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Sensuality and the Senses in Calvino's Fiction

Kathryn Hume

Calvino consistently upheld the position that reason and logic should rule the emotions. He was fond of saying 'bisogna sdrammatizzare'—one must de-dramatize. His later fictions suggest calmness verging on frigidity: the invisible cities are beautiful crystals arranged in a majestic geometric pattern; the tarot cards resemble an iconic crossword puzzle; Palomar's adventures are numerically articulated to reflect three levels of classification. Exquisite cerebration is one possible way of characterizing the aesthetic result. And yet . . . his posthumous *Sotto il sole giaguaro* was to have been an exploration of the five senses. Though incomplete, it gives us almost hallucinatorily vivid presentations of taste, hearing, and smell, and involves the characters in tensely dramatic intimacies. Another project Calvino had in hand was a *riscrittura* of Casanova's memoirs.[1] At the point when cranial hemorrhage struck him down Calvino was engaging with the sensuous and even the sensual.

The comparative absence of sensual material in Calvino's fiction can be ascribed to at least two causes. One is technical, and concerns his preferred subject matter. He shows little interest in constructing simulations of everyday reality once he has gone beyond

[1] He published five Casanovan recollections of dealings with women in "Le memorie di Casanova," *La repubblica* (15-16 August 1982), 14-15.

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the realism of works like *La formica argentina* (1952) and *La nuvola di smog* (1958) and had committed himself to the haunting strangeness of *Le cosmicomiche* (1965). He does not need sounds and smells and sights to establish the gritty details of some Balzacian cityscape when riding galaxies; indeed, Marco Polo's cities would lose their patina of invisibility were he to intrude many 'effects of the real.' The other cause is personal. The senses and their emotions seemed threatening to him, as is demonstrable from the major image clusters that characterize his fiction. For a writer dominated by intellect to distrust the body's sensations is nothing new. The banality of that attitude is precisely what makes so peculiar and intriguing the shift apparently taking place toward the end of his life. Calvino was casting off mental shackles one would have thought welded shut by a lifetime's wear when he turned and faced the senses in *Sotto il sole giaguaro.*

I would like to make two arguments. First, after illustrating Calvino's sometimes unusual handling of sensual experience, I will offer reasons for the strictures he generally placed upon such material in his fictions. In light of this half of the article, we will better understand the magnitude of what he undertook in *Sotto il sole giaguaro,* and I will then discuss those stories, focussing on what is new in his discoveries about the senses. Conclusions about that collection must be tentative because of its unfinished state, but the stories suggest that Calvino's laudable willingness to forgo security and expose himself to his own deep-seated fears was being rewarded with striking insights. These visionary flashes appear to have been leading him toward a novel hypothesis about human nature, namely that each of our senses creates a very different kind of personality within us.

Categories of the Sensual

Sensuality defined in broadest terms includes various kinds of excitation of the individual senses, plus those experiences that stimulate several senses and result in general excitement, usually sexual but sometimes just intensely aesthetic. I find seven major kinds of sensual experience in Calvino's various fictions. These categories are my own and they do not fall into the sort of neat pattern which suggests inevitability or completeness. The first three—the *orderly,* the *shiny,* and the *multiple*—do not in most writers' hands qualify as

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sensual at all, but his writing about them is fervid, yearning, and delectable. The remaining four categories most frequently concern sex, and in all of them, negative elements abound. Call them the sensual as *frustration,* as *comedy,* as *danger,* and as *explosion.* Rather than plod through seven sets of examples to illustrate these ad hoc categories, let me instead refer to several sensually charged stories or scenes and show how these categories intermingle and illumine Calvino's attitudes as they existed prior to *Sotto il sole giaguaro.*

"I cristalli" is a transposed pastoral, and illustrates the enchantment of the shiny and the orderly.[2] Qfwfq remembers the earth when it was still a roiling flux of liquid rock, jets of mercury, acid clouds, metallic rain, and aluminum oceans. The first amazing and fascinating manifestations of order to appear were crystals: they had smooth, regular faces and sharp edges; they maintained their symmetry as they expanded; they shone. They seemed everything that the chaos was not. When Vug, Qfwfq's innamorata, sees this inflorescence, she cries out, "È primavera!"—"It's Spring!" and Qfwfq makes that an excuse to kiss her. They chase each other through forests of tree-shaped filaments of crystallized silver. Skeletal fronds of crystallized tin and lead provide their vegetation. A cascade of diamonds breaks the light into a mosaic of rainbow scales; they traverse valleys of rubies. Qfwfq dreams of a perfectly crystalline order, of what the world would have been like if it had cooled more slowly, so that all the chemical compounds had been able to sort themselves out, like growing with like. At time of telling this story, however, he lives among skyscrapers whose glass faces are only a paste of molecules, not true crystals. The orderliness of his life seems likewise inauthentic: a weekly session with a psychoanalyst for Qfwfq's wife, repetitious suppers with another couple, capitalist production and consumption, searching for parking places in Manhattan. He associates crystals with exquisite beauty, with eros, and with the love of his youth, Vug.

