Rice and Celery (Tonglen)

Domenico de Clario

Edith Cowan University,
Australia.

Abstract

Berenice is the name of the last of fifty five imaginary cities that Marco Polo describes to Kublai Khan. These descriptions and further dialogues between Marco and the Khan constitute the substance of Italo Calvino's "Invisible Cities." The just in Berenice constitute a secret society, recognizing each other through the pronunciation of certain words (especially commas, parenthesis and the space between things) and through their simple diet of broad beans, zucchini flowers, rice and soup. In recent projects I have been examining the idea that evidence of the existence of a single and independent fixed self cannot seem to be found. Here I will briefly describe a recent two part project at Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) in Melbourne, titled "A Second Simplicity," and then contextualise this project within the Calvino story.

Berenice/Trieste

Berenice is the name of the last of fifty five imaginary cities that Marco Polo describes to Kublai Khan. These descriptions and further dialogues between Marco and the Khan constitute the substance of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities.*[1] Berenice is an unjust city, holding within it the seed of a just city; that just city contains in turn the seed of further injustices which give rise to the growth of yet another unjust city, and so on. The just in Berenice constitute a secret society; they recognize each other through the pronunciation of certain words, especially commas and parenthesis (the bardo space *between* things), and through the simple diet they consume evoking a former golden age; boiled broad beans, fried zucchini flowers, rice and celery soup…

In recent projects I have been examining the idea that evidence of the existence of a single and independent fixed self cannot seem to be found. Below I will outline a recent two part project at Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) in Melbourne, titled *A Second Simplicity,* and then contextualise this project within the Calvino story. In the first part of *A Second Simplicity,* I rebuilt the house of my birth in Trieste, and inhabited it with my parents and sister over a three week period, sharing food and conversation with members of my family, friends and visitors to the gallery. The second part consisted of a dusk to dawn blindfold and improvised piano performance presented inside the ACCA installation. Some of the materials below are reproduced from the ACCA catalogue essay.

I have so often returned to this city of Melbourne searching for a first simplicity, much in the way an archaeologist attempts to decipher the visible contours of the phenomenological world in order to ascertain what might lie beneath, where to begin to dig to unearth evidence of former lives. But though I know where this embedded self must be located and where I must dig, it has always evaded me. It vanished without trace on a bright June morning in 1956 when my family and I vacated the room we had nested in to board a ship bound for Melbourne, where we arrived on the 4th of August later that year.

But what might constitute a second simplicity if the first can never seem to be located? I have always believed that if a replica of one's birth house could briefly be re-occupied by its original occupants then the dynamic whose rhizome circuitry invisibly embodies both architecture and inhabitants might in some way be re-activated. This dynamic might be termed a first simplicity, and its manifestation might allow one's former life to be usefully examined, reflected upon and perhaps even encompassed. But given that this return journey to *this* side which would have it emerge in an upstairs room in Via del Bosco, how would it then find me? Having to migrate so far south to where we now live, how would it find any of *us*? As I consider all this, it starts raining from the direction of the cathedral and I move to go back inside. Crossing the threshold I have an insight, or is it feverishness? What if I could gain access to the room in Via del Bosco, and somehow occupy it during the lifetime of its *doppelganger* inside ACCA? Would my presence in it after forty nine years encourage the first

simplicity to manifest again within its original body, in the way sunlight breaks through clouds and all at once permeates sheets drying in the wind? On re-awakening might it instantly transfer itself to its twinned body now being rebuilt deep in the Southern Hemisphere?

As if in a dream I somehow manage to contact the relevant property managers, and I am informed that two brothers living in Croatia are leasing the room in order to gain EEC residency status. I telephone them while they are travelling on a train to Rijeka. The line keeps breaking and they cannot understand why I want to rent a "forgotten little room," but in the end they agree to sublease it to me for ten weeks, and the next day the room is emptied and then cleaned. In order to encourage a renewed manifestation of the first state I must somehow clearly signal my return inside its body. I buy a small fluorescent light, cover it with blue cellophane and place it on the landing's windowsill where the daily task of cooking on live coals had been tirelessly undertaken by my grandmother.

