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Calvino Makes the Shell¹

In which our hero explains to us, with digressions, how he went about making it. Though it is possible that the verb chosen here is less than precise.

Domenico Scarpa

Cosmicomiche (*Cosmicomics*) is a work as multiform as the character Qfwfq, yet in making this connection between the work and its protagonist, there is also something that ties it to the biography of its architect. From his boyhood in the '30s on, Calvino admired the spiral galaxy found on the cover of Sir Arthur Eddington's *The Expanding Universe*. As an adult, midway through the '60s, he wrote a short story called "La spirale" ("The Spiral") and chose it as the closer for *Cosmicomiche*.² Here, in the title of this essay (which I have also used to title my new book on Calvino), I suggest in turn that *Cosmicomiche*—an autobiography of the universe constructed as a discontinuous, episodic autobiography for Qfwfq—can also be read as a "hyperhistorical" autobiography of the individual Italo Calvino (in code, obviously, and thus with the appropriate transpositions and necessary discretion). Out of the book's twelve stories, it is precisely "The Spiral" that appears to be the author's most linear and complete autobiography.

Roger Caillois, in his treatise *Méduse et Cie* (*The Mask of Medusa*), gives us the first key for decoding it.

I know as well as anyone else the immense gulf that separates living from non-living matter. But I see it as a possibility that both kinds of matter may have properties in common, such as a tendency to become whole again after being damaged. I can think of nothing more likely to defy any attempt to relate them to each other than a nebula, holding thousands of worlds, and a shell secreted by a seashore mollusk. Nevertheless both obey the same law of spiral development. Nor does this surprise me, for the spiral form fulfils two fundamental laws of the universe, symmetry and growth; it combines order with expansion. It is almost inevitable that animals, plants and stars should all equally be bound by these laws.³

Given the connections Caillois points to (between organic and inorganic matter, between growth and form, and between orders of scale, micro and mega), this quote is the best possible introduction to reading Calvino's "Spirale" as autobiography, a tale about "the construction of a writer." *Méduse et Cie* was written in 1960, but ascertaining whether Calvino knew this book seems to me a side issue. It is clear that Calvino, too, was independently exploring what Caillois defines as "diagonal sciences." More generally, what really matters are not Calvino's starting points (for

¹ This is Jim Hicks' English translation of Domenico Scarpa, "Calvino fa la conchiglia," in *Calvino fa la conchiglia. La costruzione di uno scrittore* (Milano: Hoepli, 2023), 366–85. Many thanks to Domenico Scarpa and Ulrico Hoepli editore S.p.A. for providing permission to publish this translation.

² "La spirale" was written in Rome between April 22 and May 8, 1965, with a new conclusion drafted between September 24–27. It was published directly in the *Cosmicomiche*. On the two endings, see the letters to Angelo Maria Ripellino dated October 26 and November 24, 1965, in Italo Calvino, *Lettere 1940-1985*, ed. Luca Baranelli (Milano: Mondadori, 2000), 893–94 and 903–06.

³ Roger Caillois, "Diagonal sciences," in *The Mask of the Medusa*, trans. George Ordish (New York: Potter, 1964), 9–15. The original is found in "Sciences diagonales," in *Méduse et Cie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 9–18.

example, the proven or probable sources for “La spirale,” more on these below), but rather the ways in which he handled them, and also the places, not marked on any map, where he went with them (or perhaps, where he dragged them).

A second suggestion comes from Eugenio Montale, who penned an article about *Cosmicomiche* titled “È fantascientifico ma alla rovescia” (“It Is Science Fiction, but in Reverse”); what he meant was that, in Calvino’s practice, science fiction looks for origins, not to the future.⁴ And that’s right—even before the origins of the universe, the book is about the origins of somebody who speaks in first person about his memories. *Cosmicomiche* is nothing other than a series of autobiographic anecdotes told to us by Qfwfq. Of course, every autobiography is a story invented by the writer about their own past (inventing, if not the actual facts, their storyline and the rhetorical and linguistic means for conveying them), except that here everything takes place in cosmic proportions: due to the extensions of space and time mastered by those twelve stories, due to the possibility of movement in every order of magnitude, and due to the elimination of the border between the organic and inorganic worlds. For this reason, I define the autobiography that Calvino, via Qfwfq, offers us at the end of his *Cosmicomics* as “hyperhistorical.”

In the corpus of Calvino, the first traces of the future “Spirale” are found in the final lines of the first act of *I fratelli di Capo Nero* (The Brothers of Capo Nero), a juvenile drama dating back to August–October of 1943 and published after the author’s death: “Un uomo per essere così com’è deve fabbricarsi dentro e fuori, a poco a poco, e soffrire in mezzo a tante cose” (“To be who he is, a man must create himself inside and out, little by little, and suffer in the midst of many things”).⁵ Tito, one of the three brothers, utters this line. “Fabbricarsi dentro e fuori” is an anticipatory synthesis of that “Spirale” which will be written twenty-two years later.

Faced with a writer as matter-of-fact and elusive as Calvino, yet still so coherent, it is tempting to read each of his works as a series of autobiographies: transposed, symbolic, fractional autobiographies (i.e., where we see in a story, the actions of a character composed from a single slice of his personality: see, for example, *La speculazione edilizia* [*A Plunge into Real Estate*], or *La nuvola di smog* [*Smog*], or *Palomar*), or fractured autobiographies (that is, where single traits of self are distributed across a given number of characters: see, for example, *Il cavaliere inesistente* [*The Nonexistent Knight*], but also the couple Marco Polo/Kublai Khan in *Le città invisibili* [*Invisible Cities*]), or perhaps distorted, partially erased, negative autobiographies. From *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (*The Path to the Spiders’ Nests*) to “La poubelle agréée,” from *Il barone rampante* (*The Baron in the Trees*) to *La giornata d’uno scrutatore* (*The Watcher*), from *La strada di San Giovanni* (*The Road to San Giovanni*) to “Le memorie di Casanova” (“The Memoirs of Casanova”), surprisingly, the self-portrait of a writer is outlined with multiform, obstinate, autobiographical continuity, despite the author’s difficult relation with the pronoun “I.”

Calvino spoke many times, in more or less every period of his life, of an anxiety that drove him to go on writing in order to correct what he had previously written. This is a process that has no beginning (there is no “first time” for writing—this is one of the many things we are told in his 1964 preface to *Il sentiero*) and that can have no end, as long as the author is living. Today this unfinished process of self-correction can be read as a *sui generis* form of autobiographical itinerary, as an attempt to retouch his own image by molding new identities which are valid for both the past and the future.

⁴ Eugenio Montale, “È fantascientifico ma alla rovescia,” *Corriere della Sera*, December 5, 1965. Now in *Il secondo mestiere. Prose 1920–1979*, ed. Giorgio Zampa (Milano: Mondadori, 1996), 2:2760–2.

⁵ Italo Calvino, *I fratelli di Capo Nero*, in *Romanzi e racconti*, ed. Mario Barenghi and Bruno Falcetto (Milano: Mondadori, 1994), 3:443–96, cf. 464.

