

The apolitical in Italo Calvino's *if on a winter's night a traveler*

Tarun Deep Singh

Department of English & Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh, Punjab, India

Abstract

In *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, by showcasing “you” the Reader’s rite of passage from the outer world to the self-reflexive, self-referential inner world, one of fiction and fictionality, Italo Calvino puts across his own thoughts on Literature and its function in our society, which, according to us, is informed by a completely apolitical vision, divesting it of any critical or interventional agency. He reduces the acts of reading and writing to a mere aesthetic and formalist game, an isolated “play” of signifiers, detached from any existing material reality outside of these acts. Thus, Calvino is able to produce a perfect embodiment of the Derridean post-structuralist thought but, as a consequence, the vitality and vigor of his fiction suffers. Through a reading of the element of apolitical in the novel under consideration, we seek to establish the entrenchment of the aforementioned school of thought in Calvino’s fictional universe.

Keywords: derridean “play;” barthesian “jouissance;” aestheticism; neo-realism; narcissistic narrative; lukacsian formalism; self-reflexivity; metafictionality; textual pleasure

Introduction

This paper aims to highlight the apolitical, insular and detached nature of fiction which Calvino espouses in his 1979 novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. The politics which one finds Calvino engaging in is of an uncommitted nature towards anything and everything outside the ambit of literary “play” (a term Jacques Derrida made a fetish out of) and the pleasure (“jouissance”, as Roland Barthes terms it in his essay titled “From Work to Text”) a reader derives out of it. Consequently, the novel is completely distanced from the external world and exists in a fantasy world of its own creation, with little or no bearing on the real world that exists outside of it and that is shaped by all kinds of social, political, and economic forces that find no articulation in this fictional world, which seems to be insular from these (very real) forces. This novel comes across as a creative expression of the dictum “Art for Art’s sake,” the watchwords of the late 19th and early 20th century literary movement known as Aestheticism, and we must take an issue with this kind of an approach towards Literature, for its debilitating effect on the social and political function of fiction in the real world. Our appraisal of the novel in question on these grounds might come across as pedantic or didactic and one might even be tempted to ask if Arts and Literature are at all obliged to fulfill a social role in the modern world, to contribute in our better understanding of it and its various components through an analysis of those parts and the underlying forces at work that go into the making of the fabric of a society. But it is not for this paper to argue for the advantages of a suchlike outlook and the desirability of the kind of Literature which arises out of this attitude towards it, which we unequivocally espouse. It is only aimed at highlighting an absence of these ideals from Calvino’s present work of art, which is no doubt thoroughly entertaining and engaging a read, invoking, in the words of Gabriel Perri Silberblatt, a “thoroughly seductive fantastical universe of a Borgesian literary experiment” (24), and not as dry or mechanical as some of the novels which follow the ideals mentioned above tend to become sometimes. The

genius and creative talent of Calvino is not under scrutiny and admittedly we are in no position to pass any judgments on that; this paper is more of a lament for what could have been, keeping in mind the immense potential which Calvino exhibited as a young novelist when he began writing immediately after the Second World War. His very first novel *The Path to the Spider's Nest*, first published in Italian under the original title in 1947, clearly embodied the principles of “Neo-Realism, with its truthful, uncontrived storytelling, interest in the common worker, and concern for the devastating effects of war” (Silberblatt 5). However, as he grew older and matured as a writer, he transformed into a “solipsistic thinker removed from the exigencies of history” (Ricciardi 1073), shifted his allegiances from an uncompromising portrayal of reality of the external world to the game of “formal playfulness” (Silberblatt 3), which became the overriding concern of his creative endeavor. As Alessia Ricciardi puts it, “Calvino epitomizes this tendency insofar as his writings uphold an idea of literature as a formalist game that avoids any costly serious “human association” (1074) and nowhere is this obsession with literature as only a “formalist game” more evident than in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, hereafter referred to as *Winter's Night*, which is a narcissistic narrative of the very act of narration, a story about the writing and reading of a story, which is framed by the story of the protagonist’s unsuccessful attempts at completing his reading of various novels which he comes across in the chain of events set by his first failure at reading the “mise en abyme” to its completion, apparently written by Calvino himself. Such self-reflexivity, which was a very important tool in the hands of J.M. Coetzee in his novel *Foe* to expose the ethnocentrism and colonizing attitudes of writers of both history and fiction, comes across as an apolitical, a merely ornamental tool in the hands of Calvino who employs it only for the purpose of playing “formalist games” with his readers, which, titillating though they are, are completely devoid of any ideological impetus. *Winter's Night* is the culmination of the literary career of a writer whose creative trajectory has gone

