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Lightness and the Future of Antiquity in *Lezioni americane*[1]

Laura Jansen

> Siamo nel 1985: quindici anni appena ci separano dall'inizio d'un nuovo millennio. Per ora non mi pare che l'approssimarsi di questa data risvegli alcuna emozione particolare. Comunque non sono qui per parlare di futurologia, ma di letteratura. Il millennio che sta per chiudersi ha visto nascere ed espandersi le lingue moderne dell'Occidente e le letterature che di queste lingue hanno esplorato le possibilità espressive e cognitive e immaginative. È stato anche il millennio del libro, in quanto ha visto l'oggetto-libro prendere la forma che ci è familiare. Forse il segno che il millennio sta per chiudersi è la frequenza con cui ci si interroga sulla sorte della letteratura e del libro nell'era tecnologica cosiddetta postindustriale. Non mi sento d'avventurarmi in questo tipo di previsioni. La mia fiducia nel futuro della letteratura consiste nel sapere che ci sono cose che solo la letteratura può dare coi suoi mezzi specifici. Vorrei dunque dedicare queste mie conferenze ad alcuni valori o qualità o specificità della letteratura che mi stanno particolarmente a cuore, cercando di situarle nella prospettiva del nuovo millennio.
>
> Italo Calvino, *Lezioni americane*[2]

So Calvino leads into his first memo on "lightness," a concept I want to explore in relation to his vision of Greco-Roman antiquity as part of the literatures of the future. An important consideration for this theme is the conjunction of Calvino's *leggerezza*, broadly meaning "lightness" in English, and his preoccupation in this preface with the "literature of the future," which, for us, is the literature of around now. How does Calvino approach this conjunction when it comes to his regard for, principally, two classical authors—Lucretius and Ovid[3]—and his thinking about how, and why, their ancient tradition still speaks to our present moment?

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[1] This article is based on a keynote lecture entitled "Lightness and the Future of Antiquity," delivered at the "Lightness, Quickness, Multiplicity: Three Memos for Classicists" conference at Humboldt University, Berlin, in April 2022. I would like to extend my gratitude to the conference organizers and audience for their generous feedback. I am also grateful to the editors, Professors Anna Botta and Lucia Re, and to the anonymous readers for their positive feedback and encouragement. The research undertaken for this article has been generously supported by the British Academy.

[2] "It's 1985: just fifteen years separate us from the beginning of a new millennium. For now, the approach of this date does not stir any particular emotion. In any case, I am here to speak not of futurology but of literature. The millennium that is winding down has seen the birth and spread of the modern languages of the West and the literatures that have explored the expressive, cognitive, and imaginative possibilities of these languages. It was also the millennium of the book—in that it saw the book-object take the form we know it by today. Perhaps one sign that the millennium is winding down is the frequency with which the fate of literature and the book in the so-called postindustrial age is being questioned. I'm not inclined to weigh in on such matters. My faith in the future of literature rests on the knowledge that there are things that only literature, with its particular capacities, can give us. I would like then to devote these talks of mine to certain values or qualities or peculiarities of literature that are especially close to my heart, in an effort to situate them with a view to the new millennium" (Calvino 2016, 2–3).

[3] Calvino's classical engagements include Homer, Xenophon, and Pliny the Elder, though notably not Virgil, as well as various examples of material culture, such as the Trajan Column and the Colosseum. Here, I focus on Lucretius and Ovid and, partially, on Homer in section three.

This prompts further questions. How does he map out his forward-looking project in the 1980s, while witnessing ongoing shifts in the history of book culture and the increasingly globalizing context of the politics of Western literature, alongside advances in information technology and cybernetics, and the beginnings of an expansion of the virtual world? What part might his memo play in our thinking about Mediterranean antiquity, its traditions, and its competing epistemologies, not just as we move beyond the first quarter of the current century, but as we try to imagine our own time advancing and adapting to a new set of changes and circumstances? What literary values will be worth preserving and why in, say, 2085, as the twenty-first century also winds down and our successors look into the future of literature to which the classics might still belong?

In this piece, I want to bring these larger questions to bear as I discuss Calvino's commitment to ancient Greco-Roman lightness in his essay and artistic praxis. I will approach this theme from a variety of perspectives that put Calvino's ideas on the future of classical literature in dialogue with the visual and installation arts, ecocriticism, and critical theory. My aim will not be to ponder whether Calvino was accurate or not in envisaging classical lightness as a standing literary value in our millennium. For reasons that will become apparent, this would be to miss the point of his message about Lucretius and Ovid. Instead, I want to draw attention to the way he stages a future for these authors' tradition, and how this process serves to mobilize the classical past at the time of writing, as he establishes the conditions for its prospective movement into the new millennium. The Mondadori edition of Calvino's essays includes an *esordio* or introduction to the Norton Lectures that was not included in the final collection but supports my point: "Le mie riflessioni [sulla letteratura e sulle questioni che riguardano la letteratura] mi hanno sempre portato a considerare […] il passato in funzione del futuro" (Calvino, 1995, 2958; "My thinking [on literature and questions concerning literature] has always led me to consider [...] the past as a function of the future").[4] "Il passato in funzione del futuro" (literally, "the past as a function of the future"): one could identify this as an expression of "futurity." Neither a form of futurism nor of utopia, futurity refers to a reconceptualization of history that prompts us to act in the present to establish the conditions for our future. In this sense, futurity "marks the potential of literature to […] mak[e] sense of what has occurred while imagining [what] we may become" (Eshel 2013, 5). In what follows, I focus on this understanding of the future in Calvino's memo, above all as a creative and intellectual space in which he sets out to project onto our time the advent of the classical past as a light form. To be sure, any line of questioning about this sense of the future (such as that which I pose above) cannot but remain conjectural. Calvino himself stresses this in the preface to the collection, stating that his memos are not about "futurology." Instead, he goes on to speak about "un simbolo augurale" (Calvino, 1995, 639; "an auspicious sign" [Calvino 2016, 12]), which he detects in a personal catalogue of classical and Western canonical literatures, many of them of a scientific tenor, stretching across two millennia. Indeed, what lies ahead of his memos is not exactly a foreseeable phenomenon, but rather the kind of future Jacques Derrida associated with the notion of *l'avenir* ("[that which is] to come"): "In general, I try to distinguish between what one calls the future and 'l'avenir.' […] There's a future that is predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable. But there is a future, l'avenir ('to come'), which refers to [an] arrival [that] is totally unexpected. For me, that is the real future. That which is totally unpredictable" (*Derrida* 2002). Calvino would see points of contact with Derrida's observation. Take his memo on "Lightness." This is not a program (or even a manifesto) but an intuition of something "to come," which, like Derrida's *avenir*, remains something unpredictable yet still plausible, i.e., Calvino would insist that it is not "futurology." The very end of the memo underscores this sense of the future, with lightness moving forward

[4] Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

to the realm of the speculation and the unknown. The essay closes with Kafka's "The Bucket Rider" (1917), an open-ended narrative in which Kafka portrays a man who ends up flying away into the Icy Mountains with a bucket "zu leicht" and "so leer" (Kafka 1996, 444; "too light" and "so empty"). The *avenir* of Calvino's lightness, I contend, is also like these Icy Mountains, a fuzzy metaphorical landscape that the author renders open to the reader's cognition and forward-looking imagination.[5]

Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (*DRN*), a poem on atomic motion and combination, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, on the myth-history of change from Chaos to the power of Augustan Rome, are two models propelling this speculative sense of the future of lightness; and not only in the essayistic narratives of *Six Memos*. One could also link the motif to *Le città invisibili* (1972, *Invisible Cities*), in which lightness substantiates Calvino's hyper-vision of Venice across the globe and deep temporalities. In this novel, Calvino maps out the *avenir* of a "light" classical tradition, as he draws connections between Greco-Roman cityscapes, both mythical and historical, and the makings of a topography of modern California, which does not yet exist. As an ensemble, both the essay and the hyper-novel articulate curious epistemologies of antiquity's future of lightness; they stage the movement of a highly hybrid tradition, one that Calvino elsewhere charts more broadly across a deep history spanning the cosmic past and the increasingly combinable, technological character of the literatures of the future.[6] But Calvino's alternative history of the *avenir* of antiquity as a hybrid form is not simply an exercise of his speculative imaginary. On the contrary, it speaks eloquently, in Bourdieu's terms, to the field of cultural, scientific, and technological production towards the end of the twentieth century, in which vestiges of older literatures, like those of Greco-Roman classics, are put to the test in an ever-changing world. Ultimately, one could say that Calvino's commitment to the future of antiquity is rooted in the continuity of certain values, like lightness,[7] which he sees as contributing to literature's *avenir*. As we shall see, his proposal for the next millennium is the continuation of a classical tradition of writing literature beyond the authorial self and, more specifically, beyond the Anthropocene, to cast light on the world at large and give it a voice. Calvino's combinatorial vision, as well as the "architecture of lightness" (Modena 2011) he designs for his memo and *Le città invisibili*, are key strategies in this presentation.