Crystals possess twofold powers for Calvino: orderliness and play of light, the latter including shine, mirror reflections, and refraction. The spell emanating from these qualities saturates *Il castello dei destini incrociati* and *Le città invisibili,* to name but two more

[2] All quotations from this and other cosmicomical stories come from *Cosmicomiche vecchie e nuove* (Milano: Garzanti, 1984). Where translations exist, I use those by William Weaver of *Cosmicomics* and *t zero* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968 and 1969 respectively). Passages from those stories which have not yet appeared in English I translate myself.

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examples. The lambent gold leaf on the renaissance tarot arcana provides a sheen of sensuous luxury, augmented by their being laid out in orderly patterns. Marco Polo's cities have sights noted for metallic splendor, geometric shaping, and reflections or refractions of light. Each city bears the name of a woman and hence traces of sensual desire, and each city is classified according to an elaborate scheme which—in one reconstruction—is itself crystal-like in shape.[3]

These examples illustrate the spell of orderliness and shine, and introduce us as well to the sensory enjoyments of multiplicity. Calvino's love for multiplicity is evident at many levels of his fiction: the clumping together of related stories or descriptions (the cosmicomical stories, Palomar's meditations); the descriptions of the invisible cities, each constructed from myriad concrete details; the passion for lists, especially for chaotic enumerations.[4] "Senza colori," "Le figlie della Luna," "Il cielo di pietra," "Tutto in un punto," "I meteoriti," and "Il niente e il poco"—to name but a few—feature such lists.

"La distanza della Luna" can stand as paradigm for the sensual force of such multiplicity and at the same time show how its erotic side leads to frustration, another of the categories. Qfwfq's community mounts precariously onto the Moon each month when the Moon comes closest to Earth in order to gather Moon-milk, a substance composed of "succhi vegetali, girini di rana, bitume, lenticchie, miele d'api, cristalli d'amido, uova di storione, muffe, pollini, sostanze gelatinose, vermi, resine, pepe, sali minerali, materiale di combustione" (p. 105)—"vegetal juices, tadpoles, bitumen, lentils, honey, starch crystals, sturgeon eggs, molds, pollens, gelatinous matter, worms, resins, pepper, mineral salts, combustion residue" (p. 6). As if this were not enough display of variety, the mixture suffers from the undesirable presence of such things as fingernails, sea horses, fish hooks, and cartilage. This precious mud, as Qfwfq

[3] For analyses of the cities in two dimensional and in (crystalline) three dimensional shapes, see Aurore Frasson-Marin, "Structures, signes et images dans *Les villes invisibles* d'Italo Calvino," *Revue des études italiennes,* 23 (1977), 23-48. See Mario Lavagetto, "Le carte visibili di Italo Calvino," *Nuovi Argomenti,* n.s. 31 (1973), 141-8, for a competing geometrical mapping.

[4] For Calvino's use of lists and chaotic enumerations, see Mario Boselli, "Il linguaggio dell'attesa," *Nuova Corrente,* nos. 28-9 (1963), 134-52; JoAnn Cannon, "Calvino's Latest Challenge to the Labyrinth: A Reading of *Palomar,*" *Italica,* 62.3 (1985), 189-200; and Teresa De Lauretis, "Narrative Discourse in Calvino: Praxis or Poiesis?" *PMLA,* 90.3 (1975), 414-25.

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calls it, is most effectively gathered by the Deaf One, who understands the secrets of the Moon. He knows just how to press and caress the scales protecting the lunar pulp so as to cause Moon-milk to squirt forth. In ecstatic play, the Deaf One traverses the lunar landscape in graceful pirouettes, and with fingers or bare toes, he massages the breast-like moon into yielding this treasure. In dancing fantasias, he also traverses barren fields of slippery, pale clay, impressing his celebrant body in this lunar paste. He loves the Moon and makes love to her.

Into this landscape of sensual incandescence and out of a close community rife with steamy intrigue comes Qfwfq, cleverly arranging for Signora Vhd Vhd and himself to be left behind for a lunar month. To be stranded with the object of his passions in this titillating landscape might seem an adolescent daydream, but the moment they are cut off from the Earth, the sensual bonds dissolve. Qfwfq finds to his dismay that no desire remains and he is as indifferent to his innamorata as she has been throughout to him; his every yearning thought is turned to the Earth and his hopes for returning.