Despite his talent for capturing the spirit of the times he traversed, Calvino never wrote in or for the present—"For the Time Being," to cite a title from Auden. From an early age he had believed (or wanted to believe, or pretended to believe) that only the present exists, and he had believed (but seriously this time) that things written would be able to correct, not just other writing, but also intangible things, such as culture, politics, and society. He would later realize that this self-correcting process was essential, not only for writing, but also for the construction of his self, for directing his own future existence—so that things written here-and-now would continue to resonate, in reverse, on things written there-and-then, across the entire extension of his past.

Calvino may be defined as a writer who, at every moment of his work and existence, is both retroactive and proactive. The "unwritten world" that is carried inside feeds the writing without surfacing, whereas the writing tries to keep at bay, without entirely succeeding, the shadows that populate the unwritten world of interiority, the shadows to which his pages would prefer not to give way. Immersed in this labor, if someone does happen to object, telling him, *But don't forget that in the year so and so you wrote this and that*, etc., he finds the intrusion really irritating: nothing to say, already beyond all that; he dodges the question, changes the subject. In such cases, Calvino does not respond, or he answers only through his stories, rather than rebut the various sorts of views that he has been shelling out over the years. This writer, so inclined to construct conceptual prisons for himself (above all, to prove to himself how good he is at escaping them), is horrified by the conceptual prison that the critics rig up.

Today, now that the work of Calvino is a closed series, we can begin to understand that, although his texts are not autobiographical, they are becoming so. They are becoming autobiographical now—we can recognize them as such, now that our view can take in the trajectory of his flights and the always perfectible construction of an identity that these works compose as a set. Here we will take a close look at one in particular, namely "La spirale," a story which it is also possible to read today as the autobiography of the mind of Calvino, as the coded memory of his self-construction up until he was more or less forty. Technically speaking, "La spirale" is the autobiography of a prehistorical mollusk, Qfwfq, who lived roughly 520 million years ago, in the Cambrian or Ordovician period; the author will make this clear in a later text, "Le conchiglie e il tempo" ("Shells and Time").⁶

More than once, it occurred to Calvino to compare Ligurians to limpets, stuck tightly to their reefs: in a 1960 interview with his fellow Ligurian Carlo Bo, and in a 1973 text written for a documentary in Folco Quilici's series, *L'Italia vista dal cielo (Italy Seen from the Sky)*.⁷ It is, however, in a 1981 interview for the *International Herald Tribune* that we find the clearest formulation of this image, with a direct autobiographical connection, and even confession. "I have a need to hide. When I was younger I did so because I felt I had no shell; today, I have the illusion of having a shell that I carry with me and which hides me wherever I am."⁸ The English word "shell" can be translated in Italian as either "conchiglia" or "guscio," either seashell or covering, including the senses of rind, peel, or skin. Calvino knows how to play with languages other than

⁶ This text was written in Rome between October 7–15, 1966, and published in *La memoria del mondo e altre storie cosmicomiche* (Milano: Club degli editori, 1968). Now in *Romanzi e racconti*, 2:1243–47, cf. 1243. It was translated in English by Martin McLaughlin and added to a later edition, Italo Calvino, *The Complete Cosmicomics*. Trans. by Martin McLaughlin, Tim Parks and William Weaver. London: Penguin Classics, 2002. 360–64.

⁷ See Italo Calvino, "Colloquio con Carlo Bo," *L'Europeo*, 16, no. 35 (August 28, 1960); later printed in *Saggi 1945–1985*, ed. Mario Barenghi (Milano: Mondadori, 1995), 2724–32, cf. 2729. See also Calvino, "Liguria," published in part in *Esso Rivista*, 25, nos. 4–5 (July–October, 1973): 5–27; now in *Saggi 1945–1985*, 2376–89, cf. 2389.

⁸ Italo Calvino, "Italo Calvino's Soft-Giggle, Small-Smile Satire," interview by Melton S. Davis, *International Herald Tribune*, May 28–29, 1981.

his own. This rarely noticed interview offers us a binding declaration. Calvino states his need to hide himself, because when he was young he felt he had no shell, and today he carries a shell with him everywhere, hiding him from everyone's gaze. "La spirale" too is entirely a commendation of the necessity of making oneself a shell in defense against the world. Despite the methodological risks inherent in this case, we can risk reading it as autobiographical keystone. At the very beginning of "La spirale," Calvino adds further detail to this image: "Forma non ne avevo, cioè non sapevo d'averne, ossia non sapevo che si potesse averne una. Crescevo un po' da tutte le parti, come vien viene" ("Form? I didn't have any; that is, I didn't know I had one, or rather I didn't know you *could* have one. I grew more or less on all sides, at random).⁹ Calvino characterized his adolescence in Sanremo many times, up to the moment when war broke out (he was seventeen in 1940), as a disorganized period, a time where he had not yet formulated any concrete choices in life, politics, or aesthetics. He was only aware of the turmoil of frustrations and budding passions inside himself. Nonetheless, this yet to be defined life had one thing going for it:

Ma dato che non avevo forma mi sentivo dentro tutte le forme possibili, e tutti i gesti e le smorfie e le possibilità di far rumori, anche sconvenienti [...]

Era una condizione ricca e libera e soddisfatta, la mia d'allora, tutto il contrario di quel che voi potete credere [...] Quando uno è giovane, ha davanti a sé l'evoluzione intera con tutte le vie aperte, e nello stesso tempo può godersi il fatto di essere lì sullo scoglio, polpa di mollusco piatta e umida e beata.

(But since I had no form I could feel all possible forms in myself, and all actions and expressions and possibilities of making noises, even rude ones [...])

It was a rich and free and contented condition, my condition at that time, quite the contrary of what you might think [...] When you're young, all evolution lies before you, every road is open to you, and at the same time you can enjoy the fact of being there on the rock, flat mollusk pulp, damp and happy.)¹⁰

And so, with this humorous clarification (and with a change in register to keep his audience alert), Calvino confirms that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. His words point to a specific youthfulness, his own, but also to a general theory of youthfulness. Here, as elsewhere in the text, we are within the sphere of Hegel, with his praise for facing infinite possibilities, providing that at a given moment the path is determined by choosing only one and developing it fully and completely.

In the opening pages of "La spirale," Calvino conveys the pleasure of a permeable mind and the pleasure of stretching it further. In concrete biographical terms, we know of his passion for "journalism," a word that for the youthful Calvino (as demonstrated in his correspondence with Eugenio Scalfari) is a promise with no limits: drawing, comics, cinema, theater, literature, travel—the desire to do everything, and everything at once. And next, that praise for the reef, which is also a reality, that bare and harsh landscape of Liguria facing the immense sea, the clash and commingling of the dry, splintered rock with the fluid, infinite element of water. Without spelling it out in so many words, these lines from "La spirale" cause us to imagine for ourselves a sea

⁹ Calvino, "La spirale," *Romanzi e racconti*, 2: 207–21, cf. 207. All subsequent citations are to English translation by William Weaver, see "The Spiral," in *Cosmicomics*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1968), 139–53.

¹⁰ *Cosmicomiche*, in *Romanzi e racconti*, 2:208; *Cosmicomics*, 142.

opening out from the amphitheater formed from the terraced hillsides.

