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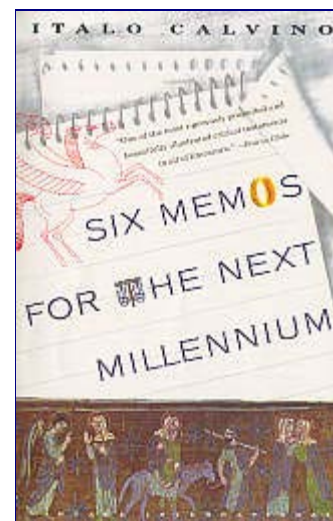


## A READER'S JOURNAL

### Six Memos for the New Millennium

by  
Italo Calvino

ARJ2 Chapter: Evolution of Consciousness  
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2013



The first thing which will strike anyone reading the Table of Contents is that there are only five memos

listed: Lightness, Quickness, Exactitude, Visibility, and Multiplicity. But in a handwritten photocopy on the page before Page 1, we can discern a faint image of six's title, looking as if it had been rubbed out by a pencil eraser. The title *Consistency* appears at the bottom of the list of Six Memos. His wife Esther notes that Italo planned to write it when he arrived in Cambridge to give the lectures(1). Since many of Calvino's tales seem to leave something for the reader to finish, perhaps this book provides an example of his consistency *in process*, an unwritten but hinted at sixth memo for the new millennium for us as his readers to flesh out for ourselves after reading the first five memos. What resources from the literature of the world would he have cited and in which languages, Italian, French, German? Quotes in all of these languages fill the first five memos, so consistency would have required him to include them in the eponymous last memo, would it not? One should perhaps read the book a second time with this thought: What would Calvino have said about Consistency in the memo he had in mind to write, before he left us alone with his first five memos?

In a prefatory note, Calvino notes that modern languages and books as we know them got their start in his millennium, in the middle of which the printing of books began in 1456 with Gutenberg's Bible. In this new millennium we enter the digital age of books where printing is moving to being done by recycled electrons on flat screens instead of black ink on paper.

**[page 1] My confidence in the future of literature consists in the knowledge that there are things that only literature can give us, by means specific to it. I would therefore like to devote these lectures to certain values, qualities, or peculiarities of literature that are very close to my heart, trying to situate them within the perspective of the new millennium.**

In his first memo, he gives us a heavy look at Lightness, opposing weight to lightness and vowing to uphold the "values of lightness". One cannot approach reading about lightness without the memory of Milan Kundera's [The Unbearable Lightness of Being](#) coming to mind, a salient example of dealing with heaviness and lightness in a novel, and Italo mentions it, aware that his own inclination to the light touch in writing was weighed down by increasing heaviness and opacity of the world.

**[page 4] At certain moments I felt that the entire world was turning into stone: a slow petrification, more or less advanced depending on people and places but one that spared**

**no aspect of life. It was as if no one could escape the inexorable stare of Medusa. The only hero able to cut off Medusa's head is Perseus, who flies with winged sandals; Perseus, who does not turn his gaze upon the face of the Gorgon but only upon her image reflected in his bronze shield. Thus Perseus comes to my aid even at this moment, just as I too am about to be caught in a vise of stone which happens every time I try to speak about my own past. Better to let my talk be composed of images from mythology.**

Perseus' forte is flight and reflection, which Calvino's epitomizes as the *poet's touch*: physical flights on winds and clouds for perspective on the world aided by the wings on his feet and flights of fancy aided by reflection upon the things of the world including myths, literature, and one's own ephemeral thoughts. Perseus would have been turned to stone as were all the men who confronted the Medusa directly, so he allowed himself to view her only through a mirror image in his polished shield, a large mirror he always carried with him. Poets likewise carry such a mirror in which to reflect upon the heavy things of the world, which are made insubstantial images by the mirror and thus can develop the lightness required by their pen.

Calvino cautions us against interpretation which can squeeze the life out of a metaphor or a myth.

**[page 4] But I know that any interpretation impoverishes the myth and suffocates it. With myths, one should not be in a hurry. It is better to let them settle into the memory, to stop and dwell on every detail, to reflect on them without losing touch with their language of images. The lesson we can learn from a myth lies in the literal narrative, not in what we add to it from the outside.**

He leads us to examine and to understand each step and each connection made in the myth of Perseus. How he carried Medusa's head hidden in a bag, only taking it out in dire circumstances to stay his enemies who deserve the fate of being turned to stone. The blood from the horrible head dripping on stone turned into Pegasus, a horse embodying the lightness of flight. After slaying the Gorgon to free Andromeda, Perseus must wash his hands, but stops to make a bed of leaves and sea plants to hold the head face-down while he washes.

**[page 6] But the most unexpected thing is the miracle that follows: when they touch Medusa, the little marine plants turn into coral and the nymphs, in order to have coral for adornments, rush to bring sprigs and seaweed to the terrible head.**

Finally Calvino's reflection on the Perseus myth leads him to Milan Kundera who wrote of the Russian occupation, which in his own country had thrown everyone who opposed or even publicized their heavy-handed bureaucracy into stone prisons. How is one to live, really live, to find lightness in such a country?

