From Perception to Cognition: the Five Senses and the Search for

Meaning in Italo Calvino’s Last Short Stories

Italian novelist and short story writer, Italo Calvino (1923-1985), is a complex, rich, and multi-faceted author, thoroughly engaged in the European intellectual dialogue of his time. Calvino’s works, especially his novels and short stories of the 70’s and 80’s, are an integral part of the postmodern literary landscape, with their playfulness, allusions, recycling of styles, quoting, framing, and especially their interest in corporeal and sensory issues that lately seem to be one of the focuses of postmodern literature.

In his early narratives, Calvino is fascinated with the French Enlightenment. This fascination is best expressed in his famous 1960 trilogy Our Ancestors,¹ where the echoes of the Cartesian dualism of “body vs. mind” resonate, and the world appears rational, ordered, and knowable. In these three short novels, which bring to mind Voltaire’s contes philosophiques, one sees Calvino’s tendency to geometrize the world, to reduce reality to its essential forms, his fascination with the idea of discovering the geometric pattern underlying the world.

In his essays, articles, and lectures, Calvino explicitly declares his predilection for intellectual exercises, for combinatorial games, for abstract constructions, for geometric figures, and for order and perfection. The author’s lecture entitled “Exactitude,” published posthumously in 1988 in Six Memos for the Next Millennium, relates: “The
crystal, with its precise faceting and its ability to refract light, is the model of perfection that I have always cherished as an emblem…”\(^2\) Thus, the crystal is a response to disorder, to entropy, to chaos, to imperfection. But Calvino has to admit: this dream cannot be fulfilled. In fact, when facing all the problems of the contemporary world - widespread violence, unhinged morals, extinct ideologies, powerless science - he realizes that the rational certainties of the past are definitely questionable.

In Calvino’s narrative works, this new awareness of the complexity of the world finds its expression in a shift from the search for rational order underlying the phenomenal world to a meditation on the phenomena themselves, on our perception of reality, and on the senses as a means of cognition of ourselves, others, and the world. In Calvino’s late works (I refer especially to the short stories of *Mr. Palomar*\(^3\) of 1983 and *Under the Jaguar Sun*\(^4\) published posthumously in 1986), the meditation has its origin in sensory experience, mostly visual in the case of Mr. Palomar; olfactory, gustatory, and aural in the case of the protagonists of *Under the Jaguar Sun*. This special attention to the senses does not originate from Calvino’s natural predisposition (from an inner necessity emerging from a real experience). Actually, he writes in “The Written and the Unwritten World” from 1985, “my sense of smell is not very sharp, I lack really keen hearing, I am not a gourmet, my sense of touch is unrefined, and I am nearsighted. For each one of the five senses I have to make an effort that will allow me to have a control over a scale of sensations and nuances.”\(^5\) Calvino’s interest in the senses comes undoubtedly from an intellectual inspiration. His predilection for the French Enlightenment allows us to look for possible sources of such reflection in Condillac or in Diderot – in one word, in
Enlightenment theses on the sensory origin of human thinking and of all the faculties of the spirit. However, Calvino’s meditation on the senses seems rather to express a phenomenological approach, with obvious roots in Husserl or Merleau-Ponty. In the same article from 1985 Calvino says: “An important international trend in the culture of our century, what we might call a phenomenological approach in philosophy and an estrangement effect in literature, urges us to break through the screen of words and concepts, and see the world as if it appeared for the first time to our sight.” This is exactly the way Mr. Palomar contemplates and examines various aspects of his surrounding reality, trying to suspend all his mental habits and conceptual assumptions in order to look at things “from the outside.” One also finds, in the late Calvino, the philosophy of “one’s own body,” which is the focus of Merleau-Ponty’s thought, where the body is considered not as an intermediary between the subject and the world, but as a place where our direct experience of the world is accomplished. In the three short stories of *Under the Jaguar Sun*, the corporeal experience of the protagonists, stimulated by the olfactory, gustatory, and aural realms, undergoes a transformation from a simple perceptive situation into a meaningful cognitive moment.

Through this inquiry, I would like to show that perception in Calvino’s short stories is a synesthetic perception. It is well known that synesthesia can be found in metaphors of our everyday speech that are not simply idioms but have a reason in being. This is the case of expressions such as “warm color,” “sweet smell,” or “deep sound” where meanings are transferred from one sensory mode to another. Metaphors express synesthesia and cancel the plurality of our sensations due to the diversification of the
sensory organs. Most of these metaphors have lost their freshness of meaning. Nevertheless, they prove the extent to which our experiencing the world is based on interrelations between various sensory and perceptual processes. Already Merleau-Ponty says that the synesthetic perception is the rule. Also according to Mikel Dufrenne, every perception could be considered synesthetic because the identification of the object mobilizes many senses. Synesthetic metaphors are commonly used in poetry where, as opposed to “dead metaphors,” they are based on unusual analogies, generating a plurality of meanings and associations.

