An Induced Reflection
The Narrative Ending in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) and Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (1972)

*Gulliver’s Travels* and *Invisible Cities* are both works written in the form of a travel diary. The authors of these diaries, namely Lemuel Gulliver and Marco Polo respectively, undertake a journey to the unknown and the unseen, and describe the fantastic places they have been to. It is therefore possible to read both these books simply as fictional adventures, but a more complex meaning can be found interweaved between the pages. As a matter of fact, the narrative ending of these two literary works, when read in comparison, can provide another interpretation of their mutual significance. Through an analysis of some passages of the narrative ending, multiple aspects of both books emerge, especially the dislike of human society by Gulliver and Polo, their resistance towards the end of the narration, and the didactic message of their fantastic journeys conveyed to the reader. Therefore, the analysis of the narrative ending is important because it provides a more profound gateway towards the meaning of the books and in a way induces the reader to have a deeper reflection upon what s/he has just read.

As *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Invisible Cities* come to an end, the dislike the two main characters experience towards humanity at the end of their voyages is portrayed and it may be that Calvino is alluding to Swift’s novel and paying homage to him. Concerning the former, this aversion finds its explanation in the way Gulliver readjusts to human society after his stay in the land of the reasonable and peaceful Houyhnhnms, whereas in Calvino’s
work it is clearly represented by Polo’s last words. First of all, an important aspect to note in these regards is how Gulliver goes back home from the land of the Houyhnhnms; he in fact acknowledges that “[He] was a poor Yahoo” and thus “[had been] banished from the Houyhnhnms” (262). The character is forced to leave Houyhnhnmsland and therefore, since it was a choice imposed on him, this aspect underlines his consequent reluctance to adapt to the human world again. Once home to his wife and family, Gulliver in fact says that “the sight of them filled [him] only with Hatred, Disgust and Contempt” (265); the choice of these three adjectives, which convey the same negative meaning, is a way of emphasizing his feelings of animosity even more. The world he suddenly finds himself in, after having lived among the superior race of the Houyhnhnms, does not mirror the new noble ideals he has acquired. In Invisible Cities, Marco Polo states that “Elsewhere is a negative mirror. The traveler recognizes the little that is his, discovering the much he has not had and will never have” (29). In the same way, for Gulliver, Houyhnhnmsland represents the contrary of his own society. There, he discovered what he did not have before the encounter with the Houyhnhnms, what he does not have after having met them, and what he will not have now that he is back to a reasonless, conflictual and passionate society.

Moreover, Gulliver’s scorn of humans/Yahoos is explained by Williams who states that:

Gulliver, once a normal affectionate being, […] is now a solitary misanthrope […]. He has become inhuman, losing the specifically human virtues in his attempt to achieve something for which humanity is not fitted. (283)

Humans in fact were not created passionless, as passions are specific characteristics intrinsic in the human nature. Therefore, Gulliver’s ‘inhumanity’ can be perceived from the fact that he seems not to have feelings anymore as “[He] could not endure [his] Wife or Children in [his] Presence, the very Smell of them was intolerable; much less could [he] suffer them to
eat in the same Room” (Swift, 266) and since he has to “habituate [him]self by time to
tolerate the sight of a human Creature” (270). The use of the words “intolerable” and
“tolerate” further conveys the idea that he cannot stand the presence of a human being. In
fact, the only creatures Gulliver can bear are his horses, with which “[he] converses […] at
least four Hours every Day” (266). This fact seems to mirror Polo’s final words in Invisible
Cities, as the character states that:

“The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is
already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together.
There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno
and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and
demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and
what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them
space.”2

(165)

Gulliver’s horses are thus a sort of relief from this feeling of hatred he nurtures towards the
humans; they are the things which enable him to forget about the “inferno”. Moreover, in
these final sentences, like Gulliver, Marco Polo too realizes that the “inferno” is present and
formed by humans, which, relating it to Gulliver’s Travels, are none other than Yahoos. So
it does not come as a surprise when Calvino, in listing all the cities “that menace in
nightmares and maledictions”, names “Yahooland” (164). Having read Swift’s work, this
is none other than a metaphor to depict human society as an infernal place. Hence, even
though in different ways, both books (one by being more clear and direct, the other one by
being subtler) portray the author’s general dislike of human society.