Silvia Rossi is an artist who rents the room across the landing as a studio. She offers a power source for the fluorescent light and willingly accepts responsibility for keeping it switched on through my permanence in ACCA. But will the breathing of the blue light on the windowsill be enough to beckon the first simplicity back, heal it from the ravages of what would certainly have been a long journey and then send it on its way across the ocean to re-join us?

"Tua mare grega, a Greek mother of a sea!" James Joyce wrote excitedly to Italo Svevo, referring to the ultimate inclusive space which beyond containing the *whole* of the world contained it as *mother*; a space in which both odyssey-child and mother-space continuously unfolded inside one another in a *first* simplicity.[2] How to establish a link then between this first simplicity and the second if not similarly through a series of seven container-*bodies*, one breathing within the other, from the tiniest to the most capacious, from a birth to a death and on to subsequent re-births? Consequently on entering a door that seemingly takes you into a room, you see a house located precisely within the room's floor grid. If you enter that house you will be led to an upstairs room that contains an *entire* house. More than that; it contains an entire universe.

On entering you see a light spectrum manifesting from each of seven ascending points and you hear a polyphonic speech seeping from its translucent tracing paper skin. Your body then becomes the core of the seven containers as the house withholds a room that simultaneously begets and encompasses you. In turn ACCA's body—manifesting a light spectrum from each of its seven windows—contains that of the house. That of the city contains ACCA's, and the continent's body indeed contains that of the city; the earth's has always contained that of the continent. Seven *bodies* then, one contained within the other and each manifesting the light spectrum, all held within a house of breath.

The cabin-room we breathe and wait in is then a transmutation machine, whose rhizome circuitry, embedded forever in the space articulated through seven pieces of furniture, is again re-activated as each of us enters it and joins with all that unfolds within it. Perhaps if through its blue lit transference from Via del Bosco that a first simplicity ever surfaces inside *this* house of breath, it might instantaneously transmute itself into readiness and preparedness for the inevitability of death. But at that moment is life over or does it begin anew? Does it begin ever anew?

On the landing at the top of the stairs we prepare the meals we ate in Trieste, and we share them with our guests on each of fifteen days. Through each meal the evidence of what we were is slowly uncovered in order to increasingly reveal what we have become. My parents have both lived beyond their expected life span, and each new day is now a gift. This is their opportunity to speak out and share with visitors a gathering of innumerable moments. The room can bring these to a focus, to a tying of those gathered moments into bundles and bunches, for some have dried and some seem freshly cut. Over the last few years a fear of other-ness has become increasingly more common in Australia, and though ours might seem well sanitized compared to that of current newcomers, it still bears speaking out as a simple encouragement to the necessary storytelling.

The dubbed sound tracks of the films that used to screen at a cinema across the street from our house now murmur on inside ACCA. On warm summer nights, the Cinema Aurora's doors were opened wide and inside the gloom of its tabernacular space, the barely visible movements of disjointed and disembodied bodies flickered and glowed on the bottom half of the screen visible from our windows. My sister and I would suck on blocks of ice and peer down into its darkness, attempting to

decipher the strange other-ness which extended, this much we knew, far beyond Via del Bosco. Depending on how they were positioned, the ice crystals would reflect numberless versions of what was unfolding both inside our room and within the gloom of the Aurora.

On the twenty first of August the sharing of food inside the room comes to an end, though our six voices remain in the form of six single notes; the seventh is silently voiced by the space that expands between each sound.

Early on the morning of the fifth of August Silvia Rossi switched on for the first time the blue fluorescent light placed on the windowsill of a second storey window at number three Via del Bosco. That evening she gave birth to a child she has named Emma.