Antiquity's Avenir and the Ethics of Combination

> La letteratura è sì gioco combinatorio.
> (Calvino, 1995, 221)[8]

> Magari fosse possibile un'opera concepita al di fuori del *self*, un'opera che si permettesse d'uscire dalla prospettiva limitata d'un io individuale, non solo per entrare in altri io simili al nostro, ma per far parlare ciò che non ha parola, l'uccello che si posa sulla grondaia, l'albero in primavera et l'albero in autunno, la pietra, il cemento, la plastica...

[5] In this sense, Calvino's speculative closing has strong points of contact with the "plural category" of speculative fiction, particularly as is "a mode of thought-experimenting that embraces an open-ended vision of the real." See Oziewicz 2017, 4.

[6] For this broader narrative in Calvino's classicism, see Jansen forthcoming 2024.

[7] While classical texts are mentioned to a lesser extent across *Six Memos*, it is in "Lightness" (and "Multiplicity," also discussed here) where Calvino outlines his key narrative of Lucretius and Ovid as part of the literatures of the future.

[8] Literature is a combinatorial game" (Calvino,1997b, 9).

(Calvino, 1995, 733)[9]

In his first memo, the concept of lightness arguably does not frame Calvino's speculative vision of antiquity's future; rather, it is the combinatorial strategies that he employs to articulate this vision that draw attention to the significance of Lucretian and Ovidian lightness in the first place. The notion of combinatorics has two main dimensions in Calvino's thought. On a macro level, it refers to merging of the two major branches of knowledge operating at the heart of his artistic vision: literature and science. In *Six Memos* and, *mutatis mutandis*, his entire fictional and essayistic oeuvre, Calvino establishes physics, chemistry, geometry, mathematics, information technology, cybernetics, and the natural sciences as allies of literature, and as bodies of knowledge shaping his artistic view of the world as it is and could potentially be, with all its interweaving rhythms and connectivities. On the micro-level, by contrast, the concept of combinatorics becomes more closely associated with the idea of literature being built out of discrete recombinable components, a process that has machine-like, systemic aspects (e.g., Calvino's discussion of literature and the alphabet, computer programs, the varying formations of cities, a point to which I will return below). His idea of combinatorics thus certainly spans the broad combination of science and humanities. Yet this main merging of fields of knowledge, while important for the large-scale aspects of his literary thought, is not the primary meaning of the term "combinatorial" in my reading, especially when I discuss Calvino's ideas about controlling the authorial ego in the service of forward-looking ethical literatures.

More broadly, Calvino's brand of combinatorial poetics draws significantly from developments in Calvino's own world, especially contemporary intellectual ideas and technologies. In *Mapping Complexity* (2005), Kirstin Pilz explores the author's combinatorial thought in the context of scientific models and methods, from modernity to postmodernity, and the ways these inform and/or are contemporaneous with his narratives. A key parallel is that of French philosopher Edgar Morin's paradigm of *la pensée complexe*, which posits that no branch of knowledge or discipline operates in isolation, but that each is necessarily part of a dialogic network of ideas, superimposing rational and imaginary elements (Morin 1982). Calvino's combinatorial vision and designs subscribe to this model of relationality, with speculative fiction and scientific ideas edifying the transformative character of his "imaginary real" world (Rushdie 2006). His essays on literature showcase further combinatorial influences. One crucial referent is Galileo, whose "Book of Nature" Calvino reads as "the alphabet [as] world" (1991, 83–90) and "a combinatorial system capable of representing everything in the universe" (1983, unpaginated). Equally influential is Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges, who receives a full discussion towards the end of "Italiani, vi esorto ai classici" ("Why Read the Classics?"), published posthumously in 1991,[10] and whose classicism emerges at the crossroads of cosmology and metaphysics, a combination that in Borges' oeuvre foreshadows the *avenir* of the World Wide Web (Jansen 2018; 2020a and b; 2023). Calvino's entry in 1973 to the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* (Oulipo) group in Paris marks a turning point in his combinatorial practice, with the mathematical poems and novels of Raymond Queneau and Georges Perec speaking closely to an increasing interest in the interplay of mathematic constraint and artistic transformation visible in his own work.[11]

[9] "[W]hat if it were possible for a work to be conceived beyond the self, a work that allowed us to escape the limited perspective of the individual ego, not only in order to enter other similar selves, but to give voice to that which cannot speak?" (Calvino, 2016, 151).

[10] Although the essay was first published in Calvino's lifetime as "Italiani, vi esorto ai classici," in *L'Espresso*, June 28, 1981, 58–68.

[11] A move which some Italian critics condemn, not without a degree of outmoded chauvinism, as a "betrayal of his "italianità" (Botta 1997). For Calvino and the Oulipo, see Duncan 2012 and 2019.

Indeed, for Calvino, "literature is a combinatorial game." But it is also a game closely aligned with the ethical dimensions that direct his writings, especially those of a speculative inflection and concerned with producing literature beyond the limitations of the authorial ego. Beginning with his first novel, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1947, *The Path to the Nest of Spiders*), Calvino exhibited an ethics of writing that would go on to inform not just his aesthetics but also the politically engaged, neorealist narratives he produced during the postwar period (Re 1990 and 1998), as well as "intense preoccupation with the role of the intellectual" and on the irreducible ethical and political dimension of literature" (Bolongaro 2003, 6–7). The interplay of nature and literature is equally central to Calvino's ethical poetics, especially when it comes to his engagement with the naturalist philosophy of the late Renaissance and the way in which it offers an escape from anthropocentrism (Porro 2007, 253–82). Recent studies further stress the ethically informed, forward-looking epistemologies of the environment that emerge as part of Calvino's combinatorial vision. Arguably most poignant is Calvino's use of fiction to point to crises in the animal world. In *Calvino's Animals* (2021), Serenella Iovino charts the author's reparative narratives of animals in a world under siege, as he gives a voice to the environmental drama of "Anthropocene animals" perpetually trapped in industrial farms, zoos, and labs. Calvino's literary thought has even been regarded as an "ethical imperative" when it comes to "environmental impact as it relates to contemporary media, dissemination, and indeed everyday life" (Wright 2020, 653). In fact, "what is literature good for?"[12] could well be an ethical question framing the *Lezioni americane* and their concern with the *avenir* of a combinatorial tradition dedicated to writing beyond the self for the just advancement of society.

For Calvino, this ethical tradition includes Lucretius and Ovid. Both poets represent an "old thread" in his combinatorial thought (2016, 8), not just in "Lightness," which I discuss in section ii, but also at the very closing of "Multiplicity," the last memo in the extant collection:

> Magari fosse possibile un'opera [combinatoria] concepita al di fuori del *self*, un'opera che si permettesse d'uscire dalla prospettiva limitata d'un io individuale, non solo per entrare in altri io simili al nostro, ma per far parlare ciò che non ha parola, l'uccello che si posa sulla grondaia, l'albero in primavera et l'albero in autunno, la pietra, il cemento, la plastica [...] Non era forse questo il punto d'arrivo cui tendeva Ovidio nel raccontare la continuità delle forme, il punto d'arrivo cui tendeva Lucrezio nell'identificarsi con la natura comune a tutte le cose? (Calvino, 1995, 733)
>
> [W]hat if it were possible for a [combinatorial] work to be conceived beyond the self, a work that allowed us to escape the limited perspective of the individual ego, not only in order to enter other similar selves, but to give voice to that which cannot speak—the bird perched on the gutter, the tree in spring and the tree in autumn, stone, cement, plastic [...]. Wasn't this, perhaps, where Ovid was going when he described the continuity of forms, where Lucretius was going when he identified himself with the nature that all things have in common? (Calvino 2016, 151)

In this passage, Calvino envisages multiplicity yet another *avenir* for the combinatorial literatures of the next millennium. Crucially, he frames this proposal with a "what if" premise, of the kind used to plot alternative futures in branches of speculative fiction (Oziewicz 2017).

[12] Explored in several essays in *The Uses of Literature*, also published as *The Literature Machine.* For Calvino's ongoing rethinking of the question of the value of literature in the light of shifting historical and cultural circumstances, see Re 1998 who charts this question across the author's equally shifting oeuvre.

The Lucretian and Ovidian projects represent in great part the potential of that "what if?" for his memos—the *avenir* of ethical, altruistic literatures which, for example, give a voice to the multiple, combinable, silent world of the non-human, as he suggests Ovid's and Lucretius' poems do. "Wasn't this, perhaps, where [they were] going?" ("il punto d'arrivo cui tendeva?)." For Calvino, this could well be Lucretius' and Ovid's legacy: the creation of combinatorial poems that, amongst other things, track alternative histories of non-human environments and ecosystems, as societies continue to grapple with the dramatic, harmful impact of the egocentric outlooks and activities of humankind. Their poetic projects advance these ideas by combining the perspectives of ancient philosophies of science (Epicurus and Pythagoras, respectively) with a poetic vision that gives the lightest things in the physical world (atoms), and the continuity of the forms constituting that world (change), a chance to speak. It is through this sense of relationality with the world at large, beyond the sphere of human endeavor and needs, that both ancient poets, as Calvino plots them, articulate ethical concerns at the heart of their environmental imagination worth preserving for the future.

