UDK 821.131.1.09 Calvino I.
https://doi.org/10.18485/ms_zmss.2025.107.29

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TEACHING ITALO CALVINO IN PARIS: FROM SMALL FRY TO BIG FISH

This essay provides a Paris perspective on how Calvino's work, if not historically central to academia, has grown more and more appreciated among both students and professors. For want of a single unanimously acclaimed masterpiece among his post-modernist novels, we prefer to focus on his criticism and short stories, in particular "Main Currents in Italian Fiction Today" and "Big Fish, Small Fish," a story that was favored by Calvino himself. The essay documents the author's deep attachment to the classics and to more contemporary foreign writers, such as Hemingway and Malraux. As for the short story, it depicts the encounter between a child, enchanted by the natural world of the sea, and a lady's seemingly infinite sorrow on land, giving a balanced example of his combined interest in fantasy and neo-realism, and his ability to deal with existential issues with a graceful lightness.

Key words: Calvino, Italian literature, short fiction, Hemingway, teaching.

In memory of Beno Weiss (1933–2012)
and in honor of another scholar
and friend, Mikhail Meilakh

Given his rich imagination and impressive diversity, it is a truism that students and professors alike respond to Italo Calvino (1923–1985) more readily and warmly than to any other modern or contemporary Italian author. Too many twentieth-century writers have virtually disappeared from the literary scene in Paris and the curriculum on our campus when their prolificity or longevity ran out: Moravia is just one example, not to mention Cassola, Soldati, Pratolini, all seemingly as dead and dated around the globe today as Anatole France and André Gide have long been even here in France. Calvino alone has outlived himself, indeed grown steadily more and more vital and appealing in the forty years since his sudden death. His posthumous survival is all the more remarkable in an age when, contrary to Dr. Johnson's excellent counsel, living authors are often more

read than dead ones and a writer's viability sometimes ends with physical visibility and literary productivity. Among the still fairly recently departed moderns, alongside Calvino only Ginzburg and Gadda, or stretching farther back, Lampedusa and Malaparte, seem to me to be fully alive in our classrooms. But their reputations, individually and collectively, are all dwarfed today by that of Calvino. Perhaps in the same way, the celebration of Kundera, a faithful friend of Calvino's and a fellow specialist on Lightness, allows too many readers and lately professors to neglect his less easily pronounced but more memorable compatriots Čapek or Lustig or Škvorecký.

Here I claim to speak only for myself, my colleagues, and our students at The American University of Paris. For a rather different approach taken at Smith College, see Anna Botta's article (2013: 42–49). On our campus we regularly visit Italian and Czech and other less studied literatures, as MLA would modestly call those once unhesitatingly labeled minor in a less politically correct age. It does not seem so long ago when some decades back Moravia still figured among the living and was speaking on a Paris panel in French, the language in which he wrote his first stories, just as Kundera wrote his later fiction and criticism in that language. Some of my students went to hear Moravia that semester. But their numbers would have been greater and their response far more enthusiastic had Kundera, already a Paris resident, or Calvino, then commuting between Paris and Rome, been lecturing that day instead, as Calvino was later slated to do at Harvard and as Kundera regularly did in a carefully concealed location at Hautes Études. In our time, the five qualities described by Calvino's own *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* are perhaps the popular reasons for reading him, whose most admired characteristics they represent, as Robert Coover was the first to remark in a review. Less clear is whether the unwritten sixth quality, Consistency, would have suited his far-flung oeuvre quite so well.

My colleagues and I thus have taught whatever small texts of Calvino we could accommodate within the vast sweep of our programs in comparative literature. It was always impossible for me to make a place for him in the blockbuster twentieth-century novel course, which took us in one semester from Bely's *Petersburg* to García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: in such weighty company there was no room for even a light work by Calvino because there was no time for more authors of any dimensions. Similarly, when my own mentors like Edward Said at Columbia had taught the Twentieth-Century Novel, Calvino was not on the roster. In addition (but in this case, it is more like subtraction), perhaps the underlying cause of his absenteeism on our reading lists is that there is no single definitive, defining masterwork by Calvino, only the many metamorphoses of his literary identity. And then, as suggestive as is the Ancestors trilogy, as imaginative as *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* or *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* may be, and as revealing as *Mr. Palomar* seems, many readers today resolutely prefer the critic to the creator. Even the new biographical mode assimilating the author to Qfwfq or Palomar is more satisfying as postmodern

trope than literary analysis. And despite a spurt of attention to spiderholes in Iraq, I do not expect to teach *The Path to the Nest of Spiders*, even when I sometimes publish on Resistance literature and on children's narrative.

