

Language and Memory in Italo Calvino: The Tarot and the Chess Game as visual aids to memory

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In his introduction to the short story collection *Racconti fantastici dell'ottocento*, Italo Calvino writes about the fantastic tale:

It is the genre that tells us most about the inner life of the individual and about collectively held symbols. As it relates to our sensibility today, the supernatural element at the heart of these stories always appears freighted with meaning, like the revolt of the unconscious, the repressed, the forgotten, all that is distanced from our rational attention.¹

According to Calvino, these elements—the unconscious, the repressed, the forgotten—gain narrative expression through a traditional and symbolized imagery that has become the stock of every fantastic tale: the journey, the locked chamber, the dream, the encounter, the mysterious woman in white, or the forbidden book. Such images in effect give us access to these unconscious elements and open a door for them to be formulated. Likewise, without any such imagery memories themselves remain locked away in the unconscious. To speak about memories is always also to speak with metaphors. Verbal images function as figures of thinking that safely anchor what we remember in models of expression and a greater context.² This essay focuses on a close reading of two of Calvino's most innovative works, *Le città invisibili* (published in 1972) and *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (published in 1973). These two works present an intersection of the fantastic tale and a

discourse on memory because they are accounts of fantastic journeys, remembered and expressed with the help of visual aids to memory: the tarot and the chess game.

For Calvino, the two books were parallel projects: he started working on *Il castello* as early as 1969, a time when *Le città* was also taking shape, and thus they share striking structural and linguistic similarities. Both books have an elaborate frame narrative, which embraces a carefully calculated grid of short, fairy-tale-like stories in *Il castello* and even shorter fragments or prose poems in *Le città*. It is significant to point out that the texts function themselves as narrative vignettes or images: their closed and concise format enables the writer to arrange and rearrange them like the tarot cards or chess figures themselves. Calvino introduces us to a game of mirrors and combinations that happens on all levels – textual and intertextual, formal and stylistic. Thus, it is not surprising that both books are rearrangements of well-known literary classics. *Le città invisibili* is a new and imaginative version of Marco Polo's *Il Milione* combined with ideas reminiscent of Thomas More's *Utopia*. *Il castello dei destini incrociati* more generally combines Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* with other myths of Western literature, from *Faust* to *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. All these important intertextual connections have been examined by critics like Martin McLaughlin or Constance Markey.³ These critics

¹ Italo Calvino, *Racconti fantastici dell'ottocento*, English trans. *Fantastic Tales: visionary and everyday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), p. vii (...come l'insorgere dell'inconscio, del represso, dell'dimenticato, dell'allontanato dalla nostra attenzione razionale).

² Aleida Assmann, Dietrich Hart, eds., *Mnemosyne – Formen und Funktionen der kulturellen Erinnerung* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1991).

³ Constance Markey, *Italo Calvino – A Journey toward Postmodernism* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), and Martin McLaughlin, *Italo Calvino* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

theory of language and signs. Indeed, it is striking how the two texts foreground language as a system of signs with multiple meanings, manifested in the arbitrariness of the relation between signifier and signified. I will focus on how Calvino complicates the signifier-signified relationship by introducing substitutes for verbal language, which mediate in the process of communication among the characters in the books, and also between narrator and reader. The tarot game in *Il castello* and the chess game in *Le città* present the reader with a sophisticated language of images and chess rules that functions without the spoken word and thus is not governed by linguistic rules.

This language of images, as I will show, not only raises questions about communication but also about memory—a topic not highlighted by the studies mentioned above. How do we remember – in words or in images? What do we want to remember? What are we forced to remember? How do we express these memories and how does language shape or even alter them? What is the connection between storytelling and remembering? My reading of *Il castello* and *Le città* will analyze how the tarot and the chess game uncover patterns of storytelling and remembering in two different situations of speechlessness. Both games, I will argue, function as visual memory aids that help their characters to retrieve and formulate repressed memories.

