

ITALO CALVINO (1923-1985)

With the June Bulletin, we continue the focus of Correnti della Storia on Italian authors that we have been considering during 2016. This month's essay deals with Italo Calvino who was an Italian journalist, short-story writer and novelist. His best known works include I Nostri Antenati (Our Ancestors), a trilogy written 1952–1959, and published in 1960, (1962 in English translation); Le Cosmicomiche (The Cosmicomics), a collection of short stories, published in 1965 (1968 in English translation); and the novels Le Città Invisibili (Invisible Cities), published in 1972 (1974 in English translation) and Se una Notte d'Inverno un Viaggiatore (If on a Winter's Night a Traveler), published in 1979 (1981 in English translation). His whimsical and imaginative fables made him one of the most important Italian fiction writers in the 20th century. He was admired in Britain and the United States, and he was the most-translated contemporary Italian writer at the time of his death in 1985. He was also a contender for the Nobel Prize for Literature.



Italo Calvino was born in Santiago de las Vegas, a suburb of Havana, Cuba, on October 15, 1923. His father, Mario, was a tropical agronomist and botanist who also taught agriculture and floriculture. Mario was born in 1876 in San Remo, Italy, and had immigrated to Mexico in 1909 where he took up an important position with the Ministry of Agriculture. In an autobiographical essay, Italo explained that his father “had been in his youth an anarchist, a follower of Kropotkin and then a Socialist Reformist.” In 1917, after living through the Mexican Revolution, Mario left Mexico for Cuba to conduct scientific experiments.

Italo's mother, Eva Mameli, was a botanist and university professor. A native of Sassari in Sardinia and 11 years younger than her husband, she married while still a junior lecturer at Pavia University, an institution that was founded in the 14th Century. Eva was born into a secular family and was a pacifist educated

in the “religion of civic duty and science.” Italo described his parents as being “very different in personality from one another,” suggesting, perhaps, deeper tensions behind a comfortable, albeit strict, middle-class upbringing devoid of conflict. As an adolescent, Italo found it hard relating to poverty and the working-class, and was “ill at ease” with his parents’ openness to the laborers who filed into his father’s study on Saturdays to receive their weekly paycheck.

In 1925, less than two years after Italo's birth, the family returned to Italy and settled permanently in San Remo on the coast of Liguria. His brother Floriano, who became a distinguished geologist, was born in 1927.

The family divided time between the Villa Meridiana in San Remo, an experimental floriculture station which also served as their home, and Mario's ancestral land at San Giovanni Battista. On this small working farm set in the hills behind San Remo, Mario pioneered in the cultivation of then exotic fruits such as avocado and grapefruit, eventually obtaining an entry in the *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* for his achievements. The vast forests and luxuriant flora that are everywhere present in Italo's early fiction (such as in *Il Barone Rampante* (*The Baron in the Trees*), published in 1957 (1959 in English translation) derive from this “legacy.” In an

interview, Italo stated that “San Remo continues to pop out in my books, in the most diverse pieces of writing.” He and Floriano would climb the many trees of the estate and perch for hours on the branches reading their favorite adventure stories. Less wholesome aspects of this “paternal legacy” are described in *The Road to San Giovanni*, his memoir of his father in which he exposes their inability to communicate: “Talking to each other was difficult. Both verbose by nature, possessed of an ocean of words, in each other’s presence we became mute, would walk in silence side by side along the road to San Giovanni.”

A fan of Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* as a child, Calvino felt that his early interest in stories made him the “black sheep” of a family that held literature in lower esteem than the sciences. Fascinated by American movies and cartoons, he was equally attracted to drawing, poetry, and theater. On a darker note, he recalled that his earliest memory was of a Marxist professor who had been brutally assaulted by Benito Mussolini’s Fascist Blackshirts: “I remember clearly that we were at dinner when the old professor came in with his face beaten up and bleeding, his bowtie all torn, asking for help.”

Other legacies include his parents’ beliefs in Freemasonry, Republicanism, some elements of Anarchism, and Marxism. Austere freethinkers with an intense hatred of the ruling National Fascist Party, Eva and Mario also refused to give their sons any education in Catholicism or any other religion. Italo attended the English nursery school, St George’s College, followed by a Protestant elementary private school run by Waldensians. His secondary schooling, with a classical lyceum curriculum, was completed at the state-run Liceo Gian Domenico Cassini, where, at his parents’ request, he was exempted from religion classes but frequently asked to justify his non-conformism to teachers, fellow pupils, and even janitors. In his mature years, Calvino described the experience as having made him “tolerant of others’ opinions, particularly in the field of religion, remembering how irksome it was to hear myself mocked because I did not follow the majority’s beliefs.” In 1938, Eugenio Scalfari, who would later found the weekly magazine *L’Espresso* and a major Italian newspaper, *La Repubblica*, came from Civitavecchia to join the same class (though a year younger), and he shared the same desk with Italo. The two teenagers formed a lasting friendship, Calvino attributing his political awakening to their university discussions. Seated together “on a huge flat stone in the middle of a stream near our land,” he and Scalfari founded the MUL (University Liberal Movement). Italo’s early letters to Scalfari are alive with youthful enthusiasm for literature, philosophy, and girls.

