

# A Postmodernist View: Methods of Subversion in Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*

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## Abstract

Postmodernism has allowed literature to reinvent itself by calling everything into question. Without the restrictions imposed by the classical canon, authors like Borges, Eco, Nabokov and Calvino have had the opportunity to experiment and to explore different ways of subverting the literary tradition. This paper discusses the ways in which Italo Calvino aims to redefine the roles of author, reader and plot in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. At first, the analysis shows how the Italian writer marks the importance of the reader and of the act of reading, and how he tries to undermine the author. The reader becomes a character in the novel and the reading of the novel turns into its plot, while the identity of the author of the novel becomes redundant to the story. The essay also examines the ten different narrations Calvino includes in his main plot as a way of subverting the narrative conventions of the novel. His attempt at making a classification of the texts would normally register as a nonfictional work but the author decides to insert it into his fictional writing. Italo Calvino ultimately uses his methods of subversion to draw attention towards the construction of the plot and other para-textual and meta-textual elements of the novel that might otherwise be ignored in a simple interpretation of its story.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, Methods of Subversion, Italo Calvino, Literature

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## Essay

Literature has always found new ways to adapt its shape and purpose to the continuous changes of the world. Questions that needed to be answered have encouraged authors like Borges, Eco, Nabokov or Calvino to experiment with different ways of writing. In *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, Italo Calvino subverts the traditional roles of author, reader and plot by engaging them in an original and unexpected combination. This way, he succeeds in offering a new perspective on the definition of the literary text.

Calvino describes his view upon the writing process by associating it with the act of playing: "Literature is a combinatorial game that pursues the possibilities implicit in its own material, independent of the personality of the poet, but it is a game that at a certain point is invested with an unexpected meaning" (1997, p. 27). Therefore, he considers the text to be a device that facilitates the revolution against the set parameters of the written word and reveals new meanings. The literary game is also detected by Everman Welch, who argues that Italo Calvino does not deny tradition, but transforms it in order to recreate and re-establish the connection between the plot and its participants (1984, p. 63). This could also be connected with T.S. Eliot's theory of modernism as it describes a reinvention and continuance of the auctorial tradition. The Italian author invests in the past and uses several devices in his novel with the purpose of restructuring his literary discourse.

One of the most important changes Calvino makes is the power he assigns to the reader by using a second person narration. The novel starts by implicating the reader, which until now has been seen as a passive participant in the development of the plot: "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveller*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade" (Calvino, 1981, p. 2). Mariolina Salvatori analyses the beginning of the novel and suggests that

the "I" that says "you" in the very first line of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* is, it does not take long to discover, a "ludic" I, one that, to make the game worth playing, requires a complementary "ludic" attitude in whoever accepts the challenge to play; the alternative to

playing with the I is to be played by the I, like the Lettore, the Lettrice, and the various other readers/characters in the novel (1986, p. 196).

In other words, she considers that Italo Calvino is challenging the reader to get involved in the narrative as a character, thus undermining the authority of the traditional author.

This redistribution of significance that led to placing the reader in the centre of the novel has drawn the attention of many critics who observed several devices of subversion used by the postmodernist writer. Madeleine Sorapure claims that the author of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* undermines his role by creating a fictional author under the same name (1985, p. 703): "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*" (Calvino, 1981, p. 2), "Just a moment, I've almost finished *If on a winter's night a traveler* by Italo Calvino" (Calvino, 1981, p. 255). By doing that, Calvino detaches himself as object of the reader's interest and transforms the lecture of the book into the plot of the novel. Furthermore, Sorapure argues that the writer eludes the reader when "multiplying images of himself throughout the text" (1985, p. 704). He does not only create a character with his namesake, but he also generates two others that seem to act as his alter egos. On one hand, there is Silas Flannery, "the tortured writer", who cannot find his identity as an author and worries about being just another name on the cover of the book: "The novels of Silas Flannery are something so well characterized ... it seems they were already there before, before you wrote them, in all their details.... It's as if they passed through you, using you because you know how to write, since, after all, there has to be somebody to write them...." (Calvino, 1981, p. 133). Further on, this fictional character's identity is separated into that of a man and that of a writer. La Lettrice Ludmilla also insists on the difference between Silas, the writer, and Silas, the narrator:

You are two separate persons, whose relationships cannot interact.... I have no doubt that you are concretely this person and not another, though I do find you very similar to many men I have known, but the one who interested me was the other, the Silas Flannery who exists in the works of Silas Flannery, independently of you, here (Calvino, 1981, p.134).

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By separating the two entities, Calvino proves again that what is important in the reality of its fictional world is still the text and what is confined within it, but not the person behind its making.

