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“Il perché del gioco”:

Chess and Medievalism in Calvino’s *Le città invisibili* and *Lezioni americane*

Akash Kumar

Introduction

When we begin Italo Calvino’s 1972 novel *Le città invisibili* (*Invisible Cities*), we are plunged into a dynamic that is at once familiar and distanced, historically inflected and yet crafting a meditation that operates in transhistorical and transnational terms. Here is the opening line: “*Non è detto che Kublai Kan creda a tutto quel che dice Marco Polo quando gli descrive le città visitate nelle sue ambascerie, ma certo l’imperatore dei tartari continua ad ascoltare il giovane veneziano con più curiosità e attenzione che ogni altro suo messo o esploratore*” (Calvino 1992, 361; “*Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions, but the emperor of the Tartars does continue listening to the young Venetian with greater attention and curiosity than he shows any other messenger or explorer of his*” [Calvino 1974, 5]). It bears repeating that, as this opening sentence makes immediately clear, this work is a framed narrative based on a literary and historical precedent. Perhaps more than that, it is very much about a relationship: that of Marco Polo, Venetian merchant and traveler, and Kublai Khan, Mongol emperor.

It is a jarring opening, and yet it seems fairly easy for a vast cultural and linguistic divide to be bridged through language. There is a heightened awareness of linguistic construction and transmission in this sentence—we can note the speech verbs, “non è detto,” “dice,” “describe,” and a listening one as well in “ascoltare.” There is also an interesting tone of skeptical distance as well as undeniable attraction: perhaps Kublai Khan doesn’t believe what he hears from the Venetian, but he nonetheless pays him more attention than any other. But what is striking in this dynamic in which the Khan listens to Marco over others is that there appear to be no issues of communication whatsoever. Belief may be another story, but the methods of communication seem to be working just fine: one speaks, the other listens with great attention, though it is the polite listener who holds the ultimate power to decide on what is true and what is not. And so we are attuned to the dynamic of an empire working by means of such transmission and selection of information. From the very opening, then, there is a skeptical view of empire and what might be known of the world as seen through such a politically oriented lens.

It is only in the second frame narrative intervention at the end of the first part of the novel, after we have passed through the descriptions of some 11 cities, that things become more culturally specific and linguistically fraught. In this portion, it becomes clear that Marco is one of many ambassadors, among whom are “*persiani armeni siriani copti turcomanni*” (Calvino 2002, 21; “*Persians, Armenians, Syrians, Copts, Turkomans*”) and then the most telling observation that the emperor is a stranger to each of his subjects and that it is only through “*occhi e orecchi stranieri*” (Calvino 1992, 373; “*foreign eyes and ears*” [Calvino 1974, 21]) that the empire might present itself to the Khan. This emperor, however, does not understand any of the ambassadors’ languages and so we find another kind of communication that emerges when we turn to this second version of Marco Polo within the novel. It is here that the language of the game first comes into the text, as an elaborate means of conveying how Marco pantomimes and moves objects about to make his

ambassadorial reports. It is the last resort for one who is speechless. First, he tries to communicate by gesture and leap, then inarticulate sound, whether shout or woof or squawk, and then: “*con oggetti che andava estraendo dalle sue bisacce: piume di struzzo, cerbottane, quarzi, e disponendo davanti a sé come pezzi degli scacchi*” (Calvino 1992, 373; “*with gestures, leaps, cries of wonder and of horror, animal barkings or hootings, or with objects he took from his knapsacks—ostrich plumes, pea-shooters, quartzes—which he arranged in front of him like chessmen*” [Calvino 1974, 21]). Eventually this second frame version of Marco will learn many languages and, we might imagine, the ambiguities and interpretive spaces will grow smaller, but in first alluding to chess as a meeting ground before and beyond language, Calvino does something quite interesting and quite medieval. This initial simile that evokes the game will come to be further elaborated only much later in the work, but even in this opening gambit it suggests a way of reading Marco’s performance as far more strategic and complex than it first appears. It also suggests looking at the game as a means to draw individuals together across a cultural and linguistic divide.

This essay proposes to interrogate Calvino’s use of chess in *Le città invisibili*, consider its resonance with the medieval representation of the game, and illustrate how this particular global game serves to elicit a connective thread that offers much in the consideration of late Calvino with regard to the perceived turn from his “neo-realist” period to more abstract and intellectualized modes of literary creation. It will begin by situating Calvino’s use of Marco Polo through his own comments on the genesis of the novel and consider how this chosen approach that privileges the fantastical over the historical lends itself to a particular sort of medievalism. We will then move to a careful reading of the connection between language, communication, and the game of chess as it stretches across the novel with a particular emphasis illustrating how Calvino’s representation of chess resonates with the global medieval history of the game. Finally, this essay will consider how Calvino’s return to the chess scene in *Lezioni americane* occasions a reflection on his own writing and its vacillation between different cultural modes of expression.

