The Genera of “Invisible Cities”

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Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* is a complex book, consisting of stories stitched together by Marco Polo and told to a great emperor, Kublai Kahn. This piece of literature is unlike other works because of its unique organization, subtle hidden meanings, and overall difficulty to understand. *Invisible Cities* is, undoubtedly, unclassifiable into one single genera. The story, presented in the form of a novel, contains many elements that differentiate it from the normal idea of a novel, mainly focusing on the fact that the type and attitude of the literature shifts during the story. Nevertheless, there are three main literary generas that I feel encapsulate *Invisible Cities* – poetry, short fiction, and the novel.

There is no doubt in my mind that poetry had a chief influence over *Invisible Cities*. Even though the book is presented as prose, from the radical and beautiful descriptions to the short and almost coded, yet vivid imagery, it seems certain that Calvino was experienced in poetry and used his knowledge and love of the art to craft this novel. For example, in one description he wrote, “one city was depicted by the leap of a fish escaping the cormorant’s beak to fall into a net; another city by a naked man running through fire unscorched; a third by a skull, its teeth green with mold, clenching a round, white pearl” (21-22). Although the description might not follow specific poetic rules, if one broke up the sentence at the semi-colons and presented it as free verse, I don’t think anyone would argue that it wasn’t, in its entirety, its own form of poetry. There is beautifully vivid imagery, condensed word usage and breaks in the sentence that all gives the impression of prose begging to become poetry. While Calvino certainly did not make it obvious (he disregards hitting his reader over the head with rhymes or meter), there is definitely a strong poetic undercurrent that seems to have inspired this work.

The book is not all poetry, however, and in fact – structure-wise – is composed primarily of short fiction. The book is full of stories told by Marco Polo of many cities, commonly referenced as being visited by a “traveler” (30), or a “man who is traveling” (34). The formation of these small stories into one larger book gives the impression that Calvino also had experience with short fiction. This genera is highly prevalent in the book, and in fact is a tool Calvino uses to carve out his story in a new, unique way. Married with many poetic descriptions, these short stories become beautiful works of literature all on their own. It is only together, however, that Calvino is able to craft a larger story.

In truth, the novel is the genera that *Invisible Cities* boils down to – without the larger picture, we have no story (confusing as that story is) – no Kublai Khan or Marco Polo. In fact, Calvino even has an omniscient narrator that he uses to give us insight into Khan and Polo’s minds multiple times throughout the story. For example, at one spot he says, “The Venetian knew that when Kublai became vexed with him, the emperor wanted to follow more clearly a private train of thought; so Marco’s answers and objections took their place in a discourse already proceeding on its own, in the Great Khan’s head” (27). We wouldn’t know these dynamics were going on without the narrator. If the narrator wasn’t there, it would seem much more like a play – with long dialogues of Polo telling stories. However, we see here instead that the material between the stories is much more like a novel than a play, and truly acts as the glue that holds the book together and allows the reader to make sense of the whole thing.