“Certo, vivevo un po’ concentrato in me stesso, questo è vero, non c’è paragone con la vita di relazione che si fa adesso” (“To be sure, I lived a bit withdrawn into myself, that’s true, no comparison with our interrelated life nowadays”)¹¹ (without saying anything about the temptation to cling to narcissism, normal for a boy who was raised in a different environment than his peers, with well-read, free-thinking, multilingual scientists as his parents). The microcosm enveloping him protects him in a particular manner, and to his benefit it is quickly replaced by the lure of other worlds, some glimpsed slightly, and many others imagined. “Ma non ero mica così indietro da non sapere che oltre a me esisteva dell’altro: lo scoglio addosso al quale ero appiccicato, si capisce, e anche l’acqua che mi raggiungeva a ogni ondata, ma pure altra roba più in là, cioè a dire il mondo” (“But I wasn’t so backward that I didn’t know something else existed beyond me: the rock where I clung, obviously, and also the water that reached me with every wave, but other stuff, too, farther on: that is, the world”).¹² Out of his attraction for whatever lies beyond—an impulse toward the future (the metropolis where he will go to live, and which he dreams of already) or a regression toward places for which he has no conscious memory (the island of Cuba, where he was born in 1923), the boy develops his own education in aesthetics. (And here again, the sentence will need to begin with a “ma” [“but”]—a continual autocorrect, because educating oneself consists of nothing else.)

Ma non crediate che stessi lì passivo, accettando a bocca aperta tutto quello che veniva: dopo un po’ m’ero fatto la mia esperienza ed ero svelto ad analizzare che razza di roba mi stava arrivando e a decidere come dovevo comportarmi, per approfittarne nel miglior modo o per evitare le conseguenze più sgradevoli. Tutto stava nel giocare di contrazioni, con ciascuna delle cellule che avevo, o nel rilassarmi al momento giusto: e potevo fare le mie scelte, rifiutare, attirare e perfino sputare.

(But you mustn’t think I just lay there passively, dumbly accepting everything that came: after a while I had acquired some experience and I was quick to analyze what sort of stuff was arriving and to decide how I should behave, to make the best use of it or to avoid the more unpleasant consequences. It was all a kind of game of contractions, with each of the cells I had, or of relaxing at the right moment: and I could make my choices, reject, attract, even spit.)¹³

After having spat on fascism (Qfwfq’s witticisms are not entirely uncalled for), this intellectual agility will be a resource. Calvino will manage to wriggle out of the unpleasantries which he encounters within the very heart of things he loves: the politics, literature, and society of the forties and fifties. The previous quote contains the birth certificate for the celebrated craftiness of Calvino, a character trait for which many critics, beginning with Franco Fortini, will fault him later.

Our mollusk now possesses a defensive shield, though cellular, not yet made of silica. His discovery of others, “ostilmente diversi da me oppure disgustosamente simili” (“hostile and different from me or else disgustingly similar”),¹⁴ will put it to the test, and here we seem to hear

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *Cosmicomiche*, in *Romanzi e racconti*, 2:209; *Cosmicomics*, 142.

¹³ Ibid., 143.

¹⁴ Ibid.

again, spoken in Qfwfq's falsetto, the prematurely burnt-out voice of Pin di Carrugio Lungo. The theater where these discoveries are made is a setting where "each of us went about on his own business."¹⁵ And this same Ligurian world-theater will be described, in 1970, in the essay, "Dall'opaco" ("From the Opaque," in *La strada di San Giovanni*). But a surprise appears, by now not entirely unexpected (we're in *Cosmicomiche's* twelfth and last story), knowing our Qfwfq. "E c'erano le altre. L'acqua trasmetteva una vibrazione speciale, come un frin frin frin, ricordo quando me ne accorsi la prima volta, ossia: non la prima, ricordo quando mi accorsi che me ne accorgevo come di una cosa che avevo sempre saputo" ("some of the *others* were female. The water transmitted a special vibration, a kind of brrrum brrrum brrrum, I remember when I became aware of it the first time, or rather, not the first, I remember when I became aware of being aware of it as a thing I had always known").¹⁶ Reading Calvino (his work as a whole, not just "La spirale"), one would likely say that all of this—his life, his development, his self-education, his burning need to narrate, his forward-looking attitude—is born from those female others, a female presence that, as unmoving engine, makes his thoughts and actions spin. In Calvino's stories, we find some women who move, impress, and influence the movement of their masculine counterparts. These are his heroines cut from Ariosto's mold: Viola in the *Barone*, Bradamante in the *Cavaliere*, Ludmilla in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (*If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*). But we also find women who, vice versa, circumscribed within the sphere of their beauty, stand still there, even when they appear to be outgoing and active, so that it will be their male counterpart that moves concretely and acts more or less effectively (though usually less). In this second category, we find icy emanations of male desire, such as Claudia in *Nuvola di smog* and Lia in *Scrutatore*, and possibly also (with only external differences, I would say) the wife of the worker in *La formica argentina* (*The Argentine Ant*).

The entities with feminine connotations that one finds in *Cosmicomiche*—from the first stories to the last in 1984, those where Qfwfq appears as a subatomic particle—belong to the second sort, except that they are not icy at all. Here it seems that Calvino managed a synthesis between the type A and type B women. Their only precursor is the girl with the sky-blue hood in "L'avventura di uno sciatore" ("The Adventures of a Skier") from *Gli amori difficili* (*Difficult Loves*). And once the Ariosto-style woman and the immobile woman are fused together again in a single being, the bond creates a singular phenomenon. In the works of Calvino, the script for male-female relations follows an almost invariable track: the woman is the realist, having descended to and integrated with the world-as-it-is, and she knows (and has always known) how to move through that thicket. The man is an exemplary indolent, awkward, and gauche human being, someone who stays constantly a step behind her, but who, despite his slovenliness and lack of practical talents, in the end manages to overtake her by way of his own intellectual agility.

Here is the reason why the characteristics of Calvino's perspective (and, even before that, his habit of thought) as a storyteller are masculine, down to their very marrow. Woman, a creature of the opposite sex, is a stage in the development of the man, and a prosthesis of his mind. Just as it is in the Hegelian dialectic, just as it is during the study break that Amerigo Ormea allows himself, at home during his lunchtime, in *La giornata d'uno scrutatore*, this relation anticipates a recognition of the female other, a development of thesis and antithesis, and finally a synthesis and sublation that entails her disappearance in order for her to be reabsorbed into that One—the masculine protagonist. The women of Calvino are supremely beautiful images (enough to make one fall for them) that at a given moment disappear, leaving a contrail behind on the page. In the

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *Cosmicomiche*, in *Romanzi e racconti*, 2:210; *Cosmicomics*, 143.

conclusions of the *Barone* and of *Marcovaldo*, respectively, the imagined worlds disappear in dramatic fashion by means of a writerly trick. Women can be made to disappear with the same technique, applied in a less flashy manner, as in the final page of *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*.

Ora siete marito e moglie, Lettore e Lettrice. Un grande letto matrimoniale accoglie le vostre letture parallele.

Ludmilla chiude il suo libro, spegne la sua luce, abbandona il capo sul guanciale, dice: – Spegni anche tu. Non sei stanco di leggere?

E tu: – Ancora un momento. Sto per finire *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* di Italo Calvino.

(Now you are man and wife, Reader and Reader. A great double bed receives your parallel readings.