The novel’s connection with chess has received a certain amount of critical attention. It has long been observed that, as Mario Barenghi points out in his introductory note to the Meridiani edition, the sum of the fifty-five cities recounted in nine parts amounts to sixty-four, the number of squares on a chessboard (Calvino 1992, 1359).¹ Paul A. Harris characterizes chess as a metaphor for mapping that “could function as a figure for the work’s formal process” (Harris 1990, 79–80). Harris sees in the game a way of reading the complexities of Calvino’s narrative process and combinatory approach that also implicates the power dynamics inherent in the Marco Polo-Kublai Khan relationship. Matteo Brera, in an essay that is emblematic of the long-standing interest in reading Calvino through the lens of semiotics, sees the chessboard as “a mirror of the semiotic relationship between the emperor and his ambassador” (Brera 2011, 281). This essay is an attempt to build on such approaches and insights by integrating the medieval context of chess to a reading of the novel, with particular attention to the way in which the game has long stood as a medium to facilitate cross-cultural communication and has a vital connection to the culture of storytelling in the long history of the frame-tale narrative. It is also an attempt to situate Calvino’s use of Marco Polo within the historical context of late medieval Italy in order to dwell on how Calvino’s particular version of the Venetian traveler and his Mongol patron is at once a resistance to history and perhaps an unconscious channeling of it.

¹ For a full reading of how the novel’s combinatory structure might correspond to the game of chess, see Zancan 1996, in particular pages 890–98. On how the novel’s structure resembles a chessboard, see Milanini 1990, 132.

Calvino's Marco

Calvino's approach to the cross-cultural dynamic is obviously present in his choice of framing this novel as a series of encounters and exchanges between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan. It bears noting that Calvino had a prior interest in Marco Polo, at least stretching back to 1960, when he was commissioned to write a screenplay by producer Franco Cristaldi. The film was never made, but Mario Barenghi observes that Calvino's version of Marco Polo in his manuscript resembles characters from *Inostri antenati*, and that this Marco is "impulsivo, esuberante, smanioso di novità e di avventure" (Calvino 1992, 1364; "impulsive, exuberant, eager for novelty and adventures").² This is not quite the Marco that we encounter in the later novel, but Barenghi finds even in that early work a way of connecting forward to the emperor's desire to find some sort of overarching design that would make sense of his vast empire and seemingly infinite possessions.³

In subsequent remarks and meditations upon *Le città invisibili*, Calvino demonstrates both his affinity for the tradition that he is drawing upon in crafting this relationship between merchant and emperor, and perhaps his awareness of the need to distance himself from the possible pitfalls of such representations of the cultural other. In 1983, a little more than a decade after *Le città invisibili* was published, Calvino spoke at Columbia University about the work, and those remarks were published in the literary magazine *Columbia*. In laying out his framing, Calvino makes some fascinating points. He first makes clear that he knows what was inaccurate, saying that his work is based in the verbal reports Marco Polo makes to Kubla Khan, "emperor of the Tartars," and then says, "In fact, the historical Kubla, a descendant of Genghis Khan, was Emperor of the Mongols; but in his book Marco Polo referred to him as Great Khan of the Tartars, and thus he has remained in the literary tradition" (Calvino 1983, 39).⁴ The way that he at once claims historical knowledge and then deliberately chooses to ignore it is quite interesting; he had no "intention of following the [actual] itinerary of the thirteenth-century Venetian merchant," he says, just the literary one. His reason for staying away from the empirical geography of Marco Polo's journeys is summarized in the statement that immediately follows: "For the Orient is nowadays a topic which is best left to experts; and I am not one" (Ibid.). Calvino goes on to say that countless poets and writers have drawn inspiration from *Il Milione* (*The Travels of Marco Polo*) "as an exotic and fantastic stage setting," (ibid.) and that only the *Thousand and One Nights* can claim similar resonance and success, and so that is the path he follows.

As has been made clear, this is Calvino speaking at Columbia a little over a decade after *Le città invisibili* was published. It is also five years after Edward Said published *Orientalism*. One wonders whether Said was in the audience, and whether such a remark might have been intended for a very specific person within the larger audience. The conclusion seems to be that Calvino will leave history to the experts, but he will also gladly take the opening that a literary history of exoticism affords him.⁵ To a medievalist, or really to any reader of that co-authored work of the late-thirteenth century by Marco Polo and Rustichello da Pisa, whether we want to call it *Il Milione*

² My translation. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

³ For more on the relationship between the earlier screenplay and the novel, see McLaughlin 2008.

⁴ We might note that Calvino refers to the Khan as "Kubla," following a usage that is perhaps more literary than historical (we might think of Coleridge's poem *Kubla Khan*). The historical figure is usually referred to as "Kublai."

⁵ On Orientalism in *Le città invisibili*, see Della Colletta 1997.

in its Tuscanized form or *Le devisement dou monde* in its Franco-Venetian one, this all becomes worth a closer look.⁶

Calvino is certainly right that “Tartars” is a misnomer for the Mongols. Indeed, as Sharon Kinoshita makes clear in her very usefully annotated 2016 translation, it is likely a conflation of the ethnic Tatars and Tartaros, the Greek word for underworld.⁷ Thus, we might point to its fairly widespread use in medieval travelogues of Marco Polo’s historical moment but we might also consider how it essentially amounts to an ethnic slur, and question just what sort of tradition Calvino seeks to invoke and inscribe himself in with this preference for the literary over the historical.