In 1941, following preparatory school, Calvino enrolled in the Faculty of Science at the University of Turin, where his father had previously taught courses in agronomy. Concealing his literary ambitions to please his family, he passed four exams in his first year while reading anti-Fascist works in literature and philosophy, in addition to works by Max Planck, Werner Heisenberg, and Albert Einstein in physics. Disdainful of Turin students, Calvino saw himself as enclosed in a “provincial shell” that offered the illusion of immunity from the Fascist nightmare: “We were ‘hard guys’ from the provinces, hunters, snooker-players, show-offs, proud of our lack of intellectual sophistication, contemptuous of any patriotic or military rhetoric, coarse in our speech, regulars in the brothels, dismissive of any romantic sentiment and desperately devoid of women.”



Calvino transferred to the University of Florence in 1943 and reluctantly passed three more exams in agriculture. By the end of the year, the Germans had succeeded in occupying Liguria and setting up Benito Mussolini’s puppet Republic of Salò in Northern Italy. Now twenty years old, Calvino refused military service

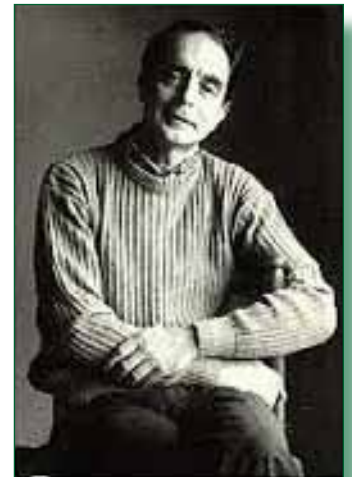
and went into hiding. Reading intensely in a wide array of subjects, he also reasoned politically that, of all the partisan groupings, the communists were the best organized with “the most convincing political line.”

In spring 1944, Eva encouraged her sons to enter the Italian Resistance in the name of “natural justice and family virtues.” Using the battle name of “Santiago,” Calvino joined the Garibaldi Brigades, a clandestine Communist group and, for twenty months, endured the fighting in the Maritime Alps until 1945 and the Liberation. As a result of his refusal to be a conscript, his parents were held hostage by the Nazis for an extended period at the Villa Meridiana. Calvino wrote of his mother’s ordeal that “she was an example of tenacity and courage...behaving with dignity and firmness before the SS and the Fascist militia, and in her long detention as a hostage, not least when the Blackshirts three times pretended to shoot my father in front of her eyes. The historical events which mothers take part in acquire the greatness and invincibility of natural phenomena.”



At the conclusion of the war in 1945, Calvino joined the Italian Communist Party. He also returned to the University of Turin; however, this time he enrolled in the Faculty of Letters. He began writing for left-wing papers and journals. He also began to record his war experiences in stories that eventually became his highly acclaimed first novel, *Il Sentiero dei Nidi di Ragno* (*The Path to the Nest of Spiders*) published in 1947 (1957 and 1998 in English translation), which won the Premio Riccione. In the novel he presents the Resistance as seen through the eyes of an innocent adolescent soldier who is as helpless in the midst of events as the adults around him. This is the first of many youthful and/or naive protagonists he employed in his novels to reflect life’s complexity and tragedy.

In 1948, he interviewed one of his literary idols, Ernest Hemingway, who was travelling with Natalia Ginzburg to his home in Stresa. Considered a member of the school of neo-Realism, Calvino was encouraged to write another novel in this tradition by his literary friends, particularly writers Natalia Ginzburg and Cesare Pavese. They, in addition to Giulio Einaudi, invited him to join the staff of their new publishing house, Giulio Einaudi Publishing. He accepted and remained affiliated with Giulio Einaudi Publishing all his life. The horror of the war had not only provided the raw material for his literary ambitions but deepened his commitment to the Communist cause. Viewing civilian life as a continuation of the partisan struggle, he confirmed his membership in the Italian Communist Party. On reading Vladimir Lenin’s *State and Revolution*, he plunged into post-war political life, associating himself chiefly with the workers’ movement in Turin. Authentic solidarity with workers was not all that easy for him, however—an ambition perhaps more than an achieved reality.