**[page 7] It is hard for a novelist to give examples of his idea of lightness from the events of everyday life, without making them the unattainable object of an endless *quête* [quest]. This is what Milan Kundera has done with great clarity and immediacy. His novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is in reality a bitter confirmation of the Ineluctable Weight of Living, not only in the situation of desperate and all-pervading oppression that has been the fate of his hapless country, but in a human condition common to us all, however infinitely more fortunate we may be. For Kundera the weight of living consists chiefly in constriction, in the dense net of public and private constrictions that enfolds us more and more closely. His novel shows us how everything we choose and value in life for its lightness soon reveals its true, unbearable weight. Perhaps only the liveliness and mobility of the intelligence escape this sentence — the very qualities with which this novel is written, and which belong to a world quite different from the one we live in.**

Next Calvino takes us into an examination of software which has the ultimate lightness, weightless bits of 0s and 1s arrayed in intricate patterns, patterns which do not add weight by their arrangement of trillions

of bits in digital computers(2), but allow the heavy computers to perform their tasks. He sees these bits as one of a continuum of tiny objects and quasi-objects which support and vivify us humans and the massive world around: neutrinos, quarks, neurons, and DNA molecules, among other things.

**[page 8] The second industrial revolution, unlike the first, does not present us with such crushing images as rolling mills and molten steel, but with "bits" in a flow of information traveling along circuits in the form of electronic impulses. The iron machines still exist, but they obey the orders of weightless bits.**

He next takes up Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, which he calls "the first great work of poetry in which knowledge of the world tends to dissolve the solidity of the world, leading to a perception of all that is infinitely minute, light, and mobile." In an amazing metaphor, he quotes Lucretius as talking about minute physical things that surround us, such as, "the spiderwebs that wrap themselves around us without our noticing them as we walk along." (Page 9) Books have many unnoticed spider webs of meaning which stick to us as we read them; they comprise the theme of books we read, but which we may finish without being aware of them, as I did with Kundera's novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

From Lucretius' tiny particles, he moves to Ovid's transformations of living beings in his poetic masterpiece, *Metamorphoses*, written fifty year after Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*.

**[page 9] For Ovid, too, everything can be transformed into something else, and knowledge of the world means dissolving the solidity of the world. And also for him there is an essential parity between everything that exists, as opposed to any sort of hierarchy of powers or values. If the world of Lucretius is composed of immutable atoms, Ovid's world is made up of the qualities, attributes and forms that define the variety of things, whether plants, animals, or persons. But these are only the outward appearances of a single common substance that — if stirred by profound emotion — may be changed into what most differs from it.**

It is this polarizing effect of strong emotion which leads police to suspect lovers when someone is murdered. They have often observed how love can turn into hate in an instant of intense emotion.

Next he shows us Boccaccio's Cavalcanti, the poet, who when confronted in a cemetery by his friends concerning a philosophical dilemma they perceive in him, he leaps deftly over a tombstone to escape the cemetery and flee the dead minds remaining behind, but only after leaving behind this smart-ass comment, "Gentlemen, you may say anything you wish to me in your own home."

**[page 12] Were I to choose an auspicious image for the new millennium, I would choose that one: the sudden agile leap of the poet-philosopher who raises himself above the weight of the world, showing that with all his gravity he has the secret of lightness, and that what many consider to be the vitality of the times — noisy, aggressive, revving and roaring — belongs to the realm of death, like a cemetery for rusty old cars.**

The so-called "vitality of our times" is like the stubborn mule who would not move from the middle of the bridge. The farmer picked up a large tree branch and whacked the mule across the head. A friar wandering past admonished the farmer saying, "Do you not think it would be better to ask the mule nicely to move on?" "Yes, Friar," replied the farmer, "but first you must get his attention." Cavalcanti's presuppositional assertion and precipitous jump must have clung to his friends like unnoticed spider webs for days and weeks, cutting eventually through the bustle of their times into meaning.

In our favorite series, NCIS, the repertory company ranges from the lightness of Abby, who flies around her lab and the squad room bringing cheery thoughts and her boss Gibbs who deals with bodies, usually dead ones, and concrete facts, evidence, and things like shell-casing, slugs, DNA, and bank accounts. Calvino discusses these two opposites.

**[page 15] We might say that throughout the centuries two opposite tendencies have competed in literature: one tries to make language into a weightless element that hovers above things like a cloud or better, perhaps, the finest dust or better still, a field of magnetic impulses. The other tries to give language the weight, density, and concreteness of things, bodies, and sensations.**

To tilt means to "charge with a lance" which Don Quixote did to windmills and famously one time a windmill hoisted him up into the air, causing him to be tilted in return! It is the most recognizable image from the long Cervantes novel and certainly the most memorable — one in which Quixote is lightly lifted into the air.