Literary synesthesia is a consciously adopted means of expression in Calvino’s *Under the Jaguar Sun*, consisting of three short stories, whose plots become a pretext for a meditation on perceptive and cognitive processes that are inherent to our interacting with the world.

The first short story, entitled *The Name, the Nose* and dedicated to smell, is constructed, one would say, with a technique of counterpoint, by interlacing three parallel stories: one set in Parisian high society of the nineteenth century, another one in the prehistoric era, and the last one in the world of the “rock” generation of the late 60’s. The three stories follow the same thematic pattern which can be summarized as a search, by the protagonist, of an unknown woman, disappearing after a chance encounter, who is finally found at the moment of her death. Attraction, eroticism, and death -- Eros and Thanatos-- these are the mythical forces underlying Calvino’s text, forces that are commonly associated with olfaction. The singularity of the three stories lies in the fact that the
search is carried out through the sense of smell: what remains of the mysterious woman is
her scent, of which only a vanishing trace is preserved in the olfactive memory, and it is a
question of tracing this perfume in order to find the woman. In this short story, the
olfactory perception is always a synesthetic one, which is reflected in Calvino’s
metaphors: “But the phials, the ampoules, the jars with their spire-like or cut-glass
stoppers will weave in vain from shelf to shelf their network of harmonies, assonances,
dissonances, counterpoints, modulations, cadenzas: our deaf nostrils will no longer catch
the notes of their scale.” In these “musical” metaphors, especially “our deaf nostrils,”
the olfactory and aural modes interact. Calvino is aware of the fact that synesthetic
perception is inseparable from the mental processes of remembering and imagining. The
sensory datum is completed and transformed into a synesthetic experience only through
memory and imagination. The following example involves all the senses: “For each
woman a perfume exists which enhances the perfume of her own skin, the note in the
scale which is at once color and flavor and aroma and tenderness…” (76). Thus, through
imagination a perfume has the power of affecting all the other senses. The realm of
imagination is stimulated by a synesthetic sensation also in the following passage:
“…there beneath me I’m surely smelling a girl’s white skin, a white smell with that
special force white has, a slightly mottled skin smell probably dotted with faint or even
invisible freckles, a skin that breathes the way a leaf’s pores breathe the meadows…”
(75). Metaphors, where the meanings are transferred from the visual or tactile modes to
the olfactory, such as “a white smell” or “a slightly mottled skin smell,” reveal again how
synesthesia participates in creating the image of the unknown woman.
Imagination is inseparable from memory. In order to find the mysterious woman whose face he has never seen, each of the protagonists has to compare his olfactory recollection with the scale of all other smells/perfumes. The search in the Parisian story takes place in a perfumery where, helped by Madame Odile, the protagonist tries to “…give a name to an olfactory sensation I could neither forget nor hold in my memory without its slowly fading. I had to expect as much: even the perfumes of memory evaporate: each new scent I was made to sniff, as it imposed its diversity, its own powerful presence, made still vaguer the recollection of that absent perfume, reduced it to a shadow” (71). The olfactory sensation stimulated by the presence of the object is confronted here with the olfactory memory that is activated in the absence of the object. Again, the metaphors used by Calvino are based on synesthesia: he attributes visual qualities to the olfactory sensation, with the perfume “reduced to a shadow,” “slowly fading,” or “evaporating.”

Calvino devotes his second short story, entitled Under the Jaguar Sun, to taste. Here he plays on the ambivalence inherent in the gustatory sensation, considered as a point of intersection between pleasure and knowledge, between oral and intellectual. The journey of a married couple in Mexico becomes a gustatory-visual experience for them, even more gustatory than visual. To know a foreign country means to digest it symbolically: “…the true journey, as the introjection of an ‘outside’ different from our normal one, implies a complete change of nutrition, a digesting of the visited country – its fauna and flora and its culture…- making it pass between the lips and down the esophagus” (12). The exploration of Mexican food becomes for both of them a cognitive experience where, except for learning about Mexican history and culture, they touch the very nature of their
relationship. Through a gustatory experience we become aware of ourselves and, most importantly, it can become a modality of communicating with the “other,” of a union between two subjects. This is precisely the case of the two protagonists: the complicity in exploring the food, the papillary eroticism, becomes a means of cognition that replaces words and even sexual union: “...the desire her whole person expressed was that of communicating to me what she was tasting: communicating with me through flavors, or communicating with flavors through a double set of taste buds, hers and mine...” (9).

