

CHARLES S. TAYLOR

## Calvino's *Mr. Palomar*: Of Bread, Spécialités fromagères and Watercress

DESPITE ITS SUBTITLE this essay is not of culinary things. The bread of interest is Scottish, discussed by a philosopher, Hume, whose craft is often ridiculed precisely because it "bakes no bread." The archaically-named cheese is Parisian; the watercress constitutes part of a salad of Italo Calvino's last protagonist, Mr. Palomar. Still, contrary to appearances, my concern is no picnic. If we reflect upon the *pleasure* (rather than the nourishment) that one can derive from bread, cheese and salad we begin at least to turn in the right direction. It is on the basis of an experience of pleasure (in the *subject* who has become disinterested), Kant tells us, that beauty is determined. Kant would, of course, deny beauty to such ordinary culinary things; yet for Calvino these prosaic things (or better, the observation of them) bring about a meditation upon the nature of the self that was first sketched in Kant's lofty analysis of the aesthetic judgment of taste. In *Mr. Palomar* Calvino's task only appears to be telling entertaining stories about Mr. Palomar the observer. Calvino's meditations give us, in fact, a framework for our own meditation. It is regularly said that the problem needing scrutiny today is how we think about the self; yet in anything so well-known as *the problem of the postmodern self* much that is worthy of thought is still lurking. The observation sought by Palomar is described in three successive segments of the book on (1) vacations (2) life in the city and (3) silences. His observations disclose to us how *we* think about the self, and invite us to do so, too.



Albrecht Dürer, *Man Drawing a Reclining Nude*.

Courtesy of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

On the cover of the paperback edition of *Mr. Palomar* Dürer's *Man Drawing a Reclining Nude* is reproduced. This print discloses Mr. Palomar's point of departure superbly. On one side of the artist's drawing-table is the "set-up"—a Renaissance nude lying in front of a window looking out over a landscape. Perpendicular to the table, between the artist and model, is a second "window" containing a graph-paper grid of wire squares through which the artist views his subject. The artist draws on paper on the table similarly divided into squares. Correct perspective is achieved by the artist's having an obelisk-like sighting device a few centimetres in front of his eye. We can acquire a similarly useful framework for our observations by careful consideration of Dürer's work.

This woodcut was an illustration for the posthumous German edition of the *Treatise on Measurement* (1538) in which Dürer shows his debt to the Italians for teaching him the scientific theory behind perspective. In 1506 Dürer made a special trip to Bologna to be taught "the art of secret perspective," the *theoretical* framework behind the perspective drawing he had learned from practice alone. The difference between the appearance of real objects and visual images of them had been *theoretically* studied by Euclid; yet, it was only in Italy at the turn of the sixteenth century that such geometrical theorems were applied to artistic representations—by a select few "in secret." This chasm between theory and practice is alive and well today still. In most introductory calculus courses, for example, students are taught formulas for obtaining the derivatives of any polynomial but are not taught the theory behind derivatives. Students mechanically apply these formulas to solve prob-

lems. "Secret" concepts such as *limits* are reserved for advanced math students. Dürer's woodcut shows an artist using an apparatus, a mechanical device, to ensure correct perspective. This device enables him to transform an unforeshortened natural figure into a foreshortened drawing that is mathematically as well as visually correct. Mr. Palomar follows Renaissance artists in a variety of ways.

First of all he copies their method. We encounter Mr. Palomar's geometrical (modern) method at the very beginning of the story. Standing on a beach Mr. Palomar wants to look at a single wave because "in his desire to avoid vague sensations, he established for his every action a limited and precise object."<sup>1</sup> Looking at a single wave turns out to be no simple matter, so Palomar begins approaching his task as Dürer's artist did. First he selects a point of observation—a tongue of sand thrusting out into the water. From this point he "tries to limit his field of observation; if he bears in mind a square of, say, ten meters of shore by ten meters of sea, he can carry out an inventory of all the wave movements that are revealed with varying frequency within a given time interval" (6). The analogy to Dürer becomes explicit as Palomar puts his system of observation into practice: "Concentrating the attention on one aspect makes it leap into the foreground and occupy the square, just as with certain drawings, you have only to close your eyes and when you open them the perspective has changed" (7). We discover that Palomar is quite fond of this method when we observe him, still on vacation, pulling weeds. Here again he starts from a fixed observation point—crouched on the lawn.

To be sure, pulling up a weed here and there solves nothing. This is how it should be done, he thinks—take a square section of the lawn, one meter by one meter, and eliminate even the slightest presence of anything but clover, darnel or dichondra. Then move on to another square. No, perhaps not; remain perhaps with the simple square. Count how many blades of grass there are, what species, how thick, how distributed. On the basis of this calculation you could arrive at a statistical knowledge of the lawn, which once established.... (31)

---

<sup>1</sup>Italo Calvino, *Mr. Palomar*, trans. W. Weaver (New York: Harcourt, 1985) 3.

Thus it is that Mr. Palomar approaches the world. He creates for himself projects reflecting the rational view of things that permeates modern thought. Under the proper conditions clear results can be obtained. One might even trace this distinguishing element of modern thought back to the Presocratic philosopher/astronomer Thales, who predicted a solar eclipse in 585 BCE. Thales grasped that events in the world take place according to knowable laws of causality and not on the basis of the unpredictable whims of the gods. Thales' insight culminates in modern thought, which believes that we can scientifically control the universe ("making better things for better living through chemistry") and morally control ourselves ("making the world safe for democracy").

