

# IF ON A WINTER'S NIGHT A TRAVELER AND MR. PALOMAR: SUBVERSIONS OF AUTONOMY AND BEAUTY

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between literature and politics in two novels by Italo Calvino. It addresses the criticisms that contend that Calvino's work ignores political, social and moral issues by demonstrating that these influences are pervasive in his writing. At the same time, Calvino sees these influences as obstacles and attempts to overcome or think beyond them. Three contentious concepts help examine this conflict: aesthetic autonomy, beauty and transcendence. Calvino's attitudes toward these concepts change over time, dividing his career into three distinct phases. In the first period, his fiction is unabashedly motivated by politics. In the second phase, Calvino rejects the idea that literature can wield political influence. Finally, towards the end of his life, Calvino's position becomes more complex and conflicted. This paper discusses this complexity in Calvino's novels *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* and *Mr. Palomar*. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* contains intricate musings on aesthetic autonomy, while *Mr. Palomar* delves into confusion about beauty. These two novels reflect his anxiety and indecision about the tangled interrelations of politics and art.

**Keywords:** aesthetic autonomy, beauty, lightness, transcendence

*If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* contains valuable insights into Italo Calvino's views about aesthetic autonomy. It has been called, among other things, a work of "metafiction," a "hypernovel" (McLaughlin 116) and a "para critical" text (de Lauretis 132). Essentially it is a book that comments on both itself and the act of writing in general. This self-reflexiveness might be seen as an embrace of autonomy and a rejection of social and political drives. However, Calvino does not use this format to create distance or evoke a transcendent state; instead, he attempts to make some statements about literature and its relationship to transcendence and the diverse effects of that relationship on authors, readers and critics.

Indeed the book is heavy with the presence of both readers and authors. Chapter eight is subtitled "From the diary of Silas Flannery", who, we learn, is an Irish author of detective novels. Silas is Calvino's most apparent alter ego in the book: at the end of chapter eight, Silas plans to write a novel in which "the protagonist [is] a Reader who is continually interrupted." (197). This is, of course, a description of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. Silas also suffers from writer's block, calling attention to Calvino's admission in chapter one that he "hadn't published for several years" (4).

It is clear from these parallels that Silas's attitudes about autonomy are essential in order to grasp Calvino's critical position fully. Silas reacts unfavourably to any superficial reading—indeed, any outside force at all—that impacts his writing. He meets a group of boys who believe that "inhabitants of other planets want to use him for communication" (183). He fears "these young people will be disappointed", and this causes him to "feel certain sorrow" (184). He encounters a woman named Lotaria who analyses his works using a computer. Silas bemoans this, too: "The idea that Lotaria reads my books in this way creates some problems for me. Now, every time I write a word, I see it spun around by the electronic brain" (188). He sums up the demands on him in one passage:

Strange people circulate in this valley: literary agents awaiting my new novel, for which they have already collected advances from publishers all over the world; advertising agents who want my characters to wear certain articles of clothing and drink certain fruit juices; electronic technicians who insist on finishing my unfinished novels with a computer. I try to go out as little as possible; I avoid the village; if I want to take a walk, I choose the mountain trails. (183)

The cumulative effect of the outside world on Silas is paralysis; he cannot write. The only thing that heartens him is the image of a woman reading, whom he sees through his spyglass. This is Ludmilla, the "good" sister of Lotaria and the Other Reader whose presence complements that of the male Reader, but to Silas, she is "the operation of reading turned into a natural process" (169). Because their communication is one-way, she imposes no particular reading on his book. She is passive, allowing Silas to keep his precious distance and his cherished autonomy.

However, is not Calvino relinquishing his distance by putting a character like himself in his novel? Perhaps, but what Calvino had said elsewhere confirms that he is, at least in part, in agreement with his alter ego. It is a lightness that compels and assists his writing here, and he discusses how the former, weighty element hindered him in the early stages of his career: "I became aware that between the facts of life that should have been my raw materials and the quick light touch I wanted for my writing, there was a gulf that cost me increasing effort to cross" (*Memos* 4). Calvino describes a kind of personal ritual to preserve his creative process. His final solace in the permanence of images undimmed by reality—the idea of autonomy—brings him comfort. This reveals an important distinction: even if aesthetic autonomy is invalid from a critical standpoint, it may still be viable and vital from the writer's perspective or for anyone else profoundly involved with or indebted to creative processes. This is precisely why Silas Flannery, an extreme version of Calvino, feels the need to retreat from the world.