On the other hand, when one reads *Il Milione*, the use of Tartars does not seem to be pejorative. Quite to the contrary, we are struck by the sense of abiding wonder and respect for this wide-ranging empire. Kinoshita makes clear that it is important to distinguish this thirteenth-century work from other medieval travelogues that tended to be far more oriented toward the exotic. She privileges the Franco-Venetian title *Le devisement du monde* as a way of restoring its original context of a descriptive work that is oriented toward the real. Moreover, its moment of composition matters: given that the prologue states it was originally composed in 1298, Kinoshita emphasizes that it is precisely in the middle of the century “in which the *pax mongolica* created by the conquests of Chinggis Khan and his successors momentarily produced a cosmopolitan world of trans-Asian travel, communication, and the circulation of people, goods, and ideas on an unprecedented scale. *Le devisement du monde* is a textual witness to that world” (Kinoshita 2016, 102).

This historical context works, in a sense, to highlight Calvino’s choices in privileging the literary tradition over either the historical Mongol empire or the historically and empirically inflected narrative of *Le devisement dou monde*. Indeed, on the front of language and communication, we have some interesting wrinkles that emerge at once. In the prologue, when Marco’s father and uncle first come to the Khan, we find that they already know the language. Polo reports that after the Khan asks them about their emperor and political customs, “he asked them about my lord the pope, everything about the Roman church, and all the customs of the Latins. Messer Niccolò and Messer Maffeo told him the whole truth about each thing in an orderly and wise way, like the wise men that they were, well acquainted with the language of the Tartars, that is Tartar” (Polo 2016, 5). Kinoshita clarifies that this seeming repetition of “language of the Tartars” and “Tartar,” in fact might be a way of distinguishing between official state languages and others that were spoken in the court. Indeed, as we move on to be introduced to a young Marco Polo who travels back to the Khan with his father and uncle, his own facility with languages is quite key to his appeal:

“Now it so happened that Marco, Messer Niccolò’s son, learned the Tartars’ customs, languages, and writing so well that it was a marvel: for I tell you in all truth that not long after coming to the great lord’s court, he learned to read and write [four] languages. He was wise and prudent beyond measure, and the Great Khan was very well-disposed toward him for the goodness and great valor he saw in him” (Polo 2016, 10).

⁶ For a recent edition of the F manuscript of Marco Polo’s work, see Polo 2018.

⁷ See Marco Polo 2016. Kinoshita makes clear that where “Tartar” is inaccurately used to refer to the Mongols in many Western European texts, the equivalent term spelled “Tatar” is inaccurately used to the same effect in Arabic and Persian sources as well (3).

We might note and emphasize both the speed with which Marco learns and the emphasis on multiplicity. Marco's language learning notably precedes his being sent off as an ambassador.

Calvino's Marco, on the other hand, is slow and learns through experience. From the initial ease of communication in the opening of the novel, we move to elaborate pantomimes that implicate the game of chess and then, at the end of this second frame intervention, the emergence of the multilingual self: "*Col succedersi delle stagioni e delle ambascerie, Marco s'impraticò della lingua tartara e di molti idiomi di nazioni e dialetti di tribù*" (Calvino 1992, 374; "As the seasons passed and his missions continued, Marco mastered the Tartar language and the national idioms and tribal dialects" [Calvino 1974, 22]). We might pause here and think about what sort of *Le devisement dou monde* Calvino had access to and what he chose to use. In fact, Barengi notes in his introduction that, in his unused screenplay for the aforementioned Marco Polo film in 1960, Calvino already had thought of the scene of Marco pantomiming while he was still in the process of learning languages (Calvino 1992, 1360). It is worth noting that the Tuscanized medieval version of the Franco-Venetian text goes about things a little differently: "Or avvenne che questo Marco, figliuolo di messer Niccolao, poco istando nella corte, aparò li costumi de' Tartari e loro lingue e loro lettere, e diventò uomo savio e di grande valore oltra misura" (Polo 2005, 14; "Now it so happened that this Marco, son of Messer Niccolao, having been at the court a short time, learned the customs of the Tartars as well as their languages and letters, and became a wise man of great value beyond measure"). We can see how in this case, while the emphasis remains on Marco's preternatural ability with regard to learning language quickly, there is a difference: the Franco-Venetian version specifies that Marco learns four languages, while the Tuscan leaves it ambiguous.⁸

This essay does not intend to go through each work and point out significant departures that Calvino makes from the thirteenth-century text.⁹ But this emphasis on language and representation of the cultural other at the work's opening indicates both a sense of Calvino's medievalism in the broad sense of his preference for the literary tradition over a historical one, and the way in which such an opening allows for the language of chess to flourish. Chess might be read productively as a means to capture Calvino's literary vision that is both on the edge of something new and yet also evokes, whether consciously or not, a medieval mode of using the game to draw cultures together, to elide boundaries of language, and mediate between scientific erudition and literary craft. In other words, this is an attempt, in line with what Barbara Spackman has evocatively laid out, to find a "non-knowledge," that complements Calvino's fictions and their "loudly pronounced 'I know very well'" (Spackman 2008, 8). It is by no means clear that Calvino was aware of every bit of the medieval historical and literary context of the game of chess that will emerge in this reading, but this essay nonetheless holds that the connections evoked in that regard do matter and can serve to draw us into a fuller and more nuanced reading of what Calvino does with the game.

