a feeling which, if it found its way into language through me, would probably produce words like ‘Christ, what a load of bollocks I’ve come out with.’ McLaughlin puts: ‘Dammit, what a lot of drivel I managed to write’ (7). The difference isn’t a matter of correctness or error, nor of better or worse, but of expectation. Knowing that he is translating a great writer for an edition, McLaughlin sticks closer to the dictionary equivalents of the words, except for ‘palle’ where he is more polite.

My version seems to me more hearable – more the sort of thing that somebody might write in a letter. But, as Lowell observed in the introduction to *Imitations*, when you try to catch ‘the tone’ of the source text, you usually end up with ‘a tone,’ because every reader hears the same piece of language slightly differently. Here we see the paradox of translation, which is also the paradox of literary interpretation. The more you try to capture what really matters in the source text, the more you end up with a version that is contentiously your own.

Calvino, though, delighted in the fractured light produced by the prism of translation. He found that working on the French version of his story ‘Smog’ was ‘a chance to really *read* what I had written’ (L, 265): ‘authors are only read properly when they are translated, or one can compare the original text with its translation or compare different texts in more than one language’ (248). If you look at multiple translations, you can get a clearer sense of the imaginative spark of the original – clearer than the original alone provides.

For instance, here is the end of the ‘Zaira’ section of *Invisible Cities*, in the translation by William Weaver, who died last November, and who was, with Archibald Colquhoun, one of the two great twentieth-century conveyors of Italian fiction into English:

The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the

steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls. (13)

It is the last phrase that is contentiously diffracted. Calvino had written ‘ogni segmento rigato a sua volta di graffi, seghettature, intagli, svirgole.’ The point of this sequence becomes clearer if we follow his recommendation and compare the French of Jean Thibaudeau: ‘sur tout segment marqué à son tour de griffes, dentelures, entailles, virgules’ (18). As they are listed, and perhaps as they are looked at, the marks become more and more language-like; but they never quite turn into legible graffiti. ‘Intagli’ are carvings; ‘svirgole’ means ‘scuffs’ or ‘knocks’ but also contains the word for commas, ‘virgole’ – a hint which the French has had to make explicit as ‘virgules’.

Weaver’s ‘scrolls’, standing in for both ‘intagli’ and ‘svirgole’, gestures towards this aspect of the Italian, but it seems an odd choice to me since scrolls are usually written upon rather than themselves being a form of mark. If it were me faced with the impossible challenge of this shadowy crowd of commas pushing against a terminal full stop, I might reach for ‘dash’ or ‘dots’ as words that suggest but are not necessarily punctuation: ‘scratches, indentations, dashes, dots.’ But perhaps the suggestion of Morse code is too much. If we are to get at what most matters in Calvino – the ‘active movement of the writing’ – there need to be several translations which we can read against one another, just as we do with poetry. Their diffracted light can re-animate his words, which are carved as lastingly into Italian as into stone.