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Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*: a Conscious Textual Play

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Abstract:

Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* is a conscious textual play with various techniques such as authorial interruption, reader's participation, open-structure, non-linearity, fragmentation, multiplicity, and Intertextuality. The author projects his presence and the status of the fiction as a mere work of art all the way through the work in various modes of textual play such as commenting on the process of writing fiction, the reader reading the fiction, the author appearing in the fiction as one of the characters of the fiction in his/her own identity, the reader as the character of the fiction, seeking attention through the beginning and the ending of the fiction, transcending of time and space, referring to other existing or fake works of art, and interpolation of classical works of art. This article analyses how effectively Calvino deconstructs the traditional novel form and creates a new structure which lays bare the process of writing/reading a text.

Keywords: metafiction, self-conscious narrative, intertextuality, textual play, frame-breaking.

Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, a perfect introduction to metafiction, is a narrative carnival with a playful text mocking at the existing order in reading literature. The reader in pursuit of the text is the main theme of the novel. By using these techniques, the author intends to hinder the linear movement of the plot and the regular course of reading the text. The reading process of the reader is interrupted so as to prevent from getting engrossed with the story. In the extreme case, metafiction novels turn to be self-conscious to seek the reader's attention interpreting a typical event in a strange mode.

Patricia Waugh in her *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* makes a list of metafictional characteristics:

...the over-obtrusive, visibly inventing narrator...ostentatious typographic experiment...explicit dramatization of the reader...Chinese-box structures...incantatory and absurd lists...over-systemized or overtly arbitrarily arranged structural devices...total breakdown of temporal and spatial organization of narrative...infinite regress...dehumanization of character, parodic doubles, obtrusive proper names...self reflexive images...critical discussions of the story

within the story...continuous undermining of specific fictional conventions...use of popular genres...and explicit parody of previous texts whether literary or non-literary...In all of these what is foregrounded is the writing of the text as the most fundamentally problematic aspect of that text (21-22).

The frame-breaking technique is used in many postmodern fictions. For example, the narrator in Federman's *Double or Nothing* insists that "this is not [...] a Jewish story" (59), and in the same way the narrator of *Take It or Leave It* claims that "[I don't want to insist too much on the Jewish side of this story but one cannot avoid it altogether I just hope you guys don't make too much out of it]" (231). Federman bracketed off the latter statement from the rest of the discourse by his own square brackets. *Take It or Leave It* begins like this:

I'm not going to make you weep / o-o / with all the sad stories he told me and yet if I wanted to tell you all the crap he told me (the trains the camps) if I wanted to describe in details and realistically all the misery and suffering he endured (the lampshades the farms the noodles) we would never get out of here / o-o / ah yes his entire family remade into lampshades (father mother sisters ah yes uncles aunts cousins too) you wouldn't believe it (wiped out)! (192).

Metanarrative devices like frame-breaking are used to slow down the narrative course as they usually refer to old texts. It takes the reader to the previous text and then brings back to the current. Therefore, the reader is demanded to make a relationship with the previous and the current text and also the reader has to interpret the underlying meaning based on the intertextual device used in the current text.

Contemporary metafiction, in particular, foregrounds 'framing' as a problem, examining frame procedures in the construction of the real world and of novels. The first problem it poses, of course, is: what is a 'frame'? What is the 'frame' that separates reality from 'fiction'? Is it more than the front and back covers of a book, the rising and lowering of a curtain, the title and 'The End'? (Waugh 28)

We can find the most of these common self-conscious features of metafiction in Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* protruding through the text. *The novel* was originally written in Italian and was translated in to English by William Weaver. The peculiar structure of this book was inspired by Italo Calvino's involvement with the *Oulipo* group, a club founded in 1960s in France to bring together writers and mathematicians who wanted to discuss new ways of structuring art.

If on a Winter's Night a Traveler is noticeably probed by several critics as an untraditional novel and a deconstruction of modernism. The novel, being a critic on reading experience, redefines our approach to reading a text. It "tells us how we read, what we do while reading, what we want as readers, as well as what the writer wants" (Lauretis 135).

