The Hero’s Quest in Calvino

In Italo Calvino’s *Il castello dei destini incrociati* we confront a grimly amusing caricature of the traditional theme of the hero’s quest. This satirical portrayal opposes the traditional hero’s journey and its elevating spiritual message against the quandary of modern man’s own more dubious life quest with its ambiguous options and intimations of despair. Often the novel feigns a religious attitude, considering teleological as well as philosophical issues. With false piety individual *novelle* explore sin and damnation along with the fundamental metaphysical question of a prime mover “... il principio ... che si muove nell’universo. . . .”¹ That the novel’s journey might even prove a redemptive mission, in the manner of Dante’s voyage to inferno, is also deceptively inferred. Yet, no sooner has this conventional denouement with its positive message been put forth than doubts quickly surface. These doubts invariably center on the question of modern man’s authenticity as a hero and on his capacity to master a universe which he himself perceives as illusory or “senza forma” (p. 97). Such subversive thoughts finally serve to dispel once and for all the initial fiction of the conventional quest of the hero in *Castello*, rudely reversing the traditional story’s confident image of man and of his certain dominance in the world.

The reassuring subterfuge that *Castello* will be no more than a repetition of the familiar hero’s journey begins even with the novel’s opening lines. Here the central narrator suggests a conventional message for the novel by immediately placing himself and the other characters within a forest: the traditional setting where many a familiar hero (including Dante) has heard the call to leave on the quest:

In mezzo a un fitto bosco, un castello dava rifugio a quanti la notte aveva sorpreso in viaggio: cavalieri e dame, cortei reali e semplici viandanti. (p. 3)

At once the forest setting above becomes a useful means to manipulate the reader. Not only does it add a mysterious aura to the

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novel, suitable and necessary to the mystique of the hero’s journey, but by so doing, it also provides the reader with a false clue as to how the novel should be read. Further enhancing the delusion of the familiar quest is the forest’s role as a cornice for all the rest of the stories in the novel (besides the central storyteller’s). Each subsequent tale, therefore, takes its point of departure from the forest, implying a deceptive sense of wholeness or “thesis,” as one critic would call it, to the entire grouping of stories.²

After the opening the narrator in a few expository pages quickly plants all the other necessary clues to the conventional journey, often casting himself ironically in the prophetic role of Dante poet in the Divina Commedia. Briefly he outlines what, besides the forest, will be the parallel circumstances of all the subsequent stories: the “symbolic defect” or original state of sin (in this case the muteness shared by all the novel’s characters)³, the viaggio itself conceived in the form of a tarot game, or destiny; the ritual tests or “prove” (p. 3) which such a journey entails; and finally leaving only the outcome of the individual tales suitably shrouded in mystery.

Yet another way in which the central narrator in Castello deceptively recalls Dante is in his dual role as both the novel’s central actor and only authentic spokesman. Like Dante, he experiences first hand the early trepidations which often accompany the hero’s departure from the forest, or place of sin, chaos, alienation. Like Dante in the opening canto of the Inferno, he senses the same vague confusion, suffers the same shortness of breath, and meets the traditional number of obstacles to his exodus:

Ero senza fiato; le gambe mi reggevano appena: da quando ero entrato nel bosco tali erano state le prove che mi erano occorse, gli incontri, le apparizioni, i duelli, che non riuscivo a ridare un ordine né ai movimenti né ai pensieri. (p. 3)

Furthermore, as the novel’s central narrator (truly the only story-teller since we have only him to interpret the event of the other stories) this moody philosopher and his cynical perspective necessarily influence the reader. At times in a parody of Dante, his view of others is intolerant, as though he self-righteously deemed the cruel punishments endured by them as appropriate. For example in the “Storia della sposa dannata,” he indulges his gothic tastes for description in the chilling story of the devil’s bride, sparing no detail of that villain’s grisly effect on the lady: her lovely face transformed from that of a tender “colomba in amore” into “una barriera di denti senza gengive né labbra” (p.
23). Finally he concludes the story by showing not pity for the lady, but a macabre pleasure in the appearance of the devil himself, his arrival constituting the lady’s just reward and a fitting contrapasso to her errors:

. . . . Belzebù in persona, che esclamando: — Hai finito, bella mia. . . . Per me non valgono due soldi . . . tutte le tue armi e armature . . . — se l’era portata giù dritto sottoterra. (p. 24)

On the other hand, when the narrator himself appears as an actor in the novel, like the modern dark comic hero of much contemporary literature, he shares the same bewilderment as his companions before the universal mysteries hidden in the emblematic tarot cards. Thus, many novelle close with thinly veiled metaphysical queries which the central story-teller either ascribes to the thoughts of the story’s protagonist or merely verbalizes himself. For example, the “Storia dell’alchimista che vendette l’anima” ends in a typical philosophical exchange between a water nymph and unknown interlocutor, touching on questions of Satan, the afterlife, and damnation:

— Hai paura che le nostre anime caschino nelle mani del Diavolo? — avrebbero chiesto. . . .
— No: che non abbiate anima da dargli. (p. 20)

In this and many similar instances the narrator then assumes the “Everyman” aura of Dante Wayfarer, and becomes a universal if cynically contemporary spectator as well as spokesman for all the other characters.

Our summary of the initial circumstances of Castello and the narrator’s role in them, by no means exhausts the ways in which the myth of the hero’s journey has been cleverly exploited in the novel, particularly on the Dantesque model. Like the traditional voyage, including Dante’s, each novella finally unfolds as an autobiography of the soul, a chronicle of man’s existence in terms of his final destiny, whether Calvino adapts the tale of a well-known hero like Oedipus or merely employs a simple character like the hapless ingrato punito in the story of the same title (p. 7). Some of the novelle, in fact, take the form of a miniature epic or underworld journey, such as the graphic descents depicted in “Storia dell’Orlando pazzo per amore,” and “Storia dell’indeciso” (pp. 29, 59). The hero’s journey from this standpoint in the novel thus feigns the positive social features of a rite de passage or a religious quest after God and salvation, in yet another resounding inversion of the Dantesque journey.
“Storia dell’indeciso” (p. 59) specifically calls to mind just such an archetypal drama, even postulating, if only ironically, what one author views to be the three fundamental steps of the familiar religious quest: the hero’s expiatory descent to the labyrinth, his turnabout, and his subsequent climb back to a new and better spiritual life. In this novella the protagonist actually makes just such a descent where he indeed confronts the devil. Next he is driven by seemingly demonic powers to the story’s crucial turning point. At last he makes a serio-comic return to earth only to find himself back in his original unresolved dilemma: his so-called rebirth via “il lancinante germogliare del bosco” has ironically done no more than restore him to his former sinful, ineffectual self, or worst yet, “un suo sosia” (p. 63).

The same sinister reversal described above dominates every story of Castello where the mirage of salvation, the hint of a positive denouement, suggested by the story’s traditional opening inevitably proves out of reach. No sooner has the stage been set in the forest and all the clues just outlined been firmly fixed for the conventional journey, than circumstances immediately begin to go awry. Therefore, even as the novel’s original thesis of the hero’s journey continues to be plotted outwardly at the beginning of each tale, the real spirit of the drama very soon perversely pulls away from its original uplifting message.

This subversion or “antithesis” of the original redeeming promise in Castello emerges most significantly perhaps in the muteness shared by the narrator and his fellow travelers. Similar to the forest backdrop described earlier, the universality of this motive suggests that it cannot be an idly interjected detail in the novel. In point of fact, we already know that at a purely technical level, the muteness of the characters is actually a timely pretext for the author’s semiotic experiments with cards as sign systems. Indeed, much critical consideration has been given to Calvino’s playful substitution of cards for language, all of which can quite readily be illustrated in the novel. For example, in one earlier story of Castello, “Storia dell’ingrato punito,” in the light of the protagonist’s muteness and in the absence presumably therefore of real words, the reader and narrator are frequently abandoned to the mercy of the tarot card emblems to interpolate many of the events in the story:

... la sua maestosa persona fece una così sfolgorante apparizione (il Sole) che il principe sfidato a duello (Cavaliere di Spade) se ne innamorò. Il banchetto (Coppe) di nozze fu celebrato nella reggia dei genitori dello sposo (Imperatrice e Re di Denari) ... (p. 48)
Although this passage and others have primarily been viewed as a testimony to the author’s semiotic games, the handicap of the silent travelers actually has other subversive functions in *Castello* which are far more essential to the novel’s theme. If we view the story as a simple fairytale, for example, we may guess that all of the characters have fallen under an evil spell or are bewitched by their forest sojourn. Or else we are tantalized by yet another possibility, perhaps but a deeper and logical extension of the first, that all of the travelers are burdened by an “original sin” bound to impede their journey. This last consideration, of course, only links the muteness of the novel’s characters once again to the traditional quest, by further evoking the initial obstacles to the hero’s journey.

More important than these familiar implications of the muteness theme in Calvino are the darker, modern implications of this handicap, however. For as we shall show, the muteness of the novel’s travelers only reiterates a theme dominant to all Calvino’s writing, specifically the *dimidiamento* or spiritual mutilation of the modern hero which our author himself discusses elsewhere. Though others have already touched on the modern symbolism of physical handicap as it occurs in Calvino, there is plainly a new and ominous twist to this allegory in *Castello* which now merits closer attention.

Populated as it is by a number of classical figures, *Castello*, even at its opening is dominated, more than Calvino’s other works, by a presentiment of doom (a fatality as applicable to the story’s end as it is to the hero’s handicap). In the story “Anch’io cerco di dire la mia” (p. 99), for example, Oedipus’s fate is sealed at the crossroads to Corinth by an immutable and irascible destiny. Lady Macbeth’s fate is similarly sealed in “Tre storie di follia e distruzione.” Her “mani di sangue” (p. 117) are depicted not just as symbolic of her crime, but as a stigmata or sign of her soul’s deformity. Even Ophelia in the same story, “povero angelo” (p. 116), as the narrator sarcastically calls her, is the ironic victim of her immaculate innocence, a spiritual flaw, which as we shall see in this novel, is perceived as grievous, perhaps even more grievous than any other. Insidiously the thought of Ophelia’s innocence as a tragic blemish casts a modern cynicism over the perspectus of the journey. Her satirical portrayal as a “helpless angel,” a comic-pathetic figure, amusing at her watery death, ridiculous in her innocent ignorance projects a new tarnished image of this tragic heroine, at once evoking a new modern senselessness to the life journey as well as a modern sense of helplessness to the story’s hero.
Before long in the various stories of Castello, we see that while the hero’s initial handicap (in this case the muteness) may eventually engender an assortment of other errors as well, including greed, lust, and envy, one aspect of it remains constant. The *dimidiamento* is irremediable. Unlike the spiritual handicap as presented in the traditional journey, or even in early Calvino, the defect is no longer perceived as a comprehensible, temporary impediment which the hero, be he Dante or Aeneas, will overcome. Nor is it any longer construed allegorically as a positive catalyst to spur the hero on to a better spiritual life. No matter the virtues of the individual character in the novel, no matter the nature of his good deeds, his *dimidiamento* persists, an absurd blot of spiritual ignorance. Unlike the Christian concept of original sin, or even the Greek notion of the tragic flaw, no sense of saving grace or nobility can right the situation of Calvino’s hero. No thought of divine intercession enters in, no promise of God or salvation. Not even a modicum of human pride is left over from the traditional journey to lighten the burden of human failure as it is depicted in Castello. In a true existential spirit, there is simply no solution to the hero’s dilemma. What is worse the hero recognizes this truism, thus becoming “absurd” (even) in his own eyes.