Palomar's geometrical observations of a wave and of a lawn come in the initial section of the book which contains primarily, the index tells us, descriptions of visual observations of natural forms. Other natural forms examined include the breasts of a nude female sunbather; the moon, sun and stars; tortoises; starlings; giraffes and iguanas. We find the same method of observation when Mr. Palomar discovers in a cheese shop a language, a system of cheeses:

It is a language made up of things; its nomenclature is only an external aspect, instrumental; but for Mr. Palomar, learning a bit of nomenclature still remains the first measure to be taken if he wants to stop for a moment the things that are flowing before his eyes.

From his pocket he takes a notebook and a pen, and begins to write down some names, marking beside each name some feature that will enable him to recall the image to his memory; he also tries to make a synthetic sketch of the shape. He writes *pavé d'Airvault*, and notes, "green mold," draws a flat parallelepiped and to one side notes "4 cm. circa"; he writes *St.-Maure*, notes "gray granular cylinder with a little shaft inside," and draws it, measuring it at a glance as about "20 cm."; then he writes *Chabicholi* and draws another little cylinder. (74)

The grid of squares employed earlier now has language added to it. This second-order system of observation also 'makes one aspect leap into the foreground' of one's attention. The cheeses on their platters "proffer themselves as if on the divans of a brothel" (72). These scientific methodologies of Mr. Palomar do not, however, constitute the real horizon upon which he invites us to meditate. He observed the prosaic, rooftop surface of Rome to offer inexhaustible material for visual study. Renaissance artists like Dürer and contemporary philosophers of science like Sir Karl Popper have respectively found scientific observation in itself to be inexhaustible. Nonetheless, the visual observation of natural form is only the first of three types of experience contained in Calvino's story.

## 2

Instead of immersing ourselves in looking at the things Mr. Palomar looks at—or watching him look—we must rather notice two other features of these primary experiences. First of all Mr. Palomar's pursuit of science follows precisely neither of the standard explanations of why we practice science. Mr. Palomar does not really seek "to gather the meaning of things" (Aristotle) nor does he seek "better things for better living through chemistry." He is no professional scientist, pure or applied. It could be said that Mr. Palomar seeks better living—but his better living is more a Pythagorean harmony of the spheres than it is bourgeois comfort. Towards the end of the book we read of those gifted in human relations:

"These gifts," Mr. Palomar thinks with the regret of the man who lacks them, "are granted to those who live in harmony with the world. It is natural for them to establish an accord not only with people but also with things, places, situations, occasions, with the course of the constellations in the firmament, with the aggregation of atoms in molecules. The avalanche of simultaneous events that we call the universe does not overwhelm the lucky

individual who can slip through the finest interstices among the infinite combinations, permutations, chains of consequences, avoiding the paths of the murderous meteorites and catching only the beneficial rays. To the man who is the friend of the universe, the universe is a friend. If only," Mr. Palomar sighs, "I could be like that!" (116–17)

In contrast to this wish, however, one sees that for the most part Mr. Palomar has a far from friendly relationship to the universe. Much of his scientific visual inspection of things turns out to be avoidance:

A nervous man who lives in a frenzied and congested world, Mr. Palomar tries to reduce his relations with the outside world and, to defend himself against the general neurasthenia, he tries to keep his sensations under control insofar as possible. (4)

His main technique for keeping his sensations under control is the taking a square zone of ten metres of shore by ten metres of sea for exclusive observation. Foreshortening allows one to reduce or enlarge proportionally. Palomar only reduces. And in this reduction he achieves not contentment but confusion and uneasiness. Finally, when he has almost seen his single wave, a change occurs:

Is the wind about to change? It would be disastrous if the image that Mr. Palomar has succeeded painstakingly in putting together were to shatter and to be lost. Only if he manages to bear all the aspects in mind at once can he begin the second phase of the operation: extending this knowledge to the entire universe.

It would suffice not to lose patience as he soon does. Mr. Palomar goes off along the beach, tense and nervous as when he came, and even more unsure about everything. (7–8)

The most persistent relation Mr. Palomar has to "everything" is being unsure.

Obviously a Mr. Palomar should look at the stars—and Calvino's Palomar does not disappoint. He approaches the stars as he does the wave—on vacation, with the same scientific technique and with the same expectation of harmony. The results match his efforts on the beach. He first examines the moon—but in the afternoon—“when its existence is still in doubt” (34). Further, the moon changes continually; it is “the most changeable body in the visible universe, and the most regular in its complicated habits” (35). Regular change hardly bothers even Mr. Palomar. One April, the three planets visible to Mr. Palomar's astigmatic, near-sighted eyes are arranged such that they can be observed the entire night. Palomar buys a telescope to better enjoy the spectacle. The telescope turns out to be, like the grid of squares used by Dürer's artist, a mechanical device to correct the mistakes of natural vision. The Italians who taught Dürer their secret art of perspective named geometrically correct drawing *costruzione legittima*. This systematic perspective drawing was achieved using the grid and obelisk; it produced the *prospettiva pigendi* (the painter's perspective) as opposed to *prospettiva naturalis*. Palomar's small fifteen-centimetre telescope made quite a difference in his relationship to the planets, which he could also observe through his eyeglasses' *prospettiva naturalis*.