This justification for autonomy may be somewhat recursive because it affirms Calvino's method of writing but says nothing about the value of his output. One possible source of value for *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* is that it comments on its autonomy instead of simply attempting to be an autonomous text. Since the possibility of transcendence is a debatable and relevant part of the discourse, this stance is supported by how Calvino complicates his version of autonomy from the more straightforward version I have given above.

I have mentioned how Calvino tempers lightness with respect for weight, but there is even a third element at work here. In *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, Ermes Marana is the foil that complicates Silas Flannery's inaffectual autonomy. Ermes is a translator whose mission is to permeate the world with apocrypha and has already manufactured countless imitation Flannery books. He is presented in the novel as mimesis, an enemy of both Author and Reader, who makes "whatever he touches, if it isn't false already, become...false" (152). For Ermes, "artifice", not art, is truth; Wiley Feinstein calls him "the pessimistic individual who has given up all illusions about a positive side to literature" (Feinstein 149). This portrayal makes him appear nothing like Calvino at first glance. However, when one considers the translator's namesake, the trickster god Hermes, we discover that Ermes personifies another of Calvino's favoured Greek mythological figures. In his essay on "quickness", Calvino writes:

All of the subjects I have dealt with [in this essay], and perhaps those from [the last one], might indeed be united in that they are all under the sign of an Olympian god whom I particularly honour: Hermes-Mercury, god of communication and meditation...inventor of writing...with his winged feet, light and airborne, astute, agile, adaptable, free and easy. (Memos 51-52)

While Calvino's physical description of Hermes is similar to that of Perseus, in practice, his function is quite different regarding autonomy. While "lightness" might be characterised as a search for autonomy, "quickness" is the principle that defeats it, that flees from the transcendent moment as soon as it becomes possible.

This balance of forces manifests itself in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* when Calvino casts doubts on his ideas. Teresa de Lauretis notes that Ludmilla, who "positively refuses to have anything to do with writing", is a manifestation of an impulse to exclude women from the creative act (de Lauretis 141). However, strangely enough, Calvino's characters speak the same sentiment at points. Ludmilla's sister Lotaria is one of these characters. She is the woman who processes Silas Flannery's books via computer and represents a critical voice in the novel. She first appears in chapter four at an academic "seminar on the feminist revolution" (73) and resurfaces at points to challenge the viewpoints of the author and reader figures in the novel. In chapter eight, Lotaria describes her sister's philosophy as "a passive way of reading, escapist and regressive" (185). This is an indication that, in some sense, de Lauretis's reading is already contained in Calvino's writing. However, a large part of Lauretis's issue with the novel is the way Lotaria is portrayed—she is "masculine", "castrating", and generally "the negative image of Woman" (de Lauretis 138-139). Even the introductory physical description of her is rather unflattering: "a girl...with a long neck and a bird's face, a steady, bespectacled gaze, a great clump of curly hair" and so on (73). Compare this to the first description of Ludmilla, the "passive" sister: "huge, swift eyes, the complexion of good tone and pigment, a richly waved haze of hair" (29).

Does this relatively negative portrayal of Lotaria makes her irredeemable or does it merely establish her status as an antagonist? We have already seen that Calvino empathises and even identifies with his antagonists, and the insults lobbed at Lotaria in the book are not any worse than those hurled at Ermes Marana, who speaks for Calvino as much as Silas Flannery does. Therefore it makes sense that Lotaria also speaks for Calvino.

Lotaria might best be described as the personification of Calvino's self-doubt. When the love story between the Reader and Ludmilla the Other Reader is consummated, Calvino compares the act of sex to "reading another human being"—a comparison that ostensibly puts man and woman on equal footing and allows the author to draw lofty parallels between love and literature (155). However, as de Lauretis observes, when a love scene between the Reader and Lotaria occurs, "it is a matter of sex—crude, violent and conventionally 'erotic'" (de Lauretis 140). This casts a pall of suspicion over the lofty aspirations of the previous love scene. At the same Lotaria challenges the interpretation of sex as "just sex" as she throws herself at the stunned Reader: "The body signifies! Communicates! Shouts! Protests! Subverts!" (219) Lotaria also wears a series of disguises that the Reader attempts to disassemble so that the confusion of multiple meanings coincides with a confusion of multiple identities:

With a frantic hand, you unbutton the white smock of Sheila, the programmer, and you discover the police uniform of Alfonsina; you rip Alfonsina's gold buttons away, and you find Corinna's anorak; you pull the zipper of Corinna, and you see the chevrons of Ingrid....(218)

