Revising, Re-visioning: Italo Calvino and the Politics of Play

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"And Polo said: "The inferno of the living is not something that will be; it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it.

The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space." "

—I.C. *Invisible Cities* (1972)

Introduction: The "Uses of Literature"

In her 1999 essay, "Lightness and Gravity: Calvino, Pynchon, and Postmodernity,"

Alessia Ricciardi foregrounds a commonplace critique of Italo Calvino's late literary career.

Citing the author's committed political origins in *L'unità*, the anti-fascist communist news daily

whose staff Calvino joined in 1947, Ricciardi laments Calvino's alleged lost sense of social

responsibility in later years:

> Sadly, Calvino the mature postmodernist became exactly what he
> feared as a young man, that is to say, a solipsistic thinker removed
> from the exigencies of history and, as [Mario] Benedetti would
> say, belonging to the "postmoderno Nazionale."[1]

Ricciardi further condemns Calvino's late style for being invested in a kind of "formalist game

that avoids any costly or serious 'human' association."

Actually, the complex of inter-relationships between literature and politics has always

been a core issue for Calvino—in a 1976 lecture revealingly entitled, "Right and Wrong Political

Uses of Literature," Calvino referred to this particular problem as the age-old "knot" whose

"frayed and twisted ends" continually get "tangled around our ankles."[2] And while Ricciardi's

criticism here is specific to Calvino's last few published literary works from the 1970s and 80s,

we might easily push all the way back to the beginning of his career to locate the origins of such

critical debates surrounding his writing. In fact, the issue that Ricciardi raises—the nature of

Calvino's ethico-political responsibility *as a writer*—comes directly out of a much wider

conversation initiated during the rise of Italian Fascism and the fallout of WWII. Calvino's

proximity to and interest in the cultural and political climate of postwar Italy is characterized by

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[1] Alessia Ricciardi, "Lightness and Gravity: Calvino, Pynchon, and Postmodernity," *Modern Language Notes* 114.5, 1999: 1073.

[2] Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature: Essays,* Trans. Patrick Creagh (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986) 90.

direct involvement. Whether actively participating in the anti-fascist Italian Resistance, or later, writing and editing some of Italy's most influential socio-political journals of the period (*Il Politecnico* and *Officina*), Calvino's early career emerges straight out of the postwar debates surrounding cultural and political progressivism. In these years (1943-63) that were so pivotal to the evolution of a contemporary Italy, the Italian intelligentsia meted out critical issues such as the role of intellectuals and cultural production in a modern political society.[3]

In short, for Calvino and his contemporaries, the political nature of their craft was always a foundational concern—one that was explicitly central to the themes and motivations behind their writing. Historically speaking, Calvino's life and work span an incredibly rich period of development in literary modernism and postmodernism. Teresa De Lauretis, one of Calvino's most dedicated scholars, rightly notes that the author's fictional and critical work is "solidly placed at the crossroads of the major issues in contemporary social, cultural, and literary theory—Marxism and structuralism, anthropology and semiotics, popular culture and antinarrative."[4] While undoubtedly, over the course of his long and prolific career, Calvino re-imagined the form, style, and content of his fiction along the lines of these important intellectual developments (from severe, modern Neo-Realist dramas to more playful post-modern semiotic "games"), this evolution was not an abandonment of his earlier political commitments. In fact, quite the opposite is true; for in demonstrating a steadfast commitment to the interrogation and reordering of literary forms, Calvino constantly searches to update and expand the political efficacy of his fiction. Interestingly, by labeling Calvino's late works "formalist *games*," Ricciardi has unwittingly opened a fruitful vein that might be followed across Calvino's career to

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[3] Eugenio Bolongaro, *Italo Calvino and the Compass of Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2003) 12.
[4] Teresa De Lauretis, "Narrative Discourse in Calvino: Praxis or Poiesis?" *PMLA* 90.3, 1975: 414.

illustrate his unified and unswerving commitment to politics. This paper will present Calvino's

experimentation with form as a consequence of his authorial *playfulness*, and will argue that this

skill is anything but frivolous or solipsistic; for Calvino, play opens new avenues of fiction to

social and political engagement and constitutes one of the most important "uses of literature."

