

# Under the Rule of the Great Khan: On Marco Polo, Italo Calvino and the Description of the World



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God made the numbers,  
all else is the work of man.

*THE NUMBER*

WERE IT TO EXIST

otherwise than a scattered hallucination of agony

WERE IT TO COMMENCE AND CEASE

welling up yet denied and closed when in view  
at last

through some widespread profusion of rarity

WERE IT TO BE CIPHERED

evidence of the sum if only there is one

WERE IT TO ILLUMINATE

It had to come to this. On his deathbed Marco Polo was asked whether he had to change his accounts of Asia. Put in a rough figure, a perfectly idiomatic one at that, the answer was no, he had not told one half of what he had seen. So, let us be literal here, and above all, let us be naughty and keep up the spirit of defiance. What was it, this one half and a bit, which was never told?

Polo studies are, quite clearly, not our frame of reference, given the question we ask. Mind you, we exploit the map checks, the fieldwork, the archival sifting, the philological reconstructions carried out by Polo scholars. Without having worked for our assumptions, we simply imply the point of arrival of an entire subject, the *we do have a problem* expressed by those in the know.

*The text.* We do not have the text. The original manuscript is lost. Perhaps, the original manuscripts are lost. Nobody, in fact, can exclude there having been more than one attempt at the book. *The copies of the copies.* The surviving non-original manuscripts form a complex contradictory system of accretions and deletions (the work of the agents of textual corruption: the copyists, the translators, the illustrators) on what for us is the absence of the original. *The title.* *Description of the World? Wonders of the World? Travels of Marco Polo? Il Milione?* Or even, just the once, *The Romance of the Great Khan?* Each takes, surely, a different slant, a different appeal to the reader from the protean book. But within its bounds, past the title lines, one and one only, quite frequent term of reference: 'the book,' with something of a capital *b*.

*The author* (small *a*). Polo and/or Rustichello. Therefore: *the authors*. The latter, a kind of ghost-writer on this occasion; otherwise, a writer of epic romances in his own name. The former, a merchant, a Venetian, a subject of the Khan for some seventeen years; above all, not a writer, despite some basic travel-noting. Hence, the mismatch in expertise in that Genoa prison that brought the two together in 1298, the discontinuity in the authorial intention. What were the terms of the collaboration is unknown, but chances are that Rustichello produced the rhetoric, the amplifications, the epic, the fakes that give *Messer Marco* his place in Mongol history, and Polo the original bundles of loose reports, perhaps an interim primitive pre-text, an unaided first attempt at the Book.

*The Asian experience*, i.e., the original mystery. Suppose the three Polos—father, uncle and Marco—spent an  $x$  number of years in Western or Middle Asia, doing little or no commerce, disappearing from all records, gathering information on Further Asia in order to return with a message, an envoy to the West, in shape of the best available record of a continent they had not crossed. You have a master plan, and an absurdity. Suppose instead our trio reached China, spent a  $y$  number of years allegedly at the service of the Khan, doing little or no commerce, never making it into any local record, gathering information on the host continent in order to return with a message, an envoy to the West, in the shape of a geography of the greater part of Asia. You have got less of a master plan, and less of an absurdity, as the project could have unfolded out of actual circumstances. But even so, the latter set of suppositions is in itself entirely hypothetical. The series of textual events *perhaps* initiated by *somehow* gaining access to reports in the Mongol administration in a capacity

that remains unclear, led to a steady delivery of messages, of imperfect replicas with a circulation size that could only have been hoped for in their senders' boldest plans, and yet fails to take us to any safe evidence of a continuous trail of experience. Perhaps they reached Beijing. Perhaps they worked for the Khan. Perhaps they travelled, but on routes that are not those traced on the maps kindly provided in print editions of the text, for those are quite obviously an organising textual device. Perhaps, they wrote down the reports of real travellers or even copied those of real bureaucrats, who knows. Faced with a mystery that ultimately looks equally thick from whichever hypothesis you tackle it, it would seem to be perfectly inane to ask what exactly was meant by Polo in his last statement. A list of his most baffling omissions, alongside that of his most baffling inclusions, can be drawn and has indeed been drawn. But so what?