A Pictorial Memory: *Il castello dei destini incrociati*

Il castello depicts characters who have lost their speech when confronted with unspeakable dangers and ordeals on their way through the woods: “da quando ero entrata nel bosco tali erano state le prove che mi erano occorse, gli incontri, le apparizioni, i duelli, che non riuscivo a ridare un ordine né ai movimenti né ai pensieri.”⁴ They all meet at the dinner table in a mysterious castle in the woods, and the set of tarot cards on the table is their only means of communication. As if guided by an instinctive force, a desire to unburden themselves, the characters start laying out their stories with the cards, while the narrator give us his interpretation. This simultaneity of narration (in the form of laying out the cards) and

also point out how both texts comment on current linguistic theories, especially Saussure interpretation is a literary bow to Freudian psychoanalysis. But the reader soon realizes that each story the narrator presents is only one possible version among an infinite number of different interpretations: there are as many stories as there are persons in the room, and none of them actually comes close to the one the storyteller has in mind. To underline that notion of interpretative vagueness, Calvino uses question marks to second-guess his own interpretation, or places little key words or phrases like “forse,” “poteva interpretare, che...,” or expressions like “...poteva contenere la soluzione dell’enigma” and “per il seguito del racconto dovevamo lavorare d’immaginazione.” All these phrases suggest that the narrator is insecure about interpreting a language as vague and intuitive as the tarot. At the same time, this vagueness highlights the difficulties each storyteller has in actually making sense of his own tale, in remembering the right order of what he experienced and how to integrate all these in most cases horrible experiences into his past and self-conception.

Calvino presents the castle itself as something otherworldly. A strange place of disorder and randomness, it seems suspended in a time vacuum without future, as do all of its guests. Memories of the past seem the only reliable thing left, but they are either beyond expression or comprehension and in the course of the book are revealed as subject to endless interpretation. Stripped of the ability to speak, the travelers have no choice but consign their memories to the cards, which in turn become not only their trigger but also their carrier. The second part of the book, *La taverna dei destini incrociati*, which in itself is a repeated and temporally more advanced version of the situation in the *Castello*, states the traumatic situation even more forcefully:

Come faccio a raccontare adesso che ho perduto la parola, le parole, forse pure la memoria, come faccio a ricordare cosa c’era lì fuori, e una volta ricordato come faccio a trovare le parole per dirlo; e le parole come faccio a pronunciarle, stiamo tutti cercando di far capire qualcosa agli altri a gesti, a smorfie, tutti come scimmie. Meno male che ci son queste carte, qua sul tavolo, un mazzo di tarocchi...⁵

⁴ Italo Calvino, *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (Milan: A. Mondadori, edizione Oscar, 1994), p.7.

⁵ Ibid., p.52.

So each of them tries to tell his story with the help of the tarot cards. The cards, on the one hand, function as aids to coordinate memory. Fragmented recollections can be put in a logical sequence by laying out the cards one by one. On the other hand, the allegorical stock imagery of the scenes depicted sets free a stream of memories of similar scenes: the characters painted on the cards function as mirrors of the characters in the stories. The colorful cards seem to speak directly to the characters' unconscious and uncover long buried sentiments: "era qualcos' altro che vedevamo in quei tarocchi, qualcosa che non ci lasciava più staccare gli occhi dalle tessere dorate di quel mosaico."⁶ Not even their muteness can keep them from expressing themselves, and maybe it is exactly this muteness and the indirectness of the tarot that allows them to come forward with their stories. Their formulaic character and stock images provide a framework for the formulation of the unconscious or repressed. The mosaic is a suitable metaphor for the process of storytelling, but also for the process of remembering. Like snapshots, we store images or narrative fragments in our head that have to be pieced together chronologically to form a complete episode.

But the tarot also has a memory of its own. In the process of storytelling, the travelers lay out all the cards and thus create a particular pattern on the table. Each story becomes tightly interlocked with the other stories (as some cards are used in several different stories), and in the end the completed pattern presents all the stories, or the collective memory of the entire group. It is important that Calvino reproduces the cards in the margins of the book and even prints the grid of cards that shows all the stories together. As a result of this brilliant move the reader is not only asked to contemplate the seductive imagery of the cards himself, but also to try to follow the stories and their interconnections on this purely visual level and include his or her own interpretation into the web of stories.¹

