

COMMENT ON THE TWENTIETH CENTURY LATIN-AMERICAN NOVELIST ITALO CALVINO'S *IF ON A WINTER'S NIGHT A TRAVELER*

Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* has been described as a dazzling post-modernist masterpiece which combines a love story, a detective story and a sardonic dissection of the publishing industry in a scintillating allegory of reading. Based on a witty analogy between the reader's desire to finish the story and the lover's desire to consummate his or her passion, *If on a Winter's Night* is the tale of two bemused readers whose attempts to reach the end of the same book are comically and constantly frustrated. It is the *Arabian Night's* of our day.

The book has been translated from the original Italian by William Weaver with an introduction by Peter Washington.

Perhaps the single-most striking development in 20th Century culture is the re-discovery of polyphony and with it the realization that all literary texts are to some degree anthologies of tone, style and genre. This has long been obvious in the great epic poems of antiquity—*The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, and the Sagas—and scholars have persuasively demonstrated their emergence from the mass of rhymes and riddles, myths, songs and stories which sounded through the ancient world, but it has also become clear that novels, too, derived from and reveal an equally rich variety of sources, literary and otherwise.

Italo Calvino was born in 1923 in Santiago de Las Vegas, Cuba, to Mario and Eva Calvino, both botanists. The family soon moved to the Italian Riviera at San Remo where Mario Calvino was curator of the botanical gardens. He died in 1985 following a cerebral hemorrhage on 19th September in Siena. Pier Paolo Pasolini was born shortly before him and Pirandello-Svevo's *The Confessions of Zeno* and Hemingway's *Three Stories and Ten Poems* appeared at about the same time. It was about the period when King Victor Emmanuel authorised voluntary fascist militia and the Italians bombarded Greek-held Corfu after the murder of an Italian general on the Greco-Albanian Frontier. The time also marked the end of the Ottoman Empire. Coolidge was US President and Baldwin Prime Minister in U.K.

In the year of his death, appeared Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved*. Shortly before his death, in 1984 to be exact, Reagan called the USSR an 'evil empire' and proposed 'Star Wars'. The famine in Ethiopia occurred at about the same time.

If one had to name a particular moment when it became clear that all literature is, as it were, 'anthological', it would probably be the modernist *annus mirabilis* of 1922, the years of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*. Eliot's poem depends largely on quotation; Joyce's novel partly on pastiche, and these works take the anthology to what might seem to be its logical limits—were it not for the dazzling post modernist achievement of Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, the novel which prompted the reflections. For Calvino deploys a selection of fictional styles which makes even Joyce look tame. He does not merely copy existing writers; he invents ten new ones (whose work nevertheless remains strangely reminiscent of books which we feel we know but cannot name).

Each of his ten writers contributes an opening chapter to the novel which the comedy—or should one call it farce—arises from the protagonist's increasingly desperate and confused attempts to locate the subsequent chapters of the ten novels. So Calvino's story constitutes an anthology of opening narrative gambits: what his imagined writer Silas Flannery calls *incipits*. Anyone who has written anything, from a business letter to a three-volume novel, knows how difficult (and how vital) it is to find the right opening words, and at one level this book is a virtuoso display of how to overcome that difficulty in a dozen different ways; it is, in other words, a treatise on writing. Yet, at the same time, it is also a treatise on reading. This is made clear at the start of the book when, with his own celebrated *incipit*—'you are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*'—the author establishes the magical atmosphere, at once intimate, absorbing and thrilling, that we associate with setting down to read one's favourite stories. But this too is only the first of many beginnings as the novel opens out into a wonderfully comic and encyclopedic account of the ways in which our reading (like our writing) is affected by factors outside what seems to be the most private of experiences: by disposition, by environment, by our relations with others, by physiology, even by posture.

These opening words present us with a series of oppositions between terms which are mutually dependent: reading and writing, public and private, body and mind, the self and others. And as we read on (conscious of our own posture, environment and disposition), we realise that this novel apparently made only out of preliminaries, is also about what comes next, about the relationship between beginning and continuing. Silas Flannery contemplates a cartoon of Snoopy sitting at a typewriter, captioned with the words 'It was a dark and stormy night . . .' and reflects how

The romantic fascination produced in the pure state by the first sentences of the first chapter of many novels is soon lost in the continuation of the story: it is the promise of a time of reading

that extends before us and can comprise all possible developments. I would like to be able to write a book that is only an *incipit*, that maintains for its whole duration the potentiality of the beginning, the expectation still not focused on an object. But how could such a book be constructed?