De Lauretis reads this scene in its entirety as evidence that Calvino is "unaware that there are women readers...who simply have no interest in men or men's desire" and attributes this to either "narcissism", "homophobia", or "a rather shocking cultural naivete" (de Lauretis 139). However, the surreal nature of the scenario tells us that it represents a kind of fantasy world. Calvino recognises a male fantasy when he sees it and points this out while cleverly shifting blame for the situation to the Reader:

Reader, what are you doing? Aren't you going to resist? Aren't you going to escape? Ah, you are participating... Ah, you fling yourself into it, too... You are the absolute protagonist of this book very well, but do you believe that gives you the right to have carnal relations with all the female characters? (219)

While the narrator seems to chastise the Reader, the "too" betrays something else. Something else is wrapped up in this scenario... Is it Lotaria? Or is Calvino referring to himself? In a way, the questions asked of the Reader all indiscriminate the author. This is Calvino's intent—it is no accident. If this scene comes off as ridiculous, it is self-consciously so. It purposely complicates any external reading of the text because the text is already reading itself in multiple ways.

Ludmilla the Other Reader also steps out of her formulaic role to become a more complicated presence. According to Lotaria, Ludmilla "insists it is better not to know authors personally" (185-86), but she decided to meet Silas Flannery anyway, seemingly against the principle. What happens next is significant. Silas is dismayed by Ludmilla's attitude toward him; she sees him as a "personalised graphic energy, ready to shift from the unexpressed into writing an imaginary world that exists independently" of him (190). This leads Silas to attempt to personalise their relationship, to dismantle the boundaries between reader and author: "Communication can be established at various levels," I start explaining; I approach her with movements surely hasty, but the visual and tactile images whirling in my mind urge me to eliminate all separation and all delay" (191). Ludmilla refuses his advances because "it would have no relevance to the problem we were discussing" (191). But even before this, Silas's fantasy falls apart. In fact, he is embarrassed while making the advances, "uttering sentences whose complete foolishness [he] recognise[s]" (191). Calvino, like Silas, is aware of the possible foolishness of his attitudes about gender and demonstrates this awareness throughout the novel. In this way, by containing many possible readings, Calvino's novel obscures a definitive reading of itself, just as Ermes obscures definitive authors. De Lauretis, even as she criticises the author's attitudes, perhaps puts it best: Calvino's writing "does not simply inscribe received popular wisdom, but engages contemporary theories of signification" (de Lauretis 141).

Until now, I have been refuting or diverting the claims de Lauretis makes about Calvino, but in a sense, all her criticisms are correct. While the novel indeed contains some of Calvino's cleverest, wittiest writing, it is also, in a sense, his "ugliest" work. Even setting aside the dubious attitudes toward gender that lie dormant in work, an ugliness runs deeper. Gone are the transcendent

reveries that appear in his earlier work; the characters, particularly Silas, struggle with issues of autonomy that never entirely escape, and the whole book, while it carefully eschews realism, seems mired in reality.

There are moments when the book seems to rise above this mire. At specific points, revelations or transformations occur, as if the text were struggling to bend toward something more redeeming, something universal. Many of the interrupted stories within the novel contain such a revelation. "I sensed at once that in the perfect order of the universe, a breach had opened, an irreparable rent"(67). "Now it seems that everything that surrounds me is a part of me, that I have managed to become the whole, finally..." (168). However, these are precise moments when the stories are interrupted, almost as if Calvino is embarrassed by what he has written. Alternatively, perhaps he feels that only the revelations are essential and that what comes after is immaterial. Either way, these transformational instants are always framed by sections of the meta-novel, the Reader's story. Because these moments are contained within a larger structure, the sense of transformation they invoke seems false; Calvino does not allow them to exist "outside" the frame of the text, and thus, they lose their transcendent qualities.

The novel's frame story, the Reader's tale, ends strangely. At the end of his journeys, the Reader finds himself, appropriately enough, in a library, where he converses with other readers. When he expresses his frustration at being unable to finish any of the stories he has started to read, one of the readers accosts him:

Do you believe that every story must have a beginning and an end? In ancient times a story could end only in two ways: having passed all the tests, the hero and the heroine married, or else they died. The ultimate meaning to which all stories refer has two faces: the continuity of life and the inevitability of death. (259)

This conception of literature seems bleak and totalitarian. All stories must have one of two meanings, which are themselves only faces of one meaning. Therefore, why have beginnings or endings, which serve only to down stories like dead butterflies? It appears as though Calvino has found a way to step outside and transcend this dreary stasis. By not finishing his stories, he allows them to escape the totality of meaning described here.