Inane tasks, however, are what keeps the literary critic in useful employment. So, let us be literary here, as well as literal and naughty, and take the Polo package where we can practice our art. We just need a light theoretical framework, nothing too intrusive. Say, a touch of Derrida, on the deadly power of language inscription. We then add a reminder, a token of the real world out there: the world of real messages, of creative messages, that is. Given the Asian motif, say we go for Kafka's undeliverable imperial message and the attached story of the *Great Wall of China*.

We finally set ourselves a goal, a second question to be answered, one that can only have nothing to do with Polo's rough final accountancy of his experience of Asia. Say, we choose Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, again a message pretending to come from the Big East, and then ask: what kind of a mental march is this latest one, aimed as it is to miss the Centre (capital *c*) that it couldn't possibly leave?

### **Messer Marco the Accountant**

The medieval mind is stranger than what it marvels at. So, let there be only the Book on our table to begin with. Here there are provinces and cities, merchandise and customs—all in plenty, all categorised for what they are: provinces, cities, merchandise, and customs. A route and a name place them among the things in existence and known. Our progress through them is swift, formulaic, surprisingly immune from cultural shocks. Easy Asia, the buffer zone already familiar to us through wars, trade, settlement and tales of marvel, serves as a method and a set of instructions: *this is the Book you have*. While the

Prologue, by introducing the *dramatis personae* of the story, states our destination, the Great Khan, the Khubilai Khan, for he has requested that messages be exchanged between our lands and has thus become a compelling point in space. There are assurances in such invitation: there must be, given the dangerous lineage of our awaiting host. The journey, we should be pleased to learn, has already been made twice safely, though the first time—the earlier envoy of the elder Polos—only as a tracer for the greater story to be told.

Indeed, a greater story, a larger picture. This time the records accumulate relentlessly, east-bound, centre-bound, finally southwest-bound for home, for textual closure, all the time zigzagging off-route to survey as many as possible of the Khan's present and future possessions, the inscribed and the inscribable world, as the diversity of land, people and produce of Asia must be entered in the catalogue of power emblems the Emperor will exchange with the Christian Princes of the West. Of course, the inserted *marvels*, the tales of war, of natural and human wonder, the paragraphs of Mongolian history that break up the monotony of the survey formula, are part and parcel of the command to write the Geography of an entire continent. Most of Asia is now under the Khan's rule. This is why the text's advance was solicited. This is the news we must break.

And yet, in its highly successful proto-encyclopaedic format the Book is but a glorified grazing of surfaces. A discontinuous grazing of surfaces. A piecemeal construction. True, the ultimate centre—the Khan's capitals and courts—couldn't be mightier in its surfaces or more connected in the exhibition of power it superimposes on an already saturated line of communication. Everything is imperial function there. Couriers unceasingly network the territory. Things in their thousands of thousands—that is, in numbers outnumbering anything European—network the territory. Even the trees by the roadside, one green milestone every twenty paces, network the territory, the dead territory of redundant inscription, and paradoxically, of insufficient inscription also, for it is the Empire, not the World that is being described. The Book notes and disguises the fact, as it must, almost admitting the limits of its achievement through a rhetorical yet pertinent refrain from the expert pen of the ghost-writer: *all that could be said has been told*. Like that other statement we have found intriguing: *not one half of what I saw*.

The humdrum of Central Office. The Empire and the Book—Power and Language—are, then, but a fiction and a show of codes, a

routine accountancy based on lines and numbers, on a reduction to number of the infinitely diverse and numerous. Invariably clever in his book-keeping, the bureaucrat—the combined figure of Polo and/or Rustichello—can be tiresome in his set phrases, the *What more shall I tell you?* used as the default spacer between records. Yet he must be understood in his barely admitted medieval frustration. We could even lend him some of our own differently coded bureaucratic anguish, for a book, like a wall of protection, like the Great Wall of China, should protect. But how can such a wall-book protect if it is not a continuous structure?

