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IMPOSSIBLE THOUGHTS, ALTERNATIVE SPACES

Essays on Meaning and Possibility in the Works of Samuel Beckett and Italo Calvino

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Faculty Readers:

Kevin Dettmar

Jordan Kirk

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Contents

Introduction.....	5
I. The Feeling of <i>Endgame</i>	10
II. The Feeling of <i>Invisible Cities</i>	17
III. Structural Repeatability.....	21
IV. Playing with Abstraction.....	26
V. Actuality and the Calculable.....	33
VI. Confounding Logics.....	41
VII. Thinking the Impossible.....	46
VIII. Structuring Possibility.....	55
IX. Silence: Void and Various.....	62
X. Fragmentary Maximalism.....	70
XI. Escherean Figures.....	76
Appendix.....	85
Bibliography.....	86

*“I speak and speak,” Marco says,
“but the listener retains only the words he is expecting.”*

Introduction

This thesis comes from a place of feeling, from something like instinct, from the experience of reading two immensely different texts and responding in much the same way. The moment of encounter was one of shattering, explosion, creation: these texts changed my world. The following pages will ask, very simply at times, how?

What *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino and *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett did was to bring my focus to bear on the process by which a text becomes meaningful. The relationship of meaningfulness is a personal one, perhaps the most powerful and ubiquitous (and also vague) relationship a reader can have with a text. It is first felt, and second thought. Yet though it is experienced personally it is founded in an external and material object: a book, the text. Though I am only one reader, and these are only two texts, it is toward an understanding of meaning – if and how it is made, what it does and can do to us – that this thesis reaches.

Such an understanding is happily unachievable. In part, this is because to understand meaning requires us to study the text from which it allegedly comes, and these texts turn out to be complex and unyielding (or multiple and infinitely generative). Somehow, in between the little inky words and the workings of the mind, meaning is formed.

Roland Barthes called the Text “a passage, an overcrossing of meanings.” It is woven like a basket, each strand of meaning woven itself from a twisting of independent fibers so that the topography of the Text (for it is spatial) is multiply patterned, a twisting of twistings.¹ The word “passage” also rings with passing, with passage as corridor through which one travels, a bridge between spaces or worlds, a crossing over.

¹ Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," 1971, in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, by Vincent B. Leitch, et al., 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 1279.

What I came to suspect, in the process of weaving and unweaving these texts, is that the question of meaning is intertwined with that of possibility, and that possibility is wrapped up in thought, and thought is entangled with reality. And there I found the stakes for my project. What these texts did to me was to change my world. What I have gone on to do, willingly or not, is to make tiny changes to the world which propagate all the changes done to me.² It is that change, at each step along the way, that I want to discuss.

Not only are Beckett's and Calvino's texts my chosen examples of powerful, possibilizing works of language, they are also interested in the very questions about meaning-making and language that I have just begun to develop. Both *Invisible Cities* and *Endgame* rehearse and explore the structures and stakes of meaning-making. For both, to make meaning is to make the world. If that is so, then the text is a site of radical possibility.

To those familiar with the play, it may come as a surprise to hear *Endgame* described as a place of "radical possibility." Beckett's 1957 play is often considered one of his bleakest works. It is something like *Waiting for Godot* without anything to wait for but the end.

It follows four characters living in a barely decorated shelter in what seems to be a post-apocalyptic world. Over the play's 90 minutes, the characters talk, perceive, move, and tell. The play's protagonist, Clov, debates leaving the shelter and freeing himself from the dictatorial rule of Hamm, his immobile master and adoptive father, confined to his armchair, spinning stories. It has often been interpreted as a bitter play, demonstrating the failure of language to communicate coherently. To read it as a space of possibility is something of a re-evaluation of the play's role, though one that has seen some critical representation in recent years.³

² I am eternally grateful to Scott Hutchison and the music that outlives him. Though this thesis is not about music, I hope that his gentleness and belief in the tiny changes pervades my writing.

³ I am thinking in particular of essays by Alberto Tondello and Amanda Dennis, which I will discuss in greater detail later on.

By contrast, Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* is a more positive, explicit space of creation, a breathtaking expanse of the strange and wonderful. Calvino's 1972 novel follows the dialogues of Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, King of the Tartars, as the former describes to the Khan the cities he has visited throughout his journeys across the empire. These cities – 55 of them in all – are at once satirical and sincere; macabre and bright; unrecognizable and unmistakably our own.

The discussions between Kublai and Marco that fill the novel's interstices track the pair's attempts at understanding the strange world that surrounds them, the Khan trying to grasp it and Polo working to save it. The two bring an elegant weightlessness to death, love, religion, modernity, urbanity, ecology, and more.

Where *Endgame* is characterized by a certain flatness, a denial of outright feeling, *Invisible Cities* is built from a gentle and deep delight in language. Their differences lend them power as a pair, as differing but periodically converging lenses through which to view questions of meaning and possibility.

Their overlapping concerns are elucidated by the contexts to which both authors were responding. Though separated by about 15 years, both Calvino, Beckett, and their works are interested in the capacity of language to mean. Though *Endgame* and *Invisible Cities* are situated respectfully just before and just at the crux of post-structuralist thought, they can both be understood in relation to the movement's interest in the rupturing of a coherent relationship between language and its other. In the space that post-structuralist thought opens between the signifier and the signified, these two authors see differing but related potentials.⁴

⁴ Though Beckett's writing certainly predates Derrida's famous proclamation that "Perhaps something has occurred in the history of the concept of structure that could be called an 'event,' " his anxiety and linguistic concern are strongly aligned with what would go on to be called post-structuralism.

In “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” Jacques Derrida posits “two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of freeplay”: one “sad, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauist” and the other “the Nietzschean *affirmation*--the joyous affirmation of the freeplay of the world without truth, without origin, offered to an active interpretation.” Though Beckett could hardly be called Rousseauist, nostalgic, or guilty, one might still construe *Endgame*, with its bleak hilarity, as representing a “*negative*” counterpart to *Invisible Cities*’ seeming revelry in the freeplay of language.⁵

As I will explore in the chapters to come, the responses of the reader to these two stylistically opposed approaches are surprisingly alike. Derrida’s distinction between the affirmative and negative is fascinating because although the two texts depart from the same concern in radically different directions, they ultimately arrive at similar places. The nostalgic aspiration toward a stable, closed system (of language, and otherwise) is present and examined in both texts. It is also ultimately exceeded by gestures to a broader, more “affirmative” possibility, in which we can glimpse the persistent making of the future, the alternative forms of life we can imagine in the space of the possible.

This thesis is divided into 11 short essays, growing in length and focus as the pages turn. The first two chapters begin with the reader and with the feeling of the texts, which mark us with their imaginative and possibilizing schemes. In the subsequent four chapters, I explore different ways in which the texts examine the process of meaning-making through the desire to form meaning coherently. I consider their relationships to repetition, abstraction, mathematics, and logic. Crossing into the second half of the thesis, I re-frame the texts as explorations of the consequences of the failure to find this meaning – the Derridean free-play they uncover – and

⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1978).

how they refigure this supposed absence or lack (such as it is often derided) as a space of imaginative and actual possibility. This begins with Foucault's concept of the hetrotopia, proceeds to examine how possibility is constrained in the context of coloniality, and then moves from constraint to creation through a scrutiny of silence. Finally, I return to the question: how do these words come to mean? before turning my attention to the work of M.C. Escher to close the thesis.

Throughout this work you will find me quoting from both texts at length. It is my hope that the essays will be readable without prior reading of the texts and also that my citations will not only bring forth the ideas, readings, and gestures I am making but also the texts themselves so that you may form your own relationships with them. One cannot match or master these texts in their incredible artifice and sheer delight, but I can hope to take them for a conductive force.

Also, sometimes I just got happily carried away and wanted that for you, too.

At the end, that is what this thesis is about. It is about the texts that bear us up and carry us away into new worlds, only for us to find that the old world we've left behind was as fabricated as the one in which we now stand. From reality to reality we go, stumbling across fragments that pierce us and gradually assembling the world with which we will die.

I. The Feeling of *Endgame*

The words of *Endgame* have a troubling quality whereby they seem to mean what they do not say. They lay unresolved, opening up a space that might be filled by interpretation or imagination, inviting the reader to become a nearly singular force in the making of the play's meaning. It is difficult, for example, to say that Clov's opening line "finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished,"⁶ is *about* any one thing. The reader scrambles to fit this referentless utterance into a neat context: the allegorical (is he talking about life?), the ecological (the world as we know it?), the metatextual (the play?) to name a meager few.⁷ The play takes a pointed interest in this impulse on the part of the reader to contextualize or make sense of the senseless. Hamm asks, with comic paranoia, "we aren't beginning to... to... mean something?" (41). As the words are read, it is already too late: meaning is being made.

How, though, can the words of *Endgame* mean what they do not say? What do they mean instead? Are the words empty, lacking meaning in the first place, or can they be understood otherwise?

The process of reading exhibited in response to Clov's ambiguous line is that of imagination. We might therefore approach these questions by considering Wolfgang Iser's concept of the "blank," which he defines in "Interaction between Text and Reader" as "the very lack of ascertainability and defined intention that brings about the text-reader interaction," where this lack is "an indeterminate, constitutive blank, which underlies all processes of interaction"

⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Endgame: A Play in One Act ; Followed By, Act without Words I : a Mime for One Player* (New York: Grove Press, 2009), 8.

⁷ Indeed, the enumeration of a list such as this one could act as a paraphrase of much of the critical history of the play.

(1454).⁸ Iser conceives of the artistic and aesthetic as two poles between which rests the “virtual work,” an interaction of the artist and reader. It is the reader’s not-knowing, that which goes unsaid by the text, that motivates “the process of ideation to be performed by the reader on terms set by the text” (1455). Though the text defines the surroundings and parameters of the blank, it is the reader who ultimately fills it.

Iser’s blanks are portrayed as a “lack” or figured in equally negative terms: the reader is “filling the blanks with projections,” finding “what is missing,” the “missing link” (1455, 1456). They are not positive things, but absences. The word “blank” seems to describe a canvas, a line even, or a place where something is missing (I think of a madlib, a “fill-in-the-blank”). Texts are, in Iser’s understanding, positive presences filled with intermittent blanks.

Though it is useful in theorizing the imaginative impulse, Iser’s blank fails to adequately describe the extent to which *Endgame* leaves things unsaid and it does not help us to understand how this difference of degree changes the reader’s interactions with a text. Pervasively blank, *Endgame* takes the temptation of interpretation far beyond where Iser’s concept – which he seeks to apply to all text – can go. When the reader or critic is confronted with the play, it is rather like a madlib in reverse: whole, empty sentences with only one word filled in. The blanks are larger, more plentiful, accumulating such an immense emptiness that the text comes to feel spacious. I propose this characteristic, “spaciousness,” to expand on Iser’s “blank” and offer a more versatile and dimensional understanding of that which the text does not say. Spaciousness calls to mind the spaces between words on a page (pages are almost all space), the three-dimensional space we inhabit (in which the play is shown), and the “*Bare interior*” of *Endgame*’s set (7). As a

⁸ Wolfgang Iser, “Interaction between Reader and Text,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 3rd ed., comp. Vincent B. Leitch, et al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 1453-60.

spatial descriptor, it also centers the inhabitant who remarks, as though they were entering a room, that the textual world of the play is quite spacious.

The idea of spaciousness is distinct from Iser's blank in three ways. Firstly, where the blank stops at an act of filling, to consider a text as spacious opens up a sort of architectural study of language, its turns and constraints, its openings and airiness. Such a study is interested not only in explaining the functional role of the blank space of a text in forming meaning, but in how the character, degree, depth and texture of that space influence the resultant meaning-making. Secondly, it refuses the entirely negative depiction of the blank, which desires always to be filled. This refusal opens up the possibility for a final difference: spaciousness allows the reader to inhabit or rest in the space of the text as we do in the world. *Endgame* tempts the reader to fill its spaciousness with imaginings and interpretations, but one could also refuse and opt instead to inhabit the text's ample space. Thus to study the spaciousness of a text is not to refute Iser's theory, but rather to build a layer onto it. For space is a kind of blankness, but a much more complex and interesting one, indeed a more fitting analogy for the text than something as linear as the blank.

The spaciousness of *Endgame* is vast and induces confusion. Consider Hamm's statement "our revels are now ended" (65). There have not been any "revels" to speak of, and there remain thirty pages of play to go (the revel that is the play seems not to have ended). Hamm quotes, of course, from *The Tempest*. This is a line spoken by Prospero as the display of nymphs, gods and goddesses fades. There, it had a clear enough meaning. But what, here, is ended? What is meant by "revels"? The reader is left to make sense and forced to move on. Nobody else in the play seems to have heard Hamm, or at least nobody cares.

The play is rife with vague moments such as this, coming chiefly in the form of vague nouns and pronouns: “it,” “thing,” and “something” run rampant, almost always without a clear antecedent. Though for the reader this poses a problem of reference, sometimes the characters seem to understand each other just fine:

HAMM: Do you not think that this has gone on long enough?

CLOV: Yes! [*Pause.*] What?

HAMM: This... this... thing.

CLOV: I've always thought so. (53)

The reader is faced with an inverted dramatic irony, whereby the referent for “this... thing” *seems* to be known to Hamm and Clov, at least by the second time Hamm says it. The spaciousness of *Endgame* is lopsided, which enhances the reader's confusion: if the characters know what this means why don't I? Naturally troubled with not knowing, the reader is left to interpret—albeit uncertainly—and to create a means of understanding or else rest in a space of eerie confusion. Whether they read the referent for “this... thing” as the play, their lives, humanity, or Hamm and Clov's conversation they are responding to the play's vague reference by imaginative interpretation. They are filling the space.

Endgame, then, is characterized by a widespread lack of referents and that absence defines the reader's interactions with it. This linguistic void is paralleled in the world of the play by the “*Bare interior*” and Clov's reading the world as “Zero” (11). But paradoxically, this absence can also be figured as a space for generation: perhaps *Endgame* is infinitely referential, multitudinous in the ways that it can signify. Its vast spaciousness opens possibilities for interpretation which refuse to collapse into any single, coherent meaning. Roland Barthes describes such a refusal as one characteristic of the “Text”: it “accomplishes the very plural of

meaning: an irreducible (and not merely acceptable) plural.”⁹ If textual plurality were measurable, then *Endgame* might be said to exhibit a high degree of plurality as a result of its spaciousness.¹⁰

What I have just called *Endgame*’s “spaciousness” has been taken by certain critics of the play for emptiness or a failure of language to communicate. Stanley Cavell addresses the widespread critique of the play that claims it “‘serves to express the breakdown, the disintegration of language’—by, one gathers, itself undergoing disintegration.”¹¹ This reading, with which Cavell takes issue, arises out of the same textual absence that I have labelled spaciousness and also from the play’s internal depiction of the failure to communicate. Cavell’s reply is that “the discovery of *Endgame*, both in topic and technique, is not the failure of meaning (if that means lack of meaning) but its total, even totalitarian, success—our inability *not* to mean what we are given to mean.”¹² It seems that to accuse *Endgame* of exhibiting a disintegration of language is to forget the veritable cornucopia of interpretations of it that exist. The widespread reading against which Cavell positions himself comes from an almost nihilistic understanding of the indeterminate meaning of *Endgame* on the level of language. Cavell counters with an observation that is centered on the reader, the human facing the spacious: that meaning is ineluctable.

⁹ Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," 1971, in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, by Vincent B. Leitch, et al., 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 1279.

¹⁰ As a student of mathematics, I do find trouble in this distinction of degree of plurality, or of spaciousness. Reason being that these spaces are, I think, infinite. Being infinite, any irreducibly and infinitely plural set of the same cardinality is more or less of the same size as any other. In mathematics, we compare infinite sets by the measure of cardinality, and I would argue that regardless of the degree to which a text is infinitely plural, it is of the same cardinality as all other infinitely plural texts. That said, it is useful to consider the varying restraints on these infinities, the qualities of these infinities, how they differ from each other, how they make us to imagine, while keeping in mind that they are of practically equal size.