At this juncture, one could question the interpretative assumptions that underpin Calvino's commitment to these two classical poets. How does the notion of "value" operate as an ethical connector between ancient Roman and modern Western combinatorial traditions, including Calvino's own? On the surface, Calvino's commitment to Lucretius and Ovid seems to point to a narrative of classical exceptionalism; in connecting ancient materialisms and the phenomena of change to modern Western (white) culture, he allows that culture to stage its own exceptionalism in turn. Furthermore, in the case of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Calvino's emphasis on the poem's ethical significance as altruistic poetry can serve to occlude the fact that the Ovidian ethics of writing is not born (at least primarily) out of respect for non-human life, not as far as the poem's overall ambitions are concerned; it would be more accurate to say that Ovid writes about anthropocentric preoccupations, such as human evolution, the interplay of gods and mortals, the rise of imperial power, and even "the fear of anthropophagy."[13] Yet, Calvino's intellectual position is more nuanced than this reading allows. Throughout his career, he constantly revised the question of literature and its uses in the light of emerging political and cultural changes in Italy and internationally (Re 1998). In his 1976 essay on "Usi politici giusti e sbagliati della letteratura" ("Right and Wrong Uses of Literature"), he tackles this issue with pressing directness:

> [O]ggi è impossibile a chiunque sentirsi innocente, se in qualsiasi cosa che uno fa o dice possiamo scoprire una motivazione segreta, quella dell'uomo bianco, o del maschio, o del fruitore d'una certa rendita, o dell'a appartenente a un dato sistema economico, o di chi soffre d'un certo complesso nevrotico, questo non dovrebbe portarci a un seno di colpa universale né a un universale atteggiamento d'accusa. (Calvino 1995, 360)
>
> It is impossible today for anyone to feel innocent, if in whatever we do or say we can discover a hidden motive—that of a white man, or a male, or the possessor of a certain income, or a member of a given economic system […]—this should not induce in us either a universal sense of guilt or an attitude of universal accusation. (Calvino 1997b, 84)

[13] On the poem's paradoxical anthropocentrism, see Sissa 2019, 181–82: "The poem is posthuman, insofar as a metamorphic fluidity undermines the idea that humans might hold a specific and special place, among, and above, living beings. The poem is paradoxically anthropocentric, insofar as *our* terror of chewing, ingesting, and digesting *human* flesh, swollen with human blood, is the principle that orders its taxonomy."

This assertion also matters in determining how the Greco-Roman classical tradition operates as a frame of reference for Calvino, as well as how he situates his own interpretation of their prospective future. In his essay "Per chi si scrive? (Lo scaffale ipotetico)" ("Whom do you write for? Or The Hypothetical Bookshelf"),[14] in which he traces a history of the "Italian bookshelf" from the postwar moment of politically engaged authorships to his present, Calvino raises the question of inherent literature, stating that his interest is in challenging "la scala dei valori e il codice dei significati stabiliti" (1995, 200; "the established scale of values and code of meanings" [1997b, 70]). For him, the "ideal bookshelf" is an "improbable shelf," one that combines books not usually put side by side. The scale of values and codes that make up this tradition emerge from a juxtaposition of literatures that can "produrre scosse electtriche, corti circuiti" (1995, 200; "produce electric shocks, short circuits" [1997b, 70]). If there is a "lineage" to be observed in his plotting of the Lucretian and Ovidian combinatorial traditions in the *Lezioni americane*, this relates to his proposition that literatures connect through a "high voltage" process, as it were. The metaphor powerfully conveys his understanding of tradition as the product of random synergies, rather than the notion of past literary cultures setting epistemic standards to be blindly observed by subsequent traditions: "ora il punto di partenza non è più nell'allaccio a una tradizione ma nei problemi aperti: il quadro di riferimento non è più la compatibilità con un sistema collaudato ma lo stato della questione su scala mondiale" (1995, 201; "We no longer start by trying to link up with a tradition, but with open questions; the frame of reference is no longer compatibility with a well-proved system, but the state of things on a worldwide scale" [Calvino 1997b, 72]). This broadening of the frame of reference to a "worldwide scale" involves the participation of disciplines "dell'analisi e della dissezione"; "of analysis and dissection" that are "in grado di smontare il fatto letterario nei suoi elementi primi e le sue motivazioni"; "capable of breaking down […] literature into its primary elements and motivations"), amongst which Calvino cites "linguistica, teoria dell'informazione, filosofia analitica, sociologia, antropologia, un rinnovato uso della psicoanalisi, un rinnovato uso del marxismo" ("linguistics, information theory, analytical philosophy, sociology, anthropology, a new use of psychoanalysis, a new use of Marxism" 1995, 201; and 1997b, 72) all of which speak to his combinatorial concerns in the late 1960s.[15]

A close look at Calvino's preface to the *Lezioni americane* (cited above) underscores this position, especially in terms of the combinatorial scrutiny with which Calvino will track the value of lightness, with the notion of "value" narrowed down to semantic precision: "values or qualities or peculiarities" ("valori o qualità o specificità"). One already finds this kind of specificity in "Cibernetica e fantasmi" (1967, "Cybernetics and Ghosts"), a lecture exploring another kind of speculative future—the "poet as machine," a motif that speaks to other kinds of relationality in his oeuvre, most pointedly, his interest in "transtechnologies" during his Oulipo period (Doove 2014). In this lecture, Calvino situates his combinatorial value-system within contemporary developments in the study of discrete mathematics, which explores ways of computing the motion and effect of small particles and is foundational to computer science:[16]

[14] First delivered in Rome in 1967 for a symposium on "For Whom Do We Write a Novel? For Whom Do We Write a Poem?" and later included in *The Literature Machine*.

[15] Pilz situates these concerns at a pivotal moment in Calvino's artistic thought, with his methods and models shifting gradually from, "Marxism and structuralism, to models of openness and deconstruction, such as postmodernism and post-structuralism" (2005a, 79). See also Pilz 2005b, re-evaluating the trajectories of this shift from the perspective of a (post)modernity.

[16] On Calvino and the computer as metaphor for his work, see Usher 1995. On Calvino and the advent of computer science, see Pilz 2005b, 206: "Calvino did not live to see the proliferation of computer technology [...], although his hypernovels clearly anticipate similar forms of textuality, and were inspired by the flowering of information science and cybernetics."

> Nel mondo nei suoi vari aspetti viene visto sempre più *discreto* e non come *continuo*. Impiego il termine "*discreto*" nel senso che ha in matematica: quantità "discreta" cioè che si compone di parti separate […] Di fronte alla vertigine dell'innumerevole, dell'inclassificabile, del continuo, mi sento rassicurato dal finito, dal sistematizzato, dal discreto. (Calvino, 1995, 209, 217)
>
> The world in its various aspects is increasingly looked upon as discrete rather than continuous. I am using the term "discrete" in the sense it bears in mathematics, a discrete quantity being one made up of separate parts […] Faced with the vertigo of what is countless, unclassifiable, in a state of flux, I feel reassured by what is finite, "discrete," and reduced to a system. (Calvino 1997b, 11–20)

In "Lightness," Calvino envisages this epistemic value in terms of discreteness; that is, as a "discrete" message of a long combinatorial tradition whose ethical sense of relationality with the world at large bears the promise of a speculative *avenir*. This message is ultimately articulated in the manner of Lucretius, but also that of Kafka, the two authors framing the memo at the beginning and end.

Lightness: Speculative Ends After Lucretius and Kafka

In his first memo, one could arguably sum up Calvino's discussion of lightness as a series of definitions and redefinitions of the term brought to bear by his combinatorial vision. He adopts this strategy throughout the essay to comment on the discrete particularities that, in his view, define lightness as a prospective quality for literature's future. This sense of the future (also advanced in *Invisible Cities* discussed in section iii) is speculative. The speculative in fictional and essayistic writing is notoriously resistant to definition. Understandings of the concept will depend on matters of use and classification (Gill 2013, 71–85), historically-located meanings (Oziewicz 2017, 1–27), and the interplay of fiction, future thinking, and philosophical analysis (de Smedt and de Cruz 2015, 1–20), amongst others. For my purposes, I use "speculative" to signal the ways Calvino stages a conjectural future for the circulation of antiquity, one that he constructs at the combinatorial intersections of fiction and reality.