Even ecstasy, a mystical experience leading to cognition, is reached in the story through experimenting with flavors, through the processes of ingestion and digestion. It illustrates again the connection between pleasure and cognition inherent in the gustatory sensation: “Just as colonial baroque set no limits on the profusion of ornament and display, in which God’s presence was identified in a closely calculated delirium of brimming, excessive sensations, so the curing of the hundred or more native varieties of hot peppers carefully selected for each dish opened vistas of a flaming ecstasy” (7).

In the third short story, A King Listens, the protagonist, a king confined in the throne room, undergoes a transformation initiated by testing his own corporality and by experimenting with his own aural sensitivity. As the king gradually learns how to listen, he evolves from a state in which he cannot decide about his own identity and that of the world to a state where, by defining himself, he also finds a way to recognize the “other.” Listening to the noises of his palace, trying to identify their nature, their sequences, and their rhythms, the king hopes to mentally reconstruct his palace and to gain control over his kingdom. Listening is connected with temporality: “The palace is a clock: its
ciphered sounds follow the course of the sun…” (37), says the king. In the same way, it is connected with spatiality. Actually, the appropriation of space is not only visual but in large part aural: “…all the acoustical routes converge on the throne room. Into the great lake of silence where you are floating rivers of air empty, stirred by intermittent vibrations” (38). In synesthetic metaphors, such as “ciphered sounds” or “lake of silence,” aural sensation interacts with the visual one. The act of listening leads the king to interpret the sounds of the palace and initiates his excruciating search for meaning. It is for him not only a way to take possession of his realm but also to know himself and, most importantly, to reach his truly human dimension by communicating with the “other”:

“Concentrate: you must catch the woman’s voice calling you and your voice calling her, together, in the same intention of listening (or would you call it the vision of your ear?)” (56). Listening is metaphorically called here “vision of your ear,” and again this metaphor is based on synesthesia connecting two different sensory modes, hearing and vision.

In Calvino’s last short stories, the desire of his various characters to reach the direct cognitive grasp of reality only through the mediation of the senses is never fulfilled completely. Each time, interposed between the subject and the world, what appears as a diaphragm, is the name which seems indispensable for capturing the essence of things in their articulated form. In the short story The Cheese Museum, Mr. Palomar is shopping for cheese. His attempt to establish a relationship of complicity between himself and the cheeses, in order to make his choices, is disturbed by the names of the cheeses: “…he would be content to establish the simplicity of a direct physical relationship between man
and cheese. But since in place of the cheeses he sees names of cheeses, concepts of cheeses, meanings of cheeses, histories of cheeses, contexts of cheeses, psychologies of cheeses […], then his relationship becomes very complicated.” In the case of the protagonists of Under the Jaguar Sun, the desire for an immediate sensory cognition is not fulfilled either. The problem of naming appears in the short story The Name, the Nose, for finding the mysterious woman means “…to give a name to an olfactory sensation…”. The gustatory experience that becomes the means of communication between the married couple in the “Mexican” story is mostly stimulated by the “baroque” names of Mexican dishes: “But I realized that in a relationship that should have been among three terms – me, meatball, Olivia – a fourth term had intruded, assuming a dominant role: the name of the meatballs. It was the name ‘gorditas pellizcadas con manteca’ that I was especially savoring and assimilating and possessing.” Thus, the sensory experience each time interferes with a mental operation, in this case with the process of naming.

The search for meaning in Calvino’s short stories originates from a synesthetic perception, considered as one of many operations of the brain and not as a mere stimulus. The effort of the protagonists in Calvino’s stories to identify a perfume, a sound, or the ingredients of a dish and to understand their meaning each time involves memory - olfactory, gustatory, or aural - and imagination, both mental processes which participate inevitably in a sensory experience. In one of his essays, La luce negli occhi, a discussion about vision leads Calvino to say: “The brain starts in the eye.” We could extend this statement to all the senses and say that our brain starts in our sensory organs.
In Calvino’s last short stories the interdependence of the two dimensions – the sensory and the intellectual – clearly emerges. Even if sensory perception is considered a cognitive guide through the phenomenal world, the geometry of the mind inexorably reappears.

Hanna Albertson
University of Mississippi
Department of Modern Languages
University, MS 38677
USA
E-mail: hfalbert@olemiss.edu


13 Calvino, *Mr. Palomar*, 73.


15 Ibid., 27.