Written in the second person pronoun, the novel addresses "You, the Reader" as its main character. When the book was published in 1979, it created a lot of discussion as it was a highly

experimental style of narration. Things get crazy when the reader realised that he/ she is the main character of the novel he/ she is reading. Due to printing error, the story gets majorly interrupted. The same is continued another ten times when the former error is attempted to be rectified. It leads You through a plot that involves corrupt dictators, a torturous romance, and a worldwide book conspiracy. All these are put together into a book of twenty-two parts and every odd-numbered section describes our worldwide quest to finish the many books we have started reading, and every even-numbered section is the first chapter of one of these fictional books.

The story begins in a train station where the narrator introduces himself as someone who is involved in some sort of grand plot that he doesn't fully understand. When this story becomes interesting, it breaks off because of an error with the book's printing. Discouraged, you, the Reader, return to the bookstore where you bought it and meet Ludmilla, the other Reader who has had the same problem. Now you not only want to read the book for its own sake, but also to get a chance of starting a conversation with Ludmilla. You start pursuing both Ludmilla and the book .You run into a crazy professor of dead languages named Uzzi-Tuzii and also meet Lotaria, Ludmilla's sister, who reads novels only to project her political and overbearing theories onto them.

As the novel unfolds, you begin to read other books, only to have them break off the same way the first one did. Eventually, you go to the books' publisher and demand an explanation. A man named Mr. Cavedagna explains that a fraudulent translator named Ermes Marana has intentionally sent the entire publishing house into chaos by swapping books' titles, contents, and authors until it seems almost impossible to set everything back in order. In the meantime, you continue to come across new novels that Marana has counterfeited only to find yourself completely engrossed. For one reason or another, you are never able to get past a first chapter. The search for an explanation sends you poring over Marana's letters, which eventually lead you to a reclusive old author of detective fiction named Silas Flannery. After confronting him, you learn that Marana might be in Ataguitania, and go there in search of what you are not sure of.

After landing in Ataguitania, you encounter a woman who goes by many different names, but who you are certain is Ludmilla's sister, Lotaria. When you arrive in the country, the police swipe the book you were trying to read and you find yourself entangled in some insane war between dictators and revolutionaries. Thwarted in all failed readings, you move to a library that seems to have copies of all the books you have begun to read. While at the library, you encounter numerous readers, one of whom seems to point out a secret buried within all of the books You have been trying to read. You will have to finish the book to find out what. After he explains to you that stories traditionally have only two endings, marriage and death, you decide that he wants to marry Ludmilla.

Postmodernism shatters the authorial supreme power and prefers the relationship between the reader and the text in the interpretation of the text. The author's role is limited to the writing of the text and the reader continues the role of the author in decoding the text. The seminal works

of Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author* and Michel Foucault's *What is an Author?* Discuss the transcendence of the role of the reader as the interpreter. Jean- Baudrillard stresses on the importance of sign and image with loss of reality as the predominant feature of postmodernism and Jean- Francois Lyotard expresses his skepticism towards grand narratives of human progress. The critical theories propounded by the postmodern critics like Patricia Waugh, Linda Hutcheon or Mark Currie are based on these notions and they mainly question the arbitrary nature of language which allows any way of interpretation and consequently ends up exposing the world inside the text as a mere linguistic construction.

Patricia Waugh makes a note on *Winter's Night* in her *Metafiction*:

The more the author appears, the less he or she exists. The more the author flaunts his or her presence in the novel, the more noticeable is his or her absence outside it. Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* is a fictional completion of Barthes's statement: that the death of the author makes possible the birth of the reader (Barthes 1977b, pp. 142—9). It is suggested that the narrator, the traveller, is an 'I' who is possibly the 'I' of the author addressing his readers ('by the very fact of writing "I" the author feels driven to put into this "I" a bit of himself'; *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, p. 15). He is also an 'I' who talks to the characters in the novel, and therefore exists at the level of story and at the level of discourse. Finally, as an 'I', he becomes part of the reader's own subjectivity ('because I am called "I" . . . this alone is reason enough for you to invest a part of yourself in the Stranger "I"; p. 15)' (134).