This fatal view of the hero’s *dimidiamento* in one way or another touches each novella of Castello. It is, however, in “Due storie in cui si cerca e ci si perde” most explicitly where we see the metaphysical handicap clearly defined in terms of Parsifal’s guilty-innocence, and then acted out with stunningly modern religious irreverence. This tale in particular emerges as a contemporary inverted Everyman drama with Parsifal in every way the ideal protagonist. Indeed Parsifal, just as Faust, represents a telling example of the hero in Castello, chosen expressly for the aura of failure which surrounds him.

Significantly the actual details of Parsifal’s quest for the Grail are of only secondary interest in the novel, and are rather briefly disposed of. The central storyteller rushes on instead to what interests him more: the absurdity of the hero’s quest at all and the inevitability of its failure. He hammers at the unavoidable nature of Parsifal’s errors, stressing repeatedly that the hero’s only real sin consists of simply “not knowing.” As if to underscore the bitter irony of the predicament, the narrator insistently juxtaposes Parsifal’s innocence against the heinousness of his crimes:

Figlio di connubio colpevole, matricida senza saperlo. . . . Parsifal corre il mondo leggero, in perfetta innocenza. Ignorante di tutto. . . . E splendente di chiara ignoranza attraversa contrade gravate da un’oscura consapevolezza. (pp. 95-96)
Lighthearted, innocent, ignorant Parsifal, no matter his purity of heart is nonetheless his mother's murderer. No redeeming virtue, least of all innocence, will save him or offset tragedy. His naiveté, no longer considered either refreshing or correctable, as in early Calvino, is now cynically perceived as a damnable curse, a metaphysical guilt which cuts him off from true awareness. For unlike the hero of earlier myth Parsifal, as we shall learn, is a man bereft of divine guidance, and hence not privy to divine intelligence. Unlike the hero of the traditional journey, therefore, Parsifal makes his way "in solitudine" over "terre desolate," (pp. 95-96) a helpless, misunderstood victim, the comic-pathetic hero of a cynical, modern tragicomedy, which he will never comprehend much less master. Even the things of nature, as the quote above reveals, have a clearer, though perverse conception of Parsifal's fate.

These characteristics of Parsifal, and others we will soon examine, do not speak to us of the traditional success of the hero or his journey, but rather recount contemporary man's dilemma in a modern, godless society. Many modern authors, particularly those of proto-existential sentiment, have expressed similar attitudes of helplessness and "not knowing." Kafka, to whom Calvino has been compared, comes readily to mind. Not only are there similarities to be observed in both authors in the basic perception of man's infinite ignorance and extreme isolation, but the mode of depicting these limitations allegorically is similar as well. The idea of muteness, for example, with its symbolic spiritual connotation of alienation and frailty is a common theme in both authors. The terrible sense of entrapment repeatedly lamented by the mute narrator in Castello (pp. 5, 51-52, and 99) in many respects mirrors the inner turmoil of Gregor Samsa, for example, the protagonist of Kafka's sinister little tale, "Metamorphosis." To be sure the portrayal of Kafka's Samsa is more terrifying for the science-fiction details of his suffocating dumbness and profound isolation, as personified by the giant insect body which holds him a muzzled victim. Though such grotesque touches are missing from "Due storie," Parsifal's mute solitude is spiritually just as profound and just as damming. Parsifal's naive but fatal habit of never asking questions, his hesitation "di far domande" (p. 96) constitutes an irreparable breach between himself and Re Amfor-tas in the story, a breach which both the original legend and this present version condemn, though perhaps for different reasons. In the original legend of Parsifal (Percival) his sin is often interpreted as cowardice. Asking the question would have freed the Fisher King and his castle from an evil curse. In "Due storie" Par-
sifal’s fault is derived from a graver and more deep-seated limitation: he does not ask questions because he does not know what to ask. His ignorance therefore is existential, a paralyzing affliction which renders him impotent.