In "Lightness," Calvino begins by drawing a distinction between lightness as frivolity and lightness as thoughtfulness, with thoughtfulness giving his reading semantic precision: "esiste una leggerezza della pensosità, così come tutti sappiamo che esiste una leggerezza della frivolezza; anzi; la leggerezza pensosa può far aparire la frivolezza come pesante e opaca" (Calvino, 1995, 638; "[T]here is a lightness that is thoughtful and that is different from the frivolous lightness we all know. Indeed, thoughtful lightness can make frivolity seem heavy and opaque" [2016, 12]). Above all, lightness is for Calvino the *removal of weight*, a principle that shapes his own method of composition across his oeuvre: "la mia operazione è stata il più delle volte una sottrazione di peso; ho cercato di togliere peso ora alle figure umana (Calvino, 1995, 631; "My method has entailed, more often than not, the subtraction of weight. I have tried to remove weight from human figures, from celestial bodies, from cities. Above all I have tried to remove weight from the structure of the story and from language" [2016, 3]). Later in the essay, somewhere between Guido Cavalcanti and Paul Valéry, lightness takes a further semantic turn, one that connects weightlessness with the notion of levitation: "La leggerezza per me si associa con la precisione e la determinazione, non con la vaghezza e l'abbandono al caso. Paul Valéry ha detto: 'Il faut être léger comme l'oiseau'" (1995, 643); "Lightness for me is related to precision and definition, not to the hazy and haphazard. Paul Valéry said, 'One must be light like the bird, not like the feather'" [2016, 18–19]). This is one of the many

examples that speak to Calvino's combinatorial poetics in the manner I outlined above. Vivid imagery and a simile from the natural world here illustrate a scientifically "precise" yet simultaneously creative point that gives a voice to the voiceless: we are asked to visualize Valéry's birds, whose flying represents not just the removal of weight but also *levitation*—the process by which these creatures are held aloft from the ground and move dynamically through the air. Calvino now introduces Lucretius' *DRN*, a poem concerning a form of lightness that could even be thought of as an articulation of "nothingness": "La poesia dell'invisibile, la poesia delle infinite potenzialità imprevedibili," Calvino writes of *De rerum natura*, "così come la poesia del nulla nascono da un poeta che non ha dubbi sulla fisicità del mondo." (1995, 637; ["a poetry of the invisible, a poetry of infinitely unexpected possibilities, just like a poetry of nothingness, are born from a poet who had no doubts on the physical reality of the world." (2016, 9–10)]. It takes a combinatorial thinker like Calvino to cast the *DRN* with such *lightness*, in the "discrete" sense traced thus far, as well as through the "worldwide-scale" relationality (1997b, 72) that informs that ancient poem. One could even argue that Calvino approaches Lucretius through a "physics of reading" (Jansen 2018 and 2020): here, the "weightless particles" of Lucretius' atoms recall Valéry's light birds; though we cannot, in fact, perceive these atoms, their scientific logic brings new light to the simile. From this perspective, Lucretius' atoms become the lightest of circulating beings, invisible agents of "infinite possibilities"—that is, *combinations*—substantiating a hidden story of the "nothingness" that silently informs the solidity of all tangible things in our world. The room in which we find ourselves, the person next to us, the pen we are holding—all are supported by the silent motion of lightness.

At this juncture of the essay, one finds a telling point of contact between Calvino and Lucretius: their readings of atoms and lightness are not just combinatorial, but also gesture towards their own speculative ends. In Lucretius, the lightness of atoms becomes a didactic message that bifurcates into at least two main routes of interpretation towards the end of the sixth book of *DRN*, which focuses on the plague of Athens, the epidemic that devastated the city-state during the second year of the Peloponnesian War (430 BC). At this narrative endpoint, Lucretius implicitly urges his readers to make an educated ethical choice based on the philosophy of science that he has expounded across his poem: how does one face the prospect of death in the event of a plague? This will depend on whether readers believe in the Olympian gods, whose intervention in human affairs is systematically refuted in *DRN* 3 (lines 830–end), but whose putative ability to inflict punishment in the afterlife bears heavily on the reader's consciousness. Alternatively, the reader can trust Lucretius' scientific and ethical message concerning the "lightness" that governs and rationally explains the material world, as proposed by Epicurean physics: when we die, we become once more as light as the atoms that gave us life in the first place, and no god is the executer of this plan.[17] Lucretius' readers, then, must decide which value-system they would prefer to guide their future: the "heavy" myths of religion (depicted as the "in terris oppressa gravi sub religione" [1.62-3; "weight of superstition on earth"]) and its solid tradition in the late Roman Republic, or the "lightness" conveyed by Epicurean scientific discovery and teachings? Indeed, the future of Lucretian lightness turns out to be another kind of *avenir*—a leap of faith, as it were, regarding the value that his message has for future generations of Romans. In his preface, Calvino also articulates the *avenir* of literary lightness in terms of "faith" or, also possibly, with *fiducia* meaning "confidence" ("La mia fiducia nel futuro della letteratura" ["My faith/ confidence in the future of literature"]). One could argue that his is merely a manner of speaking. Yet this is, after all, the message that the preface imparts to those who are about to read the memos (if a linear mode of reading is

[17] The opening of the *DRN* has Venus, but this mythological figure acts as a metonym for Lucretius' readers, before the poet begins to draw parallels between the Venus as mother of Rome and *natura physica*.

followed); here, readers are left to speculate about whether lightness, with its "particular capacity" as a discrete, scientifically-oriented measure, is the ethical value that will potentially shape the future of literature, and if so, how it will achieve this. Both Lucretius and Calvino thus implicitly unfold forward-looking narratives of lightness whose future applicability is speculative, and which assume that readers have the freedom to choose a future path of interpretation.[18]

The motif of a scientifically inflected understanding of lightness for the future furthermore touches on the activity of creative composition. Here Ovid joins Lucretius, his *Metamorphoses* offering an equally transformative vision:

> Tanto in Lucrezio quanto in Ovidio la leggerezza è un modo di vedere il mondo che si fonda sulla filosofia e sulla scienza: le dottrine di Epicuro per Lucrezio, le dottrine di Pitagora per Ovidio (un Pitagora che, come Ovidio ce lo presenta, somiglia molto a Budda). Ma in entrambi i casi la leggerezza è qualcosa che si crea nella scrittura, con i mezzi linguistici che sono quelli del poeta, indipendentemente dalla dottrina del filosofo che il poeta dichiara di voler seguire. (Calvino, 1995, 638)
>
> For both Lucretius and Ovid, lightness is a way of seeing the world based on philosophy and science—on the doctrines of Epicurus for Lucretius, on the doctrines of Pythagoras for Ovid (a Pythagoras who, as Ovid depicts him, closely resembles Buddha). In both cases, however, this lightness is something created in the writing, using the linguistic tools of the poet, independent of whatever philosophical doctrine the poet claims to be following. (Calvino 2016, 11)

Calvino situates himself in line with this Ovidian (and Lucretian) creative tradition, combining science and myth, with his methodological strategies presented as analogous to those of the aerodynamic power of Perseus, a mythical figure whose aerial mobility is at the center of Ovid's treatment of the myth in *Metamorphoses* books 4 and 5:[19]

> Nei momenti in cui il regno dell'umano mi sembra condannato alla pesantezza, penso che dovrei volare come Perseo in un altro spazio. Non sto parlando di fughe nel sogno o nell'irrazionale. Voglio dire che devo cambiare il mio approccio, devo guardare il mondo con un'altra ottica, un'altra logica, altri metodi di conoscenza e di verifica. (Calvino, 1995, 635)
>
> When the human realm seems doomed to heaviness, I feel the need to fly like Perseus into some other space. I am not talking about escaping into dreams or into the irrational. I mean that I feel the need to change my approach, to look at the world from a different angle, with different logic, different methods of knowing and proving. (Calvino 2016, 8)

This aerodynamic methodology that combines logic and the imagination abounds on Calvino's page. It informs his entire strategy of articulating the physical world and its multiple

[18] Indeed, for Lucretius this involves the *clinamen* or swerve, and for Calvino the free will that enacts change such social, scientific, and cultural revolutions. See Pilz 2005a ,137–42.