The changes that Mr. Palomar's telescope make, however, are different from the corrections of Dürer's drawing device. Dürer obtains 'legitimacy,' certainty, but Palomar becomes confused. Mars turns out in the telescope to be “a more perplexed planet than it appears to the naked eye” (38). Saturn receives more attention and thought, though initially it does not produce perplexity:

Quite the opposite is the relationship he establishes with Saturn, the most exciting planet to the person viewing it through a telescope; there it is, very sharp, white, the outlines of the sphere precise and of the ring; a faint zebra striping marks the sphere; a darker circumference distinguishes the edge of the ring. This telescope hardly picks up any other details and accentuates the geometrical abstraction of the object; the sense of extreme difference, rather than diminishing, becomes more prominent now than it is to the naked eye.

It is cheering to think that an object so different from all others, a form that achieves the maximum strangeness with the maximum simplicity and regularity and harmony, is rotating in the sky.

"If the ancients had been able to see it as I see it now," Mr. Palomar thinks, "they would have thought they had projected their gaze into the heaven of Plato's ideas, or in the immaterial space of the postulates of Euclid; but instead, thanks to some misdirection or other, this sight has been granted to me, who fears it is too beautiful to be true, too gratifying to my imaginary universe to belong to the real world. But perhaps it is this same mistrust that prevents us from feeling comfortable in the universe. Perhaps the first rule I must impose on myself is this: stick to what I see." (38–39)

The changes of thought in this passage rival the changes of the moon—but they are far from 'regular.' First we have sharpness, precision. Yet this precise vision of simplicity is also of that which has maximum strangeness. One of the 'ancients,' Heraclitus, saw harmony in the strife of opposites just as Palomar finds 'cheering harmony' in strangeness combined with simplicity and regularity. Palomar's imagination places him in a Platonic heaven. Distrusting this vision he imposes the rule that controlled Dürer—Palomar decides to stick to what he sees. Dürer scrutinizes what he sees and then draws it according to the truths of Euclid. Dürer uses nature as his point of departure; he rejected the ancient demand to draw images of the soul (Platonic images) as well as the medieval demand to draw things as God would see them. Dürer, and now Palomar, want to stick to what they themselves see. Thus in Dürer and in Palomar we can see the anthropocentrism which has persisted in Western thought ever since the Renaissance. This anthropocentrism is a decisive bridge from ancient scientific thought to modern scientific thought. In modern thought it is humans who propose to make better things for better living for themselves and it is humans who propose to make the world safe for democracy.

In contrast to his Renaissance precursor, however, Mr. Palomar distrusts his senses and is thereby prevented from feeling comfortable in the universe. In order to comprehend the mistrust Mr. Palomar



feels we must watch him contemplating the stars. Calvino gives us a picture Dürer would enjoy:

The first problem is to find a place from which his gaze can move freely over the whole dome of the sky without obstacles and without the invasion of electric light; for example, a lonely beach on a very low coast.

Another necessary condition is to bring along an astronomical chart, without which he would not know what he is looking at; but between times he forgets how to orient it and has first to devote half an hour to studying it. To decipher the chart in the darkness he must also bring along a flashlight. The frequent checking of sky against chart requires him to turn the light on and off, and in the passages from light to darkness he remains almost blinded and has to readjust his vision every time.

If Mr. Palomar employed a telescope, things would be more complicated in some ways and simplified in others; but for the present, the experience of the sky that interests him is that of the naked eye, like that of ancient navigators and nomad shepherds. Naked eye for him, who is nearsighted, means eyeglasses; and since he has to remove his eyeglasses to study the chart, operations are complicated by this pushing up and lowering of the eyeglasses on his brow, and there is a wait of several seconds before his crystalline lenses can focus the real stars or the printed ones...

In other words, to locate a star involves the checking of various maps against the vault of the sky, with all the related actions: putting on and taking off eyeglasses, turning the flashlight on and off, unfolding and folding the large chart, losing and finding again the reference points. (43–44)

It takes no effort to imagine a corresponding description of Dürer's artist using obelisk and grid to correctly draw the nude in front of him. The conclusion of this elaborate affair is that Mr. Palomar "distrusts what he knows; what he does not know keeps his spirit in a suspended state. Oppressed, insecure, he becomes nervous

over the celestial charts, as over railroad timetables when he flips through them in search of a connection" (47).

Focusing upon the discord that Mr. Palomar experiences as the major result of his inspection of the visible universe, it might seem that another, much more famous piece by Dürer would present itself as the visual correlate to Palomar's experience. Indeed, the more one reflects on the *Melencholia I* the more it seems to disclose something essential in Calvino's story.<sup>2</sup> To begin with, Dürer draws one fundamental perspective for this work from medieval views of the melancholic temperament. Melancholics, thus conceived, are gloomy, inactive—perhaps even lazy, inclined to sleep; their black gall was associated with earth, dryness, cold, autumn, evening, the age of sixty. Dürer invests his *Melencholia I* with additional meaning. The gloom and inertia are for him the product of a distinct consciousness. The *Melencholia I* is about scientific activity or artistic activity which has lost its meaning. Dürer's brooding woman is surrounded by the tools of architecture and carpentry—of artistic, applied geometry. It is the perplexity of a thinking being that Dürer captures so perfectly.

