

*The Sword of the sun,*  
Mr. Palomar (1983), Italo Calvino

When the sun begins to go down, its reflection takes form on the sea: from the horizon a dazzling patch extends all the way to the shore, composed of countless swaying glints; between one glint and the next, the opaque blue of the sea makes a dark network. The white boats, seen against the light, turn black, lose substance and bulk, as if they were consumed by that splendid speckling.

This is the hour when Mr. Palomar, belated by nature, takes his evening swim. He enters the sea, moves away from the shore; and the sun's reflection becomes a shining sword in the water stretching from the shore to him. Mr. Palomar swims in that sword, or, more precisely, that sword remains always before him; at every stroke of his, it retreats, and never allows him to overtake it. Wherever he stretches out his arms, the sea takes on its opaque evening color, which extends to the shore behind him.

As the sun sinks toward sunset, the incandescent white reflection acquires gold and copper tones. And wherever Mr. Palomar moves, he remains the vertex of that sharp, gilded triangle; the sword follows him, pointing him out like the hand of a watch whose pivot is the sun.

"This is a special homage the sun pays to me personally," Mr. Palomar is tempted to think, or, rather, the egocentric, megalomaniac ego that dwells in him is tempted to think. But the depressive and self-wounding ego, who dwells with the other in the same container, rebuts: "Everyone with eyes sees the reflection that follows him; illusion of the senses and of the mind holds us all prisoners, always." A third tenant, a more even-handed ego, speaks up: "This means that, no matter what, I belong to the feeling and thinking subjects, capable of establishing a relationship and evaluating perceptions and illusions."

Every bather swimming westward at this hour sees the strip of light aimed at him, which then dies out just a bit beyond the spot where his arm extends: each has his *own* reflection, which has

that direction only for him and moves with him. On either side of the reflection, the water's blue is darker. "Is that the only non-illusory datum, common to all: darkness?" Mr. Palomar wonders. But the sword is imposed equally on the eye of each swimmer; there is no avoiding it. "Is what we have in common precisely what is given to each of us as something exclusively his?"

The sailboards slide over the water, cutting with sidelong swerves the land wind that springs up at this hour. Erect figures hold the boom with arms extended like archers', competing for the air that snaps the canvas. When they cross the reflection, in the midst of the gold that enshrouds them the colors of the sail are muted and the outline of opaque bodies seems to enter the night.

"All this is happening not on the sea, not in the sun," the swimmer Palomar thinks, "but inside my head, in the circuits between eyes and brain. I am swimming in my mind; this sword of light exists only there; and this is precisely what attracts me. This is my element, the only one I can know in some way."

But he also thinks, "I cannot reach that sword: always there ahead, it cannot be inside me and, at the same time, something inside which I am swimming; if I see it I remain outside it, and it remains outside."

His strokes have become weary and hesitant; you would think that all his reasoning, rather than increasing his pleasure in swimming in the reflection, is spoiling it for him, making him feel it as a limitation, or a guilt, or a condemnation. And also a responsibility he cannot escape: the sword exists only because he is there; and if he were to go away, if all the swimmers and craft were to return to the shore, or simply turn their backs on the sun, where would the sword end? In the disintegrating world the thing he would like to save is the most fragile: the sea-bridge between his eyes and the sinking sun. Mr. Palomar no longer feels like swimming; he is cold. But he goes on: now he is obliged to stay in the water until the sun has disappeared.

Then he thinks, "If I see and think and swim the reflection, it is because at the other extreme there is the sun, which casts its ray. Only the origin of what matters: something that my gaze cannot

confront except in an attenuated form, as in this sunset. All the rest is reflection among reflections, me included.”