[19] A motif that also recalls the flights of mind of ancient scientific philosophers like Epicurus in *DRN* 1.62–79.

phenomena through the value of lightness. Take, for instance, his observation in the memo on the psychological and physiological underpinnings of melancholia: "la melanconia è la tristezza diventata leggera" (1995, 647; "sadness that has become light" [2016, 23]). It is as if heavy emotions here become subject to a subtle, regulating mechanism of subtraction that explains the experience of less palpable human feelings. In "Lightness," the combinatorial reading of phenomena, like the emotions, also informs a pivotal passage on the interaction of soft- and hardware in late twentieth-century computer science. This begins with the technological revolution that marks the end and beginning of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, respectively. The passage presents this process as historical fact, but hints at a speculative future: the advent of a technological revolution that precipitates the *avenir* of a new world order. That is, lightness in the form of "bits of information" that now rule over "heavy machines":

> Poi, l'informatica. È vero che il software non potrebbe esercitare i poteri della sua leggerezza se non mediante la pesantezza del hardware; ma è il software che comanda, che agisce sul mondo esterno e sulle macchine, le quali esistono solo in funzione del software, si evolvono in modo d'elaborare programmi sempre più complessi. La seconda rivoluzione industriale non si presenta come la prima con immagini schiaccianti quali presse di laminatoi o colate d'acciaio, ma come i bits d'un flusso d'informazione che corre sui circuiti sotto forma d'impulsi elettronici. Le macchine di ferro ci sono sempre, ma obbediscono ai bits senza peso. (Calvino, 1995, 635)
>
> And then there are computers. It's true that software cannot exert the power of its lightness except through the heaviness of hardware, but it's the software that's in charge, acting on the outside world and on machines that exist solely as functions of their software and that evolve in order to run ever-more-complex programs. The second industrial revolution doesn't present us, as the first did, with overwhelming images of rolling mills or molten steel, but rather *with bits of information that flow* [emphasis added], as electrical impulses, through circuits. We still have machines made of steel, but they now obey bits that are weightless. (Calvino 2016, 8)

"*Bits of information that flow as electrical currents, and which are ultimately the makers of complex programs*." We are already in Calvino's own technological future, one that gives the reader even more certainty or precision regarding the part lightness plays in his memo, now soon coming to an end. The motif of information-bits, accounting for the smallest unit of data that a computer can process and store, is here analogous to the phenomenon of the alphabet, light characters or "bits" containing data that flow through the combinatorial activity of writing words on the page. Authors like Calvino, who pursue their writing like a Perseus, removing weight from the world and adopting a mode of composition that includes logic as much as the ethical imagination, know how to manage letters as flowing bits in a transformative way. Lucretius also knew this writing game well, and Calvino characterizes the poet's key contribution (along with those of Galileo and Cyrano, in particular) as a seminal intervention in the specific tradition of lightness for the future that Calvino himself unfolds in his *Lezioni americane*:

> Poi c'è il filo della scrittura come metafora della sostanza pulviscolare del mondo: già per Lucrezio le lettere erano atomi in continuo movimento che con le loro permutazioni creavano le parole e i suoni più diversi; idea che fu ripresa

> da una lunga tradizione di pensatori per cui i segreti del mondo erano contenuti nella combinatoria dei segni della scrittura. (Calvino, 1995, 652–53)
>
> Then there's the thread about writing as metaphor for the particulate substance of the world: already for Lucretius letters were atoms in constant motion, whose permutations created the most various words and sounds—an idea later taken up by a long line of thinkers for whom the secrets of the world were contained in the combinatorics of written signs. (Calvino 2016, 31)

This is as far as Lucretius (and Ovid) feature in "Lightness." Next follows Kafka, the author with whom Calvino will close the memo on a highly speculative note. He chooses "The Bucket Rider," published in 1917 and outlined in my introductory remarks (Kafka 1983, 412–14). As Calvino puts it, the story clearly alludes to the realities of deprivation during World War I, such as the coal shortage experienced across the Austrian Empire during the winter. In his desperate search for coal, the rider takes his empty bucket with him, an object likened to a mythical horse, able to lift the rider high up in the air, so high that, when he attempts to ask the coal dealer for coal, he cannot make himself heard (Kafka 1983, 33). While the theme of deprivation brought by the horrors of war may well be one of Kafka's meanings in this story, Calvino appeals to Kafka's short narrative to evoke the image of how he and his readers will bring lightness, classical ancient and Western modern into the next millennium. This motif, I argue, leads to a false closure for the reader. The final analogical movement of the bucket stresses this effect: "il secchio è così leggero che vola via col suo cavaliere, fino a perdersi oltre le Montagne di Ghiaccio" (1995, 655; "the bucket is so light that it soars off with the rider and disappears beyond the Icy Mountains" [2016, 34]). The contemplative effects of this scene were visualized by American artist Jerome Kaplan, who engaged closely with Kafka's story in his work "Ice Mountains" (fig. 1), one of several relief etchings on this narrative included in his *The Bucket Rider—Franz Kafka* (1972).[20] It is this metaphorical landscape that represents the rider's unknown future and Calvino's use of it for his final point: lightness is not a quality that we will find in the next millennium. Rather, it is an epistemic value of a combinatorial tenor that we will carry with us, like a light bucket, into a future whose landscape we don't yet know, and about which we can only speculate. What lies ahead is "open to endless reflection" as to whether and how this notion will make its imprint on the *avenir* of things:

> apre la via a riflessioni senza fine […] né il regno al di là delle Montagne di Ghiaccio sembra quello in cui il secchio vuoto troverà di che riempirsi. Tanto più che se fosse pieno non permetterebbe di volare. Così, a cavallo del nostro secchio, ci affacceremo al nuovo millennio, senza sperare di trovarvi nulla di più di quello che saremo capaci di portarvi. La leggerezza, per esempio, le cui virtù questa conferenza ha cercato d'illustrare. (Calvino, 1995, 655)
>
> This idea opens the way to endless reflection […] nor does the realm beyond the Ice Mountains seem one in which the empty bucket might find something to refill it. Besides, as soon as it was full it would be unable to fly. That is how we, astride our bucket, will face the new millennium: without hoping to find there anything more than we're able to bring with us. Lightness, for example, whose virtues this talk has tried to illustrate. (Calvino 2016, 34)

[20] The work is one of the several relief etchings in his *Der Kubelreiter* (1972).

Lezioni americane unfolds a curious history of lightness for the future, one that combines a scientific and ethical poetic tradition with forms of cognition found in speculative writing. Calvino first envisages this tradition "after Lucretius"; that is to say, with regard to the manner in which Lucretian combinatorics has lightness bear a philosophical and scientific message beyond the authorial self. Yet, as the memo ends, this point metamorphosizes into a Kafkaesque scenario, in which the *avenir* of this ancient message, for whatever it is worth, cannot be predicted—it can only be, in 1985, a theme of "endless reflection" as we look ahead. In *Le città invisibili* (discussed below), this theme takes an expansive, deep-historical turn. Here, *leggerezza* informs the makings of an imaginative geo-history of antiquity's future that goes back to the Homeric world. From this point, Calvino projects the circulation of the Homeric world as a highly hybrid and transcultural tradition, a tradition which already foreshadows the scientific and speculative models of Lucretius, Ovid, and Kafka that Calvino would subsequently present in *Six Memos.* The cover of the first edition of the hyper-novel (fig. 2) invites comparison with Kaplan's depiction of the Icy Mountains (fig. 1); the image of Magritte's *Le Château des Pyrénées* (1959) powerfully depicts the body of a city-castle suspended by levitation on a large rock formation, which, one presumes, moves across the visual landscape of sea and sky through the kind of aerodynamics discussed in "Lightness." It does so not without raising the pressing question as to where exactly this castle above a rock-mountain will take us.

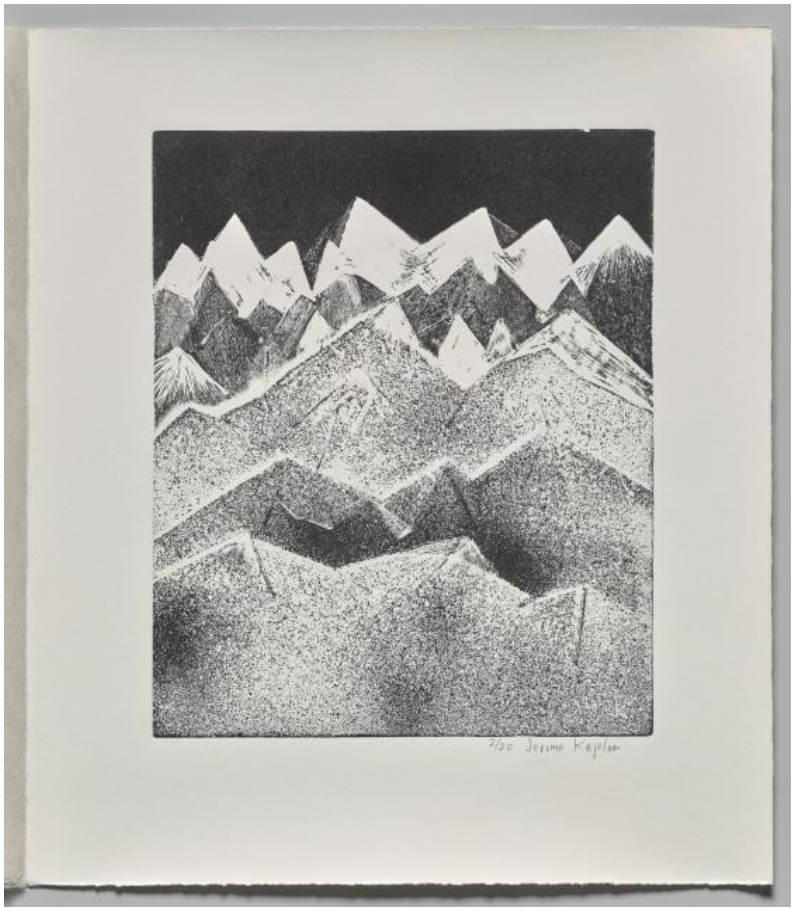

Fig. 1. *The Bucket Rider—Franz Kafka: Ice Mountains*, 1972. Jerome Kaplan (American, 1920–1997), Janus Press. Etching; sheet: 32.2 x 56 cm (12 11/16 x 22 1/16 in.); image: 22.8 x 18.8 cm (9 x 7 3/8 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Ronald Rumford 2001.196.17 *The Bucket Rider—Franz Kafka: Ice Mountains*, Jerome Kaplan (1972). Reproduced with permission of The Cleveland Museum of Art.