This pattern of passion frustrated is the norm in Calvino's stories. In the tales featuring chaotic lists mentioned above, Qfwfq and his loved one find themselves divided by differences of taste or changes of form. He loves color, for instance, but Ayl loves colorlessness ("Senza colori"). The adored Signora Ph(i)Nk_o of "Tutto in un punto" is lost to Qfwfq when she turns into the energy-heat-light of the universe. In "Le figlie della Luna" the young women of our world transfer to a regenerated, sultry, fecundly vegetated Moon while the men are left rampaging Earth's savannahs in the form of woolly mammoths. What prompts the longing need not be sexual for Calvino to frustrate it. Marcovaldo longs for tasty food or a quiet sleep outside on a hot night, or for supermarket goods; his attempts to realize his dreams are all thwarted.

In addition to frustration, Calvino resorts to other devices for distancing the sensual. The loves of Cosimo in *Il barone rampante* illustrate two of his main techniques—danger and comedy. Cosimo's feeling for Violante is the main love of his life, and it torments him, body and soul. It is dangerous to all that he stands for, because this willful woman wants to drag Cosimo down out of the trees as proof of her power over him. They enjoy an occasional carnal embrace, but most of their meetings are marked by the strain of what he will lose if he yields to her. Dangers are even

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mortally threatening in several adventures of *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore,* where the lives of minor characters, of some protagonists of the incipits, and of the Reader himself are endangered by acts of sex.

Alternatively, in the long intervals between meetings with Violante, Cosimo satisfies his bodily urges with willing girls from the village, as is the wont of barons. He is said to prowl the trees, yowling like a tom-cat gone a-wooing, and the villagers grumble tolerantly over such caterwauling. In this fashion, Calvino reduces sex to comedy and drains sensuality of most of its tension. In *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* Alex, Valeriano, and Irina engage in an orgy, but Calvino renders it hilarious rather than stimulating with the image of Irina as a Magna Mater figurine, the snakes in her hands being her two lovers' members. Qfwfq as mollusc—whose longings (according to him) are among the most important forces of the universe—anticlimactically fertilizes his adored one's eggs by going "sfluff sfluff sfluff." The great lover, Casanova, is portrayed as comically exhausted by the social tensions of maintaining two mistresses at the same time. The non-existent knight holds off a lustful lady with disquisitions on love, with remaking the bed, with enumerations of various ways to light a fire, by undoing and redoing her coiffure and so forth. The encounter is not without sensual moments—his armored hand gently touching her hair, for instance—but the net effect is of comedy and much-diminished sensual tension.

The result of sensory experience being allowed to mount unchecked by such tactics is explosion. Were this merely orgasmic, it would presumably be enjoyable, but Calvino allows no such uncomplicated response. The explosion that transforms Signora $Ph(i)Nk_o$ into energy robs Qfwfq of her. The orgasm he approaches with Queen Or ultimately damages his mind for at the moment of consummating his marriage, Qfwfq finds the answer to his visionary quest. Unfortunately for him, he values that vision above his love, and as a result, he is savaged by the beaks and talons of the courtier birds among whom he is sojourning in this story. They tear him from his wife and toss him out of the realm of the birds forever, his memory shattered.

This fear of the explosive shows itself in non-sexual situations as well. Let me offer as final illustration "L'implosione," a story in which shine, frustration, comedy, danger, and explosion are all present. As a galactic nucleus, Qfwfq wonders, Hamlet-like,

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whether to explode or implode and thus become a white or a black hole. Being the introvert that he normally is, Qfwfq prefers the idea of implosion, but then he tries to imagine it: "assorbito dal vortice di questa galassia, riaffacciarsi su altri tempi e altri cieli? Qui sprofondare nel freddo silenzio, là esprimersi in urli fiammeggianti d'un altro linguaggio?" (pp. 217-18)—"absorbed from the vortex of this galaxy, to reappear in other times and other skies? Here to sink into cold silence, there to burst forth in the flaming screams of another language?" He wonders then if he should explode instead and muses on the language of exploders, which is the language of revolution, but realizes that an exploder's expelled matter is merely food for the kind of black hole he contemplates becoming. He oscillates comically, but finally opts to hunker down like a mole in its hole, having chosen implosion but resisting that transformation and its excessive, brimming sensations.

These, then, are the categories of sensual experience most commonly found in Calvino's fiction. I cannot say definitively why he feels compelled to curtail his expressions of such experience, but the compulsion forms part of a larger pattern in which his conscious self feels threatened with being overwhelmed. This pattern is characteristic of just about all his work and has even manifested itself in the metaphysic that he developed to express his sense of the universe.[5]

This universe divides into two, the I and the not-I, or consciousness and cosmos. That consciousness is a cogito, an entity that exists because it thinks and can be sure of existing only when thinking, applying reason, sorting impressions, and above all trying to discern pattern and meaning.[6] The cosmos can be registered by that

[5] Calvino's metaphysic is discussed in chapter two of Kathryn Hume's *Calvino's Fictions: Cogito and Cosmos* (forthcoming from Oxford University Press).