Ludmilla closes her book, turns off her light, puts her head back against the pillow, and says, “Turn off your light, too. Aren’t you tired of reading?”

And you say, “Just a moment. I’ve almost finished *If on a winter’s night a traveler* by Italo Calvino.”)¹⁷

And so, by turning out her light, the woman disappears, after having been madly loved; she disappears just as do the spaces of the hypernovel that she has illuminated until now.

Let’s return to “La spirale.”

Fu allora che mi misi a discernere materiale calcareo. Volevo fare qualcosa che marcasse la mia presenza in modo inequivocabile, che la difendesse, questa mia presenza individuale, dalla labilità indifferenziata di tutto il resto. Ora è inutile che cerchi di spiegare accumulando parole la novità di questa mia intenzione, già la prima parola che ho detto basta e avanza: *fare*, volevo *fare*, e considerato che non avevo mai fatto nulla né pensato che si potesse fare nulla, questo era già un grande avvenimento. Così incominciai a fare la prima cosa che mi venne, ed era una conchiglia.

(It was then that I began to secrete calcareous matter. I wanted to make something to mark my presence in an unmistakable fashion, something that would defend this individual presence of mine from the indiscriminate instability of all the rest. Now it’s no use my piling up words, trying to explain the novelty of this intention I had; the first word I said is more than enough: *make*, I wanted to *make*, and considering the fact that I had never made anything or thought you could make anything, this in itself was a big event. So I began to make the first thing that occurred to me, and it was a shell.)¹⁸

Here they are, Calvino’s moral foundations: love (being), but especially *making*, which Calvino underlines with italics and which also appears in the title of this essay.

¹⁷ Italo Calvino, *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, in *Romanzi e racconti*, 2:611–870; *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 260.

¹⁸ *Cosmicomiche*, in *Romanzi e racconti*, 2:212; *Cosmicomics*, 145–46.

For the results of both love and making to be effective, it is necessary—except in particularly risky and vulnerable situations, as here in “La spirale”—that they be implied and alluded to in some fashion, rather than expressed overtly. Calvino was unwavering in his belief that major endeavors, whether contests of the body or the mind, had to remain silent, or risk ruining their formative function. This is why both love and making, immediately after they are named, get covered over in the siliceous shell that lay there, within reach of his story. “Cominciai a buttar fuori secrezioni che prendevano una curvatura tutto in giro, fino a coprirmi d’uno scudo duro e variegato, scabroso di fuori e liscio e lucido di dentro.” (“I began to give off secretions which took on a curving shape all around, until I was covered with a hard and variegated shield, rough on the outside and smooth and shiny inside.”)¹⁹ At this point, however, it is necessary to pause and to focus attention (which will be a two-step process, with what follows as the first) precisely on the shell and on *making*.

Already a couple of times we have seen the name and terminology of Hegel pop up, in references to his *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, here taken in its broadest sense. The Qfwfq that in the first pages exists “in quel modo indeterminato di sentirsi lì che non escludeva nessun modo di sentirsi lì in un altro modo” (“in that indeterminate way of feeling oneself there, which did not prevent us from feeling ourselves equally there in some other way”)²⁰—that, to express it in Hegelian terms, exists completely “in itself”—begins *making* the shell for two complementary and opposing reasons: to protect itself from the world and to enter into relation with the world—and in particular (with more authorial italics, as we have seen) with “*le altre*” (“*female others*”).

At this point, another revealing citation will be of use to us, one where female others do not appear, but which brings all the rest together, Hegel included. It comes from *Speak, Memory*, the autobiography of Vladimir Nabokov.

The spiral is a spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free. I thought this up when I was a schoolboy, and I also discovered that Hegel’s triadic series (so popular in old Russia) expressed merely the essential spirality of all things in their relation to time. Twirl follows twirl, and every synthesis is the thesis of the next series. If we consider the simplest spiral, three stages may be distinguished in it, corresponding to those of the triad: We can call “thetic” the small curve or arc that initiates the convolution centrally; “antithetic” the larger arc that faces the first in the process of continuing it; and “synthetic” the still ampler arc that continues the second, while following the first along the outer side and so on.²¹

Speak, Memory came out in 1967, two years after *Cosmicomiche*, but technically Calvino could have been aware of its fourteenth chapter, where this citation is found, since it was first published under the title “Exile” in the *Partisan Review* in 1951.²² Again in this case, however, I would argue that this detail is secondary. It is essential, on the other hand, how the intervention of a writer—someone who confronted the horrors of History, without staying silent and without letting them affect his voice—makes clear what is at stake, ethically and philosophically, in “La spirale.” The same is true for Calvino, hence his shell, “rough on the outside and smooth and shiny inside.”

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *Cosmicomiche*, in *Romanzi e racconti*, 2:208; *Cosmicomics*, 142.

²¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (London: Penguin, 1982), 211.

²² Vladimir Nabokov, “Exile,” *Partisan Review* 18, no. 1 (1951): 45–58.

The world that the young Calvino had to face in the postwar years was hard and gray. It is not by chance that he will bestow a “cosmicomical” definition to his years of direct political engagement (the period of 1945–57, the Cold War years): the Iron Age. The calcareous armor formed in a spiral that Qfwfq begins making is a perfect metaphor for his reaction to that History: coarseness, distance, with tact on the outside (yet with a speckled surface, one which astonishes the observer) and clarity on the inside (ordered thinking, an iridescent imagination, and invention equally based on order). Of course, Calvino is still a young man, as will be seen in the lines that follow.

Così io facevo la conchiglia, cioè solo per esprimermi. E in questo esprimermi ci mettevo tutti i pensieri che avevo per quella là, lo sfogo della rabbia che mi faceva, il modo amoroso di pensarla, la volontà di essere per lei, d’essere io che fossi io, e per lei che fosse lei, e l’amore per me stesso che mettevo nell’amore per lei, tutte le cose che potevano essere dette soltanto in quel guscio di conchiglia avvitato a spirale.

(That’s how I made the shell: simply to express myself. And in this self-expression I put all the thoughts I had about her, I released the anger she made me feel, my amorous way of thinking about her, my determination to exist for her, the desire for me to be me, and for her to be her—all the things that could be said only in that conch shell wound into a spiral.)²³

Out of this antagonism in the face of reality is born, for example, the energetic tone of the thirty stories in *Ultimo viene il corvo* (*Last Comes the Raven*), out of this love and rage that can only be expressed from inside a shell. In fact, even praising the urge for self-expression is a marker of youth. That this is the case, the “elderly” Calvino (in 1979) confirms overtly in a particularly ill-tempered interview. “E cosa devo esprimere? Può essere un desiderio della giovinezza quando, se non ci si esprime, si ha paura di non esserci. Ma quel che è stato è stato. Oggi cerco di rispondere a una certa domanda, di fare dei prodotti finiti. Il fondamento della mia morale è di fare oggetti che rispondano a una data funzione” (“And what do I have to express? This could well be a childish desire, from a time when, if you don’t express yourself, you are afraid that you don’t exist. But what happened happened. Today I try to respond to well defined requests, to make finished products. The foundation of my ethics is making objects that correspond to given functions”).²⁴ Is this really true? For now, let’s leave the question open. Let’s return to young Calvino and see how he makes this shell of his.

