

The deconstruction of form as a postmodern way of narration in Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*

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ABSTRACT

Postmodernist fiction with the spirit of questioning dethrones the conventional supremacy of form wherein the idea of stable narration, clear-cut viewpoints, omniscient narration, transparent and objective narration, and authenticity are highlighted. Postmodernists such as Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, and Lyotard have rejected the conventional tools of representation. Rationality, logicity, sensory data, intuitive recollection, and even language are not considered as reliable sources of knowledge for either ontology or epistemology. With the postmodern radical questioning of the very ground on which they exist, those parameters cannot be thought as reliable or authentic sources of knowledge. The present study shows how Calvino deconstructs the form of novel in the process of narration. The form itself becomes a slippery ground on which no stable narration can rest.

Calvino's novel becomes depthless with only surfaces. Calvino from the beginning to the end keeps the story ironically stalled and yet moving. The story goes nowhere except exposing its own self-referential problems or metafictional play. The writer himself confesses that, "instead the sentences continue to move in vagueness, greyness, in a kind of no man's land of experience reduced to the lowest common denominator" (12). The narrator or in other words the writer himself does not fix the novel to fixities as the movement of the novel simply wavers in the narratorial play. The narrator does not impose fixed meanings to the sentences or does not guide the novel to just one direction. In fact, the novel moves in a circular way going nowhere. The narrator mentions his dilemma: "Where would I go out to? The city outside there has no name yet, we don't know if it will remain outside the novel or whether the whole story will be contained within its inky blackness" (14). Ironically, the narrator identifies with the general ignorance of the reader. The "we" in the quotation suggests this phenomenon. This unreliability or helplessness, as opposed to the godlike superiority of the realist fiction, is found in numerous postmodern fictions.

Calvino establishes an unusual relationship between the reader and the narrator, in which the narrator seeks the reader's partnership not only in the functioning of the novel but also in all the narratorial devices that are prompted in the novel. The reader becomes one of the characters who also partakes in the collective play endorsed by Calvino in the novel. Every now and then, the narrator calls upon the reader seeking his/her partnership in the building of the novel. In fact, the writer in the functioning and development of the novel directly refers the reader.

The closed, continuous, and complete form of a novel is replaced by deviation in form that has either multivalent meanings or no meaning at all. Calvino rejects such unities and completeness or closeness of a novel, and instead, he prefers an open novel in which reader himself becomes a participating character. There is a direct relationship between the narrator

and the reader. The direct reference and inclusion of a reader in the mainstream of the novel is carried out in such a way that he guides and keeps on referring to the reader regarding the incidents. The form itself becomes too open to include anything in it. He says to the reader, "To read properly you must take in both the murmuring effect and the effect of the hidden intentions, which you (and I, too) are as yet in no position to perceive" (18). The self-referentiality of the novel ironizes and problematizes the conventional narrative form, i.e. the know-all narrator or the omniscient narrator. The playful narrator of the postmodern novel does not present the external reality as it is, and in fact, he problematizes the entire notion of representation. The narrator point out, "Your (the reader) attention, as reader, is now completely concentrated on the woman, already for several pages you have been circling around her, I have – no, the author has – been circling around the feminine presence, for several pages you have been expecting this female shadow to take shape the way female shadows take shape on the written page..." (20). He further adds, "You (the reader) surely would want to know more about what she's like, but instead only a few elements surface on the written page, her face remains hidden by the smoke and her hair, you would need to understand beyond the bitter twist of her mouth what there is that isn't bitter and twisted" (20).

It is recognized that Calvino ironizes the omniscient narrative that describes the details of the characters in the novel. The uncertainty in the narration looms over the entire novel. The frequent appearance of the narrator who is ignorant, playful, and ironical or in opposition with the writer himself is seen. The uncertainty, in fact, stalls the still, continuous, and sequential narration of the novel. The narrator mentions his uncertainty, "I say; or, rather, it isn't clear whether I really say it or would like to say it or whether the author interprets in this way the half sentence I am muttering" (21).

Calvino ironizes the entire process of writing a novel including the very form of the fiction. The subtle and ironical self-referentiality deconstructs the process of writing. In fact,

he posits that there is nothing original in the postmodern world; all that is found have commonalities or already said in some other texts. He literally seems to prove Barthes's point from *The Death of the Author* that "the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (146). Calvino highlights the point of repeatability. Everything that an author says is nothing but a case of repeatability. We have reached in the time where no originality exists; there are only cases of repeatability. He mentions his self-referential points, "In fact, this whole passage reads like something I have read before" and he further adds, "Nothing: the narration is repeated, identical to the pages you have read!" (25).