The words are adapted from Kafka, a serious lender of anguish. Marco Polo, for his part, did not make a record of the Wall of China. Perhaps he never really went to China after all; perhaps he passed through a gap big enough not to notice the wall; perhaps he did see the wall, but removed the seeing, for those gaps in it would spoil his vision of an all-powerful universal monarchy fitting all human commerce. By the time of the making of the Book, in a Genoa prison, Khubilai Khan, *his* Khan, was dead, and the *Pax Mongolica* truly twice over. Yet the Western Princes were still due their message. This would have to be euphoric, a euphoric feat of bureaucracy, signed and sent by a Mongol accountant under Venetian disguise. For what else had Marco turned into? Could he have become anything other than that, coming, as he did, from the united front of a city built on sand banks, with not a scrap of hinterland, and enemies on most waters? Indeed, the envoy would have to be euphoric to the extent of omitting the news of the Khan's death years previously, while the Polos were journeying back from Asia. The Khan alive and well, in the year of God 1298? And Marco did not know? This time the inclusion, the *present* age of Emperor, a characteristically generous count too, amounted to an erasure of fact. One more statement on his conscience.

But "it is impossible for what is written not to be disclosed," even though "a text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition." The words are now Derrida's, as the earlier motif of the envoy, of an Asian postcard as it were, was also his suggestion, though indirectly. More Derrida is fitting here, from *Plato's Pharmacy*, as the lines just quoted. "*Pharmakon* means *coup* . . . 'so that pharmakon will have meant: that which pertains to an attack of demoniac possession [*un coup démoniaque*] or is used as a curative *against* such an attack' . . . One ought to distinguish, between two repetitions.—But they repeat each other,

still; they substitute for each other . . . —Nonsense: they don't replace each other, since they are added . . . —Precisely. One still has to take note of this."

There is an optimism of Logos—Logos, as in Plato's sense of the word: as discourse, justification, account and formula—that, despite the euphoric intention of the plan, Polo couldn't share, because human commerce and connectivity is not even half of the story. His prescription—maximum commerce, heightened connectivity, under the rule of the greatest connecting power: an empire of non-individuals, of couriers running the imperial grid to keep the Khan linked to his nation—is, of course, sealed in the Book. But so is the ambivalence, the empty rhetoric of function, the erasure of the news that the Khan was dead. Function was all there was, then? And size? That interminable expanse of land? Those twelve thousand stone bridges in the city of Quinsai, his new Venice, only on a different scale, with a garrison of ten thousand *per bridge*? Bologna did not have twelve thousand souls at the time, Venice just made it to one hundred thousand. The whole Mongol-Chinese report was a utopia of a kind, and it showed. A utopia born out of wars, marked by wars while a *Pax mongolica*, and not destined to last past its greatest Khan. But one he had travelled to, perhaps.

An enthusiastic bureaucrat of Power and Language; a medieval mind at war with itself; a merchant unconcerned about having to settle his accounts with his Maker. The prescription of the Book had to be a divided one. It then got somehow packaged, transmitted, corrupted—disseminated, as Derrida would put it. One day Calvino unpacked it, found it to be a map of his own mind, corrupted it further, and sent it on. For it is impossible for what is written not to be disclosed.

### Calvino's Centripetal March

Or rather, on rough counts still. Even though, like Polo, we have already told all that can be said. About Calvino especially. But, like Derrida in *Plato's Pharmacy* quoted earlier, let us continue on awhile. So, take an  $x$  number of descriptions of cities, some half-real, some half-imaginary, written at an all low in creativity, the summer of 1970. The plan, despite the crisis, is no less than a remake of Marco Polo's *Milione*, an exercise in the description of the world, possibly with a frame in the shape of some dialogue between Polo and the Khan. It is the second stab at the idea, actually. The other Polo project of ten

years earlier—that quick swash-buckling affair destined for the screen, with Marco a very protagonistic young man in love with the visible world, with visible women especially, and the Khan a conqueror with no more to conquer, a melancholic gazer of stars—is still unpublished and could be reused. Yet the lesson learnt with *Our Ancestors*, the trilogy, or even the recent *Cosmicomics*, belongs to the past. This may be the age of the cartoon strip, but, in Paris, it is the age of the French. So, why play the Rustichello to Polo, and go for *travels and adventures*?