¹¹ Stanley Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (n.p.: Cambridge UP, 2002), 115. He is here quoting from Martin Esslin here. See *Samuel Beckett: The Search for the Self*, 1991.

¹² Cavell, "Ending the Waiting," 117.

But if meaning is ineluctable, then what does *Endgame* mean and how? Who is the agent of Cavell's "what we are given to mean"? The meaning comes from the reader's habitation of the space left, created, constrained by the text. It comes from the eye beholding, filling, feeling, and populating its space. *Endgame* feels like an invitation to interpret because it is, in the same way that an empty bench is an invitation to sit. Moreover, it is so spacious as to be able to contain "whatever ideas *we* discern inside it" (emphasis mine).¹³ This description, given by Hugh Kenner, at once locates "ideas" (meanings, interpretations) as within the play and makes that location, the containment of ideas, contingent on an act of discernment by an agential "we." It is as though the text is a spatial interpretation-generator into which we propel ourselves in order to discern. All the possible discernments, all those that will come, are then in some sense contained in this textual space, waiting for a reader to come along and, mixing themselves with the text, give them form.

In a moment of post-humanist irony, the most hostile, unwelcoming, and destitute world of *Endgame* becomes, under the eye of a reader, a colorful and productive space of creation.

This wouldn't be a truly Beckettian work if the play did not in some way undercut such a liberal interpretation of interpretation. Meaning-making readers are caricatured by Hamm's "rational being" monologue: "Imagine if a rational being came back to earth, wouldn't he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough. [*Voice of rational being.*] Ah, good, now I see what it is, yes, now I understand what they're at! [*Clov starts, drops the telescope and begins to scratch his belly with both hands*]" (41). Our understanding is taunted by Clov's plainly asinine behavior and the voice of the being who makes absurd sense of it. The

¹³ I am aware that Hugh Kenner is far from a reader response theorist, and that by "we" he really means "I," but I find that a literal reading of this quotation from Kenner is perhaps a more apt description of the play's relationship to its reader, to its own spaciousness, than he intended when he wrote it. Hugh Kenner, "Life in the Box," in *Samuel Beckett, a Critical Study*, new ed. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1973), 164.

audience is made to laugh at themselves and the meaning they think they are making. But in the ruthless irony of the play, not even the joke is allowed to stand. Hamm goes on in “*Normal Voice*”: “And without going so far as that, we ourselves... [*with emotion*] ... we ourselves ... at certain moments ... [*Vehemently*.] To think perhaps it won’t have been for nothing!” (41). The actor’s delivery of this last sentence will determine its interpretation and the tone of meaning in the play because “*Vehemently*” does not tell us whether it is with heart or with dismay that Hamm delivers a line that might be called hopeful, whose “perhaps” hangs over the sentence like angel or executioner. Are we to imagine, then? Is there something there? Or are we being mocked like the “rational being” for not merely letting the play fall on us? As Beckett puts it in a letter to Alan Schneider, “If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin. Hamm as stated, Clov as stated, together as stated, *nec tecum nec sine te*, in such a place, and in such a world, that’s all I can manage, more than I could.”¹⁴

There is nonetheless a reading of tentative hope here, and I will follow it.

¹⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 10.

II. The Feeling of *Invisible Cities*

In *Invisible Cities* everything feels possible. The empire Marco Polo walks across, which Kublai Khan seeks to grasp, is so vast, multivalent, percolated with such richly improbable beings and sheerly impossible spaces that when one encloses it between its covers, it seems like it might burst from its physical boundaries. Nymphs bathe in houses made only of pipes, life is suspended on nets above chasms, the business sector packs itself up each year like a carnival, the faces of your dead populate a city.

Yet the way it creates otherness feels distinct from the imaginations of science fiction, of dystopian or utopian literatures, or of fantasy. While these genres are drawn upon in particular moments, the world of Calvino's novel is of a different sort. Each genre with which it might be compared is concerned with rules in a way that *Invisible Cities* is not, whether it's science fiction's hypothesizing of different physical laws or dystopian literature's recurring interest in defining radically and subtly oppressive societies. Where these genres tend to explore the ramifications of particular orders, *Invisible Cities* is instead constantly transgressing the realm of the possible that it establishes. It is more interested in thinking about rulemaking and acts of definition than in the particular rules, definitions, and their repercussions. This is evident in the form of the novel, in the departure almost every page brings from the last city and into a new one, where no overlap can be presumed. Marco Polo and Kublai Khan contemplate these different cities, their attempts to generalize them always falling short.

Where in *Endgame* the reader faces words at their most meaningless, and in that space uncovers the possibility of possibility, the reader of *Invisible Cities* feels their mind tingling with a maximum of reference. Umberto Eco once wrote that Calvino's 1957 novel *The Baron of the Trees* "had the persuasive power of parable, the deep appeal of myth, the charm of a fairy tale,

and the gentle force of poetry.”¹⁵ Though *Invisible Cities* was written 15 years after *The Baron of the Trees*, this list of qualities helps to describe it. In the forms of parable, myth, and poetry especially, the word is strained to a form of meaning beyond its mere definition. Calvino attributes this quality to literature itself: “surely literature is constantly struggling to say something it does not know how to say, something it cannot say, something it does not know, something that cannot simply be known?”¹⁶ In *Invisible Cities*, words are bursting at the seams, if they are contained at all.

The book’s persistent feeling of possibility derives in large part from its delight in literary language’s aspiration toward this unsayable, unknowable “something.” The savored decadence of the listing descriptions, the airiness of the world described, the almost aphoristic tone of the novel, all contribute to this feeling. *Invisible Cities* reveals itself in this delight; this delight comes from language. It is felt by a reader who often cannot help but let their hands drop, book held open, and stare at the world with a very soft gaze, the mind wrapped up in all of this, transported even, but ultimately returned to itself.

The word “delight” bears many productive synergies when thinking about Calvino’s work. One of them is the prepositional complement to its verbal form: “in.” One delights *in* something.¹⁷ Thus the reader, not precisely by an act of transportation but more by habitation, comes to delight *in* the world of *Invisible Cities*. The reader of *Invisible Cities* becomes its resident: a third, silent presence on the terraces of the Khan’s great palace.

The power of delight in *Invisible Cities* is also that of spaciousness. The option to fill (the temptation so central to *Endgame*) is certainly present, especially in the more aphoristic

¹⁵ Umberto Eco, "Aerial Maneuvers," *PEN America* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 54.

¹⁶ Italo Calvino, "Appunti Sulla Narrative Come Processo Combinatorio" [Notes Towards a Definition of the Narrative Form as a Combinative Process], *20th Century Studies* 1 (1970): 97.

¹⁷ Julien Luebbbers, "Delight," *Unstamatic*, <https://unstamatic.com/2022/11/09/delight-julien-luebbbers/>.

moments; there is an appeal to the reader who enjoys the feeling of saying “I got it!” But here, as in *Endgame*, the reader will always find themselves undercut, either directly or by possibility.

Another route is offered: rest in the sheer delight, feel a sprinkling of atoms fall upon the mind.¹⁸

Calvino’s novel also possesses the perplexing combination of density and lightness, certainty and nullity, that is typical to aphorism: “From up here, nothing of Argia can be seen; some say, ‘It’s down below there,’ and we can only believe them. The place is deserted. At night, putting your ear to the ground, you can sometimes hear a door slam.”¹⁹ This angle on the city Argia is wry, with its unattributed “some say” and “sometimes.” It opens doors into a world without quite breaching them. It steps away from certain meaning just after it allows you to feel it. Nietzsche once wrote of his aphorisms that “my ambition is to say in ten sentences what everyone else says in a book—what everyone else does not say in a book . . .”²⁰ It seems that *Invisible Cities* achieves Nietzsche’s ambition with every page. It is a book which, every ten sentences, says as much as a whole book:

With cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.
(44)²¹

This passage offers much, from the delicate, airy cadence of the final sentence to the perplexing but credible claim that cities are made of desires and fears. There is a notion of possibility proposed here, the logical conclusion of which is that everything imaginable can be in a city. The

¹⁸ See Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf. Volume 4: 1925 to 1928*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 4.

¹⁹ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 26.

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Richard Polt (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 85.

²¹ Italicized citations from *Invisible Cities* come from the unnumbered interstitial chapters in which, rather than being narrated by Polo, the discussions between Polo and the Khan are recounted. This is a typographical choice I take from the text itself.

city is mysterious, it is multitudinous and unknowable, and it defers infinitely by concealment. The language and world of *Invisible Cities* is much the same, exuding secrecy and gesturing at concealed possibilities. Nothing seems to be what it purports to be. Or, it teaches that nothing is ever “merely” what it is.

The tone of this passage is very certain, verging on the space of maxim. Such confidence stands in contrast to what it says, to its expression of an unknowability inherent in its subject, to its bifurcating possibility at the word “or.” In this sense it is an impossible assertion. *Invisible Cities* is characterized by such maxims. It depends for its lightness on floating over, not necessarily diving deep. But as the narration drifts over these complex depths it probes them as if by sonar, and though the path of our journey through *Invisible Cities* is a smooth one, it is composed of and haunted by the complexities in *meaning*. It is for that reason that *Invisible Cities* is secretly spacious, and why it can stand beside *Endgame*.

III. Structural Repeatability

Both *Endgame* and *Invisible Cities* are structurally repeatable: not only do they repeat themselves on the level of the line, but it is a basic tenet of their forms that they can continue in the same vein *ad infinitum*. It is curious that though they share this trait, their structures could not be more different. *Endgame*, a play, occurs in one long act which, though certain critics have tried to understand it in terms of a complex internal structure, cannot be easily sub-divided.²² *Invisible Cities*, a novel, is on the other hand highly structured through its division into parts and those parts into chapters while each chapter makes up one installment of a series of five chapters going by the same name.²³

In one sense, to think of *Endgame* as repeatable is easier than *Invisible Cities*. Hugh Kenner points out that seeing Clov open the play by unveiling all of its set pieces – folding “carefully over his arm” the sheets that cover Hamm and the trash cans at the start – we the viewers “are reminded ... that what we are to witness is a dusty dramatic exhibition, repeated and repeatable.”²⁴ For Kenner, *Endgame* lays bare a repeatability inherent in drama. On the level of dialogue, the characters (especially Hamm) seem to be “play-acting,” as Anthony Easthope puts it, keenly aware of theater and theatrical forms, which extends to the play’s repeatability: “why this farce, day after day?” both Clov and Nell ask at different moments (40, 21).²⁵

Invisible Cities is no less interested in repetition, though of a different sort. In the Mariner editions designed by Peter Mendelsund and Oliver Munday, the table of contents is displayed

²² See Hans-Peter Hasselbach, "Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*: A Structural Analysis." *Modern Drama*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1976, pp. 25-34.

²³ This is best illustrated by looking at the actual table of contents, which I have attached in Appendix 1.

²⁴ Hugh Kenner, "Life in the Box," in *Samuel Beckett, a Critical Study*, new ed. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1973), 155.

²⁵ Anthony Easthope, "Hamm, Clov, and Dramatic Method in *Endgame*," *Modern Drama* 10, no. 4 (1967): 426, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.1967.0025>.

across four full pages. The reader can observe, as from 30,000 feet up (or as from the terrace of the Great Khan's palace) the movement of the chapters, the landscape through which they will soon wander. With the exception of the first and final (9th) sections, each chapter number counts down from five : 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, ..., (new section), ..., 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, Each chapter "type" (e.g. "Cities and Signs" or "Cities and the Dead") has five instances, numbered one through five. Considered as a whole, this structure, according to Carolyn Springer, creates "the illusion of an autonomous narrative machine, capable of generating new combinations in a potentially infinite mathematical series."²⁶ Calvino's chapters form a repeatable series of possibly infinite scope. The repeated structure of the seven central sections is sandwiched between two larger, ten-chapter sections.²⁷ *Invisible Cities* winds up and winds down in this long-winded crescendo and decrescendo. It winds up like a clock, is left to run, but doesn't peter out: it opens and closes in symmetry.²⁸ It would not change the structure much to have 11, 13, or 47 intervening sections. Calvino's novel seems like it could wind on forever.

How does the treatment of repetition in these two texts differ? How is it similar? What is the repetitive potential *doing* and what happens when things are repeated? In *Endgame*, repetition invokes mundanity, the way in which this day and the next, though undoubtedly different, are always the same. Thus, Hamm remarks, "then it's a day like any other" (53). The characters undergo this type of quotidian mundanity, but they do so in contrast with the fact of the play's performance: every night it should be *exactly* the same. For the play, repetition means an aspiration to sameness, while for the characters it is the experience of mundanity. Hamm's

²⁶ Carolyn Springer, "Textual Geography: The Role of the Reader in 'Invisible Cities,'" *Modern Language Studies* 15, no. 4 (1985): 291, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3194671>.

²⁷ Again, see Appendix 1.

²⁸ See Appendix 2, the diagram made by Carolyn Springer to depict the counting of the chapter numbers throughout *Invisible Cities*' 55 individual city chapters. There are also 18 interstitial chapters, discussions between Polo and Kublai Khan.

unclear (and perhaps devious) comparison works with both of these repetitions. A day like any other it may be, but we know nothing of the other days. Only this one is performed. In *Waiting for Godot*, at least, a tree loses its leaves; in *Endgame* there is only one long day.

For Clov, repetition comes as an annoyance. Either by habit or by rehearsal, he has seen this all before; answering Hamm's questions, he says: "[*Wearily*] Same answer. [*Pause.*] You've asked me these questions millions of times." Hamm replies, "*with fervour,*" "Ah the old questions, the old answers, there's nothing like them!" (46). Hamm, nostalgic and reveling in the repetition, tires Clov.

Though nostalgic in this moment, Hamm has another equally important impulse, which is to make a return to the era of his nostalgia impossible, to end the cycle of both his own life and life more generally ("But humanity might start from there all over again!" he says of a flea Clov finds in his pants, insistent that he kill it). There are also the repeated calls for "ending," perhaps of the play or perhaps the mundanity of the repeating days: "It's time it ended" (41, 9).

The most overt repetition in Beckett's play comes on the level of the line. For example, "something is taking its course" is said twice (20, 40). There are plenty of others too such as when Clov repeats himself to be heard ("GRREY!") or "We're getting on," which Hamm says four times (39, 16, 21, 47, 76). But repetition in *Endgame* has an air of futility, a senselessness that it is something like habit, which Beckett, in his essay on Proust, describes provocatively as "the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit."²⁹

For Calvino, repetition is more ambiguous, perhaps even generative. One suggested reading of *Invisible Cities*, initially raised by the Khan in the text itself, posits that every city described (all 55) is in fact Venice. Thus each city chapter is a repetition of the same thing or,

²⁹ Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit, *Proust and Three Dialogues with George Duthuit* (London: John Calder, 1999), 19.

seen more generatively, the same thing permutates into different things through the interpretive eyes of Marco Polo.

Repetition is also related to memory. Polo describes the city of Zirma as “redundant”: “it repeats itself so that something will stick in the mind” (19). In Zirma, repetition is the same thing multiple times: multiple blind men, multiple madmen in skyscrapers. In the first paragraph of “Cities and Signs 2,” Polo describes Zirma as a city of repeated images which are also “distinct memories.” It is a city whose nature seems to be to repeat itself and, on the model of rote memory, to be remembered. Repetition forms memory. Its goal is for something to “stick in the mind.”