In this context it is interesting to consider what C.G. Jung writes about archetypes and the collective unconscious: archetypes are "Ur-

bilder," which are a part of the collective unconscious of every human being. Fairy tales and myths function as forms of expression of these archetypes: "Nie gebrach es der Menschheit an kräftigen Bildern, welche magischen Schutz verliehen gegen das unheimlich Lebendige der Seelentiefe. Immer waren die Gestalten des Unbewussten durch schützende und heilende Bilder ausgedrückt und damit hinausgewiesen in den kosmischen, außerseelischen Raum."⁷ The symbolic process of experiencing the archetypes is comparable to the visual experience of looking at images that contain certain stock figures or allegories: "Wenn man sich vom symbolischen Prozess ein Bild machen will, so sind dafür die alchemistischen Bilderserien gute Beispiele.... Es hat auch allen Anschein, als ob die Bilderserien des Tarot Abkömmlinge der Wandlungsarchetypen wären."⁸ Kathryn Hume presents a similar reading of the tarot in her book *Calvino's Fictions: Cogito and Cosmos* where she conducts a Freudian analysis not only of the text but also of its author: "The psychoanalytic repressed seethes in the anxious images of these stories. Indeed, as unassuaged infantile anxieties and their resultant metaphysic of self and dissolution into flux, such psychoanalytic material makes its presence felt at several levels: the personalistic, the transpersonal or cultural, and the metafictional."⁹

At this point it is useful to take a closer look at the tarot game and its history to consider how it was used. In his book about the tarot, Alfred Douglas points out that the question of origin is not satisfactorily resolved: Although the cards were established in Italy, France and Germany by the late fourteenth century, the time, place and circumstances of their creation remain a mystery. One function of the tarot could have been to pictorially represent religious and other doctrines to the illiterate. The cards, he writes, were created at a time when many streams

⁷ C. G. Jung. *Archetyp und Unbewusstes*. Olten: Walter, 1984, p. 85. : „Humankind never lacked powerful images which provided magical protection against the uncanny that is alive in the depths of the soul. Always were the figures of the unconscious expressed by way of protective and healing images, and thus were expelled into the cosmic realm outside the soul.” (translation mine).

⁸ Ibid., p. 111.: “Alchemist imagery is a good example for the visualization of this symbolic process. ... it also seems that the imagery of the tarot descends directly from these archetypes.” (translation mine).

⁹ Kathryn Hume, *Calvino's Fictions: Cogito and Cosmos* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p.114.

⁶ Italo Calvino, *Il castello*, p. 8.

of ideas were converging in Europe, so that they are in all probability not the product of any one single tradition. As a result, the imagery of the cards is compatible with myths of Christian, Gnostic, and Islamic, but also Celtic and Norse imagery. But what exactly is it that has made the tarot so compelling for almost seven centuries? Douglas's answer also illuminates *Il castello*:

If the major arcana of the tarot pack illustrate twenty-two important stages in the path of life, then each card can be interpreted at several levels. It can point to important principles and forces operating in the world; it can unveil significant processes in the expansion of mystical consciousness; it can indicate the emergence of as yet unevolved aspects of personality, and when reversed, it can warn of physical or psychic pitfalls which may be encountered. The tarot speaks in the *language of symbols*, the *language of the unconscious*, and when approached in the right manner it may open doors into the hidden reaches of the soul. The mysterious beauty of the cards provides a stimulus that awakens one's intuitive faculties, leading on to an understanding which lies outside the scope of the intellect [italics mine].¹⁰

Douglas hints at another possible function of the tarot game, which is closely connected to the so-called *ars memorativa*, the art of memory. "it is known that other complex allegorical pictures were being produced in medieval Europe as *aids to memory* and as a means of giving religious instruction to the illiterate [italics mine]."¹¹ Even without this last hint, a compelling case can be made that one function of the tarot was to trigger lost or repressed memories.

