

This is the basic summary of what we concluded together about the first few sections of Calvino's *Cybernetics & Ghosts*. Since we didn't really manage to get to the last two sections directly (although we did address some of the ideas indirectly), I have taken the liberty of filling in some key words and quotes from those sections as a supplement.

## I)

- A) Combination. Poverty of ideas in primitive culture as compared to a developed nation in the information age. Contraries.
- B) Serving as a fish tank filter, the storyteller of the tribe refreshes the linguistic dwelling by introducing combinations of an unforeseen sort, drawing on this vast potential body for the substance of new structures.
- C) Practices of the structuralists/Tel Quel are modern equivalents of this primitive practice in a more complex linguistic universe(?).

*"Every animal, every object, every relationship, took on beneficial or malign powers that came to be called magical powers but should, rather, have been called narrative powers, potentialities contained in the word, in its ability to link itself to other words on the plane of discourse."* -p5

*"The true literature machine will be the one that itself feels the need to produce disorder, as a reaction against its preceding production of order: a machine that will produce avant-garde work to free its circuits when they are choked by too long a production of classicism."* -p13

## II)

- A) "Infinity" closes the system too conveniently. Faith in the unconscious, God, the beyond, to dispense artistic "inspiration" is a misunderstood and long overused concept. The "itineraries" of the indeterminate piece have not all been plotted by the author ahead of time, because the author has used a means of text generation that yields a product of unexamined potential. That potential is only realized when the text is read, at which point meaning, or the psychological content of the reader (ghosts), becomes invested or projected into the text through the process of interpretation. The degree of unfamiliarity of its structure is the measure of investment required of the reader. Hence the primacy of the reader in the literary event (this is what we decided, right?).
- B) The "mechanical" nature of the author is two sided. While too long a production of classicism portrays authors as mechanical slaves to form and repetition, one alternative (One of Calvino's proposed alternatives?) would be to literally turn over (one of) the authors role(s) literally to a machine, so that her attention might be redirected to aspects of literary experience other than combination.

*“Once we have dismantled and reassembled the process of literary composition, the decisive moment of literary life will be that of reading. In this sense, even though entrusted to machines, literature will continue to be a “place” of privilege within the human consciousness, a way of exercising the potentialities contained in the system of signs belonging to all societies at all times... What will vanish is the figure of the author... that anachronistic personage... --that spoilt child of ignorance—to give place to a more thoughtful person, a person who will know that the author is a machine, and will know how this machine works.”*

### III)

- A)** How does one talk about introducing indeterminacy without talking of some element of chance? Queneau says that the random elimination of constraints is no way to produce a novel piece of writing. I ask, what about the random application of constraints? His declaration that “The Oulipo is anti-chance” (*Oulipo...* p17) seems to be a little extreme, but I really don’t know (insert Steven’s answer here: perhaps this is better understood in the context of Oulipo’s break from and distaste for Surrealism. Where the surrealists exalted chance, the aleatory and oneiric—particularly the automatic, the Oulipo is strict. The “random elimination of constraints” is partly a reference to Surrealist automatic writing, trance-state stuff, etc. The Oulipan claim is that automatic writing is simply constrained by something the writer is unaware of. By contrast, the Oulipo is interested in workmanship, on the one hand, and the sort of crystalline determinacy of the constraint itself: the system, the pattern, the abstraction. So: Calvino is managing the same ethos, to some degree, with different terms. It’s his interest in computation that seals it. For Calvino, all the possibilities latent in the system are already present by virtue of their computability. Our response to the wealth of possibility cannot be to simply shut our eyes and see what comes but to work toward the unknown with precision, rigor... with constraint. We may not know where we are going, but we are not getting there by chance).

*“The unconscious is the ocean of the unsayable, of what has been expelled from the land of language, removed as a result of ancient prohibitions. The unconscious speaks—in dreams, verbal slips, in sudden associations—with borrowed words, stolen symbols, linguistic contraband, until literature redeems these territories and annexes them to the language of the waking world.*

*The power of modern literature lies in its willingness to give a voice to what has remained unexpressed in the social or individual unconscious...”—p19*

### IV)

- B)** Mingling of Cybernetics (advanced combination) and Ghosts (psychic content projection) brings about new literary events. The newness and resultant difficulty of the object resultant from combination determines the degree to which the reader invests/charges the text with “meaning.”

*“At a certain moment things click in to place, and one of the combinations obtained—through combinatorial mechanism itself, independently of any search for meaning or effect on any level—becomes charged with an unexpected meaning or unforeseen effect which the conscious mind would not have arrived at deliberately... a meaning that is not patent on the linguistic plane on which we were working but has slipped in from another level,*

*activating something that on that second level is of great concern to the author or his society.” -p23*

## V)

### A)

Fables accumulate, disappear, or stick around long enough depending on how well they suit the projection of their listeners. Ones that outlast all the others solidify into myth.

### B)

The function of literature varies according the societal demands in which it is grown. How then does Calvino’s essay comment on the state of society? You answered: “Society (like the fish bowl) is stagnant!”

*“For long periods of time literature appears to work in favor of consecration, the confirmation of values, the acceptance of authority. But at a certain moment, something in the mechanism is triggered, and literature gives birth to a movement in the opposite direction, refusing to see things and say things the way they have been seen and said until now.” -p24*

*“Written literature is born already laden with the task of consecration, of supporting the established order of things. This is a load that it discards extremely slowly, in the course of millennia, becoming in the process a private thing, enabling poets and writers to express their own personal troubles and raise them to the level of consciousness. Literature gets to this point, I would add, by means of combinatorial games that at a certain moment become charged with preconscious subject matter, and at last find a voice for these.” -p24*

## VI)

### A)

Main characteristic of “labyrinthine” literature: you don’t know the way out. The pattern by which it was constructed is one that is unfamiliar to you. The points of confusion are the dynamic nodes where meaning is created. Language is the substance of all our labyrinths. If we must live in prison, let it be the ultimate (inescapable) prison!

*“The game can work as a challenge to understand the world or as a dissuasion from understanding it. Literature can work in a critical vein or to confirm things as they are and as we know them to be. The boundary is not always clearly marked, and I would say that on this score the spirit in which one reads is decisive: it is up to the reader to see to it that literature exerts its critical force, and this can occur independently of the author’s control.” -p26*