Can the Author Escape Himself? Italo Calvino on the Absolute Power and the Insuperable Limitation of Authorship

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Abstract

 How much power does the author have, and what limits it? I examine how these questions are approached by Italo Calvino in his last novel, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1979). This article considers a specific theme of authorship in this book: namely, the questions of the power the author has by virtue of being an author, on the one hand, and the limitations of this authorial function, on the other hand. I start by showing how Calvino portrays the writer's struggle of trying to surpass authorial limitations, focusing on three distinct sources of his writer's block: 1) the realization that nothing that the author produces will be original or innovative; 2) the realization that writing is a process of killing infinite narrative possibilities; 3) the desire to get rid of the individual characteristics of the author. For Calvino, the questions about the nature of authorship and the author's powers and limitations were as much theoretical (a response to literary theories that tried to annihilate the author) as personal (in the years 1973-1979 Calvino experienced a profound creative crisis). Next, I depict the author's powers that his position grants him by arguing that Calvino offers a positive solution to the struggle of trying to escape the seemingly inescapable authorial limitations: a solution that consists in embracing the authorial subjectivity by transforming it into a literary theme and a process of exploring human nature, and through which the author eventually manages to assert his creative power and makes positive use of his position.

Keywords: Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, authorship, writer's block, aesthetics, philosophy of literature.

> Only when it will come natural to me to use the verb "write" in the impersonal form will I be able to hope that through me is expressed something less limited than the personality of an individual.
> — Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*

Introduction

Italo Calvino was one of the most prominent Italian writers of the twentieth century and certainly one of the most interesting experimental novelists of all time. He was a member of the French experimental literary group *OuLiPo* (*Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle)* together with writers including Georges Perec and Raymond Queneau. He was also heavily inspired by structuralist and post-structuralist

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philosophical and literary ideas (Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida), as well as by the writings of Jorge Luis Borges.

Calvino's last novel, *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (*If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* [1979]), has often been described as "his most ambitious work."[1] It holds a central place in Calvino's works for a number of reasons: it is a commentary on the totality of his literary legacy and, more generally, "a demonstration of how fiction works, how we read it, how the world is treated, and … how authors write."[2] The source of the complexity and experimental character of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* is owed primarily to the fact that Calvino "create[d] a literary work out of contemporary theories of reading and literature,"[3] but also managed to avoid explicitly agreeing or disagreeing with any of them.

Similarly to these theories, his novel closely explores the relationship between the three 'levels' or 'points of reference' that the literary work encompasses: authorship (the process of writing); the text as an entity on its own; and readership (the process of reading). Calvino, we could say, responds to the question how to write fiction in our times: *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* showcases that writing is reading, because an author has to take a stand on all these issues in order to write, and because writing is never an original act, and that reading is writing, because the reader complements the text and thus is its necessary constituent. The traditional distinction between the author and the reader collapses, and Calvino's "narrative carnival"[4] involves both.

In this article, I analyse one of the elements that constitute this intricate game: authorship. I do not attempt an exhaustive analysis of the theme of authorship in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. Rather, what I will do is consider one aspect: the question of the power the author has by virtue of being an author, on the one hand, and the limitations of this authorial function, on the other hand. For Calvino, the questions about the nature of authorship and the author's powers and limitations were as much theoretical (a response to literary theories that tried to annihilate the author) as personal, for in the years 1973-1979 he was undergoing a creative crisis and could not bring himself to write anymore, which triggered a reflection on the limitations of authorship.

This article analyses these limitations, showing how they can be turned into something advantageous, looking in particular at themes of the authorial limitedness and power through the question of whether the author is capable of escaping and transcending himself. Thus, I will show how Calvino portrays writers' struggles to surpass such authorial limitations by focusing on three distinct sources of his writer's block, which is both an internal theme of the book and an external inspiration for it. Following this is a discussion surrounding the powers that the author's position grants him; here I will argue that Calvino offers a positive solution to the struggle of trying to escape the seemingly inescapable authorial limitations: a solution that consists in embracing the authorial subjectivity by transforming it into a literary theme and a

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[1] Martin McLaughlin, *Italo Calvino* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 118.
[2] Albert Howard Carter, *Italo Calvino. Metamorphoses of Fantasy* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1987), p. 126.
[3] McLaughlin, *Italo Calvino*, p. 118.
[4] Inge Fink, 'The Power behind the Pronoun: Narrative Games in Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 37, no. 1 (1991), p. 93.

process of exploring the human nature, and through which the author eventually manages to assert his creative power and makes positive use of his position.