[6] Various critics have responded to Calvino's search for meaning, and some prefer to see it as a quest for psychic wholeness, or an attempt to escape alienation; I prefer the philosophical to the psychological or economic slant, but recognize that they are all interrelated. The range of identifications of Calvino's structures are as follows: Vito Amoruso, "L'armonia' di Calvino," *Nuova Corrente,* no. 14 (1959), 68-71 (integration of man and world, and alienation); Jean Baudrillard, "Les romans d'Italo Calvino," *Les Temps Modernes,* 17.192 (1962), 1728-34 (alienation); Teresa De Lauretis, "Calvino e la dialettica dei massimi sistemi," *Italica,* 53 (1976), 57-74 (the oppositions of I and not-I or individual and group as dialectic process in the fictions); Antonia Mazza, "Italo Calvino: uno scrittore dimezzato?" *Letture,* 26 (1971), 3-14 (world vs implacable observer); I. T. Olken, "*Spira mirabilis:* Italo Calvi-

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cogito in two forms, as particle or paste. If the cogito conscientiously studies the world, and if its powers of reason are fully engaged in testing a system for making sense of the universe, it normally succeeds in seeing the world in particulate form—"pulviscolo" is one of Calvino's key terms throughout both his fiction and his essays.[7] In flashes of success, the minimal units are seen as dancing. If the cogito's current system for engaging with the cosmos is proving inadequate, however, the particles merge into a paste or flux, a sea or vortex, a labyrinth or maze, and the cogito feels threatened by dissolution or drowning or becoming lost in that uncontrollable mass. The dancing quality disappears to be replaced by petrifaction. Calvino works with an astonishing array of particles or minimal units: signs, female entities, grains of sand, cities, tarot cards, neutrinos, initial chapters of novels, colors, animals, cheeses—anything that takes his fancy. In *Sotto il sole giaguaro,* the units are sounds, smells, and tastes.

Calvino's restraint and caution when facing the sensual is thus part of this larger fantastic structure governing his imagination. Crystals, for instance, though attractive to him aesthetically and because of their rigid order, are also at some point threatening because of their resemblance to petrifaction.[8] Consciousness can be threatened by multiplicity of the particles, when they become too numerous or varied or small to be properly counted and ordered. I am arguing that Calvino is not simply hostile to the senses; rather, his imagination fears engulfment in any form, and sensuality is just one kind of experience that rouses this fear.

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no's progressionary paradigms," *MLQ,* 49 (1988), 142-72 (search for coherence and understanding); Piero Raffa, "Il miraggio dell'oggettività," *Nuova Corrente,* 21 (1961), 65-72 (self and objects); Franco Ricci, "Introversion and Effacement in *I racconti* of Italo Calvino," *Italica,* 63.4 (1986), 331-45 (alienation); Claudio Varese, "Italo Calvino: Una complessa continuità," *La rassegna della letteratura italiana,* no. 84 (1980), 252-6 (evading totality); Gore Vidal, "On Italo Calvino," *New York Review of Books* (21 November 1985), 3, 6, 8-10 (the One and the Many); and J. R. Woodhouse, *Italo Calvino: A Reappraisal and an Appreciation of the Trilogy* (Hull: University of Hull, 1968) (alienation).

[7] For analysis of some of Calvino's pulviscoli, see Francesco Muzzioli, "Polvere di utopia," *Nuova Corrente,* 34.99 (1987), 147-56.

[8] As prologue to the Priscilla stories in *Ti con zero* Calvino quotes from Galileo, who suggests that cosmographers enamored with the immutability and perfection of the translunary cosmos should be exposed to the gaze of Medusa. Galileo goes on to assert that life on this planet is infinitely better in its maculate and messy form than it would be if the earth were one entire diamond.

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Facing the Senses in *Sotto il sole giaguaro*

In the realms of "Un re in ascolto," "Il nome, il naso," and "Sotto il sole giaguaro," the minimal units being systematized are sounds, odors, and flavors.[9] More than that, however, each sense functions as a filter for constructing the reality of the story; this filter lets through only those elements of the world that seem to Calvino relevant to that sense. Hence, we find him constructing several very different worlds.

The unhappy, listening king meditates upon four kinds of sounds. Daily noises of palace life let him register the slow passage of time. Trumpets at flag-raising, rumbling trucks unloading provisions, maids beating carpets, whinnies from the stables: these remind us of the infrastructure of servants and services needed to support institutions such as palace and monarch. The second set of sounds consists of knockings and bangings stemming from the dungeons deep beneath the throne room. These invoke the world of political repression, and the problem of hermeneutics: how does one decipher such an attempt to communicate? The third kind of sound is that of the city, and consists mostly of industrial din and noises of construction. The fourth is musical; the sounds of parade bands, of funeral processions, of nightclub dance music, and above all of one woman's singing voice.