Palomar only half-fits this context. He is not a professional scientist—his observations are those of an amateur. He is seeking pleasure from something he loves to do. Yet while perhaps a 'klutz,' Palomar could not be described as incompetent the way 'amateurs' are today. As a serious lover of science (which the root of *amateur* implies), Palomar seems somewhat closer to the standard medieval melancholic than to Dürer's melancholic genius. Dürer learned from the Italians how to *transform* the given *prospectiva naturalis*, to give the already known a new meaning. Dürer transforms the medieval melancholic into a *melancholia artificialis*—an artist's (and scientist's) melancholy. Today science no longer represents the new transformational mode of thought as did the development of anthropocentric science in Dürer's time. Now science is the dominant model of modern thought. Calvino is watching a transformation of modern thought through observing his amateur scientist.

We catch a glimpse of the work of Calvino when we consider Panofsky's explanation of why Dürer added the number 'I' to

---

<sup>2</sup>*Melencholia I* is frequently reproduced, as for example in Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*, 4th ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1955) fig. 209.

the title of this masterpiece.<sup>3</sup> Panofsky argues that the 'I' designates the first of three possible forms of genius which are subject to the melancholic influence/inspiration of Saturn (as was Palomar). In contrast to the genius for metaphysics found in philosophers, poets and theologians (*Melancholia III*), and in contrast to the genius for practical action found in politicians and scientists (*Melancholia II*), Dürer portrays the genius of imagination found in artists. In fact artistic genius shares with politico-scientific genius a limitation of thought which makes both inferior to metaphysical genius. Neither can extend its thought beyond the empirical world—the world of Euclidean space. Their melancholy comes from their inability to comprehend the metaphysical; they are aware of the metaphysical but cannot adequately get it into their grasp. Like Palomar the non-metaphysical geniuses 'stick to what they see.' It is precisely *Melancholia* in its modern form which Calvino invites us to meditate upon. The metaphysical entity whose grasp eludes us so frequently is none other than (paradoxically) the *self*. Named at the beginning of this discussion, only now does the self become present for our inspection. We started with the 'primary experience' of the observation of natural form and now this emphasis on the self becomes the second part of Calvino's meditation.

## 3

A brief history of the modern self will be of great help in developing this part of Calvino's story. Though Descartes' *Cogito* is the standard starting place for reflection on the anthropocentric modern self, we can start one step later with Hume. There are a number of ways in which Palomar and Hume share perspectives. Both, for example, are believers in empirical observation and both seem to be instinctively anti-metaphysicians. The self for Hume starts out as a passive receptor of impressions. The lively impressions are transformed by the mind into ideas which are both less lively and subject to examination in terms of resemblance, contiguity and causality. It is causality that provides Hume with his most important material for reflection. Hume realizes that on the basis of em-

---

<sup>3</sup>Panofsky, *Dürer* 169–70.

pirical observation alone we cannot know that the future will resemble the past. Thus Hume insists that one cannot know that the bread which nourished us yesterday will in fact do so again today.<sup>4</sup> Not only does philosophy seem unable to bake bread, it also seems unable to know its properties. If one cannot know something as seemingly simple as the nourishment of bread, the self attached to such uncertainty is surely an ephemeral self at best.

Kant provides the next piece of this history. Awakened by Hume from his 'dogmatic slumber' Kant described the first authentically modern self—and the one which creates all our problems. Drawing an analogy from the very tool which is being used to create this essay, one can say that Kant realized that the mind is no passive receptor of impressions (as Hume assumed) but rather, like a computer, the mind can function only after the data are organized by some operating system. Thus the Macintosh OS™ determines the nature of this document. If it weren't the Mac OS then it would be some other OS. Kant insisted that the human mind is composed of a two-part built-in "operating system"—consisting of the *a priori* intuitions of space and time and the twelve categories of the Understanding. All the data in the mind are conditioned by its operating system and are experienced as having *form* derived from that OS. We can no more use simple electrical impulses 'in themselves' than we can know the world as it is in itself. The Kantian self constituted by spatiality, temporality and fixed categories of Understanding is a more substantial entity than Hume's.

Hume's self fits most appropriately with the first of the three types of experiences of Palomar we are told about—descriptions of visual observations of natural form. The choice of what Hume said about bread actually stretches this level of thinking to its limits. Hume was more fond of his discussion of billiard balls and the impossibility of knowing that motion in one ball will in some future moment *cause*, upon impact, motion in the second. Palomar accomplishes this observation of natural form most fully in trying to see his wave, in looking at the rooftops of Rome and in viewing the garden of sand and rocks of the Ryoanji of Kyoto. But even in

---

<sup>4</sup>David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977) 21.

these instances he already discloses a self which is *not passive* and, as such, one that Hume would not accept. In looking at his wave Palomar, we must note, knows what he is doing. In the *intention* here we see only the surface of the role of the active self in all of Palomar's attempts to establish relations with his world. Hume's inability to know that the future will resemble the past leads to scepticism; we have already seen that Palomar feels something of such scepticism when he thinks about the mistrust of his senses which prevents him from feeling comfortable in the universe. On closer observation we find that Palomar's mistrust of sense experience extends further than does Hume's.