Posso dire dunque che la mia conchiglia si faceva da sé, senza che io mettessi una particolare attenzione a farla riuscire in un modo piuttosto che in un altro, ma questo non vuol dire che intanto io rimanessi distratto, a mente sgombra; mi ci applicavo, invece, in quell’atto del discernere, senza distrarmi un secondo, senza mai pensare ad altro, ossia: pensando sempre ad altro, dato che la conchiglia non sapevo pensarla, come del resto non sapevo pensare neanche altro, ma accompagnando lo

²³ *Cosmicomiche*, in *Romanzi e racconti*, 2:213; *Cosmicomics*, 146.

²⁴ Italo Calvino, “Genericità della parola, esattezza della scrittura,” interview by Marco d’Eramo, *Mondoperaio*, 32, no. 6 (June 1979): 133–38, cf. p. 135, in Calvino, *Sono nato in America... Interviste 1951–1985*, ed. Luca Baranelli (Milan: Mondadori, 2012), 288. Translation by Jim Hicks.

sforzo di fare la conchiglia con lo sforzo di pensare di fare qualche cosa, ossia qualsiasi cosa, ossia tutte le cose che si sarebbero poi potute fare.

(I can say that my shell made itself, without my taking any special pains to have it come out one way rather than another, but this doesn't mean that I was absentminded during that time; I applied myself, instead, to that act of secreting, without allowing myself a moment's distraction, never thinking of anything else, or rather: thinking always of something else, since I didn't know how to think of the shell, just as, for that matter, I didn't know how to think of anything else either, but I accompanied the effort of making the shell with the effort of thinking I was making something, that is anything: that is, I thought of all the things it would be possible to make.)²⁵

The insistence on making as a form of thinking, and on the equivalence or reversibility between these two actions, is clearly intended. From the start Qfwfq made evident to his listeners that, as a mollusk, he lacks a brain, and thus his thinking consists simply of being there, of reacting to external stimuli and of the act of making that which bit by bit he makes. Better yet: he made this evident *almost* from the start, because already in the first lines of the text thinking appeared, although unaccompanied by any explanation, and it is not credible that Calvino was simply distracted: “Io fermo, piatto piatto, a succhiare quel che c'era da succhiare e a pensarci sopra tutto il tempo” (“me there, still, flat, sucking what there was to suck and thinking about it all the time”).²⁶ Here, in the fourth line of the original text, we have already that thinking-as-making (and vice versa) in which a living organism with undifferentiated cells engages (“Non avevo né occhi né testa né nessuna parte del corpo che fosse differente da nessun'altra parte” [“I had no eyes, no head, no part of the body that was different from any other part”]).²⁷

Making and *thinking* are active verbs, and the action appears to presuppose an intention. What value might these verbs have for Qfwfq, the primordial mollusk? “*Qui donc a fait ceci?* me dit l'instant naïf” (“Who made this?” the naive instant asked me).²⁸ This resonant question was posed by Paul Valéry, in an essay “L'homme et la coquille” (1937, “Man and the Sea Shell”) that Calvino certainly knew. Here too the verb *to make* is in italics, and the “naïve moment” that launches the question is key to the text. Valéry is meditating on a seashell that he found on the beach. To the question he has just asked, he responds by setting an “absolute condition.” “If one can only make a single thing and in a single way, it means that the thing almost makes itself; therefore, such an action is not truly human (since thought is not necessary to it), and *we do not understand it*. What we make in this way really makes *us* more than we make it.”²⁹

In this case again the italics are chosen by the author, though it could well be one of the reckless phrases from Qfwfq, one of his particularly explicit and honest sentences. Valéry opposes the “*construction*” of an object like the seashell to its “*formation*” (his italics, here as well), specifying that, for the mollusk who makes it, it is only possible to speak of the latter. “But the making of the shell is lived, not calculated: nothing could be more contrary to our organized action

²⁵ *Cosmicomiche*, in *Romanzi e racconti*, 2:214; *Cosmicomics*, 147.

²⁶ *Cosmicomiche* in *Romanzi e racconti* 2:207: *Cosmicomics*, 141.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Paul Valéry, “L'homme et la coquille,” *Nouvelle Revue Française* 281 (1937): 891; this English translation is from “Man and the Sea Shell,” in *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, ed. Jackson Matthews, vol. 13, *Aesthetics* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 12.

²⁹ Valéry, “L'homme,” 895; Valéry, “Man,” 16.

preceded by an aim and operating as a cause.”³⁰ Humans are capable of making shells, in the sense that we could build them, but we could never make them as they make themselves. We could produce one as the result of a premeditated activity, separate from that ourselves and governed by the rules of number and proportion, but not as a natural activity, outside the category of necessity, that gets extruded from a living creature out of its very being, and that thus is not observable by the one who achieves it, precisely because this being is defined by this action, expressing itself fully, leaving nothing behind.

I began with the premise that, if “La spirale” is actually an autobiography, it is a transposed one. If this is true, then it should be translated point by point, and one cannot escape asking how we can reconcile it with making and living, how we can reconcile it with acting towards a goal, which is the precise opposite of the natural process of growth for a living creature. In reality, in the text of “La spirale,” Calvino also tells us what Valéry said in “Man and the Sea Shell”: we have already heard him say that if it is only possible to make a single thing, and if that single thing is only possible to make in a single way, then that thing is made on its own. Calvino said it, although he did so while hiding it in a discussion which hinged on its emphasis on the verb *fare* (to make or to do) along with other images that imply consciousness and construction.

Calvino follows a double strategy: in comparison to Valéry’s description, he depicts the procedure that results in the spiral-shell as even more impersonal (concretized, ineluctable), but at the same time he constantly anthropomorphizes it, because Qfwfq, here as in the other stories, expresses himself by means of images, resemblances, and ways of speaking that belong to the ordinary experience of humankind. This is the way that Calvino smuggles in *making oneself* by using the language of *making*. His aim is to merge *making oneself* within the sphere of *making*, and write in such a way that readers are not aware of the gap, and don’t notice the incongruity.

And so, Calvino does make the shell, or does Calvino unknowingly find himself inside a lovely, ready-made shell? Here I must ask for your patience, because only at the end of this reading will I be able to offer a hypothesis. For now, let’s note the contradiction, acknowledging it as such, and return to the story.

With the conceptual pirouettes in these last citations above, Calvino is letting us know that it is not possible to imagine your own mind and map it out for yourself abstractly, because the architecture of a mind is determined concretely, by what it does or makes. Calvino believes that our mind is “ammobiliata” (“furnished”) with a few “principî sottintesi e non dimostrabili” (“principles implied but not demonstrable”)³¹ yet it will always be doing or making—the *praxis* of his Marx, read in the light of Hegel—that puts it into action. Calvino believes, or better knows, something else as well. He knows that whatever we do or make will always have a personal stamp, even if the person doesn’t intend to leave one. Each individual mollusk will find itself with a shell that has a unique and unrepeatability form and tonality, but the only one who will not be able to speak of it will be precisely the mollusk that made it and that now lives inside it. When Qfwfq tells us that he makes his shell...

senza mai pensare ad altro, ossia: pensando sempre ad altro, dato che la conchiglia non sapevo pensarla, come del resto non sapevo pensare neanche altro, ma accompagnando lo sforzo di fare la conchiglia con lo sforzo di pensare di fare

³⁰ Valéry, “L’homme,” 900; Valéry, “Man,” 23.

