THE OTHER AS HOST. DECONSTRUCTING THE STRANGER IN ITALO CALVINO'S *INVISIBLE CITIES* AND SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *THE ENCHANTRESS OF FLORENCE*

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Abstract

This paper attempts a comparative analysis of two postmodern novels that might be read as instances of highly sophisticated, meta-literary writing, were they not also very significant and relevant for a contemporary problematics of encountering the Other. Both Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972) and Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008) rework the literary myth of Marco Polo's travels (*Il Milione*, probably 1299); Calvino's novel is also alluded to by Rushdie. Besides the exotic setting and the Oriental storytelling frame, the figures of the Stranger and his 'Other' are constructed in a modern (and ambiguous) manner in both novels. Although, at a certain level, these narratives belong to the genre of historical novels, their close reading of the past involves an even closer look at the present. The issues of intercultural exchange, of tolerance, of moral responsibility, become central to the two novels that develop a challenging representation of identity. The intertextual relationships between Polo's travelogue and the later novels also thematize the motifs of stranger and host in a complex and fascinating structure. The analytical methodology employs both theoretical studies on identity in the context of travel, and critical essays on the respective novels.

Keywords: *Identity, travel, intertextuality, representation, deconstruction.*

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One of the most fascinating and influential postmodernist novels is Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972). A cult book, perhaps Calvino's best known, the novel inspired musicians, architects, photographers, and other novelists alike. To name but a few of the artistic works modelled on it, we can mention Jonas Dahlberg's exhibition project with the same title (2004-2005), Michael Abbriano's suite for chamber orchestra (2005), Emili Rosales's ekphrastic novel *La ciutat invisible/The Invisible City* (2005), or even the post-rock band The Drift who included an extended piece on this theme in its 'Noumena' album (2005).

For the Italian novelist, the subject of Marco Polo's travels to the East was a long-lasting obsession. He first used this theme in a 1960 screenplay[2], then reworked it in the poetic prose form of *Invisible Cities*. The richness and spectacular narrative of Polo's book *Il Milione* (*The Travels of Marco Polo*) captivated the European cultural and travel imaginary for centuries. Recently, Polo's figure and its reinterpretation by Calvino were undertaken by another famous writer, the Anglo-Indian Salman Rushdie, in his *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008). Rushdie's book is another instance of a 'historiographic metafiction' (in Linda Hutcheon's phrase, 1989) that makes use of a rich variety of documentary sources and moulds them into a narrative pattern that transcends historical facts into an autonomous literary structure.

At first glance, such novels might be said to attempt a highly sophisticated representation of a literary myth; they could be termed intertextual fantasies, or 'exotic' fictions and thus denied any political, ethical, or cognitive relevance[3]. In this paper I will argue that besides their textual mastery and artistic value, both Calvino's and Rushdie's novels treat important issues of cultural communication and identity construction that are highly relevant for the contemporary readership outside their historical touch.

Let us recount, first, the story and the main themes of these three texts. The third chapter of Marco Polo's travels (in Latham 1982: 113-163) narrates his stay at the court of the Mughal emperor Kubilai Khan. The apparent purpose seems to be the assessment of the Khan's mightiness: 'the greatest lord the world has ever known' (in Latham 1982: 113), almost a God-like figure. His noble and military prestigious ascendency is accounted for by the traveller. Polo presents the impressive dimensions of the Khan's empire, and his mastery in keeping together different races and religions (Saracens, idolaters, Jews, Christians). The narrator does not miss the opportunity for some Christian propaganda: 'he – *the Khan, my note* – regards the Christian faith as the best' (Latham 1982: 119); the people 'have no regard for the welfare of their souls,

[2] Martin McLaughlin, 'Calvino's Rewriting of Marco Polo: From the 1960 Screenplay to *Invisible Cities*', in Conklin Akbari/Iannucci/Tulk (eds.) 2008, chapter 8.

[3] See Alessia Ricciardi's comments and John Welsh's answer in Welsh 2008, or Malgorzata Myk's feminist reading in Myk 2009.