The Zirma chapter is just two paragraphs, and the second mirrors the first, repeats it, shifting from the mystical and generalized “traveler” to Polo’s own experience of Zirma. It repeats so that Zirma will stick in the mind. Polo describes the multitudes of dirigibles he sees, the tattoo parlors, but his companions “swear they saw only one” of each. Polo concludes: “Memory is redundant: it repeats signs so that the city can begin to exist” (19). It is not clear whether repetition is here internal (in Polo’s memory) or external (taking place in the city), or both, or neither, but something is repeating, and the stakes are ontological: through repetition, “the city can begin to exist.” The form of Zirma’s chapter is a repetition: the city’s description is effectively repeated, with small changes, twice. Perhaps that repetition is crucial to the existence it leads.

Zirma’s opposite, the city of Zara, the city that is like a memory palace – “forced to remain motionless and always to same,” – has “disintegrated, disappeared” (16). There, sameness is motionlessness is disintegration. Repetition is lacking in Zara. Unrepeated, it exists in memory but not in actuality.

Hamm's desire for continuation and repetition to cease and Polo's claim that repetition in Zirma gives it its existence (as well as its memorability) are in some sense in agreement, at least in their conceptions of the stakes of repetition. In both *Endgame* and *Invisible Cities*, repetition has the ability to actualize, and it is somehow linked to existence. The biggest difference is that in *Endgame*, repetition bears some degree of sameness, or at the very least mundanity. In *Invisible Cities*, sameness is related to repetition but more distantly, because sameness, as is demonstrated in Zara, is disintegration. Repetition, then, is constitutive and generative.

IV. Playing with Abstraction

If *Invisible Cities* has a plot in the conventional sense of that word, it is motivated not by the explorer-narrator Polo but by the Khan he serves. Kublai is an emperor in search of his empire, which is not to say that he does not have one but that he feels he does not possess it. Through Polo's stories, the Khan seeks to "discern," "possess," "learn."

Possession has something to do with understanding, as in both French and Italian the words for "to seize," "saisir" and "cogliere" mean also to understand (similar to the English "grasp"). To understand something is to possess it, and it is to that end that Kublai works to understand Polo's tales; he thinks that in them lies a sort of secret to his kingdom.

Understanding does not come easily for the Khan; Polo's tales prove elusive (any reader can testify to that) refracting every light that reaches them, seeming to escape any attempts at grasping. Kublai's challenge is, according to Carolyn Springer, to become a reader and an interpreter of Polo's tales, one able to forge from them a meaning that attains to understanding.³⁰ But Kublai is not a perfect reader. He is a clever and experimental one, meandering with gusto through the space of Polo's words, almost always certain and very often wrong.

In the early days of Polo's employment, before he spoke the language of the Khan, Polo conveyed his travels by arranging a sample of wares "*in a certain order on the black and white tiles, and occasionally shifting them with studied moves.*" It is the physical movement of these objects over the floor that makes the Khan think of chess. Seeking to decipher their meaning, he decides that "*ignoring the objects' variety of form, he could grasp the system of arranging one with respect to the others on the majolica floor.*" He rehearses a structuralist move and thinks "*if each city is like a game of chess, the day when I have learned the rules, I shall finally possess my*

³⁰ Springer, "Textual Geography," 295.

empire, even if I shall never succeed in knowing all the cities it contains.” He discovers difference and relation, noticing and uncovering not the objects themselves, but the patterns in their movement: they might be defined not by what they are but rather by what they are not and how they are not. He hypothesizes the existence of some essential rules which can be known as a substitute for the insurmountable task of learning the individual cities of his kingdom.³¹

Thus the Khan takes Polo’s carefully constructed communicative system and reduces it to a sort of matrix which, though complex, might yield a discernable pattern. Focused only on the pieces’ relationships and not the pieces themselves, the Khan pushes his analysis another step further:

Actually, it was useless for Marco’s speeches to employ all this bric-a-brac: a chessboard would have sufficed, with its specific pieces. To each piece, in turn, they could give an appropriate meaning: a knight could stand for a real horseman, or for a procession of coaches, an army on the march, an equestrian monument: a queen could be a lady looking down from her balcony, a fountain, a church with a pointed dome, a quince tree. (121)

“An appropriate meaning”? Perhaps many. Each piece is given a short list of possible meanings. The chessboard becomes the new communicative medium, similar to the objects on the floor but reduced by one level of complexity, and further cut off from the actual empire and its cities. The Khan-as-reader interprets Polo’s chess pieces, inscribing them with meaning. Put that way, it might be a theory of language Kublai is espousing. The board becomes a line-ruled paper and the pieces a sort of ink.

³¹ Beckett, too, was interested by chess. In *Murphy*, for example, a full game is given, move for move, and commented on; the game might even attain to the kind of communicative matrix it represents for Kublai. *Endgame*, especially in the original French, is framed as the end of a game of chess. Hamm’s opening line “me—[he yawns]—to play,” which in the English is ambiguous in its use of the word “play” (noun, verb) is much simpler in the French: “— À — [bâillements] — à moi. [Un temps.] De jouer” (8). The French line translates cleanly to “my turn to play.” *Endgame*, which finds Hamm and Clov at the end of the game of chess, is a reduction of possibility toward the ultimate zero, a collapse; the options, the moves, are limited by the bare board and the impending end. Samuel Beckett, *Fin De Partie: Suivi De, Acte Sans Paroles* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1957), 14.

But this move on the part of Kublai comes, as Springer points out, at the cost of asserting that “knowledge of the empire can be achieved without further reference to the external world, by manipulating an inventory of formal abstractions.”³² Abstractions, here, are not distillations but rather ideal, untethered wisps of thought. The system Kublai describes is abstract because it develops meaning about his empire without in any way resembling it, or seeming to relate to it at all.

This disconnect becomes poignantly clear when Polo returns later, and is invited, by silent gesture, to sit at the chess board and to abandon the things of his journey for only this scant, though permutatively infinite board.³³ A skilled communicator, Polo moves the pieces, tells and depicts. The Khan, meanwhile, interprets, contemplates, reflects

on the invisible order that sustains cities, on the rules that decreed how they rise, take shape and prosper, adapting themselves to the seasons, and then how they sadden and fall in ruins. At times he thought he was on the verge of discovering a coherent, harmonious system underlying the infinite deformities and discords, but no model could stand up to the comparison with the game of chess. Perhaps, instead of racking one's brain to suggest with the ivory pieces' scant help visions which were anyway destined to oblivion, it would suffice to play a game according to the rules, and to consider each successive state of the board as one of the countless forms that the system of forms assembles and destroys. (122)

If discovering the rules between the pieces is the goal, then why do anything but play the game? Such seems to be the implication of the Khan's thinking. Working with the board as a communicative medium, he finds himself approaching the “harmonious system” but always turned back to the game of chess itself, brought to bear on his one final truth, the existence of what is right before him. So he does away with all the rest – what little of it remains – and sees the board as a truly abstract system of forms, utterly disconnected from his empire. He ceases to

³² Springer, "Textual Geography," 295.

³³ Permutatively and conceivably infinite. Mathematically, it is finite. For the sake of Kublai and Polo, it is infinite.

use it to communicate and the cities around his empire cease to be thought of. Why not make the space of the signifier all? The result is mere combinative play.

Though play has its reason for being, in the Khan's quest for understanding he has lost his way. Concluding that each state is merely another state says very little; it is nearly tautological, a throwaway result. He has reduced the board to a total abstraction that knows no connection to the real: "*now Kublai Khan no longer had to send Marco Polo on distant expeditions: he kept him playing endless games of chess*" (122). The Khan comprehends the assembly and destruction of forms, but it seems without stake, without purpose: "*now it was the game's purpose that eluded him.*" How can this be? Has the Khan not set or decided the purpose at each turn? First to seize, to communicate, then to learn the rules at play and finally to merely permute? He has fallen victim only to himself and his own interpretive constrictions, but it is not himself he sees:

At checkmate, beneath the foot of the king, knocked aside by the winner's hand, a black or white square remains. By disembodiment his conquests to reduce them to the essential, Kublai had arrived at the extreme operation: the definitive conquest, of which the empire's multiform treasures were only illusory envelopes. It was reduced to a square of planed wood: nothingness.... (123)

Calvino ends the opening chapter of section 8 here, to be taken back up (by continuation of the ellipses) at the end of the section.

This interpretive act—for that is what it means to link "*a square of planed wood*" and "*nothingness*" by a colon: to define, to interpret—comes from the reading mind of Kublai. It is the final point of arrival of his dangerous reading journey. First, he observed the patterns, "*ignoring the objects' variety of forms.*" Then, he thought to do away with the objects and work only with the chess board as a communicative, substitutive matrix. Finally, he stripped that away

too and left himself with only the abstract formal system of the game of chess, signifiers shuffling, empty and uninscribed.

It is Kublai who, seeing the square of wood, conflates it with “nothingness,” a conclusion drawn understandably from his abstract system’s gradual waning toward zero, a reduction in pieces and an emptying of spaces. This act is described as “*disembodying his conquests*,” removing his kingdom from his kingdom, “*reducing them to the essential*.” “*Essential*” here proves not to be a synonym of “necessary,” nor of “the distillation,” but instead the purposeless. He does not see himself as the agent *doing* the disembodying. Instead, he gazes at the empty square and thinks that *it* is nothingness, when really it was he who put nothingness there.

Seeing the Khan staring at the empty square on his chessboard, Marco Polo finally speaks:

“Your chessboard, sire, is inlaid with two woods: ebony and maple. The square on which your enlightened gaze is fixed was cut from the ring of a trunk that grew in a year of drought: you see how its fibers are arranged? Here a barely hinted knot can be made out: a bud tried to burgeon on a premature spring day, but the night’s frost forced it to desist.”

Until then the Great Khan had not realized that the foreigner knew how to express himself fluently in his language, but it was not his fluency that amazed him.

“Here is a thicker pore: perhaps it was a larvum’s nest; not a woodworm because, once born, it would have begun to dig, but a caterpillar that gnawed the leaves and was the cause of the tree’s being chosen for chopping down... This edge was scored by the wood carver with his gouge so that it would adhere to the next square, more protruding...”
(131-2)

Polo’s intervention into the Khan’s angst is simple: it is to *read*. He reads and interprets the square tile that in Kublai’s system of formal abstraction had been taken for mere “nothingness.” Polo’s reading is perhaps an act of imagination, perhaps of deep knowledge, but it is figured by the narrator as an act of discernment: “*the quantity of things that could be read in a little piece of smooth and empty wood overwhelmed Kublai*.” From this point of discernment Polo makes a

departure, a generative explosion indistinguishable from a world: “*Polo was already talking about ebony forests, about rafts laden with logs that come down the river, of docks, of woman at the windows...*” (132). Polo sees a vast, untethered possibility sprouting associatively from the little square. He seems, so casually as to be unaware, to hold the world in a tile of wood, or to create it from one.

Though Polo and Kublai both interpret, they interpret differently. By comparison to the Khan’s, Polo’s reading is generative and sensitive. Where Kublai had assumed that spaciousness and nothingness were synonymous, Polo could glimpse the conditions that allowed for that spaciousness to exist. Kublai seems to get so caught up in his conceptualized world of abstractions, that he forgets the world he is trying so hard to conceptualize.

I am certain that, in some way, Kublai’s reading is wrong because it is violent, it erases material existence, it “*disembodies.*” One of his earliest moves was to “*ignore the objects’ variety of form,*” the objects Polo brings to depict the journey he has undergone. Eventually, he does away with these objects entirely, then stops sending Polo out at all. And in the end, what he fails to see and what Polo elucidates for him, is that the *thing* on which he had inscribed a null meaning, like the *things* whose actual form he ignored, like the empire he seeks to grasp, itself has a history insofar as it exists materially. Polo teaches Kublai about the histories accumulated by the signifier, to respect the thing on which meaning is inscribed through interpretation.

But even more, it seems to give the signifier something of the status of the signified. Georg Lukács writes that “the separation of image and significance is itself an abstraction, for the significance is always wrapped in images and the reflection of a glow from beyond the image shines through every image.”³⁴ If the image is to be read as analogous to the signifier, to the

³⁴ Georg Lukács, "1. on the Nature and Form of the Essay," *Essays on the Essay Film*, December 31, 2017, 21, <https://doi.org/10.7312/alte17266-002>.

square of wood, then Polo can glimpse and read the “glow,” which was always already there. He sees the intermingling of the thing and its history, the thing and what lies behind it, where the Khan can’t but forcibly separate, disembody.

V. Actuality and the Calculable

Where in the study of language and literature questions of believability, realness, and truth are common crutches or touchstones, in mathematics they are givens. This is not the case, of course, in the upper echelons of each subject, but instead in the common, K-12 curricula; inquiries into reliability, fidelity, truth-value—“can we believe what the narrator/novel/words tell us?”—form the basis of an English education, whereas almost no question is asked of mathematics’ ability to convey or contain or relate to reality. We feel as though math is not arbitrary, or that the relationship between its terms and the world is direct. This is perhaps why, in *1984*, though newspeak draws some attention to itself it is ultimately the forced affirmation “ $2+2=5$ ” that is most jarring. Re-inventing vocabulary, a shuffling of signifiers, slips by unnoticed compared to a change in the fundamentals of the mathematical language.

For mathematics is just that: a unique sort of language, a system of signification like many others with elements and rules with the implicit goal of describing and understanding, making meaning from the actual world. Certain sub-systems of mathematics even have obvious transcendental signifiers, the un-provable but necessarily accepted tenets from which all other things arise. The most obvious of these is the five axioms of Euclidian geometry (“any two points connected form a straight line,” for example).³⁵ From such basic notions a whole system of proofs and constructions follows. Meaning within the system is dependent on accepting the system’s postulates and adhering to its logical rules.

Mathematics *means* something, of course, as the kindergartener faced with two sets of two cookies realizes when they are combined to a set of four. It is right. The student of algebra

³⁵ Thomas F. Banchoff, *Beyond the Third Dimension*, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://www.math.brown.edu/tbanchof/Beyond3d/chapter9/section01.html>.

can find in mathematics a vocabulary for describing the arc of a baseball (a parabola) and the ecologist a model for carrying capacity.³⁶

Beckett and Calvino were interested readers of mathematics, and it appears in their work as an alternative to the word-language they find so troublesome. In *Invisible Cities* mathematics is postulated as knowledge through calculation. In *Endgame*, measurement is similarly proposed as a path to understanding in the context of a geometric predicament. Both authors turn to these methods to ask of them, can you do for us what language cannot? Can you, mathematics, signify unambiguously? Do you reduce the space of uncertainty that challenges the interpreter of the written word to zero?

To conceive of mathematics as linguistic is one thing, to consider language as mathematical another. In his essay “Notes Towards a Definition of the Narrative Form as a Combinative Process,” Calvino ponders a history of narrative derived from “combinative play,” a sort of mathematical trial and error. In his story, the early storyteller “would delve into the natural resources of his own stock of words. He did this by combinations and permutations of all the characters, activities, and tangible objects which could be involved [...] the result of this was a kind of geometry of storytelling which invariably offered a set of balances and correlatives.” He finds this mathematical conception of literature at odds with another argument: that literature is “in fact a supreme effort to arrive outside the boundaries of language.” If literature is merely a combinatorial process, all of its combinations can be expressed as “a set of variations on a finite stock of functors and functions.”³⁷ Calvino is troubled by the co-truth of these characterizations,

³⁶ I have chosen these examples very deliberately because they are simple, and also wrong. As any student who went on to take advanced mathematics knows, the question of a baseball’s arc gets quite complicated when you consider air resistance, and models for carrying capacity are more than mere logistic curves.

