

## Displaced Author, Creative Reader and Ubiquitous Text: A Postmodern Reading of Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*

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**Abstract:** In the realm of Postmodern thought, there is a marked shift from the pre-existing dominance of the author to the all- pervasive ubiquity of the text. The text is no more seen as an entity that is the sole creation of the author-god, the uncontested creative genius. It is, on the contrary, a construct in language. 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.

**Keywords:** Postmodern Reading, Italo Calvino, Winter's Night a Traveller

In the Postmodern realm of thought, the author is no more the creator of the text, rather is only a medium through which language precipitates into the text. The importance rather shifts to the reader who through his act of interpretation renders meaning to the text which readily defies the meaning implied by the omniscient author. In this postmodernism-induced arena of shifting perspectives, language is given supreme importance as the text is constructed in language and there is “no outside text” (Derrida 158). Based on these precepts, this article intends to examine Calvino's magnum *opus* *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* in the light of the above-mentioned postmodern concepts and to establish the text as a representative book of postmodernity.

Repudiating the authorial omnipotence in a text, Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* avers that writing is an impersonal act whose scope extends beyond the authorial imperium. The waning significance of the author is readily traceable in the very first chapter through the reader's failure to locate the “unmistakable tone of the author” and his concomitant conviction that the book is “readable . . . independently of what . . . [is] expected of the author” (Calvino 9). The depersonalization of the author is more evidently noticeable in the chapter “If on a Winter's Night a Traveler” where a purposefully created confusion between the identities of the author, the reader and the character of the novel (the traveler in the train) baffles us and we are not able to dis sever them as distinct individualities. These three discrete personalities dramatically merge into a single person (the traveler) with their separate persona or the “I [s]” [Calvino 15] thoroughly fragmented and getting mixed up confusedly amongst each other.

Adding to the ripping apart of the author's individuality to an array of multiple fractions, the narrator in “Chapter five” describes that the “author has become plural” so that “no body can be delegated to represent anybody” (Calvino 96). Such disintegration of the authorial presence and its synchronic blurring of the author/reader/text barricades are resonant of the Roland Barthes concept of the “death of the author.” No more considered as the sole architect of the text, the author is now an unseen occurrence, an “anonymous presence against an even more anonymous background” (Calvino 14). Giving a serious jolt to the author's preconceived ingenuity, the reader in “Chapter Two,” witnesses him as a copier, not as a creator. Divulging his “virtuoso tricks” of copying, the reader informs us that instead of saying anything new, he merely keeps on repeating the same thing “word for word” (Calvino 25). For his sheer inability to write afresh, the text remains 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).

Writing, bereft of authorial encumbrance, then remains an impersonal act. The narrator-author in “Chapter Eight” befittingly denounces any anthropocentric trace, whether social or cultural or psychological, that contributes to the shaping up of his individual subjectivity. They might, apprehends the author, curtail his limitless writing prowess. Depersonalizing the process of writing, the narrator aptly demonstrates: “Style, taste, individual philosophy, subjectivity, cultural background, real experience, psychology, talent, tricks of the trade: all the elements that make what I write the recognizable as mine seem to me a cage