Authorial Limitations

One of the ways in which Calvino problematizes the author's position as having absolute power and also being constrained by insuperable limitations is by focusing on the challenges of creating a literary text and the creative limits of such an undertaking. The novel's narration, particularly in the frame-story, is non-transparent to such an extreme extent that it lies bare all the struggles and difficulties that the writer faces during the process of writing, and can be seen as an act of deconstructing the very process of writing. Indeed, in the years 1973-79 Calvino was undergoing a creative crisis, which certainly triggered a reflection on the nature and limitations of authorship.

Calvino believed that the only way to access a writer's mind and opinions is through his or her literary works. Therefore, in order to tell us about what writing means and what challenges it faces, he needed to convey these messages in a literary text. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* does precisely this: at first rather implicitly, presenting us with a series of beginnings of various novels; later much more explicitly, showing us, through the writer Flannery's diary (chapter 8), exactly what intellectual struggle a self-conscious author like himself may be going through. In the novel, Flannery, just like Calvino in the 1970's, is experiencing the writer's block, which in the case of both Flannery and Calvino gets resolved by creating the same (self-referential) novel. The writer's block is therefore not only an external inspiration for the novel (Calvino's writer's block), but also its internal theme (Flannery's parallel writer's block).

In chapter 8, Calvino speaks to us through the voice and struggles of Flannery, equating his process of writing *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* with that of his fictional writer: "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 … I could write it all in the second person: you, Reader ... I could also introduce a young lady, the Other Reader, and a counterfeiter-translator, and an old writer who keeps a diary like this diary."[5] The diary presents to us the answer to an implicit, but pressing question of the novel: why the incipit-stories comprised by *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* have no continuation and no closure: Flannery that he cannot uphold the narrative excitement with which his novels start.

How so? Chapter 8 presents us with not one, but multiple sources of the writer's block in question. I claim that it is possible to identify at least three distinct but interconnected such sources:
1) the realisation that nothing that the author produces will be original or innovative;
2) the realisation that writing is a process of killing infinite narrative possibilities;
3) the desire to get rid of the individual characteristics of the author.

Firstly, Flannery cannot escape both the feeling of unoriginality or inauthenticity of his creations and that of repetitiveness. He confesses: "At times I think of the subject

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[5] Italo Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, trans. William Weaver (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), pp. 197-198.

matter of the book to be written as of something that already exists: thoughts already thought, dialogue already spoken, stories already happened, places and settings seen."[6] His constant awareness of this inability to create something completely (or even remotely?) original and of the fictiveness and indeterminacy of his texts alludes to the structuralist and post-structuralist theories of language, such as de Saussure's claim that "the language is never completed by any single individual, but exist perfectly only in the collectivity"[7] and Derrida's subsequent observation that any linguistic discourse is "a differential network of meaning."[8]

Flannery's obsession with the inevitable repetitiveness of the written word and its subsequent unoriginality is evident, for example, in the rhetorical question he poses at the beginning of his diary: "How many years has it been since I could abandon myself to a book written by another, with no relation to what I must write myself?"[9] The transition from being a reader to being a writer seems to have imposed on him new limitations: after all, "reading is a necessarily individual act, far more than writing,"[10] and writing in turn is, Flannery appears to think, characterised by the unoriginal reiteration of thoughts already thought and stories already happened.

Furthermore, moving on to the second source of the writer's block, Flannery sees any attempt at continuing a freshly begun story as the process of killing the infinite narrative possibilities that such a freshly begun story conveys. The writer is enhanced by "the pure state by the first sentences of the first chapter"[11] of any novel, and views it as "the promise of a time of reading that extends before us and can comprise all possible developments"[12]. But, unfortunately, such a blissful state full of possibilities and potentialities "*is soon lost* in the continuation of the story" [my emphasis].[13] Hence, Flannery ends up writing only beginnings of different literary works, which he then never completes. However, these unfinished stories find their place in a completed (and, indeed, published) novel – the very *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* of 1979. There is something ironic about the fact. Is this a deliberate artistic strategy on Calvino's part or a side effect of his (and Flannery's) creative crisis? The answer is not obvious: Calvino does not univocally praise on condemn the idea of writing unfinished novels.