The form of the novel, unlike any realistic novel, disavows traditional narrative techniques. On the one hand, it assumes metafictional quality by exposing the narrative process to the reader and including him in the process of the construction of the same, and on the other hand, it dwells into the referential problems of language. The reader is alert in the novel to know what he is reading as the narrator or the author directly refers to him. The narrator mentions in the midst of the novel, "The story must also work hard to keep up with us, to report a dialogue constructed on the void, speech by speech. For the story, the bridge is not finished: beneath every word there is nothingness" (83).

The entire process of representation is complicated/disrupted/parodied. The postmodern thought rejects simple and direct representation of either modern or realistic tradition. As a result, the basic tools in novels imbue the quality of uncertainty, incompleteness, or pseudo-completeness in them. The form of a postmodern novel ceases to be reliable in terms of explanation and representation of the events. The events, in fact, assume the quality of unpredictability and breaks away from the natural law of cause and effect. The narrative leaves the reader baffled with uncertainties and questions that are never going to be answered by the writer or narrator. Referring to the contemporary narrative techniques, David Lodge rightly mentions, "While renouncing the mythic parallelism of Joyce's treatment of Dublin, it also ignores or ridicules the conventions of realism adopted by the representative novelists of the 1930s" ("Postmodernist Fiction" 254).

Italo Calvino plays the game of representation by deconstructing the unities and transparency of the form. It is interesting to note that he utilizes all the types of narrative voices instead of sticking to just one. The novel infuses third person narrative, second person narrative and first person narrative. The writer manipulates the narrative voice now and then, and shocks the reader with its fusion. For example, all the novels within the novel portray clearly the first person narrative. Indeed, most of the part of the novel is directly associated with second person narrative in which the narrator directly refers to the reader calling him "You". This "You" can be the reader portrayed as a character within the novel or the external reader who is reading the novel. This uncertainty can never be deciphered as he keeps on referring to both the readers (internal and external). His frequent inclusion of the reader (either internal or external) in the process of writing and narration, and inviting him to participate in the entire novel dilutes the common line of demarcation between the external reader and the narrator.

The conventional fixity in terms of the narrative voice is completely renounced as the narrator continuously switches from one narrative voice to another. In the sixth chapter of the novel, both the second person narrative and the first person narrative are seen running simultaneously. The writer narrates:

The Sultan sent for me to ask me how many pages I still have to translate in order to finish the book. I realized that in his suspicions of political-conjugal infidelity, the moment he most fears is the drop in tension that will follow the end of the novel, when, before beginning another, his wife will again be attacked by impatience with her condition. He knows the conspirators are waiting for a sign from the Sultana to light the fuse, but she has given orders never to disturb her while she is reading, not even if the palace were about to blow up.... I have my own reasons for fearing that moment, which could mean the loss of my privileges at court...." (124).

Just after the first person narrative, the writer switches over to the second person narrative while referring to the reader:

Many feelings distress you as you leaf through these letters. The book whose continuation you were already enjoying in anticipation, vicariously through a third party, breaks off again.... Ernes Marana appears to you as a serpent who injects his malice into the paradise of reading.... In the place of the Indian seer who tells all the novels of the world, here is a trap-novel designed by the treacherous translator with beginnings of novels that remain suspended... just as the revolt remains suspended, while the conspirators wait in vain to begin it with their illustrious accomplice, and time weighs motionless on the flat shores of Arabia.... Are you reading or daydreaming?" (125).

In *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, Calvino thwarts representation differently by employing a playful narrator who distorts the norms of representation. The narrator playfully narrates the descriptions of events and characters; sometimes the characters are left without any description, sometimes they are just given mild reference, sometimes they are playfully mentioned while metafictionally involving the reader, and sometimes the entire description is parodied by providing excess of information just like the realist tradition. The reader is left on the tenterhooks while reading the novel without predicting the future course the narration. It can be construed as showing resistance to interpretation, or playing with or complicating the notion of representation. Such incidents can be found floating all over the novel. One of the incidents is as follows:

Waves of talk from which surface the vocabularies of the most specialized and most exclusive disciplines and schools are poured over this elderly editor, whom at first glance you defined as "a little man, shrunken and bent," but not because he is more of a little man, more shrunken, more bent than so many others, or because the words "little man, shrunken and bent" are part of his way of expressing himself, but because he seems to have come from a world where they still – no: he seems to have emerged from a book where you still encounter – you've got it: he seems to have come from a world

in which they read books where you encounter “little man, shrunken and bent” (96).