away from his early revolutionary ideals, modes of thought and representation to mere formalism (in Lukacsian sense of the word) and a singular focus on the “stylistic dimension of the work of art...foregoing more ethically responsible engagement with social realities” (Ricciardi 1063). Much like William Wordsworth, who began his literary career under the pervasive influence of French revolutionary ideals but later succumbed to status-quoist and conformist attitudes, thereby completing his transmogrification from Shelley’s “lone star whose light did shine” to Browning’s “lost leader”, a similar decline and complete abandonment of political commitment in Calvino’s literary output is also clearly visible, and we will look at *Winter’s Night* as symptomatic of this jettisoning of political agenda.

At the very outset, Calvino asserts the supremacy of the world of words over the external cultural reality where instant forms of entertainment like television, radio, cinema etc. have replaced books and oral storytelling as the preferred modes of engagement with the fictional world. When he tells “you” the Reader (not to be confused with the actual reader of the novel, although there is an attempt to create an association between the two throughout the novel) to shut out the voice of a television [“Tell the others right away, “No, I don’t want to watch TV! Raise your voice-they won’t hear you otherwise” (Calvino 3)], it is a clear insistence on his part with the reader to come to his own fold, the world of reading and writing, which becomes an important injunction not just for the reader, whose world has been monopolized by the different and various modes of communication, but also for the writer himself, whose own world and even sustenance and livelihood have been brought under considerable threat by these new developments in technology. This assertion of one’s own profession is not problematic in itself but it grows to a more and more uncomfortable pitch which ultimately results in a complete exclusion of the outer reality from the fictional world and “you” the Reader is firmly entrenched within this insular fictional world only. Here we see an artistic rendering of the injunctions of another of his characters in his 1972 novel *Invisible Cities*, Marco Polo, who warrants us to “recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure” (qtd. in Ricciardi 1070). In *Winter’s Night* it seems as if the world of Reading and Literature only is the “not inferno,” while all else, certainly the external reality, could be discarded as inferno. Such an obsession with his own art lends to the air of self-reflexivity which is all-pervasive in Calvino’s fictional world in this novel; even the frame story of this novel revolves around a fictitious international conspiracy by the translation scam artist Ernes Marana, the jilted lover of an avid reader Ludmilla, who is out there on a mission to sabotage any attempt at reading by anyone, including Ludmilla, by filling the international market with fake, apocryphal books to get even with her. Even though it is not mentioned in the novel itself, it is possible that because of this “you” the Reader is frustrated in his attempt to read the whole book at the very beginning, the novel which also has the title *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, which leads him to reading nine other incipits, broken off at the very point they begin to become interesting. The actual reader, who is identified with “you” the Reader, hereafter referred to as only Reader (with a capital R), gets intertwined in the same process of reading the incipits, much to his/her bewilderment, even exasperation. This helplessness and the lack of agency of both Reader and reader are characteristic of Calvino’s politics

that he reinforces through his poetics, which evince an undesirability to share in the structures of power with the reader. “(T) he power the author displays in his game with the characters is not limited to the fictional level alone. The reader outside the text...is never outside the ludic manipulations of the text” (Fink 101). Despite all the problems facing the Reader and the reader, both carry on with their reading because of the “irresistible attraction of a story” (Fink 102). The writer manipulates the “poetics of desire” (Fink 102) to keep both the readers entangled in his web of literary games, whose rules are decided by the writer himself and the only choice the reader has is to play along because of his need to know. “In Calvino’s game we, the readers, risk frustration: letting ourselves be dragged into the story, we are bound to suffer from aroused and dissatisfied curiosity” (Fink 97). This creates an impression of a helpless reader, at the mercy of the sadistic writer, dependent upon the latter to achieve the textual pleasure, which indeed becomes synonymous with sexual pleasure because of the similarities between the male sexual pursuit and the stop-start structure of the novel. These constant interruptions and the many frustrations of culmination which arise from the cutting short of the ten embedded stories in the novel become synonymous with “coitus interruptus” (Mary McCarthy, qtd. in Fink 102). These observations highlight the fact that this novel and its writer both are single-mindedly concerned only with the textual and fictional world, and its operations on the reader, rather than engaging with any concrete material reality. Calvino’s artistic world is inhabited by the “soul of postmodernism, which is ironic and necrophiliac, doubled back on itself in the autoreflexive mechanisms of metafiction...confined in an intertextual labyrinth...of a wholly literary world” (Carla Benedetti, qtd. in Ricciardi 1063).

