**Italo Calvino’s Total Control in *If On a Winter’s Night Traveler***

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“The romantic frustrations 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,” (Calvino, 177). Italo Calvino’s book *If On a Winter’s Night a Traveler* takes this idea and runs with it. This novel’s constant twists and turns leave the reader feeling breathless after each chapter. The story begins with Calvino informing the reader that they are “I” in the story, making the experiences feel more personal and eventful. However, it is clear to see that Calvino was able to establish the idea that even though the reader is told they are in control of the narrative, that the author is truly in control of not just the narrative but also the emotions, connections, and experiences the reader encounters while reading. It is because of this that Calvino believes the author has total control of their work.

In chapter 1, the author discusses the idea that the reader doesn’t have particular expectations for reading or for anything anymore. “It’s not that you expect anything in particular from this particular book. You’re the sort of person who, on principle, no longer expects anything of anything,” (Calvino, 4). It is within this narrative that Calvino embraces the idea that the reader expects nothing of him or this book, which then allows the reader to remain curious about this implication. Calvino continues by stating: “You believe you may still grant yourself legitimately this youthful pleasure of expectation in a carefully circumscribed area like the field of books, where you can be lucky or unlucky, but the risk of disappointment isn’t serious,” (4). This quote offers the reader hesitant peace, with curiosity still brimming in their mind.

The reader encounters serious disappointment when they realize that the copy of *If On a Winter’s Night a Traveler* does not contain the full text but rather is composed of repeated chapters:

You are the sort of reader who is sensitive to such refinements; you are quick to catch the author’s intentions and nothing escapes you. But, at the same time, you also feel a certain dismay; just when you were 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. Did you say paragraph? Why, it’s a whole page; you make the comparison, he hasn’t changed even a comma. And as you continue, what develops? Nothing: the narration is repeated, identical to the pages you have read! (Calvino, 25).

After thinking he received a defective copy, the reader makes his way to the bookstore to exchange it. The bookseller informs the reader that he isn’t the only one experiencing this issue and explains that the pages were swapped with a Polish book titled *Outside the town of Malbork* by Tazio Bazakbal. After learning the book the reader began wasn’t Calvino’s, the reader decides to read the Polish novel since he is already invested. It is during this chapter that the reader is introduced to Ludmilla, another victim to the publishing disaster. Since the reader and Ludmilla both encountered the same problem, both choose to read the Polish novel instead and exchange numbers to discuss their reading. However, once the reader begins the new, he realizes this isn’t the book he read the day before and wonders if this is another publishing error. It is then that the reader might realize that Calvino’s book itself, not the one in the story, is composed of a virtuoso trick. The same ideas, emotions, and frustrations are openly repeated. This is how he exerts his control.

This cycle keeps repeating for the reader and Ludmilla. They go on a quest, discuss the book with a professor Uzzi Tuzii who is knowledgeable about the Cimmerians and face an argument about the true history of the text. Was it the Cimmerians or the Cimbrians? Instead of debating, the reader and Ludmilla go to a study group where they are also discussing the same text but by a different name. Time after time, the pair are met with disappointment in their quest to finish the novel they started. It is then that the reader decides to visit the publishing house responsible for this mess. Mr. Cavedagna, an employee of the publishing house, explains this fiasco all started with Ermes Marana, a counterfeit-translator who created this far-reaching disaster.

Eventually, all of these characters come together in chapter 8. Silas Flannery, whose diary the reader is encountering, explains his difficulty in reading for pleasure and envies a woman he sees reading on her balcony. He discusses the difficulties he encounters with writing, and discusses a possible idea for a novel about two authors, one productive and one tormented. Flannery has been in contact with Ermes Marana, who discusses the counterfeit translations of his books. It is after this that Flannery has a brilliant idea: he decides to write a book composed of only the first chapter of each story line he creates:

I have had the idea of writing a novel composed only of beginnings of novels. The protagonist could be a Reader who is continually interrupted. The Reader buys the new novel A by author Z. But it is a defective copy, he can’t go beyond the beginning…He returns to the bookshop to have the volume exchanged…I could write it all in second person: you, Reader…I could also introduce a young lady, the Other Reader, and a counterfeit-translator, and an old writer who keeps a diary like this diary,” (Calvino 197-198).

It is then the reader realizes they are the subject of a virtuoso trick. They are Reader, they met the young lady, and know of the counterfeit-translator throughout Calvino’s book. Calvino appears to be Flannery. Is this his story? Is this his diary? Did he really draw inspiration from counterfeit translations of his work? Is Calvino the tormented author who is trying to find a way to write about topics never discussed before? After all of these repeated ideas, Reader, how could you continue to fall for these tricks? Calvino demonstrates his total control by continuing the reader on their journey for the truth.

Even after this realization, the reader continues their quest to find the ending of the book they want to read. However, he stays in this revolving loop and tries to find the book he is searching for. It is not until the very end of the book that he realizes that the titles of the stories he has read during his quest all form a cohesive, beginning to a story.

*If on a winter’s night a traveler, outside the town of Malbork, leaning from the steep slope without fear of wind or vertigo, looks down in the gathering shadow in a network of lines that enlace, in a network of lines that intersect, one the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon around an empty grave—What story down there awaits an end?—he asks, anxious to hear the story* (Calvino 258).

It seems if Calvino’s control of the narrative is centered around a single idea: the beginnings of books that don’t have an ending.

One of the other characters understands his frustration and offers insight on the journey that Calvino had his readers participate in.

You have only this beginning and would like to find the continuation, is that true? The trouble is that once upon a time they all began like that, all novels. There was somebody who went along a lonely street and saw something that attracted his attention, something that seemed to conceal a mystery, or a premonition (Calvino 258).

In frustration, the reader explains that this isn’t the story continuation that he wanted to know and wanted an ending. Through one of his characters, he claims:

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, 259).

It is through marriage, that Calvino ends his novel.

Italo Calvino’s novel *If On a Winter’s Night a Traveler* is the sadistic writing of a genius. Within the first few chapters, the reader is left dazed, wondering what they are reading. They don’t realize they are a victim of the virtuoso writing trick. They don’t realize they have lost complete control of their reading experience and that this was all predetermined by Calvino. Did the reader really meet Ludmilla by chance? Did the new book really spark curiosity or frustration to find the true book they should have read? As a reader, I feel tricked. I didn’t realize Calvino’s power as an author until after I finished reading the book and I began writing. I didn’t pick up on subliminal messages or clues from the very beginning until the end. It is up to the reader, the victim of this novel, to determine if they feel disappointed or thrilled about their participation.