³⁷ Italo Calvino, “Appunti Sulla Narrative Come Processo Combinatorio” [Notes Towards a Definition of the Narrative Form as a Combinative Process], *20th Century Studies* 1 (1970): 97.

but finds that they might not be so at odds as they seem. For one thing, what mathematics calls “finite” we might call practically infinite, like the possible states of a chess board. For another, in the process of combinative play, according to Calvino, certain generations “may suddenly register an unexpected meaning ... one that has come sliding down from a different level, one that is capable of bringing into play something that exists at that other level for the writer or society he belongs to and means a great deal to him.”³⁸ Thus the combinatorial capacity of the abstract system of language carries in it something like a series of hidden gems, which the storyteller or writer might find. These gems are not objective in themselves, they take on “unexpected meaning” *for* “the writer or society he belongs to.” Shifting at every moment, a combinative conception of narrative is not reductive at all, but generative, giving a pleasant infinitude in which to conceive and consider.

Calvino’s conception of language introduces mathematics into the world of words. In an undelivered lecture on “Exactness,” he proclaims that “I wanted to tell you about my fondness for geometric forms, for symmetries and sequences, for combinatorics, for numerical proportions—to explain what I’ve written in terms of my fidelity to the idea of limits, of measure [...] But perhaps it is that very idea that evokes what is endless: the succession of whole numbers, the straight lines of Euclid...”³⁹ It is within the well-defined (in mathematics, “well-defined” is a synonym for “unambiguous,” or “assigning a unique interpretation”) scope of basic mathematics and Euclidian geometry that Calvino finds the evocation of the endless. His relationship to them is personal, though, one of “fondness,” writing with “fidelity.” In Calvino’s work and lectures, the infinite evokes a sort of ambiguity or uncertainty, contrary to its more

³⁸ Calvino, “Appunti Sulla Narrative,” 99.

³⁹ Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. Geoffrey Brock (Boston: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), 83.

domesticated mathematical form. In his mathematical conception of language, too, there is an element of the unknown, the affective chord struck by certain permutations. Though Calvino might be fond of and loyal to a mathematics that prize the unambiguous, his use of them is that of the writer, prizing not certainty but possibility.

Some of Polo's cities aspire to a sort of mathematical essentialism, toward the unambiguity supposedly promised by its practice. Eudoxia is one such city, not derived from but related to a depiction of its true form, a geometric form, depicted in the figure of a carpet:

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 through the whole woof. (96)

The carpet and its geometric forms and patterns come to signify the essence of the city of Eudoxia and to depict it better than Eudoxia itself, as it completes "the incomplete perspective you grasp" when on its streets (96). It is described as an "immobile order," the unchanging figural or calculated representation. Stopping here, a reader might understand Calvino to be lauding the essential truth-value of the geometries and symmetries laid into the carpet, but Eudoxia's relationship to the Euclidian carpet is ruthlessly ambiguous.

An oracle says that "one of the two objects ... has the form the gods gave the starry sky and the orbits in which the worlds revolve; the other is an approximate reflection, like every human creation" (97). Which is which, one cannot say. It would be tempting to assert that the carpet is the true form, capturing in its geometries what Eudoxia would be if it were made by the gods. But after all, mathematics is itself a human creation.

The carpet is the true, geometric, essential representation and the city the rough approximation. Or the opposite. The rough and the exact are mingled and mixed like Calvino's combinatorial language. But under these conditions the aspiration to mathematical unambiguity is troubled or impossible.

This particular impossibility is again encountered in *Endgame* as Hamm and Clov negotiate mathematical concepts in actual space. When Clov takes Hamm "for a little turn ... right round the world!" by pushing his chair around the edge of the room, Hamm immediately asks, "I was right in the center, wasn't I?" (33). After his tour about the room – an incomplete round due to Hamm's insistence – "[*Clov pushes chair back to center.*]"

HAMM: Am I right in the center?

CLOV: I'll measure it.

HAMM: More or less! More or less!

CLOV: [*moving chair slightly*] There!

HAMM: I'm more or less in the center?

CLOV: I'd say so.

HAMM: You'd say so! Put me right in the center!

CLOV: I'll go and get the tape.

HAMM: Roughly! Roughly! [*Clov moves chair slightly*] Bang in the center!

CLOV: There! [*Pause.*]

HAMM: I feel a little too far to the left. [*Clov moves chair slightly.*] Now I feel a little too far to the right. [*Clov moves chair slightly.*] I feel a little too far forward. [*Clov moves chair slightly.*] Now I feel a little too far back. [*Clov moves chair slightly.*] Don't stay there, [*i.e.. behind the chair*] you give me the shivers. [*Clov returns to his place beside the chair.*] (34-5)

The problem in this scene comes from wanting to find a center. This desire rings with post-structuralist resonances, an unavoidable reading of this scene, but one which we will defer for the moment. Instead, consider the problem geometrically, as that of finding the center of a room, or the center of a circle inscribed in a room (the half-circle traced by Hamm's round). In Euclidian geometry, to locate the center of a rectangle, one might construct a pair of intersecting

lines from opposite corner to opposite corner and, at their intersection, find the center. For a circle, intersect the bisecting perpendicular lines of two chords. One might also measure and divide. The point is that finding the center is (mathematically) possible and definitive. Clov opts to measure. But Hamm insists “more or less! More or less!” The difficulty with approximating, though, is that you always want to be as un-approximate as possible, to attain to Euclid’s beautiful and proven forms: *this* is the center. The problem of approximation also emerges as a problem of language. “More or less,” plus or minus. Hamm wants his chair “more or less” in the center, already inexact. When Clov replies “I would say so,” Hamm’s position becomes doubly uncertain. Not only is it “more or less” in the center, but it might not even be that.

The scene then moves to a comical back-and-forth. In the end, it is not the moving of the chair that settles Hamm but Clov’s relocation. The search for the center is finished, unresolved and uncertain. Hamm is an oscillating point circling another, the center. He never arrives and perhaps never can arrive at the center of the room, such is the roughness of actuality. Where in *Eudoxia* the relationship between divine mathematical form and reality is ambiguous, in *Endgame* it seems as though the ideal of the center, the center of this actual three-dimensional space, haunts the scene, untraceable though conceptually facile. The mathematical model of the space, of the circle with its center, is untenable or unachievable. As a system of signification, a means of understanding the world, Hamm and Clov find mathematics woefully insufficient.

Kublai Khan also seeks to comprehend the infinite variation of the world with the singularity of mathematics. It is toward a totalizing calculation that Polo’s tales might bring him.

Polo addresses the Khan:

While, at a sign from you, sire, the unique and final city raises its stainless walls, I am collecting the ashes of the other possible cities that vanish to make room for it, cities that can never be rebuilt or remembered. When you know at last the residue of unhappiness for which no precious stone can compensate, you will be able to calculate the exact

number of carats toward which that final diamond must strive. Otherwise, your calculations will be mistaken from the very start. (60)

The Khan's "*unique and final city*," which stands as a transcendental truth, "*stainless*," unambiguous, is figured as a problem of calculation. Calculation is one of the most basic parts of mathematics, distinct from solving, proving, isolating, reducing, or any specific operation in that at the moment of calculation, all values are known. Calculation results in one single value. In order to calculate this "*exact number of carats*," however, the Khan must know the value of an elusive variable: "*the residue of unhappiness for which no precious stone can compensate*." It is doubtful that such a residue can be measured in the units of carats. Michel de Certeau writes of city walkers that "their story begins on the ground level, with footsteps. They are myriad, but do not compose a series. They cannot be counted because each unit has a qualitative character: a style of tactile apprehension and kinesthetic appropriation."⁴⁰ The city and its people are not, for de Certeau, quantifiable: each is qualitative, made of particular footsteps, each incalculable. And even if they were, if a particular "residue of unhappiness" could be measured for a given city, the number of possible cities is as infinite as the field of the possible. It seems that the implication of Polo's statement is that such a calculation as the Khan's will always be mistaken if it is begun.

Polo and Kublai again reveal the flaw in considering mathematics as an ideal means of signification: like language, it runs across the grain of reality rather than with it. The ways in which mathematics relates to the actualized world is different from language, though its goals are similar. Its abstraction is troubled by the roughness, the infinitesimal texturing and trailing off into unlimited digits of any reality. There is always a little sliver of space between Hamm and the center. There will always be another possible city whose ashes have yet to be collected. Some

⁴⁰ Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 97.

things, it turns out, just cannot be measured, just cannot be calculated. Whether they be the center of a room or the “residue of unhappiness,” the problem is the same, and that problem seems to be the desire for the unambiguous.

VI. Confounding Logics

Logic is concerned with truth: what is correct, what is false. Its manipulation of symbols creates a context within which these things can be decided. Applying its structures to quotidian verbal language renders logic informal, but it still claims the ability to discern truths and falsities from the muddle of certain linguistic propositions. The construction of knowledge in mathematics takes for its model the groundwork of formal logic, as do debate, political discourse (at its most sensible) and much else. The common terms “proof by contradiction,” “recursive,” “inductive and deductive reasoning” are all located within logic or logic’s predecessors. Informal logic’s relationship to language, however, is slippery, for it assumes either a separate, more regulated kind of language (limited to simple declaratives) or assumes that all language can be resolved into a form where coherent meaning can be derived.

Though its claims to certainty easily arouse skepticism, the systems of formal and especially informal logic prove a useful ground for considering how meaning is made from language, how we know. *Invisible Cities*, always exuding certainty, makes ample use of the *champs lexical* of logic: “hypothesis,” “correct,” “unless,” “conjecture,” “rejected,” “proved.” The book’s seventh section is bookended by two dialogues that are either theatrical or platonic in form, and filled with such words. Their central problem is ontological: “*I too, am not sure I am here,*” says Kublai in the opening passage (103).

At the chapter’s end, they circuitously approach the question of their own existence, of those who surround them, and of those who do not. These questions are, as in Kublai’s confession of uncertainty, all tied to notions of location.

POLO: ... Perhaps the terraces of this garden overlook only the lake of our mind...

KUBLAI: ...and however far our troubled enterprises as warriors and merchants may take us, we both harbor within ourselves this silent shade, this conversation of pauses, this evening that is always the same. (117)

Under Polo's "Perhaps," the two consider one possible explanation for this question of where: where are we? Where is this conversation? Perhaps, they say, it is only within their minds, while their bodies are or can be taken far away. The conversation is made to run across normal concepts of space. It is also "always the same," as though frozen in time, "always evening." Across both time and space, something remains fixed within these two, silent or speaking: the conversation. Perhaps.

POLO: Unless the opposite hypothesis is correct: that those who strive in camps and ports exist only because we two think of them, here, enclosed among these bamboo hedges motionless since time began.

KUBLAI: Unless toil, shouts, sores, stink do not exist; and only this azalea bush.

POLO: Unless porters, stonecutters, rubbish collectors, cooks cleaning the lights of chickens, washerwomen bent over stones, mothers stirring rice as they nurse their infants, exist only because we think them. (117)

Glossing their first idea as "no matter where or when we are, always this conversation is in our minds," its anticipated opposite might be something like "we are always here, on this terrace, and all the places and times we could be are in our minds." It is surprising that Polo's opposite hypothesis is not this, but rather an extreme version of it: not only that the two are still, stationary, and think of others but that the others' presence in thought is the only existence they lead. What Polo proposes here is the purest form of solipsism: that which is exterior to the solipsistic subject "*exists only because [they] think them.*" They are still, though, considering possibilities, in the "perhaps... unless..." construction.

KUBLAI: To tell the truth, I never think them.

POLO: Then they do not exist. (117)

Polo and Kublai come in contact with the logical succedent of solipsism, a violent un-existing, one too grand and too sweeping. The Khan steps back:

KUBLAI: To me this conjecture does not seem to suit our purposes. Without them we could never remain here swaying, cocooned in our hammocks. (117)

It is a somewhat dissatisfying reason on first glance: the others must exist for the Khan's "purposes," so that he can sway in his hammock.

POLO: Then the hypothesis must be rejected. So the other hypothesis is true: they exist and we do not. (118)

Once again, Polo does not negate the current hypothesis as we might expect. The first part is to be expected: "they exist," but to assert one's own non-existence seems a contradiction in terms. This is the total logical opposite of solipsism's two claims. The opposite of "We exist and they do not" is "We do not exist and they do." But in an inquiry into the sort of existence led by the duo and their conversation, it seems that the one answer that would be unacceptable is this one. And yet this is the conclusion on which they settle:

*KUBLAI: We have proved that if we were here, we would not be.
POLO: And here, in fact, we are. (118)*

Their pseudo-logical exploration of ontology leads to a paralogism: an assertion of their own non-existence. The seeming contradiction derives from the verb "to be," which is doing a great deal of work, and the preposition "here," in conjunction with the certainties "proved" and "in fact." On a tonal level, Polo and the Khan are certain. The language, however, doesn't seem to make sense, either on the level of existence (to who and what does this final conclusion grant existence?) or that of location (the troublesome deictic "here.")

The two ideas are intermixed by Polo's closing line. Splicing the sentence "here we are" with "in fact" completely changes the meaning. The placement of those two words puts distance

between the deictic “here” and the verb referring to it, “are.” “And here, in fact, we are” perfectly conjoins “we are here” and the simpler assertion “we are,” with the breathy exhalation of the latter concluding a statement fundamentally interested in the necessity of existence to location. Polo’s line is thus in direct contradiction with the Khan’s logical construction, “if we were here, we would not be,” which seems to split the verb “to be here” from “to be.”

“Here” almost always poses interpretive issues. It only references clearly when accompanied by a gesture, a point, or perhaps when uttered in space. On the page of a book, of course, it might be emulating the latter, but the simple question of “where is here?” is complicated in the passage by the simultaneously accepted assertion of the speakers’ non-existence. It begins to sound like the characters know their own textuality. The printed “here” points glaringly to itself, physically located on a page, perhaps referring only to that physical location. Then it is a sort of intersection between the text and the spatial world that holds it, like the spot on a map that lines up perfectly with where on the map the map is. “Here” is *here* on the page, on this page on which Kublai and Polo also *are*.⁴¹ And here, in fact, they are, in this book in this world. They lead a material existence, but one perhaps not quite attaining to an un-nuanced use of the verb “to be.” They might be here but not be, residing as fictional characters in the in-between of Polo’s spliced sentence.

Polo and Kublai are trying to make sense of themselves and their world through the lens of logic, but the conclusion at which they arrive is uncertain on the level of language. The minutest grammatical choices have the most significant ramifications for what and how their words mean. The words come to shapes and possibilities outside the framework of the hypothesis-mongering of informal logic. The complexity of what they say, of the seemingly

⁴¹ But then the book is printed and reprinted, and the “here” compounds, shooting out across the globe from bookstores and distribution centers, a “here” that is nowhere and almost everywhere.

simple words “to be” and “here,” cannot be reduced to fit into such a frame. Logic is either a curious route to indeterminacy, a sort of play, or ultimately incapable of providing what it claims to.

In his essay on lightness, Calvino writes that “When the human realm seems doomed to heaviness, I feel the need to fly like Perseus into some other space. I am not talking about escaping into dreams or into the irrational. I mean that I feel the need to change my approach, the look at the world from a different angle, with different logic, different methods of knowing and proving.”⁴² Perhaps this is one such “different logic.”

Alberto Tondello claims that “Calvino creates new images through a rational imagination,” which we might modify slightly to say “inspired by a rational imagination.”⁴³ For by confounding the rigors of the logical system, Polo and Kublai arrive at an airy, light exhalation, a space between existence and nonexistence culminating in the affirmation, “here, in fact, we are.” Such a simple, light phrase on the tongue, rife with consequence when heaved on the mind. There is a breath-taking beauty to this conclusion, to the assertion of existence contingent upon giving great existence to the “they” outside. It is paradoxical, and in the space of that paradox, in the space of this language which is nothing if not confounding, there is a glimmer of alternative possibility.

⁴² Calvino, *Six Memos*, 8.

⁴³ Alberto Tondello, “Italo Calvino and Samuel Beckett: Regenerative Creation in the Fiction of the 1960s,” *The Modern Language Review* 111, no. 1 (2016): 30.