For a more specialized national literature course like my two-semester Italian sequence, a panoramic overview might well close with Casanova or Goldoni: the instructor is a Romanist publishing extensively in comparative medieval and Renaissance. So even when we usually push on to the twentieth century in our second-semester readings, we might regretfully stop short of Calvino. We devote the first semester to central texts, major and minor, from what is perhaps the first known exercise in Italian, the "Indovinello veronese," to the long-standing monuments of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance by the Three Crowns of Florence. The second semester spans Petrarchism and beyond to somewhere approaching the near-present. Given our Paris location and American orientation, the Italian literature survey often focuses on the Italians who long before Moravia wrote partly in French, like Goldoni, Casanova, and Ungaretti, or who occasionally wrote in English and/or translated from it, such as Pavese in both categories, or who early on visited the U.S. and wrote of the experience, including Soldati... and Calvino. In the constellation of Italian literature, Calvino is just one bright light, not the North Star. But he can still help orient us even in the Milky Way. That is the approach I adopt when occasionally making space for him in the second-semester survey as the concluding author, represented as both critical and creative writer.

After this ample preamble, I must say that I most often teach just two little-known, short texts by Calvino while recommending many others. And I know my recommendations are not wasted. Often they are redundant, since some students already know several of his later, more celebrated works and spontaneously refer to them or even write about them in their comparative research projects. My Calvino texts for teaching are just one story and one essay, highlighting his dual nature as creator and critic with two works of equal length and comparable modesty. They also allow us to draw some conclusions about the sweep not only of Italian literature in the twentieth century but also present a cross-section of world literature of the last few millennia, with which Calvino supposedly broke before ultimately returning to his personal favorites among the classics (Calvino 1999). The two texts represent him not as the familiar postmodernist whom my students may already know but as the too easily forgotten writer at the apex of the classical tradition. This latter (but earlier!) Calvino serves as an appropriate conclusion to a classical Italian literature sequence. It also opens out onto the later Calvino and more recent developments in the latest post-post Italian canon. Calvino is thus the last author, the last text to be treated in the course. Janus-like, he looks back over the entire span of Italian and indeed world literature to Homer, but also forward, beyond this survey course, to the new modes he ushered into Italian and (some would say, world literature) without ever fully abandoning his and our literary ancestors, *i nostri antenati,* in another sense, as he might have said.

To target this goal, the class reads and we discuss one essay and one story. The essay is "Main Currents in Italian Fiction Today," (Calvino 1960: 3–14). Calvino while visiting the States was in good company in a special issue on "Aspects of Italy Since the War": other contributors included Aldo Scaglione, Sergio Pacifici, and one of my own mentors, Dante Della Terza. Esther Calvino notes how important this American interlude was in her husband's development (Calvino 2003: 16–120). Among these luminaries Calvino furnished the lead essay, in which he looks over a baker's dozen of writers but perhaps naturally overlooks himself, except to acknowledge his personal debt to Ariosto, Hemingway, and Malraux and to dissociate himself from any existing school. Among others, Germana Pescio Bottino has noted in passing such influences in Calvino's short stories as Faulkner, Pavese, Vittorini (1976: 15).

Then, after that backward-looking overview, which is even more so sixty-five years after its original publication, we read one short story drawn from his more forward-looking fiction. "Pesci grossi, pesci piccoli" is available in convenient bilingual format (Trevelyan 1965: 69–87). That little gem seems to me to serve best as an introduction to Calvino, who was most hopeful and whimsical simultaneously when juxtaposing adults and children, the defining theme of this story already in its title. From this deceptively simple narrative can be extrapolated both Calvino's well-known early years (scientific parents, childhood in Cuba, on the Riviera, Conrad) and mature axes (science crossed with fable, neo-realism vs. fantasy, satire or allegory, alienation and authenticity, separation amidst continuity, etc.).

