

**IS CALVINO POSTMODERN? RE-READING *IF ON A WINTER'S NIGHT A
TRAVELLER***

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Abstract

*There has been a considerable amount of debate whether the famous Italian writer Italo Calvino belongs to the modern or the postmodern narrative tradition. The author of this article claims to establish Calvino as a postmodern author by examining his magnum-opus *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* in the light of Roland Barthes' famous notion of the death of the author. The text, with its all-pervasive ubiquity, is no more seen as an entity that is the sole creation of the author-god, the uncontested creative genius. The author remains no more than a "shaman" (as Roland Barthes would have it), a mediator through which the infinite play of language precipitates into the text. In this arena of shifting perspectives, it is also found that it is not the author who renders meaning to the text; rather, it is the reader who gives meaning to the text through his act of reading. The text therefore slips out of the dictatorial hands of the author and generates its own meaning which is deciphered and interpreted by the reader.*

Key Words: *Postmodernism, poststructuralist, death of the author, plurisignation*



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Italo Calvino's belongingness to the modern or the postmodern tradition of writing has been a question of enormous debate. But a close reading of the text by the author of this article would reveal clear and distinctive postmodern traits in his writing. Based on these precepts, the author intends to re-read Calvino's one of the most famous novels *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* applying the radical theory of the death of the author propounded by French post-structuralist Roland Barthes—a theory that has its generative roots in the

post-structural linguistic turn particularly in the second half of the Twentieth Century. A close reading of the text would seem to ridicule the notion of the omnipotence of the author as the sole creator of the work. The diminishing glory of the author, in Calvino's paradigm, is accompanied by the increasing importance of the reader who provides meaning to the text by his act of "reading." In addition, language is given prime importance over the author as the text is seen as a construct in language that combines in different ways to construct the text. Viewed in this context, this article explicitly discusses the issues of the "death of the author," the role of the reader and the prime importance of language over the author in Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*.

Giving a serious jolt to the author's preconceived ingenuity; the reader in "Chapter Two" of the novel witnesses the author as a copier, not as a creator. Divulging the author's "virtuoso tricks" of copying, the reader informs us that instead of saying anything new, the author merely keeps on repeating the same thing "word for word" (Calvino 25). For his sheer inability to write afresh, the text remains no more than a copied representation of other pre-existing texts as the narrator admits: "Of course: there are themes that recur, the text is interwoven with these reprises . . ." (Calvino 25).

"Chapter two" of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, while underpinning the notion of the author's demise, affirms that the book is not the progeny of the authorial motif, rather a mechanistic assemblage of the minimal constituent fragments of language. The flinging of the defective copy onto the floor by the reader in this chapter results in the crumbling of the composite book into the elementary shards of language. This linguistic disintegration of the book is accurately expressed in the following lines by the narrator:

You fling the book on the floor . . . let sentences, words, morphemes, phonemes gush forth, beyond recomposition into discourse . . . You would like to throw it out of the house, out of the block, beyond the neighborhood, beyond the city limits, beyond the state confines, beyond the regional administration, beyond the national community, beyond the Common Market, beyond Western culture, beyond the continental shelf, beyond the atmosphere, the biosphere, the stratosphere, the field of gravity, the solar system, the galaxy, the cumulous of galaxies . . . where it would be received by nonbeing, or, rather, the not-being . . . (Calvino 2)

In this process of linguistic disintegration, evidently, the linguistic modules of the book including "sentences, words, morphemes, phonemes" break further into even finer fragments like molecules, atoms, protons, electrons, neutrons that gush forth and move

beyond “the neighborhood,” “the city limits,” “the state confines,” “the regional administration,” “the national community,” “the common market” and “the Western culture” to be received by the “nonbeing” or “not-being” (Calvino 26). Manifestly, the linguistic components of the book stretch beyond the confinements of human subjects and human organizations as mentioned above thereby thoroughly undermining any probable human domination over language. The deliberate usage of the expressions like “nonbeing” or “not-being” hint at the disassociation of the text from any subjective trace of the author’s “being.” The truth of the text, therefore, is not the truth of the author, rather, of language where the text is the product of a linguistic discourse. Echoing a similar view, Julia Kristeva, in her essay “The Ethics of Linguistics,” says: “. . . the problem of truth in linguistic discourse became dissociated from any notion of the speaking subject [the author]” (208). Such a disregard for the author or the speaking subject is part of what Hans Bertens would call “linguistic determinism” (59), i.e. the idea that claims that our concept of reality is no more than a construct in language. Eliciting a similar thinking, M. H. Abrams, in his influential essay “The Deconstructive Angel,” reprises the Derridean emphasis on the disappearance of any sort of subjective agency once the play of language begins. He construes:

Since the only givings are the already existing marks, ‘deja écrit,’ we are denied recourse to a speaking or writing subject, or ego, or cogito, or consciousness, and so to any possible agency for the intention of meaning something (‘vouloir dire’); all such agencies are relegated to the status of fictions generated by language, readily dissolved by deconstructive analysis (245)

Evidently, the subjectivity agency, being an effect of language, dissolves unassumingly in the sea of language form which it is produced. It is also interesting to note at this juncture that It is not just the author who mingles unassumingly to the realm of language; rather, it is the whole world that readily mingles into the same as “everything is language (tout est langage)¹” (Benjamin 82). The whole world is a construct in language or in other words, the whole world is a text, to use a Derridean paradigm of thought. This maverick conceptual framework through which the world is conceived as a written text finds true reflection in the words of the narrator in “Chapter three” as he says: “. . . this world dense with writing surrounds us on all sides . . .” (Calvino 49). Such an altered premise of thought attributes supreme ascendancy to language which constructs the whole world in the form of a “unitary book” (Calvino 255) of which the individual books are mere constituent fragments. These fragmented parts of the single book act as mere corollaries or confutations or

references to each other and finally merge into the unique single text of the world. Such a thinking is beautifully explicated in the following lines of the fourth reader in “Chapter eleven”:

Every new book I read comes to be a part of that overall and unitary book that is the sum of my readings. This does not come about without some effort: to compose that general book, each individual book must be transformed, enter into a relationship with the books I have read previously, become their corollary or development or confutation or gloss or reference text. For years I have been coming to this library, and I explore it volume by volume, shelf by shelf, but I could not demonstrate to you that I have done nothing but continue the reading of a single book. (Calvino 255-256)

As mentioned in the opening sections of this article, there is a clearly visible increase the importance of the reader with a concomitant regression of the of the author’s omnipotence. The alterations of significances between the author and the reader is all the more evident in “Chapter eight” entitled “From the diary of Silas Flannery” where Flannery feels that the reader’s “eye that sucks up the flow of . . . [his] sentences” and “leads the story in the directions that elude [Flannery]” (Calvino 170). Furthering the deterioration of the authorial value, Flannery says: “I feel a throng of readers looking over my shoulder and seizing the words as their set down on paper” (Calvino 170-171). Such feelings on the part of Flannery are overwhelming indications of the fact that the text takes shape not according to the author’s plan of things, rather according to the reader’s expectations to the extent that they suck up the flow of Flannery’s sentences diverting them in the direction they want. In a sense, the “reading” of the readers concomitantly stimulates “writing” where the Manichean binary between the two is on the verge of destabilization. Both “reading” and “writing” mingle into one signifying practice of the creation of the text as Roland Barthes fittingly comments in his “From Work to Text”: “. . . the Text requires that one try to abolish (or at the very least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading, in no way by intensifying the projection of the reader into the work but by joining them in a single signifying practice” (1474).

With the disappearance of the author, the meaning of the text also liberates itself from his clutches. It no more resides in the authorial intent, rather, remains in the language which constitutes the text. “Language,” believes Saussure, “is a system of signs expressing ideas . . .” (8). The narrator of the chapter “Outside the town of Malbork” provides the most fitting example of the self-referentiality of language by citing the example of the food item

“schoeblintsjja.” The very word generates its own meaning “with its sound or only with its visual impression” thereby suggesting “an acidulous flavor” (Calvino 34) to the reader. The basic purpose of such a description is amply suggestive of the fact that language has the innate ability to generate its own meaning without a meaning thrust on it from outside. Now, it remains for the reader to decode the meaning generated by language itself. In such an altered premise, the authorial preeminence is jettisoned with the ensuing “birth of the reader” (Barthes 150) with a transference of the meaning-making onus to the reader. Such a retreating magnitude of the author with a resultant escalation of the reader’s import explicitly noticeable in “Chapter Eight” entitled “From the diary of Silas Flannery.” Instead of being the controller of his own writing, he is rather crushed by it. He says: “This is why writing presents itself to me as an operation of such weight that I remain crushed by it” (Calvino 172). Now, he has “neither expressive energy nor something to express” (Calvino 190). In addition, he finds his own writing to be a stressfully unnatural process for him whereas on the reverse, he traces the firmest bond between “writing” and the reader as he finds the former to be the life-breath of the reader (Ludmilla in this case). He admits:

. . . I say to myself that the result of the unnatural effort to which I subject myself , writing, must be the respiration of this reader, the operation of reading turned into a natural process, the current that brings the sentences to graze the filter of her attention, to stop for a moment before being absorbed by the circuits of her mind and disappearing, transformed into her interior ghosts, into what in her is most personal and incommunicable. (Calvino 169-170)

Validating such a conceptual transformation, Flannery asserts that “writing . . . will continue to have meaning only when it is read by a single person and passes through his mental circuits” (Calvino 176). The endless play of language is coded into the text in the form of signs inviting the reader to decode them and impart meaning to the text. Meaning, therefore, is not incarcerated in the author’s motifs and intentions; rather, it becomes “a negotiable act of understanding between reader and text” (Clark 67). Different readers, however, belong to different “interpretive communities” (Fish 301) and hence, provide plural meanings to the text by decoding the above-mentioned textual code through manifold ways. Testifying the existence of the interpretive communities and unearthing the presence of an invisible bond between the two readers of an interpretive community, the narrator in “Chapter two” says: “There, you have said it. What is more natural than that a solidarity, a complicity, a bond should be established between Reader and Reader, thanks to the book?” (Calvino 32). Russian formalist Roman Jakobson talks about the nature and function of language in his

famous essay “Linguistics and Poetics.” Making his investigation in the special context of the verbal communication of language, Jakobson states that a message (constituted of language) contains a “CODE fully, or at least partially, common to the . . . encoder and decoder of the message” (33). In case of writing, correspondingly, the different members of an “interpretive community” are telepathically connected through a similar secret textual code. The narrator in “Chapter seven” finds that Ludmilla and the “other reader” are connected through a similar textual “code between the two,” a code that is “a means to exchange signals and recognize each other” (Calvino 148).

This code, nonetheless, can be subject to multiple decodings by various decoders who attribute the text a plurality of meanings thereby purposefully denying the single meaning of the text intended by the author. Meaning is essentially elusive in nature keeping in tune with the inherently slippery nature of language which gets better of the author. Canvassing the polysemous nature of the language system, Mikhail Bakhtin, the pioneer of the concept of “heteroglossia²,” says: “Literary Language—both spoken and written— . . . is itself . . . heteroglot in its aspect as an expressive system, that is, in the forms that carry its meanings” (1211). Because of this, the text never achieves closure; rather, it is always a text in process. This also defies the role of the author as the sole creator of the text as that would have resulted in the closure of the text with the only meaning intended by the author. Roland Barthes says therefore: “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (149). Regarding such a polysemous nature of a text, Jerome McGann fittingly comments: “. . . Instability is an essential feature of the text in progress” (517).

Deleuze and Guattari, in their monumental treatise *A Thousand Plateaus*, talk about this instability of the text through a never-ending dialogic tension between territorialization and deterritorialization. The text achieves its semantic instability through these two opposing forces that prevent the text from becoming stable. Deleuze and Guattari explain such a scenario in the following terms: “In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity. Strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialisation and destartification” (4).

We get another glimpse of the polysemous nature of language from the incident of Professor Uzzi-Tuzii’s act of translation of the book *Leaning from the steep slope*. While translating, Professor Uzzi-Tuzii has to stop at every word to “illustrate its idiomatic usage and its connotations” that generate multiple meanings. This connotative nature of language makes the text contain more than “what the story is telling” (Calvino 68) or more than what

the author is conveying. The text, believes Uzzi-Tuzii, contains “an inner afflatus” that gets dispersed in the air and contains the “echo of a vanished knowledge revealed in the penumbra and in tacit allusions” (Calvino 68). The basic purpose behind Uzzi-Tuzii’s statement confirms that language contains the knowledge that extends beyond the capacity of the author through its infinite connotative suggestiveness. Expressing such an idea, Uzzi-Tuzii says: “All books continue in the beyond . . .” (Calvino 71). Silencing the voice of the author in such a scenario, it is language that speaks in the text. Language in the form of the “prose of the novel” gets better of “the uncertainties of the voice [of the author]” whereas the reader-interpreter-translator Uzzi-Tuzii swims “like a fish” (Calvino 69) in the ocean of language in search of the meaning of the text.