It is indeed astounding how powerful and suggestive the imagery of the tarot can be. In the course of my research I examined, among others, the Visconti-Sforza tarot cards, the same ones Calvino had in front of him while writing *Il Castello dei destini incrociati*. The seventy-four cards now divided between the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York and the Carrara Academy in Bergamo are commonly attributed to

Bonifacio Bembo and constitute the oldest and most famous deck of tarot cards in the world. Adorned with Sforza emblems (like the quince and the fountain), and the Visconti motto "A BON DROYT," the deck was most certainly painted for Francesco Sforza and Bianca Maria Visconti around 1450. More than 600 years after their creation their iconography still exerts a compelling narrative power: the cards strongly connect to medieval Christian imagery and even contain references to other art works of the Middle Ages. This becomes especially obvious in comparing the iconography of the major arcana with corresponding images in Christian art: Justice is a crowned woman with a scale and a sword, The World is represented by two angels holding a sphere with a city on an island (reminiscent of the celestial Jerusalem described in the revelations of St John and St. Augustine's City of God), and Judgment is depicted as a judging God Father assisted by two angels with trumpets.

Calvino too suggests an art historical reading of the cards as well as a divinatory one. Paying close attention to the iconographic details, the author is able to flesh out the stories and at the same time demonstrate the high quality of these little art works: we notice the liveliness of minutely sculpted faces expressing fear or serenity, the diligence in the reproduction of a landscape in the background, and the careful attention devoted even to the smallest accessories and attributes. Even for the contemporary viewer the cards exert a luring fascination. Many of the figures look straight at you and with a knowing expression pull you into their world. Others turn their gaze at something outside the frame of the card, so that if the cards are placed next to each other, an intricate network of interacting glances is created between viewer and figures and also among the figures themselves. Their poses are elegant and the arrangement of gowns and the movement of gestures creates a flowing dynamic and liveliness. Immediately, the viewer is prompted to create a narrative that connects the cards. Calvino does the same thing: he puts himself into the position of one of us who looks at the cards and creates interesting readings of his own.

But he never forgets that the tarot in front of him is a work of art. In "Anch'io cerco di dire la mia," the narrator's and author's own story, Calvino equates the tarot cards Hermit and Knight of Swords with two famous paintings, St. George by Rembrandt and St. Jerome by Dürer.

¹⁰ Alfred Douglas, *The Tarot – The Origins, Meaning and Uses of the Cards* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 38.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

Suddenly we find ourselves accompanying the writer on a tour through an imaginary art museum and in the midst of a discourse on the old *paragone* between the sister arts of painting and writing. The tarot cards are not only placed on the same level with the paintings but also function as a hinge between visual and verbal arts. In sum, there are two features that render the tarot cards such a suitable memory aid: one is the familiar iconography that is reencountered in the cards' typified scenes; the second, even more important one, is their paradoxical quality of narratological sequence that insists on its own fragmentedness. The cards are not connected like the pieces of a puzzle; they remain individual images with a universal appeal that can mean different things in different contexts.

We realize that Calvino's book is multi-layered and that memory is at work on different levels. The book itself is a peculiar kind of literary memory in that it presents rewritings of famous works of literature and myths like the ones of Oedipus, Parsifal, Faust, and Orlando. These famous literary heroes are in close company with other, more general kinds of literary heroes: the princess, the king, the villain and the helper are stock figures that appear in all fantastic narratives or fairy tales. As I already hinted at in my introduction, Calvino was familiar with Vladimir Propp's theories on the repetitive patterns according to which certain types of characters and events or patterns of behavior recur in all fables.¹² In placing Hamlet and Orlando beside the princess and the fool, Calvino ascribes to the great myths of Western literature the same structural parallels that Propp ascribes to fables. The tarot cards, with their own set of stock figures, make these patterns visible. Even more, they are both pattern and story, a mosaic of intertextual remembering.