³¹ Italo Calvino, “Il modello dei modelli,” in *Palomar*, in *Romanzi e racconti*, 2:967; Calvino, “The Model of Models,” in *Mr. Palomar*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 111.

qualche cosa, ossia qualsiasi cosa, ossia tutte le cose che si sarebbero poi potute fare.

(without allowing myself a moment's distraction, never thinking of anything else, or rather: thinking always of something else, since I didn't know how to think of the shell, just as, for that matter, I didn't know how to think of anything else either, but I accompanied the effort of making the shell with the effort of thinking I was making something, that is anything: that is, I thought of all the things it would be possible to make.)³²

. . . he is describing to us a method of proceeding that, as a writer, he has always tried to follow: meeting a challenge, but doing so in solitude and without showing himself to anyone, so that the result appears to be something natural, simple, and necessary to whoever admires it, once it is *perfect* in the etymological sense, which is to say over and done. With the secrecy of a workshop at a fair, showing off only its final products, Calvino the writer tries to escape the restrictions that others place upon him, but also those he gives himself, and he does it with his texts, which each have a unique and unrepeatable form, but he also does it with his own commentary on those texts, which have nothing to do with Qfwfq's shell and yet, nonetheless, which Calvino produces at a steady stream.

“La spirale” is a story in three movements, like a piano sonata or the stages of dialectical thought. Here the central moment, written in italics, is an example of how Calvino practices what I have called “hyperhistory.” The second part of “La spirale” in effect consists of a long leap forward in time, five hundred million years, that ends with a beautiful, sunny day and with a Qfwfq scattered throughout the entire universe. Qfwfq, a mollusk that is by definition lacking eyes, sees the events of life pass by as if he were the eye of God: he catches a train crowded with Dutch girls, a truck loaded up with encyclopedias, a swarm of bees, a farmer digging, an astronomical observatory, a cinema review, and all this in a single, incredibly long sentence, spiraling like the structure of DNA in terrestrial beings.

This sentence suggests that everything is connected, in life as in the universe. From the cosmos to everyday life, all the Qfwfqs that we have met throughout the *Cosmicomiche*, all the metamorphoses of the mind and body of Calvino converge in that long sentence in italics carved into the middle of “La spirale,” and each of the Qfwfqs that crowd in this key page is motivated by the same search, which is once again a search for one of the *female others*: now you see her as a Dutch girl on the beach, now as the queen bee that drags a swarm of workers behind her, now as an anchovy that broke through the surface of the sea, now as the effigy of Cleopatra on the cover of a magazine, now as a soaring seagull. The universe is full of signs. Each of them seems to speak to the beloved with an unmistakable voice, known for five hundred million years but also unclear, distorted, no longer traceable.

“The Spiral,” which I have offered up as the autobiography of the mind of Calvino, is packed with bodies and physical, material images. Even the mind gets presented with these sorts of images. Instead of an autobiography, it would be more correct to speak of, to borrow a title from Giovanni Giudici, an “autobiology.” The contradiction here is only superficial, because only today can we speak of the umpteenth paradox in Calvino: the quantity of work that this shy, disembodied writer (he often gets described this way, and often really was like this) has dedicated to the autobiography of the body: the elemental cell of “Priscilla,” the residues of dissection in the “Poubelle agrée,”

³² *Cosmicomiche*, in *Romanzi e racconti*, 2:214; *Cosmicomics*, 147.

the life and death drives woven together in the acts of eating and coming together in *Sotto il sole giaguaro* (*Under the Jaguar Sun*), culminating with the Qfwfq of the last *Cosmicomiche*—the very human and very material non-body of an elementary particle. All of this would seem less paradoxical if we were to return to reading Calvino with our eyes less dazzled by the surface of his texts and by the instruction manual that he himself has given us. It will suffice to read again *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, a novel that throws a murky light onto corporeal netherworlds that Calvino will then do everything to undermine, but that filter through again in the varied stories of *Ultimo viene il corvo*, and on this path one can see that in *Palomar* as well there are moments of awkwardness and fragility of the body that are mirrored in the awkwardnesses and fragility of the mind.

Mi ero fatto una mia idea e cioè che l'importante era costituire delle immagini visuali, e poi gli occhi sarebbero venuti di conseguenza. Quindi mi concentravo per far sì che quanto di me stava fuori (e anche quanto di me all'interno condizionava l'esterno) potesse dar luogo a un'immagine, anzi a quella che in seguito si sarebbe detta una bella immagine (confrontandola con altre immagini definite meno belle, bruttine, o brutte da far schifo) [...]

Insomma, il collegamento occhio-encefalo io lo pensavo come un tunnel scavato dal di fuori, dalla forza di ciò che era pronto per diventare immagine, più che dal di dentro ossia dall'intenzione di captare una immagine qualsiasi.

I had conceived an idea of my own, namely that the important thing was to form some visual images, and the eyes would come later in consequence. So I concentrated on making the part of me that was outside (and even the interior part of me that conditioned the exterior) give rise to an image, or rather to what would later be called a lovely image (when compared to other images considered less lovely, or rather ugly, or simply revoltingly hideous) [...]

In short, I conceived of the eye-encephalon link as a kind of tunnel dug from the outside by the force of what was ready to become image, rather than from within by the intention of picking up any old image.³³

The scientific premise given as an epigraph to “La spirale” discusses things that seem beautiful to the eye (as do, in fact, the shells of gastropods) yet that exist “indipendentemente da ogni rapporto con la visibilità” (“independently of any relationship to visibility”).³⁴ The story that Calvino writes, beginning with this prompt, works furiously to prove it wrong. It is not true, Calvino says in the voice of Qfwfq, that things worth seeing exist without any relation to visibility. Just the opposite: it is the existence of things worth seeing that causes the birth of an organ with the corresponding sense: sight. In “La spirale,” Calvino reformulates the evolutionary principle of adaptivity from an aesthetic perspective, grounded in the idea that functions cause the development of organs. Calvino asked himself many times if the world exists independently of us: see, for example, the essay, “Dall’opaco,” or the chapter “La spada del sole” (“The Sword of the Sun”) in *Palomar*. Even “La spirale” is born out of his epistemological creativity. Calvino is ready to drive the most contradictory hypotheses to their most extreme consequences out of dedication to the task

³³ *Cosmicomiche*, in *Romanzi e racconti*, 2:218; *Cosmicomics* 150–51.

³⁴ *Cosmicomiche*, in *Romanzi e racconti*, 2:207; *Cosmicomics*, 139.

of explaining that which exists, or from the need to write a good story. And here we find our surprise conclusion.

Così i nostri sforzi ci portavano a diventare quei perfetti oggetti d'un senso che non si sapeva ancora bene cosa fosse e che poi diventò perfetto appunto in funzione della perfezione del suo oggetto il quale eravamo appunto noi. Dico la vista, dico gli occhi; solo non avevo previsto una cosa: gli occhi che finalmente si aprirono per vederci erano non nostri ma di altri.