VII. Thinking the Impossible

It is the strange power of fiction to render the inconceivable thinkable, to give credence to that which seems ludicrous, to momentarily scatter the realist specters that haunt our imaginations. In our guided wanderings through the space of the text, we can suddenly find ourselves somewhere we didn't know existed. This happens through the language by which fiction comes to us. What is this language doing? What are these moments when the unthinkable can be thought? What does the work that cultivates such moments—for me, those of Calvino and Beckett—*do* to us that instigates such a minute and fleeting shift in our thinking?

To put words to this subtle yet world-rending feeling has proven very difficult, and I am grateful to have identified the very same sensation in the writings of another. Michel Foucault writes in the introduction to *The Order of Things* that, reading a particular passage in Borges, he broke into a laughter “that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought – *our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography – breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other.”⁴⁴ Foucault's is the best description of what it feels like to engage with the type of text I am interested in, the type of text defined by this effect.

The passage in Borges that Foucault is responding to describes an encyclopedia that divides animals into ridiculous, impossible, overlapping categories. To Foucault, it is unthinkable. He deems this passage, in his first use of the term, a heterotopia. In many ways, this

⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xvii.

moment in Borges resembles the works of Beckett and Calvino; all formulate a bizarre, somewhat jarring, mildly comedic oddity in language that, when held in the mind, feels like it should not be possible and in some way changes the actual world.

Though I take heterotopia to refer to a certain text or object capable of producing the “shattering” effect Foucault describes, in his own work the term developed in a rather different direction. From this literary use of the term, it shifted into the realm of space and structure to describe the uniquely regulated spaces in society that pressure, through violation of certain orders, everything else.⁴⁵ For thinking about the doings of words, the first, literary definition takes precedence. But the literature that Foucault identifies as heterotopic is the same as that which I earlier identified as spacious, as a unique and perhaps impossible architecture into which the reader is placed. Intersecting both of his uses of the term, heterotopia might be a text-space whose very impossibility applies a certain pressure to the realm of the possible.

It provokes this effect by mingling impossibilities, shifting imaginations, opening spaces. But crucially, it is built with a different sort of geography which distinguishes it from other forms of fiction. Kevin Knight, in an essay on restoring the heterotopia to the literary, writes that “Although utopias, as Foucault says, ‘have no real locality,’ there is nevertheless an implied imaginary geography that precedes the writing of a utopian fiction. Heterotopias, on the other hand, open up a space ‘without law or geometry,’ collapsing the distinction between *fabula* and *syuzhet*, precluding the possibility of an a priori referential world.”⁴⁶

Were Calvino to read Knight’s characterization, he might argue that such worlds are not necessarily without law or geometry, but may simply abide by another set of them (this analysis

⁴⁵ Examples include brothels, cemeteries, and ships. Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité*, October 1984.

⁴⁶ Kelvin T. Knight, "Placeless Places: Resolving the Paradox of Foucault's Heterotopia," *Textual Practice* 31, no. 1 (April 22, 2016): 143, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2016.1156151>.

also seems more faithful to Foucault's vision, in which he sees "another system of thought"): "I feel the need to change my approach, to look at the world from a different angle, with different logic, different methods of knowing and proving."⁴⁷

In heterotopic space, the incommensurate can commensurate, the impossible is possible, and critically, the *unthinkable* can be thought and written.⁴⁸ This is how Foucault describes the Borges passage about the encyclopedia that so shattered his thinking: "the thing that we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*."⁴⁹ Foucault's "impossible," then, is contextual because possibility is revealed by the Borges passage to be a matter of which system of thought you are in. The passage allows Foucault to "apprehend" this limitation, to glimpse or enter another system of thought. It entails the realization that other ways of thinking and existing exist.

This strange interaction occurs in a non-geographic space; heterotopia is strictly alternative. For Calvino and Foucault, the power of this otherness is not merely its difference (that might be innate to fiction) but its capacity to *affect* the reader with a moment of apprehension, to return them to themselves: Foucault's thought is shattered by Borges' writing, Calvino's approach changed by another space. New logics, angles, and epistemologies can be not only glimpsed but undergone through the space of a heterotopia. Crucially, this is not a form of escapism because the gaze is always ultimately turned back toward the world. The final realization is not only that of another system of thought, but of the limitations of our own.

⁴⁷ Calvino, *Six Memos*, 8.

⁴⁸ The relationship between the possible and the impossible is always unclear. The word "impossible" feels tinged by the over-adult, circumscribed worldview that dooms any radical change. It is what parents say to children to shut them up, to kill an idea. The heterotopia is what allows the impossible to be possible and the unthinkable, in spite of its name, to be thought.

⁴⁹ Foucault, *The Order*, XV.

It might be argued that what I have thus far described as heterotopia is just a fancy way of saying fiction, that in fact these traits are not special at all. That, however, would be a generous reading of fiction as a genre, one which fails to account for its capacity – in mirroring that of the heterotopia – to re-entrench the boundaries of the possible. Heterotopia’s otherness, its pressuring of language, is one side of a spectrum on the other side of which lies the dull, reinforcing narratives that perpetuate rather than challenge the lines of possibility circumscribed around us. All of this is to say that it would be fair to argue that all fiction has the capacity to be heterotopic, but to say that all fiction *is* would be a blatant misunderstanding.

Amanda Dennis, in her essay on Beckett, Calvino, and literature as heterotopia, writes that “by manifesting what is impossible for us to think, heterotopias cause us to suspect that ours is not the only order, that there are other ways, for instance, of configuring the border between the impossible and the real.”⁵⁰ That border is not itself strictly real, but rather uncovered or imposed. Dennis reads *Endgame*, following Theodor Adorno, as exhibiting both the “illusory and esoteric” and “our world.” It is “a space in which multiple conflicting orders co-exist,” and yet – as demonstrated by the real objects that populate the play, and by its real, physical performance – of our world, a world which might render such orders impossible.

Dennis focuses on the geography of *Endgame*, and what she calls the “indeterminacy” of its setting. Her work recalls Knight’s argument about implied geometry, noting that the play makes explicit reference to recognizable names from the actual world (the Ardennes, Sedan, Lake Como) but leaves the space around the bunker largely uncharacterized. It is only by Clov’s scant descriptions (“grey,” “zero,” etc.) that we come to know it, and these don’t exactly furnish

⁵⁰ Amanda Dennis, “Heterotopias: The Possible and Real in Foucault, Beckett, and Calvino,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space*, by Robert T. Tally (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 172, WorldCat.

our imagination. The result is the reader's "inability to restrict the play's calamity to a place and time," which "makes it feel omnipresent."⁵¹

The broadly heterotopic world of *Endgame* is made of words which, on their smaller scale, replicate this indeterminacy. Many of the passages examined thus far cultivate this sense of strangeness. Take, for example, the simple exchange:

HAMM: What time is it?

CLOV: The same as usual. (10)

There are many possible readings and resolutions to Clov's bizarre response. On the level of the play's performance, one can imagine that Clov is talking about the scheduled time of the play. Perhaps time in the shelter is of no consequence, and Clov is merely brushing off Hamm's question, or wryly contesting his power to demand an answer. One certain effect of Clov's response, though, is to warp the noun "time." Time, as we understand it, is permanently progressive. It doesn't have a typical, characteristic, "usual" state. But in the space of *Endgame* this statement is allowed to hold, stilling time in its tracks.

What this passage does to the word "time" is to render it strange, which Viktor Shklovsky famously argues is the role of art. Where Shklovsky develops his theory of estrangement from the works of Tolstoy, arguing that his "method of estrangement consists in not calling a thing or event by its name but describing it as if seen for the first time," Beckett's method (and Calvino's, too) might be a sort of opposite, using the name "time" to describe something that clashes with or responds strangely to our understanding of that word. The result is to force a re-consideration of what "time" means, a stretching or pressuring of the term.⁵²

⁵¹ Dennis, "Heterotopias: The Possible," 173.

⁵² Viktor Shklovsky, "Art, as Device," *Poetics Today* 36, no. 3 (September 1, 2015): 163, <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-3160709>.

Foucault characterizes his unsettlement in the face of Borges as emerging in part from what his writing does to language: “heterotopias ... desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences.”⁵³ They “are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy ‘syntax’ in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to ‘hold together.’”⁵⁴ This is perhaps what is at play when Clov lashes out at Hamm over the word “yesterday”:

HAMM: Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday!

CLOV: That means that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day. I use the words you taught me. If they don't mean anything any more, teach me others. Or let me be silent. (51)

Words pass from Hamm to Clov; but Clov emphasizes that it is not the word itself that holds meaning but its use. *Endgame* not only lays bare this way of words but begins to tear the words apart, to stretch, shatter, desiccate them.

Perhaps it is the space made in the sign between the signifier and the signified that creates a heterotopia. The words and the things, separated, create an openness, a spaciousness, in which meaning may play. In this space, it is not fictionality that is emphasized, as in the simpler words of non-heterotopic fiction, but *possibility*.

Like *Endgame*, *Invisible Cities* is heterotopic in both its world and its words. Calvino's novel turns on the peculiar mingling of the incommensurate in the Foucauldian “non-place of language.” It creates a curious and challenging linguistic space and constructs a textual world

⁵³ Foucault, *The Order*, XVIII.

⁵⁴ Foucault, *The Order*, XX.

whose geography is heterotopic not merely because it is “impossible” (though it is that) but because it is “unthinkable.” It leaves the mind reeling.

Polo’s first description begins *in medias res*: “Leaving there and proceeding three days toward the east...” (7). All of the directions Polo gives to the Khan are deictic. Moreover, because of the seemingly non-linear temporality of the novel we cannot “enter into” the space of the world and learn our way about from one city to the next. Rather, the world seems disjointed and fragmentary, as though it is made of pieces drifting amidst vast unknown spaces, populated moments in an otherwise blank and unplaced universe.

In this non-geographic space, *Invisible Cities* brings the incommensurate together. Each city, defined by a new set of rules, works differently from every other, and they seem able to contradict one another in spite of existing in the same textual world. From Hypatia Polo writes “There is no language without deceit,” but contradicts this 14 pages later writing of Olivia: “Falsehood is never in words; it is in things” (48, 62).⁵⁵ Both maxims speak to how they are interpreted, too, the one calling its own form into question and the other all-too assuredly self-affirming.

Ultimately, the cities themselves take on impossible geometries, resting on words that verge on the unthinkable:

The ancients built Valdrada on the shores of a lake, with houses all verandas one above the other, and high streets whose railed parapets look out over the water. Thus the traveler, arriving, sees two cities: one erect above the lake, and the other reflected, upside down. Nothing exists or happens in the one Valdrada that the other Valdrada does not repeat, because the city was so constructed that its every point would be reflected in its mirror, and the Valdrada down in the water contains not only all the flutings and juttings of the facades that rise above the lake, but also the rooms’ interiors with ceilings and floors, the perspective of the halls, the mirrors of the wardrobes. (53)

⁵⁵ Aren’t words a sort of thing? You are looking at ink on a page, or pixels on a screen, which make up words which are a sort of thing. I do not think that Calvino is unaware of this.

Valdrada is geometrically impossible; no construction of houses or cities could be reflected completely by a lake or mirror. And yet Calvino emphasizes that, in the lake “its every point would be reflected.” There is an almost mathematical precision to this insistence that even the most secretive activities – the love and murder that, in our world, ought not to be seen – are reflected in the Valdrada of the lake and that the perpetrators are aware. Reflected how? Described as like a mirror, reflecting, an image, we do not have the mind nor the words to think of such a city, and yet Calvino is able to assert it. It takes a certain shape in the mind, begins to exist in some way. It reads like a wild hypothetical without even a hint of “what if” to reduce it to alternative stature.

The impossible logic that dictates Valdrada’s reflection is unique to it; the next city will be unthinkable in a new way. The effect of this is for the reader, rather than being absorbed into the laws of any individual city or world, to jump between them and to see that each city’s thought is circumscribed by its geometry and geography. In Zenobia, this effect defines the city, whose inhabitants are enabled only to think in terms that already exist: “No one remembers what need or command or desire drove Zenobia’s founders to give their city this form [...] But what is certain is that if you ask an inhabitant of Zenobia to describe his vision of a happy life, it is always a city like Zenobia that he imagines.” The result is a circularity, an imagination constricted to forms of life “always derived by combining elements of the first model” (35). Though it is only in Zenobia that this restriction is stated outright, it is visible all across the *Invisible Cities*, and felt increasingly by the reader who leaps between them, eventually gathering that they, too, are thus restricted: the novel’s structure lays bare that “our thought” (to quote Foucault) is in fact *ours*. It reveals that the boundaries of thought that we believed to be natural were in fact imposed, inherited, or otherwise acquired, but that they are anything but inherent.

Calvino is able to open up this revelation, and develop a vast strangeness, all within the word “city.” In passage after passage language is stretched, sheared and torn, wrested from our grip, to reveal that it was our grip that held it together. But it is the word “city” that does the most work in Calvino’s novel, and it is also the word that on the scale of the whole book is truly undone. Through the symbolic lens of the city, we are able to see impossibilities, think unthinkable things, and ultimately feel the boundaries of possibility circumscribed around us start to shudder.

In encountering heterotopia the stakes of reading are at their highest. The process of making meaning becomes the subject of the meaning making, and the possibility of what we can think, what can be *meant*, is expanded, stretched, exploded. Reading heterotopic literature changes us because it changes how the possible is policed by the real, enabling glimpses of otherness that might be disallowed or devalued by the way we have been taught to think. Such a change is, according once again to Foucault, the very stakes of imagination, of a lifetime of stumbling into moments such as these: “The imaginary is not formed in opposition to reality as its denial or compensation... it grows among signs, from book to book, in the interstice of repetitions and commentaries; it is born and takes shape in the interval between books.”⁵⁶ The imaginary grows in parallel with reality, *from* reality, so that in the future it may shape the form of the world from which it came.

⁵⁶ Foucault, Michel. "Fantasia of the Library" In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* edited by Donald F. Bouchard, 91, 1980. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501741913-006>

VIII. Structuring Possibility

The political and intellectual structures that form the basis of social life mediate interactions with the world, with art, with processes of meaning-making. They circumscribe thought, decide possibility, determine identity. The heterotopic text claims to shatter these structures, or to show that they represent one among many ways of existing with the world. But how can a text exceed the systems from which it has emerged? To pose this question in a Marxist framework, how can the modes of capitalism, consumerism, and bourgeois thought be exceeded if they structure every work of art within them? In post-colonial terms, “Can the subaltern speak?”⁵⁷

The critical history of *Endgame* has taken an interest in this sort of contextualized thought, examining the play’s relationship to questions of power, language, and empire. The play has proven a productive ground for readings that frame the relationship between Hamm and Clov as antagonistic, an asymmetrical struggle which takes for its stakes this very question of speaking, thinking, and making meaning that moves beyond the systems of thought which one inherits to make sense of the world.

Theodor Adorno was the first to connect Hamm and Clov’s relationship to the Hegelian master-slave dialectic.⁵⁸ Their relationship’s asymmetry – which is to say Hamm’s practical dependence on Clov and Clov’s linguistic dependence on Hamm – was noted early on by critics such as Hugh Kenner, however it was Dina Sherzer who – following after Adorno – contributed

⁵⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," *Die Philosophin* 14, no. 27 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.5840/philosophin200314275>.