Memory and the city: *Le città invisibili*

Memory in *Le città invisibili* is just as complicated and multi-layered, but also connected to a certain kind of speechlessness, as

it seems to retreat behind problems of translation. Because he doesn't speak the language of Kublai Khan, Marco Polo uses gestures and objects to communicate the things he has seen on his travels. With leaps, animal cries, pantomimes, and presentations of travel souvenirs, Polo tells of faraway cities and the people who live there. When it becomes clear that the objects he arranges on the black-and-white tiles of the floor in the Khan's palace actually form a game of chess, they switch to a real chessboard, ascribing different cities to different games with different moves. Finally, even though Polo has long since learned the language of the Khan, they cease to even use the chess game and communicate in imagined dialogues that take place only in their minds. As in *Il castello*, Calvino concentrates on substitutes for language:

Nuovo arrivato e affatto ignaro delle lingue del Levante, Marco Polo non poteva esprimersi altrimenti che con gesti, salti, grida di meraviglia e d'orrore, latrati o chiurli d'animali, o con oggetti che andava estraendo dalle sue bisacce: piume di struzzo, cerbottane, quarzi, e disponendo davanti a sé come pezzi degli scacchi. Di ritorno dalle missioni cui Kublai lo destinava, l'ingegnoso straniero improvvisava pantomime che il sovrano doveva interpretare.¹³

Forming another striking similarity with *Il castello*, the narrator in *Le città* also points out the multiplicity of interpretations of the sign language they have developed:

Non sempre le connessioni tra un elemento e l'altro del racconto risultavano evidenti all'imperatore; gli oggetti potevano voler dire cose diverse: un turcasso pieno di frecce indicava ora l'approssimarsi d'una guerra, ora abbondanza di cacciagione, oppure la bottega d'un armaiolo; una clessidra poteva significare il tempo che passa o che è passato, oppure la sabbia, o un' officina in cui si fabbricano clessidre.¹⁴

Similar phrases that emphasize vagueness can be read in *Il castello*, when the

¹²Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott, 2nd ed., ed. Louis A. Wagner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), pp. 19-68.

¹³ Italo Calvino, *Le città invisibili* (Torino: Einaudi, 1972), p. 29.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

interpretation of the tarot becomes multifaceted. The sign remains the same; only the hermeneutics change. Marco Polo and Kublai Khan also develop a fixed set of signs: “Col crescere d’un’intesa tra loro, le mani presero ad assumere atteggiamenti stabili, che corrispondevano ognuno a un movimento dell’animo, nel loro alternarsi e ripetersi. E mentre il vocabolario delle cose si rinnovava con i campionari delle mercanzie, il repertorio dei commenti muti tendeva a chiudersi e a fissarsi.”¹⁵ Just as the travelers do with the tarot, they develop their own substitute language. The most sophisticated stage, the language of chess, works in ways similar to the tarot game in *Il castello*. Calvino emphasizes the visual and concrete rather than the verbal and abstract. Even though they follow the rules of the game, they take the figures of the chess game literally as characters in the stories about the cities:

A ogni pezzo si poteva volta a volta attribuire un significato appropriato: un cavallo poteva rappresentare tanto un vero cavallo quanto un corteo di carrozze, un esercito in marcia, un monumento equestre: e una regina poteva essere una dama affacciata al balcone, una fontana, una chiesa dalla cupola cuspidata, una pianta di mele cotogne.¹⁶

With its spatial character, the chess game seems to be the best means to show “l’ordine invisibile che regge le città.”¹⁷ Calvino does not reproduce the image of a chess board with the moves of the players, as one might expect. But he mirrors the rigid order of the chess in the way he arranges and numbers his city-vignettes or prose poems. Just as in *Il castello*, however, the superficial order of the game and the book is undermined by the apparent randomness and fragmentedness of the things described. The dichotomy between superficial order and underlying chaos is a key element in both books and also an important feature of the process of remembering. For, amidst his discourse on signs and their interpretation, Calvino introduces the topic of memory. Obviously, it functions on a structural level as a category for the cities described: “Le

città e la memoria.” These overt references to memory, however, remain on a poetic level and are often juxtaposed to references to forgetting. Evoking the great city-myths of Atlantis or Troy, Marco Polo describes

a city that “contiene [il passato] come le linee d’una mano,”¹⁸ or a city which “la terra l’ha dimenticata.”¹⁹ It is worth examining Calvino’s choice of the prose poem, or miniature as appropriate format for his city descriptions. The condensed little vignettes are arranged like images – very much like the tarot cards in *Castello* – and are similarly closed in their hieroglyphic imagery and yet open to a series of interpretations. Just as the prose-poems resist a one-dimensional reading, the cities themselves resist legibility.²⁰ Their multi-layered imagery reveals the city as a palimpsest of many cities in time, space and memory.