Esseri informi, incolori, sacchi di visceri messi su alla meglio, popolavano l'ambiente tutt'intorno, senza darsi il minimo pensiero di cosa fare di se stessi, di come esprimersi e rappresentarsi in una forma stabile e compiuta e tale da arricchire le possibilità visive di chiunque la vedesse... Per merito nostro, quello spazio mal differenziato diventa un campo visivo: e chi ne approfitta? questi intrusi, questi che alla possibilità della vista non avevano mai pensato prima (perché, brutti com'erano, a vedersi tra loro non ci avrebbero guadagnato niente), questi che erano stati i più sordi alla vocazione della forma. Mentre noi eravamo chini a smaltire il grosso del lavoro, cioè a far sì che ci fosse qualcosa da vedere, loro zitti zitti si prendevano la parte più comoda: adattare i loro pigri, embrionali organi ricettivi a quel che c'era da ricevere, cioè le nostre immagini... Insomma, si fecero gli occhi a nostre spese.

(So our efforts led us to become those perfect objects of a sense whose nature nobody quite knew yet, and which later became perfect precisely through the perfection of its object, which was, in fact, us. I'm talking about sight, the eyes; only I had failed to foresee one thing: the eyes that finally opened to see us didn't belong to us but to others.

Shapeless, colorless beings, sacks of guts stuck together carelessly, peopled the world all around us, without giving the slightest thought to what they should make of themselves, to how to express themselves and identify themselves in a stable, complete form, such as to enrich the visual possibilities of whoever saw them. They came and went, sank a while, then emerged, in that space between air and water and rock, wandering about absently; and we in the meanwhile, she and I and all those intent on squeezing out a form of ourselves, were there slaving away at our dark task. Thanks to us, that badly defined space became a visual field; and who reaped the benefit? These intruders, who had never before given a thought to the possibility of eyesight (ugly as they were, they wouldn't have gained a thing by seeing one another), these creatures who had always turned a deaf ear to the vocation of form. While we were bent over, doing the hardest part of the job, that is, creating something to be seen, they were quietly taking on the easiest part: adapting their lazy, embryonic receptive organs to what there was to receive; our images. And they needn't try telling me now that their job was toilsome too: from that gluey mess that filled their heads anything could have come out, and a photosensitive mechanism doesn't take all that much trouble to put together. But when it comes to perfecting it, that's another story! How can you, if you don't have

visible objects to see, gaudy ones even, the kind that impose themselves on the eyesight? To sum it up in a few words: they developed eyes at our expense.)³⁵

A long quote because this is the moment with the most abrupt autobiographical outburst: where Calvino *says*—and says it with concentrated fury—and where his hyperhistory again crosses the line into History. And as for those eyes that take pleasure in the spectacle of the shell, they belong to species that are not at all ugly and unformed. They are the eyes of the entire animal world: “occhi tumidi e slavati di polpi e seppie, occhi attoniti e gelatinosi di orate e triglie, occhi sporgenti e pedunculati di gamberi e aragoste, occhi gonfi e sfaccettati di mosche e formiche” (“the swollen, colorless eye of polyps and cuttlefish, the dazed and gelatinous eyes of bream and mullet, the protruding and peduncled eyes of crayfish and lobsters, the bulging and faceted eyes of flies and ants”).³⁶ And so on and so forth. This virtuoso performance (in the work of Calvino, from here on, there will frequently occur virtuoso performances) continues up until it arrives at the human eye. “Tutti questi occhi erano i miei. Li avevo resi possibili io; io gli fornivo la materia prima, l’immagine” (“All these eyes were mine. I had made them possible; I had had the active part; I furnished them the raw material, the image”).³⁷

The conclusion of “La spirale”—this affair of shells that went out to look and got looked at—lends itself to multiple comparisons with the biography of Calvino in this period. The abusive spectators might be that society that had taken over after the wishful thinking of the Partisan Resistance, or that variegated world that the writer, after recently dedicating himself to the life of a hermit, had closed the door on. It might also be that affluent, carefree, superficially beautiful society for which the obscure work of the mollusk has laid the foundations, or young people, and along those lines, the latest literary recruits, and even farther, the kids, born for good or bad in a peaceful time. It might be that desert of history wherein the grain of sand of the individual political militant gets lost, or, on the contrary, that solidarity between animate and inanimate beings which glues the universe together. Or perhaps those “they” are this writer’s readers, who get to enjoy images that wore down his patience and energy, or even the writer himself confronting some part of his self, almost as if the mother lode of the “frivolous,” the fantastic and combinatory, can only be opened up after that sort of hard, often frustrating apprenticeship which the young Calvino *engagé* imposed upon himself many times.

Whatever it is, there’s anger and, what’s more, there’s disappointment. The voice of Qfwfq in this tirade is the voice of someone who could not manage to foresee either the positive or negative aspects of this society as well as, perhaps, of himself. Furthermore, none of his other contemporaries, none of the new oldies, had been able to foresee them either.

That is it exactly, the new oldies. We know by now that the composition of “La spirale” occurs at the peak of a crucial period in Calvino’s life. Calvino considers this story a destination, even if that does not mean that he sees it as conclusive. A year later, in October 1966, he wrote a brief continuation and titled it “Le conchiglie e il tempo” (“Shells and Time”). From the most exteriorized of sensory organs, sight, he shifts to a level of interiorized perception, the passage of time. A Qfwfq with a solemn voice informs us that, in making his own shell, he had made not only something worth seeing, and thus also the organ for seeing, but also time. In the geometric turning of its shell, articulated according to the cadence of the golden ratio, each of the shells similar to him was obliged to create continuous, unlimited time, turn after turn. Each mollusk would work

³⁵ *Cosmicomiche*, in *Romanzi e racconti*, 2:219–20; *Cosmicomics*, 151–52

³⁶ *Cosmicomiche*, in *Romanzi e racconti*, 2:220; *Cosmicomics*, 152.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

to fabricate a shell with no end, one which would never interrupt its curvilinear pace. “Era fatica sprecata, la nostra: il tempo si rifiutava di durare, era una sostanza friabile, destinata a andare in pezzi, le nostre erano soltanto illusioni di tempo che duravano quanto la lunghezza di un’esigua spirale di conchiglia, schegge di tempo staccate e diverse l’una dall’altra” (“It was wasted effort on our part: time refused to last, it was a friable substance, destined to crumble into pieces; ours were only illusions of time that lasted as long as the length of a tiny shell-spiral, splinters of time that were detached and different from each other, one here and another there, not linkable or comparable to each other”).³⁸

None of the shells achieves its goal, each individual effort is soon interrupted by death, but it is precisely this flood of individual deaths that creates time: it creates time in that “cross-section of the Earth’s crust” where are conserved, intact for hundreds of millions of years, the casings of the primordial seashells, where man will later discover the “vertical dimension of time,”³⁹ reading it layer upon layer.