Parsifal’s role suggests again the unquestioning passivity of Kafka’s protagonists in such novels as The Castle, and most especially in Kafka’s grim parable, The Trial, where the central figure’s silent lifelong wait outside of the hall of justice anticipates the “ore o anni” (p. 97) of Parsifal’s mute vigil over the tarot cards in Castello. Indeed in the light of Parsifal’s apathy, namely his being “. . . così nuovo al mondo . . . che non gli viene mai in mente di far domande . . .” (p. 96) one must even pause to reconsider here the original meaning of the passive childish observer often seen in early Calvino. The mute accepting innocence of such characters as Pin in Il sentiero dei nidi di raggio, and Marcovaldo in Le stagioni in città, once construed as positively instructive by the critics, actually anticipates, though perhaps still tentatively, the curse of “not knowing” or dimidiamo which we see in Parsifal, and therefore already presupposes many of the negative inferences which such a helpless posture has suggested to contemporary philosophers.

For Paul Tillich, the muteness, isolation, and other alienating handicaps, physical and emotional, which characters share in Kafka, Calvino, and other modern writers are little more than a symbolic extension of the dour existential sentiment that estrangement is a basic fact of human life.\textsuperscript{10} By estrangement, however, Tillich and other existential thinkers are no longer speaking of just the social and physical separateness, the human rejection which many of Kafka’s characters bear, but more important of a cosmic insensitivity to their frail, finite lives which many of them also intuit.

How closely Parsifal’s role in Castello reflects the intuitions of Kafka and conforms even more specifically to Tillich’s gloomy commentary on them, can be readily observed by returning to the somber conclusion of “Due storie.” Here we see Parsifal still alone and still dumbly fingering the tarot cards in a vain attempt to make sense of his own life as well as the greater mysteries of existence. Yet each time he bends over the cards, they defy interpretation. His consuming innocence (ignorance) poses an unyielding barrier to any conclusions on his part which are not “sempre provvisoria” (p. 97). Without divine inspiration his mind wanders, the cards “oscilla” according to the “umori della giornata” (p. 97). Thus deprived of direction he can never hope to comprehend himself much less “il nocciolo del mondo” whose secrets he would penetrate (p. 97). At last he derives one slight, sad comfort
from the still-tentative, though tragic, observation that perhaps he is not alone in his plight. (And here the story takes a cynical and dramatic leap from the realm of one man’s flaw to the notion of universal dimidiamento.) The reason he will never know is that perhaps there is nothing to know. The principle which moves the universe is after all, only “lo spazio del niente,” and he indicates “il rettangolo vuoto circondato dai tarocchi” (p. 97).

With this last mournful reflection, Parsifal’s story breaks off, but not his journey, which the central narrator has cynically implied could go on indefinitely. Thus to Parsifal’s already heavy burden of physical dimidiamento, the storyteller does not refrain from adding some of his own personal rancor over man’s universal impotence. This is an important gesture, however, for it demonstrates how much more profoundly pessimistic the concept of dimidiamento has grown in Calvino over the years. Its meaning no longer involves just a silly quirk in the narrator’s personality such as Quinto’s penchant for neurotic speculation in “Speculazione edilizia,” or Dr. Trelawney’s eccentric practice of medicine in *Il visconte dimezzato*. Neither is it a pretext for an amusing anecdote on the pitfalls of gullibility as in Marcovaldo’s adventures. Instead, in *Castello*, the gloomy fatality of the hero’s in-born error now dominates the narrator’s mentality, seriously eroding his self-esteem and already largely predating the hopeless failure of the rest of his journey.