Take then a  $y$  number of descriptions of cities by early 1972. Group them as you like, *Memory, Desire, Signs, Form*. They continue to fit more than one group, and the frame is turning out to be a vicious circle of a dialogue. Drop *Form*, as all cities are *form*; put the frame aside for the time being. Discard some cities, introduce new themes, reshuffle. And, above all, refresh your math. But which is the right math? Besides, the half-real cities are getting rare. The descriptions are fully imaginary now, even though it is difficult to say what *imaginary* really is. A bit of the native San Remo everywhere? The phrase *città invisibili* is listed somewhere on one of the loose bits of paper. Could be a good title. The outrageous utopia: the invisible city. Hasn't the whole of intellectual Paris been reading Fourier since 1968, thanks to Queneau? The minute, the discontinuous utopia. The perfect city caught in the interstices of imperfection. Some thought.

Now take fifty-five cities, as good a number as any to make sixty-four. Or rather, settle for fifty-five cities and eleven series or themes. So, five cities to a theme. Pretty neat, for some reason. Or rather still, take fifty-four cities, the number of cities in More's *Utopia*, add one truly invisible city, Baucis, and place it at the centre of the text. Break up the one frame into eighteen half-frames, that is nine entire frames; add fifty-five, and you have sixty-four, the number of squares in a chessboard. You can check it all in a diagram. But the result is not a square. It is better than a square because of a three-way interaction: nine chapters (firmly enclosed by the half-dialogues); eleven series (of five numbered items each: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5); fifty-five titled cities (with the title calling the series and the number within the series, but not the name of the city, as that is reserved for the text). Seven chapter structures (chapters 2–8) thus generate the sequence 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 from the ten-element chapter 1 establishing the proceedings. That is, each new chapter after the first one opens on the closing item of a series and closes on the opening item of a new series, with the final chapter, again in ten elements, progressively exhausting the remaining

materials. The cities are now all-contiguous, though categorised and sequenced. Definitely neat.

And quite simple too, even though Calvino had laboured on this slanted four-sided figure filled in with numbers. Some could see the shape of a diamond in it, others the pattern of the sextet. Someone else, keener still on numbers, recalculated the lot and produced the magic figure of 666. The number for the Beast in the *Apocalypse*. Quite some thought. It caught Calvino unaware. And then, once he had become aware, the inadmissible doubt? The doubt that complicated all previous doubts and made unwelcome sense of a brilliant career, leaving one in one's place, the only place available? Can we suspect as much? Perhaps not. All that Calvino ever admitted to the last rough count of his achievements in the *Six Memos*, was that in *Invisible Cities* he had managed to say *the most*. Previously he had called it a last poem to the city, for soon there would be cities no more: a neat mathematical poem where one symbol fitted all, thoughts, theories, as well as a life history, in the least space. But could his love of schemata and his love of the visible world—two supposedly incompatible loves, or, as he would be more likely to put it, two *difficult* loves—could those two have generated a *monster book*?

So, let's suspect in earnest. After all, within the rough figure of his achievement, within that *most* he had managed to say in *Invisible Cities*, hadn't he already admitted it all: all that he could possibly admit? Take Perinthia, the city founded on the best possible set of astronomical numbers. A population of deformed bodies walks the city as a result, with no light fun being poked at Campanella's eugenics. Take Theodora, the graveyard of the animal kingdom. Animals have been made extinct there to exclude the same happening to humans. But libraries have started releasing their special collections, and now sphinxes, harpies, basilisks are at large in the dreams of the people. Another failed experiment.