**[page 17] The scene in which Don Quixote drives his lance through the sail of a windmill and is hoisted up into the air takes only a few lines in Cervantes' novel. One might even say that the author put only a minimal fraction of his resources into the passage. In spite of this, it remains one of the most famous passages in all of literature.**

We leave this first lecture on Lightness wrapped by spidery threads of meaning, which had been dispersed loom-like throughout its pages during our wanderings. The loom-master himself, Calvino, marvels at the threads he has laid out for his spidery tapestry. Like a shoe wearer might wonder as he attempts to untie a large knot in his shoelace, "Which lace should I pull on to find the end in my hand?"

**[page 26] Have a great number threads been interwoven in this lecture? Which thread should I pull on to find the end in my hand? There is the thread that connects the moon, Leopardi, Newton, gravitation and levitation. There is the thread of Lucretius, atomism, Cavalcanti's philosophy of love, Renaissance magic, Cyrano. Then there is the thread of writing as a metaphor of the powder-fine substance of the world. . . . There remains one thread, the one I first started to unwind: that of literature as an existential function, the search for lightness as a reaction to the weight of living.**

In Kafka's tale of the "Knight of the Bucket" we find an Austrian man out in a wintry wartime night with a bucket looking for coal to bring warmth to his home. The bucket takes on a Pegasus attribute and carries the man into the air where he begs for some coal for his bucket. This story reminds me of a friend who had just lost his day job and formed a band playing for tips in a small pub late at night in the French Quarter. Several times, maybe too many times, he urged people to put some money in the bucket, often swinging the bucket or holding it up over his head as he did so.

**[page 28] Many of Kafka's short stories are mysterious, and this one is particularly so. It may be that Kafka only wanted to tell us that going out to look for a bit of coal on a cold wartime night changes the mere swinging of an empty bucket into the quest of a knight-errant or the desert crossing of a caravan or a flight on a magic carpet. But the idea of an empty bucket raising you above the level where one finds both the help and the egoism of others; the empty bucket, symbol privation and desire and seeking, raising you to the point at which a humble request can no longer be satisfied — all this opens the road to endless reflections.**

To Calvino, the Knight of the Bucket who finally flew to beyond the Ice Mountains was like himself — given that Calvino did face the new millennium in ultimate lightness — accomplishing the deed of leaving his bucket and body behind and me thinking: If reading is like walking, what do we call the spidery webs which wrap about us unnoticed, and what do we turn into after our reading walk is done?

## 2. QUICKNESS

This chapter starts off strangely, dealing with the quick and the dead: Charlemagne and Harald, King of Norway, each king reputed to have slept with his wife after she had died. Harald had his wife wrapped in a cloak which made her appear to him as alive, quick instead of dead. (Page 34) But the legend of

Charlemagne, King Charles the Great, is filled with an amazing sequence of necrophilia and fetishes.

**[page 31] Late in life the emperor Charlemagne fell in love with a German girl. The barons at his court were extremely worried when they saw that the sovereign, wholly taken up with his amorous passion and unmindful of his regal dignity, was neglecting the affairs of state. When the girl suddenly died, the courtiers were greatly relieved — but not for long, because Charlemagne's love did not die with her. The emperor had the embalmed body carried to his bedchamber, where he refused to be parted from it. The Archbishop Turpin, alarmed by this macabre passion, suspected an enchantment and insisted on examining the corpse. Hidden under the girl's dead tongue he found a ring with a precious stone set in it. As soon as the ring was in Turpin's hands, Charlemagne fell passionately in love with the archbishop and hurriedly had the girl buried. In order to escape the embarrassing situation, Turpin flung the ring into Lake Constance. Charlemagne thereupon fell in love with the lake and would not leave its shores.**

*Rhymes in prose*, what a wonderful phrase Calvino introduces. It makes so much sense that I've already begun using the process in my writing, as in this sentence from a recent [review](#), "This is a book full of spots, *frissons*, and scars — scars of John Ed bleeding from his heart upon the pages of this book, each letter a tiny scar upon the page, assembled together artfully into words of scars, into sentences of scars, into paragraphs of scars, into chapters of scars, into a full book of scars, and into a night of scars in which the LSU Tigers along with John Ed Bradley gave everything they had and left it on the field against USC in 1979, emerging not as winners of that game, but winners in the game of life." Parallel constructions can be considered to be "rhymes in prose" in which the repetition of a structural element builds a harmonious pattern which pulls us through into meaning.

**[page 35] Just as in poems and songs the rhymes help to create the rhythm, so in prose narrative there are events that rhyme. The Charlemagne legend is highly effective narrative because it is a series of events that echo each other as rhymes do in a poem.**

Everyone has heard someone tells a story poorly, pausing, offering apologies for not saying something right, carrying the story line on and on, until everyone is wishing that the storyteller would bring their clumsy novella to a quick end. Calvino offers us an example from Boccaccio and adds.