⁵⁸ Theodor W. Adorno and Michael T. Jones, "Trying to Understand Endgame," *New German Critique*, no. 26 (1982): <https://doi.org/10.2307/488027>.

an in-depth examination of their dialogue, positing that Clov “adopts linguistic behavior which permits him to challenge and reject Hamm’s domination without saying so explicitly.”⁵⁹

Séan Golden considers Clov’s situation to be bleaker, underscoring his *inability* to break from the shadow of Hamm. He reads *Endgame* as “an allegory of the persistence of bourgeois modes and mores in a post-bourgeois world.”⁶⁰ The driving tension of the play, he argues, is whether or not Clov will be able to escape, not only from Hamm’s bunker – his physical domain – but from the language and modes of thought which he has received.⁶¹

It becomes clear from a couple of examples that “Hamm speaks his own language, that is, the language of the bourgeois culture, while Clov speaks, mainly Hamm’s language, the language he has been given to use.”⁶² Take Clov’s digression on the word “yesterday,” for example, cited above, or Hamm’s grammar lesson on laying:

HAMM: Did you get him?

CLOV: Looks like it. [*He drops the tin and adjusts his trousers.*] Unless he’s laying doggo.

HAMM: Laying! Lying you mean. Unless he’s *lying* doggo.

CLOV: Ah? One say’s lying? One doesn’t say laying?

HAMM: Use your head, can’t you. If he was laying we’d be bitched.

Overlooking for a moment the profusion of puns, Hamm corrects and controls Clov’s language, informing him of the rules – yes – but framing it literally as a matter of what one says and doesn’t say. “Control over language is Hamm’s greatest power,” Golden writes. “What begins as a lesson in grammar based on literal meanings of words quickly becomes an indoctrination in

⁵⁹ Dina Sherzer, “Beckett’s *Endgame*, or what talk can do,” *Modern Drama* 22, no. 3 (1979): 295, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mdr.1979.0056>.

⁶⁰ Séan Golden, “Familiars in a Ruinstrewn Land: ‘Endgame’ as Political Allegory,” *Contemporary Literature* 22, no. 4 (1981): 444, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1207877>.

⁶¹ Language is, in this essay, acting on some level as a stand-in for thought. Language as a colonial and bourgeois weapon for forming thought, language as structuring thought. Therefore, to reformulate, shatter, explode, exceed language (which Calvino argues is the very goal of great literature) would be to reformulate, shatter, explode, exceed the system of thought that is inscribed by that language.

⁶² Golden, “Familiars in a Ruinstrewn,” 445.

what to say and, therefore, to think.”⁶³ In the end, Golden’s conclusion is that Clov is unable to work past the “modes and mores” of bourgeois thought, of Hamm’s thought.

Though the play depicts the impact of bourgeois modes in the process of making meaning, Golden does not consider the impact of the play on the audience and reader who, seeing what he fairly characterizes as a bleak depiction of possibility, might go on to make their own meanings. This is Nels C. Pearson’s intervention into Golden’s arguments. He establishes analogous stakes in the context of post-coloniality but argues that “On a deeper level, we discover a play that, especially in its manipulation of representational and metatheatrical devices unique to drama, repeatedly asks its audience to see *outside* of the master/slave dialectic that it ruthlessly and scrupulously portrays.”⁶⁴ The portrayal that Pearson gives is indeed a ruthless one. In addition to reading Clov’s attempts at his own speech as stuttering, searching, but ultimately finding only Hamm’s language, he emphasizes the role of Hamm’s chronicle as a “controlling structure,” a narrative History – to use Edouard Glissant’s capital-H distinction – that supplants any alternative history with a certain specific past which then structures the relations of the present, “silencing alternative voices and histories.”^{65,66} Clov’s actions throughout the play are read as attempts to construct such an alternative narrative.⁶⁷

Hamm even goes so far as to remind Clov of how his world has been constructed and given to him. “It was I a father to you,” he says, awaiting Clov’s reply: “Yes. [*He Looks at*

⁶³ Golden, “Familiars in a Ruinstrewn,” 448.

⁶⁴ Pearson, “Outside of Here,” 216.

⁶⁵ Pearson, “Outside of Here,” 220.

⁶⁶ Glissant, in his writings on Caribbean coloniality, writes of capital-H “History” as “a totality that excludes other histories that do not fit into that of the West.” This colonial relationship is represented, albeit in a different post-colonial context, in *Endgame*. See Édouard Glissant, “History and Literature,” in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, 3rd ed. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 75.

⁶⁷ Pearson’s arguments are particularly interested in Irish post-coloniality, noting a stand-out and passing reference to “kov,” which he relates to a prison for Irish revolutionaries. Though I do not go into detail about it here, Pearson’s discussion of how Clov “articulates the problems of language, identity, and origins that are deeply intertwined with Irish and other postcolonial experience(s)” is engaging and productive in reading the play.

Hamm Fixedly.] You were that to me.” Hamm is not, as near as can be told, Clov’s actual father, but the role of father is used to cultivate a sort of guilt: “But for me, [*gesture towards himself*] no father. But for Hamm, [*gesture towards surroundings*] no home” (46). Hamm repeatedly emphasizes his singular importance in the constitution of Clov’s world, which becomes amply clear when, as the play works towards its climax, Clov makes his most strange and wonderful attempt at breaking from Hamm’s world through the medium of speech, through a verbal depiction of his world. In full:

HAMM: A few words...from your heart. [*Pause.*]

CLOV: [*fixed gaze, tonelessly, towards auditorium*] They said to me, That’s love, yes, yes, not a doubt, now you see how—

HAMM: Articulate!

CLOV: [*as before*] How easy it is. They said to me, That’s friendship, yes, yes, no question, you’ve found it. They said to me, Here’s the place, stop, raise your head and look at all that beauty. That order! They said to me, Come now, you’re not a brute beast, think upon these things and you’ll see how all becomes clear. And simple! They said to me, what skilled attention they get, all those dying of their wounds.

HAMM: Enough!

CLOV: [*as before*] I say to myself—sometimes, Clov, you must learn to suffer better than that if you want them to weary of punishing you—one day. I say to myself—sometimes, Clov, you must be there better than that if you want them to let you go—one day. But I feel too old, and too far, to form new habits. Good, it’ll never end, I’ll never go. [*Pause.*] Then one day, suddenly, it ends, it changes, I don’t understand, it dies, or it’s me, I don’t understand, that either. I ask the words that remain—sleeping, waking, morning, evening. They have nothing to say. [*Pause.*] I open the door of the cell and go. I am so bowed I only see my feet, if I open my eyes, and between my legs a little trail of black dust. I say to myself that the earth is extinguished, though I never saw it lit. [*Pause.*] It’s easy going. [*Pause.*] When I fall I’ll weep for happiness. [*Pause. He goes towards door.*] (88-9)

What Clov delivers is by far his longest speech, a sustained and poeticized description of, perhaps, his life in servitude and the freedom that might follow. Certain moments suggest colonial relationship and conditioning, like the ominous “they” against whom Clov opposes himself which serves to identify, define, and label the world: “That’s friendship, yes...” “They”

make demeaning reassurances, at once placing Clov outside the class of “brute beast” and constructing such a division by the Cartesian virtue of thought, but a particular thought, a taxonomizing thought of “order” and the “simple!”

Hamm continues to try to exert his power over Clov as the monologue is given, but Clov ignores him. He does not change his speaking when told to articulate, nor stop when Hamm says “Enough!” In this sense, he does defy Hamm. But his defiance of Hamm serves primarily to demonstrate his inability to make a meaning from the world other than the one that Hamm had given him. Though aware of his dependence on the “they,” Clov is unable to do anything about it. He renounces the possibility for change in a uniquely Clov-like, aestheticized description of the grip “they” have on him: “Good, it’ll never end, I’ll never go.” Even when it does end, what he describes is a person so wearied by time under this “they” that he can hardly stand, hardly look up. His experience is still conditioned by his time in servitude. For Pearson, this condition is epitomized by Clov’s lamentation, “I say to myself that the earth is extinguished, though I never saw it lit”: whether or not Hamm is right in asserting that “Outside of here it’s death,” this is the only interpretation of the world that Clov has learned to create (16, 79). “The world may in fact *be* ‘lit,’ ” Pearson writes, “but he only knows, and can only repeat, Hamm’s description of the outside [...] The problem is that this blindness to alternatives has become so entrenched in the duo’s minds that they can never see external solutions because they only know the world through the *language* of blindness and the language of an assumed history.”⁶⁸

Within the frame of the play, then, Pearson’s answer is no: the subaltern cannot speak. Clov does not succeed in breaking from the framework of Hamm’s language, and in fact he cannot. Clov, much like his Shakespearean and colonial parallel Caliban (invoked by Hamm’s

⁶⁸ Pearson, “Outside of Here,” 233.

“our reveals our now ended” and the “yesterday” dialogue), is stuck in the linguistic world of his colonizer/landowner/master, unable to think beyond it.

“But this is exactly where *our* insight into alternative solutions should come in,” Pearson goes on. Within the world of the text, alternatives are null, but the audience outside of it, in perhaps analogous positions, is able to respond differently. “Hamm and Clov’s inability to see outside of the Hegelian paradigm of master and slave that subsumes them is a performance which demands to be read, or rather *watched*, as a frustrating enactment of our own desire for the use of such models to interpret and correct the problems that, ironically, we feel that dialectic has created.”⁶⁹ The play’s engagement with the dialectic of master and slave removes the reader to a level above or beyond that dialectic. We are able to see, in the language or enactment of the play, the way in which we are encircled by this structure and how, because what the Hegelian dialectic fundamentally does is control how values and meaning are attributed, it becomes in some sense unescapable. But the very possibility of escape is contingent on exactly this realization, which we are counterintuitively able to have through the lens of the play.

The play’s final scene makes the audience’s *choice* in these circumstances amply clear, demonstrating that in fact the play is not a bleak and hopeless depiction of the world as it is but, in the words of Ben Ware, “ethically loaded,” forcing the viewer to come to terms with their own place. Hamm, in his final monologue, throws his whistle – which he used to summon Clov – to the audience: “With my compliments” (133). Ben Ware writes that the gesture works on two levels: “it is not just that the spectator is in an obvious and trivial sense the very condition for the cruelty onstage—there is, as Rancière reminds us, no theatre without spectators. Here he or she is explicitly being invited to take over Hamm's role, to actively participate in his regime of

⁶⁹ Pearson, "Outside of Here," 233-4.

domination.”⁷⁰ The viewer, catching the whistle in their hand, is invited to recognize the horrible power they hold and to which they are subservient as active forces making meaning in and from the world.

Pearson’s argument turns out to be larger than he realizes. It demonstrates a capacity of fiction as apparatus for the making of anti-structural meaning. Language is able to show us our own world *as though it were another*, or to show us another world which makes meaning in our own. Seeing Clov’s perception of the world become the world, one recognizes the possibility of doing the same, but changing the perception. Having the tool of domination thrown to the audience provokes an awareness of the power one holds as an individual. Language depicts a system of thought, and our very glimpsing of it, tracing of its space, its outline, its architecture, allows us to see that it is bounded and that there is a beyond. Language, even if it doesn’t internally enact the system-breaking or escaping, can prompt us, the readers or viewers, to do so.

⁷⁰ Ben Ware, "Tragic-Dialectical-Perfectionism: On the Ethics of Beckett’s *Endgame*." *College Literature* 42, no. 1 (2015): 13-14, accessed March 26, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24544583>.

IX. Silence: Void and Various

[*Pause.*]

.....

Endgame by Samuel Beckett

Invisible Cities by Italo Calvino

Endgame is riddled with the word “Pause,” the intermediary, the intervening, the silence that is always in between. Beckett’s “[*Pause.*]” is silence in miniature, twice bounded: in space by brackets and in time by its place in a chronology of utterances, a script. Silence is a bounded space where – for a fraction of time – vibrations are not, outside of which they are. Both space and time go on outside of the place of the pause, presumably forever, pressuring it. Interior to the pause, comprising the pause, is a unique space.

Distinguished by their empty chapter headings and italicized text, *Invisible Cities*’ nameless chapters are also a sort of silence. The dialogues between Kublai Khan and Polo might or might not be uttered, may only be imaginary. In the table of contents, they are referred to without name, marked only by the ellipses that take increasing precedence as the book goes on, which Rachel Prentice says mark “the hidden forces of the unsaid, the unsayable, the past, the unconscious, and the silences that haunt human speech.”: “.....”⁷¹

In a study of meaning making, silence is the space of opportunity, the place from which meaning comes or maybe the place that meaning invades. Always already interstitial, the silence is bound to be subsumed. Its very existence – the statistically miraculous absence of pulsating air – draws sound to it like an artificial vacuum draws air.

⁷¹ Rachel Prentice, “Invisible Cities and the Work of Storying the Future,” in *Invisible Cities and the Urban Imagination*, by Benjamin Linder (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 55.

There is a type of total silence that is impossible, a stillness that can only be theorized and then it is still unimaginable.⁷² On other scales there are little silences, personal or individual silences, a refusal to speak. Silent the way a person is, or a stone, or even a room. They make no noise. It is these little, microcosmic silences that *Endgame* is interested in.

Endgame exaggerates the silence, interstitial to all language, of the pause. As Pia Brinzeu points out, *Waiting for Godot* sets a precedent for well-defined silences, a veritable cornucopia of different types and sorts: “*hesitation, slight pause, short pause, long pause.*”⁷³ In *Endgame* this variety is collapsed into “[*Pause.*]” At first the pauses seem to echo and reverberate with what came before, and in the negative space of non-speech we are no longer listening, but hearing instead what is within our own heads mingled with that which preceded:

CLOV: [*fixed gaze, tonelessly*] Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished. [*Pause.*] (8)

The verbally spacious line seems to inflate in the space of the “[*Pause.*]” and the “it”s and “finish”s echo and call attention to themselves. But as the play goes on, and the pauses accumulate, they undergo some change. They become a part of the rhythm of the language, a word in itself uttered still-lipped and silent, like a heartbeat, a negative pulse. Reading, one must remind oneself time and time again to pause with the text and not overrun those five letters. In the theater, one hears the chairs squeak, the people breathe, and one’s own mind churning. By the play’s end, there have been nearly 400 pauses, each one of them begun and ended, but also filled, either by the audience or by the mind, which rushes awkwardly to fill the space of the

⁷² It is this impossibility that John Cage demonstrates with his “4’33,” a silent composition inspired at least in part by the sound of an anechoic chamber.

⁷³ Pia Brinzeu, “‘Without a Word’: Pauses in Beckett’s Drama,” *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui* 2, no. 1 (December 8, 1993): 230, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18757405-90000027>.

silence. If spacious language invites the reader to imagine, fill, or perhaps to rest within it, the time and space of silence are filled by thought, every time.

CLOV: What all is? In a word? Is that what you want to know? Just a moment. [*He turns the telescope on the without, looks, lowers the telescope, turns towards Hamm.*] Corpsed. [*Pause.*] (37)

Brinzeu calls Beckett's pauses "recoverable abysses," retreats into the mind, shut off, an abyssal ceasing. But isn't the abyss always giving off a sort of hum? I don't imagine the abyss as silent, but as a discordant set of frequencies on the edge of audibility, the soft humming into which all sound eventually fades. A sort of refusal to mean by a maximum of presence, a logical union of all utterances.

HAMM: I once knew a madman who thought the end of the world had come. He was a painter—and engraver. I had a great fondness for him. I used to go and see him, in the asylum. I'd take him by the hand and drag him to the window. Look! There! All that rising corn! And there! Look! The sails of the herring fleet! All that loveliness! [*Pause.*] He'd snatch away his hand and go back into his corner. Appalled. All he had seen was ashes. [*Pause.*] He alone had been spared. [*Pause.*] Forgotten. [*Pause.*] It appears the case is... was not so... so unusual. (52)

Here the pause creeps up on us. All that loveliness! *The world is lovely.* All he had seen was ashes. *Fires. Ashes. Wind. But isn't—* He alone had been spared. *Spared? From what? From—* Forgotten. *By whom? Surely not—* It appears the case is... was not so... unusual.