Unfortunately, the Reader's story, unlike the others in the book, must end. The narrator addresses him: "You stop for a moment to reflect on these words. Then, in a flash, you decide you want to marry Ludmilla" (259). And he does. Calvino concludes this convoluted tale with a flash of wit and a knowing smile. However, his chosen route seems facile and, therefore, unsatisfying. Instead of opening up into new spaces, his novel ends with an invocation of the common literary trope, a cliché. After placing such importance on stories without endings, he forfeits this position by this story an ending. He does so with a certain amount of irony and deftness, but this is a small consolation. The quick and light movements of Calvino's hand in the act of writing disguise the fact that he was not sure he could live up to his own experience. A palpable fear hides behind the writing in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. However, what, exactly, is Calvino afraid of? Is he afraid of someone like de Lauretis finally understanding him, reading him all too well? Or is he afraid of being misconstrued?

Calvino's fears of being misunderstood are certainly reflected in Mr. Palomar. We know precious little about Palomar, but we can piece together a picture from clues scattered throughout the book. He is male; he broods on "the difficulty of speaking to young" and therefore is not young himself (106). Calvino establishes this fact without revealing Palomar's exact age or generation. Mr Palomar is tired of life—towards the end of the book, he decides that "he will act as if he were dead, to see how the world gets along without him"—but this could just as quickly be a condition of middle age as of old age (121). All that can be said is that he is "not young".

Similarly, Palomar's occupation is alluded to but not specified. He is "lucky" because "he can say he is working in places and attitudes that would suggest complete repose; or, rather, he suffers this handicap: he feels obligated never to stop working, even when lying under the trees on an August morning" (22). This suggests the attitude of a writer or artist or at least some kind of thinker. In other words, like Silas Flannery, Palomar, the character invites comparisons to Calvino, the author. At the same time, Mr. Palomar has an anonymous or generic quality akin to that of the Reader, Calvino's Everyman. Calvino wants us to identify with Palomar (and by proxy with himself), but the author also places us at a careful or ironical distance from the character.

This is in part because Palomar is distanced from himself. Calvino called Mr Palomar a series of "exercises in the description" or observation (Memos 75). It is helpful to recall that Palomar is also the name of a famous telescope since, in each section of the book, Mr Palomar attempts to perceive something external, something outside himself. This perception is ruined or complicated when Palomar realises that he is impartially part of the situation he is trying to observe. In "The Cheese Museum", Palomar, while shopping, is confronted by a dizzying array of fancy cheeses. For him, the shop becomes "a dictionary; the language is the system and hopes to discover an absolute choice, the identification of the cheese that is his alone" (72). Amid this reverie, he reaches the front of the line, and an employee calls him: "Monsieur! Hoo there! Monsieur!" (74). Palomar panics and ends up ordering the most "obvious" and "banal" cheeses, despite the urge to diversify his knowledge (75). That is just one example of a changing environment upsetting the order of Palomar's mind.

Awareness of his changing surroundings causes Mr Palomar to reevaluate his opinions continually. His first observational exercise, called "Reading a wave," is to look at the sea and distinguish "one individual wave" from the rest (3). He starts with simple visual observation but soon decides to "cannot observe a wave without bearing in mind the complex features that concur in shaping it" (4). He then turns his attention to two waves coming into contact with one another and finds that in order to "understand the composition of a wave", he must also consider these "opposing thrusts" (5). Seen from different directions, the overlapping of several waves seems "broken down into sections that rise and vanish" (6). Finally, observing the "reflux of every wave... that hinders the oncoming waves", Palomar concludes that "the truth movement is the one that begins from the shore and goes out to sea" (7). However, instead of being satisfied with making the waves travel backwards in his mind, he leaves "even more unsure about everything" (8). One of Mr Palomar's fundamental qualities is constant scepticism about his observations. Alternatively, we can say that he is in a perpetual state of self-acknowledged error.