Calvino's deliberately ambiguous approach to the most important issues of authorship is also visible in Flannery's idealistic yet naïve observation that all his creative dilemmas and the pain of killing narrative possibilities by settling on a single line of narration would go away if he were a copyist instead of a writer. He reflects on "the meaning and fascination of a new inconceivable vocation: that of the copyist,"[14] which results in his expression of envy of the copyist whose profession allowed him to "write without the anguish of having the void open before his pen."[15] But Flannery's

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[6] Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p. 171.

[7] Ferdinand De Saussure, 'Nature of the Linguistic Sign', in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. David Lodge (New York: Longman, 1995), p. 7.

[8] Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 22.

[9] Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p. 169.

[10] Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p. 176.

[11] Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p. 177.

[12] Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p. 177.

[13] Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p. 177.

[14] Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p. 178.

[15] Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p. 178.

conclusion is, of course, absurd. The copyist never produces anything original within the realm of literary creation, and thus is the quintessence of literary unoriginality: another of Flannery's authorial fears.

In search for a perfect writing act that, for him, is an original one, Flannery ponders two opposing strategies. On the one hand, he envisions the possibility of creating a single, universal novel that would encompass all the possible viewpoints, and thus no particular viewpoint at all: "[writing] a book that could be the unique book, that exhausts the whole in its pages."[16] Such a novel, of course, would have no specific author, because authorial subjectivity would destroy the objectivity of such narration. On the other hand, Flannery fantasises about writing all possible novels in the world – novel which through their different opinions, events described in them, and differing literary styles would collectively convey all possible viewpoints. And because of the differences between these books, all of them in some way 'false', no one would be able to tell what Flannery's actual opinions and style are like: "the author who devised a perfect system of artifices would succeed in identifying himself with the whole."[17] The real *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* itself, of course, merges these two ideas: the incipit-chapters that are beginnings of various, unfinished novels represent the multitude of 'false' novels that hide the true opinions and style of the author, whilst the frame-story written in the second person and touching upon meta-literary issues represents an attempt to write a universal novel that encompasses the whole of knowledge.

Flannery tells us that his actual writing does not match his expectations of writing; he wishes to create "the unique book, which contains the whole, could only be the sacred text, the total word revealed,"[18] to disappear from his texts completely, removing all his personal qualities as an author: his experience, his style, his personal views, and the like. This attempt, which he judges as doomed and which in fact results in his writer's block, arises from his belief that each novel should be written directly by the world, the universe, the nature, and thus need not convey author-specific features that obscure the truth coming from the world itself, from the world directly. And this is the third source of his writer's block.

Flannery wishes to remove the cognitive subject from the act of writing, to remove the writer as a medium from all literature. This desire culminates in the desperate exclamation: "How well I would write if I were not here! If between the white page and the writing of words and stories that take shape and disappear without anyone's ever writing them there were not interposed that uncomfortable partition which is my person! … [A]ll the elements that make what I write recognisable as mine seem to me a cage that restricts my possibilities."[19] The idea of altogether eliminating any personal, individual traces from the act of writing is furthermore reiterated in the following observation Flannery makes a few pages later: "Only when it will come natural to me

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[16] Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p. 181.
[17] Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p. 180.
[18] Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p. 181.
[19] Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p. 171.

to use the verb "write" in the impersonal form will I be able to hope that through me is expressed something less limited than the personality of an individual."[20]

Both passages display a high degree of absurdity. For example, the exclamation "How well I would write if I were not here!" conveys two personal pronouns "I" that refer to the same person; but while the first use of the pronoun refers to a writer who wants to write well, the second one refers to someone who does not exist – but someone who does not exist would not be able to write at all! The following sentence too contains an almost contradictory notion: the writer's creative abilities as being restricted by *his own* way of writing. The second passage, similarly, talks about the writer's desire to say "it writes" instead of "I write" – but what would this rephrasing change if it were still the same author who wrote these very words?

Flannery's pain of inevitable subjectivity and individual viewpoint that can never encompass a universal perspective can be traced back to Kant's emphasis on the limitations of our human capacities to perceive and experience the world in his theory of knowledge. Just as for Kant the human intellect may only perceive and understand the reality through its own modes of cognition, and thus this reality becomes the only objective reality for them within their subjective, phenomenal realm of existence, – so for Flannery writing is limited to the author's viewpoint and individual boundaries that he cannot transcend. Flannery struggles from being unable to portray the world in itself – the Kantian noumenal reality – as a literary piece conveyed in written language.