Ultimo Viene il Corvo (*The Crow Comes Last*), a collection of stories based on his wartime experiences, was published to acclaim in 1949. Despite the triumph, Calvino grew increasingly worried by his inability to compose a worthy second novel. He returned to Giulio Einaudi Publishing in 1950, responsible this time for the literary volumes. He eventually became a consulting editor, a position that allowed him to hone his writing talent, discover new writers, and develop into “a reader of texts.” In late 1951, presumably to advance in the Communist Party, he spent two months in the Soviet Union as correspondent for *L’Unità*. While in Moscow, he learned of his father’s death on October 25, 1951. The articles and correspondence he produced from this visit were published in 1952, winning the Saint-Vincent Prize for journalism.

Over a seven-year period, Calvino wrote three realist novels, *The White Schooner* (1947–1949), *Youth in Turin* (1950–1951), and *The Queen's Necklace* (1952–54), but all were deemed defective. During the eighteen months it took to complete *Youth in Turin*, he made an important self-discovery: “I began doing what came most naturally to me—that is, following the memory of the things I had loved best since boyhood. Instead of making myself write the book I ought to write, the novel that was expected of me, I conjured up the book I myself would have liked to read, the sort by an unknown writer, from another age and another country, discovered in an attic.” So, in the early 1950s, Calvino turned decisively to fantasy and allegory, producing the three fantastic tales that brought him international acclaim.

The first was *Il Visconte Dimezzato* (*The Cloven Viscount*) published in 1952 (1962 in English translation), which was composed in 30 days between July and September 1951. The protagonist, a 17th century viscount split in two by a cannonball—a good half and an evil half—becomes whole through his love for a peasant girl. This novel incorporated Calvino’s growing political doubts and the divisive turbulence of the Cold War. Skillfully interweaving elements of the fable and the fantasy genres, the allegorical novel launched him as a modern “fabulist.”

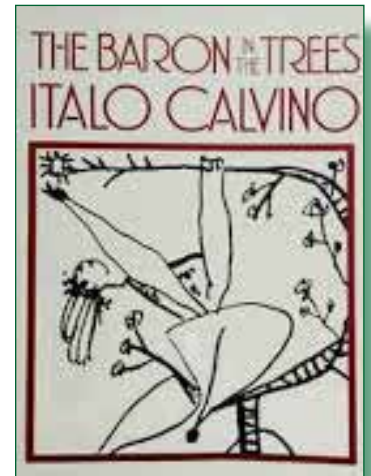


The second, his most highly acclaimed fantasy, was *Il Barone Rampante* (*The Baron in the Trees*) published in 1957 (1959 in English translation). Completed in three months, the fantasy is based on the “problem of the intellectual’s political commitment at a time of shattered illusions.” It is a whimsical tale of a 19th-century nobleman who one day decides to climb into the trees and who never sets foot on the ground again. From the trees he does, however, participate fully in the affairs of his fellow men below. The tale wittily explores the interaction and tension between reality and imagination. The third, *Il Cavaliere Inesistente* (*The Nonexistent Knight*) published in 1959 (1962 in English translation) is a mock epic chivalric tale.

In 1954, Giulio Einaudi commissioned his *Fiabe Italiane* (*Italian Folktales*) published in 1956 (1961, 1975, and 1980 in English translation) on the basis of the question, “Is there an Italian equivalent of the Brothers Grimm?” For two years, Calvino collated tales found in 19th century collections across Italy, then translated 200 of the finest from various dialects into Italian.

From 1955 to 1958 Calvino had an affair with Italian actress Elsa De Giorgi, a married, older woman. (Excerpts of the hundreds of love letters Calvino wrote to her were posthumously published in the *Corriere della Sera* in 2004, causing some controversy).

In 1957, disillusioned by the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary, Calvino left the Italian Communist Party. In his letter of resignation published in *L'Unità* on August 7, 1957 he explained the reasons for his dissent (the violent suppression of the Hungarian uprising and the revelation of Joseph Stalin’s crimes) while continuing to confirm his “confidence in the democratic perspectives” of world Communism. He withdrew from taking an active role in politics and never joined another party for the rest of his life. Ostracized by the Italian Communist Party leader, Palmiro Togliatti, and his supporters on his publication of *La Gran Bonaccia delle Antille* (*Becalmed in the Antilles*) (1957), which was a satirical allegory of the party’s intransigence, Calvino



began writing *Il Barone Rampante* (described above). Calvino found new outlets (since he was now banned from writing for the periodicals and journals of the Italian Communist Party) for his periodic writings in the journals *Città Aperta* and *Tempo Presente*, the magazine *Passato e Presente*, and the weekly *Italia Domani*. In 1959, he became co-editor of *Il Menabò*, a cultural journal devoted to literature in the modern industrial age, a position he held until 1966.