Take Eutropia, again a disenchanting homage to utopia, More's *Utopia*. Of the several Eutropias in the territory only one is lived in. Every so often a town swap takes place to ensure variety if not equality. Yet despite the redistribution, the changes are minimal, barely noticeable, as function, rather than life, governs the city. Or take Fedora and its museum of crystal balls, each of them a vision of the perfect Fedora of the future. Only trouble, each project becomes obsolete as it is being drawn, hence its perfect usefulness to the museum. Or, lastly—because we too must take a significant number and have reached five—, take Eudoxia, a city with a carpet. Which of



the two—the city smelly of frying, thick with crowds, or the carpet with its clear geometry—is the actual map of the universe?

The love of *schemata* and the love of the visible world. Calvino had made his statement. Look for the discontinuous in our midst. Give it space. Be available for the invisible. Train yourselves to see that even the last city, the city of all imperfection, as he had called it in the close of *The Watcher*, has its perfect hour, the moment when in every city there is the City. This he had said quite clearly. And yet, in this best book of his, disguised through line and number, didn't it all amount to that most terribly *passé* of expectations, a *moment of being*, call it a moment of *seeing*, of some kind or other? What if then, and that would be the worst of it all, what if he wasn't modern enough: yes, not French enough?

Again, he had made no mystery about it. A hermit in Paris. That is to say—among the various things he was conceding by calling himself so—, he had reservations. He knew, of course he knew about structures and enclosures, games and their safety. His fictional prisoners were perfectly safe, having a hell of a safe job getting nowhere in their plans for evasion. The fortress always wins. He had said so in another close, the last story of *Ti con zero*. Make the smallest calculation error, and you for ever head further into the prison, heading centre while being the centre. It was becoming a fixation. He once called it the centripetal march. Stuck and centripetal. That's what he too was, even though on that particular occasion he had been talking about Frye. Stuck like anybody else. And yet, unlike most of his colleagues, unlike the French that is, wasn't he hoping for a glimpse not of the Beyond, but of the Beyond Structures? As in *Super-Structure*? Was he a double charlatan, then?

His Khan had played tough chess to win. But so had Marco, for whenever the King was taken and the empty all-important square showed the figure of the void, he would fill up the space with the oddest minute perceptions: the void? An inlay of wood, the void? Look at this tiny knot in the wood! And that would rush back the larger perceptions and concepts: wood, cutting wood, transporting wood, selling and buying wood. As in a game of Go, where you don't catch your opponent to reduce him to absence: you fill in the square on which you land, you impose a filling of holes, you refuse to give in to absence. But wasn't one supposed to keep things *spacious*? To give space by looking for the discontinuous in our midst? One really had to work hard, harder than one had worked on those neat numbers, to see no contradiction here or elsewhere.

True, Marco had only taken on the Khan so as to complement him more fully, to train and be trained in the process, to be available for uncanny role reversals. A coming together of incompatible loves. And yet, what if it all meant just this? What if those two were incompatible to the extent of being one and the same thing, the one and one only way of world-making? The final optimism, the closing line of the *Cities*, the message to reader *go and look for the interstices* would then really be a charlatan's work. Was he a charlatan? In that panopticon of his—his work—he was after all the most visible of writers. He displayed his work. He made no mysteries about it. There was, ultimately, no mystery to it, for it is impossible for what is written not to be disclosed. So better be done with it. No depth. All surfaces. All stated. He had not been selling any wonder drug, had he?

Strangely, the only city from *Il Milione* that had made it into his descriptions of the world with its original name was Quinsai-Venice, but that had been as part of the dialogue frame. In his later years he too had become some traveller. The Middle East, The Far East, Mexico. Mexico had been almost too strong an experience. The baroque there was delirious, the food fiery, and nature, like the old tree at Tule, near Oaxaca, a useless proliferation of shapes. Or was there a lesson to be learnt? It was surely a country to undo the poetics of a lifetime. The Mihrabs of Iran were instead extremely reassuring. Small precious frames framing blank walls. Again, the small empty square. He clearly still believed in that one. Even better the imperial palace at Persepolis. The perfect seat of power, a utopia in itself. The closer one got to it, the smaller the bas-reliefs representing the converging of the nations. No weight, no depth. Power as centre, and as ultimate absence. A stroke of genius.