Could such removal of the writer-subject be possible for literature? The Kantian answer, and one that the evil character Marana adopts as well, is: no. In a conversation with Flannery, Marana emphasises the necessary fakeness of literature by arguing that "literature's worth lies in its power of mystification, in mystification has its truth"[21]. By virtue of being a writer, therefore, an author must be present in the act of creating literature in order to complement it. Flannery tries to oppose that, saying: "I read in a book that the objectivity of thought can be expressed using the verb 'to think' in the impersonal third person: saying not 'I think' but 'it thinks' as we say 'it rains'. There is thought in the universe."[22] Calvino gets this notion of the possibility of a thought without an 'I' from Lichtenberg, and from Borges' subsequent exploration of Lichtenberg's argument in his short story *A New Refutation of Time*.

Flannery and Lichtenberg may be right: thinking is a quality of the universe. However, what Flannery does not realise is that in order to express such thinking in human language—as the most fundamental mode of authorial communication, a condition of authorial expression—one needs to adopt a subjective viewpoint, and such a viewpoint has a limiting quality. If it is not, we might then say, thinking itself that limits us, it is surely writing in language (the choice of particular words, expressions, or style) that does.

Contradicting himself, Flannery subsequently goes on to demonstrate the truthfulness of this fact through his example of the Koran and Muhammand's relation with his writing-hand Adbullah, without which Koran, he claims, would not exist in its

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[20] Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p. 176.
[21] Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p. 180.
[22] Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p. 176.

complete form. Once again, Calvino shows that the writer is a necessary constituent of the novel and cannot, as Flannery wishes, become "the author who is dissolved in the cloud of fictions."[23] As Cotrupi comments, "the invention of an authorial perspective of necessity accompanies the act of narration."[24] Calvino leaves the readers with Flannery's assertion that the subjective authorial perspective – expressed, moreover, in human language – is necessary for any literary text to be created; it is, in other words, a condition of the possibility of literature.

Authorial Power

Should this realisation lead us to draw the conclusion that the subjective authorial perspective, the author's idiosyncratic use of language, and the unoriginality of his creations are something that *limits* him and his enterprise? Is this necessarily a limitative aspect of authorship, or can it be viewed, on the contrary, as an advantage – as something that the writing process should see as its power and an opportunity? Indeed, Calvino's novel shows that even though an author cannot remove himself from his texts completely, it is his subjective perspective and voice that truly complement his texts and thus yield truth (understood as an authentic and worthwhile artistic expression). On the contrary, Marana's vision of texts without a real author will never yield truth, even though in theory their author does not exist; universality and objectivity of literary texts, in other words, is not actually desirable.

Calvino's solution to these limitative aspects of authorship, which have caused his writers block, is multi-faceted. Firstly, as I have mentioned in the previous section, Flannery's unfinished novels need not be viewed as his (or Calvino's) failure, for these incomplete stories nonetheless find place in a complete and published book – Calvino's own *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. I suggest that there is another interesting feature about the fact that Calvino himself managed to finish his novel, in addition to composing it of other, unfinished, novels. One of the causes of Flannery's writer's block is the realisation that completing a literary text inevitably carries with it the necessity of killing the other possibilities that the beginning of the text contained. How does Calvino get out of this problem? Taking a look at the very beginning of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* provides us with an interesting answer: "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."[25] What Calvino does here refer to the reader directly, thereby *shifting the burden* of killing the narrative possibilities from himself (the author) onto his readers. Aware of the interpretative richness and ambiguity of his novel, Calvino warns us that getting distracted from the text of his new book (as often happens when there is something that pulls out attention away from the text) will result in the reader's noticing less about the complexity of Calvino's novel and its hyperfictional qualities.

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[23] Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p. 180.
[24] C. Nella Cotrupi, 'Hypermetafiction: Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller'*, *Style*, vol. 25, no. 2 (1991), p. 286.
[25] Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p. 12.