City/Self

I wanted to approach the second part of this project from another perspective. I wanted to question the very basis on which the first part of this project was predicated upon by examining the idea of co-dependence, which arises from the notion that a specific and identifiable self actually exists.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason,* Kant writes:

> Consciousness of self according to the determinations of our state in inner perception is merely empirical, and always changing. No fixed and abiding self can present itself in this flux of inner appearances ...[3]
>
> [Thus] there must be a condition which precedes all experience, and which makes experience itself possible ... this pure original unchangeable consciousness I shall name transcendental apperception.

Tsultrim Gyamtso remarks:

> Buddhism is not telling anyone that they should believe that they have a self or that they do not have a self. It is saying that when looks at the way one suffers and the way one thinks and responds emotionally to life, it is as if one believed there were a self that was lasting, single and independent and yet on closer analysis no such self can be found.[4]

Through the rebuilding of a birth house inside ACCA, a second simplicity attempts to manifest this non-findable self through the location of a first, primal self. But has this self ever existed? Was the child conceived in an attic in Via del Bosco on a full moon night in early September 1946 the same one that sailed from Trieste in June 1956? Can the boy that disembarked in Melbourne later that year in August be still identified, through what seem to be demonstrably shared aggregates of experience, with the ageing man that through a September 2005 full moon night sits blindfolded at a keyboard inside ACCA? Might the belief that a single fixed and lasting self abides through endless arisings of various aggregates of experience constitute a search for the miraculous?

The Buddha was said to have discovered on the eve of his enlightenment not only the momentariness of the arisings of various aggregates of experience, but the entire edifice of causality (the circular structure of the binding chain of habituality, each link being unceasingly conditioned by each of the others) that constitutes the pattern of human life as a never-ending circular quest to anchor experience in a fixed and permanent self.

A Second Simplicity seems to be also predicated on the belief that each existence is made up of the various aggregates of experience which all the while build a fixed and permanent self, whose narrative can be identified and recounted coherently. Yet, on reflection, it is clear that the three year old child who rode a tricycle in Via del Bosco constituted one self; the boy that sailed through Trieste's gulf in the Toscana on a journey to the southern hemisphere was a different self; and the man that now sits blindfolded at the keyboard inside ACCA is yet another.

Kant proposes that what lies underneath conscious experience might be termed "transcendental apperception; a pure, original and unchangeable consciousness." This condition, he argues, makes experience itself possible, and consequently generates the arising of each self. Might this pre-self state also include an awareness of the condition (bardo) that follows death and precedes each re-birth? Could transcendental apperception then, as understood by Kant, encompass both a first and

second simplicity? And if both states have indeed always resided simultaneously within a pure and unchanging consciousness, then, as a consequence, a reunion inside the upstairs room of Via del Bosco's doppelganger becomes impossible. The term co-dependence arising best describes the transitory yet recurrent patterns of elements, that so effectively protect the edifice of causality in which the illusion of a fixed and lasting self resides, from all efforts to bring it down. If one wished to make a start on an attempt to dismantle this edifice, an increased awareness of the relationship between original consciousness, causality and the aggregates of experience might be usefully gained through the clear eyed attentiveness to what at each moment lies before us; one can begin with the breath.

Berenice (the city as *self*) also does not seem to define itself as a fixed and independent self, though it certainly contains within its "pure and unchangeable consciousness"—or the condition that makes experience itself possible; all of its potential future selves.

I sit high up in the corner of a large room, in a suspended state above the comings and goings in Berenice, and I pronounce commas and parenthesis in a particular way through the touching of the keys of a ruined piano, evoking perhaps a former golden age; but to which of the alternate Berenices do I belong? The piano voice you hear as you perhaps taste the soup of the just, is a sound translation of the letters that make up the words of the last story in *Invisible Cities,* the description of Berenice as told by Marco.