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caring only for the nurture of their bodies' (Latham 1982: 160). Almost every aspect of social life is surveyed from a neutral, non-biased perspective (as compared to the standards of the 13th century). The organization of the empire, the court manners, the matrimonial habits, the means of communication, the hunting parties, the general economic level of the population, all are taken into account by Polo's keen eye and sense of cultural difference. His readership is the medieval European whose amazement is anticipated: 'You may be inclined to ask...' (Latham 1982: 123). Accordingly different kinds of explanations are supplied. Yet, the narrator does not hesitate to share his readers' surprise. Even a very accurate representation cannot do justice to the capital city or the palace of the Khan – 'the largest that was ever seen' (Latham 1982: 125), or to his wealth:

> "I can assure you that the Great Khan has such a store of vessels of gold and silver that no one who did not see it with his own eyes could well believe it" (Latham 1982: 136).

Polo's tone is highly appreciative of everything he sees. When he senses that his audience's capacity to picture what is being told might be surpassed, he employs the conventions of the fairy tale or of mythical structures. For instance, the Khan's garden is described as a Paradise on Earth which in turn points to the traveller's privilege of getting there. He uses typical phrases that are meant to establish a trust pact with his readers: 'You can see for yourselves that...' (Latham 1982: 138), without realizing that that would be impossible other than at the discursive level[4]. Anyway the audience's expectations are met since they refer to the domain of the implausible. No wonder the story is astonishing; this is how it should be.

The plot and the discourse follow different patterns with Calvino and Rushdie. This time the narratee is the emperor himself. Consequently, the protocols of description and interpretation have changed. *Invisible Cities* might be the prototype of the purely descriptive novel. It has a frame story that is situated in the present tense of the narration; here the conversations between Marco Polo and the Great Khan take place. The two main characters (the only characters actually) are described as 'the emperor of the Tartars' and 'the young Venetian' (Calvino 1997: 5). As the story unfolds, Marco tells the emperor about the cities he visited during his numerous travels. The cities are grouped into 11 categories: cities and memory/cities and desire/cities and signs/thin cities/trading cities/cities and the eyes/cities and the names/cities and the dead/ cities and the sky/continuous cities/ hidden cities, in this order. The novel is organized into 9 parts. Each of them introduces a new city category in the end, except the last one. Each category gradually rises to prominence. This

[4] Nevertheless he was taken seriously by many. Cf. Larner 1999.

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combinatorial game will be further used by Calvino in other novels, most strikingly in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1973).

Nothing else 'happens' except for the description of the 55 cities whose names are all feminine, reminding one of Oriental empresses, of mythical or literary characters. (The feminine symbolism of the city was convincingly assessed by psychoanalysis and archetypal criticism.) Most of the dialogues between Marco and the Khan that frame the travel accounts are meditations about the transience of human life and dwellings, or about provisional relationships. From time to time there are references to Venice, Marco's native city that commands the perspective and provides the term of comparison for all the other encounters.

By contrast, *The Enchantress of Florence* has a very complex plot. I will not attempt to summarize it here[5]. It unfolds on various levels – political, erotic, cultural, even mythical. The novel brings together an Oriental story taking place at the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar (1542–1605) and a Florentine one organized around political intrigues and everyday life in the time of the Medici's rule and of Niccolò Machiavelli. There are two narrative agents that make these threads connect: Qara Köz, later called Angelica, a 'lost princess' of the Mughal dynasty and great-aunt of the emperor, who was a stunning beauty with an adventurous life, travelling to the West as far as the New World; and Niccolò Vespucci, aka Uccello di Firenze and Mogor dell'Amore, also an wanderer who functions as a Polo-like figure in the story. Only this time the places he tells Akbar about are not seen through the objective eye of the ambassador but are intertwined with his spectacular and at the same time tragic life. There are many sides to these stories and several thematic connections between them.

One level of 'strangeness' to be accounted for here refers to the relationship that these three literary works develop. Marco Polo's *Il Milione/Le Devisement du Monde* is incorporated into the theme, plot, and style structure of the later novels: more closely and explicitly by Calvino, or disseminated within the narrative texture with Rushdie. Despite the seven centuries that separate the model from its postmodern reinterpretations, there is a network of associations that brings them remarkably close.