It is little wonder then that in “Due storie” again, contrary to the conventional monomyth, Parsifal, burdened by primordial guilt or stigma, fails the prove put to him at the castle of Re Amfortas. It is not surprising either that, consistent with the subversion of the hero’s journey in this novel, all of the other travelers in *Castello* fail their tests as well. The knight in “Storia del guerriero sopravvissuto,” for example, loses the duel with the “guerriero pervinca” (p. 73). The king in “Storia del regno dei vampiri,” loses to the insidious “pascolo di vampiri” which have infested his shining, metallic kingdom (*Castello*, p. 85). Even the writer in “Anch’io cerco di dire la mia,” locked in his studio, finally renounces his efforts to cope with the “carnificina quotidiana della città” (p. 111). The same situation is reflected in Faust’s gloomy history in the second story of “Due storie.” His journey too reveals a lost contest with the devil, but significantly enough not because of any deliberate choice for evil, as in the traditional story of Faust. Faust’s itinerary in *Castello*, like those of the other travelers in the novel, reveals no such decisive turning point or spiritual crossroads where the right path might well have been chosen. Apparently authentic moral choice is as unknown to him as it is
to Parsifal, for Faust’s mind swings like a pendulum. His tarot reading undergoes arbitrary changes, the fragments of his life coming together only to disintegrate (disfano) immediately (p. 97).

This absence of any critical turn of events or any depiction of ethical choice in Castello constitutes yet another meaningful sub-version of the hero’s journey in the novel. Indeed, the deterioration of this pivotal issue of right choosing (or the bivio,11 as it is called in Castello) at last spells a final blow to the initial fiction or the conventional journey and for a specific reason. Without this moment of truth or real repentance the hero can never return, can never be spiritually reborn or know God. Exactly how significant the moral turn is to the happy ending of the traditional hero’s redemptive voyage, in fact, can be easily illustrated by examining the various underworld journeys of such classic travelers as Dante and Aeneas, and even by looking at the contemporary voyages of such modern authors as Joyce and Hemingway where the final turn for the better is often still figured.12

In Castello by contrast, the positive spiritual message of the moral turn or right choice is irretrievably lost. Parsifal and Faust, for instance, cannot even recognize the right and wrong paths much less repent. Although the fiction of right and wrong roads appears visually over and over again in the tarot maze, true spiritual bivio or right choosing is actually little more than an artfully contrived illusion both in the novel’s tarot game and its stories. A careful examination of the individual voyages of the different players in Castello reveals that, while there are many trials, challenges, interruptions, and obstacles as the card rows intersect to suggest a moment of truth or decision (bivio), none of these instances precipitates a purposeful change in the traveler’s destiny, much less conveys any sense of moral rebirth as suggested by Dante’s journey or those of other conventional heroes. The characters go everywhere but nowhere, their paths cross (bivio), their lives bump up against each others (bivio), but all of these experiences prove non-instructive, non-redeeming. For example the theme of the bivio, or the spiritual crossroads of decision, is a prominent feature of “Tutte le altre storie” (p. 41) in Castello where the paths and the cards of Helen of Troy, Astolfo, Ulysses, and Paris converge and disrupt each other’s course, creating considerable havoc, but significantly no resolution to the events. A further example of the bivio dominates the aptly titled, “Tre storie di follia e distruzione,” where three doomed travelers litigate pointlessly for possession of the same cards, hopelessly entangled in the card maze on the table:
Difatti i tre si mettevano a litigare adesso lo facevano con gesti solenni come declamassero, e se puntavano tutti e tre un dito sulla stessa carta, con l'altra mano e con smorfie evocatrici s'adopravano per significare che quelle figure erano da intendere così e non così. (p. 113)

The ensuing disorder of cards, and the emotional conflict of the characters concerning them, no longer typifies the methodical wholeness of the tarot game as it is artfully pictured in the novel (p. 41). Neither does it evoke thematically the reassuring and predictable steps of the traditional hero's voyage. Rather the sudden confusion, or more expressly the "absurdity," in the card readings marks a decisive spiritual breakdown in the novella, one which well illustrates the negative dynamics of Calvino's writing. For in the dramatic struggle we observe the disintegration of the story's integrity, the splintering of what once seemed a coherent pattern of events into a volatile mass of indiscriminate phenomena.