**[page 39, 40] The novella is a horse, a means of transport with its own pace, a trot or a gallop according to the distance and the ground it has to travel over; but the speed Boccaccio is talking about is a mental speed. The listed defects of the clumsy storyteller are above all offenses against rhythm, as well as being defects of style because he does not use the expressions appropriate to the characters or to the events. In other words, even correctness of style is a question of quick adjustment, of agility of both thought and expression.**

Calvino attributes the power of poetic style as largely due to rapidity, and from my experience this is true.

**[page 42] The power of poetic style, which is largely the same thing as rapidity, is pleasing for these effects alone and consists in nothing else. The excitement of simultaneous ideas may arise either from each isolated word, whether literal or metaphorical, from their arrangement, from the turn of a phrase, or even from the suppression of other words and phrases.**

One night I read aloud my poem "What is a Writer?", which is full of simultaneous ideas, to a live audience (See my review of [Building Great Sentences](#)), reading its short lines in a rapid-fire fusillade, and I was delighted at the excitement it provoked, spontaneous bursts of applause popping up during my reading. The juxtaposition of incongruous images and double-meanings like "Michelangelo painting a cistern" and "Bogart making a double-bogey" had a most pleasing effect on my audience.

"Hurry slowly" Calvino claimed as his personal motto, which in Latin becomes *Festina lente*. In a Jazz Funeral in New Orleans, the motto is reversed, *Lente festina*, or to start off walking very slowly to a dirge until you reach the cemetery and the coffin has been lowered into the ground ("the Preacher releases the body") — that is the First Line — then the tempo picks up to double-time jazz tunes during the Second Line when people literally jitterbug in the streets with handkerchiefs and colorful umbrellas swinging high up in the air.

A Venetian publisher, Aldus Manutius, symbolized the *Festina lente* by a dolphin wrapped around an anchor. Calvino's favorite emblem involved the butterfly and the crab from a design by Paolo Giovio. "Butterfly and crab are both bizarre, both symmetrical in shape, and harmony," Calvino writes on page 48. Searching through archives on-line, I found Giovio's drawing of a butterfly right above a crab. Years ago I bought a butterfly-crab drawing symbolizing my astrological sign, only in this drawing the crab and butterfly were superimposed together, as if the *Festina* and *lente* were blended intimately together, the slow-moving crab internal to the fast flitting butterfly, illustrating graphically my steady Sun Sign blended with my unpredictable Aquarian Moon.



When Columbus returned to Spain and was dining with nobles, one of them said, "In Spain there are many men who could have built ships and have discovered America." Columbus replied by asking for an egg and wagered that none of the nobles present could get the egg to stand up on one end. They tried and failed. Then Columbus took the egg, lightly smashed one end of the egg, and the egg stood up on end. Having seen the *fait accompli* anyone could do it, but Columbus did it when no one knew how to do it, and he got to America when no one knew how to do it or even *knew that it was there*. Much like Columbus, Jorge Luis Borges created a new world of literary possibilities which Calvino describes.

**[page 50] The last great invention of a new literary genre in our time was achieved by a master of the short form, Jorge Luis Borges. It was the invention of himself as narrator, that "Columbus' egg," which enabled him to get over the metal block that until nearly forty years of age prevented him from moving beyond essays to fiction. The idea that came to Borges was to pretend that the book he wanted to write had already been written by someone else, some unknown hypothetical author — an author in a different language, of a different culture — and that his task was to describe and review this invented book.**

In his first attempt at this new genre in 1940, everyone believed it to be a review of an actual book by an Indian author. Borges did to books what the mathematician Rafael Bombelli did when he invented imaginary numbers — Borges invented the idea of imaginary books.

Calvino said he wanted to create a collection of tales consisting of one sentence only, but he could only find one he considered worthy of the collection, by Guatemalan writer Augusto Monterroso: "When I woke up, the dinosaur was still there." (Page 51)

We have seen Calvino migrating from quickness as speed to quickness as shortness in time or space. He also discusses the immobility of silent words and how the writer's craft attracts those who can enjoy contemplating these objects that do not move in time or space, but that move with the hearts, minds, and