Much more interesting with respect to memory are the dialogues between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan. In discussing and analyzing the cities in the Khan’s empire, the two become immersed in musings about major philosophical and literary questions. They weigh utopia against dystopia, they comment on the city as a symptom of the state of the human condition, and they discourse about power and destruction. Questions about how the city or the empire or the world will be remembered—how will I be remembered, who will remember me—run as an undercurrent through their exchanges.

Calvino alludes to the technique of memory, or *ars memorativa*. In transferring objects of knowledge from the written or spoken into the visual and imaginative, the content will be inscribed onto the brain. Through this process of visualization the knowledge is forever and inseparably connected with the image used for visualizing it. Marco Polo seems to have made use of such a technique in order to give sufficient report on the Khan’s cities—until even the Khan

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 24.

²⁰ For a more in-depth analysis of the “illegibility” of *Le Città*, see G. Almansi’s essay “Le città illegibili” in *La visione dell’invisibile. Saggi e materiali su Le città invisibili di Italo Calvino*. A cura di Mario Barenghi, Gianni Canova, Bruno Falchetto. Milano: A. Mondadori, 2002, pp. 123-130.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 128.

¹⁷ Ibid.

himself, convinced by Polo's metaphors, assimilates them as his own:

Ma, palese o oscuro che fosse, tutto quel che Marco mostrava aveva il potere degli emblemi, che una volta visti non si possono dimenticare né confondere. [...] Eppure ogni notizia su di un luogo richiamava alla mente dell'imperatore quel primo gesto o oggetto con cui il luogo era stato designato da Marco.²¹

Another important component of mnemonics is its spatial aspect. As Cicero's famous story of Simonides shows, the art of remembering is closely connected to a spatial or architectural and again clearly visual sense. The poet Simonides is the only person who, after the roof in the palace of his host collapses, is able to identify the dead. He remembers exactly where every guest sat at the dinner table; only with the help of his spatial memory can the horribly disfigured corpses be named.²² Marco Polo's memory functions in a similar way: not only can he locate the exact geographical position of each city; he also remembers its ports, wells, streets, statues, and cemeteries. In using the chess game as a metaphor, Polo transfers his spatial memory of a city in the landscape onto the spatial grid of the black-and-white board and its figures.

"Dunque, è davvero un viaggio nella memoria, il tuo!"²³ the Great Khan exclaims; and we realize that Marco Polo has kept a secret. His secret is his own past, of which we learn nothing in the book, and especially his native city, Venice: Marco Polo: Sire, ormai ti ho parlato di tutte le città che conosco. Kublai Kan: Ne resta una 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. Quando ti chiedo d'altre città, voglio sentirti dire di quelle. E di Venezia, quando ti chiedo di Venezia.

Per distinguere le qualità delle altre, devo partire da una prima città che resta implicita. Per me è Venezia.

²¹ Ibid., p. 30.

²² Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume – Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1999), pp. 35ff.

²³ Italo Calvino, *Le città invisibili*, p. 105.

Dovresti allora cominciare ogni racconto dei tuoi viaggi dalla partenza, descrivendo Venezia così com'è, tutta quanta, senza omettere nulla di ciò che ricordi di lei.

Le immagini della memoria, una volta fissate con le parole, si cancellano, - disse Polo. - Forse Venezia ho paura di perderla tutta in una volta, se ne parlo. O forse, parlando d'altre città, l'ho già perduta a poco a poco.²⁴

This powerful and moving passage thematizes forgetting as much as remembering. In it, the written or spoken word as expression of things remembered is problematized. Throughout the history of language, writing has always been the first and most immediate metaphor of remembering. Yet even though the process of writing and remembering are very much analogous, writing has also always been seen as the antagonist or destroyer of memory. Aleida Assmann discusses this phenomenon in her book *Erinnerungsräume*. The function of memory is externalized in that it is fully transferred onto writing. The human mind, then, does not feel the urge to practice the art of memory because it can consign the duty of remembering to the page. Writing promotes a certain apathy of memory. She quotes Plato's famous *Phaedo* as the first account of this problem. Plato taught us to see writing and remembering as opposites. In *Phaedo*, he criticizes the invention of the written word because it enables us to forget instead of helping us to remember. The written word, according to Plato, can only remind someone who has knowledge but never instruct someone who is ignorant. Words on a page are mute and the ignorant cannot ask important questions.²⁵

