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### ITALO CALVINO AND MAGICAL REALISM

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#### ABSTRACT

The term Magical Realism has become highly fashionable and disputable since 1980. The term is a combination of oxymorons. What the narrative mode offers is a way to discuss alternative approaches to reality. At first it was used to refer to the German Painterly Movement that tried to capture the mystery of life behind the surface reality. Later it was introduced in Latin America during the 1940s as an expression of the mixture of realist and magical views of life in the context of the differing cultures of Latin America expressed through its art and literature. In the 1950s it was used in relation to Latin American fiction, but has since been adopted as the main term used to refer to all narrative fiction that includes magical happenings in a realist matter-of-fact narrative. Magical Realism is understood, in Salman Rushdie's words, as the 'commingling of the improbable and the mundane'.

Critics still debate whether the term refers to modes, genres or forms of writing, or simply cultural concepts. It is widely used term both at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Italo Calvino is an Italian journalist, short story writer and a novelist known for his famous works Our Ancestor Trilogy, Cosmicomics and other writings. This paper intends to review and throw some light on the elements of magical realism used by Italo Calvino with special reference to his fictions The Cloven Viscount and Invisible Cities.

#### KEYWORDS:

Neorealism, Magical Realism, Narrative Technique, Literary Genre

#### INTRODUCTION:

Italo Calvino spent the first two years of his life in Cuba, later taken to Italy where he remained throughout his childhood and adolescence. He soon established ties with writers who like him were early proponents of neorealistic fiction. The Path to the Nest of Spiders, Calvino's first novel, was written when Calvino was only 24.

Calvino edited Italian Fables, which was the result of extensive research and most recognized

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work by his audience. The folk literature served as inspiration for much of his later fiction, which delved into the worlds of fable and fantasy. Thereafter Calvino published three modern folk tales—*The Cloven Viscount*, *The Baron in the Trees*, and *The Nonexistent Knight* marking a significant departure from his earlier socio-realistic fiction were collected and issued as a three volume set entitled *Our Ancestors*. With a new orientation to his writing, Calvino continued to move from a traditional framework toward a more experimental one. *Cosmicomics*, for instance, was a series of narratives depicting the evolution of the universe. Calvino's innovative works found an expanding international audience and received more written commentary.

Calvino's most ambitious fiction was published in the final two decades of his career. *Invisible Cities* is less a novel than a series of prose poems, and *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* was originally written to accompany a collection of tarot cards. *Mr. Palomar*, a novel that some consider his finest, was at press at the time of his death. It is difficult to find a modern author writing in Italian more revered than Italo Calvino. In heeding his famous credo, "I believe that fables are true," most critics choose to view his fantasies not as escapes from reality but as alternate ways to perceive it. His literary career stands as a restless search for the newest approach to storytelling, with each successive work opening another door of the imagination.

### THE CLOVEN VISCOUNT

*The Cloven Viscount* is one among the three in the "Heraldic Trilogy" or *Our Ancestors Trilogy*. *The Cloven Viscount* is a fantasy novel written by Italo Calvino. It was published in English in 1962 by William Collins, with a translation by Archibald Colquhoun. In the book, Viscount Medardo of Terralba joins the Christian forces to fight against infidels in Bohemia during the late seventeenth century war between Austria and Turkey. Approaching the royal encampment, the still innocent and inexperienced warrior encounters the horrors of war and its accompanying pestilence. When he finally joins in the battle, he is quickly halved by a cannonball. As a result of the injury, Viscount Medardo becomes two people: Gramo (the Bad) and Buono (the Good). The army field doctors save Gramo through a stitching miracle; the Viscount is "alive and cloven". With one eye and a dilated single nostril, he returns to Terralba, twisting the half mouth of his half face into a scissors-like half smile. Meanwhile, a group of hermits find Buono in the midst of a pile of dead bodies. They tend to him and he recovers. After a long pilgrimage, Buono returns home.

Gramo returns to his Ligurian estate in Terralba and establishes a reign of terror among the local populace by cutting in half plants and animals, setting fires, and condemning several of his subjects to death for minor infractions. Eventually the other half of the Viscount Buono living in forest, endowed with exemplary qualities, arrives at Terralba and protects the populace from the evil segment. At first, however, the people fail to recognize that it is the left side of Medardo that has returned. The villagers dislike both viscounts, as Gramo's malevolence provokes hostility and Buono's altruism provokes uneasiness. When the two sides fight a duel for the love of a young shepherdess, Pamela, both are badly wounded. But Doctor Trelawney sews the cloven parts together, thus making the Viscount whole again and has become 'neither good nor bad, but a mixture of goodness and badness'.

### INVISIBLE CITIES

*Invisible Cities* is a novel by Italian writer Italo Calvino. It was published in English in 1974. It is the

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most innovative of Calvino consists of the descriptions of 55 fictive cities that are narrated by Polo to prove the expanse of Khan's empire, but which are all actually just descriptions of one city, Venice. The book is in the form of a series of dialogues between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan. The first and the last chapters contain seven descriptions of individual cities, the middle chapters contain five. The descriptions are fragmented pictures of Calvino's imaginary world. The conversational pieces between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, which open and close the nine chapters, provide a much-needed framework for the book. The fantastic accounts of the cities Polo claimed to have visited, accompanied by descriptions of the city's inhabitants, notable imports and exports, and whatever interesting tales Polo had heard about the region are given. Calvino's intent as a writer is to open up his text for the reader the way Marco Polo the explorer opened up the continent of Asia for European society, and for the khan as well.

Another structuring device is the numbering and heading of the cities. The accounts are radically different from one another and divided into eleven categories, each consisting of five cities: cities and memory, cities and desire, cities and signs, thin cities, trading cities, cities and eyes, cities and names, cities and the dead, cities and the sky, continuous cities, and hidden cities. In each succeeding chapter, a new city category is introduced. Each city bears a beautiful and arcane feminine name with Arcadian, Classical, and Oriental echoes: Sophronia, Eudoxia, Thokla, Olinda, Diomira, Zaira, Isaura, Zenobia, Euphemia, Chloe, Fedora, etc. However, the imaginary cities do not appear on any of the khan's maps, nor is it clear if they exist in the past, present, or future because their temporal and spatial locus is always in Marco Polo's fluid consciousness. A utopian, highly illusionary and imaginary world is produced in the descriptions of Polo by Calvino.

### CONCLUSION

Both *The Cloven Viscount* and *Invisible Cities* in particular and all the writings of Italo Calvino in general, have been reviewed and appreciated by many for they are the very good examples of Magical Realism fiction that keeps on fascinating a large number of readers still. John Updike comments on Italo Calvino that 'he has taken fiction into new places where it had never been before and back into the fabulous and ancient sources of narrative'. His writings are quite marvelous and pathbreaking for the young generation of fiction writers.

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