In asking what conclusions can be drawn from Calvino's views on hearing, I come up with several tentative answers. One is that hearing does not produce a very stable center of consciousness. Because the story is written in the second person singular, it can be spoken by the king to the reader, from a perspective of the royal speaker looking down upon himself and commenting on his life from a distanced perspective. Or the voice can be that of an observer, speaking to or of the king, describing how the king lives in order (implicitly) to criticize or mock it. The voice may be external to him, or imagined by the king. The addressee, in other words, shimmers unstably between king and reader and the speaker may be an unknown authorial commentator, a figment of the king's imagination, or the king himself.

A firmer conclusion is that reliance on hearing, unsupplemented

[9] The editions cited are *Sotto il sole giaguaro* (Milano: Garzanti, 1986) and *Under the Jaguar Sun,* translated by William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988).

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by other senses, creates a paranoid relationship to reality. Hearing is crucial when one is in physical danger from humans or animals sneaking up through the undergrowth. Its survival value is considerably diminished in a relatively safe, suburban life, for instance, and in most regal lives, its function would have virtually nothing to do with safety. Even if the king should hear the revolutionaries' signal he so fears, and if he managed to recognize it as such, what could he do? His aural anxieties render him pointlessly miserable.

Hearing also highlights the problem of interpretation. Calvino puts this in terms of codes of enigmatic knocks, but he might equally put it in terms of spoken words, which are open to misconstruction or incomprehension or gradual deformation, as happens with rumors. Sounds are also difficult to locate; they do not seem as immediate to us as objects of sight unless a particular noise is caused by actions which we can also see. The singing woman never came into view, so the king never managed any satisfying communication with her. When not linked to sight, sound offers considerable hermeneutic problems in this story.

Finally, Calvino found himself putting a story about hearing in a context of dominance relationships to reality. The king rules. Given that he exists in a world of computers and telecommunications, his command, technically his voice, can be broadcast to sway the lives of all within his realm. When we are not aware of his sovereignty, we are reminded of his fears that others wish to displace and dominate him. We also note alternative forces capable of dominating life: the buzzing and throbbing of the city threatens to absorb all sighs, calls and sobs, all the emotions the king is feeling at the end of the story, as well, presumably, as all the emotions of the workforce serving the machinery. Calvino thus suggests realms of action in which hearing leads to tyranny. The voice conveys the tyrant's demands; hearing brings about compliance. Or the roaring machinery drowns out protest and pain.

Our sense of smell invokes a very different world, or rather, worlds, since Calvino suggests that human abilities in this realm have changed over time. To illustrate the phases, he created three narrators: a prehistoric hominid, a nineteenth-century Parisian man about town, and a contemporary rock musician in London. All three find themselves powerfully attracted to a particular woman's scent; all try to follow it, lose it in a mob scene, and when they discover it again, feel horror at its inextricable mingling with the scent of death.

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For the hominid, the odors are basic and absolute: food, nonfood; our cave or the enemy's; fruit; birds' eggs in a nest; male and female. For the punk rocker, too, most scents are simple and strong: sweat, cigarette smoke, vomit, spilt beer, and gas from a heater. When we enter the Proustian world, however, we find an elaborate mental system for ordering scent. The Parisian sensualist goes to a parfumerie for aid in his search for one woman's perfume. There the art of savoring odors is an elaborate ceremony demanding preparations. Shop girls remove his boutonniere, lacquer his moustache, and neutralize the cigar-stench clinging to his waistcoat. They tease his sexual awareness into action, to heighten his abilities to discriminate and respond. Then the proprietress of this temple helps him organize scents into distinguishable sectors. Does the fragrance have elements of cinnamon, musk, violet, or almond?

One of Calvino's conclusions seems to be that scent as organizing framework for experience is intensely personal and not readily shared with others. The hominid can only say that one female's smell seems different, aimed at him, absolute. Monsieur de Saint-Caliste finds almond and cinnamon a poor start for describing a scent that made him feel as if he were inhaling the soul of a tigress. A bit unexpectedly, the musician offers the most imaginative description. His girl has a white smell, as if from a white skin dusted with invisible freckles. Vivid, but monumentally unhelpful in all three cases: the odor of invisible freckles on white skin or of a tigress' soul will not communicate to somebody else.

The different modes of smelling create three dissimilar protagonists whose relationships to the world around them are not the same. The hominid, for whom scent is the primary sense, experiences smells as absolutes; an odor is immediately relevant to needs and survival, and it is totally understandable, or it is neutral and hardly registered. He lacks words for finer distinctions, and indeed lacks complex concepts of any sort. As he takes to trotting on his hind feet, he notes that he loses some odors but gains others, and also that he sees more with his eyes. As we can surmise, his eyes will give him a wider range of referents, more things needing words, and fewer absolutes.