The most acclaimed ideologies of Barthes and Foucault on the role of the author has to be reviewed as the authorial power is reestablished in metafiction texts in the form of authorial interruption and textual play. While the reader shares the role of the author in creating and interpreting the text, the author reemerges throughout the text and establishes her/his immanent existence. The writer of metafiction invites the reader to participate in and make comments on his novels and thus establishes a new relationship between the author, the text and the reader.

John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* declares the reestablished authorial power:

The novelist is still a god, since he creates (and not even the most aleatory avant-garde novel has managed to extirpate its author completely); what has changed is that we are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing; but in the new theological image, with freedom our first principle, not authority. (1969)

Calvino's metafictional narrative frames the beginnings of ten unique novels. This type of structure allows Calvino the opportunity to insert his own thoughts and opinions on theories of reading and writing. Eventually Calvino exercises total authorial control over the characters, the plot and the structure of the novel and also he controls us as readers of the novel. By creating a

game-like novel and controlling the characters like the characters of a video game that have no control for themselves but simply act according to the way they are programmed. Calvino acts as the ultimate game-creator/game-master who controls both the characters he creates and the real players of this game-like novel, the readers. As readers we become caught up in Calvino's playful language and his narrative tricks, but on another level we are subject to Calvino's metafictional discourse. We cannot ignore the sections of the novel that deal with aspects of writing, authorship, and publishing in ways that reflect Calvino's own opinions and feelings. By speaking his opinions through his characters, Calvino is persuading us to identify with him, and is therefore able to maintain his position of control and authority. Thus, through the playful use of metafiction Calvino can achieve the creation of a novel that is self-consciously reflective.

In *Winter's Night*, the author invites the reader to come and get absorbed in the story. "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade" (*Winter's Night* 3). In the first chapter of the novel, the author keeps commenting on the reader and directs the reader on how to read a novel. But in contrast, by his interruption, the author prevents the reader in the beginning itself from the possibility of an uninterrupted forward moving story. Wherever there arises a possibility of a forward movement in the plot, the author carefully avoids his interference. The author calls the reader's attempt to get the text from Lotaria as an act of trying "to gain possession of the novel" (*Winter's Night* 91).

The author of the text plays the role of the game master and controls the game on the textual medium. By opening and closing the text with the reference to the reader's point of view, it superficially seems that it is the reader who decides the beginning and the end of the text. But the underlying fact is that it's the author who plays the key role by creating and controlling the whole situations. Inge Fink, in her interesting article "The Power Behind the Pronoun – Narrative Games in Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*", discusses about the two extremes involved in the process of reading a fiction.

The ludic impetus in the book rests on the simultaneous presence of two forms of literary discourse: on the one hand, there is the traditional novel, in which the reader identifies with more or less realistic characters whom the author, concealed by the "narrative voice," presents to him/her in an apparently objective manner. On the other hand, however, there is the postmodernist self-conscious novel in which the author strives to lay bare the mechanics of literary production, and the reader is constantly reminded of the text's artificiality. (Fink94)

Inge Fink appreciates Calvino for tactfully balancing between these two poles. He never lets his readers forget that they are reading a novel. At the same time, he is not ready to leave the reader to his/ her comfortable zone of emotional relief through identification. The reader's alienation and interest are neutrally retained through metacommentary. As each new novel sequence begins to reach a point of climax, Calvino stops the story and leaves both the Reader in the text and the reader outside the text hanging:

The game strategy emerges clearly from these few passages: by creating suspense the author captures our interest, but he keeps deferring the consummation of our curiosity by means of metacommentary, the complicated proliferation of pronouns, and eventually by arresting the story altogether. (Fink 97)

Calvino continues this strategy throughout the novel and as a result he encourages his readers to join in and take up the quest with the Reader for a complete novel that has not been compromised by a devious translator or a slipping publisher. Yet each time the reader traverses a new beginning, he is denied access to an authentic novel and cannot complete the reading experience. This continuous delay of resolution and wholeness begins to indicate that the reader is seeking something that is unattainable and that the goal of the game is not to find an authentic novel. By seeking authenticity and wholeness the reader has not been following the rules of Calvino's game. Throughout the novel the Reader has been confronted with clues that would lead one to believe that the modern reading experience is not, or does not have to be, whole, complete, and accurate. In the case of each novel there has been some error in printing, translation or binding that has compromised the integrity of the whole novel.