In the passage quoted above, Calvino comments on the dichotomy of writing and remembering in his own way. Marco Polo is afraid of losing his memory of Venice if he speaks about the city. In describing it indirectly, through the other cities he talks about, he has secretly already conveyed what is most important to him about Venice. Telling the story of his native city through the medium of other cities seems to be the least dangerous way. This process of storytelling is, of course, comparable to how the travelers in *Il castello* speak about their adventures through the medium of the tarot. And yet, even this indirect way of speaking of Venice is not completely safe; Marco Polo

²⁴ Ibid., p. 94.

²⁵ Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume*, p. 185.

wonders if he will nonetheless slowly lose the memory of Venice. Words, he implies, have a selective quality that falsify or even destroy memory. In choosing one word over the other to describe his city, he would leave so many aspects of the memory unsaid. Over time, the words he chose would develop into a fixed narrative of Venice that would take the place of all the various true memories.

Is the only true memory, then, the one we never give away? Do we have to keep our dearest memories to ourselves in order not to lose them? Would another person ever really understand what this dearest memory means to us, even if we tried explaining it? Calvino does not provide an answer; he asks his readers to find out for themselves. Even more, he adds an ironic twist. Like Plato, he uses the very medium he seems to mistrust, and without the written word we would never have read about Plato or Marco Polo's cities.

But does Calvino really leave his readers without any answers? When Marco Polo says that Venice is in every city he describes, he means that there is an element that unifies all the cities that exist or that you can imagine. This is the human element. In this sense, Calvino answers the question about how we remember a city. We remember the people who live in it:

Non le labili nebbie della memoria ne l'asciutta trasparenza, ma il bruciaticcio delle vite bruciate che forma una crosta sulle città, la spugna gonfia di materia vitale che non scorre più, l'ingorgo di passato presente futuro che blocca le esistenze calcificate nell'illusione del movimento: questo trovavi al termine del viaggio.²⁶

Sometimes the past becomes much more unpredictable than the future. Svetlana Boym quotes this Russian saying in her book on nostalgia.²⁷ And indeed, Calvino uses the tarot not to predict the future but to express the past. In a letter to Edoardo Sanguineti, he writes: "Sì, è vero che nel mio libro i tarocchi non dicono l'avvenire ma il narrabile, ossia il narrato, ossia il passato. Del resto nel nostro secolo che dovrebbe essere quello che sa declinare il futuro,

i destini dell'individuo si leggono decifrandone il passato sepolto, e in fondo anche i destini collettivi non si sa come configurarsi se non attraverso comparazioni di modelli storici."²⁸

Thus, the tarot cards on the one hand illustrate a general, archetypal plot inherent to all myths and literary works from the fable to the great tragedies. On the other hand they illustrate the specific narration and the personal memories of each traveler. Images more than words have the power to suggest the universal and the specific. This is also the reason the tarot set is such a successful substitute for language. The allusiveness of the colorful scenes triggers repressed memories, and the indirectness of the medium as such helps the traumatized travelers to overcome their reservations and express themselves.

The city in *Le città* becomes a mnemonic code which gives a particular form to Marco Polo's memories. Each new city opens a window onto the past and also onto his native city of Venice; and the memory of Venice gives additional meaning to each new city visited. Thus, the city becomes universal and symbolic; and as such it becomes the discovery site of the personal past. The chess game is a successful model of the relation between memory, language, and the city: the intricate system of its rules and the spatial order of its grid suggest the shape of the city with its web of streets and alleyways that is so similar to the complicated, intertwined threads of memory.

²⁶ Italo Calvino, *Le città invisibili*, p. 106.

²⁷ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. xiv.

²⁸ Italo Calvino, *Lettere: 1940-1985*, ed. Luca Baranelli (Milan: A. Mondadori, 2000), p. 1226.

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