Soup

This is how I can best describe how the translation process of this text into keyboard sounds: the Italian alphabet's sixteen consonants are assigned in sequence to sixteen numbered white notes at the centre of the keyboard; the twelve numbered black notes that are found within the range of these sixteen white notes are assigned to vowels and punctuation marks. The resulting numbers are constructed into two tiers. The upper tier corresponding to black notes describes the number sequence allotted to vowels and punctuation marks; the lower tier corresponding to white notes describes the numbers allotted to consonants. By "reading" the numbers as one would sheet music, and by consequently pressing the notes which are correspondingly numbered on the keyboard, any text is able to be "played," and manifested as a series of unpredictable keyboard sounds. As I was making the soup this afternoon I thought of Berenice, and how we now need to find ways to facilitate that possible awakening that Calvino speaks of, when, like an insistent opening of windows, we are filled with a latent love of justice, and the desire to reassemble a city more just than it was before it became the vessel for injustices.

If we believe that the particular unjust city each of us now inhabits is also be made up of an endless number of non-fixed selves, one inside the other, each eventually giving way to its opposite, we may be able to retrieve within ourselves, whether we presently fill the ranks of the just or the unjust, enough desire for a reassembling…

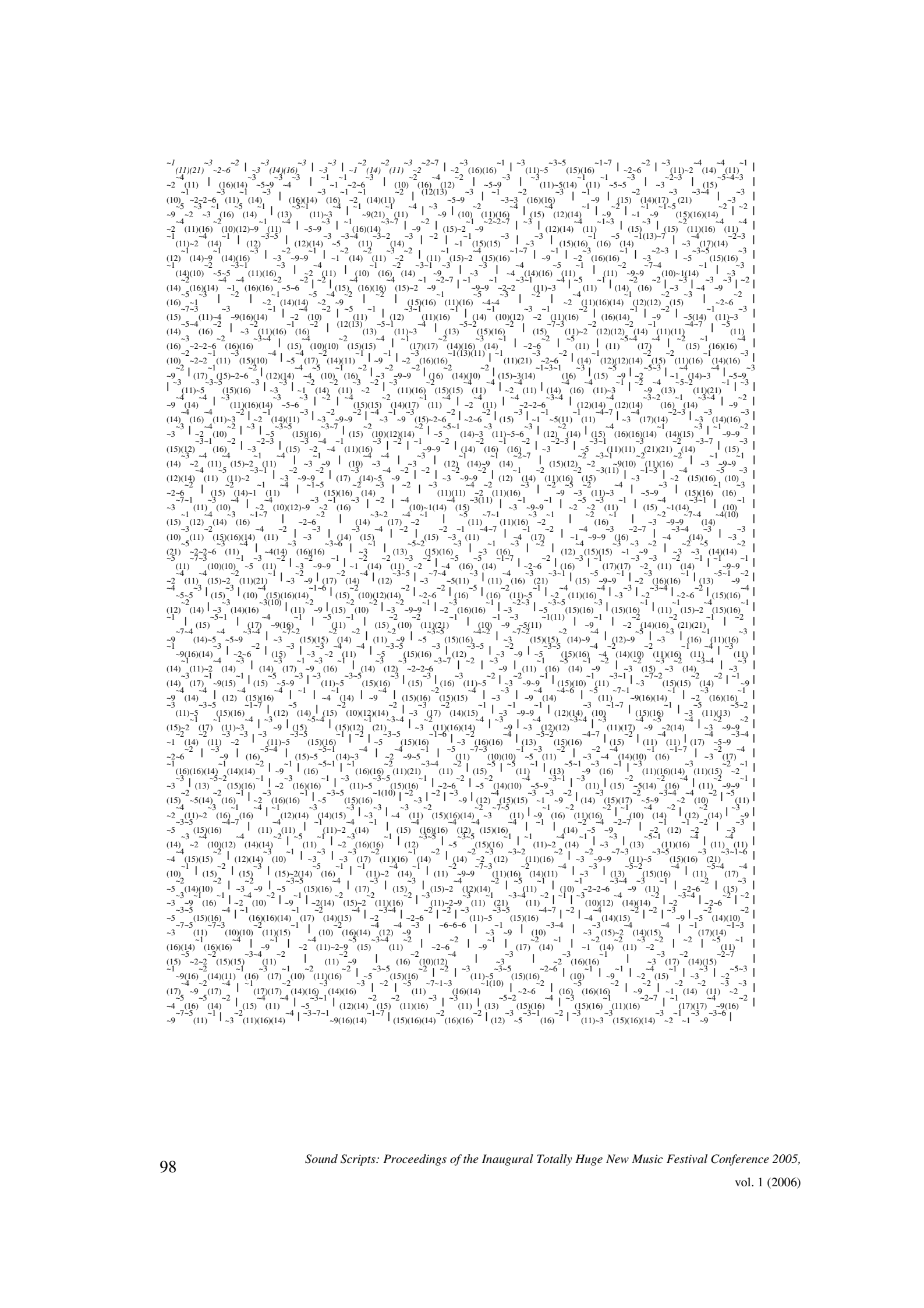
Perhaps the taste of rice and celery soup might help us to remember the former golden age to which we once belonged.