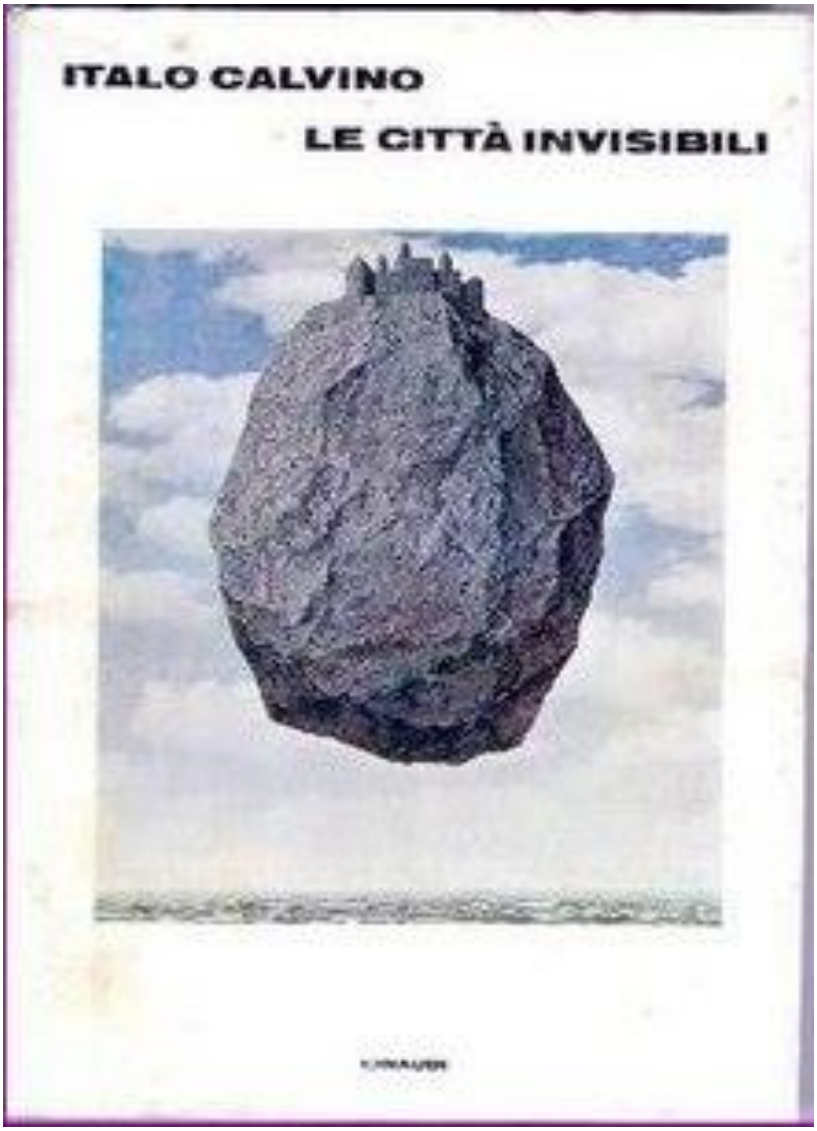

Fig. 2. First edition of *Le città invisibili* by Einaudi (1972) with a cover image reproducing René Magritte's *Le Château des Pyrénées* (1959). Image via Wikimedia Commons.

The Speculative Tradition of Antiquity's Lightness in *Le città invisibili*

Le città invisibili explores the imaginary geographies and complex temporalities of fifty-five cities, many of them faintly echoing classical names (e.g. Chloe, Eudoxia, Phyllis, Berenice, Octavia; Pyrrha, Penthesilea, Baucis),[21] and all of them alluding to the city of Venice. Like many of Calvino's texts, the overall structural organization of *Le città invisibili* is highly mathematical and follows a certain geometrical form. This text is divided into nine chapters: chapters one and nine contain ten cities each, while the rest of the chapters in between contain five. Each chapter begins and ends with a dialogue between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, the first emperor of China from the Yuan Dynasty in the thirteenth century. Here, the merchant

[21] The city of Baucis goes back to the myth of Baucis and Philemon in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. See "Calvino's Classical Ecologies" in Jansen forthcoming 2024.

describes for Kublai Khan imaginary voyages to cities that he has supposedly seen, and which the emperor is keen to locate in his atlas. Marco Polo's urban fictions both appear and don't appear in this atlas. As he moves from one imaginary city to another, and in and out of the world sketched in our *mappa mundi*, he retells journeys through remote, forgotten, convoluted, multi-structured, and multi-temporal spatiality, giving the emperor the grounds to suppose that his empire expands *without end*. Yet, beneath these urban stories of fantastic realism, there lies the concrete city of Venice, which Calvino masterfully recasts fifty-five times and potentially *ad infinitum* in the novel:

> – Ne resta una [città] di cui non parli mai.
> Marco Polo chinò il capo.
> – Venezia, – disse il Kan.
> Marco sorrise. – E di che altro credevi che ti parlassi? L'imperatore non batté ciglio. – Eppure non ti ho mai
> sentito fare il suo nome.
> E Polo: – Ogni volta che descrivo una città dico qualcosa di Venezia.
> (Calvino, 2012, 124)
>
> "There is still one [city] of which you never speak."
> Marco Polo bowed his head.
> "Venice," the Khan said.
> Marco smiled. "What else do you believe I have been talking to you about?"
> The emperor did not turn a hair. "And yet I have never heard you mention that name."
> And Polo said: "Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice." (Calvino 1997a, 78)

"*Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice*." Invested with the multiplicity that Calvino expounds in the *Lezioni americane*—with reference, in part, to Ovid—and retold through appeal to the light quality of memories, signs, desire, mirages, the dead, and the senses, Marco Polo's Venice encompasses a world whose connectivity is larger and far more complex (in Edgar Morin's sense of the word) than first meets the cartographic eye. This is also the point at which Venice opens its concrete geolocal dimensions to the perplexing topographies of what Calvino refers to in "Lightness" as the Lucretian "invisible": "*the poetry of the invisible, of infinitely unexpected possibilities—even the poetry of nothingness*." Indeed, *Le città invisibili* is open to similar aerodynamic mechanisms of lightness expounded in the first memo. In his speculative[22] topographies, Calvino resituates the body of Venice in a dialogical system organized in such aerodynamic ways. It is through this "light" movement, staged as a nearly invisible trajectory to readers like the emperor, that Calvino (and Marco Polo) relocate(s) the real city of Venice at multiple places or points in time *all at once*.

But how can one conceive of the bizarre tradition of Marco Polo's city? Where might one locate the entry point at which the emperor's atlas opens to the speculative dimensions of this city's putatively invisible narratives? In other words, how do we read Venice in the manner of Marco Polo? Marco Polo's points of orientation are as fascinating as they are overwhelming. His version of Venice is to be found somewhere amidst the deep temporalities that join his past, present, and future, and between the dimensions of literature and history, as well as the worlds of empirical facts and alternative histories:

[22] For my use of "speculative," see p.8.

> Marco Polo sfoglia le carte [dell'atlante dell'imperatore], riconosce Gerico, Ur, Cartagine, indica gli approdi alla foce dello Scamandro dove le navi achee per dieci anni attesero il reimbarco degli assedianti, fino a che il cavallo inchiavardato da Ulisse non fu trainato a forza d'argani per le porte Scee. Ma parlando di Troia, gli veniva d'attribuirle la forma di Costantinopoli e prevedere l'assedio con cui per lunghi mesi la stringerebbe Maometto, che astuto come Ulisse avrebbe fatto trainare le navi nottetempo su per i torrenti, dal Bosforo al Corno d'Oro, aggirando Pera e Galata. E dalla mescolanza di quelle due città ne risultava una terza, che potrebbe chiamarsi San Francisco e protendere ponti lunghissimi sul Cancello d'Oro e sulla baia, e arrampicare tramvai a cremagliera per vie tutte in salita, e fiorire come capitale del Pacifico di lí a un millennio, dopo il lungo assedio di trecento anni che porterebbe le razze dei gialli e dei neri e dei rossi a fondersi insieme alla superstite progenie dei bianchi in un impero piú vasto di quello del Gran Kan. […] Il catalogo delle forme è sterminato: finché ogni forma non avrà trovato la sua città, nuove città continueranno a nascere. Dove le forme esauriscono le loro variazioni e si disfano, comincia la fine delle città. Nelle ultime carta dell'atlante si diluivano reticoli senza principio né fine, citta a la forma di Los Angeles, […] senza forma. (Calvino, 2012, 166)