The Parisian sensualist mingles the savor of various perfumes with his sexual pursuits, and lives a life full of nuanced, sharply varied, and pungent odors that convey a world with few absolutes. Since he lives before life became prepackaged and sterilized, he

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knows the stink of horse droppings and piss, the reek of nineteenth-century gutters, and the wisps of unpleasantness emanating from a human corpse as well as perfumes, but none of these reflect absolute concepts such as ours and not-ours, food and not-food. They give him a world existing apart from himself, not a world divided into the relevant or irrelevant.

The rock musician has no trouble identifying the smells of his world because he is not attempting a refined differentiation. Like the hominid's, his world is fairly simple, and consists of the unpleasant odors that come from unwashed bodies, throwing up, and gas, and from the industrial equivalents—the unwashably polluted Thames mud, thrown out fishy refuse, and toxic industrial smoke. However, like the smells of nineteenth-century Paris, these belong to a world apart from self with no absolute connections or values. Their preponderant unpleasantness, moreover, would further estrange subject from object in the world constructed by that sense.

Whereas hearing unexpectedly defined its world in terms of tyranny for Calvino, odors frame a world of sexual aggression. The hominid at one point batters and maims a sexual rival with primitive weapons, and wins the harem. The musician does not fight for his woman, but does take her sexually when she is in no state to consent. Monsieur de Saint-Caliste vows to kill the shadowy man attached to his sought-for lady. While his relationship with her seems superficially chivalric, his relations with many women about Paris, including several at the parfumerie, are overtly exploitive. He evidently enjoys his life as a voluptuary, but is a well-educated, somewhat selfish brute. His refinement of palate has brought no refinement of spirit. Even with the etherialized spectrum of perfumes, he seeks their sexual uses, and for him sex means exploitation and aggression.

Overall in "Il nome, il naso" the ultimate smells are sexual attractants, edibles, dangers (including industrial wastes), and death. Though occasionally protective, our sense of smell does not lead to many cultural creations, perhaps because we have not managed to make it shareable or recordable or reproducible. A civilization that was safe and pleasant would make a nose practically unnecessary. Our shift from nose to eye as dominant sense has widened a gap between self and surrounds, and augmented what in the West has been felt as a split between subject and object. One can say of this sense that it does not lend itself to large-scale tyranny, but it does lead fairly directly to personal exploitation, possibly because smells

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operate over a relatively short distance, unlike the voice. When considering the ramifications of odor, Calvino does not push beyond the bounds of ordinary Western experience; he does not speculate about aromas used to create positive cultural artifacts, medicine ("aroma therapy"), say, or scent-music. We get no olfactory Bach creating a coffee cantata using fresh-roasted aromas. Scent in this story remains closely allied to aggression and squalor, a piece of psychological insight that chimes with the anal-stage impulses which are generally held to influence our responses to smells.

Of the three senses explored in this collection, taste generates the most complex fictive realm. In "Sotto il sole giaguaro" taste not only invokes food, predictably enough, but also religion, death, politics, the nature of a cogito's mental operations, female companionship, and infantile anxieties—a range that makes tyranny and sexual aggression pale by comparison.

In order to find a vocabulary for flavors, Calvino drew on many modes of experience. Music provides modulations, chords, dissonances. Textures and flavors mingle in fatness and softness, harshness and bitterness, only to slide into the vaguely sexual with "un-'arrendevolezza cremosa e dolcigna" (p. 31)—"a creamy, sweetish surrender" (p. 5), terms variously used to describe guacamole and chiles en nogada. Sexual overtones resonate when the pleasures of the table are transferred by the protagonist and Olivia to bed and then back to the table. Many of the ingredients are indigenous to the New World, but the forms given to them reflect the religious fantasies of sophisticated nuns, their needs for bliss and transfigurations, martyrdoms and torments. Thus the pagan Aztec spicy chilis and Christian baroque architecture reinforce each other's flaming ecstasies in Calvino's attempts to find an answerable vocabulary for the food.

As in the stories about sounds and smells, pursuit of the featured sense leads to the threat of death. The traveler is launched into this threatening vortex by some questions from Olivia about the ancient religious sacrifices and sacred cannibalism practiced by the pre-Columbian cultures. In pursuing information on this subject, he imagines himself being sacrificed by a Mayan priest-king, and also daydreams about being eaten by Olivia. Though he totters on the brink of imagined death in both Mayan and modern fantasy, he somehow retains consciousness and avoids the dissolution of the cogito that threatens in so much of Calvino's fiction.