Always, the pause ends in a sort of disruption which we anticipate but forget. A good actor playing Hamm here will understand how long to pause, to leave a space sufficiently large for the audience to just enter into it, to fill it, before he crashes in on them with the next line. He becomes a sort of composer of thought. To be silent, in *Endgame*, is to recognize the boundedness of consciousness. It is to hear the noise that fills the silence and to realize that it is nobody else's.

Calvino's ellipses are different, less structured. They are first paratextual and figured as the absence of a title. The sections referred to by this lengthy set of dots (".....") are a space separate from the declarative, oral tales of the city chapters. Contrarily, the interstitial sections follow a dialogue – though it might not be verbal, or even “real.” It may be a dialogue of silence, silence in which possibility can proliferate, as represented by the mounting of the word “or” in the following passage (my emphasis):

That is to say, between the two of them it did not matter whether questions and solutions were uttered aloud or whether each of the two went on pondering in silence. In fact, they were silent, their eyes half-closed, reclining on cushions, swaying in hammocks, smoking long amber pipes.

Marco Polo imagined answering (or Kublai Khan imagined his answer) that the more one was lost in unfamiliar quarters of distant cities, the more one understood the other cities he had crossed to arrive there; and he retraced the stages of his journeys, and he came to know the port from which he had set sail, and the familiar places of his youth, and the surroundings of home, and a little square of Venice where he gamboled as a child.

At this point Kublai Khan interrupted him, or imagined interrupting him, or Marco Polo imagined himself interrupted, with a question such as: “You advance always with your head turned back?” or “Is what you see always behind you?” or rather, “Does your journey take place only in the past?”

All this so that Marco Polo could explain or imagine explaining or be imagined explaining or succeed finally in explaining to himself that what he sought was always something lying ahead, and even if it was a matter of the past it was a past that changed gradually as he advanced on his journey, because the traveler's past changes according to the route he has followed: not the immediate past, that is, to which each day that goes by adds a day, but the more remote past.

The space of silence is the realm of the “or,” the alternative. The co-mingling of two consciousnesses to populate a silence creates a mounting of “or”s at each successive paragraph, first confined to the parenthesis then breaking them, bounding every action. Speech – because imagined, because filling a silent space – loses its origin. The moment at which the speech becomes silent, it grows. In the silence, everything becomes possible and multiple.

The physical words on the page make clear their *own* silence. In the final paragraph, even the locations of the acts of imagination (previously either the Khan or Polo are said to imagine interrupting, to imagine answering) are gone: “...*Polo could explain or imagine explaining or be imagined explaining or...*” (my emphasis). It seems as though the space of silence internal to the world has overlapped with the silence of the reader who imagines Polo explaining and then imagines themselves imagining Polo explaining. The series of three “or”s, of four possibilities comes to include even *us*, and it is allowed to proliferate because it goes unsaid. In a later chapter (my emphasis again):

These words and actions were perhaps only imagined, as the two, silent and motionless, watched the smoke rise slowly from their pipes [...] As the puff carried the smoke away, Marco thought of the mists that cloud the expanse of the sea and the mountain ranges and, when dispelled, leave the air dry and diaphanous, revealing distant cities. It was beyond that screen of fickle humors that his gaze wished to arrive: the form of things can be discerned better at a distance.

Or else the cloud hovered, having barely left the lips, dense and slow, and suggested another vision: the exhalations that hang over the roofs of the metropolises, the opaque smoke that is not scattered, the hood of miasmata that weighs over the bituminous streets. Not the labile mists of memory nor the dry transparency, but the charring of burned lives that forms a scab on the city, the sponge swollen with vital matter that no longer flows, the jam of past, present, future that blocks existences calcified in the illusion of movement: this is what you would find at the end of your journey.

The textual real bifurcates at the “or,” becomes multiple. The silence of *Invisible Cities* is not a space not of nullity, of emptiness filled, but of multiplicity and co-presence. The stakes, in this moment, are as high as can be, prophetic readings of the smoke rising silently from their pipes (but one imagines the soft crackling of the pipe, the whoosh of the air leaving their lungs...): two irreconcilable visions of the world. The mechanism of silence – for in Calvino’s work we can see that silence *does* and invites doing – is spaciousness.

emptiness, as “void” seems to indicate. It has “cool air,” somewhere to run, and someone in it to do the running.

Over time, these worlds change with Polo’s acquisition of the Khan’s language, *“but you would have said that communication between them was less happy than in the past: to be sure, words were more useful than objects and gestures...”* but utility isn’t everything, even to the great Khan. Speech has something to do with this sort of use, and lacks something of happiness, of the spaciousness of their former medium, but it is not clear why. So the Khan and Polo take to communicating mutely after they have finished with the necessary, useful words. Even this auditory silence is troubled, though: *“their hands began to assume fixed attitudes... as a vocabulary of things was renewed with new samples of merchandise, the repertory of mute comment tended to become closed, stable. The pleasure of falling back on it also diminished in both; in their conversations, most of the time, they remained silent and immobile”* (39). In the space of silence we have found the proliferation of possibility, the bifurcation of textual reality. Here, silence is revealed not to be a simple lack of sound, for non-verbal communication fails to act in the same way as silence. The gestures of hands can develop into just as closed and stable a system as those of speech, and it is that closure that troubles the pleasure and happiness of silence, whose virtue is its multiplicity and its *inability* to mean.

The real antithesis in Calvino is not, finally, between communication and silence, or speech and silence, but the “closed, stable” systems and the “various,” the “void,” what I have called spaciousness. It seems as though silence is that in time and space which is defined solely by this latter trait of spaciousness and multiplicity. When the systems close, cohere, stabilize, they lose something. Communication, as in Polo’s early visits, can be multiple, can resemble the bifurcating “or” of imagination and silence, but it is always working to digress into stability.

The unsaid may become the might-be-said which in turn becomes the might-be. Silence could, in the seemingly paradoxical words of Beckett, be “the evocation of the unsaid by the said.”⁷⁵

In another supposed conversation between the Khan and Marco Polo, the Khan refers to their conversation, their circumstances, perhaps their textual existence as “*this conversation of pauses, this evening that is always the same*” (117). Though *Endgame* and *Invisible Cities* have shown different relationships to the notion of silence, I think that here they begin to converge. Firstly, Kublai’s description is an almost Beckettian metatheatrical comment; *Endgame* is aptly described as a “conversation of pauses,” and since it is a play, an “evening that is always the same.” But both works – the one with its nearly 400 uses of “[*Pause.*]” and the other with its 73 chapters, section breaks – repeatedly face their readers with a silence that is an absence or freezing of auditory or physical communication. In the space of these two kinds of silence, the mind can see itself doing, generating, multiplying thought. Silence, it would seem, is the realm of unbounded (but not unconditioned) spaciousness, the opportunity to wander, to run off, to ponder.

⁷⁵ Beckett, *Dijecta: Miscellaneous*, 192.

X. Fragmentary Maximalism

The story of these texts is the story of an old question: how can these words be made to mean? It is a question that, in the time of their writing (the late 50s, then the early 70s), had taken on a fresh importance. Both *Invisible Cities* and *Endgame* exhibit the impossibility of positive expression – a kind of expressive anxiety we see in their forays into mathematics, logic, repetition – that is most vividly manifest in their dependence on silence to communicate. Beckett and Calvino seem to reach for certain similar responses to this lack, and I have worked to demonstrate that the effects made in the reader, the feelings of meaning, are very much akin.

Yet though they emerge out of similar concerns and work toward closely related effects, the two texts could hardly be more different in surface, structure and form. This project's opening two chapters examine this observation: that though they do not *look* of a kind, they *feel* of a kind. The process of holding the two texts up to one another is both claim and question, claim in question. By asking if and how they are alike, I have already joined them, had them intermingle and asserted that they *can* be held up together. Thus far, however, it seems as though the similarities in effect that I have closely traced are in spite of their surface differences: where *Endgame* seems to say nothing, and in saying nothing to mean everything, *Invisible Cities* seems to say everything and to thus mean everything. It is strange to consider that scarcity and muchness can arrive at the same, vast, result.

Scarcity is the style of Beckett and *Endgame*; he pares back, confines, reduces, renounces. The space of the stage is confined, doubly indoors, and the space of the bunker comes to feel almost claustrophobic. The play is structured in a single act, an uninterrupted chronological movement. The language is bare, with the exception of a few poetic outbursts. Take the example of Hamm and Clov's dialogue about the weather:

HAMM: What's the weather like?

CLOV: As usual.

HAMM: Look at the earth.

CLOV: I've looked. (35)

The style is reduced, linguistically constrained. It is not merely the bare subject that is minimal (though what could be more stereotypically bland than the weather?) but the disinterested tone taken toward it, toward almost everything in the play. There is a tonal matter-of-factness and a disengagement on the level of language. It is through this striking absence of feeling that the reader begins to feel.

In each of these respects, *Invisible Cities* proves to be a different text. By contrast to the claustrophobic room, its world is vast, infinitely so (recall Caroline Springer's position that it alludes to an infinite, permutative narrative machine). The book is divided into 73 pieces of numerous sorts and types, each unique. The language may be plain and understated at times, but it also employs stylized catalogues and describes, with a distinctly aesthetic flourish, the people, places, and things that populate its world: "The boat that lands there with a cargo of ginger and cotton will set sail again, its hold filled with pistachio nuts and poppy seeds, and the caravan that has just unloaded sacks of nutmegs and raisins is already cramming its saddlebags with bolts of golden muslin for the return journey" (37).

Calvino's world is full and populous, Beckett's void.

I have claimed that these two stylistically distinct texts create the same or very similar effect, a sort of epiphanic shattering of the concepts that circumscribe one's understanding of the possible, derived from an imaginative meaning-construction resulting from spacious language. What, then, is at stake in the surface-level differences between them? For clearly, they are different. How can scarcity and muchness produce the same or similar effects?

The framework of spaciousness has been useful in understanding the mechanisms for this common effect. Like the distinct silences that populate each text, these spaciousnesses look and feel different. In Beckett, it is easiest to link this to a stylistic minimalism and the proliferation of blanks, pauses, and empty moments that form a space for the imagination to fill. Of Beckett's trilogy Frederick R. Karl writes:

In such works the reader is aware of the spaces between words, the pauses between breath, the silence between noises. Everything is intermittent [...] By contracting, by nearly silencing, he isolates individuals from objects, nature itself becoming a residue or remnant. Yet forms of salvation come in language, voices, speaking to oneself.⁷⁶

For Karl, Beckett's project involves formulating a space via absence in which the reader might become that populating voice. Even though the mechanisms of this are different in *Endgame* than in the prose writing of the trilogy, the effect is not; the text verbally and formally replicates silence. The emphasizing of "spaces between words, the pauses between breath, the silence between noises" is, for Karl, directly related to this stylistic minimalism. Calvino himself recognized that Beckett "has obtained the most extraordinary results by reducing visual and linguistic elements to a minimum, as if in a world after the end of the world."⁷⁷

Calvino's own writing offers a poignant counterpoint to Karl's argument about Beckett, because it opens up a similar space in which silence, breath, and space are emphasized, but *not* through an absence: rather, by a positive multiplying, a pouring forth. In Calvino, it is in spite of a writing style that exhibits and inflicts a maximum of reference, meaning, and allusion that he achieves an emphasis on the silent and the spacious. Such a claim is wildly counterintuitive. The

⁷⁶ Frederick R. Karl, "The Possibilities of Minimalism," in *American Fictions, 1940-1980: A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 384-5.

⁷⁷ Quotation from Calvino's writings, translated by Alberto Tondello. See Tondello, "Italo Calvino," 19.

relationship between minimalism and silence, minimalism and imaginative space or spaciousness, is almost obvious: where there is less, the reader will add more. “Because authors use fewer words,” writes Robert Clark in *American Literary Minimalism*, “each is invested with a heightened sense of interpretive significance.”⁷⁸ Though this is an accurate characterization of how *Endgame* functions, it does not explain *Invisible Cities*.

Alberto Tondello’s arguments about the *Cosmicomics* lump Calvino into Beckett’s stylistic minimalism. He writes, “...both authors empty the process of writing of some of its constitutive elements, creating a void whose ultimate aim is not the annihilation and exhaustion of literary composition but a new and fruitful beginning from scratch.”⁷⁹ Though his claim might hold up better with the *Cosmicomics*, it is troubling when considered in Calvino’s broader body of works. His characterizations of the effects of Calvino’s writing are very apt in working with this later novel, however, while Tondello is right in noting the two authors’ tendency toward what he calls regenerative writing, or what I see as a more explosive kind of act, he oversimplifies the problem to align their approaches. Even in the *Cosmicomics*, Calvino’s approach is not the same minimalism as Beckett’s. How, then, does *Invisible Cities* achieve an effect so often associated with linguistic minimalism?

One possible answer is that in its high-frequency fragmentation, its insistent breaking away, reconstructing, being ever-new, *Invisible Cities* becomes so multivalent as to gesture to its own insignificance. That is to say, though it is densely styled, filled, and described, the textual world’s constant shifting between seemingly irreconcilable cities gives the world a sense of vastness, or infinitude. There is a gradual realization as the pile of cities grows and grows that

⁷⁸ Robert C. Clark, "Introduction," introduction to *American Literary Minimalism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015), 1.

⁷⁹ Tondello, "Italo Calvino," 17.

the realm of possibility is unconstrained. The parts of this world that we *do* see feel like mere fragments drifting in a vast and unknowable space, paling against the backdrop of what might be. Although so much is shown, that much is shown to be little.

To put it slightly differently, at each subsequent chapter or city, Polo redefines the rules and boundaries for that fragment. Each re-definition emphasizes the arbitrary nature of the act of defining, and each time possibility is bounded, it is shown to be boundable. Whereas in *Endgame* the strict imposition of a single, inescapable boundary (best argued in Pearson's reading) reveals that it is merely a construction, in *Invisible Cities* the artificiality of the constrictions on possibility is apparent in their incessant re-imposition.

Another explanation might emerge from the word "explosion," which expands on Foucault's reading of Borges. In understanding the effects of heterotopic texts on the reader, I repeatedly fell back on this word to characterize what happens to the reader's concept of the boundaries of the possible in the moment of epiphanic reading. If it is an explosion that we observe, feel, or undergo, then how did that explosion occur?

Thinking back to the post-colonial and Marxist readings of Pearson and Golden, *Endgame* might be understood through the oppression of Clov. On the level of language, Pearson tracks how Hamm stifles him, then how Clov's poetic outburst *might* represent a bursting forth. According to Hans Peter Hasselbach, it is the anticipation of Hamm's breaking from his constraints that motivates the play's dramatic tension. Hasselbach identifies the repetitive, echoing structure of the play as a mounting pressure, with a sort of deflationary end.⁸⁰ Of course, in Pearson's reading Clov's outburst is not an explosion; he reads it as a failure which, however, has that explosive, destructive effect on the audience, who are able to see what Clov cannot.

⁸⁰ Hasselbach, "Samuel Beckett's."

Endgame might then be understood as a sort of *implosion*, a contraction, a peak of pressure, and then (on behalf of the audience), the explosion, the Foucauldian shattering.

Invisible Cities, arriving at a similar endpoint, does not exhibit the same kind of mounting pressure. By contrast, it tracks a strict explosion of possibility, following a sort of chain-reaction of bifurcating, multiplying, fragmenting possibilities. It achieves this through a proliferation of descriptions, lists, cities. Even on the scale of the individual city, there are often many possible cities therein. Fedora, for example, contains a museum with all of the dreamed, ideal Fedoras of past moments. Berenice is concentric, containing the seeds of all the future Berenices. Esmerelda never repeats itself, never offers itself to the viewer in the same way twice. Like looking at a fractal, the closer one gets to the world of *Invisible Cities* the more it duplicates itself, modifies itself, expands what it can be. The result is a sort of expanding cloud of fragments, pieces, possibilities that are like the shrapnel of an explosion hung in suspension, each now separated from any purported origin, leading independent, small existences in the vast scheme of fragments fleeing from the explosive center like the pieces of Polo's ideal city: "*At times all I need is a brief glimpse, an opening in the midst of an incongruous landscape, a glint of lights in the fog, the dialogue of two passersby meeting in the crowd, and I think that, setting out from there, I will put together, piece by piece, the perfect city, made of fragments mixed with the rest, of instants separated by intervals, of signals one sends out, not knowing who receives them.*"⁸¹

The minimal, the maximal. Both gesture in their own ways to the same infinitude, the same epiphanic space of possibility.