Palomar's behaviour in "The Naked Bosom" is no different. This chapter features Mr Palomar walking "walking along a lonely beach," observing a "young woman... lying on the sand taking the sun, her bosom bared" (9). Since Mr Palomar's attitude undergoes a series of revisions and refinements as he attempts to find a proper reaction to this "pleasing" sight, it is a story concerned with errors about beauty (11). Before progressing too far into this story, I would like to take a small but significant detour. Another writer I have mentioned also discusses errors in beauty in great depth. Elaine Scarry points to events in Homer's *Odyssey* as examples of how errors about beauty occur. Surprisingly, she views these errors as positive things. When Odysseus is washed up on a beach in Phaeacia and meets Nausicaa, he is immediately struck by her beauty and commits one such error:

I have never laid eyes on anyone like you,  
 Neither man nor woman...  
 I look at you, and a sense of wonder takes me. Wait,  
 Once I saw the like—in Delos, beside Appolo's altar—  
 The young slip of a palm tree springing into the light. (6.175-9)

According to Scarry, in this case, the error happens because Odysseus initially believes that Nausicaa's beauty has no precedent when he finds such a precedent seconds later. On the one hand, Scarry attributes this to the way beauty "fills the mind and breaks all frames" (23). She uses this error to identify the three qualities of beauty that are central to her argument: it is "sacred," "unprecedented", and "life-saving" (23-24). On the other hand, she is forced to acknowledge that Odysseus's speech—his "hymn to beauty"—was not spontaneously inspired by beauty alone (26). Odysseus is quite strategic when he wonders which action will result in the best possible response from Nausicaa. His calculated thought process is reflected in a moment's paralysis before he takes action:

Should he fling his arms around her knees, the young beauty,  
 Plead for help, or stand back, plead with a winning word,  
 Beg her to lead him to the town and lend him clothing. (6.156-8)

Scarry insists that this aspect of his character, "endearing, sly and suave," does not distract from the meaning of the speech (6.162). She suggests a reversal of roles: just as Odysseus's "hymn to beauty can be seen as an element subordinate to the larger frame of his calculation for reentering the human community, so the narrative of calculation can be seen as subordinate to the hymn of beauty"(27)Odysseus's reaction she contends, literalises the typical reaction to the beauty that have by emphasising the care we must take when we encounter it; otherwise, we become cut off from it" and "feel its removal as a retraction of life " (27-28). Scarry emphasises Odysseus's words rather than the deliberation that bore them into being; in other words, she emphasises action over thought. But what about Calvino's Homeric retelling? This is precisely what "The Naked Bosom" now appears to be: like Odysseus, Palomar stumbles upon a great beauty and becomes caught up in the struggle to find the best way to pay homage to it. Moreover, as in the *Odyssey*, Palomar is a man, his object of observation, a woman, and a beach, the location of their meeting. However, the focus of "The Naked Bosom" is neither action nor speech; Palomar never utters a word to the girl while passing along the shore. Instead, it is an extrapolation of what takes up three lines in Homer's original and what Scarry finds inconsequential: that moment of uncertainty.

When he first notices the young sunbathing, Palomar averts his eyes as he passes. After he has done this, however, he reconsiders his action. He realises that "not looking presupposes...thinking of that nakedness" and decides that this is "an indiscreet and reactionary attitude" (10). He walks past again, this time regarding the woman and the scenery around her with "impartial uniformity" (10). Already Palomar is asking a version of Odysseus's question: should he look at or look away? However, he is also dissatisfied with his second answer to the question. To him, it means "flattening the human person to the level of things, considering it an object" (10). So, naturally, he walks by again, allowing himself a darting glance at the woman's bosom as a gesture of appreciation and acknowledgement. However, even if this is not enough, he decides. His glance could be construed to reflect an "attitude of superiority" or an underestimation of the woman's beauty. The fourth and final time he walks by, he resolves to let his eyes "linger on the breast with special consideration" (11).

This series of reactions seems to demonstrate another quality of beauty identified by Scarry: it "incites deliberation" (Scarry 28). Scarry says perceiving beauty encourages "self-correction and self-adjustment" (29). Furthermore, this is a "key element" of beauty because the initial distorted reaction to a beautiful thing leaves a strong imprint (29). Beauty instantly "fills the perceiver with a sense of conviction about that beauty, a wordless certainty" (29).