We find not so much mistrust as absence of sense information when Palomar observes tortoises mating. Trying to understand the mating ritual he is watching, Palomar asks:

And what about the tortoises, enclosed in their insensitive casings? The poverty of their sensorial stimuli perhaps drives them to a concentrated, intense mental life, leads them to a crystalline inner awareness. (21)

Palomar cannot grasp the *eros* of such beings which lack the sensuous skin so essential in human *eros*. And yet, there is also another level of distrusting the senses involved in the very *eros* Palomar takes as essential. When he encounters the nude woman sunbathing on the beach Palomar tries to establish a proper (i.e. non-erotic, Kantian disinterested) relationship to her. Achieving this disinterestedness is not easy and Palomar ends up walking past her so many times she finally leaves in irritation, "as if she were avoiding the tiresome insistence of a satyr" (12). It is this same distrust of eroticism that Palomar feels when talking of cheeses proffering themselves as do prostitutes. In talking of the shopping experiences of Mr. Palomar we have moved into the second level of his experiences where we have narratives which add language, symbols and other anthropological elements to visual observation. What seems to have emerged thus far in our observations is a pervasive mistrust of our ability to collect correct data about the external world. This is indeed a cause of uneasiness for Palomar precisely because it is in such reduced relationships that Palomar believes he can best find the comfort he desires in his relations to the world.

The narratives about Mr. Palomar shopping occur in the geometrical centre of the text. The central section of these narratives is his visit to the cheese museum. The eroticism which was one of his earliest causes of mistrust of his senses also appears in a visit to a Parisian *charcuterie* where goose fat and the memory of *cassoulet* “awaken an immediate fantasy not so much of appetite as of *eros*” (68). We have already considered the cheeses-as-prostitutes element of his visit to the *Spécialités fromagères* shop. We also learn that Palomar is not inclined to pursue the kind of relation with cheeses suggested by some of their names—*crottin* (horse turd), *bouton de coulotte* (button on [a woman’s ?] pants—which either are part of erotic ‘talking dirty’ or of a perverse satisfaction of debasing objects of gluttony with “lowering names” (72). Palomar here as always wants to reduce his relations to “the simplicity of a direct physical relationship” (73). This too turns out to be less simple than it first appears as Palomar reflects that “the refinement of the taste buds and especially the olfactory organs has its moments of weakness, of loss of class” (72). Thus Palomar tries to ‘stick to what he sees.’ Unfortunately he understands that behind every cheese is a specific civilization which has given the cheese form and taken form from it; he “feels as he does in the Louvre” (73). Since Palomar only senses and does not consciously articulate the complexities beneath the surface of what he sees (or smells), he resorts to the method already mentioned of writing down names and drawing pictures of the objects. In drawing a flat parallelepiped, writing down the descriptions “green mold,” and “4 cm. circa.” next to the name *pavé d’Airvault*, Palomar finds the greatest equilibrium between self and world he ever achieves. We need to look carefully at this accomplishment.

The term *equilibrium* just used is intentionally taken from Calvino’s description of the acoustic space in which Palomar spends his summer—listening to birds. This space is

irregular, discontinuous, jagged; but thanks to an equilibrium established among the various sounds, none of which outdoes the other in intensity or frequency, all is woven into a homogeneous texture, held together not by harmony but by lightness and transparency. (22)

Palomar starts out with an intentionally reduced self which wants only to see what is present. This self has trouble being certain of just what it is that it sees. Additionally it slowly recognizes that the self is no wholly passive element in any looking at the world. The self has disclosed itself here in the cheese shop as a significant participant in Palomar's relations with his world. Writing down names of cheeses, drawing their pictures and describing their colour and shape are all activities of a "self of lightness" quite different from Hume's passive self. In the final shopping event in this centre segment of the book Palomar almost reaches his completed scientific perspective—in the butcher's shop. "Butchering wisdom and culinary doctrine belong to the exact sciences, which can be checked through experimentation" (76). The Kantian self could perform the experimentation, which would allow for correct understanding of such culinary truths. The (modern) perspective of science sought by Dürer, Palomar and Kant (and Hume) relies upon a notion of the self which is here eluding our grasp just as Palomar's wave never wholly allows itself to be seen. The non-interfering self assumed by modern science is understood as a static, fixed self which *can* discover the truth of things because not only the truth but also *that self* remains unchangeable. Kant opened the door for a self which is not changeless, though he did not see any possible changes in the 'operating system' of space, time or the categories of the Understanding which constitute the self. The self for Palomar slowly changes throughout his story. At first it encounters difficulties in doing the things it takes to be simple—the reductions already considered. Here in the cheese shop the self has emerged to be part of an equilibrium with the world. Like the acoustic space of the birds, this self-world relation is jagged, irregular. What finally emerges in Calvino's story is not so much the transparency of sounds as a transformation of selves. With this statement we have begun the final piece of this meditation.

