SIX MEMOS for the NEXT MILLENNIUM

ITALO CALVINO

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A NOTE ON THE TEXT

About the title: Although I carefully considered
the fact that the title chosen by Italo Calvino,
“Six Memos for the Next Millennium,” does not
correspond to the manuscript as I found it, I have
felt it necessary to keep it. Calvino was delighted
by the word “memos,” after having thought of and dismissed titles such as “Some Literary Val-
ues,” “A Choice of Literary Values,” “Six Literary
Legacies”—all of them ending with “for the Next
Millennium.”

Calvino started thinking about the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures as soon as they were pro-
posed in 1984. He stood before the vast range of possibilities open to him and he worried, believing as he did in the importance of constraints, until the day he settled on a scheme to organize the lectures; after that, he devoted most of his
time to their preparation. From the first of Janu-
ary 1985 he did practically nothing else. They
became an obsession, and one day he announced
to me that he had ideas and material for eight
lectures. I know the title for what might have been
an eighth lecture: “Sul cominciare e sul finire”
(On the beginning and the ending [of novels]).
But I have not yet been able to find the text.

My husband had finished writing these five
lectures by September 1985, at the moment of
departure for the United States and Harvard Univer-
sity. Of course, these are the lectures Calvino
would have read—Patrick Creagh was in the
process of translating them—and he would certainly
have revised them before their publication as a
book by Harvard University Press. But I do not
think there would have been major changes:
the difference between the first versions I read and
the final ones lies in structure, not content. Calvino
wanted to call the sixth lecture “Consistency,”
and he planned to write it in Cambridge. I found
the others, all in perfect order, in the Italian
original, on his writing desk ready to be put into
his suitcase.

I should like to express my gratitude to Patrick
Creagh for his hard work on the translation; to
Kathryn Hume, from Pennsylvania State University,
for the help she has given me—in more ways than
one—in preparing the manuscript for publication;
and to Luca Marighetti, from Konstanz University,
for his deep knowledge of Calvino’s work and
thought.

_Esther Calvino_

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SIX MEMOS
FOR THE NEXT MILLENNIUM

1. Lightness
2. Quickness
3. Exactitude
4. Visibility
5. Multiplicity
6. Consistency
We are in 1985, and barely fifteen years stand between us and a new millennium. For the time being I don't think the approach of this date arouses any special emotion. However, I'm not here to talk of futurology, but of literature. The millennium about to end has seen the birth and development of the modern languages of the West, and of the literatures that have explored the expressive, cognitive, and imaginative possibilities of these languages. It has also been the millennium of the book, in that it has seen the object we call a book take on the form now familiar to us. Perhaps it is a sign of our millennium's end that we frequently wonder what will happen to literature and books in the so-called postindustrial era of technology. I don't much feel like indulging in this sort of speculation. My confidence in the future of literature consists in the knowledge that there are things that only literature can give us, by means specific to it. I would therefore like to devote these lectures to certain values, qualities, or peculiarities of literature that are very close to my heart, trying to situate them within the perspective of the new millennium.