Chess and Storytelling: Marco's Game and its Medieval Context

When chess next emerges in *Le città invisibili*, we are quite a ways in, moving toward the conclusion of the work, and yet it seems that we are right back at the beginning of the relationship. At the beginning of part eight, we once again have a scene of Marco Polo "*informatore muto*"

⁸ Such a line of reading is of course also oriented to thinking about Calvino's representation of the cultural other. See Della Colletta 1997, 411–31.

⁹ As Della Colletta points out, such work has certainly been carried out. She draws in particular on the work of Francesca Bernardini Napoletano (415).

(“mute informant”) who moves objects around in a certain order (Calvino 1992, 461; Calvino 1974, 121). These objects come from the far reaches of the empire, but they are moved about on a “*pavimento di maiolica*” (“majolica pavement”) at the foot of the Khan’s throne (Calvino 1992, 461; Calvino 1974, 121). We cannot but think of a form of chess when we read the following line: “*Disponendo in un certo ordine gli oggetti sulle piastrelle bianche e nere e via via spostandoli con mosse studiate, l’ambasciatore cercava di rappresentare agli occhi del monarca le vicissitudini del suo viaggio, lo stato dell’impero, le prerogative dei remoti capoluoghi*” (Calvino 1992, 461; “Arranging the objects in a certain order on the black and white tiles, and occasionally shifting them with studied moves, the ambassador tried to depict for the monarch’s eyes the vicissitudes of his travels, the conditions of the empire, the prerogatives of the distant provincial seats” [Calvino 1974, 121]). The black and white squares and studied moves implicate the game, but Marco’s use of this ludic form to represent his journeys and the very state of the empire make it far more significant than any other kind of game. Indeed, in what follows this description of Marco’s procedure, we find that “*Kublai era un attento giocatore di scacchi*” (“Kublai was a keen chess player”), that he follows Marco’s moves, and understands the relations between object and movement to tell the story. Importantly, this procedure is termed as “*il modo di disporsi gli uni rispetto agli altri sul pavimento di maiolica*” (“the system of arranging one with respect to the others on the majolica floor”), a turn of phrase that evocatively meditates upon the relation of self to other, the one to the many, as part of the very nature of this game (Calvino 1992, 461; Calvino 1974, 121).

Kublai’s insight in this moment is to turn to the game itself as a new form of Marco making his reports and he believes that this method will allow him to truly possess the full reaches of his empire by understanding it as an enclosed system governed by specific rules, extrapolating from the one description of the city to understand the whole of the game: “*Pensò: ‘Se ogni città è come una partita a scacchi, il giorno in cui arriverò a conoscerne le regole possiederò finalmente il mio impero, anche se mai riuscirò a conoscere tutte le città che contiene’*” (Calvino 1992, 461; “He thought: ‘If each city is like a game of chess, the day when I have learned the rules, I shall finally possess my empire, even if I shall never succeed in knowing all the cities it contains’” [Calvino 1974, 121]). This way of linking the game of chess with imperial control is quite telling. Indeed, it might bring to mind the origin story of chess from the medieval Persian epic *Shahnameh*, in which the game is invented by wise men in India and sent to Persia as a challenge to determine who should rule whom. An envoy bears the following letter to the Persian court:

May you reign for as long as the heavens turn. Set this chessboard and its pieces before your most learned men, to see if they can understand this subtle game, the names of its pieces, and where each one’s home is on the board. See whether they can comprehend what the pawns and elephants do, and what the moves of the rook, the knight, the king, and his advisor are. If their intellects can fathom this subtle game, we shall gladly send the tribute and taxes that the king has demanded. But if the famous sages of Iran are all deficient in such knowledge, if their knowledge is not equal to ours, then Iran should no longer demand tribute from us. It is we who should accept tribute from you, since knowledge is the best of all things that confer glory. (Ferdowsi, 699)

The terms of this challenge are intellectual, but they also play upon the various possibilities of what the pieces mean, how they might move, and, most significantly for our purposes, how the

game of chess might be implicated in the workings of empire and conferral of power and possession. Because this is a Persian epic, the conclusion of this cross-cultural encounter is Persian dominance in the form of chess being mastered and a new game of *nard* being created as a response to this Indian challenge. Crucially, though, we find here that chess serves as an alternative means of communication, a privileging of diplomacy over military conflict, and a means of emphasizing the game as an intelligence test.