The story is not at all representative of the *The Crow Comes Last* collection in which it later momentarily appeared, for it is longer, more universal, surpassing the time frame of the mostly pre-war, wartime, and post-war stories written between 1945 and 1949. But it is fully representative of its young author and his familiar Ligurian space, inhabited by fish, crustaceans, and octopus. The Caribbean as a memory and especially the Mediterranean as a presence are attested here, for the world is a garden, a natural history museum full of animals and plants named, categorized, described under the scrutiny of a younger Palomar.

Some of my many good students, like Irene Bulgari, have outspokenly expressed their preference for longer, more substantial texts over the shorter, more experimental forms... exemplified by authors like Calvino. But aside from his *Italian Folktales* compendium, there is only one such longer work by Calvino and that is his collected works! For all these reasons, and the fact that his most polished and enduring fiction invariably seems to take the form of short fiction — for so we may read also the embedded novel chapters in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* — it is a short story that we read of his in my classes, when we read him.

I feel no burden of guilt here in short-changing perhaps the best known and most beloved of Italian writers today. Calvino remains present and other texts by him happily continue to pop up everywhere in passing in our Comp Lit classroom discussions, where he is spontaneously but not unpredictably remembered.

Thus *Invisible Cities* invites comparison to Alberto Manguel and his *Dictionary of Imaginary Places* or to Manguel's own mentor, Borges and his *Ficciones*. And when Calvino insists that the best place to live is where one is a foreigner, the parallel to Ettore Scola's film *Gente di Roma* will be inescapable. With Calvino there is no shortage of teachable texts. One of my colleagues in Comparative Literature teaches *Cosmicomics*, for example, and I see that one other admirer of this book claims it as "probably" Calvino's best in the course of a review of *Mr. Palomar* and *Six Memos* (Leithauser 1988: 76).

I have always looked forward to reading "Pesci grossi, pesci piccoli" (1950) once more with my students. As a textual scholar, I remind them that this story has climbed in the author's esteem or at least in his personal hierarchy, as shown by its publication history. The story ultimately has come to enjoy pride of place in Calvino's short fiction, no doubt for some of the same reasons it has been anthologized in England and taught in Paris. As Calvino recycled and redistributed his early works from one collection to the next, the story has risen to prominence. Was it a favorite for the author as well? Calvino like Dalton Trevisan seems always to have reworked or repositioned his stories. But where the Brazilian short story writer is said to have revised his stories with each re-publication, Calvino certainly reordered and reorganized his collections, sometimes demoting or promoting "Pesci." Its textual history confirms this elevation of the story to prominence in Calvino's self-presentation. It was not among the original thirty stories from 1945–49 in the first edition of *Ultimo viene il corvo* published in 1949 because it was written only in 1950. (It is not included in the original Calvino 1949 or as reprinted in Calvino 1994). Then, in the 1969 edition of *Il corvo*, which reprints twenty-five of the original thirty in a different order, it figures among the five from slightly later that were added. Since, with the author's blessing, the 1976 re-edition and then the 1994 reprint faithfully reproduce only the original 1949 *Corvo*, the story has now permanently disappeared from that collection. But when twenty of the first thirty were included in *I racconti* of 1958 (not 1950 as Giuseppe Bonura confusingly suggested in 1972: 62), "Pesci" was added to these and indeed placed first among them only at that later date, 1958. In short, this story which only briefly figures in the single intermediate edition of the *early The Crow Comes Last* collection in 1969 and not in the 1976 reprint of the 1949 original, now leads the pack because it comes first of all of Calvino's salvaged stories in his collected *Stories*. (Calvino 1958: 9–16, then Calvino 1993: 5–14, but not translated into English as a single volume). The story is included in *Difficult Loves* (Calvino 1984: 36–46), but not in *Adam, One Afternoon* (Calvino 1983). From its chance chronological exclusion in the author's first collection of 1949 and its temporary inclusion later in 1969 before a definitive exile from that anthology when reprinted in 1976 reproducing 1949, it has nevertheless been elected to stand first in his life-long collected short fiction in 1958, leading the *Amori difficili* section, which is the longest and arguably the most important. Given its final placement by the author at the portal of his definitive collected short fiction, we are perhaps justified in seeing it as quintes-

sentially not Calvinesque but better Calvinonian ("Calvinian" according to Angela Jeannet, 1995: 238) Since it functions as the introduction to his short fiction in the *Racconti*, it may rightfully serve the same purpose now in the classroom.