The novel does not run smoothly by providing causal links to the subsequent chapters or parts. If we go by chapter-by-chapter analysis, we will end up making all the different analysis for all the chapters. The chapters do not have any link with each other except the fact that the reader (both internal and external) is the same for all the chapters. Each chapter has a new set of characters, new setting, new suspense, and an unusual ending, if there is any. The names that recur in the subsequent chapter assume different identities altogether, having no connection with the previous one. For example, Mr. Kauderer (an owner of the estate in Petkwo) of *Outside the town of Malbork* has no relationship with Mr. Kauderer (a meteorologist of Petkwo) of *Leaning from the Steep Slope*, or with Kauderer (a passing reference given by the writer as the Kauderer munitions factories—a possible owner of the factories or a place where munitions factories have been built) of *Without Fear of Wind or Virtigo*. In each story, the name Kauderer has different references. The writer explains a connection between the stories in an incomprehensible way. The muddle or confused errors made by the publishers is found out by the reader, but to no avail, as the justification provided by the publishing body is too complicated or complex to understand; or to put it in another way, it is very unclear or incomplete, and the reader (both internal and external) does not fathom it in its totality.

In *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, the only commonality in all the stories is the reader (either internal character or the external reader). The writer mocks the traditional continuous narrative, which begins once, ends once, and has fixities in terms of place, characters, narrative voice, themes, and genres. These fixities have been ironized, parodied, mocked, questioned, and subverted by the writer. It is fathomed that the myth of continuous narrative does not hold any ground in the postmodern era.

Postmodern fiction suggests a breach of the continuous narrative with the rejection of simple beginning and conclusive endings. The reader does not know everything about the happenings in the novel. There are many gaps in the narration, and the deliberate gaps in the narration stall any straightforward understanding. Instead of clear-cut and continuous narration, Calvino in the present novel employs narrative gaps, and these gaps are formalistic or linguistic in nature. In fact, the reader as a character in the novel does not have any clue of what is happening around. These deliberate gaps are created throughout the novel. The narrator says:

“But why should the OAP hijackers want to get possession of that manuscript? You glance through the papers, seeking an explanation, but you find mostly the bragging of Marana, who gives himself credit for diplomatically arranging the agreement by which Butamatari, having disarmed the commando and got hold of the Flannery manuscript, assures its restitution to the author, asking in exchange that the author commit himself to writing a dynastic novel that will justify the leader's imperial coronation and his aims of annexing the bordering territories” (120).

The narrator himself accepts the narratorial gaps that represent the lack of correct, complete, and total information in

terms of the sequence and narration of the events. It is essential to note that the novel appears to be interesting and captivating, but at the same time, it is tricky with regard to its comprehension, interpretation, and the flow of continuation. David Lodge has rightly mentioned in relation to the postmodern fiction while referring to Beckett's *Murphy* and which applies equally to Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*:

The predictability of the style and development of the action is extremely low, and although it is a very funny book it is not at all easy to read for this reason. It resists reading by refusing to settle into a simply identifiable mode or rhythm, thus imitating, on the level of reading conventions, the resistance of the world of interpretation (“Postmodernist Fiction” 254).

In fact, the entire process of the creation of novel and its publication is questioned/ fractured by the writer. He seems to be diminishing the distinction between the genuine creation, translated work, and plagiarized work. For instance, Marana, a fictional writer, translator, plagiarizer, is shown to be publishing novels under his name, and the novels of which whereabouts is quite uncertain. Flannery, a famous and bestselling author, is exposed with dubious certifications in terms of his publications. He deconstructs the entire notions of originality and authenticity. The narrator mentions the purpose behind the meeting of Marana with Flannery that, “he seems to have gone there to defend the interests of a Belgian writer who had been shamelessly plagiarized by Flannery, Bertrand Vandervelde...” (122). Moreover, the concept of creative writing is subverted by the way of subjecting the process of creative writing to the latest computer technology. Marana says that, “our computers would be capable of completing it (incomplete works of Flannery) easily, programmed as they are to develop all the elements of a text with perfect fidelity to the stylistic and conceptual models of the author” (118).

The narratorial gaps reiterate throughout the novel leading a sense of curiosity to its heightened intensity and leave the same unquenched by the way of narrative stasis, which hinders further meanings. For example, the reader is unable to know why certain things happen or is unable to excavate the roots behind the happenings. The narrator mentions the puzzled status of mind when a female reader at the beach is hijacked and put behind bars, “Why is she being forced to undergo as a torment what is her natural condition, reading? And what hidden plan makes the paths of these characters cross constantly: she, Marana, the mysterious sect that steals manuscripts?” (129). The narrator himself does not know the story in its completeness and hence, it is highly unlikely that the reader can know the same.

It is also important to note that these narratorial gaps happen to resist the irresistible spirit of interpretation. That is why Lodge has mentioned the need to stall interpretation as a key area or agenda of postmodern fiction. He states, “The often – asserted resistance of the world to meaningful interpretation would be a sterile basis for writing if it were not combined with a poignant demonstration of the human obligation to attempt such interpretation, especially by the process of organizing one's memories into narrative form” (255).