Despite severe restrictions by the US against foreigners holding communist views, Calvino was allowed to visit the United States, where he stayed six months from 1959 to 1960 (four of which he spent in New York), after an invitation by the Ford Foundation. Calvino was particularly impressed by the “New World.” “Naturally I visited the South and also California, but I always felt a New Yorker. My city is New York.” The letters he wrote to Giulio Einaudi describing this visit to the United States were posthumously published 2003 in a collection of his autobiographical writings, *Hermit in Paris*, as “American Diary 1959–1960.”

In 1962 while in Paris, Calvino met Argentinian translator Esther Judith Singer (“Chichita”) who had been working for years as a translator for UNESCO. They were married in 1964 in Havana, during a trip in which he visited his birthplace and was introduced to Ernesto “Che” Guevara. On October 15, 1967, a few days after Guevara’s death, Calvino wrote a tribute to him that was published in Cuba in 1968 and in Italy thirty years later. He and his wife settled in Rome in the Via Monte Brianzo where their daughter, Giovanna, was born in 1965.

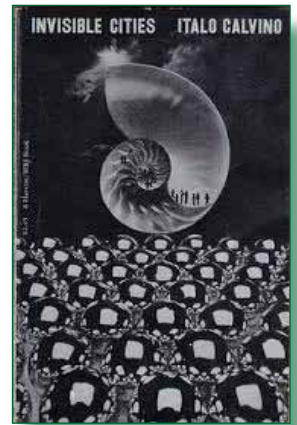


Once again working for Giulio Einaudi Publishing, Calvino began publishing some of his “Cosmicomics” fantasies in *Il Caffè*, a literary magazine. In his writings Calvino continued to search “for new forms to suit realities ignored by most writers.” He found in the comic strip the inspiration for both *t zero*, (the original title was *Ti con Zero*, and was also published as *Time and the Hunter*) published in 1967 (1969 in English translation) and *Le Cosmicomiche* (*Cosmicomics*) published in 1965 (1968 in English translation). The latter is a book compiled from *Il Caffè* writings of the same name as well as new material. In these pieces, which resemble science fiction, a blob-like being named “Qfwfq” narrates the astronomical origins of the cosmos as well as the development of the species over millenia.

The 1970s saw the publication of *Le Città Invisibili* (*Invisible Cities*) (1972; 1974 in English translation), the story of Marco Polo’s voyage from Venice to Cathay, including descriptions of many fictionalized cities; *Il Castello dei Destini Incrociati* (*The Castle of Crossed Destinies*) (1969; 1977 in English translation), which is organized around the imagery of medieval Tarot cards; and *Se una Notte d’Inverno un Viaggiatore* (*If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*) (1979; 1981 in English translation). This last work consists of ten unfinished novels within a novel which is itself a wild romp through the worlds of academia, publishing and criticism.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Calvino had more contacts with the academic world, with notable experiences at the Sorbonne and the University of Urbino. His interests included classical literary studies: Honoré de Balzac, Ludovico Ariosto, Dante, Ignacio de Loyola, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Cyrano de Bergerac, and Giacomo Leopardi. He became a regular contributor to the important Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, and spent his summer vacations in a house in Roccamare, near Castiglione della Pescaia, Tuscany.

In 1975 Calvino was made an Honorary Member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Awarded the Austrian State Prize for European Literature in 1976, he visited Mexico, Japan, and the United States where he gave a series of lectures in several American cities. After his mother died in 1978 at the age of 92, Calvino sold Villa Meridiana, the family home in San Remo. Two years later, he moved to Piazza Campo Marzio in Rome near the Pantheon and began editing the work of Tommaso Landolfi. Awarded the French Légion d'Honneur in 1981, he also was accepted to be Jury President of the 29th Venice Film Festival.



In 1980 *Italian Folktales* was included on the American Library Association's Notable Booklist. In 1983 *Palomar (Mr. Palomar)* (1985 in English translation) was completed. Calvino turned this novel into a dramatization of a mathematical formula categorizing the actions of the title character, named for the famous observatory, at a seaside resort. The book is at once a highly comic and abstract allegory. In 1984 he was awarded an honorary degree by Mount Holyoke College.

During the summer of 1985, Calvino prepared a series of lectures on literature for the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures to be delivered at Harvard University in the fall. However, on September 6, he was admitted to the ancient hospital of Santa Maria della Scala in Siena where he died during the night between September 18 and 19 of a cerebral hemorrhage. His lecture notes were published posthumously in Italian in 1988 and in English as *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* in 1993.

In retrospect, we can say that Italo Calvino redefined literary forms and in so doing breathed new life into the novel, the fable, and the folktale.

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from: Encyclopedia Britannica online edition; Biography: Your Dictionary online edition; Jonathan Galassi, "The Dreams of Italo Calvino" review of Italo Calvino, Letters, 1941–1985 in The New York Review of Books online edition, June 20, 2013; and Wikipedia.

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