A professor's interest in a particular text is inseparable from his or her approach in teaching it. In my classroom, DVD never replaced VCR, or Very Close Reading, in this case analyzing the Italian original, with reference to the successes and disappointments, if any, of the facing English version. All my students must read the translation even if some as native speakers or advanced students of Italian have breezed through the original story, as protagonist Zeffirino's name suggests he might. But translation is always interpretation, says Aristotle, and that reason alone is sufficient to make the target language version into required reading, to find perhaps other interpretations.

When we consider Calvino's text in both languages, one professorial style is based on Socratic dialogue: indeed, I am a peripatetic and a gypsy in the classroom, always on my feet and on the move from one student to another in all the corners of the classroom, on the move also in my ideas, I would hope. For "Pesci grossi, pesci piccoli" we begin the class session devoted to it, as always, with questions, not answers. Is this Calvino story perceptibly a departure from any of his novels that students would have read? Beyond brand name recognition, Calvino is invariably a known quantity to at least some students — and so they volunteer from having read one or another of his longer works. Perhaps the mix between realism and fantasy is different here, I suggest. If in the novels the fantasy distinctively takes the upper hand, here in this story (guess what is its date? early or late?) there is a healthy balance achieved. What is the subject and viewpoint, then, of this one? Is it so wrenchingly Darwinian a worldview as it might at first seem or is there ample room for whimsy? We look first for the parameters of an answer in the title, as keyhole to the import of the story, on the crisscrossing of binary polarities: human and animal (including fish), land and sea, adult and child, sadness and happiness. I show students a photograph I snapped in Ostia Antica of a floor mosaic depicting the shaky relationship between two fish: one is large, open-mouthed and wide-eyed, pursuing or (less likely) escorting a traumatized smaller specimen.

Who, I ask students, are the big fish and who the small fry in the story and what are their several relationships? I remind students that by his name Zeffirino is associated with Nature. They quickly catch on that he is assimilated to a fish: at home only in water ("invece in aqua dava punti a tutti"), not fully human ("gambe che finivano da pesce"), knowing only fish ("finchè si trattava di mare e di pesci era il più in gamba"), a kind of immature protozoan who has not yet crawled up onto the land, prefiguring the later Qfwfg. Stuttering, open-mouthed ("bocca aperta e balbuziente"), only a wide-eyed spectator to the adult world and not yet a fellow sufferer, Zeffirino is suspended between his twin allegiances, at once admiring a world of beauty in the water but fascinated by the world of pain on land. Soon he will recognize that issues of life and death are played out in both realms, but concurrently that there is perhaps also beauty to be found

in both as well. This is a faithful image of Calvino himself, who never lost that open-eyed (if no longer open-mouthed) fascination with the natural world, not just in the naturalist's sense, but with life generally. He is his little boy (who grew up in San Remo), who stubbornly saw beauty (as does this little boy), not suffering (like the big signorina): "Tu non puoi capire, sei un ragazzo" (cf. *Marcovaldo*).

As we re-read in class the story that everyone has read at least once, "Pesci/ Fish" becomes a story about the food chain, from little boy to big woman, by a natural scientist with his taxonomies and hierarchies in place from the title on. The father is practical, scientific, feet on the ground when it comes to catching and cooking and eating seafood. His son is open-eyed, fascinated by life and his own enthusiasms: when he sees the invisible city through the magic of his goggles, he does not foresee death coming or fathom love. And the signorina, compared to a floundering seal ("come una foca"), is presented as neither fish nor fowl, rather as an amphibean equally ill-adapted to land or sea or generally the life into which she is plunged. Similarly perhaps, the giant octopus, her not so ill-chosen partner, is "almost" humanized to match the oversize signorina: "quasi umano", "l'occhio rossiccio e quasi liquido." With its watery, cyclopean vision lacking in all perspective, it is also implicitly juxtaposed with and ultimately defeated by the four-eyed father, who makes a meal of him. I ask students again: Is life here so wrenching a portrait of hunger, scarcity, suffering? Not so, we conclude, for the boy or his father, only perhaps for this tearful woman who looks for unhappiness, who is blind to natural beauty, who cannot swallow the cycle of life and death, who seems to share a sense of the *lacrimae rerum* with the grotesque octopus, not in its element either but also bleary-eyed like the woman, with all its limbs flailing out in its vain search for a sister soul: "così era la vita".