By rendering meaning to the text through their act of “reading,” the reader, in a sense, becomes the “maker” of the text or the “self-imaging author” (239), as E. D. Hirsch Jr. would have it. The author-text nexus is substituted by that between the reader and the text . Providing a phenomenological approach to the reading process and establishing the unbreakable link between the reader and the text, Wolfgang Iser says: “The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence” (189). “Chapter five” of *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* offers a brilliant example of the reader being the maker. The narrator, initially feels that there is a “boundary line” between “those who make books” and “those who read them” to realize very soon, nonetheless, that: “The boundary line is tentative, it tends to get erased: the world of books who deal with books professionally is more and more crowded and tends to become one with the world of readers” (Calvino 93). Roland Barthes, in his monumental work *S/Z*, reinforces the notion of the reader being the maker by introducing his concept of “Writerly Texts” where the reader, in a sense, is the writer of the text as Barthes feels “the writerly text is ourselves writing” (227). He moreover construes: “. . . the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (227). Evidently, the reader is elevated to the status of the “make” or the “creator” of the book in the continually shifting paradigm of the role of the author and that of the reader. “Chapter eleven” of the book offers revealing insights into the mechanism of the reader’s act of “reading.” In a prolonged conversation amongst different readers, one reader, while philosophizing on the act of reading, says that reading is a “discontinuous and fragmentary operation” where the object of reading (i. e. the text) is a “punctiform and pulviscular material” (Calvino 254). Through this discontinuous and fragmentary operation, the reader breaks up these elementary components of language like words, phonemes and morphemes etc. and to decode their complex permutations and

combinations through which they form the text. Meaning, therefore, lies in the language, not in the author's intentions. The reader in this chapter fittingly comments: "In the spreading expanse of writing, the reader's attention isolates some minimal segments, juxtapositions of words, metaphors, syntactic nexuses, logical passages, lexical peculiarities that prove to possess an extremely concentrated density of meaning" (Calvino 254). This act of reading or the decoding of meaning is an endless process giving rise to endless meanings of the text. The reader therefore says: "This is why my reading has no end: I read and reread, each time seeking the confirmation of a new discovery among the folds of the sentences" (Calvino 255). Christopher Butler, in this context, thinks that by providing meaning to the text, the reader, in a sense, constructs the text and meaning becomes his property. He construes: "The text, as really constructed by the reader, . . . [is] thereby liberated and democratized for the free play of imagination. Meanings . . . [are] the property of the interpreter. Who . . . [is] free to play deconstructively with them" (24).

The third reader, in the same chapter, feels that the process of reading is without an object where he considers "reading" as an object in itself. Making reading an endless and timeless process, this third reader robs reading of purpose, goal and objective. Neither the text nor the act of reading, in this process, is able to achieve closure. Every re-reading, feels the reader, is a new reading and every re-reading is a progression in time and space in a scenario where the text serves as only a pretext to the very act of reading. Continually progressive re-readings, therefore, surpass the single, confined boundary of meaning created by the author. His long speech is worth quoting here:

I, too, feel the need to reread the books I have already read," a third reader says, "but at every rereading I seem to be reading a new book, for the first time. . . . is reading a construction that assumes form, assembling a great number of variables, and therefore something that cannot be repeated twice according to the same pattern?. . . The conclusion that I have reached is that reading is an operation without object; or that its true object is itself. The book is an accessory aid, or even a pretext. (Calvino 255)

Reading, as explicitly made evident in the above passage, is a goalless construction with endless variables producing endless meanings. In this act of the creation of multiplicity of scopes for reading automatically leading to a multiplicity of endless interpretations, interpretations that go beyond the imaginings of the author thereby nullifying his role in the text.

Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, therefore, provides a maverick vision to us regarding the changing perceptions about the role of the author, the reader and language in the Postmodern realm of thought. In Calvino's paradigm of thinking, the author reduces himself from an individual existence to an invisible point easily mixable in the tangles of language. In the final analysis, this novel convincingly arouses Calvino's conviction that it is not the author who speaks through the text; rather, it is language who does the talking and it is the reader who determines its meaning.

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