But the Japanese gardens were better still. The finite number of views. The path doing the trick: the multiplication of the garden through the planning of the path—but also its subtraction from the vertigo of infinity. It is, one of the Kyoto reports reads, by reducing the number of things around us that we prepare ourselves to take in the idea of a world infinitely larger. A clear case of elective affinities, this discovery of things Japanese. Did it explain his fascination for Marco Polo years previously? Polo, think about it, had not even travelled to Japan. Barthes, however, had. So, had there been all along something very French about his going East to the Empires of Signs? Still not quite sure. Back in Milan, after an exhibition of Arakawa, he would think in arrows. Was he deluding himself? The canvas, call it the mind, felt like a perfect blank at times. A blank

ready to take those vectors. He had always wanted, he believed it dearly, to keep himself empty and ready to be travelled by thought. If only one could have been sure of there being lines and numbers. Caught end gaining, as usual; the very wish was a give-away. He wasn't Oriental enough either. Ask Palomar.

He had said it: for all its literacy and numeracy, the mind gives no protection, and yet it is continuous. He had said it *most*, actually, while thinking about San Remo, hence also in *Invisible Cities*, as there is nowhere stronger than the original place. *D'int'ubagu*. He had even said it in a dialectal phrase. I write from a dark pit—*d'int'ubagu*—trying to reconstruct the map of a place in the sun which is an unverifiable axiom for the calculations of memory, the geometrical seat of the Self, of the Myself I need in order to know that I am Myself, the Myself the World needs to receive news of its existence, a device the World uses to know it is a World.

Yes, he had been a charlatan. He too, thank God, sold ambiguous drugs at street corners: like that other medieval mind.

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One or two ideas from Calvino (low counts are typical when one has borrowed much) are interspersed in this essay in rough English translation. They are left unsourced, though clues are given, as part of a homage to the final paragraphs of *Plato's Pharmacy*, partially quoted in the body of the text. There Plato is seen holding the *pharmakon* in one hand, the calamus in the other: he is heard muttering: he is hearing voices: he means to distinguish between *pharmakon* and *pharmakon*, but cannot. In the process, the other distinction—that between Plato and Derrida—gets blurred, the implicit *Platon c'est moi* giving a further twist to the problematisation of the source.

Something of the kind has been attempted here, in an exercise of informed suspicion that decided the *cut*—again Derridian jargon, from *Dissemination*—to be given to the materials. The interpretative act, the game of potentialities which, as in the finale of the *Pharmacy*, is played increasingly from within the Polo and the Calvino mindset, is willingly, or naughtily if you prefer, conducted on the awareness of having trespassed the limits of interpretation at least once, in the lines about the Japanese game of Go, which are taken from Deleuze's *Le pli*, again in rough translation and without quotation marks. In this way, the doubt we have read into Calvino, and into Polo also—for our two bureaucrats appear to converge on this issue, an idea not previously explored in Calvino studies when discussing the remake—is phrased in the least space, a sufficiently idiomatic, if self-delusory justification for the move, so that for us too the square is full and unprotected at all times, regardless of the modalities and the levels of inscription.

The two epigraphs can be fully declared. They come, respectively, from an after dinner speech by Leopold Kronecker, quoted by G.T. Kneebone in *Mathematical Logic and the Foundation of Mathematics* (London: D. van Nostrand, 1963) 259, and from Stéphane Mallarmé, *A Throw of Dice*, quoted by J. Derrida in *Dissemination* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981) 321.

On afterthought. As the idea for this essay, Derridian touch included, came from having been to the recent Calvino conference-exhibition at the Triennale, Milan, only through the agency of the book complementing the event, an acknowledgement of its power as supplement is due in the form of a bibliographical reference: *La visione dell'invisibile. Saggi e materiali su 'Le città invisibili' di Italo Calvino*, ed. M. Barenghi, G. Canova & B. Falchetto (Milan: Mondadori, 2002).