Once again, it is individual defeat that makes victory possible, collective and for others. In the deposits of fossils on the hillsides and mountains, thousands upon thousands of interrupted lives consolidate in a segmented continuity. “Occorrono troppe vite per farne una “ (“Too many lives are needed to make just one”):⁴⁰ Calvino cites and comments on this verse in his obituary for Montale. This is the line that, in Montale’s *Le occasioni* (*The Occasions*), closes his poem “L’estate” (“Summer”), “where the shadow of the kestrel in flight makes us sense that self-destruction and remaking are inherent in every biological and historical continuity.”⁴¹

Autobiology alongside autobiography, or inside it. We will need to call on another poet: Andrea Zanzotto. We can listen to his “Conversazione sottovoce sul tradurre e l’essere tradotti (1993, “Whispered Conversation about Translating and Being Translated”) as if he too were a particularly intense and intent Qfwfq.

Si può pure accettare l’idea, almeno convenzionalmente, che ogni lingua rappresenti la parte più segreta e più irriducibile del “narcisismo” di un determinato gruppo. È come il punto di massimo inconchigliamento su se stesso che il gruppo raggiunge. Dico inconchigliamento e mi riferisco al brusìo delle lingue, tema ben noto; e specie dei vari sistemi fonologici che anche a orecchio si percepiscono come tali [...] Tale brusìo viene dalle scelte misteriose che lungo i millenni un sistema fonologico, in continua mutazione, ha prodotto, ma concedendosi anche un’“identità,” cioè stabilità assai fondata.

Dentro una conchiglia, magari fossile [...] si conserva l’infinito brusìo che è stato di un certo momento storico e di una lunga serie di momenti storici; si conservano un’essenza e una *durée*.

(One might even accept the idea, at least conventionally, that every language represents the most secret and irreducible aspect in the “narcissism” of a given group. Something like the point of greatest inshellation that the group managed to

³⁸ Italo Calvino, “Le conchiglie e il tempo,” in *Romanzi e racconti*, 2:1245; “Shells and Time,” in *The Complete Cosmicomics*, trans. Martin McLaughlin (London: Penguin, 2002), 362.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Eugenio Montale, “L’estate” (1935), in *Le occasioni* (Turin: Einaudi, 1939); “Summer,” in *The Collected Poems of Eugenio Montale*, trans. William Arrowsmith, ed. Rosanna Warren (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012), 183.

⁴¹ Italo Calvino, “Lo scoglio di Montale (Le parole nate nella Bufera),” *la Repubblica*, September 15, 1981; now in *Saggi 1945–1985*, 1192.

wrap around itself. In saying “inshellation,” I refer to the chatter within languages, an oft-noted theme, namely, various phonological systems that even the ear perceives in this manner [...] This chatter stems from the mysterious choices that a phonological system has produced, over the course of millennia, in continuous mutation, while also granting itself an “identity,” i.e., a well-founded stability.

Inside a shell, perhaps a fossil [...] lies conserved the infinite chatter from a given historical moment and a long series of historical moments; what is conserved is an essence and a *durée*.)⁴²

As in the opening citation from Caillois, this quote from Zanzotto too seals together all the themes and moments of this discussion: the hyperhistorical dimension as well as the contingent dimension of *Cosmicomics*, and also the autobiography of Calvino which I have attempted to extract from “La spirale.” When a writer is discussed, language lies at the alpha and omega of every commentary.

“La spirale” is a rock of a short story, and a foundational story, like those Calvino wrote at his début. This one comes twenty years after, but if you put your ear up to its shell you can still hear the chatter of his experiences during the forties. Over the years, Calvino cared for it and transplanted it, intact, inside a web of allusions and cultural references of which I have managed here to reconstruct only a minimal part.

At an earlier moment, when the decisive question came up (does Calvino make the shell or does he find himself with a ready-made shell?), I asked you to wait patiently for the conclusion. Now, with the help of Valéry and Zanzotto, along with some from Calvino himself, I can offer a hypothesis. The real story that “La spirale” tells us is not about the shell. The story that lies under the surface of the text is about the body, the flesh of the mollusk.

I am convinced that what Calvino invariably offers us is his defenseless core—intellectual and human—strange as that may seem. Calvino was modest about his own talent, and frightened of it as well. He was not ready to accept the idea that, if you were a mollusk, your shell would be made on its own. Calvino was a fabricator of shells that seemed to make themselves, because he had talent. But he also needed to believe—and in the case of “La spirale,” to tell us the story—that it was him and only him that made them, that dreamed them up and produced them, along with every aspect of their curving shapes, their colorful shadings, inside and out.

Calvino needed to protect his talent—and in protecting it, to chastise it, to make its life difficult—in order to see if that talent of his would manage to work naturally even under maximal pressure; in order to see if he could manage to get himself seen one more time by those others, the usurpers equipped with eyes. In this manner we can also explain books like *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (*The Castle of Crossed Destinies*) and *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*. This last is a book where two things might happen, with both of them containing a truth about Calvino; in short, the stories within the *Traveler* (its ten pseudo-novels, as well as much of the metanarrative frame) at times are protected, and perhaps enhanced, by the colossal machinery that Calvino has put on stage, while, at other times, they get suffocated, squashed, or stabbed by it.

I was speaking of the flesh. In his stories, whenever Calvino begins an analysis, whenever Qfwfq or Mr. Palomar starts one of his soliloquies, in expectation of its logical force, that unstable, defenseless, biological matter—its innocence—is noticeable (for whoever wants to note it), because in those moments Calvino makes us see the world, complex as it is, for the first time—

⁴² Andrea Zanzotto, “Conversazione sottovoce sul tradurre e l’essere tradotti,” *Testo a fronte* 8, no. 1 (March, 1993): 62–63. Translation by Jim Hicks.

not through the analysis but beyond it. Among the meanings which the flesh of the mollusk might have, this is perhaps the first, and also the most hidden.

Calvino constructed himself following a law of internal development of which he tried to be increasingly self-aware, in order to take charge of it and direct it. Here, therefore, is one answer to that question: Calvino made a shell that made itself. It is perhaps his limitation, and many think so. Certainly it is what made him unmistakable, in his shell and in the flesh. For it is not true that he did not have anything to express, as he says in that ill-tempered interview, and it is not true that he did not want to do anything more than fabricate products as ordered and according to demand. But if Calvino always gave the public something that it wasn't expecting! But if he always kept his most willful liberties locked inside a cage of logic! And this is what one sees on every page he wrote, as one does in every single image that animates "La spirale."

Zanzotto focuses on the linguistic chatter that emerges from the covering of the seashell even in fossils, and he is right to do so. Because there is an invisible story right up to the last lines of "La spirale," where one thing gets named in order to speak of another. In the last lines of the story, Qfwfq projects himself, together with his female counterpart, within the crowd of other eyes that surround him and, with the image of her, he will live inside those eyes which are not his own, "nell'ultramondo che s'apre attraverso la sfera semiliquida delle iridi, il buio delle pupille, il palazzo di specchi delle r tine, nel vero nostro elemento che si stende senza confini" ("in that beyond which opens, past the semiliquid sphere of the irises, in the darkness of the pupils, the mirrored mansion of the retinas, in our true element which extends without shores, without boundaries").⁴³

In "La spirale," the entire autobiography of Calvino lies in these last two lines. The "element" which is spoken of here is the imagination. Calvino needed to construct an entire "mirrored mansion," an entire complex optical machinery, an entire exteriorized self, in order to live as he liked, in that element which was his own, "without boundaries."

⁴³ *Cosmicomiche*, in *Romanzi e racconti*, 2:221; *Cosmicomics*, 153 (translation modified).