> Marco Polo leafs through the pages [of the emperor's atlas]; he recognizes Jericho, Ur, Carthage, he points to the landing at the mouth of the Scamander where the Achaean ships waited for ten years to take the besiegers back on board, until the horse nailed together by Ulysses was dragged by windlasses through the Scaean gates. But speaking of Troy, he happened to give the city the form of Constantinople and foresee the siege which Mohammed would lay for long months until, astute as Ulysses, he had his ships drawn at night up the streams from Bosporus to the Golden Horn, skirting Pera and Galata. And from the mixture of those two cities a third emerged, which might be called San Francisco and which spans the Golden Gate and the bay with long, light bridges and sends open trams climbing its steep streets … The atlas has these qualities: it reveals the form of cities that do not yet have a form or a name … The catalogue of forms is endless: until every shape has found its city, new cities will continue to be born. When the forms exhaust their variety and come apart, the end of cities begins. In the last pages of the atlas there is an outpouring of networks without beginning or end, cities in the shape of Los Angeles [...] without shape. (Calvino 1997a, 125–26)

"*The atlas has these qualities: it reveals the form of cities that do not yet have a form or a name*." Marco Polo's presentation of Venice as a multi-locative and multi-temporal aerodynamic phenomenon that constantly shifts beneath the surface of the emperor's atlas, with its clear divisions between cities, kingdoms, empires, continents, and oceans, amounts to one of the most innovative readings of the city in the twentieth-century imagination; one that has even contributed to the rethinking of urban landscapes and architecture in the real world (Modena 2011). With a view to antiquity, this passage can also be interpreted as combining the notions of the Homeric journey and Ovidian metamorphosis, especially with regard to its classicizing references (Troy, the Achaeans, Odysseus, and Carthage). Calvino here offers a miniature *Odyssey* that involves the kind of fluid subtraction of weight one finds in Lucretius' "poetry of the invisible, of infinitely unexpected possibilities," and in Ovid's mythical

narratives of change, in which the solidity of the present is no more than an illusion sustained by the principle of "contiguity" (Calvino 1991, 25–36).

Marco Polo's miniature *Odyssey* begins in the geography of the so-called Near East with two cities that have deep connections to Mediterranean antiquity: Jericho, on the West Bank of modern Palestine, and Ur, now situated in modern Iraq. The Venetian merchant's eye then finds Carthage, which opens his reading to Greek mythology and Homer's *Iliad* 20.74-5 and 22.149ff.: the mouth of the river-god Scamander where the Achaean ships waited for a decade to besiege Troy. This, in turn, takes him to Odysseus and the Trojan horse. At this point, and zooming out from this specific set of changes, the geography of the emperor's atlas has fully metamorphosized into Homeric epic, thus making archaic Greek mythical narrative a hidden or "light" element woven into Venice's already convoluted cultural and geographical history. At this juncture, one might think, the heavy, solid presence of Venice on the emperor's map could not subsume more levels of Lucretian lightness. Yet, still glancing at the section of the atlas that depicts what is, for us, modern Turkey, Marco Polo next associates mythical Troy with historical Constantinople under its first sultan, Mohammed. This is by no means the end of his miniature *Odyssey* of transformations and Ovidian combinations. Now mythical Troy and historical Constantinople combine into a new, speculative urban entity ("*and from the mixture of those two cities a third emerged*"), unexpectedly moving this city to circulate from the Mediterranean basin to the US West Coast, as Marco Polo finds himself in modern San Francisco and the Bay Area, with its urban technologies, such as bridges and trams. At this bizarre geographical point, he also discovers that the atlas has an undefined edge, where his reading of Venice as an invisible city seems to open into further unknown constellations of cities "without shape," like Los Angeles. "The catalogue of forms is endless: until every shape has found its city, new cities will continue to be born," Marco Polo concludes.

In his reading of the surfaces and depths of cartography, Marco Polo proposes an alternative history of Venice's *avenir* as a hybrid cultural form. He does so by subjecting this city to a large-scale remapping across space and time, propelled by the qualities of lightness and multiplicity one later finds in the *Lezioni americane*. Here, while gravity continues to pull the real Venice towards its concrete locality at the core of the Western world, Marco Polo amplifies that fixed locality, staging a centrifugal narrative of its hybrid mobility, one that ultimately acquires a globalizing turn which speaks closely to the making of "planetary" modernisms (Friedman 2015, drawing in part on Spivak 2003) of the long twentieth century, from Virginia Woolf, Joyce, and Césaire, to Borges and Walcott (Eastley 2018). He does so by situating the Western position of thirteenth-century Venice within a hyperreal trajectory that originates in an Eastern-oriented archaic antiquity and culminates on the unknown edges of a futuristic Pacific landscape. At this point, the history of Venice's future also becomes their *avenir*. Marco Polo nevertheless complicates this presentation through a deep history that operates across concrete and blurred demarcations of the globe, through times before and after his own existence, and at the giddy intersections of physics, topography, architecture, cultural history, and classical myth. Perhaps one way to conceptualize this vertiginous exploration of the atlas is to propose that, with *Le città invisibili*, Calvino invites us to contrast two forms of reading a city. One of these can be termed "topical," i.e. it portrays Venice as a *place*, an urban cosmos with a fixed locality and fixed forms of interaction. The other can be termed "heterotopic," according to Michel Foucault's conception of "heterotopia" as "*des spaces autres*" (1967, 46–49), other spaces which are not concretely present around us because they are hidden in the structures and institutions that organize Western societies.[23] By this logic, the emperor reads topically and, one should add, though the lens of gravity—that is, heaviness—convinced that his empire builds itself quantitatively, through accumulation. By contrast,

[23] On the "geographies of heterotopia" in Foucault, see Johnson 2013.

Marco Polo's narrative of Venice is heterotopic. He reads this city as a body in constant combination, one that disseminates itself "lightly," embodying multiple and, in theory, endless invisible cities.[24] His is ultimately a cartographic vision of Venice as an ever-unfinished body circulating across space and time in a technically "imperfect" or incomplete fashion, and thus signaling towards a future that can be no more than speculated: what will the form of Venice be when it is envisaged as a futuristic city emerging on the blurred edges of coastal California and the Pacific Ocean? As Derrida would put it, this is a matter of *l'avenir*, not an architectural plan. It will all depend on the specific circumstances of that future moment, and the capacity of Marco Polo's Venice to adapt to them. Meanwhile, the emperor fails to grasp this sense of Venice, with his vision remaining narrowly fixed upon the two-dimensional order and gravity of his atlas and the potential of its endless expansion. One could conclude that Marco Polo's ontology of Venice responds to a "trans-area" logic[25] according to which Venice "is here but it is also somewhere else," because he sees his city as conceptually part of a larger dialogical network of the kind Edgar Morin presents: one that transcends the visible locations of the atlas.

So much more could be said about this passage in *Le città invisibili*—indeed, the bibliography on the novel seems already as vast as Marco Polo's combinations and speculations.[26] What I want to highlight at this latter point is that the vision of Venice as a complex, combinatorial system also has implications for our understanding of antiquity's conceptual future. In this part of his novel, Calvino has appealed to lightness as a vector that connects the ancient Mediterranean world with a myriad of cultures and countries across a vast spatio-temporal platform. Here, the historical and mythological cities of the ancient Mediterranean basin circulate—*flow*—as light bits of information that collectively map out speculative cartographies, with its blurred borders and unknown shapes, just as Calvino's first memo will do in its invitation to relocate the tradition of lightness in the meta-narratives of Kafka. Both narratives thus prepare the ground for antiquity's future, without ever revealing what this would look like beyond that point. Calvino instead offers a quasi-cinematic projection of lightness based on how this discrete value has shown itself to permutate and adapt from the distant past of Homeric locales to his own present.