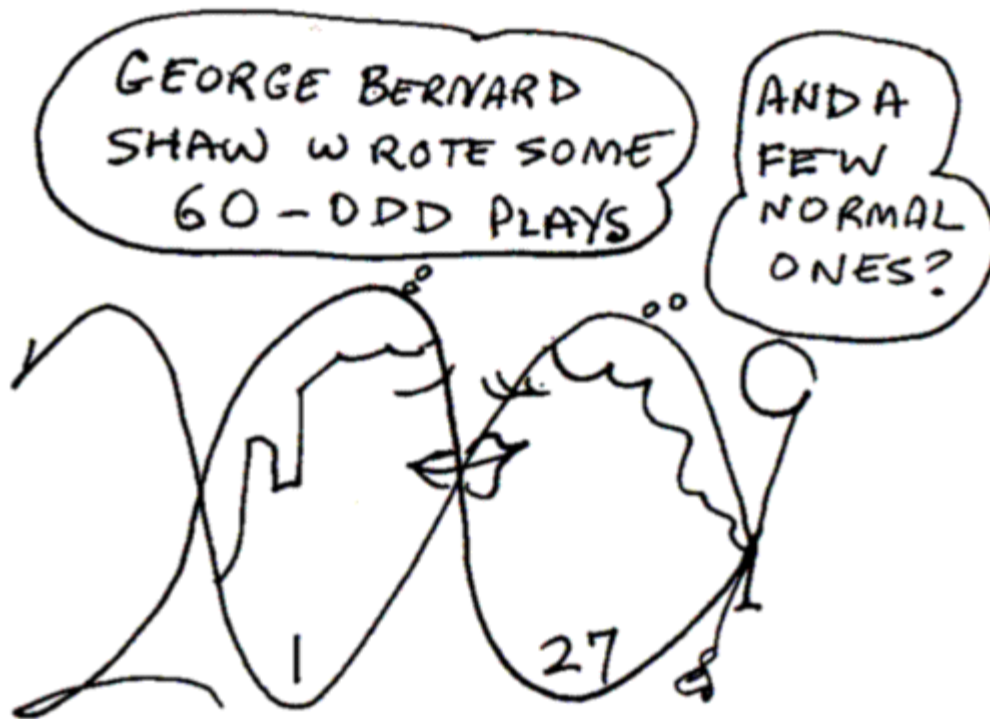
bodies of those reading them.

**[page 52] Certainly literature would never have existed if some human beings had not been strongly inclined to introversion, discontented with the world as it is, inclined to forget themselves for hours and days on end and to fix their gaze on the immobility of silent words.**

Here is the final story of the lecture on Quickness, a *lente* followed by a *Festina*, what I call the journey of 3,000 days ends in a single step. It is the gazing on the immobility of things which over time, in its own time produces the result. My wife used to tease me that I spent some much time staring at my writing with my back to her that she was going to paint a happy face on my bald spot to keep her company. Since then she has become my copy-editor and enjoys the quick step of reading my reviews which completes the journey of many days of my staring at the silent words.

**[page 54] I began this lecture by telling a story. Let me end it with another story, this time Chinese: Among Chuang-tzu's many skills, he was an expert draftsman. the king asked him to draw a crab. Chuang-tzu replied that he needed five years, a country house, and twelve servants. Five years later the drawing was still not begun. "I need another five years," said Chuang-tzu. The king granted them. At the end of these ten years, Chuang-tzu took his brush up, and, in an instant, with a single stroke, he drew a crab, the most perfect crab ever seen.**

Many years ago, before I had ever heard the above story, around 1978, I began drawing a symbol each year to represent the date and attached a number for the month and day to it. A friend, Ed Manning, referred to my drawing as a *glyph* and now I call it a "date glyph". When a new year starts, I prepare ahead of time for what the new year will



look like. Generally the year glyph consists of two single strokes, though in some decades like the 1980s I managed it in one stroke, continuous, and without stopping. The first couple of months, the date glyphs are often awkward looking as I strive for smoothness and simplicity of the form. By the end of the year, drawing the glyph becomes as smooth as the one stroke of Chuang-tzu's crab must have been.

### 3. EXACTITUDE

In 1988 when I read Giorgio de Santillana's book, [Hamlet's Mill](#), I came to understand that myths are records of astronomical events, whether they be Mayan, Danish, Eskimo, or Hindu myths, etc. Now I learn

the that Calvino heard this author lecture in 1963, some years before he wrote the above book which was published in 1977. I had often heard of experiments to determine the weight of a soul by measuring a person's body as they die, but never considered the possibility that there was a unit of measurement for the weight of a soul, the Maat.

**[page 55] For the ancient Egyptians, exactitude was symbolized by a feather that served as a weight on scales used for the weighing of souls. This light feather was Maat, goddess of the scales. The hieroglyph for Maat also stood for a unit of length — the 33 centimeters of the standard brick — and for the fundamental note of the flute.**

**This information comes from a lecture by Giorgio de Santillana on the precision of the ancients in observing astronomical phenomena, a lecture I heard in Italy in 1963 which had a profound influence on me. These days I have often thought of Santillana, who acted as my guide in Massachusetts during my first visit to the United States in 1960. In memory of his friendship, I have started this talk on exactitude in literature with the name of Maat, goddess of the scales — all the more because Libra is my sign of the Zodiac.**

Calvino gives us three aspects in his definition of what he means by exactitude: (1) a well-defined and well-calculated plan for the work in question; (2) an evocation of clear, incisive, memorable visual images; and (3) a language as precise as possible both in choice of words and in expression of the subtleties of thought and imagination. (Pages 55, 56) It seems that one who strove to speak with exactitude would never quite reach these three ideals, and Calvino is acutely aware of that aspect of speech and says he tries to talk as little as possible.