that restricts my possibilities” (Calvino 171). This is part of what Brian McHale would call “procedural writing<sup>i</sup>” (183) that according to him “involves . . . surrender of authorial control over the production of the text, as a means of evading or overriding the constraints of literary and cultural norms and personal psychology” (184). The author, in an attempt of self-assassination, intends to take his redundant “presence” away from the space in between “the white page and writing of words” (Calvino 171). His confessions are worth quoting here: “How well I would write if I were not here! If between the white page and the writing of words and stories that take shape and disappear without any one’s ever writing them there were not interposed that uncomfortable partition which is my person!” (Calvino 171). Reinforcing further the “desacrilization of the image of the Author” (Barthes 148) and the impersonality of writing, the author imagines himself as only “a hand, a severed hand that grasps a pen and writes” (Calvino 171), a practice akin to the surrealist “automatic writing<sup>ii</sup>” (Barthes 148). Interestingly however, he wants to erase his personality not for being the spokesman of trans-individual entities like the “collective unconscious” and “the spirit of the times;” but “to transmit the writable that waits to be written, the tellable that nobody tells” (Calvino 171). He writes only for the sake of the act of writing, not to represent any socio-cultural milieu, whether physical or psychological, that builds his persona. There is a death of subjectivity with the act of writing. Echoing a similar idea in his monumental essay, “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes says: “Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body of writing” (146-147). Making the author a mingling point in the ocean of language and citing the example of the French symbolist Mallarme who could foresee his own death in his act of writing, Barthes continues: “For him, for us too, it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality . . . to reach that point where only language acts, ‘performs’, and not ‘me’” (147). French philosopher Michel Foucault, In his monumental essay “What is an Author,” describes the text, in a maverick tone, to be the murderer of the author as he construes: “The work, which once had the duty of providing immortality [to the author], now possesses the right to kill, to be its author’s murderer . . .” (175).

“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 . . . hurl the book and reduce it into photons, undulatory vibrations, polarized spectra; through the wall, let the book crumble into molecules and atoms passing between atom and atom of the reinforced concrete, breaking up into electrons, neutrons, neutrinos, elementary particles more and more minute; through the telephone wires, let it be reduced to electronic impulses, into flow of information, shaken by redundancies and noises, and let it be degraded into a swirling entropy. You would like to throw it out of the house, out of the block, beyond the neighbourhood, 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 26)

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 use 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.

Similar to the previous chapter, "Chapter five," of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, is an exemplary exposition of the notion of the "death of the author." We see, in this chapter, how the publishing house agent Mr. Cavedagna struggles to find the author of the novel that the reader intends to read. Jacques Derrida, in his epoch-making essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," makes a study of myth in the book *The Raw and the Cooked* by the cultural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss and finally fails to find the "source," the "center" and the "founding basis" of the book and concludes that the "absence of the centre is here the absence of a subject and the absence of an author" (97). In a similar scenario, Cavedagna suffers a typical Derridean failure to locate the origin or the source or the center or the founding basis of the book in the form of the author. Eventually, the letter of the translator Ermes Marana shown to the reader by Cavedagna in "Chapter five" puts an end to this ongoing beating around the bush in the complete depletion of the author from the text. In a tactful voice, Marana says: "What does the name of an author on the jacket matter?" (Calvino 101). Citing the instance of the anonymously authored Iranian epic Gilgamesh, Marana explains that after three thousand years, there will be some famous authorless books like Gilgamesh. On the reverse, there will be authors like Socrates none of whose works will survive whereas in another probable alternative, perhaps all surviving books will be attributed to a "single, mysterious author, like Homer" (Calvino 101). Effecting a disconnection between the author and the text, such descriptions by Marana confirm that the book is an authorless entity.

Cavedagna's understanding of the author's role in text in the same chapter is worth considering. The narrator's long speech about Cavedagna's understanding of the role of the contradictorily dubious and indeterminable positioning of the author is worth considering. He says:

For many years Cavedagna has followed books as they are made, bit by bit, he sees books be born and died every day, and yet the true books for him remain others, those of the time when for him they were like messages from other worlds. And so it is with

authors: he deals with them every day, he knows their fixations, indecisions, susceptibilities, egocentricities, and yet the true authors remain those who for him were only a name on a jacket, a word that was part of the title, authors who had the same reality as their characters, as the places mentioned in the books, who existed and didn't exist at the same time, like those characters and those countries. The author was an invisible point from which the books came, a void traveled by ghosts, an underground tunnel that put other worlds in communion with the chicken coop of his boyhood. . . ." (Calvino 101-103)