Thematically this contention over the tarot cards as "arbitrary signs" marks an equally negative turn to the novel's dialogue on man's existence. Just as the variables in the cards bring chaos to the storyteller's game, so too the irrational absurdity of the drama's events has corrupted the integrity of the novel's portrait of life. Indeed the central narrator, even in the earliest pages of the novel, has already confessed to being overwhelmed by the "impressioni contrastanti," and by the "senso di casualità e di disordine" which dominate his perspective (p. 4). Life for him and his companions, no matter how they struggle to put matters right, remains from the start to finish of the novel, a snarled mass of unrelated events, mysterious data, stripped of chronology and a cohesive point of view. The travelers' lives therefore assume the contours of a labyrinth journey through a forest marked by twists and bends, and sinister surprises. At times the voyage takes on a carnival glow, with all the illusory charm of games of chance, fortune telling, turns of the wheel, and feats of magic. These moments of fleeting happiness, however, represent little more than a respite in the hero's relentless wandering, in his inevitable yet absurd progress towards nihilation, as so aptly depicted by "lo spazio del niente" at the center of the tarot card maze (p. 97).

In conclusion, therefore, Calvino's final portrait of life in Castello as a grimly humorous and sylvan misadventure is ultimately long removed from the generous spirit of the traditional hero's journey with its sublime confidence in man and its faith in the journey's positive outcome. For despite the novel's seeming reliance on traditional paradigms, Castello more truly portrays a thoroughly modern and cynical likeness of life. The arbitrary absurdity of the
tarot card readings in such stories as "Tre storie di follia e distruzione" (p. 113) only reflects the kind of lonely, blind-alley freedom so often depicted in the works of such existential writers as Sartre and Camus. The absence of the very essential factor of the hero's return in such stories as "Storia dell'indeciso" (p. 55) and of his extinction in other stories such as "Storia dell'ingrato punito" (p. 7) merely completes our author's ironically contemporary subversion of the traditional journey.

This satirical reversal of the conventional theme in turn serves well to throw into sharp relief a modern view of man and an existence which is the very opposite of the comforting hero's mission. Thus, the final effect of Il castello dei destini incrociati is that of an archly modern Everyman drama in which the storyteller expresses a modernist, alienatory orthodoxy far removed from Dante. With teleological vindictiveness. Calvino's handicapped hero puts forth his doctrine of disbelief, doubt, and fear in the form of such dire homilies as, "Il mondo non esiste" or "Il nocciolo del mondo è vuoto" (p. 97). With scathing self-contempt he jibes at the outcome of a life journey in which man is no longer perceived the heroic arbiter of his destiny, and where once "L'uomo è stato necessario: adesso è inutile" (p. 69).

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NOTES

1 Italo Calvino, Il castello dei destini incrociati (Torino: Einaudi, 1973), p. 97. All subsequent quotes from this work are from the same edition.
3 In accordance with the steps of the traditional journey, the hero at the outset of his voyage is impeded by any number of temporary obstacles, usually symbolic of his own personal defects or of "world pains." See Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces (Cleveland: Meridan Books, 1956), pp. 52-97 and 245.
5 Another reference to de Lauretis, p. 70.
For more about Calvino's use of the tarot cards in narrative, besides de Lauretis, see Gerard Genot, "Le Destin des recits entrecroise," *Critique*, 28 (1972), 788-809.


For one interpretation of the puzzling legend of Parsifal, see Leeming, pp. 147-52.


*Bivio*, the Italian word for the Latin *bivium* is an essential theme in *Castello*. In the novel the *bivium*, or crossroads of decision, is often figured quite literally as a juncture in a highway, the traditional choice between the right and wrong path. In the tarot game, it is visually demonstrated by the interlocking paths of the card arrangement.

For more on the turning point in the traditional hero's journey as well as in that of the contemporary literary hero, see Fortuna, p. 141.

A now well-known term coined by Ferdinand de Saussure in *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. with introd. by Wade Baskins, ed., Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye in collaboration with Albert Riedlinger (New York: McGraw-Hill Books Co., 1966), pp. 67-69, which implies that the relationship between the name of something and the thing itself is not fixed, not dependent on any relationship between them. Hence, meaning becomes arbitrary, dependent on the speaker and more specifically on the linguistic community.