The deliberate focus on the author in modernist fiction is shifted to the reader in postmodern writing. Usually, if the main character of a traditional novel is a narrator, it will be shown through the use of the first person pronoun 'I' which the traditional reader is very much accustomed to. But in *Winter's Night*, the main character is addressed You which signifies the shifting role of the author/ narrator to the reader. This shift in the role of the main character and the consequent shifting of the focus from the author to the reader is successfully achieved by Calvino through the effective usage of the second person pronoun.

Calvino cleverly leads his readers on the same empty quest that the Reader is on so that at the end of the novel we find that we were totally under his control the whole time. We are not merely observers of Calvino's game, but active participants who become trapped by our natural identification with the Reader and his desire for resolution:

Although it might seem as if we are watching the game from a safe place outside the discourse, we are nevertheless the ones for whom it is intended: through identification with the characters and our (erotic) desire to discover the mystery we deliver ourselves into the hands of the author, who wins the game by drawing us into the narrative almost against our will. (Fink 94)

While Calvino does bring us into the narrative game he does not do so overtly. As the author/game-master he uses linguistic tricks to lure his readers into the novel and away from a safe point of observation. As the novel begins, Calvino seems to be speaking to us as readers: "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel *If on a winter's night a traveler*" (*Winter's Night* 3). We are immediately drawn into the novel only to find out that 'you' refers to the Reader, the male protagonist of the novel. By using the second person point of view to address the Reader as 'you', Calvino makes it difficult at times for the real readers of the novel not to insert themselves into the role of Reader:

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 [. . .] and so he has been kept a pronoun, in the abstract condition of pronouns suitable for any attribute and any action. (*Winter's Night*141)

By this intentional invitation, Calvino wants to control the readers of his novel so that they will identify with the second person male Reader. He does so in a subtle and tricky manner so as keep the readers under his influence. He not only controls the game of the novel, but he plays games with us as readers. We feel that at times Calvino is undoubtedly speaking to us, leading us to invest a more personal interest in his topic, yet in the next instant we are forgotten and he has gone back to addressing the Reader.

To further complicate things, Calvino uses the first person point of view in each of the ten beginnings of novels, and as a result we are never sure who the protagonists, "I," are. Each of these beginnings acts as a mini-game sequence in which the "I" character could potentially be played by anyone, as if it were a virtual reality game. By establishing this sense of anonymity within these sequences Calvino leaves them open for us as readers to project ourselves into the game:

this is simply because I am called "I" and this is the only thing you know about me, but this alone is reason enough for you to invest a part of yourself in the stranger "I" (*Winter's Night*15).

Here we feel that Calvino wants us to identify ourselves with the "I" figure, but before we can do so he goes on to tell us that the "I" figure might represent Calvino himself:

Just as the author, since he has no intention of telling about himself, decided to call the character "I" as if to conceal him, not having to name him or describe him, because any other name or attribute would define him more than this stark pronoun; still, by the very fact of writing "I" the author feels driven to put into this "I" a bit of himself, of what he feels or imagines he feels. (*Winter's Night*15)

With this we become more confused because suddenly Calvino is saying that we should identify with "I", but that "I" might also be Calvino. The author is obviously trying to trick us in some way, especially when he goes on to say that maybe no one should identify with "I" because we don't know much about him. Calvino's manipulation of pronouns is also his tool for manipulating his readers and characters. By both drawing us in and then alienating us we become actors in his game, waiting to be put into action once he gives a verbal signal: "as the novelistic plot develops, the reader moves to the sidelines of the discourse and assumes the position of an observer, but he/she is nevertheless bound to the Reader by the magic of the second-person pronoun" (Fink 98).