The ghost of a sail passes; the shadow of the man mast flows among the luminous scales. “Without the wind this trap put together with plastic joints, human bones and tendons, nylon sheets, would not stand up; it is the wind that makes it a craft that seems endowed with an end and a purpose of its own; it is only the wind that knows where the surf and the surfer are heading,” he thinks. What a relief it would be if he could manage to cancel his partial and doubting ego in the certitude of a principle from which everything is derived! A single, absolute principle from which actions and forms are derived? Or else a certain number of distinct principles, lines of force that intersect, giving a form to the world as it appears, unique, instant by instant?

“... the wind and, obviously, the sea, the mass of water that supports the floating and shifting solid bodies, like me and the sailboard,” Mr. Palomar thinks, in a dead-man’s float.

This upside-down gaze now contemplates the straying clouds and the hills clouded with woods. His ego is also turned upside down in the elements: the celestial fire, the racing air, the water cradle and the earth-support. Can this be nature? But nothing of what he sees exists in nature: the sun does not set, the sea does not have this color, the shapes are not those that the light casts on his retina. With unnatural movements of his limbs, he is floating among phantoms; human forms in unnatural positions shift their weight to exploit not the wind but the geometrical abstraction of an angle made by wind and the tilting of an artificial device, and thus they glide over the smooth skin of the sea. Does nature not exist?

The swimming ego of Mr. Palomar is immersed in a disembodied world, intersections of force fields, vectorial diagrams, bands of position lines that converge, diverge, break up. But inside him there remains one point in which everything exists in another way, like a lump, like a clot, like a blockage: the sensation that you are here but could not be here, in a world that could not be but is.

An intrusive wave troubles the smooth sea; a motorboat bursts forth and speeds off, spilling fuel and skipping on its flat belly. In greasy, multi-colored glints the skin of oil spreads out, rippling in the water; a material consistency can be doubted in the glint of the sun, but not in this trace of the physical presence of man, who scatters excess fuel in his wake, detritus of combustion, residues that cannot be assimilated, mixing and multiplying the life and death around him.

“This is my habitat,” Palomar thinks. “Here there is no question of accepting or rejecting, because I can exist only here, within it.” But if the fate of life on earth were already sealed? If the race toward death were to become stronger than any possibility of rescue?

The wave flows, a solitary breaker, until it crashes on the shore; and where there seemed to be only sand, gravel, seaweed, and minute shells, the withdrawal of the water now reveals a margin of beach dotted with cans, peanuts, condoms, dead fish, plastic bottles, broken clogs, syringes, twigs black with oil.

Lifted also by the motorboat’s wave, swept off by the tide of residue, Mr. Palomar suddenly feels like flotsam amid flotsam, a corpse rolling on the garbage beaches of the cemetery-continents. If no eye except the glassy eye of the dead were to open again on the surface of the terraqueous globe, the sword would not gleam any more.

When you come to think of it, such a situation is not new: for millions of centuries the sun’s rays rested on the water before there were eyes capable of perceiving them.

Mr. Palomar swims under water, surfaces; there is the sword! One day an eye emerged from the sea, and the sword, already there waiting for it, could finally display its fine, sharp tip and its gleaming splendor. They were made for each other, sword and eye; and perhaps it was not the birth of the eye that caused the birth of the sword, but vice versa, because the sword had to have an eye to observe it at its climax.

Mr. Palomar thinks of the world without him: that endless world before his birth, and that far more obscure world before his birth, and that far more obscure world after his death; he tries to imagine the world before eyes, any eyes; and a world that

tomorrow, through catastrophe or slow corrosion, will be left blind. What happens (happened, will happen) in that world? Promptly an arrow of light sets out from the sun, is reflected in the calm sea, sparkles in the tremolo of the water; and then matter becomes reflective to light, is differentiated into living tissues, all of a sudden an eye, a multitude of eyes, burgeons, or reburgeons...

Now all the sailboards have been pulled ashore, and the last shivering swimmer--Mr. Palomar by name--also comes out of the water. He has become convinced that the sword will exist even without him; finally he dries himself with a soft towel and goes home.