Another aspect that is found in the narrative ending of Gulliver’s Travels and
Invisible Cities is that both resist the convention of narrative closure. Concerning the first
one, Gulliver’s character resists the ending of the story by telling the readers his
observations upon the Houyhnhnms, saying that “[He] dwell[s] the longer upon this Subject
from the Desire [he] ha[s] to make the Society of an English Yahoo by any means not insupportable” (271). The narration of the book is now in the present, and although Gulliver’s adventures are over, he keeps on holding on to the past; he wants to “dwell the longer” on the subject of Houyhnhnms because he cannot stand humans/Yahoos. The fact that he hates them and that he is condemned to live with them, makes him want to escape, and a way to do so is to keep recalling past adventures and hold on to memories. Similarly to Gulliver, there are some passages that indicate that Marco Polo’s journeys are also a way of escaping reality and resisting the “inferno” that comes with it. In this regard, the Kahn, when talking to Polo asks “Journeys to relieve your past? […] Journeys to recover your future?” (Calvino, 29) and later on affirms “…So then, yours is truly a journey through memory!” (98). The cities which Calvino describes were discovered in the past, but are brought to life again when presented to the Kahn. So, every time Polo recounts his adventures, he resists the ending and consequently the “inferno” too. Moreover, the way in which Invisible Cities is written, gives the possibility to the reader to add more descriptions of cities. In fact, since the order in which the cities are depicted is not set in a chronological sequence, it allows to add infinite new places to the narration, considering that there would not be a rupture in the progression of the story. An aspect that can confirm this, are Marco Polo’s words when he encourages the Kahn to keep looking for cities:

“If I tell you that the city toward which my journey tends is discontinuous in space and time, now scattered, now more condensed, you must not believe the search for it can stop. Perhaps while we speak, it is rising, scattered, within the confines of your empire, you can hunt for it, but only in the way I have said” (164)

From this passage it is thus possible to acknowledge that it is the teller of these cities himself who wants his journey to be continued and expanded. Therefore, both endings of both books invite sequels, rewrites and create the opportunity for whoever reads Gulliver’s and Polo’s
adventures to continue their journey and inform the public about unknown and fantastic places.

The last aspect conveyed by the narrative ending of the two texts is that both do not want only to amuse and entertain the reader, but to teach him/her something. In fact, in the last chapter of *Gulliver’s Travels* there is written: “*The Author takes his last leave of the Reader: proposeth his Manner of Living for the future, gives good Advice, and concludes*” (266). From this quote it is possible to understand that Gulliver wants us to reflect upon ourselves and wants us to realize that we should be less like the Yahoos and more like the Houyhnhnms. Like in the rest of Voyage IV, in the last page of the book Gulliver is despising the Yahoos; the reader further acknowledges that the Yahoos he disinances the most are those “smitten with Pride” (271). This conclusive note, underlining Gulliver’s disgust towards the majority of all human beings, forces the reader to think about his/her own vices. Since “[He] write[s] for the noblest End, to inform and instruct Mankind” (268) and since “[his] sole Intention was the PUBLIC GOOD” (267), the book should thus be read as a teaching lesson. With regard to *Invisible Cities*, Marco Polo does not make any clear statement like Gulliver does, but from the description of certain cities, it is clear that he wants the book to convey a moral too. Even though, as the Kahn says, “[Polo’s] cities do not exist. Perhaps they have never existed. It is sure they will never exist again.” (59) they nevertheless contain “splinters of modern urban life [which] are everywhere to be found” (Tal-Socher, 342). So, for example, when Polo describes the fantastic city of Leonia,

[A city that] refashions itself every day: every morning the people wake between fresh sheets, wash with just-unwrapped cakes of soap, wear brand-new clothing, take from the latest model refrigerator still unopened tins, listening to the last-minute jingles from the most up-to-date radio. On the sidewalks, encased in spotless plastic bags, the remains of yesterday's Leonia await the garbage truck. Not only squeezed tubes of toothpaste, blown-out light bulbs, newspapers, containers, wrappings, but also boilers, encyclopedias, pianos, porcelain dinner services. It is not so much by
the things that each day are manufactured, sold, bought, that you can measure Leonia's opulence, but rather by the things that each day are thrown out to make room for the new.\(^7\) (114)

Calvino is making a critique of consumerism, and sarcastic descriptions of cities of this kind are scattered throughout the whole book. In doing so, the ‘naïve’ depiction of some cities is in reality a way to point out some negative aspects that characterize humankind, as *Gulliver’s Travels* does too with every community the protagonist encounters. The reader is thus lightly and implicitly driven to reflect upon these problems and consequently could receive the book as a teaching.