However, the errors about beauty Palomar makes are not the ones Scarry identifies. As I have noted, "The Naked Bosom" focuses on uncertainty. Palomar is not immediately convinced of anything; instead, his whole train of thought seems to be an attempt to recover the sense of conviction that Scarry takes for granted. On Palomar's final journey across the beach, he does an about-face and walks with firm steps, and it seems for a moment that he has succeeded in reconstructing this attitude. However, when he reaches this point, he is not allowed to act upon his newfound conviction; as he approaches, the woman gets up and covers herself, "shrugging in irritation, as if she were avoiding the tiresome insistence of satyr" (12). This is an exact inversion of the *Odyssean* version of events; with his ulterior motives and careful mannerisms, Odysseus succeeds in endearing himself to Nausicaa, while Palomar, with good intentions but essentially guileless, succeeds only in driving the young beauty away. In this light, Palomar's situation seems unfair; with one broad stroke, Calvino criticises the *Odyssean* approach to Perceiving beauty, which rewards cunning and punishes frankness, and a more contemporary viewpoint seems to offer no place at all for the admiration of beauty.

The transformational aspect of beauty touted by Scarry is also absent in Calvino's tale. Scarry believes that observers of beauty are themselves beautified by their proximity. Moreover, indeed, Homer's Odysseus, after meeting Nausicaa, is given a bath and a flask of oil; Athena herself lavishes "splendour over his head and shoulders", and he emerges from the water glistening in his glory, breathtaking. Scarry uses this to demonstrate how those who encounter something beautiful are inspired to be themselves or create something beautiful. And this applies to literature as well: when Dante pines for Beatrice in poetry, "it is as though he has bathed on the Phaeacian shore"(77)

Mr Palomar, however, undergoes no such change. He is left more or less the same as before, although he has attempted transformation. With each successive walk on the beach, he travels back in time, trying to reach that moment of pure expression that Odysseus finds when he encounters Nausicaa. Finally, Mr Palomar, on the last iteration of his passage, seems to arrive on the Phaeacian shore, like Dante. He sees the world as if for the time, expressing his gratitude for "the sun and the sky, for the bent pines and the dune and the beach and the rocks and the clouds and the seaweed, for the cosmos that rotate around those holed cusps (11-12). For a moment, the woman's bosom is the centre of the universe, and beauty appears to have all those qualities Scarry ascribes to it—sacred, unprecedented, life-saving. However, the young woman has not travelled back in time with him, and she dispels the illusion of time travel with her departure. In the modern world, the world Palomar lives in, beauty, unfortunately, has none of these qualities.

However, can beauty regain these qualities? Scarry would like us to think so. She feels these qualities have merely been obscured by the recent political climate, which allows beauty to be talked about only in whispers. Palomar seems to agree with her when he thinks bitterly, "The dead weight of an intolerant tradition prevents anyone's understanding the most enlightened intentions" (12). Palomar's attitude, as we have seen, hearkens back to an older tradition, or idealistically speaking, a time before

tradition existed. Is Calvino, like Scarry, merely mourning the current state of affairs? Not necessarily. First, we must decide: this is Palomar's hymn to beauty, but is it Calvino's? Calvino approaches the situation with a certain amount of irony and humour, and at the story's final twist, the reader is likelier to laugh than feel let down. Palomar is the butt of this joke, and Calvino would not mock something he utterly believed in. Undeniably, Calvino's story challenges many of Scarry's preconceptions of beauty simply by retelling the meeting of Odysseus and Nausicaa in a modern setting. Scarry, for instance, lends no credence to the idea that noticing beauty "brings harm to the thing noticed" (64). However, Palomar's observation of the woman causes harm in two ways: first, from Palomar's perspective, it causes the object of beauty to exit his field of vision; and second, from the woman's point of view, Palomar's strange behaviour is unsettling and irritating. Calvino's ideas and Scarry's beliefs are sharply divergent here.

When separated from Palomar's, Calvino's feelings about beauty become more ambivalent and harder to classify. As he appears in this story, Palomar is perhaps another manifestation of the shocking cultural naivete that de Lauretis identified in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. His whole attitude, enlightened though it attempts to be, is dependent on the woman remaining stationary, an object, and when she moves, he is confounded. On the one hand, Calvino is undoubtedly aware of this. While Palomar may be a stand-in for a piece of Calvino, he is not the whole.

On the other hand, we cannot wholly ignore the rhapsodic moment when beauty becomes the centre of Palomar's universe. He achieves a transitory innocence that attracts us even if it is naïve. Neither perspective tells the whole story. Calvino does not present a definitive answer because he rejects easy answers; he is not able to forsake beauty altogether, nor is he able to simply brush its problematic aspects aside.

Other critics, however, have accused Calvino of trying to avoid addressing complex problems in his work. If on a Winter's Night a Traveller and Mr Palomar, written toward the end of Calvino's life, are complicated, problematic novels that give glimpses of the deeply conflicted presence that generated them.

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