On the other hand, there is Ermes Marana who is the one responsible for the fragmentation of the novel, the “metafictionist” as Sorapure calls him, whose wish is of a literature “entirely of apocrypha, of false attributions, of imitations and counterfeits and pastiches”(Calvino, 1981, p. 112). That seems to be Calvino's purpose, seeing that his novel comprises a pastiche of several other genres that create confusion. He declares that a literary work is like a battleground because there is a constant fear of not being able to satisfy the reader (Calvino, 1981, p. 156). Therefore, the reading process is the most important one because without it, a text would not be completely finished. Through the character of the translator, Italo Calvino puts a further emphasis on the destination of a piece of writing and not on the one generating that piece.

What is more is that Marana seems to completely dismiss the function of the writer Silas Flannery, whose style is copied by a machine and turned into a text, making him doubt his authorship: “The only books I recognize as mine are those I must still write” (Calvino, 1981, p. 137). Calvino appeals to the same image when talking about the uses of literature and confirms that literature could be viewed as a machine but the act of reading could only be undertaken by human beings (1997, p. 21). In other words, a reader is considered to be irreplaceable, while the writer might easily be replaced by another person who masters the skill of writing. Michel Foucault predicts Flannery's auctorial crisis by asking a question fundamental for the modernists: “What difference does it make who is speaking?” (1991, p. 120).

The death of the author is discussed more thoroughly by Roland Barthes. He considers the author a product of society who felt the need to connect literary works to the personality of a writer. Barthes argues that the text is the result of the “here and now” and by assigning an author, it only limits its infinite possible interpretations (1977, p. 148). From what the French critic says, one could only conclude that the text breaks the convention of meaning and exists in as many alternatives as the number of readings it gathers. One of the readers discussing this issue at the end of Calvino's

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novel states that even the same reader can have different experiences each time he repeats reading a book:

At every rereading I seem to be reading a new book, for the first time. Is it I who keep changing and seeing new things of which I was not previously aware? Or 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? Every time I seek to relive the emotion of a previous reading, I experience different and unexpected impressions, and do not find again those of before (Calvino, 1981, p.177).

The end of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* thus presents a new setting in which readers keep their autonomy. Calvino engages the Lettore in a community of readers that discuss the various ways a book can be read. The result of their interaction inevitably leads to what Barthes calls "the birth of the reader" (1991, p. 148).

At the same time, with the rise of the reader, some critics have noticed that his empowerment could just be illusive and that the confines of the novel could imprison the reader. Melissa Watts claims that the "authorial manipulation" does not necessarily mean the exclusion of the reader's liberation Roland Barthes was talking about. She suggests the authority of the reader relates to the expectations he has in regards to the development of his own reading (1991, p. 715). This could mean that although the reader is part of the fictional universe, he or she is only interested in what he or she could gain from the ten novels Calvino is starting in his book. On this note, Ian Rankin talks about the two Readers in the novel. One of them, la Lettrice, is considered to be the "pure reader" because she is "reading avidly for the sheer joy of the experience, and her view of the reading act is unquestionably reader-response oriented" (Rankin, 1986, p. 126). As mentioned above, Ludmilla displays a type of behaviour strictly oriented towards enjoying the pleasure of lecture: "Believe.... Why believe? I like to read, really to read" (Calvino, 1981, p. 49).

The male reader, on the other hand, seems to pay more attention to the progress of the plot and Rankin suggests that he gets caught in a "conspiracy whereby texts are faked" (1986, p. 127).

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Therefore, the tension Calvino creates by fragmenting the storyline in ten different others transforms the reader in an avid seeker of the real main plot of the novel, with a beginning and an ending. In his search, he lets himself be influenced by the external plan and consequently falls under the author's control. Furthermore, Melissa Watts argues that the authority of the writer has not been removed from Calvino's novel but there is a confusion that

arises from the simultaneous release of the reader from the traditional constraints of fiction and the imposition of new ones. *Traveler* seems to give the literary stage over to the reader, and yet at every turn, there is the author directing the scene. Perhaps the greatest power possible for those who read is an awareness of the author's constant presence (1991, p. 715).

In other words, the critic suggests that the power of the reader is given by him or her knowing that their reading experience is supervised by the author. However, the feeling of being constrained cannot be eliminated. At the level of the text, it is materialised in the scene where il Lettore is arrested for owning a book that is apparently banned in the country he travels to, a place where 'everything that can be falsified has been falsified' (Calvino, 1981, p. 148). The authority that captures him becomes thus questionable.

Melissa Watts further addresses the way in which the Italian writer subverts the function of the reader and how it manifests throughout the text. She observes that, although the reader is addressed directly by means of the second person narration – "you", his response to what is happening in the novel is limited by the directions the author gives him from beginning to end (Watts, 1991, p.p. 711-2):

Your function was quickly reduced to that of one who records situations decided by others, who submits to whims, finds himself involved in events that elude his control. Then what use is your role as protagonist to you? If you continue lending yourself to this game, it means that you, too, are an accomplice of the general mystification (Calvino, 1981, p. 152).