In the pre-modern mentality, the archetypal figure of the stranger triggers a range of connotations evolving from the neutrality of a difference in perspective, to fear of deceit and a sense of threat. The issue of trust in a stranger's tale is brought forward by both novels. The Khan of the *Invisible Cities* changes his mood quite frequently, from deep understanding and familiarity that dispense with words, to open distrust: 'Your cities do not exist' (Calvino 1997: 59), he says to Marco. The same holds true for the relationship between the young Florentine and the Mughal Akbar in *The Enchantress*. When

[5] For an extensive account see Jorissen 2008.

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the first enters the city of Sikri, the emperor's residence, the young man is very conscious of what he is going to face: 'The traveller knew that the question of trust was one he would have to answer convincingly. If he did not he would quickly die' (Rushdie 2008: 8). Then many times during his prolonged conversations and troubled relationship with the Khan, the question of his trustfulness comes out. Thus the novel and *The Travels* entertain on a thematic level an issue that concerned, in Polo's case, the reception of the book by travellers, geographers, or the general public over the ages.

Another important theme undertook by the contemporary novels is that of power. Exercising possession over an immense territory and leading its mixed population was among the Khan's qualities much admired by Marco Polo. In Calvino's novel this possession becomes problematic. Kubilai needs Marco's descriptions to assure him that he knows (and therefore rules over) his empire. Here Polo-the foreigner fulfils an essential function: he makes the empire readable to the Khan, as he knows it better than the emperor.

> "'If each city is like a game of chess, the day when I have learned the rules, I shall finally possess my empire, even if I shall never succeed in knowing all the cities it contains', remarks the emperor in a melancholic tone" (Calvino 1997: 121)[6].

The sight of power is among the first images that strike Niccolò Vespucci upon his arrival in Sikri:

> "In the tower's display of might the traveller recognized the same quality of flamboyance that burned upon his own forehead like a flame […]. Is power the only justification for an extrovert personality? The traveller asked himself, and could not answer" (Rushdie 2008: 9).

Later on his account of the Florentine political state of affairs includes a lesson on power valid everywhere, in the Western and Eastern world alike:

> "Therefore the prince must be sure of his ability to overpower the servants' uprisings as well as the foreign armies, the assaults of the enemy within as well as attacks from outside" (Rushdie 2008: 334).

At the stylistic level, in order to mark the distance from the medieval intertext, Calvino employs a free indirect discourse that relates to one or the other of the characters, in turn. In the dialogued passages, the emperor uses the first person plural, as customary, while Polo the storyteller sometimes adopts the neutral position of 'the visitor', 'the foreigner', 'a man', or even 'he'. This objectification strategy is quite distant from the 'original' Polo's speech who

[6] In *The Enchantress of Florence,* the motive of chess playing takes the form of *human pachisi,* a powerful metaphor of the will of the master who treats his (female) subjects as inanimate pieces on the game board.

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used the first person singular. What is preserved from *Il Milione* is the manner of addressing directly an imaginary audience: 'you can say', 'you come upon' (an indication perhaps that this is an everyman's journey, in the medieval sense).

In this matter, the conversations between the emperor and his favourite and double Mogor dell'Amore (in Rushdie's novel) parallel those between Marco and the Khan in Calvino's novel (for instance, the wonderful discussion on pantheism). Niccolò/Mogor even mentions Polo's 'fantastic voyages' when talking about his father's Florentine young years (Rushdie 2008: 167). And the very first sentence of *The Enchantress* bows to Polo and Calvino's beginnings, making its intertextual references appear simultaneously historical and present in the narrative time:

> "In the day's last light the glowing lake below the palace-city looked like a sea of molten gold. A traveller coming this way at sunset – this traveller, coming this way, now, along the lakeshore road – might believe himself to be approaching the throne of a monarch so fabulously wealthy that he could allow a portion of his treasure to be poured into a giant hollow in the earth to dazzle and awe his guests" (Rushdie 2008: 5).

Thus, in different ways, both Calvino and Rushdie incorporate *Il Milione* and the literary myth of Marco Polo into their own narrative structures; and Rushdie refers to *Invisible Cities* as if illustrating Roland Barthes's theory of the (post)modern text as essentially *writable/writerly* (as opposed to the traditional *readable* one).

But it is not the only kind of strangeness that demands interpretation in these novels. 'Who is the stranger?' becomes a question difficult to answer. The Easterner and the Westerner, the powerful and the powerless, the foreigner and the host are of course easily recognizable categories, but not quite stable ones.