As we move into this new phase of game-playing between the Khan and Marco Polo, what emerges is a link between storytelling and games. As the Indian ruler did in the medieval Persian epic, the Khan, too, issues a chess challenge: Marco must tell of the cities he has seen using only the chessboard and its pieces:

Con un gesto lo invitò a sedersi di fronte a lui e a descrivergli col solo aiuto degli scacchi le città che aveva visitato. Il veneziano non si perse d'animo. Gli scacchi del Gran Kan erano grandi pezzi d'avorio levigato: disponendo sulla scacchiera torri incombenti e cavalli ombrosi, addensando sciame di pedine, tracciando viali diritti o obliqui come l'incedere della regina, Marco ricreava le prospettive e gli spazi di città bianche e nere nelle notti di luna. (Calvino 1992, 461–62)

Returning from his last mission, Marco Polo found the Khan awaiting him, seated at a chessboard. With a gesture he invited the Venetian to sit opposite him and describe, with the help only of the chessmen, the cities he had visited. Marco did not lose heart. The Great Khan's chessmen were huge pieces of polished ivory: arranging on the board looming rooks and sulky knights, assembling swarms of pawns, drawing straight or oblique avenues like a queen's progress, Marco recreated the perspectives and spaces of black and white cities on moonlit nights. (Calvino 1974, 122)

In lush, evocative prose, the board and pieces are transformed into cityscapes illuminated by moonlight. But we might also begin to notice a certain emphasis on positioning that is oriented toward making sense and order out of the raw material of the game in the repeated use of a verb like “disporre.” The Khan, too, is prompted to think about order and the unseen ties that bind, but he is unable to come up with an alternative system of understanding: “*Alle volte gli sembrava d'essere sul punto di scoprire un sistema coerente e armonioso che sottostava alle infinite difformità e disarmonie, ma nessun modello reggeva il confronto con quello del gioco degli scacchi*” (Calvino 1992, 462; “*At times he thought he was on the verge of discovering a coherent, harmonious system underlying the infinite deformities and discords, but no model could stand up to the comparison with the game of chess*” [Calvino 1974, 122]). At least in this moment, there is no other game, no other system that can provide something approaching imperial or, indeed, existential coherence in the way that the game of chess can.

In both of these cases—the link between chess and storytelling and the association between the game and a totalized, systemic understanding—we might once again look to a prominent medieval tradition. In the *Shahnameh*, the story of the invention of chess and backgammon is immediately followed by the story of how the *Kalileh and Demneh*, the Arabic translation of the Indian frame-tale narrative *Panchatantra*, makes its way into Persian circulation. In linking the transmission of games to the transmission of that most important frame-tale tradition, Ferdowsi dwells upon that essential connection between play and story. Such a connection is certainly made

in Boccaccio's *Decameron* that finds Pampinea, queen of the first day, advocating for the telling of tales over the playing of games: "Ma se in questo il mio parer si seguisse non giucando, nel quale l'animo dell'una delle parti convien che si turbi senza troppo piacere dell'altra o di chi sta a vedere, ma novellando" (Boccaccio 2004, 1.intro.111; "[but] if you would take my advice in this, we should not spend the hot part of hte day playing games, for they necessarily leave one of hte players feeling miffed without giving that much pleasure either to his opponent or to those who are watching. Rather, we should tell stories..." [Boccaccio 2014, 93]). Though this moment suggests a conflict between the more inclusive, egalitarian act of storytelling and the socially isolating play of games such as chess in which there is inevitably a loser, there is also an understanding of their fundamental connection as ways to escape the plague-ridden city through immersion in an alternative reality.¹⁰

With regard to the systemic understanding of the cosmos that the game might evoke, there has long been an interest in connecting chess to the mandala and to the movement of the stars. The tenth-century Arab historian al-Mas'udi describes a variation of chess that is played on a round board and has twelve zones to correspond to the signs of the zodiac.¹¹ Perhaps in more pointed urban fashion, we can dwell on a medieval Italian work such as Jacobus de Cessolis' thirteenth-century treatise on the game of chess (*Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium ac popularium super ludo scachorum*) that makes the game into an allegory of medieval society, going so far as to assign a profession to each pawn and explain how the movement of the pieces corresponds to the ideal carrying out of their social functions. When he dwells upon the nature of the board, Jacobus specifies that it was created "to represent the great city of Babylon" (Jacob de Cessolis 2008, 99), and then goes on to expand the potential application of such a connection in writing "Just as the chessboard represents the city of Babylon, it can also represent other kingdoms, even the whole world" (Ibid., 102). In this, Jacobus is more pointedly elaborating on something that he already made clear at the start of his treatise: that this particular game is capable of signifying anything and everything. He writes that the inventor of the game created something "filled with various unlimited metaphors and parables. Because of the countless number of ways to play, because of the various meanings and metaphors, and because of the ingeniousness of the battles, the game has become famous" (Ibid., 10). Such an understanding of the narrative and metaphorical possibilities of the game in the century of Marco Polo falls in line with what Calvino seeks to appropriate, as the game becomes a new form of exchange between the Venetian merchant and the Khan. It also resonates with Calvino's fascination with structuralism: the game, even in its medieval representation, thus participates in what Lucia Re has called a "structuralist democratization" that places the literary alongside other systems of signs and thus allows us to better value the act of reading that gives literature its value (Re 1998, 129).¹²

This game, however, is one that threatens to take over. It occurs to the Khan that there is no point in using the tools of the game without playing the game itself. He has not come up with any alternative system of understanding his empire from afar and seems resigned to the fact that Marco's manipulations of the board and its pieces to evoke visions of cities cannot endure. Chess

¹⁰ For more on this line of reading, see my essay, Kumar 2020.

¹¹ See, for example, Murray 2012, 343. Murray's work, first published in 1913, remains a vital resource. For the cosmological significance of games, see also Burckhardt 1969 and, more recently, Daryaee 2002. Burckhardt's work speaks to the popularity of such looks eastward around the time Calvino was writing *Le città invisibili*.