**[page 56] It seems to me that language is always used in a random, approximate, careless manner, and this distresses me unbearably. . . . If I prefer writing, it is because I can revise each sentence until I reach the point where — if not exactly satisfied with my words — I am able at least to eliminate those reasons for dissatisfaction that I can put a finger on. Literature — and I mean literature that matches up to these requirements — is the Promised Land in which language becomes what it really ought to be.**

First it seemed to me that Calvino saw language as some people view animals, poor creatures mistreated by their human owners who need a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Language to protect them from abuse and to provide sanitary and humane centers to protect language in the bosom of literature. Then, as a I read on, I saw another view of his intention.

**[page 56] It sometimes seems to me that a pestilence has struck the human race in its most distinctive faculty — that is, the use of words. It is a plague afflicting language, revealing itself as a loss of cognition and immediacy, an automatism that tends to level out all expression into the most generic, anonymous, and abstract formulas, to dilute meanings, to blunt the edge of expressiveness, extinguishing the spark that shoots out from the collision of words and circumstances.**

It seems that he wishes for a National Institute of Language Health which would do research into finding a cure for what ails language as it is used. Perhaps also a Center for Disease Control to find the source of the epidemic which he sees besetting language.

**[page 56] At this point, I don't wish to dwell on the possible sources of this epidemic, whether they are to be sought in politics, ideology, bureaucratic uniformity, the monotony of the mass media, or the way schools dispense the culture of the mediocre. What interests me are the possibilities of health. Literature, and perhaps literature alone, can create the antibodies to fight this plague in language.**

Having begun his lecture on the theme of exactitude, he moves in the opposite direction, wanting to write into the void of his own unknowing.



**[page 68] Rather than speak to you of what I have written, perhaps it would be more interesting to tell you about the problems that I have *not* yet resolved, that I don't know how to resolve, and what these will cause me to write: Sometimes I try to concentrate on the story I would like to write, and I realize that what interests me is something else entirely or, rather, not anything precise but everything that does not fit in with what I ought to write — the relationship between a given argument and all its possible variants and alternatives, everything that can happen in time and space.**

The story one would like to write is like a concentrated form, the form of a crystal perhaps, and the everything else is like a throbbing fire consuming form and creating all possibilities of flame reaching for the sky. Crystal and fire, two ways of being.

**[page 71] Crystal and flame: two forms of perfect beauty that we cannot tear our eyes away from, two modes of growth in time, of expenditure of the matter surrounding them, two moral symbols, two absolutes, two categories for classifying facts and ideas, styles and feelings. . . . I have always considered myself a partisan of the crystal, but the passage just quoted teaches me not to forget the value of the flame as a way of being, as a mode of existence. In the same way, I would like those who think of themselves as disciples of the flame not to lose sight of the tranquil, arduous lesson of the crystal.**

Were these two aspects of reality, crystal and flame, to come to battle, the outcome would likely be as in Leonardo's fable about fire.

**[page 78] . . . the fire, offended because the water in the pan is above him, although he is the "higher" element, shoots his flames up and up until the water boils, overflow, and puts him out.**

#### 4. VISIBILITY

Which comes first the chicken or the egg? It is an ancient conundrum which Calvino resurrects here, in this memo to the new millennium, as this question: Which comes first the word or the image? Each one is an imaginative process. The word can be the egg for the image of the chicken; the image can be the chicken which lays the words as an egg which can grow into the chicken. The image is the word made visible; the word is the image made invisible.

**[page 83] We may distinguish between two types of imaginative process: the one that starts with the word and arrives at the visual image, and the one that starts with the visual image and arrives at its verbal expression. The first process is the one that normally occurs when we read. For example, we read a scene in a novel or the report of some event in a newspaper and, according to the greater or lesser effectiveness of the text, we are brought to witness the scene as if it were taking place before our eyes, or at least to witness certain fragments or details of the scene that are singled out.**

The second process involves the "mental cinema" of our imagination which "projects images before our mind's eye" which can be converted into words to describe an event in a novel or to create newspaper report of a real event from the memories of the event projected in our mental cinema. In our day, Calvino sees the visual images taking priority over verbal expressions. One need only to observe groups of people gathering to stare at YouTube videos on handheld devices to understand his point.

