

Hermit in Paris: Autobiographical Writings

By Italo Calvino

Translated from the Italian by Martin McLaughlin

(selected, with a preface by Ester Calvino)

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Reviewed by Paul Devlin

Hermit in Paris is a series of autobiographical sketches, essays, questionnaires, letters, interviews, and diary entries by the Italian novelist Italo Calvino, selected by his widow, Esther Calvino. Calvino (1923-1985) is one of the finest (among my three favorite) novelists of the second half of the twentieth century. Perhaps best known for his more "heavier philosophical" novels such as *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* and *Invisible Cities* (which is hard to really call a novel, brilliant as it is; he also notes that it is his most popular book in America although "furthest from American reading habits"), he is also the author of (perhaps underrated) "lighter philosophical", more comic works, such as the completely spellbinding, enchanting book *The Baron in the Trees* (which is one of the most enjoyable reading experiences I've ever had), the hilarious collections of short stories about a primordial being QFWFQ in *Cosmicomics* and *T Zero*, and the novella about the adventures of an empty suit of armor, *The Non-Existent Knight*. Calvino also wrote many short stories, published in English in the collections *Difficult Loves* and *Numbers in the Dark*. In addition to these are the well-regarded novels *Mr. Palomar*, *The Cloven Viscount*, and his very first novel (written in six weeks and published at age 23) *The Path to the Spider's Nest*, which holds up better than one might imagine given the circumstances of its writing. He also edited *Italian Folktales*, a scholarly collection of old tales he pieced together. Calvino was also a fine, no, masterful and original non-fiction writer, and his exposition of his literary aesthetics, *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*, I find to be indispensable for thinking about his own work, but also perhaps the most rigorous and at the same time poetic defense of literature in general I've ever seen (*Six Memos* were to be the 1985 Norton Lectures at Harvard, but he died suddenly and tragically at age 62 before delivering them). In addition to *Six Memos*, his profound, funny, and lucid essays, prefaces, and book reviews are available in English from both Harcourt (*The Uses of Literature*) and Vintage (*Why Read the Classics?*). The centerpiece of both highly readable and useful (and similar enough that I don't feel the need to own both of them) books is the title of the former, *Why Read the Classics?* which is an intelligent, sober, and balanced defense of the canon and at the same time a humorous meditation on what a classic is and who reads them and when and why and why he does and why you should. In fact, the combination of balance, serenity, and most light and refreshing senses of humor is what may make Calvino so unique and enjoyable.

All these characteristics are on display in *Hermit and Paris*, and yet *Hermit in Paris* is almost completely inferior to all the works mentioned in that last paragraph. Mark Van Doren once said that letters of Walt Whitman were "of little or no literary interest". This is certainly *not* the case with *Hermit in Paris*, yet this potpourri of sketches and whatnot not of "extreme" literary interest either, like the letters of, say, Keats or Wallace Stevens or Marianne Moore. Some of these pieces were previously published and some were not. Some are more useful than others, although I wouldn't call any "useless". Still, if I wasn't already a big reader of Calvino, I'm not sure I'd find much of the book intrinsically interesting. Although there is one part that is of overwhelming intrinsic interest, and quite frankly, worth buying or borrowing the book for, and that is his *American Diary 1959-1960*, which runs from pages 16-121.

In 1959-60 Calvino toured the United States on a grant from the Ford Foundation. His *Diary* is a series of letters to his friend Daniele Ponchiroli (for him to read and share with other friends and co-workers) at the Einaudi publishing house in Turin. (Calvino worked in the *publicity* department at Einaudi for many years. I knew he worked there before reading this book, but I'd always assumed it was in the editorial department.) Calvino thought of this trip to America as very important in his life, and even wrote a book about it; *An Optimist in America*, which he decided not to publish when it was in the second proof stages (this information is in the preface by Esther Calvino). Calvino's trip to America begins in New York, where he's checking out the literary and art worlds, going to cocktail parties, seeing the sights, being annoyed by the beatniks, and having meetings with his publishers. (He's already an established writer by this time with

several of his books translated into English. He has all sorts of connections and is meeting everybody: writers, scientists, diplomats, etc.) He's checking out all sorts of places and constantly relating them back to Turin. He visits the New York Stock Exchange and Merrill Lynch and is amazed by the power of the computers, carefully taking down all sorts of facts about their speed. All of this (not just his trip to Wall Street and almost his entire trip to America) is keen reportage and without any self-righteousness about the evils of capitalism of any such thing.