With a little encouragement, students might spontaneously re-conceive Zeffirino as an Italian Nick Adams, since many of them — and especially the Americans who constitute one-third of our undergraduate population — know their Hemingway and the stories he wrote at roughly their age when he like them first came to Paris. In each case, both Zeffirino and Nick are Adams discovering love and death in a terrestrial or aquatic "enchanted garden" of wonders, as the first story in *Il corvo* underlines: the Edenic "Adamo, un pomeriggio." That first story lends its title to twenty-one of the stories from the collection in one of its transformations, the English translation *Adam, One Afternoon*, where the original third story, "Il giardino incantato," has been placed more conspicuously in immediately following the title story.

Since all of our students have at least some French, required for graduation at our English-language university, they may also look up "Gros poissons, petits poissons" included among twenty-four of the original thirty *Il corvo* stories in *Le corbeau vient le dernier*, present at all only because this 1980 translation is based on the second Italian edition of 1969 (Calvino 1980, and not on the 1949 original as the credits mistakenly and misleadingly suggest, p. 7). Of course, the bilingual Italian-English edition of the story remains our classroom text. But students seeking more of Calvino in the same vein will often go to the first and last *Il*

corvo (which, again, does not include our "Pesci"), the English *Adam* (which also does not include "Fish"), but finally and most productively the French *Corbeau* (which, again, happily does give a place to "Poissons"). The shifting positions and relative highlighting of this story and other stories thematically related to it encourage students to reflect on its centrality to the author's concerns, as noticeable in the repositioning of this story and others, both by Calvino himself and also by his translators and foreign publishers.

For all these reasons, the story for me and, I hope, my students is a fine initiation to Calvino: always hopeful if whimsical in his mature works too, a kind of odd man out in his universal features, at the antipodes of his mentor Pavese's suicidal vision which we also study, sometimes beginning the second semester with the farewell poems from his office desk drawer that became *Verrà la morte e avrà i tuoi occhi,* arguably Pavese's "most famous poem" according to Lucia Re (1990: 126). By way of conclusion to our class I try to reach and teach beyond Calvino by returning to the short essay on "Main Currents in Italian Fiction Today" and which students have read along with his short story. In that overview from the U.S. of Italian literature sixty-five years ago, Calvino scrutinizes his contemporaries but, once again, assigns himself no place among them because, as he readily acknowledges, he belongs to no school. His avowed models are premodern (Ariosto) or foreign (Hemingway and Malraux). Calvino belonged to Italy and then to the world, hence his enduring appeal to international readers like my students — and their professor.

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Рој Розенштајн

ПРЕДАВАЊЕ О ИТАЛУ КАЛВИНУ У ПАРИЗУ: ОД СИТНЕ ДО КРУПНЕ РИБЕ

Резиме

Овај есеј пружа париско виђење тога како је дело Итала Калвина, иако историјски није био у самом средишту академских истраживања, временом постајало све више цењено међу студентима и професорима. У недостатку једног општеприхваћеног ремек-дела међу његовим постмодернистичким романима, пажњу смо усмерили на његову књижевну критику и кратке приче, нарочито на есеј „Главни токови у савременој италијанској прози“ и причу „Крупна риба, ситна риба“, која је била међу Калвиновим омиљеним. Есеј показује ауторову дубоку привржености класицима, а такође и савременијим страним писцима попут Хемингвеја и Малроа. Што се тиче кратке приче, она описује сусрет детета, очараног природом морског света, и жене чија се наизглед бескрајна туга одиграва на копну. Ова прича сведочи о уравнотеженом прожимању ауторовог интересовања за фантастику и неореализам, као и о његовој способности да се на суприлан начин суочава са егзистенцијалним питањима.

Кључне речи: Калвино, италијанска књижевност, кратка проза, Хемингвеј, предавање.