**[page 86] Let us return to purely literary problematics and ask ourselves about the genesis of the imaginary in a time when literature no longer refers back to an authority or a tradition as its origin or goal, but aims at novelty, originality, and invention. It seems to me that in this situation the question of the priority of the visual image or verbal expression ( which is rather like the problem of the chicken and the egg) tends**

**definitely to lean toward the side of the visual imagination.**

How does Calvino devise a story? He tells us on page 893 that an image comes into his mind, charged with meaning, but as yet without words. Soon a field of analogies, symmetries, and confrontations form around the image. From these the outline of the story emerges and the writing becomes important. (Page 89)

**[page 89] At the same time, the writing, the verbal product, acquires increasing importance. I would say that from the moment I start putting black on white, what really matters is the written word, first as a search for an equivalent of the visual image, then as a coherent development of the initial stylistic direction. Finally, the written word little by little comes to dominate the field. From now on it will be the writing that guides the story toward the most felicitous verbal expression, and the visual imagination has no choice but to tag along.**

As a long-time computer scientist, I have studied the parallels between the human mind and computers. What I've learned is that computer scientists make too much of the parallels, jumping from the numerous analogies between human thinking and computer software/hardware to the unsustainable conclusion that the human brain is nothing but a computerized operation. My early work was in process control and I can tell you that what the computer worked on and manipulated involved huge chemical plants not just digital bits in the computer. Data arrived from outside the process computer, was used in calculations, stored, printed, and perhaps sent in modified form back out to the chemical process. Those data lines which come into the process computers could be considered as merely the five senses of the human being, but that thinking is simply a *nothing-but reductionist approach*. Humans have the ability to sense that which transcends the five senses, do they not? Ever known a computer to have a hunch? To fall in love? To appreciate a poem or a piece of music or a work of art? Will anyone ever create a computer with the abilities of a 7-year-old Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart? How did the inputs arrive in Mozart's brain, the fully-fleshed out concertos and symphonies which he wrote on paper and from which notes, others have strived to play and make it sound close to the music that Mozart had earlier heard in his mind? No, a *nothing-but sensory input* premise is not a worthy scientific approach to the understanding of the mind of the musician, the poet, the artist, or even the scientist.

**[page 91] The poet's mind, and at a few decisive moments the mind of the scientist, works according to a process of association of images that is the quickest way to link and to choose between the infinite forms of the possible and the impossible. The imagination is a kind of electronic machine that takes account of all possible combinations and chooses the ones that are appropriate to a particular purpose, or are simply the most interesting, pleasing, or amusing.**

Calvino cannot have meant that a computer can find things interesting, pleasing, or amusing in choosing a combination appropriate to a particular purpose; computers are, rightly understood, merely a very fast lookup file cabinet, but they have no personality nor opinions or preferences, much less a choosing ability based on interesting, pleasing, or amusing. "When will computers have reached the level of human intelligence?" a student asked Gregory Bateson and he answered, "When we ask them a question and they reply, 'That reminds me of a story.'" Or as I might ask those pretentious A. I. pioneers who see computers replacing humans, "What part of 'artificial' do you not understand in 'Artificial Intelligence'?" What kind of A. I. machine could ever evoke images of things *not there*?

**[page 91, 92] Will the power of evoking images of things that are *not there* continue to develop in a human race increasingly inundated by a flood of prefabricated images? . . . We are bombarded today by such a quantity of images that we can no longer distinguish direct experience from what we have seen for a few seconds on television. The memory is littered with bits and pieces of images, like a rubbish dump, and it is more and more unlikely that any one form among so many will succeed in standing out.**

Does it seem to you that Calvino was above talking the latest fad that we call Modern Art? You know those so-called artworks where a blank canvas is purposely "littered with bits and pieces of images, like a rubbish dump"?

Visibility means *icastic* forms in which meaning stands out in a memorable fashion, as in a Picasso, a Monet, a Dali, or a Georgia O'Keefe.

**[page 92] I have in mind some possible pedagogy of the imagination that would accustom us to control our own inner vision without suffocating it or letting it fall, on the other hand, into confused, ephemeral daydreams, but would enable the image to crystallize into a well-defined, memorable, and self-sufficient form, the *icastic* form.**

## 5. MULTIPLICITY

In the last of the five memos included in this book, we have a multiplicity of things to talk about. Take for example, *That Awful Mess on the Via Merulana* by Carlo Emilio Gadda, known as the Italian James Joyce by some. Calvino quotes from it, two and a half pages of Italian prose, followed by an equally long English translation. I know very little Italian, but recognize many of the words with roots in other languages familiar to me. With my scant knowledge and exposure to spoken Italian from my weeks in Rome and other Italian cities, I decided to read the Italian passages to myself and was surprised how much of the language spoke to me clearly as I did so, passages and short sentences revealed their meaning to me. The French and German I had an easier time with, but somehow these various languages seemed appropriate for a lecture to be given at Harvard University, or would he have delivered all of the lectures in Italian? No indication was given by his wife Esther. So, we had to deal with a multiplicity of languages just to arrive at Memo 5 in this book.

Here's a quote from the Gadda passage, in English. Officer Ingravallo would interrupt his sleep to speak on the affairs of men and women, and his words were treated as trivial blather, but a curious thing happened over time.