This artistic convention results out of the view of Language that Calvino holds up in his novel, which is very similar to the postmodernist and poststructuralist view of language which always eyes it with suspicion and incapable of communicating the true essence of reality, for its essentially mimetic nature. To quote Michael Wood, “Calvino loves and distrusts and displaces language, drives it to its limits and beyond them, devises tests and defeats for it. (It is) his conviction that language is often a form of failure rather than success” (156). This highlights the low stock that Calvino sets with Language in its ability to accurately represent the reality of external world and this outlook is clearly reflected in the novel in question. Such a view of inefficacy of Language to adequately represent a reality that pre-exists it necessarily leads to an erosion of the political impetus behind the fiction and gives rise to a fiction that exists more and more for its own sake. This is precisely the feeling we get from *Winter’s Night*. Such a view of language and the consequent nature of fiction arising out of it must be encountered through the following arguments as presented by Anil Raina in his book *Marxism and Literary Value*:

The truth of no truth that Derrida and his followers arrive at in their “prison-house” may be irrefutable if we view language contemplatively, but as Marx says in *The German Ideology*, language itself must be understood not as a self-sufficient system but as social practice. And as Eagleton argues, there is the more profitable way of viewing language as something we do, as indissolubly interwoven with our practical forms of life. If we are to keep faith the Marxist promise of a better future for man, the practical view of language will have to be preferred over the contemplative one. (10)

But Calvino explicitly abandons this “more profitable way of viewing language” in favor of play of language and complete proliferation of meanings leading to an impossibility of determinacy. To quote Ricciardi, “Calvino’s text clearly adheres to a notion of language as a form of life, not to a notion of language as an evocative and provocative instrument. It should come as little surprise, then, that for Calvino the depiction of the world ultimately describes the process of writing itself” (1072). In *Invisible Cities* (1972) the narrator comments on the conversation between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, who recently acquired the ability to converse with each other by the former’s learning of the latter’s language, thereby replacing their earlier mode of communication which was conducted through movements of hands and gestures. The narrator observes, “You would have said communication between them was less happy than in the past” (qtd. in Wood 156), and one cannot help but observe the pessimistic attitude towards language which Calvino adheres to. Only when a writer values confusion and the so-fetishized “proliferation of meanings” to clarity could this hold well for him. In the ninth chapter of *Winter’s Night*, amidst the confusion of revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries of the country Ataguitania, the writer deliberately and playfully equates liberation with arrest, to represent the bewilderment of the protagonist who is unable to make sense of the Kafkaesque world he is caught up in. No effort is made to situate his peculiar condition in the specific context of the material realities, nor is there an attempt to draw any parallels between the contemporary world and the fictional world of Ataguitania. And the only solace the Reader is offered from his conundrum is an escape into the world of books and fiction, an apolitical withdrawal, which he readily laps up out of his new-found apathy for Reality. Literature is held up on its own, creativity only for the sake of enjoyment with no political purpose whatsoever. This links up all so well with his inclination towards ‘play’ of signifiers, also evident in his 1972 novel in which “the shift from gestures to words (is seen) chiefly as a loss” (Wood 156). One would think that the ability to communicate properly with other human beings rather than an inability of it would be more valued, pleasurable, and “happy”. This view of an impossibility of communication and connection with fellow human beings had begun to take its shape in Calvino’s writings right after his early phase of political commitment had subsided after disillusionment from the Communist cause because of the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary, and finds full articulation in *Winter’s Night* through the kind of ideological landscape it inhabits.