Calvino was a member of the Italian Communist Party in his youth, which of course, in Italy, meant being anti-Mussolini, but he left it in 1956-57 because "it did not de-Stalinize fast enough". This is explained in *Hermit in Paris* in the later essay *Was I a Stalinist Too?*, which is a very serious, even moving piece. But just as politics don't explicitly color his novels (except perhaps *The Path to the Spider's Nest*), it doesn't weigh down his letters to Ponchirolì. (Actually, I never would have guessed before reading this book that Calvino, who fought in the anti-Fascist resistance during World War II maintained such close connection to the Communist Party after the war.)

American Diary is broken up into sections, few longer than a page or two, with headings such as "How Random House Work", "Wall Street", "The UNO" (United Nations), "The Actors' Studio", "Electronic Brains", "TV Dinners", "At the Israeli Temple", "The Longshoremen's Union", "Memoirs of a Motorist", "Laughing at Death" (after visiting a comedy club in Harlem), and "The Girls' College" (relating a full day's visit to Sarah Lawrence where an extremely unlikely and very funny coincidence happens). These headings are tremendously useful. (It's unclear whether the letters were originally written with the headings or added later on or something.)

Calvino eventually leaves New York (which he calls elsewhere in the book "the prototype of a city" and although he only lived there for a few months, "my city") and visits the Midwest, California, the South West, and the South. It's all as good as his reports on New York; funny, informative, and interesting. On March 6th, 1960, he arrives in Montgomery, Alabama. He finds himself right in the middle of the exploding civil rights tension. (At five pages, this is probably the longest letter in *American Diary*.) To Calvino's credit, his common sense and sharp, insightful analysis of human nature and character on display in his novels do not fly out the window when discussing race in America, as I feared might happen when I got to this section, because as a Marxist-oriented European, Calvino was not in the most perceptive company when regarding these issues. However, his analysis of the situation is intelligent, and generally cliché free, although I did cringe a few times. Then again, these were private letters never intended for publication, so perhaps he's simplifying things for his audience. He writes: "These black leaders – I've approached several of them in the past few days, of different tendencies – are lucid, decisive people, totally devoid of black self pity...". But is he surprised by this? It's hard to tell. And what is this "black self pity" stuff? Why not just plain old "self pity"? What's the difference between "black self pity" and "Neopolitan self pity" or "Sicilian self pity"? Self pity is what it is, but it's good that Calvino recognized that the civil rights leaders he met were free of it.

Some other pieces in *Hermit in Paris* (Paris, by the way, is where he settled in the late 1960's, is where he married and raised his daughter) I've found more or less interesting than others. The title piece, *Hermit in Paris*, is great. When in Paris he "never leaves this study". Paris for him was at first the city of *The Three Musketeers*, and then of *Les Misérables*, and then of the French Revolution, of Balzac and Zola, and then, of his own family life and endless complexities. He relates this beautifully.

I wasn't terribly interested in the overtly political writings (*Summer of '56*, *The Duce's Portrait*, *Political Autobiography of a Young Man*). They struck me as somewhat stale and dated, and of little relationship to his novels and later non-fiction. On the other hand, I found the piece *Behind the Success* to be of great documentary interest. Here he gives a history of his unlikely career as a creative writer. I say unlikely because in many of the autobiographical questionnaires included in this book, he mentions that his parents were both scientists (his father being an eminent, world-class botanist; his mother also a successful botanist), his uncles were scientists, and his brother became a professor of geology. He was educated from birth to be a scientist, and yet somehow caught the bug of literature and excelled like few others have done. Science writing, is of course, in a sense, imaginative literature in its own way, so perhaps it is not surprising

that one of the most wild and fertile imaginations in all of literature grew up on a steady diet of books on science. But he never rejected science per se, and continued to read deeply in it throughout his life, and his scientific knowledge is certainly on display in his novels (perhaps most obviously in *Cosmicomics*).

Hermit in Paris is, for me, as a fan and serious reader of Calvino's work, essential and indispensable. For someone who doesn't know his work or has only read *Invisible Cities* or *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, I'm not sure how interesting the whole book will be. (Then again, who knows.) (But his *American Diary* should be interesting for anyone.) Not only does *Hermit in Paris* present us with a complicated and well-rounded portrait of Calvino, it also gives us these interesting bits of trivia: he once went fishing with Ernest Hemingway on a lake near Stresa in Italy in 1948; if he could be any character in literature he'd be Mercutio; and he considered (or considered at one time) Kafka's *Amerika* to be the greatest novel of the 20th century! Calvino rarely ceases to amaze, delight, and surprise us.