To conclude, reading the narrative ending of *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Invisible Cities* together (or comparatively) opens the possibility for new and more profound interpretations of the books that shed light on each other/in a mutually illuminating way. They both end on a bittersweet note, announcing that their end is just the beginning for us readers to embark on a new journey of adventure and learning. They therefore can be read multiple times, and the purpose of the books can change every time, depending on the attitude of the reader towards them. These literary works can be seen solely as fantastic and amusing journeys towards the unknown, or properly as critiques or relevant teachings, but none of these provides a correct and absolute way on how one should interpret them. As Marco Polo very rightly says “*It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear*” (135), therefore, the meaning of both books is entirely in the hands of the reader.


Quotes from the original text in Italian, *Le città invisibili*. Torino: Einaudi, 1973:

1 “L’altrove è uno specchio in negativo. il viaggiatore riconosce il poco che è suo, scoprendo il molto che non ha avuto e non avrà.” (35)

2 “L’inferno dei viventi non è qualcosa che sarà; se ce n’è uno, è quello che è già qui, l’inferno che abitiamo tutti i giorni, che formiamo stando insieme. Due modi ci sono per non soffrirne. Il primo riesce facile a molti: accettare l’inferno e diventarne parte fino al punto di non vederlo più. Il secondo è rischioso ed esige attenzione e apprendimento continu: cercare e saper riconoscere chi e cosa, in mezzo all’inferno, non è inferno, e farlo durare, e dargli spazio.” (170)

3 “Viagg per rivivere il tuo passato? […] Viagg per ritrovare il tuo futuro?” (35)

4 “… Dunque è davvero un viaggio nella memoria, il tuo!” (105)

5 “Se ti dico che la città cui tende il mio viaggio è discontinua nello spazio e nel tempo, ora più rada, ora più densa, tu non devi credere che si possa smettere di cercarla. Forse mentre noi parliamo sta affiorando sparsa entro i confini del tuo impero; puoi rintracciarla, ma a quel modo che t’ho detto.” (169)

6 “Le tue città non esistono. Forse non sono mai esistite. Per certo non esisteranno più.” (69)

7 La città di Leonia rifà se stessa tutti i giorni: ogni mattina la popolazione si risveglia tra lenzuola fresche, si lava con saponette appena sgusciate dall'involvero, indossa vestaglie nuove fiammanti, estrae dal più perfezionato frigorifero barattoli di latta ancora intonsi, ascoltando le ultime filastrocche che dall'ultimo modello d'apparecchio. Sui marciapiedi, avviluppati in tersi sacchi di plastica, i resti di Leonia d'ieri aspettano il carro dello spazzaturaio. Non solo i tubi di dentifricio schiacciati, lampadine fulminate, giornali, contenitori, materiali d'imballaggio, ma anche scaldabagni, enciclopedie, pianoforti, servizi di porcellana: più che dalle cose di ogni giorno vengono fabbricate vendute comprate, l'opulenza di Leonia si misura dalle cose che ogni giorno vengono buttate via per far posto alle nuove. (119)
First of all, an important aspect to note in these regards is how Gulliver goes back home from the land of the Houyhnhnms; he in fact acknowledges that "[He] was a poor Yahoo" and thus "[had been] banished from the Houyhnhnms" (262). The character is forced to leave Houyhnhnmsland and therefore, since it was a choice imposed on him, this aspect underlines his consequent reluctance to adapt to the human world again. Reflection is a phenomenon that has been observed in ventricular tissue in which an impulse reaches an abnormal area and induces another impulse that returns in the direction from which the first impulse came (â€œreflected impulse) [1]. Reflection, also named â€œreflected reentry, is a special type of reentrant circuit in a one-dimensional structure. Â Reflection and ectopic activity induced by early afterdepolarizations. A computer modeling study. The results show that an induced narrow peak can be generated in the original broad reflection dip, which is attributed to the coupling and interference between the Tamm plasmon and defect modes in the grating structure. Â Additionally, the induced reflection can be dynamically tuned by adjusting the angle of incident light. The numerical simulations agree extremely well with theoretical calculations. The coupling strength between the Tamm plasmon and defect modes is determined by the above parameters.