¹² The imaginative 2008 work by Craig Conley, *If a Chessman Were a Word: A Chess-Calvino Dictionary*, evokes both Calvino's link between chess and storytelling as well as its medieval past in Jacobus de Cessolis' social allegory.

thus becomes a means of circular understanding and avoidance of reality, creating a world unto itself that does not rely upon any outside contact:

Ormai Kublai Kan non aveva più bisogno di mandare Marco Polo in spedizioni lontane: lo tratteneva a giocare interminabili partite a scacchi. La conoscenza dell'impero era nascosta nel disegno tracciato dai salti spigolosi del cavallo, dai varchi diagonali che s'aprono alle incursioni dell'alfiere, dal passo strascicato e guardingo del re e dell'umile pedone, dalle alternative inesorabili d'ogni partita. (Calvino 1992, 462)

Now Kublai Khan no longer had to send Marco Polo on distant expeditions: he kept him playing endless games of chess. Knowledge of the empire was hidden in the pattern drawn by the angular shifts of the knight, by the diagonal passages opened by the bishop's incursions, by the lumbering, cautious tread of the king and the humble pawn, by the inexorable ups and downs of every game. (Calvino 1974, 122–123)

There is a temporary suspension of Marco's embassies in favor of unending games of chess. So sure is the emperor that he will thus find ultimate knowledge of his empire in the carefully crafted moves of knight and bishop, king and pawn, that he seeks to play until there are no more possibilities left. The words "interminabili" and "inesorabili" suggest that such an end is simply impossible, an effect that might remind us of Calvino's "Il conte di Montecristo" and the endless variations of escape that inevitably result in the fortress winning. This idea of chess as a game of infinite possibilities is of course one that we have already seen in the thirteenth-century context of Jacobus de Cessolis. Indeed, the medieval Italian trope of the game as infinite bears emphasizing, since the general critical tendency is to associate Calvino and other members of the Oulipo with the more directly acknowledged medieval influence of the *ars combinatoria* of Ramon Llull.¹³ To Jacobus we might also add the mathematical problem of the doubling of the chessboard—the result of placing one grain on the first square of a chessboard and doubling the amount on each subsequent square—that comes up notably in Leonardo Fibonacci's *Liber abaci*, the work that introduces the Hindu-Arabic numeral system to the Western world. Such a link between the game and infinity finds further voice in Dante's *Paradiso* 28, when the poet seeks to describe the number of angels. Both of these lines of thinking the game, along with the medieval romance tradition that stages cross-cultural encounters through the playing of chess, are part of the medieval world of Marco Polo that Calvino evokes.

Calvino himself dwelled upon the link between chess and infinite possibilities in his 1967 essay, "Cibernetica e fantasmi" ("Cybernetics and Ghosts"). It bears mentioning, as Anna Botta has emphasized, that this essay was published before Calvino became a member of Oulipo, that group of literati and mathematicians devoted to constraint as a mode of producing new forms from the potential of everyday language (Botta 1997, 83). This essay already dwells upon the idea of literature as a combinatory game, positing a machine capable of producing literature, and quite tellingly deploys the idea of chess as a gathering of innumerable possibilities that is linked to the workings of the human mind:

¹³ Llull's incorporation of the Kabbalah into his philosophical system is notable and has drawn particular critical attention as a conversion strategy. See Hames 2000.

Sappiamo che, come nessuno giocatore di scacchi potrà vivere abbastanza a lungo per esaurire le combinazioni delle possibili mosse dei trentadue pezzi sulla scacchiera, così—dato che la nostra mente è una scacchiera in cui sono messi in gioco centinaia di miliardi di pezzi—neppure in una vita che durasse quanto l’universo s’arriverebbe a giocare tutte le partite possibili. Ma sappiamo anche che tutte le partite sono implicite nel codice generale delle partite mentali, attraverso il quale ognuno di noi formula di momento in momento i suoi pensieri, saettanti o pigri, nebulosi o cristallini. (Calvino 2015, 210)

Just as no chess player will ever live long enough to exhaust all the combinations of possible moves for the thirty-two pieces on the chessboard, so we know (given the fact that our minds are chessboards with hundreds of billions of pieces) that not even in a lifetime lasting as long as the universe would one ever manage to make all possible plays. But we also know that all these are implicit in the overall code of mental plays, according to the rules by which each of us, from one moment to the next, formulates his thoughts, swift or sluggish, cloudy or crystalline as they may be. (Calvino 1986, 8–9)

Calvino’s connection between the infinite combinations possible within the game and the infinite possibilities of the human mind is quite significant, balancing a perspective that celebrates the complexity of human thought that is captured by inexhaustible permutations of chess moves and a rules-based structure (“codice generale”) that nonetheless confers some degree of power and control upon the thinker/player. This prescient essay even explores the now quite real possibilities of an artificial intelligence capable of producing literary texts.¹⁴