It is in quest of a solution to this problem that we embark with the Reader addressed in the opening sentence—the Reader who is also the protagonist of the action of a crazy odyssey (the literary allusion seems especially appropriate) through a series of ever stranger and apparently unrelated opening chapters which are distinct from the novel we are reading, and yet somehow a part of it. On the way, we encounter an extraordinary collection of literary forms and genres—including a love story, a mystery, a political satire, a mock-literary biography and parody of the campus novel. In addition, Calvino offers us a meditation on the current state of fiction and a wry commentary on the publishing trade. Even the titles of the ten stories interleaved between the chapters are used to make up a poem which is itself a reflection of the narrative. And all this is a book less than half the length of *Ulysses*.

Such a description is bound to make *If on a Winter's Night* sound dauntingly clever and difficult, and it is true that the novel goes far beyond conventional summary. Even worse, any attempt to summarise it will suggest that the book is 'literary' in the bad sense: inward-looking, self-referential, clever. If there is one thing worse than the pile of biographies in a bookshop, is it not the plague of novels about novels, novels about writers, novels about academics who are writers writing novels about academics writing novels? Self-reflexiveness, which once seemed to liberate modernist and post modernist fiction from the chains of naive realism, now threatens to mire it in a muddy hole of narcissism. Yet, although *If on a Winter's Night* is breathtakingly complex and self-conscious (there are moments when it quite literally makes one gasp with astonishment), it is neither alarming nor depressing. On the contrary, this is one of the most accessible and enchanting novels written in the last fifty years.

If on a Winter's Night explores all these relationships in a wonderfully witty way, wittiest of all when it comes to the link between love and literature. The connection between the two—between, as it were, erotics and hermeneutics—was not a new theme for Calvino who had already touched on it, twenty years earlier in 'The Adventure of a Reader,' a piece later collected in *Difficult Loves* (1970). In this story, a man looks forward each year to his reading holiday. Part of the pleasure is thinking beforehand about the new novels and the favourite books he will take with him. Calvino, in this story, combines a meditation on the delights of re-reading with a playful spray of allusions to the great masterpieces of European literature which his protagonists

use to make sense of his own life. For Amadeo lives vicariously (though fascinated by action, he is yet another Calvino protagonist who “has tended to reduce his participation in active life to the minimum”), preferring to find excitement in stories. But when he arrives at the beach complete with his cushion, his towel and his book, he is distracted from his reading by an attractive woman. Inevitably, the two make love, and Amadeo is taken away from his book; the comedy arises from his attempt to continue reading at all costs—attempts which involve him in comic contortions to keep the pages of his book in view even during intercourse.

There are many anticipations of *If on a Winter's Night* here—the counterpart of loving and reading, the investment of the text with literary allusions, and above all the careful intercutting of different narrative levels as Amadeo's active life, his inner life, and his reading life all intermingle. There are also crucial differences. In 'The Adventure of a Reader', the unnamed woman dislikes reading: idly leafing through a women's magazine, she resents the fact that Amadeo's attention is distracted from her by a book. She in turn distracts him from the book. Reading and physical desire appear to be opposites, or at least mutually exclusive in this story: love belongs to the world of action and engagement which Amadeo has foresworn in favour of literature and to which he returns briefly and reluctantly.

Yet though here is a sense in which every reader writes the book he reads, paradoxically the writer is the one person excluded from such an activity by virtue of having already written the text. Thus the reading figure comes to signify not only the reader's pleasure but also the writer's alienation, both from the reader and from his own text. As Beckett said, apropos Marcel Proust, 'Art is the apotheosis of solitude.' The very medium of language which unites reader and writer also drives them apart.

To read a book, to love a person, it is necessary to be other than that book and that person, and we read in order to overcome our otherness. When the image of the absorbed reader re-appears yet again in the very last lines of the book, it comes upon us no more gently as an ending to the comedy, as the protagonist reads in bed with his wife by his side. So the story which began with the image of solipsism—'Let the world around you fade'—ends with the most intimate form of involvement. Yet even here, reading comes between the Reader and another. The book is indeed both a refuge and a barrier, a symbol of communion and a sign of our absolute solitude.

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