Secondly, Calvino and Flannery arrive at the conclusion that the only true book they can write – i.e., *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* – is one that would be constantly self-conscious of its subjectivity and authorship, and one that, even though limited by its author, cannot get rid of him. So, the most authentic thing that can be done is being self-aware. Calvino's solution to the inescapability of the subjective stance of the author, therefore, consists in embracing this subjective stance and exploring its structure. "The only truth I can write", Flannery finally observes, "is that of the instant I am living. Perhaps the true book is this diary, in which I try to note down the image of the woman in the deck chair"[26] – and, we may add, in which he notes down his literary struggles and meta-reflections.

Therefore, Calvino's solution to his, and Flannery's, writer's block involves also the very self-referentiality of the novel which is self-conscious and filled with meta-fictional techniques and auto-thematical references, such as "appeals either implicit or explicit to a reader turned narrate; unabashed parody and inventory of genre and style (…); metafictionally motivated intertextual references and allusions; transparency of textual correction, revision, and erasure; destabilisation and disruption of narrative continuity; and multiple contextual ironies." [27] Calvino transforms the notion of Flannery's inability to create neither all the possible novels nor a single, 'objective' novel. This inability ceases to be a problem that causes his writer's block, and instead becomes a fascinating literary theme and a structural tool that organises Calvino's novel. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, despite being a single book, conveys infinite narrative and thematic possibilities, and artistically explores Flannery's realisations that ha cannot create anything original and that he is limited by his experiential and linguistic self. The novel, therefore, becomes a perfect complement of the imperfect position in which the author *qua* author finds himself. This follows Flannery's own vision of what a good novel should be like: "the book should be the written counterpart of the unwritten world; its subject should be what does not exist and cannot exist except when written, but whose absence is obscurely felt by that which exists, in its own incompleteness."[28]

It therefore seems that Calvino's own writer's block, from which the writer notably suffered in the 1970's, was overcome by creating a self-referential novel that problematizes the very inability to write a novel. After all, the only true book is his own diary, as we read in chapter 8.[29] *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, in fact, is both of Flannery's fantasies at once: the true 'objective' book (arguably constituted by the frame-story) and the many books that comprise all possible viewpoints (i.e. the multiple incipit-stories that display different styles of writing and narrative techniques). Calvino thus manages to escape the necessity of sharing with us his real opinions (even those concerning literature or literary theory themselves). As Fink argues, "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. This refusal to take sides suggests that we

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[26] Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p. 181.
[27] Cotrupi, 'Hypermetafiction: Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*', p. 282.
[28] Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p. 172.
[29] Cf. Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p. 181.

are dealing here with a playful text, a narrative carnival designed to mock the existing order."[30]

Finally, Calvino displays his authorial virtuosity by showing us how well he can imitate different literary genres and narrative styles. The diversity conveyed in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* as well as the overarching picture of Calvino's writings, which differ substantively from one another, make Calvino almost immune to Nehamas' idea of the "postulated author"[31] who can be created in the readers' minds as a figure who unites all of the historical author's writings. At the beginning of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, in fact, Calvino makes this explicit, telling us about himself: "he [Calvino] is known as an author who changes greatly from one book to the next. And in these very changes you recognize him as himself."[32]

Conclusion

Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* artistically problematises the question of authorship, and in particular the dichotomy of the power and the limitations of authorship. My essay took a close look at both of these notions. I explored Calvino's and Flannery's struggles to transcend their individual, subjective viewpoint and linguistic sphere of writing in search for an objective perspective that can encompass the entire universe without mediating in through their individual subjecthood or through language.

Calvino's solution to this seemingly tragic realisation on the part of the author consists in embracing his subjective standpoint and transforming this struggle into a fascinating literary theme and an organisational tool of, and strategy for, the novel, which thereby becomes more authentic and yields truth. Despite – and precisely by virtue of – offering no univocal theory about who is ultimately in control over the reading process, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* successfully warns us against the Barthesian illusion that the author is dead and has no control over his text, and against the illusion that any one literary theory or approach can interpretatively exhaust a text. The novel advocates for a more dynamic interaction between text, author, and reader, suggesting that the meaning of a text is not fixed but continuously shaped by this triadic relationship.

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[30] Fink, 'The Power behind the Pronoun: Narrative Games in Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*', p. 93.

[31] Alexander Nehamas, 'The Postulated Author: Critical Monism as a Regulative Ideal', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1981), pp. 145.

[32] Calvino, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, p. 21.