The reader gathers many uncertainties and harbours serious doubts in terms of authorship. The entire notion of an attribution of a work is complicated as well as confused. The narrator himself is unsure of the authorship of various works mentioned in the book and leaves these questions hanged permanently. The narrator mentions the traumatic condition of a reader, "You want to ask Cavedagna if he can immediately let you read *In a network of lines that enlase* by the pseudo (or genuine?) Flannery, which might also be the same thing as *Looks down in the gathering shadow* by the genuine (or pseudo?) Vandervelde" (131).

The uncertainty in the novel is found in both the narrator as well as the reader. Seeing this uncertainty in the novel, Fink states, "There is a fundamental unreliability at the heart of the text, which seems to say "yes" to every critic's question and thus negates them all" (93). It seems appropriate to refer to Bakhtinian carnival that destabilizes the existing order. The carnival that is noticed in the text is the narrative carnival or the formalistic carnival that dethrones the coveted realistic and conventional ideology with reference to the creation and production of the novel.

The myth of powerful protagonist does not exist in a postmodern novel. The postmodern protagonist simply turns into an ironical figure. Calvino not only installs the protagonist and gives him a significant role to play, but also subverts him by reducing him to nothing more than a puppet and turning into an ironical figure. He mentions the condition of a protagonist in the following words: "You had flung yourself into the action, filled with adventurous impulses: and then? 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?" (218).

In fact, the protagonist of the novel is not the Reader or any other person, but the form or the frame of the novel itself. It is the form of the novel that guides both the Reader and controls the entire system of the novel. The form becomes the central protagonist and takes the charge of the events take place within and outside the novel. Form is both the subject and the object of the novel. With the close analysis of the novel, It is found that all the formal aspects such as the narrative techniques, beginning and end, climax, characterization, descriptions, continuity, and the unity of form are deconstructed and given new definitions, or the void replaces them throughout the novel.

Calvino deconstructs both the beginnings and the ends. There is more than one beginning of the novel, and in some way, there are no ends. The narrative frame of the novel runs on four ways: the story of the both internal as well as external reader; the story of the counterfeiter Marana; the story of Silas Flannery, a fictional author; and ten unfinished novels within the main novel. In other words, within one novel, there are multiple novels and hence, there is more than one plot in the novel. Throughout the novel, Calvino negates the idea of

totality and unity. A chain of unfinished stories is witnessed, which only forms multiple beginnings within the same novel.

In the present novel, all the types of endings are witnessed except the closed or the open ending. All the novels within the novel generate different beginnings and leaves the stories devoid of ends or with unusual ends. Having finished the first story, the reader enters into the second story *Outside the town of Malbork*. It is apparently a simple story in which the narrator is going to be replaced by another character Ponko for the duties in the house, which has lasting and intimate relationship with the narrator. The story does not reveal anything once the replacement is done. Hardly had the story begun properly when it ended inconclusively. The reader is uncertain about the future of the narrator or Ponko in the house.

By deconstructing the ends, the writer suggests the incomprehensibility of life or the impossibility of representing the world through words that have no relation with the externality. Only the chain of endless beginnings (devoid of their ends) continues in the novel. For example, *Leaning from the steep slope*: a personal diary of one week which leads nowhere once the week is over and neither the narrator nor the reader knows about the prisoner who escapes the prison and approaches the narrator, *Without fear of wind or vertigo*: an erotic story set against the backdrop of revolution does not answer all the questions pertaining to the life of the narrator who is charged with the treason in the end, *Looks down in the gathering*: a story of a murder, in which the narrator is caught while disposing off the body, does not lead to any other consequence afterwards, *In a network of lines that enlase*: a story in which a telephone ring follows the narrator like a ghost or a shadow, *In a network of lines that intersect*: a story in which the billionaire narrator gets kidnapped once by his own wife Elfrida leaving plenty of doubts and questions in the end, *On the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon*: a story of a narrator who indulges in an erotic romance with the wife of the professor and proposes romance to the daughter of the professor, *Around an empty grave*: a magical story that describes the story of a narrator who, as suggested by father, goes to Oquedal to find his mother, and *What story down there awaits its end?*: a story of a narrator who erases everything that surrounds the earth just to increase the chances of meeting Franziska and meets 'nothingness' in the end, represent either nothingness or inconclusiveness.

Apart from the contention of the closure, the form of the novel is never a stable one. The novel never assumes a single form in terms of its unity and totality. For example, the novel during the various phases of sub-novels and on regular intervals changes its nature and genre. It is this hybridity consisting of multiple genres such as a detective story, a magic realist story, a fantasy, a diary, letters, a satire, an erotic story, a romance, and a quest set the novel apart from the conventional novel. In fact, it installs all the various forms and deconstructs them simultaneously. The idea of narrating a story with one genre, i.e., having a single genre at a time is rejected in favor of creating a culture of hybridity wherein the novel assumes the quality of multiple genres simultaneously.

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