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Food at a tea-party provides Calvino with an opening for assessing modern politics. While the couple's friend discourses upon ancient religious cannibalism, the ominous sounds of scraping knives nudge us to wonder who might be the victims now. Is it all of those present, or perhaps the few men among the many women? They submit themselves to the cloying protocols of such social affairs, feeling smothered in the fluttery tinkle composed of voices, cutlery, and clinking china, a sound that is likened to the vortices of a cascade—vortex being an important Calvinian term for the ravening flux capable of drawing one in and drowning one. Are they victims because they agree to measure out their lives in coffee spoons? Or are the victims unseen, the peasants and Indians marginalized by the bourgeois political structure? The women at the party eat cake; are they Marie Antoinette, indifferent to the plight of the poor?

Olivia also pulls modern politics into the ambit of taste when she remarks that we still tear one another apart but pretend not to taste the flavors any more. Whether her specific target is bourgeois society, Western technological society, or Capitalism remains unclear; as a general statement about European society, however, it seems clear from context that she sees cannibalism as an apt symbol for its mode of operation. Pursuit of the idea of taste has led to a symbolic rendition of society's repressions and injustices.

Sex is another direction in which their exploration of taste leads them. The act of chewing and savoring becomes distinctly orgasmic in the protagonist's fantasy of being eaten:

> Era la sensazione dei suoi denti nella mia carne che stavo immaginando, e sentivo la sua lingua sollevarmi contro la volta del palato, avvolgermi di saliva, poi spingermi sotto la punta dei canini. . . . Situazione non completamente passiva in quanto mentre venivo masticato da lei sentivo anche che agivo su di lei, le trasmettevo sensazioni che si propagavano dalle papille della bocca per tutto il suo corpo, che ogni sua vibrazione ero io a provocarla: era un rapporto reciproco e completo che ci coinvolgeva e travolgeva.
>
> Mi ricomposi; ci ricomponemmo. (pp. 50-51)

> It was the sensation of her teeth in my flesh that I was imagining, and I could feel her tongue lift me against the roof of her mouth, enfold me in saliva, then thrust me under the tips of the canines. . . . The situation was not entirely passive, since while I was being chewed by her I felt also that I was acting on her, transmitting sensations that spread from the

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> taste buds through her whole body. I was the one who aroused her every vibration—it was a reciprocal and complete relationship, which involved us and overwhelmed us.
>
> I regained my composure; so did she. (p. 23)

This gustatory orgasm, or another like it involving a dish named "plump girls pinched with butter" resolves the sexual aridity that had temporarily been blighting the relationship, and they find again their horizontal inspiration.

Taste also leads Calvino to explore the pleasures of female companionship in a fashion unmatched elsewhere in his fiction. Only Ludmilla of *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* is adequately fleshed out among his previous female characters, and she and her Reader are only starting a relationship whereas Olivia is an active, appreciated, interesting, challenging participant in and tart commentator upon a long-standing partnership. When the protagonist and Olivia both eat guacamole, the act is shared much as if they were reading the same book. Her questions are what start him on the trail of cannibalism and its relationship to questions of taste; it is she who sharpens his awareness of what they do, of flavors, of the cultures they learn about. She facilitates the interactions between the I and the non-I for the protagonist, and heightens his perceptions of what he finds.

Taste also leads Calvino to probe psychological tensions. Anxieties of being engulfed and overwhelmed are common to most of his fictions, but this is the first (and last) in which he traced that image to its oral source and put it boldly in oral terms. Nor are oral anxieties the only ones tested. Taste and its ancient framework of sacrifice and cannibalism lead the protagonist to imagine himself slashed open by a priest-king, that his beating heart might be torn out. In fairy-tale terms, the cannibalistic priest-king is the man-eating giant or ogre who embodies infantile fears of the father and resistance to his order. Calvino's images usually exhibit more anxiety and strain in the face of this paternal threat, and more hostility towards it. Here he relaxes rather than struggle; he is sacrificed—and yet survives, just as being eaten by Olivia is both a process experienced and something survived. Calvino is generally uninterested in psychology as a facet of literature. In one of his journalistic essays, he dreamily remarks when viewing the preserved skin flayed from a young man, that he has never felt any attraction toward innards or toward psychological interiority, hence his fas-

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cination with this man who is all extension, with nothing hidden.[10] He is presumably not consciously putting such psychological material into his fiction; taste, though, leads him to his most overt and most successful confrontation with a set of anxieties that recur in much of his fiction.[11]

This story is much the sunniest of the three, despite the threats to existence. As the protagonist tries to absorb flavors, he finds that they pull him into wider vortices; the tastes join surging, formless energies—solar energy as it enters vegetal lymph, that in turn becomes one with blood; chemical energy in hot peppers that blasts one to incandescence; religious energy that bursts forth as architecture and cuisine; political energy that devours sacrificial victims; and erotic energy. Each time taste directs him to one of these energy fields, he faces a universe not reducible to discrete quanta (which this cogito would prefer), but rather a flux of currents and vortices. However, he seems to feel almost charged with their energy instead of being simply consumed by it. Cannibalism remains a negative facet of taste—taste can thus lead to a dominance relationship—but this is partly balanced by the non-dominance relationship established with Olivia.