This may all seem removed from the social dimension, but I quite agree with Botta’s resistance to the notion that the late Calvino is cold and unfeeling, oriented only toward scientific abstraction and combinatory games. She makes clear that “Oulipian aesthetic of formal constraints and permutational games is not a procedure divorced from social and cultural meanings. Literary ludics are not cold scientific procedures” (Botta 1997, 87). Indeed, attention to the game of chess in its various uses allows for such social and cultural meanings to assert themselves all the more. If in this essay the game is invoked to represent all the combinatory possibilities in play and thought, in line with a kind of Oulipian turn to such things as the mathematical problem of the knight’s tour across the chessboard (notably evoked in Georges Perec’s *La Vie mode d’emploi*), the human element of the game nonetheless matters both here and in the targeted evocations of the game in *Le città invisibili*. In this passage, we might note not just the characterization of thoughts that can vary from one moment to the next, but also the very descriptive and warm characterization of these thoughts as striking or slow, vague or crystal-clear. This is not so much a cold mental calculus as an appreciation of the infinite possibilities that give human cognition its very vitality.

¹⁴ It is at least worth acknowledging recent advances in neural nets such as GPT-3. See Johnson 2022. Johnson explores how GPT-3 can respond to various prompts and write essays based on input. It is no surprise at all that one of the examples Johnson dwells on is a possible essay about Italo Calvino and metafiction. Chess has, of course, long been a proving ground for artificial intelligence. We might think of the uproar when IBM supercomputer Deep Blue beat world champion Garry Kasparov in 1997.

Chess, Exactitude, and Medievalism

I would like to turn in conclusion to the last appearance of chess in *Le città invisibili* and how this moment is explicitly recalled by Calvino in the composition of his *Lezioni americane*. If playing chess has become an alternative to sending Marco out on embassies, an abstract and systematic way of understanding empire, it too proves to be empty. At the end of this frame portion, we find that the Khan cannot make the game work for him or with him: “*Il Gran Kan cercava d’immedesimarsi nel gioco: ma adesso era il perché del gioco a sfuggirgli. Il fine d’ogni partita è una vincita o una perdita: ma di cosa? Qual era la vera posta? Allo scacco matto, sotto il piede del re sbalzato via dalla mano del vincitore, resta un quadrato nero o bianco*” (Calvino 1992, 462; “*The Great Khan tried to concentrate on the game: but now it was the game’s purpose that eluded him. Each game ends in a gain or a loss: but of what? What were the true stakes? At checkmate, beneath the foot of the king, knocked aside by the winner’s hand, a black or a white square remains*” [Calvino 1974, 123]). Try as he might, the Khan cannot make himself one with the game and so the very reason for the game eludes him. Its infinite possibilities of representation and meaning are no longer enough to distract Kublai from the material conditions he is faced with: what, exactly, is won and what is lost? By stripping the game down to its essence, he is left with nothing more than a painted wooden square: “*A forza di scorporare le sue conquiste per ridurle all’essenza, Kublai era arrivato all’operazione estrema: la conquista definitiva, di cui i multiformi tesori dell’impero non erano che involucri illusori, si riduceva a un tassello di legno piallato: il nulla*” (Calvino 1992, 462; “*By disembodiment his conquests to reduce them to the essential, Kublai had arrived at the extreme operation: the definitive conquest, of which the empire’s multiform treasures were only illusory envelopes. It was reduced to a square of planned wood: nothingness*” [Calvino 1974, 123]). This extreme operation of stripping the game and his imperial conquests down to the “essenza” makes for a vast empire being reduced to “il nulla.”

Yet, what seems a failed experiment and utter loss of faith in the game turns into a wholly different mode of seeing the world. Marco’s embassies resume, and after we travel to five more cities, we come upon the last frame intervention of part eight. It picks up right where we left off. In fact, the entire section beginning with “*Il Gran Kan cercava d’immedesimarsi*” is repeated, but for one meaningful change: instead of the reduction of all of the chess-based empire to a single square of painted wood being followed by the mournful, nihilistic “il nulla” that sentence ends, and Marco responds with a stunning look to the material of the game. The wood of the chessboard, the trees from which it comes, the specific ring of the trunk that is the origin of the square that Kublai stares at, and so the Khan is immersed in nature and its human manipulation: “*Allora Marco Polo parlò: –La tua scacchiera, sire, è un intarsio di due legni: ebano e acero. Il tassello sul quale si fissa il tuo sguardo illuminato fu tagliato in uno strato del tronco che crebbe in un anno di siccità: vedi come si dispongono le fibre?*” (Calvino 1992, 469; “*Then Marco Polo spoke: ‘Your chessboard, sire, is inlaid with two woods: ebony and maple. The square on which your enlightened gaze is fixed was cut from the ring of a trunk that grew in a year of drought: you see how its fibers are arranged?’*” [Calvino 1974, 131]). This delving into the details, into the crafting and deeper history of the board and its pieces also has a precious link to language. It is in this moment that the Khan realizes, quite improbably, that Marco speaks his language fluently: “*Il Gran Kan non s’era fin’allora reso conto che lo straniero sapesse esprimersi fluentemente nella sua lingua*” (Calvino 1992, 469; “*Until then the Great Khan had not realized that the foreigner knew how to express himself fluently in his language*” [Calvino 1974, 131]). We wonder what the form of the words that we have been reading took for the Khan up to this point. Was it all gesture

and games that were translated for our benefit? What is abundantly clear is that, from the beginning to almost the very end of this novel, there is an insistent link between the game of chess and the storytelling across cultural boundaries that we have been immersed in all throughout. The final part of the novel, the very last frame intervention, takes us to the Khan's atlases, but this penultimate part and its focus on chess and language might be said to constitute an alternative conclusion, one that allows for infinite narrative possibilities with the new mode of description that it prompts.