Late in the first section of Palomar's story, while looking at the stars and having the above-mentioned difficulties, Palomar begins using his imagination as a complement to his complicated visual activities. Traditional science disdains interference from the imagination, but as noted Palomar is no professional scientist. Accordingly we are told, "Although it is right for the imagination to come to support the weakness of vision, it must be immediate and

direct like the gaze that kindles it" (41). What we have here is a clear instance of the self no longer being merely a passive receptor of data, but now an active entity which apparently *chooses* to assist the weakness of one of the passive sense faculties. We find an even more active self involved in the shopping expeditions. His fellow shoppers in the *charcuterie* are grey and opaque and sullen—quite unlike the splendid items in this “good gastronomical shop” (67)—and Palomar “would like to catch in their eyes some reflection of these treasures’ spell” (69). Even more than detecting animation in the eyes of his fellow shoppers Palomar finds himself wanting to be ‘chosen’ by the pâtés as the one worthy of such delicacies. Hume and his followers would dismiss such desire as the idiosyncratic wishes of a glutton. Palomar finds his gluttony inauthentic and discomforting just as his pure observations had been. He wonders if his gluttony is not “chiefly mental, aesthetic, symbolic” (69). Palomar’s unease reflects the traditional disdain for anything subjective like desire; yet lurking here is an awareness of the not-so-inessential role the self plays in all human relations. His concern is not about the automatic causal activity of a ‘will’ compelling action; rather, he focuses upon the mental-aesthetic-symbolic contributions of the *self*. Here such awareness is still lurking in that the self has only begun to disclose its complexity.

The development of Palomar’s sense of self begins as, it seems, do all his relations—in perplexity. Swimming one evening while on vacation he begins to think about the “sword of the sun,” the strip of sunlight seemingly aimed at him alone. Three different egos—one megalomaniacal, one depressive (melancholic) and one even-handed—contribute to this meditation. On either side of the sword is darkness, and Palomar wonders if “[darkness] is not the only non-illusory datum common to all” (14). His perplexity grows as he thinks, “I cannot reach that sword: always there ahead, it cannot be inside me and, at the same time, something inside which I am swimming: If I see it I remain outside it, and it remains outside” (15).

The conclusion of this meditation is the first occurrence of Palomar’s notion that the self creates form beyond which one cannot move. “Only the origin of *what is* [i.e. of what has being] matters; something my gaze cannot confront except in an attenuated form, as in this sunset” (15; *italics and bracketed explanation added*).



What we confront is always "in an attenuated form." This is the lesson and legacy of Kant's *a priori* 'operating system' giving form to everything that is experienced. At first this thought leaves open the tantalizing possibility that we might somehow manage a glance into things with no attenuation (into things as they are in themselves). This is, of course, the illusion concealed in Hume's wondering about the nourishing abilities of bread. Even more tantalizing but also different possibilities are opened for us by Palomar. These possibilities are disclosed in the examination of the *varieties* of those attenuations and not in the self-deceiving hope that they might be surmounted ... somehow. What matters is not simplistically what we see. What matters (*what is*) is always encountered in attenuated form but not always in the same attenuated form.

Palomar returns often to look critically at the forms he finds himself employing as he studies his observations. Looking at the stars, or rather resting his eyes, he embarks on another activity of the imagination:

unable to keep the image sharp ... he has to lower his eyelids for a moment, let the dazzled pupil find again the precise perception of outlines, color, shadows, but also let the imagination strip away borrowed garments and renounce its show of book learning. (41)

Kant named the contents of our consciousness 'Representations' [*Vorstellungen*] to underscore the fact that the content of consciousness is that which is placed before it (re-presented) according to, as already discussed, the pre-established operating system that constitutes the 'faculty of Understanding.' Less abstractly Palomar thinks of the forms he perceives as corrupted in their attenuation by "garments," by "book learning." This relation between original and representation never quite disappears from Palomar's thoughts. The lawn he scrutinizes has as its purpose 'to represent nature.' "He no longer thinks of the lawn: he thinks of the universe. He is trying to apply to the universe everything he has thought about the lawn" (33). Usually though he distrusts his representations at least as much as he mistrusts his sense data. He looks at the stars both through a telescope and with the 'naked' (with eyeglasses) eye. With the naked eye he is able to bear in mind the matters of scale between

himself and the universe being examined, and thinks that such empiricism allows truthful observation. With the telescope he has an illusory encounter as if face-to-face with the planet-object close at hand. This assumption of the superiority of the 'naked eye' gives way to the opposite thought that the only true world is our own—the one created by our plans, models, minds. This thought first emerges while looking at 'the order squamata' being kept alive artificially in habitats in glass cases at the zoo. Here we have nature not only *known* as it is through experimentation in butchering wisdom but also ... *controlled*.