As evidently explained in the above passage, the author having their subjective emotions like ego or indecision or fixations are not the true authors whereas the true authors are only "a name on a jacket," a "part of the title" (Calvino 101), a mere linguistic element, an "invisible point from which the books came" and a "void travelled by ghosts" (Calvino 102). On the other hand, he exists and does not exist at the same time. Intriguingly, the authenticity and credibility of the author are thrown into an unviable and dubious limbo thereby destabilizing his very credible existence. In continuation of such a perception, the narrator of "Chapter seven" conceives of the author as an "alien voice" and a "silent nobody made of ink and typographical spacing" (Calvino 148). 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. Adding a further dimension to the liberation of the text from the authorial ascendancy, the reader Ludmilla in "Chapter five," asserts the textual autonomy by saying that the novel should have its "own growth, like a tree, an entangling, as if of

branches and leaves" (Calvino 92). Through Ludmilla's voice, we hear a reiteration of Derrida's notion of the automation of writing, as exemplified in his epoch-making book *Writing and Difference*, through its extrication from the author. Writing is an automatic activity as it does not originate from the author; rather, the author becomes a mere diaphanous element in the automatic going forth of writing. The author, says Derrida, should leave writing then. He beautifully explains it as: "To leave writing is to be there only in order to provide its passageway, to be the diaphanous element of its going forth . . ." (70). Apart from "writing," Ludmilla also expects "reading" to be cleansed from the last reminiscences of any implicit authorial persuasion through "rediscovering a condition of natural reading, innocent, primitive" (Calvino 92).

It is not just the author who mingles unassuming to the realm of language; rather, it is the whole world that mingles unassumingly into the realm of language as "everything is language (tout est langage)"<sup>iii</sup> (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 boom 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)

Latoria's adoption of a maverick method of reading a novel in "Chapter eight" poses another set back to the author's reign. Instead of reading the book in conformation to the authorial directionality, Latoria reads it electronically using a properly programmed computer that determines the meaning of the text from the order of the frequencies of its linguistic components like "articles," "pronouns," and "particles" (Calvino 186) etc. In addition, the Irish writer Silas Flannery is convinced, in this chapter, that "the whole responsibility of writing weigh on those isolated syllables" (Calvino 189), not on the author. He also continues by saying that it is not he who creates the book; rather the "avalanche of isolated words" (Calvino 189) could construct his book and could express a truth which he himself does not know. Flannery's candid confessions are worth quoting: "Perhaps instead of a book I could write lists of words, in alphabetical order, an avalanche of isolated words which expresses that truth I still do not know, and from which the computer, reversing its program, could construct the book, my book" (Calvino 189). Eliciting a glaringly anti-humanist attitude, such an instance privileges language over the author in the detection of the textual meaning. Such an overturn of the pre-existing man-language relation echoes German philosopher Heidegger's voice in his book *Basic Writing*: "Man acts as though *he* were the shaper and master of language, while in fact *language* remains the master of man" (348). This change, believes Paul Sheehan, is part of a "linguistic turn" that is "quite explicitly antihumanist" (23).

In the final analysis, Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* offers a thorough understanding of the renewed Postmodern perceptions about the role of the author, the reader and the language in the text. Through a radical alterity of vision, Calvino topples the position of the author upside down reducing him from an individual existence to an invisible point easily mixable in the tangles of language. 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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#### End Notes:

<sup>i</sup> It was practiced by poets like John Cage, Jackson MacLow and the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets and a few prose writers of the OuLiPo group including Queneau, Calvino, Georges Perec, Harry Mathews and others.

<sup>ii</sup> Roland Barthes talks about the surrealist “automatic writing” in his essay “Death of the Author” where he says that “automatic writing” is achieved by “entrusting the hand with the task of writing as quickly as possible what the head itself is unaware of” (Barthes 148).

<sup>iii</sup> It is a reference to the famous structuralist principle that there is nothing outside the realm of language and our perception of the world is possible only through language.

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