Another important clue to Calvino’s apolitical engagement with literature is to be found in the ideal of the Reader and reading process he holds up for his actual readers. His Ideal Reader is the Other Reader, Ludmilla, and not the Reader, who nevertheless comes close to realizing the ideal in his thirst for stories for their own sake. But Ludmilla “reads one novel after another” (Calvino 44), an exercise Calvino represents as the “condition of natural reading, innocent, primitive...” (92). There is no desire of actively engaging with the text on hand and she wants to read all these novels as mere stories. ““The novel I would most like to read at this moment,” Ludmilla explains, “should have as its driving force only the desire to narrate, to pile up stories upon stories, *without trying to impose a philosophy of life on you*” (92) (Emphasis mine). But is it ever possible for a work of art to not at least communicate, if not

impose, its philosophy of life to its readers? Even Calvino’s novel, which might appear and claim to be not doing this is certainly exhibiting its own viewpoint and imposing its own ideology on its readers through the various narrative techniques involved and through the game he plays with them, as has been shown in the preceding arguments. The worldview which it embodies and holds up is of fragmentariness and disjointedness of the reality of modern life and its narrative structure holds up this viewpoint in the typically postmodernist vein. A phobia and fear of this reality is cultivated in Calvino’s novel, against which is help up the shield of the world of fiction, an action symbolized by Ludmilla’s refusal to accompany the Reader to the publication house to enquire about the editing/binding/printing mistakes in the four books they both have read till that point. She tells him,

There’s a boundary line: on one side are those who make books, on the other those who read them. I want to remain one of those who read them, so I take care always to remain on my side of the line. Otherwise the unsullied pleasure of reading ends, or at least is transformed into something else, which is not what I want. (93)

The unsavory effects of getting embroiled with the real world soon begin to show upon the Reader’s existence when he gets involved in the international conspiracy involving Ernes Marana, conspirators from the cult of Apocryphal Power, fascist dictators, and warring nations in the ninth section. When a police officer on an airport snatches the banned book from him in Ataguitania, it is symbolic of his loss of reading ability and becoming a non-reader like Irnerio, who is knee-deep into the realities and complexities of the real world. For all these absurd events happening to the Reader, the world of fiction is offered as only a solace from reality, not as a complementary entity to help him understand it better. This amounts to making the world of fiction perform only an escapist function. What is the writer hinting at here? Is he completely against any overlaps between the real world and the world of fiction? Is this novel an allegorical representation of the ‘Fictive versus Experienced’ through which he cautions the readers (Us) to not engage with Reality? It would certainly be more conducive for Calvino the writer’s vested interests that the reader should only exist in a relationship with the world of writing. As Ricciardi rightly alleges, Calvino’s is “a shallow postmodernism, extremely moderate and finally acquiescent to the cultural market interests” (1076). When Ludmilla meets the author Silas Flannery, she does cross the “boundary line” but nothing happens to her. Why? This again has to be explained on the basis of the kind of politics Calvino is encouraging, although in a very subtle manner. Because she is the Ideal reader and reads only for the sake of the pleasure that she derives out of it she is saved the trouble which her lover, the Reader, has to go through. In the light of this observation, the novel must be read as a rite of initiation for the Reader who has to learn to keep the outer world apart from the fictional world. Such morally ambiguous upholding of the world of fiction against the ‘ravages’ of reality is further reinforced whenever the Reader inexplicably resorts to the act of reading time and again despite the frustrations he is met with in his task. Calvino deliberately pulls him in this whirlpool, from which there seems to be no escape, even in the most impossible of situations. At the very end of the fifth section, just before the incipit titled *Looks Down in the Gathering Shadow* begins, the Reader meets a yet with another frustration at locating the work he actually wanted to read.

Instead he has a completely unrelated work in his hand and we hear the narrator's voice telling us that "You could tell him it didn't matter, this isn't the novel you were looking for, but partly because you rather like its opening, and partly because...there is nothing for you to do but start reading" (102); the Reader embarks upon yet another reading process, which inevitably will leave him dissatisfied again. One would imagine he should be completely tired by now to be starting off with a yet another novel, what with all those lingering doubts in his mind, but he begins anyway, knowing well in advance he will not be able to finish it in time or carry it home. This necessity to read and engage with the world of fiction is held up as exemplary, and Ludmilla is the epitome of this kind of attitude towards Literature. This novel then becomes a philosophical treatise on the necessity of the act of reading in isolation from the external reality. Thus Ludmilla is held up as the preferred Reader while her sister, the activist-reader Lotaria, is held up for ridicule and contempt by Calvino.