The question of whether our models accurately *re-present* reality or whether they invent the model's own reality bothers Palomar more and more as his meditations proceed. Intertwined in this persistent questioning is our question of the changing nature of the self. Looking at the sand garden of the Ryoanji, Palomar encounters a *scene*,

the image typical of that contemplation of the absolute to be achieved with the simplest means and without recourse to concepts capable of verbal expression, according to the teaching of the Zen monks, the most spiritual of Buddhist sects. (91)

Prior to this we have been told that Palomar was not lost in contemplation of the wave but was looking at it, 'reading' it. Then he did not possess the 'right temperament' for contemplation. In Kyoto there seems to be something of the same absence of the right temperament as Palomar does not see a *scene* (a representation) before him but rather looks at the rocks one by one and therefore sees *things*. Working methodically (as he did with the waves and with his lawn) he first of all 'reads the instructions for use' but still has trouble. He is *not* "really sure of having a personality to shed [nor] of looking at the world from inside an ego that can be dissolved, to become only a gaze" (93). This desire to 'become only a gaze' should not be confused with the requirement that lies at the core of the methods of modern science: to be unprejudiced in observation. Similarly different as well is the Kantian aesthetic desire to become disinterested when contemplating the beautiful. Palomar reflects that "this outset ... demands an effort of supple-

mentary imagination" (93). This effort seems to have to come from no other source than the self. Here, however, the self which contemplates does so without concepts capable of verbal expression. Here the absolute is contemplated by a still different self than any hitherto.

At the end of the passage on his visit to the sand garden Calvino asks what Palomar sees, knowing that he has resolved to 'stick to what he sees':

And between mankind-sand and world-boulder there is a sense of possible harmony, as if between two nonhomogeneous harmonies: that of the nonhuman in a balance of forces that seems not to correspond to any pattern, and that of human structures, which aspire to the rationality of a geometrical or musical composition, never definitive. (94)

The harmony here takes us a step beyond the equilibrium between self and world discussed earlier. An equilibrium can be achieved between opposing forces held at bay by each other. An equilibrium of opposition could be imagined between world and model such that the model's distortion is rendered negligible. Palomar gets harmony here of the non-human boulder which has no pattern in conjunction with the sand raked by humans into non-definitive rational order. If we are to comprehend the move Palomar has made here we have to look at some of the examples that led him this way.

Before getting to the iguanas at the zoo Palomar stops to watch the 'giraffe race.' Modern humour would describe the giraffe as an animal designed by a committee.

The giraffe seems a mechanism constructed by putting together pieces from heterogeneous machines, though it functions perfectly all the same. Mr. Palomar, as he continues watching the racing giraffes, becomes aware of a complicated harmony that commands that unharmonious trampling, an inner proportion that links the most glaring anatomical disproportions, a natural grace that emerges from those ungraceful movements.... the world

around him moves in an unharmonious way, and he hopes always to find some pattern in it, a constant. Perhaps because he himself feels that his own advance is impelled by uncoordinated movements of the mind, which seem to have nothing to do with one another and are increasingly difficult to fit into any pattern of inner harmony. (80)

In the giraffe we find an example of the non-human achieving a harmony much like the balance-of-forces harmony Palomar saw in the rocks in the sand garden. On the other hand, the human structures aspiring to rationality we have encountered in the butchering wisdom checked through experimentation. There remains one final piece of this story. The harmony Palomar seeks has remained elusive; he has found instances of harmony in a variety of places ... in the stars, in the zoo, or while shopping or travelling, to recall only some. If he finds a balance of forces it corresponds to no pattern. If there is ambitious rationality it remains 'never definitive.' What Palomar does in his final meditations is to develop his thoughts about the role the self plays in all of this. We have seen that role both expand and become more problematic. In the concluding sections of the book the relation between self and world becomes explicit for the first time. Having asked questions of this relationship on our own initiative thus far, we can now see how Calvino ends his meditations.

## 5

The final section, "The Meditations of Mr. Palomar," begins, "After a series of intellectual misadventures..." (113). We are already adequately aware of the nature of these misadventures. Certain things, we are told, have the ability to summon the prolonged attention of Palomar. He now decides neither to let these summonses escape nor to attribute to observation less importance than it deserves. Realizing he cannot observe all things, he must select the right ones—just as he selected the *good* gastronomical shop. Soon his *own* ego is, as usual, causing him problems.

But how can you look at something and set your own ego aside? Whose eyes are doing the looking? As a rule, you think of the ego as one who is peering out of your own eyes as if leaning on a window sill, looking at the world stretching out before him in all its immensity. So, then: a window looks out on the world. The world is out there; and in here, what do we have? The world still—what else could there be? With a little effort of concentration, Mr. Palomar manages to shift the world from in front of him and set it on the sill, looking out. Now, beyond the window, what do we have? The world is also there, and for the occasion has been split into a looking world and a world looked at. And what about him, also known as “I,” namely Mr. Palomar? Is not he a piece of the world that is looking at another piece of the world? Or else, given that there is world that side of the window and world this side, perhaps the “I,” the ego, is simply the window through which the world looks at the world. To look at itself the world needs the eyes (and the eyeglasses) of Mr. Palomar. (114)

It might seem that what occurs here is that the self goes through a process of disintegration. The troublesome ego disappears when it is realized that the looking out of the window at the world is being done by the world. The ego, as the appearance has it, is reduced to the medium through which seeing occurs. Once reduced in this way the ego dissolves and we have only world looking at itself.

Having reached the just-mentioned realization Palomar does in fact begin to try to see the world with a gaze that does not come from ‘inside’—that is, not from his own self—but with a gaze that comes from ‘outside.’ As with all of Palomar’s projects, this one fails.