**[page 103] At first sight, or rather, on first hearing, these seemed banalities. They weren't banalities. And so these rapid declarations, which crackled on his lips like the sudden illumination of a sulphur match, were revived in the ears of people at a distance of hours, or of months, from their enunciation: as if after a mysterious period of incubation. 'That's right!' the person in question admitted, 'That's exactly what Ingravallo said to me.' He sustained, among other things, that unforeseen catastrophes are never the consequence or the effect, if you prefer, of a single motive, of a cause singular; but they are rather like a whirlpool, a cyclonic point of depression in the consciousness of the world, towards which a whole multitude of converging causes have contributed.**

We see the "whole multitude" as an example of the theme of this fifth memo, but exactly why did Calvino include this Gadda's work here? Usually, with other authors, we are left to ponder that question, like the people had to ponder the ejaculations of Ingravallo, but not with Calvino. He tells us why, as if he hears us asking him the question.

**[page 105, 106] I wished to begin with this passage from Gadda because it seems to me an excellent introduction to the subject of my lecture — which is the contemporary novel as an encyclopedia, as a method of knowledge, and above all as a network of connections between the events, the people, and the things of the world. [and also] . . . because his philosophy fits in very well with my theme, in that he views the world as a "system of systems," where each system conditions the others and is conditioned by them.**

People, in some group of every person together, comprise a system which conditions some other group of

people and is in turn conditioned by them. For example, Gadda says (Page 108) "to know is to insert something into what is real, and hence to distort reality." Systems of systems we are all.

Robert Musil is another encyclopedic writer. (Page 110) "Everything he knows or thinks he deposits in an encyclopedic book that he tries to keep in the form of a novel, but its structure continually changes; it comes to pieces in his hands. The result is that not only does he never manage to finish the novel, but he never succeeds in deciding on its general outlines or how to contain the enormous mass of material within set limits."

Flaubert who wrote to a friend, "what I'd like to do is a book about nothing", went on to write "the most encyclopedic novel ever written, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*." (Page 113) Flaubert read over 1500 books on science, medicine, etal to write this novel of two men who devoted their lives to copy the books in the universal library.

Thomas Mann arises next before us; his *Magic Mountain* proffered by Calvino as "the most complete introduction to the culture of our century." Following on his heels is Alfred Jarry and his *L'amour absolu* (1899), a mere fifty page novel, but one that can be read as three different stories:

**[page 117]**

- (1) the vigil of a condemned man in his cell the night before his execution;**
- (2) the monologue of a man suffering from insomnia, who when half asleep dreams that he has been condemned to death;**
- (3) the story of Christ.**

Before we can catch our breath or our balance, Calvino challenges us with his favorite author, Jorge Luis Borges and his vertiginous essay on time, "The Garden of Forking Paths", "which is presented as a spy story and includes a totally logico-metaphysical story, which in turn contains the description of an endless Chinese novel — and all concentrated into a dozen pages." (Page 119)

Naturally, Calvino mentions his own vertiginous work, a masterpiece in my opinion, [\*If on a winter's night a traveler\*](#), which my review provides my own insights into, available by a click on the title. It is worthy to note that the *Traveler* book ends with the two main characters Ludmilla and Reader in bed together, and Reader is almost finished reading the book Calvino was almost finished writing. The last page, Chapter 12, is very short: Ludmilla closes her book and turns off her light to go to sleep, asking, "Aren't you tired of reading?" and Reader answers, "Just a moment, I've almost finished *If on a winter's night a traveler* by Italo Calvino." Here is Calvino looping himself as Escher does in his gallery drawing which shows a man looking at an image on the wall which includes an image of him looking at the image. We find ourselves reading a book in which a character in the book is reading the same book we are reading. *Vertiginous*.

From his wife Esther's prefatory comments we can deduce that Italo Calvino died shortly before his moment of departure for America to give these lectures at Cambridge, and thus he never got to write his planned sixth lecture on *Consistency*. Harvard later published his five lectures, and later Random House published this Vintage International Edition. Wading through a multiplicity of authors, we finally reach an end to this chapter of multiplicities of multiplicities, Calvino's *meta-chef d'oeuvre*, wondering if he ever reached what stood closest to his heart:

**[page 124] "a work that would let us escape the limited perspective of the individual ego, not only to enter into selves like our own but to give speech to that which has no language, to the bird perching on the edge of the gutter, to the tree in spring and the tree in fall, to stone, to cement, to plastic . . . ."**

What can we say after those fateful words from a speech which he never gave, but which speaks to our minds and hearts across the distance of 34 years, bridging his millennium and our millennium, speaking of the "nature common to each and every thing."

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----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1.

Esther Calvino also wrote that in 1985, a year he devoted entirely to writing these memos, he had early on announced to her he planned to write eight memos. The last she has not found any trace of, except it dealt with the "Beginning and Ending of Novels". She mentions nothing of memos 6 and 7, but it's possible she had his notes or a rough draft of them.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

Footnote 2.

Think of software in a computer like the disks on the rods of an abacus. Changing the disks' arrangement during an arithmetic computation does *not* change the weight of the abacus.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 2.](#)

