

Italo Calvino

Invisible Cities

Translated from the Italian by William Weaver

A Harvest Book • Harcourt, Inc.

A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book

San Diego New York London

I have come to this explanation: the streams of water channeled in the pipes of Armilla have remained in the possession of nymphs and naiads. Accustomed to traveling along underground veins, they found it easy to enter into the new aquatic realm, to burst from multiple fountains, to find new mirrors, new games, new ways of enjoying the water. Their invasion may have driven out the human beings, or Armilla may have been built by humans as a votive offering to win the favor of the nymphs, offended at the misuse of the waters. In any case, now they seem content, these maidens: in the morning you hear them singing.

Trading Cities

5



In Esmeralda, city of water, a network of canals and a network of streets span and intersect each other. To go from one place to another you have always the choice between land and boat: and since the shortest distance between two points in Esmeralda is not a straight line but a zigzag that ramifies in tortuous optional routes, the ways that open to each passerby are never two, but many, and they increase further for those who alternate a stretch by boat with one on dry land.

And so Esmeralda's inhabitants are spared the boredom of following the same streets every day. And that is not all: the network of routes is not arranged on one level, but follows instead an up-and-down course of steps, landings, cambered bridges, hanging streets. Combining segments of the various routes, elevated or on ground level, each inhabitant can enjoy every day the pleasure of a new itinerary to reach the same places. The most fixed and calm lives in Esmeralda are spent without any repetition.

Secret and adventurous lives, here as elsewhere, are subject to greater restrictions. Esmeralda's cats, thieves, illicit lovers move along higher, discontinuous ways, dropping from a rooftop to a balcony, following gutterings with acrobats' steps. Below, the rats run in the darkness of the sewers, one behind the other's tail, along with conspirators and smugglers:

✓

When you have arrived at Phyllis, you rejoice in observing all the bridges over the canals, each different from the others: cambered, covered, on pillars, on barges, suspended, with tracery balustrades. And what a variety of windows looks down on the streets: mullioned, Moorish, lancet, pointed, surmounted by lunettes or stained-glass roses; how many kinds of pavement cover the ground: cobbles, slabs, gravel, blue and white tiles. At every point the city offers surprises to your view: a caper bush jutting from the fortress' walls, the statues of three queens on corbels, an onion dome with three smaller onions threaded on the spire. "Happy the man who has Phyllis before his eyes each day and who never ceases seeing the things it contains," you cry, with regret at having to leave the city when you can barely graze it with your glance.

But it so happens that, instead, you must stay in Phyllis and spend the rest of your days there. Soon the city fades before your eyes, the rose windows are expunged, the statues on the corbels, the domes. Like all of Phyllis's inhabitants, you follow zigzag lines from one street to another, you distinguish the patches of sunlight from the patches of shade, a door here, a stairway there, a bench where you can put down your basket, a hole where your foot stumbles if you are not careful. All the rest of the city is invis-

Cities & The Sky

1



In Eudoxia, which spreads both upward and down, with winding alleys, steps, dead ends, hovels, a carpet is preserved in which you can observe the city's true form. At first sight nothing seems to resemble Eudoxia less than the design of that carpet, laid out in symmetrical motives whose patterns are repeated along straight and circular lines, interwoven with brilliantly colored spires, in a repetition that can be followed throughout the whole woof. But if you pause and examine it carefully, you become convinced that each place in the carpet corresponds to a place in the city and all the things contained in the city are included in the design, arranged according to their true relationship, which escapes your eye distracted by the bustle, the throngs, the shoving. All of Eudoxia's confusion, the mules' braying, the lampblack stains, the fish smell is what is evident in the incomplete perspective you grasp; but the carpet proves that there is a point from which the city shows its true proportions, the geometrical scheme implicit in its every, tiniest detail.

96

It is easy to get lost in Eudoxia: but when you concentrate and stare at the carpet, you recognize the street you were seeking in a crimson or indigo or magenta thread which, in a wide loop, brings you to the purple enclosure that is your real destination. Every inhabitant of Eudoxia compares the carpet's

Hidden Cities

✓

1

In Olinda, if you go out with a magnifying glass and hunt carefully, you may find somewhere a point no bigger than the head of a pin which, if you look at it slightly enlarged, reveals within itself the roofs, the antennas, the skylights, the gardens, the pools, the streamers across the streets, the kiosks in the squares, the horse-racing track. That point does not remain there: a year later you will find it the size of half a lemon, then as large as a mushroom, then a soup plate. And then it becomes a full-size city, enclosed within the earlier city: a new city that forces its way ahead in the earlier city and presses it toward the outside.

Olinda is certainly not the only city that grows in concentric circles, like tree trunks which each year add one more ring. But in other cities there remains, in the center, the old narrow girdle of the walls from which the withered spires rise, the towers, the tiled roofs, the domes, while the new quarters sprawl around them like a loosened belt. Not Olinda: the old walls expand bearing the old quarters with them, enlarged, but maintaining their proportions on a broader horizon at the edges of the city; they surround the slightly newer quarters, which also grew up on the margins and became thinner to make room for still more recent ones pressing from inside; and so, on and on, to the heart of the city, a totally new

Cities & The Sky

5



Andria was built so artfully that its every street follows a planet's orbit, and the buildings and the places of community life repeat the order of the constellations and the position of the most luminous stars: Antares, Alpheratz, Capricorn, the Cepheids. The city's calendar is so regulated that jobs and offices and ceremonies are arranged in a map corresponding to the firmament on that date: and thus the days on earth and the nights in the sky reflect each other.

Though it is painstakingly regimented, the city's life flows calmly like the motion of the celestial bodies and it acquires the inevitability of phenomena not subject to human caprice. In praising Andria's citizens for their productive industry and their spiritual ease, I was led to say: I can well understand how you, feeling yourselves part of an unchanging heaven, cogs in a meticulous clockwork, take care not to make the slightest change in your city and your habits. Andria is the only city I know where it is best to remain motionless in time.

150

They looked at one another dumbfounded. "But why? Whoever said such a thing?" And they led me to visit a suspended street recently opened over a bamboo grove, a shadow-theater under construction in the place of the municipal kennels, now moved to the pavilions of the former lazaretto, abolished when