Having the outside look outside is not enough; the trajectory must start from the looked-at thing, linking it with the thing that looks.

From the mute distance of things a sign must come, a summons, a wink; one thing detaches itself from the other things with the intention of signifying something. (115)

The world is being looked at here but it is being looked at by *the thing that looks*. This thing-that-looks can be no other type of thing but a self which responds to the summons. The self which does the looking here is not Palomar's ordinary self with all its troubles in establishing relations with the world. This self is rather a transformed self which through this transformation does not cease being a self. Its transformation dissolves not the self but the singular version of the self incorrectly assumed by the philosophical tradition to be the only form the self could possess. Given the traditional assumption that the self must be some fixed unchanging form, it has been taken for granted that the nature of this entity could only be that arbitrary, egotistical being which interferes with the progress of science as well as art. What Palomar is slowly coming to see is that there are a variety of selves all of which participate in our relations with the world and in strikingly different ways.

His relations with the world are always involved with considerations about 'the universe' and these final meditations are no exception. At the beginning of this essay we looked at a passage in which Palomar wishes he could be like those people who are friends of the universe. In that same section of the book he considers what it might mean to be in that kind of relationship with things. He starts on a rather general level.

The idea that everything in the universe is connected and corresponds never leaves him: a variation in the luminosity in the Nebula of Cancer or the condensation of a globular mass in Andromeda cannot help having some influence on the functioning of his record player or on the freshness of the watercress leaves in his salad bowl. (117)

To think of everything being connected is in itself only the first step in this thought process. The phrase "some influence" is too vague for Palomar, who wants to avoid vague sensations. He soon is back to noting the role of the self in this situation of influence.

The only way still open to him is self-knowledge; from now on he will draw the diagram of the moods of his spirit, he will derive from it formulas and theories, he

will train his telescope on the orbits traced by the course of his life rather than on those of the constellations. 'We can know nothing about what is outside of us if we overlook ourselves,' he thinks now, 'The universe is the mirror in which we can contemplate only what we have learned to know in ourselves.' (119)

When we first begin to sort out what Palomar is thinking we might be tempted to hear no more than the truth that Palomar has repeatedly shown himself to be uncomfortable—with his distrust of his senses (in more than one way), with his relations to others—and so now we learn that discomfort with self is mirrored in discomfort with the universe. To reach this conclusion alone is to stop short of what Palomar can let us see.

The idea of the universe as a mirror in which we can contemplate ourselves allows for a variety of selves to be mirrored in differing circumstances. The only self Hume allowed to have any significance was the purely passive one which receives impressions but cannot know if bread will nourish tomorrow. Kant gave the self an active role in the process of knowing even if he saw the self which was of note to have always the same active role. Calvino *radicalizes* the Kantian self such that the self has no one true or fixed nature. Calvino's self can be the mirror in which the world looks at the world and it can be the mirror in which a shopper in a cheese store wonders if he might not be in a brothel. There must always be some self present in every instance in which the world wishes to look at itself. The world does this in many ways, each of which discloses truth about the relations between the self and the world. As noted earlier, what matters (*what is*) is always encountered in attenuated form.

In "Dialogue on the Art of the Novel," Milan Kundera says that all novels are concerned with the enigma of the self. This enigma, according to Kundera, has been explored by a variety of methods. First we had the self as seen in action, which Kundera traces to Dante—though one could go back as far as Aristotle to find this same thought. A more recent quest for the self is to be seen in the 'psychological' novel. The quest for the interior life of the self, for Kundera, is completed in Joyce. Kundera sounds very much like Calvino in the following:

Joyce analyzes something still more ungraspable than Proust's "lost time": the present moment. There would seem to be nothing more obvious, more tangible and palpable, than the present moment. And yet it eludes us completely. All the sadness of life lies in that fact. In the course of a single second, our senses of sight, of hearing, of smell, register (knowingly or not) a swarm of events, and a parade of sensations and ideas passes through our heads. Each instant represents a little universe, irrevocably forgotten in the next instant. Now, Joyce's great microscope manages to stop, to seize that fleeting instant and make us see it. But the quest for the self ends, yet again, in a paradox. The more powerful the lens of the microscope observing the self, the more the self and its uniqueness elude us; beneath the great Joycean lens that breaks the soul down into atoms, we are all alike. But if the self and its uniqueness cannot be grasped in man's interior life, then where and how can we grasp it? ... The quest for the self has always ended, and will always end, in a paradoxical dissatisfaction.<sup>5</sup>

How well this fits Palomar! Kundera includes his own quest for the self through the novel in this concluding paradoxical dissatisfaction. Kundera's path to the self is via a presentation of "the essence of its existential problem" (32). What we have been looking at in this essay is Calvino's contribution to understanding *why* Kundera is correct when he says that the novel's quest for the self will always end as do Palomar's attempts at establishing relations with the world. Every path we take to look for the self contains the mirroring Palomar comes to recognize. We see different selves mirrored in the world when we study action, or the interior life, or one's existential problem ... or one's desire to be chosen by the pâtés in a *charcuterie*. Perhaps, after all, this is a culinary essay.

---

<sup>5</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. L. Asher (New York: Grove, 1988) 24–25.