The antipathy of the writer towards Lotaria is representative of his attitude towards any and every theoretical paradigms which seek to explain and unravel the hidden meanings behind a literary work. We come across various snide comments on the practice of Theory and Criticism throughout the length of this novel. Statements like "it would seem that those who use books to produce other books are increasing more than those who just like to read books and nothing else" (93) abound in this novel. The practice of theoretical criticism is seen as creating an industry which ultimately originates from the books of fiction, which are held up as the only important things. In this intermittent critique of Theory and Criticism, one could see Calvino the writer jealously guarding his intellectual treasure and not allowing anyone else to reap benefits from it. While coming across as an extremely insecure practitioner of his art, he is also deliberately trying to keep the role of Literature limited to that of giving pleasure to its reader. Lotaria, being the representative of the section of readers who try to extend the field of interaction of any literary work and debunk the whole concept of autonomy of a work of art, has to be undermined then. It is interesting to point out here that Homer Obed Brown terms her the "non-passive reader" (335); she prefers to combine her literature with the external reality and prefers to understand the former in the light of this reality, as opposed to readers such as the professor Uzzi-Tuzzi, Ludmilla, or the Reader, whose involvement with the literary text is purely based on a relationship of passive receptivity.

Through these arguments we have attempted to bring into light the inversion of Barthes' concept of the "writerly" text, which "requires the active participation of the reader in establishing the meaning of the text" (Vallath 48), at work in Calvino's novel. Despite being a challenging read because of its complex narrative structure and the use of second and third person pronouns, among other strategic narrative ploys, this novel does not force its actual reader to think any farther than the literary world it builds up and he is left to fend off for himself in this world where the play of signifiers reigns supreme over and above everything else, thereby reducing him to the status of a passive spectator as the "formalist game" unfolds in front of his eyes (All masculine pronouns have been used to highlight the similarity of these experiences between the Reader and the actual reader). This kind of literature can be entertaining to read but does not contribute ideologically to the discussions raging around us in the politically charged atmosphere of the modern

world which we inhabit. To quote Raina, "Literature can be a form of play (the free play of human creativity as in Marx's Utopia) but we have not as yet reached the stage where we can afford to play; ours is still an age of struggle" (182). Therefore there is still some time to reach a point where works like Calvino's could be enjoyed uncritically and without any nagging doubts about the morally irresponsible nature of them.

References

1. Brown, Homer Obed. Ordinary Readers, Extraordinary Texts and Ludmilla: Part One. Rev. of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, by Italo Calvino, trans. William Weaver, and *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins, and *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, eds. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman. *Criticism*. 1981; 23(4):335-348. JSTOR. Web. 26 Jan. 2017.
2. Calvino Italo. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. Trans. William Weaver. London: Vintage, 1998. Print.
3. Fink Inge. The Power behind the Pronoun: Narrative Games in Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. *Twentieth Century Literature*. 1991; 37(1): 93-104. JSTOR. Web. 19 Jan. 2017.
4. Raina Anil. *Marxism and Literary Value*. New Delhi: Prestige, 2002. Print.
5. Ricciardi Alessia. Lightness and Gravity: Calvino, Pynchon, and Postmodernity. *Comparative Literature*. Spec. issue of *MLN*. 1999; 114(5):1062-1077. JSTOR. Web. 27 Jan 2017.
6. Silberblatt Gabriel Perri. *Revising, Re-visioning: Italo Calvino and the Politics of Play*. N.d.: N.pag. <https://apps.carleton.edu/curricular/english/assets/Gabriele_Silberblatt_Calvino_Comps_Webcopy.pdf>
7. Vallath Kalyani. ed. *What about Theory?* Thiruvananthapuram: ESchool-Vallaths, 2011. Print.
8. Wood Michael. *Hidden in the Distance: Reading Calvino*. *The Kenyon Review* ns. 1998; 20(2):155-170. JSTOR. 2017.