By the intentional use of the second- person pronoun, Calvino succeeds in bringing the reader outside the text inside as the main character of the novel. Whenever You, the Reader is addressed in the novel, the reader is getting the satisfaction of being a part of the text. Contradictorily, this emotion of participation and identification is ruptured by the function of the same second- person pronoun. On the one hand, the reader watches the author's play by standing outside the text as an observer but unwittingly he/ she is brought into the text and started identifying with the course of the plot which is within a short span disrupted by the use of the second person pronoun. Thus the second person pronoun acts like a wand in a magician's hand or a whip of a ringmaster in controlling the reader according to the author's strategic move.

This surrendering of the reader into the hands of the author is a phenomenon which is paradoxical to the reader- response theory. As a whole, though it seems that the reader is playing the major role, only the author influences the reader throughout the text by his authorial interruption and metacommentary. The reader firmly believes that the interrupting voice which comes cutting across the textual world to the world outside is directly from Calvino.

In *The Uses of Literature* Calvino writes:

The preliminary condition of any work of literature is that the person who is writing has to invent that first character, who is the author of the work...It is always only a projection of himself that an author calls into play while he is writing; it may be a projection of a real part of himself or the projection of a fictitious 'I' – a mask, in short. (Calvino 1986, 111)

Calvino successfully achieves this target of introducing the first character as the author. In the incipit of the text itself the situation is getting complicated when Calvino, the first character we come across in the novel, introduces himself as the author of the novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* calling himself "I" and addressing the reader "You". The reader who starts reading the novel with the typical anticipation is put under a shock. The metacommentary says:

...[J]ust when you are beginning to grow truly interested, at this very point the author feels called upon to display one of those virtuoso tricks so customary in modern writing, repeating a paragraph word for word. (*Winter's Night* 25)

By continuously and effectively applying the same technique, the author successfully retains the reader in a same point and the further progress is thus totally checked. In the next chapter with the title *If on a winter's night a traveler*, there arises a symptom of the story's beginning but the authorial comment interrupts and the movement is stopped in the initial stage itself.

The novel begins in a railway station, a locomotive huffs, steam from a piston covers the opening of the chapter, a cloud of smoke hides part of the first paragraph. . . . The pages of the book are clouded like the windows of an old train, the cloud of smoke rests on the sentences. (*Winter's Night* 10)

While this chapter shows some possibility of the pleasure of reading, it is complicated by the use of “I” again but now not indicating the author but the character- narrator talking about “him”, the author to “You”, the reader.

Watch out: it is surely a method of involving you gradually, capturing you in the story before you realize it-a trap. Or perhaps the author still has not made up his mind, just as you, reader, for that matter, are not sure what you would most like to read.... (*Winter's Night* 12)

The plot is further obscured instead of development as the narrator's voice continuously disturbs the reader by piling, “supposition on supposition in long paragraphs without dialogues, a thick, opaque layer of lead” (*Winter's Night* 14). As we are about to get involved again in the narrative, the metacommentary destroys the continuity by telling us of the “fragments of conversation that seem to have no function beyond that of depicting the daily life of a provincial city” (*Winter's Night* 17). In the second chapter, Calvino writes, “And as you continue, what develops? Nothing: the narration is repeated, identical to the pages you have read! Wait a minute! Look at the page number. Damn! From page 32 you've gone back to page 17!” (*Winter's Night* 25).

When the reader feels like giving up the effort of reading further, a hint to a murmuring effect captivates the reader and so the narrative horizon appears. In self-conscious narratives, it is very difficult to identify where one frame begins and ends in a text as the text opens the possibilities of infinite continuation without involving in a closure. Towards the end of the novel, one of the readers in the library suggests the main Reader to include the children's story too in the list of interrupted books. The end of the novel talks about the beginning. This hide and seek between the author and the reader makes the course of the reading a narrative carnival.

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