And it is this moment that remains in Calvino's literary memory, re-emerging in poignant and personal fashion in *Lezioni americane* as he is composing the lecture on "Exactitude." A little ways into the essay, Calvino admits that it has not gone where he wanted it to: he wanted to speak of his predilection for geometry and symmetry, but instead finds himself writing about infinity and the cosmos (Calvino 2015, 686). What gets him back on track, so to speak, is attention to a binary, to the crystal and flame as two divergent modes of understanding a formative process. The crystal looks irregular and haphazard but has a highly refined structure within, where the flame looks whole and unified from without but is incessantly moving within. And this binary takes Calvino in a highly personal and self-reflexive direction in looking back at his *Le città invisibili*—the book that he characterizes in "Exactitude" as the one in which he managed to say the most—as well as his own identity as a writer.

According to Calvino, everything in the novel is double-sided: "Nelle *Città invisibili* ogni concetto e ogni valore si rivela duplice: anche l'esattezza" (Calvino 2015, 690; "In *Invisible Cities* every concept and every value—even exactitude—turns out to be double" [Calvino 2016, 87]). To illustrate this point, he goes precisely to the moment of the Khan insisting that Marco describe the cities he has visited only through chess. And he reflects upon what Kublai Khan is channeling here: "Kublai Khan a un certo momento impersona la tendenza razionalizzatrice, geometrizzante o algebrizzante dell'intelletto e riduce la conoscenza del suo impero alla combinatoria dei pezzi di scacchi d'una scacchiera" (Calvino 2015, 690; "Kublai Khan at a certain point personifies the intellect's rationalizing, geometrizing, algebrizing tendency, reducing knowledge of his empire to the permutations of pieces on a chessboard" [Calvino 2016, 87]). In this, Calvino, even as he is reversing the stereotype of the superiority of western and Cartesian rationality, is perhaps unwittingly evoking another kind of orientalist exoticism, not the fantastic stage setting that he spoke about at Columbia University in 1983, but rather a stereotypical way of associating outstanding mathematical skills with Asia and Asians.

Calvino goes on to reproduce the entire page that has the Khan seeking to make himself one with the game, to understand its "perché," and failing to do so. Then, he reproduces Marco's response that shifts our perspective to the game's materials and how they come to be sent across the world.¹⁵ Calvino's insight that is provoked by the game and his own representation of it is nothing short of career-defining: "Dal momento in cui ho scritto quella pagina mi è stato chiaro che la mia ricerca dell'esattezza si biforcava in due direzioni" (Calvino 2015, 691; "As soon as I wrote that page, it became clear to me that my pursuit of exactitude was forking in two directions" [Calvino 2016, 90–91]). He sees in himself the tendency to abstraction and the theoretical, as well as the possibility in language to represent the perceptible world in the most detailed way possible. Calvino goes on to write that he is neither one nor the other, but regularly moves between these

¹⁵ We might think of this response that focuses not just on the natural material but also its transportation as oriented toward Marco Polo's mercantile identity. See Breiner 1988. Breiner reads this difference in approach as a confrontation between emperor and merchant, or a Mongol empire founded on possession of lands and a Venetian mercantile one empowered by the circulation of goods and control of trade routes.

two poles: “Tra queste due strade io oscillo continuamente e quando sento d’aver esplorato al massimo le possibilità dell’una mi butto sull’altra e viceversa” (Calvino 2015, 691–92; “I constantly go back and forth between these two roads, and when I feel that I have fully explored the possibilities of one, I head over to the other, and vice versa” [Calvino 2016, 91]). In a sense, this is Calvino’s own definition of his writerly self, and it relies upon the exchange, the different forms of play and narrative, and the insights that the games of chess between Marco and the Khan provoked. As much as we might take some issue with Calvino’s exoticism, this insight also pushes us to appreciate how he sees himself not just in the Venetian traveler but also in the emperor of the Tartars who sought to make himself one with the game, who embodies the rational, geometric, algebraic tendency, and who seeks to find the overarching system for all that we can possess and know.

Taken in this way, Calvino’s medievalism does not necessarily remain at the superficial level of privileging the literary over the historical. Rather, the exchange and insight provoked by the game of chess give us a far richer possibility. We have seen chess stand in for language from the very beginning of *Le città invisibili*, giving Marco’s pantomimed performance a more ludic and sophisticated dimension. As we move through the novel, the language of the game resonates with its medieval history of boundary crossings, from its origin story in the *Shahnameh* as an intelligence test and alternative to armed conflict between India and Persia, to its link to the frame-tale narrative, to the very impulse to tell stories, as seen in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. Finally, in its ability to evoke both sides of Calvino’s authorial identity, his tendency toward abstraction as well as his faith in language to render the most minute details of reality, the game between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan permits another sort of medievalism to emerge in which the author creates the condition through which he can see himself reflected in both sides of a cultural divide, or rather, both sides of the chessboard.

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