Lacking the fourth and fifth stories, we can say little about Calvino's overall project. The extant stories offer no immediate answers, but suggest some interesting directions for his thought. We can see, for instance, that the senses, if made too prominent in our means of assimilating the world, lead to violent and mostly dominance-seeking relations with reality.

The difficulty in identifying a self in "Un re in ascolto" and the multiplicity of selves in "Il nome, il naso," taken with the spectrum

[10] "Il museo dei mostri di cera" in *Collezione di sabbia* (Milano: Garzanti, 1984), pp. 31-6. William Weaver has translated this story as "Looking at Dr. Spitzner's Waxworks," *Antæus*, no. 40-41 (1981), 526-30.

[11] Critics who comment on psychological material in Calvino's stories include Giovanni Falaschi, "Ritratti critici di contemporanei: Italo Calvino," *Belfagor*, 27 (1972), 530-58 (castration anxieties); Aurore Frasson-Marin, *Italo Calvino et L'imaginaire* (Genève-Paris: Editions Slatkine, 1986) (various Jungian archetypes and schizomorphic images inter alia); Marilyn Migiel, "The Phantasm of Omnipotence in Calvino's Trilogy," *Modern Language Studies*, 16.3 (1986), 57-68 (omnipotence fantasies of the phallic stage); Giuliana Sanguinetti Katz, "Le 'adolescenze difficili' di Italo Calvino," *Quaderni d'italianistica*, 5 (1984), 247-61 (failure of various characters to reach post-oedipal maturity); and Marilyn Schneider, "Calvino's Erotic Metaphor and the Hermaphroditic Solution," *Stanford Italian Review*, 2 (1981), 93-118 (male-female imagery, castration anxieties).

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of protagonists called into being in the whole project, suggest that the senses activate different kinds of selves within us. One conclusion might be that human nature derives some of its contradictions from ways in which our senses process data and make it assimilable. Each sense urges us toward a different mode of action, toward mutually exclusive ways of responding to the world. Each sense tries to make us into a different kind of person. Individuals might evince particular characteristics if they were notably biased toward one sense. Cultures might differ with regard to the senses most valued. Calvino's hominid hints at the effects of such specialization, as he begins the shift from nose to eyes.

Implicit too is the conclusion that the senses do not, taken together, offer a well-integrated system for organizing reality. If we simply depend on them, we will be driven in opposing directions and will have no overall program to rely upon. We will be at the mercy of the vortices of sensation into which they draw us. The vortices themselves lead to further destabilization. In "Un re in ascolto" we find the statement, "La notte è esplosa, rovesciata dentro se stessa. Buio e silenzio precipitano dentro se stessi e gettano fuori il loro rovescio di fuoco e d'urla" (p. 88)—"The night has exploded, turned inside out. Darkness and silence plunge into themselves and throw out their reverse of fire and screams" (p. 59)—the plunging into the vortex of self echoes that of "L'implosione" quoted earlier. Other forms of experience prompt Calvino to depict annihilation in terms of mazes or the ocean; the senses seem for him particularly associated with the vortex, and with violent transformation into the opposite of all that one stands for rationally.

In *Palomar,* another creation from late in Calvino's life, we find a cogito rather like the protagonist of "Sotto il sole giaguaro." He has a fairly clear sense of a code of reason and control governing the impulses, and tries to live by it, biting his tongue rather than answer hastily or in anger, for instance. Perhaps what the unfinished collection of stories offers is some unusual reasons for why Calvino sees such control as desirable or necessary. When he projects himself into the senses through his writing, he finds them not just disturbingly potent but contradictory in their aims and natural goals. He also finds them conducive to tyranny—not enslavement of self (a common objection), but of others, a radical and perhaps upsetting insight. Tyranny is something he was much concerned to

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avoid, as seen in his own evolving philosophy for relating to the world.[12]

In his earlier works, we find him curtailing sensuality out of anxiety and out of motives he may well not have been conscious of. With *Sotto il sole giaguaro,* however, he courageously faces the anxiety directly—oral engulfment. He plunges into the realm behind the barrier erected by those anxieties. One result is "Sotto il sole giaguaro" itself, surely among the very best of his stories, endowed with many concerns and levels which I have not touched on in this study limited to the senses. Another is the degree to which these three stories clarify the relationship between sensuality and the symbolic structures of Calvino's imagination. Given the cosmic nature of his chief metaphysical images, particle and flux, we can better understand sensuality in his scheme of things when we note the cosmic shape—vortices—that the senses take in his fantastic rendition of reality.

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[12] For a detailed discussion of Calvino on tyranny, see chapter seven of *Calvino's Fictions: Cogito and Cosmos.*

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