In *Invisible Cities*, one way of thematizing the ambiguity of the relationship between how things look like and how they really are is by employing perspective games. 'There are two ways of describing the city of Dorothea', says Marco (Calvino 1997: 9); another city, Despina, looks entirely different when viewed from sea and from land. The traveller changes in the course of his travels too. So if knowledge depends on seeing, then knowing a city is a complex and deceiving process. Also human encounters are construed as a perpetual game of interpretation, of readings and misreading: 'In Chloe, a great city, the people who move through the streets are all strangers. At each encounter, they imagine a thousand things about one another…' (Calvino 1997: 51). In the representation of his travels, the narrator makes use of a dialectics of the familiar and the unfamiliar. By assuming the identity of an ambassador, a go-between figure, he acquires a certain autonomy and power that make him a partner for the emperor. In one of the italicized frames of the story, the narrator takes on Marco's perspective:

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> "The ambassadors were Persians. Armenians. Syrians. Copts. Turkomans; the emperor is he who is a foreigner to each of his subjects. And only through foreign eyes and ears could the empire manifest its existence to Kublai" (Calvino 1997: 21).

The deconstruction of the conventional stranger type is obvious here.

A peculiar relationship is established between the place and the identity of the traveller/foreigner. It is mediated by references to one's own past; as he travels to distant places, Marco loses track not only of Venice, his dream city, but also of himself. He goes on looking for himself and his native city by spatializing the past as such (see Duncan/Ley (eds.) 1993: 39-57): 'the foreignness of what you no longer are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places' (Calvino 1997: 29). The modern and the ancient often intermingle in his descriptions of the cities. Instead of familiarizing the distant for the Khan's view, Marco Polo as the narrator of *Invisible Cities* estranges it and, by the same move, begins to share the other's perspective so that the two of them are indistinguishable in the end.

In Rushdie's novel, the theme of encountering the Other is mainly developed by means of a surprising and very efficient strategy. The mirror motive functions as an organizing principle of the story. The imaginary queen Jodha and the Enchantress Qara Köz/Angelica are symmetrical figures, workings of the imagination that cross the border into the real world through Akbar's love. We learn that the princess Qara Köz had a young servant girl whom everybody calls The Mirror due to their striking resemblance. On another level, of the story-within-the-story, the imaginary hero Hamza – a sort of Orlando innamorato – is depicted by the court painter as the emperor's symbolical mirror and their life stories are thus matched. The city of Herat is called 'the Florence of the East'. The first enchantress of Florence, Simonetta Vespucci – Botticelli's model for Primavera and Venus – stands in a similar relationship to the Mughal princess, and so on. The intricate network of correspondences gives the novel its symmetrical form.

Rushdie's reworking of the historical novel pattern affects the issue of identity as a seemingly fixed construct in a traditional, pre-modern world. Through this mirroring technique people's identities are confusing and fluid. Several characters in the novel change their names, religions, languages, and world views. The emperor's and the court's perceptions of the young Niccolò Vespucci are considerably modified as the story progresses. The wanderer Mogor dell'Amore, seen at first as a sorcerer or a thief, improves his image to such an extent that Akbar thinks of him as a brother or even a son and considers including him in the royal family (the emperor himself, we are told, was raised by his father's enemies, in exile, among foreigners). As a natural outcome of their close friendship the emperor finds in the Western political and moral philosophy a support for his 'Renaissance' thoughts; and his young friend encourages him in a Polo-like pessimistic wisdom:

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> "'This may be the curse of the human race,' responded Mogor. 'Not that we are so different from one another, but that we are so alike'" (Rushdie 2008: 171).

During the story-telling that constitutes the novel, the two, Mogor (the fake Mughal) and Akbar the emperor learn to come to terms with their past and with the outcome of their decisions. Foreignness becomes a relative notion, depending on the viewer's perspective and on his/ her unpredictable changes. It also engenders a reflection on moral responsibility and acceptance that 'betrays' the historical setting of the novel into an illustration of Julia Kristeva's words in *Strangers to Ourselves:*

> "The image of hatred and of the other, a foreigner is neither the romantic victim of our clannish indolence nor the intruder responsible for all the ills of the polis. (...) Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder" (Kristeva 1991: 1).

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