Below is my translation of Calvino's story:

> instead of telling you of Berenice the unjust city that crowns with triglyphs abaci and metopes the gears of its meat-grinding machines (when the ones assigned to polishing lift their chins above the balustrades and contemplate the atriums stairways and porticoes and feel even more imprisoned even more short of stature) I should tell you of the hidden Berenice the city of the just handling rescued makeshift materials in the shadows behind workshops and under stairways tying together a network of wires and tubing and pulleys pistons and counterweights that weaves itself like a secret vine among the huge cogs of the wheels (when these will finally jam a dull ticking will alert us to the fact that a new and precise mechanism now governs the city) instead of describing to you the perfumed pools of the baths where the unjust of Berenice recline and weave their intrigues with rotund elegance whilst observing with a proprietorial eye the rotund flesh of the bathing odalisques I should tell you of how the just always cautious to evade spying sycophants and the janissaries' mass arrests recognize one another through their speech especially the pronunciation of commas and parenthesis of their customs which remain austere and innocent avoiding complicated and shadowy emotions from their sober but

tasty food that evokes an ancient golden age rice and celery soup boiled broad beans, fried zucchini flowers from these facts it's possible to deduce an image of the future Berenice that will bring you closer to an understanding of the truth more than any information on the city as it seems today as long as you bear in mind what I'm about to tell you within the seed of the city of the just a malignant seed is in turn hidden the certainty and pride of being in the right and of being more so than any of the others who declare themselves to be the most just ferments in bitterness rivalry and resentments and the natural desire of revenge on the unjust is coloured by the urge to be in their place and to act as they do another unjust city then though different from the rest is digging its space within the double sheath of the just and unjust Berenices having said this I would not want your gaze to catch a distorted image so I must draw your attention on an intrinsic quality of this unjust city that germinates secretly inside the secret just one and this is the possible awakening like an insistent opening of windows of a latent love for justice not yet subject to rules capable though of reassembling a city still more just than it was before it became the vessel of injustices but then if you peer deeper into this new seed of justice you can just make out a tiny spot that dilates like the increasing inclination to impose what's right through what's unjust and perhaps this is the seed of an immense metropolis from my words you will have reached the conclusion that the real Berenice is composed of a succession in time of different cities alternately just and unjust but the thing I wanted to warn you about is another that all future Berenices are already present in this instant wrapped tightly and crammed inextricably one within the other.

Below is the notation I use to sound out the text. Enjoy the soup...

Notes

[1] Italo Calvino, *Le città invisibili* (Torino: Einaudi, 1972), also *Invisible Cities,* trans. William Weaver (London: Pan Books, 1979).
[2] James Joyce, *Selected Letters of James Joyce,* ed. Richard Ellman (NY: Random House, 2000).
[3] Immanuel Kant [1855], *Critique of Pure Reason,* trans. Norman Smith (London: Macmillan, 1978).
[4] Quoted in: Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive science and the human experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1993).