Epilogue: Lightness and the Projection of the Classical Tradition as Alternative History

Whether the literature of classical lightness is to have a bearing on the new millennium, and whether this literature will still be seen to have epistemic value, will, for Calvino, depend on how one gauges its futurity. More precisely, it will depend on the consideration of its trajectory as a tradition that still has something to offer in a past that Calvino regards as *a function of the future* (Calvino 1995, 2958). I have contended that he stages this condition by disclosing alternative histories of antiquity's lightness. For him, these histories have an ethically informed goal, giving a voice to silent ecologies and environments, as well as displaying a wide-ranging relationality with the world at large, capturing that world beyond the sphere of human action and concerns. In his readings of Lucretius and Ovid, Calvino commits to an "open field" of possibilities that come to define the makings of the classical tradition up to our time (Güthenke and Brookes 2018, 53–74), one to be reckoned with in his forward-looking memo. This speaks closely to his own philosophy and praxis of writing, especially as from the 1960s, when his ideas about what constitutes politically-engaged writing in postwar Italy fuse with a renewed

[24] "[I]n theory" because Calvino also foresees an end to the seemingly endless continuity of forms: "When the forms exhaust their variety and come apart, the end of cities begins" (Calvino 1997a, 126).
[25] For which see Ettel 2016 and Beecroft 2018, 223–24.
[26] Amongst this extensive bibliography, I find Capozzi 2003, Grujicic 2009, Modena 2011, and Schwartz 2012 most insightful.

ethical and intellectual commitment to the makings of literature. He articulates this position in the above-mentioned "Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature," an essay exploring the interplay of politics and literature from his youth during the Italian resistance in the mid-1940s, through the worldwide escalation of social conflicts and injustices that led to protests of 1968 in Italy and abroad to what he sees as the "deterioration and corruption [of the Italian] institutional framework" (79) in the 1970s. Here, he advocates a new political vision of what literature is, or could be, for:

> "Ma c'è anche, io credo, un altro tipo d'influenza, non so se più diretta ma certo più intenzionale da parte della letteratura, cioè la capacità d'imporre modelli di linguaggio, di visione, d'immaginazione, di lavoro mentale, di correlazione di fatti, insomma la creazione (e per creazione intendo organizzazione e scelta) di quel genere di modelli-valori che sono al tempo stesso estetici ed etici, essenziali in ogni progetto d'azione, specialmente nella vita politica." (Calvino, 1:1995, 359)
>
> There is also, I think, another sort of influence that literature can exert, perhaps not more direct but certainly more intentional on the part of the writer. This is the ability to impose patterns[27] of language, of vision, of imagination, of mental effort, of the correlation of facts, and in short the creation (and by creation I mean selection and organization) of a model of values that is at the same time aesthetic and ethical, essential to any plan of action, especially in political life. (Calvino 1997b, 70)

In *Le città invisibili*, this finds an implicit point of contact in Marco Polo's hypervision of Venice across the open field of the atlas, a model for reading the geo-historical movement of this city that ultimately challenges the expansionist and colonialist drive of the Chinese emperor. Yet a more explicit articulation of this position can be tracked in, for instance, *Palomar* (1983), whose eponymous hero, partly in Lucretian and Ovidian fashion, also extends his mind far beyond his own garden to contemplate the nature of the universe itself. Crucially for my argument, Calvino's position also closely informs the innovative epistemology of antiquity's *avenir* that he presents in "Lightness" in 1985. Here, he contributes a road map for rethinking the mechanisms of the classical tradition at the intersections of combinatorics and speculative fiction, as well as through his constant revision of the question of what literature is, or could be good for, if politics is channeled to an ethical goal. His proposal is far-reaching—by plotting ancient Greco-Roman lightness as a quality whose futurity will always be subject to aesthetic, ethical, and political scrutiny at the point of emergence, Calvino offers a framework for appraising cultural mobilities from past to future along with his contemporary concerns. For Calvino, if this version of antiquity is to survive, it will be because its model still exhibits the potential, at least in his case studies of Lucretius and Ovid,[28] to amplify the field of vision, not only for writers and readers but for the project of literature itself. This point underpins the intimate connection that Calvino posits between human knowledge of the changing world and writing that reflects this change as art. He puts this better than anyone else could in "La penna in prima persona" ("The Pen in the First Person): "Le forme create dall'uomo essendo sempre in qualche modo imperfette e destinate a cambiare, garantiscono

[27] "[I]mpose patterns:" this phrase seems to emerge in tension with Calvino's idea of literature as a combinatory system that goes beyond authorial agency. In general, one wonders how combinatorics aligns with his idea of literature's ethical imperative. This could well be an apparent contradiction, and I have not found tangible evidence of the contrary in his writings.

[28] For Calvino's essay on Pliny the Elder's *Natural Histories*, see Baldi 2019 and Jansen forthcoming 2024.

che l'aspetto del mondo quale lo vediamo non è quello definitivo, ma una fase d'approssimazione verso una forma futura." (1995, 1:365); "The forms created by man, being always somehow imperfect and bound to change, guarantee that the world's appearance as we see it is not definitive, but a phase, working toward a future form. So much for the world. And art? Art will be a reflection on forms" [1997b, 237]). "*Working towards a future form ... art will be a reflection on forms*." There is a recent, little explored reception of Calvino's *Lezioni americane* in the visual arts that complements this utterance and brings a comparative perspective to my own point. In his eight-piece installation and photography series, "Geografía Espejo" ("Mirror Geography"), exhibited across Europe in 2017–18 and continuing post-pandemic worldwide, Spanish photographer Victor Hugo Martín Caballero (b. 1982) invites viewers to consider the legacy of Calvino's lightness in terms of "a possible future projection and a look back on a common heritage, imagination, humanity and civilization" (CreArt 2018).[29] Each image in this series tracks the emergence of lightness in the shape of a rectangular figure surfacing in a range of natural environments, such as rock, pebble, water and wood landscapes. Figures 3-6, reproduced below, capture the very moment in which that symbolic image of lightness projects its formation, giving the impression that one could just about grasp its complete form. Like the projection of the tradition of antiquity's lightness in Calvino's oeuvre, the figures gesture towards their own concreteness, not without retaining a sense of speculation about their own *avenir*. The Lucretian and Ovidian combinatorial tradition, with its ability to overcome "the limited perspective of the individual ego" and to "give voice to that which cannot speak—the bird perched on the gutter, the tree in spring and the tree in autumn, stone, cement, plastic" (2016, 151) could well be an instantiation of this time to come.

Fig. 3. "Geografía Espejo VII," 2017, Victor Hugo Martín Caballero. The European Exhibition of *Six Memos*, curated by Branka Benčić. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

[29] My thanks to the artist for explaining his work and generously allowing it to be reproduced in this piece.

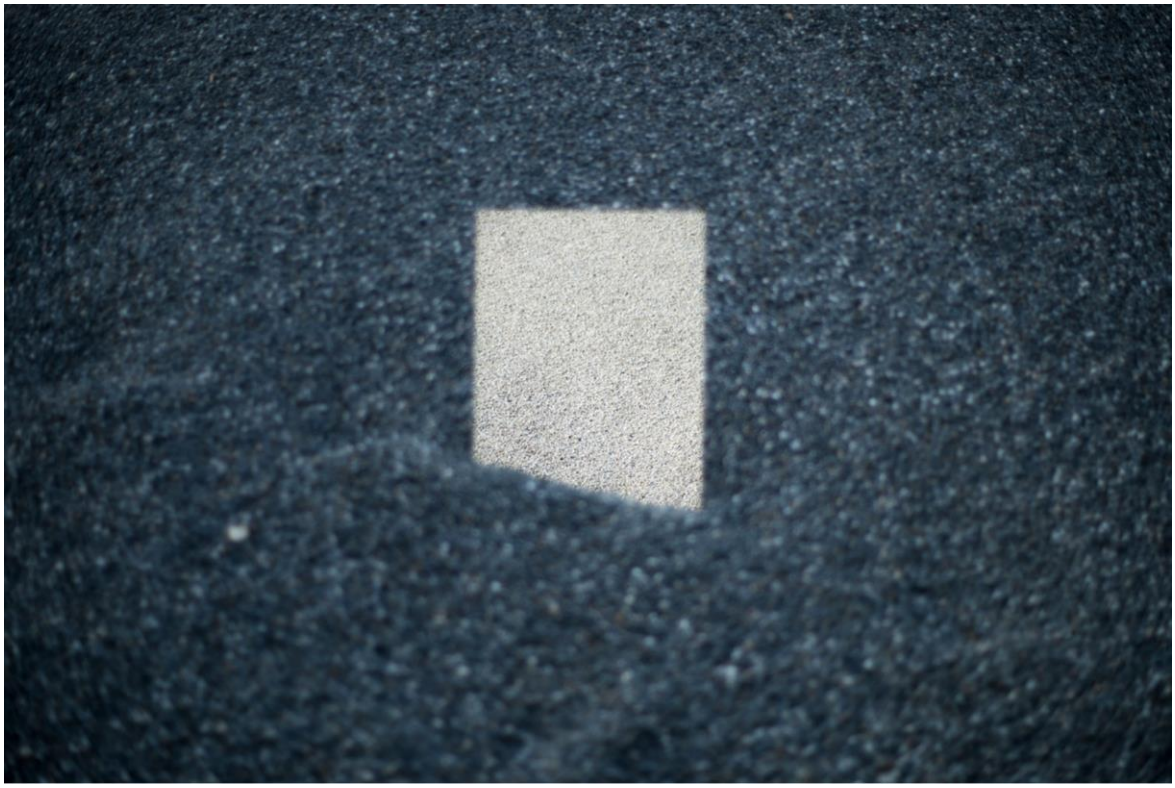

Fig. 4. "Geografía Espejo VIII," 2017, Victor Hugo Martín Caballero. The European Exhibition of *Six Memos*, curated by Branka Benčić. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

Fig. 5. "Geografía Espejo II," 2017, Victor Hugo Martín Caballero. The European Exhibition of *Six Memos*, curated by Branka Benčić. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

Fig. 6. "Geografía Espejo III," 2017, Victor Hugo Martín Caballero. The European Exhibition of *Six Memos*, curated by Branka Benčić.
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