⁸¹ Like Cornelia Parker's *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*, the pieces gesture at once to their contained origin, histories not forgotten, and to their movement away, into space.

XI. Escherean Figures



Figure 1: M.C. Escher's Ascending and Descending. Lithograph, 1960

There is hardly anything strange to be found in much of Escher's famous lithograph. The makeup of the building is, in almost every way, strikingly ordinary. Yet couched within this hardly locatable and frankly uninteresting architecture is a remarkable thing, this foreboding and unfamiliar shape which exudes a strangeness, an air of mystery. The drawing doesn't lead the eye to any particular place, though one feels it is down the center chute – to the courtyard formed by the impossible stairs – that one wishes to glimpse.

The staircase implies, by the figures that walk it, both up and down. They all face forward, their postures somewhere between upright and broken. Though the geometry of the staircase is square, the figures' movement is cyclical and endlessly repeating. Each step down or up attains – on average – to nothing at all, even if the figures give the impression of a rise or a fall.

Perhaps this is the cyclical, unending punishment for a civilization that has found how to sin even against God's geometric laws; or, it is His innovative solution to the tower of Babel, to let them wander ever in high circles; or, they've already ascended to a heaven free from geometric constraints, dimensional bounds.

What they do appears meaningless, perfectly and brilliantly so. It is a sort of mere accumulation of effort, perhaps distance, which nullifies the altitudinal goal of the staircase.⁸² They are subservient to its geometry. The staircase is monolithic, resting on and built from a building that could not be less so. It is set here in the center of nothingness, a blank page, casting a shadow, being impossible.

Throughout the process of considering how *Endgame* and *Invisible Cities* mean impossible things, Escher's rendition of the Penrose stairs has been of great use to me. It has seemed at times to embody much of what I see these novels doing, to act as a simplified, more realized material equivalent to them. Not only that, but the strange spatial-temporal presence of the staircase has had an almost mystical effect on my readings of the novels, to the point that it seemed for a time to crop up everywhere.

⁸² Perhaps I am wrong, and really they are just exercising. After all, is the Penrose stair not just a clever, intellectualized Stairmaster? To the modern gym junkie, who never seems to tire of endless treadmill "miles," "yards" pulled on an erg or "kilometers" clocked on the stationary bike, such an activity as this might not be difficult to understand.

This should not be altogether surprising. Escher was interested in the boundaries of the possible: the asymptotic resolution of the apparent edges of a sphere, the impossible aspiration of bringing to the 2D plane what doesn't belong there. In one of his few published essays, he writes that "it sometimes seems to me that we are all afflicted with an urge and possessed by a longing for the impossible."⁸³ It can only ever be a longing, because to attain the impossible renders it possible, but it is in their *seeming* impossible that Escher's works come to life.

In *Ascending and Descending* Escher explores the artificiality of perspective and the trickery – the free play even – of the techniques that artists have long used for making the flat into the three-dimensional. His drawing works because of his devious shading, subtly diverging angles, and disguised parallels. Altogether, these very slight deviations from traditional perspective disrupt the set of visual conventions to which the viewer is accustomed.

Ascending and Descending is of particular interest in part because it is such a widely known image. Before the presentation of the Penrose stairs by Lionel and Roger Penrose in the late 1950s, such a figure as this did not, strictly speaking, exist.⁸⁴ Escher's popular rendition helped to bring it into the global imaginary, interpreting the figure almost allegorically. In this sense, it came to lead a tactile existence, both as image and as a marking force, so that while it does not quite attain the status of an "actual" thing, it lays some claim to a place in the ontology of the real.

Though unbridled by the spatial constraints of the actual world, the Penrose Stairs can be imagined, viewed, seen, constructed by the mind or eye of any individual person. Their

⁸³ M. C. Escher and J. W. Vermeulen, *Escher on Escher: Exploring the Infinite* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1989), 135.

⁸⁴ In fact, the Penrose stairs were discovered independent of the Penrose family about 20 years earlier, but the point holds if we only push back the date. See Kaley Overstreet, "The History of the Penrose Stair and its Influence on Design," Arch Daily, last modified May 10, 2022, <https://www.archdaily.com/981561/the-history-of-the-penrose-stair-and-its-influence-on-design>.

impossibility derives from their purporting to, in a confined and continuous space, carry a traveler forever up and up, so that to call them “real” seems to clash with a certain definition of reality. Yet they are somehow real, a presence whose existence is not without stakes. The Penrose stairs have left a mark, not only on the imagination but on the actual things worked by such imaginations, from interiors to album covers.⁸⁵

To use the word “impossible” to write off the Penrose stairs is to misunderstand the ontological status they complicate. While it is true that such a figure could not be rendered in three dimensions and walked on – it does not, in other words, exist in the same way as a table, a chair, or a piece of paper – to simply designate it as nonexistent is to deny its effects and to deny the non-actual’s role in conditioning reality.⁸⁶ In this way, it is similar to Calvino’s and Beckett’s fictions, where the label “impossible” holds similarly little value, or seems to misunderstand the point of what the works are doing. It is not merely their contestation of convention (of perspective, of language) that makes them objects of importance, but what that contestation does to the beholder. The very presence of these works in the space of human imagination speaks to their importance and their capacity to act and do.

The existence of the Penrose stairs is also tied to its undeniable materiality, to its presence as a projection or stamping of ink onto paper. It is the result of human artifice and to put it quite plainly, it is *there*. So although the figure of the Penrose stairs is not actual, it does have a physical manifestation, it does have effects, and we can feel and find both in the material of the actual world.

⁸⁵ The Strokes’ album *Angles* depicts a version of the Penrose stairs on its cover.

⁸⁶ To nuance this too, 3D optical illusions have been constructed such that from a fixed view-point one can behold a 3D version of the Penrose stairs. Of course, walking on it is still impossible.

This re-alignment of the impossible geometry of the Penrose stairs with material reality is rooted in Escher's own understanding of the impossible: "It can happen to every one of us that suddenly, with ecstasy in our hearts, we feel the rut of daily life fall away from us for a moment. It can happen that we become receptive to the unexplainable, to the miracle that surrounds us continuously."⁸⁷ Though his "miracle" rings with Christian aestheticism it in fact derives from an understanding of the vast unknowability of the material present, which might include the realm and boundaries of the possible which so interest Escher at the moment in his career when he is drawing *Ascending and Descending* and its successor *Waterfalls*. It is to this fact, to a whole world beyond our current understanding of the possible (the world to which *Ascending and Descending* once belonged) that the drawing gestures. We can also glimpse in his "rut of daily life," which falls away for a moment, and in the reception of "the unexplainable," something of Foucault's shattering of our thought and the mental effect of heterotopia. In nearly geometric terms, Foucault described heterotopia as "breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things."⁸⁸

Though texts are in a sense more complex constructions – relying on a negative spaciousness to ignite imagination where the image gestures by a positive example toward that space – the effects of analogously impossible texts like *Endgame* or *Invisible Cities* can be understood through the example of *Ascending and Descending*. The heterotopic text, like the heterotopic image, is a presence in the world once it is read, and it works on the world by the same mechanisms as Escher's image. Texts, distributed across societies, change and manipulate thought; they refigure reality and the realm of the possible. They assert a diffuse presence that can never henceforth be banished from the almost Akashic collective discourse that moves

⁸⁷ Escher and Vermeulen, *Escher on Escher*, 135.

⁸⁸ Foucault, *The Order*, XVIII.

human societies. They leave a mark, sometimes a powerful one, on the world that the reader sees and constructs around themselves.

Escher's image also demonstrates that the materiality of the art object is akin to that of the text. The case of the text is again different from that of the print, though ultimately it falls to the same basic fact: that in the printed text, belonging to the material world, resides this bridge, this dynamite, this shattering laughter, or at least the path to find it. In the sense that it was always possible, it was always already there. Lubomír Doležel writes that "textual poiesis, like all human activity, occurs in the actual world; however, its constructs—fictional realms—show properties, structures, and modes of existence that are, in principle, independent of the properties, structures, and existential mode of actuality."⁸⁹ This is much the same counterintuitive claim made by heterotopia: to be able – with materials, concepts, and a prior knowledge gleaned only from the world and a circumscribed notion of the possible – to create something that exceeds it.

But if the capacity to create beyond the current realm of the possible is always present, then it is also always possible. We can then derive that the "current realm" was ill-defined in the first place: it can always be operated on to reach beyond itself. Possibility cannot be confined, because it always has this infinite capacity – with text, tied to the permutative infinity of language – of going beyond. Doležel's observation that all human activity occurs in the actual world enables us to see that all of the consequences of human action must necessarily be couched in the actual world from the start as various types of possibility. He is wrong to say that the text can show "modes of existence ... *independent*" of the structures of actuality, because it will always bear some relation to them. But that relation might be one of denial, explosion, overextension, exceeding, or ignoring, and the possibilities are truly infinite.

⁸⁹ Lubomír Doležel, "Possible Worlds of Fiction and History," *New Literary History* 29, no. 4 (1998): 790, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20057512>.

The final city described by Polo in *Invisible Cities* is Berenice, a city of the unjust which contains the germ for a future of justice. But within that future city “a malignant seed is hidden, in its turn: the certainty and pride of being in the right.” But there is yet another potential couched in this one: “an intrinsic quality of this unjust city germinating secretly inside the secret just city: and this is the possible awakening ... of a later love for justice” (162). Here is the secret of the present: “From my words you will have reached the conclusion that the real Berenice is a temporal succession of different cities, alternately just and unjust. But what I wanted to warn you about is something else: all the future Berenices are already present in this instant, wrapped one within the other, confined, crammed, inextricable” (163). It is a beautiful lesson: about the germs of the future present in the now, about the responsibility of the present that is always moving forward, about the ever-bifurcating network of possibilities for which we, in the present, are responsible. The infinite is not simply paralyzing, it can be freeing. But that freedom is not a freedom from stakes, it is anything but.

The final moment of *Endgame* is one such moment, a vibrant bifurcation, a question. Its ambiguity (does Clov, posed in the doorway “*dressed for the road*,” finally leave?) has haunted critics and viewers since its first performance. But to resolve the final paradox would be to relieve the audience of the weight of present possibility, and to relieve them of the play’s final ethical provocation.⁹⁰ As the stage lights go out one can’t help but imagine what happens next, and then the theater brightens, and they see the faces of those around them.

The infinite possible is always already present. It is by certain miraculous works of literature and art that this is made clear to us.

⁹⁰ (Hamm’s throwing the whistle into the crowd.)

Calvino ends *Invisible Cities* by entering into a space of momentary pessimism. “*It is all useless,*” the Khan says, “*if the last landing place can only be the infernal city, and it is there that, in ever-narrowing circles, the current is drawing us.*” He is a man who has not glimpsed alterity.

And Polo said: ‘The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many of us: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not the inferno, then make them endure, give them space.’ (165)

From Berenice we can understand that if the future is hell then the present contains it, but that the present also contains other possibilities, perhaps (as with the case of Escher’s drawing) unimaginable to us now. These may be ways into realms of unthinkable strangeness, alternative ways of being, captured between the pages of a book. Polo’s final, ethical, imperative statement is to find these, to make them endure, to give them space. This word, the last of Calvino’s novel, has been shown to be an inhabitable, alternative site of possibility: space is potentially otherwise to the infernal order. It is the condition of a certain engagement which expands and pressures the so-called “real.” It is in texts such as these (and many, many others) that we may find it.

The first words that I wrote for this project now sit at its fore: “this thesis comes from a place of feeling,” a feeling that literature has a role in the formation of a better world and a better future, and that perhaps these texts might help me to understand how.

It has seemed for some time that the way in which we live is in dire need of change. That change is largely unapparent, appearing in fragments across both space and time like Polo’s ideal city. But in his words, “*If I tell you that the city toward which my journey tends is discontinuous*

in space and time, now scattered, now more condensed, you must not believe the search for it can stop" (165). It is difficult not to feel hopeless, to think that this future city is so scattered as to be irretrievable: imperceptible through the din of the inferno. But it is present nonetheless, nestled deep in the layered futures of the now, here for our search which can never finish.

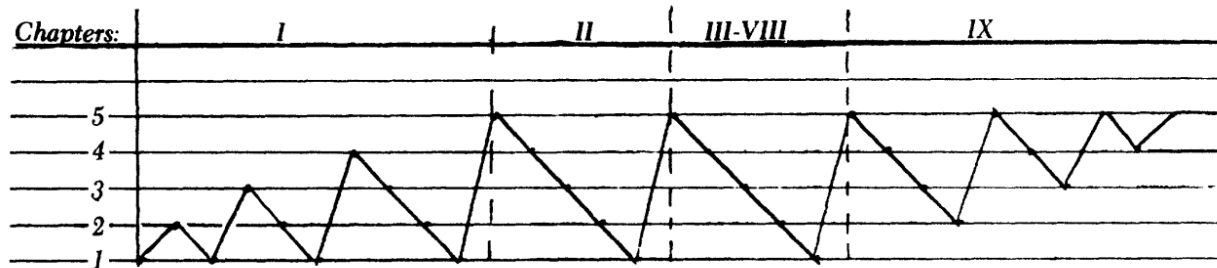
We are right to hesitate to... to end.

Appendix

(1) The table of contents from *Invisible Cities*.

<p>1</p> <p>Cities & Memory 1 Cities & Memory 2 Cities & Desire 1 Cities & Memory 3 Cities & Desire 2 Cities & Signs 1 Cities & Memory 4 Cities & Desire 3 Cities & Signs 2 Thin Cities 1</p> <p>2</p> <p>Cities & Memory 5 Cities & Desire 4 Cities & Signs 3 Thin Cities 2 Trading Cities 1</p>	<p>3</p> <p>Cities & Desire 5 Cities & Signs 4 Thin Cities 3 Trading Cities 2 Cities & Eyes 1</p> <p>4</p> <p>Cities & Signs 5 Thin Cities 4 Trading Cities 3 Cities & Eyes 2 Cities & Names 1</p> <p>5</p> <p>Thin Cities 5 Trading Cities 4 Cities & Eyes 3 Cities & Names 2 Cities & The Dead 1</p>	<p>6</p> <p>Trading Cities 5 Cities & Eyes 4 Cities & Names 3 Cities & The Dead 2 Cities & The Sky 1</p> <p>7</p> <p>Cities & Eyes 5 Cities & Names 4 Cities & The Dead 3 Cities & The Sky 2 Continuous Cities 1</p> <p>8</p> <p>Cities & Names 5 Cities & The Dead 4 Cities & The Sky 3 Continuous Cities 2 Hidden Cities 1</p>	<p>9</p> <p>Cities & The Dead 5 Cities & The Sky 4 Continuous Cities 3 Hidden Cities 2 Cities & The Sky 5 Continuous Cities 4 Hidden Cities 3 Continuous Cities 5 Hidden Cities 4 Hidden Cities 5</p>
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(2) "Frame Structure in Invisible Cities," Carolyn Springer.⁹¹



⁹¹ Carolyn Springer, "Textual Geography: The Role of the Reader in 'Invisible Cities,'" *Modern Language Studies* 15, no. 4 (1985): 299, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3194671>

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