Otherwise said, although the author claims to give freedom to the reader by making him a protagonist of his book, his literary strategy proves to be more restraining than it should be. Moreover, Watts notices the lack of information that the narrator gives about the reader, turning him into an abstract entity (1991, p. 712):

This book so far has been careful to leave open to the Reader who is reading the possibility of identifying himself with the Reader who is read: this is why he was not given a name, which would automatically have made him the equivalent of a Third Person, of a character (whereas to you, as Third Person, a name had to be given, Ludmilla), and so he has been kept a pronoun, in the abstract condition of pronouns, suitable for any attribute and any action (Calvino, 1981, p. 99).

Addressing the reader directly, Calvino manages to surprise him or her because he gets involved in the action, but at the same time, the reader is no more than just an abstract figure that could be replaced by anybody.

At this point, it could be useful to mention a distinction made by Umberto Eco in his classification of readers. According to him, there is a difference between the empirical reader, the 'concrete' reader of the text, and the model reader, who is able to interpret the text as the author intended. Subverting the typology used by Eco, the reader created by Calvino is meant to manipulate the empirical reader into becoming a model one. The place of this privileged reader is taken by the author himself, according to Joseph Francese (1997, p. 10), because he is the one ultimately supervising the progress of the action.

Familiar with the paradigms of French structuralism, Calvino declares in an interview with Gregory Lucente that structuralists "seek to give a description of the text, of the phenomenon, which is not the same as an *interpretation*" (1985). The purpose of the Italian author is to devise a plot that does not fall under the classic paradigm of the narrative construction but one that embodies a text about a text, a metafictional work. The ten stories only sampled in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* could be viewed as an attempt to classify the different types of novels existing at that moment. These ten

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stories Calvino put together in the same textual universe form a register of novels, a classification viewed as a nonfictional genre. The Italian writer manages to subvert the role of the plot by inserting this genre into a fictional writing. At the same time, the purpose of making a record of different types of texts implies that the chaos presumably created by the change in rules is still ruled by order.

Further on, Peter Bondanella considers that "Calvino's novel contains successive false narrative starts, whose lack of success constitutes his completed successful novel" (2003, p. 175). In other words, the reading experience *il Lettore* and *la Lettrice* gain through searching for the right text, among the ten novels introduced in Calvino's work, is ultimately satisfactory. The process undertaken by them is more important than finding out the conclusion of the books they have started. Towards the end, the reader cannot find any book anymore but it does not matter because the experiment is complete. This opinion is reviewed towards the end of the Italian text, in the words of one of the readers from the library:

Do you believe that every story must have a beginning and an end? In ancient times a story could end only in two ways: having passed all the tests, the hero and the heroine married, or else they died. The ultimate meaning to which all stories refer has two faces: the continuity of life, the inevitability of death (Calvino, 1981, p. 180).

At this point, Calvino surprises the reader by writing a traditional ending. The story of the Reader and the Other Reader finds its resolution in their marriage and the plot is once again subverted from the fragmented narrative of the inner frame to this conventional development of the action in the outer frame of the story.

While the two Lettori continue their life together, there is still the question of death present in that reader's statement. The way Calvino structured the text and, more importantly, the inspiration he took from *The Arabian Nights*, could provide an explanation in that matter. According to Foucault, the main purpose behind Scheherazade's fragmented storytelling was to "keep death outside the



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circle of life" (1991, p. 102). By inserting the uncompleted stories into the novel, Calvino desires to keep his readers' interest and consequently avoid the death of the author.

This theory agrees with Markey's observation that books could be preserved into eternity as long as they have readers to experience their texts (1999, p. 119). Therefore, the act of reading forms the grounds for the perennity of the written word. Moreover, the third reader taking part in the last scene at the library talks about a "book of all books", that comprises his literary experience: "Every new book I read comes to be a part of that overall and unitary book that is the sum of my readings" (Calvino, 1981, p. 178). The statement is in favour of the *tabula rasa* theory according to which knowledge is gathered in time and through experience. The innocent reader is not initiated into the reading process and is left to discover the world of fiction by himself, just as the editor Cavedagna remembers himself having done: "You know? As a boy, in order to read, I would hide in the chicken coop..." (Calvino, 1981, p. 67).

The sign that Calvino's work is an experiment in the literary field could be found in the title of the novel itself. Mariolina Salvatori notices the "if" in the title of the novel that could suggest "a hypothesis, a hypothetical reading that the reader must continue to question, test, and reread, rewrite, reread" (1986, p. 31). In her opinion, Calvino's work implies a re-evaluation of the conventional paradigms of the novel. Moreover, by introducing the hypothetical in the beginning, he offers the reader what Ruth Dunster recognizes as the Coleridgean "willing suspension of disbelief" (2010). This would mean that the reader is being prepared from the start to witness a new approach of the written word.

Italo Calvino has never stopped playing the game of reordering the literary space while writing *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. He invests in a metafictional text that analyses the role of reader and author beyond the simple acknowledgement of their existence and offers a new perspective upon writing that places the reader in the centre of the literary process. What is important is that the Italian author masters the principles of narratology as well as Hesse's Joseph Knecht masters those of epistemology. Through his methods of subversion, he proves himself as a true Magister Ludi.

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