Why Neo-Realism? The Postwar Politico-cultural Debates and Calvino's Literary Beginnings

In order to appreciate fully the political implications of Calvino's formal playfulness in

his later work, it is important to consider the historical context that forged the aesthetic

conventions of the writer's earliest attempts at fiction. The year 1943 is often cited as a kind of

'year zero' for the emergence of a contemporary Italy. Even with the war still unresolved, it was

clear at this point that Italy was already a losing party. In 1943 Mussolini's arrest and

deposition, and King Victor Emmanuel III's flight from Rome to the Allied-controlled South,

left a virtually complete power vacuum in the war-torn country. As world powers vied for

political control of Italy's industrial base, the country was left "fragmented, humiliated, and

demoralized in the extreme."[5]

The most consequential and extensive, though by no means homogenous, effort on the

part of Italians to win back control of their homeland was the development of localized partisan

bands referred to collectively as the anti-fascist Resistance. It was precisely the heterogeneous

admixture of partisans that made the Resistance such an interesting phenomenon: whether poor

or wealthy, urban or rural, communist or nationalist, all different kinds of anti-fascists

participated. Calvino and many other young college-educated intellectuals became active

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[5] Bolongaro 13.

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members alongside poorer industrial and agricultural workers. As long as actual fighting

continued on the peninsula, the otherwise incongruous political ideologies and perspectives of

those committed to the Resistance were eclipsed by the overriding objective of the period:

unified opposition to the Nazis and the Fascists. It was in this anti-authoritarian spirit of

solidarity that Palmiro Togliatti, the leader of the Italian Communist Party, was able to proclaim

in June of 1944:

> Remember always that the insurrection that we want has not got
> the aim of imposing social and political transformations in the
> socialist or communist sense. Its aim is rather national liberation
> and the destruction of Fascism. All other problems will be
> resolved by the people tomorrow, once Italy is liberated, by means
> of a free popular vote and the election of a Constituent Assembly.[6]

In this way, as Eugenio Bolongaro has noted, the Resistance movement was a crucible: "The

long-lamented division between the intellectual class and the 'people' seemed to disappear…it

seemed that different social groups could actually talk and *understand* each other, work for a

common goal, and win together."[7]

   But after the end of the war in 1945, the artistic and intellectual class of the Resistance

(made up of individuals like Calvino and his peers) began to reflect seriously on the nature of

cultural production and its relationship to *contemporary* historical, political and social issues. As

it was steadily argued in a series of scholarly journals as late as the mid 1960s, it was clear that

many intellectuals believed that Italian poetry and literature (among other art forms) now had a

responsibility not only to respond directly and explicitly to current socio-political issues, but also

to dictate political practice in a post-fascist era. In his role as a contributor and editor of these

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[6] Translated in Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943-1988* (London, England: Penguin, 1990) 43.
[7] Bolongaro 15-16 (my emphasis).

journals (*Il Politecnico* 1945-47; *Officina* 1955-59; and *Il Menabó* 1959-67), Calvino found himself at the center of these ideological debates.

While it is exceedingly difficult to say what exactly it would mean for cultural values to pervade the political sphere, we can identify the aesthetic conventions in art and literature that were promoted under this theoretical position. The most emphatic cultural realization of the immediate postwar period is the genre of Italian Neo-Realism. Maria Corti has argued that the conventions of Neo-Realism as a narrative form came naturally out of the kind of storytelling (oral and written) that accompanied the experience of the Resistance, and has also noticed that after the war, a marked interest in memorial narratives spread across the whole of Italy.[8] Neo-Realism, with its truthful, uncontrived storytelling, interest in the common worker, and concern for the devastating effects of war, served as an antidote to twenty years of fascist mystification and rhetoric. "[The Italian] people wanted," Bolongaro explains, "to know the truth about the past as well as the present, and they longed for that reality which *open and frank communication* could disclose."[9] Such was the aesthetic of Italian Neo-Realist film and literature, and these art forms picked up popularity because of their enthusiasm for political progressivism and social change. They were, in short, representative of the kind of straight-talking, politically committed art and literature that was encouraged as a counterpoint to the experimentalism and perceived obscurantism of European literary high modernists such as T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf.

Not unlike the famous films directed in these postwar years by Italian directors like Vittorio De Sica and Roberto Rossellini, Calvino's early writing deals frankly with the difficult

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[8] Maria Corti, *Il Viaggio Testuale [le Ideologie E Le Strutture Semiotiche]* (Torino: Einaudi, 1978).
[9] Bolongaro 48 (my emphasis).

economic and moral situation of the postwar period. Formally, Neo-Realist works supplement these themes with logical and continuous narratives, naturalistic attention to detail, and simple, coherent language. Calvino's 1951 novel *I Giovani del Po* (published under the English title *Youth in Turin*), for instance, tells the story of a young man from the agricultural south who comes face to face with the stark realities of urban capitalism when he migrates to the city in order to find work at a factory. *Youth in Turin* is, like iconic works such as De Sica's film *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), an empathetic story about the common mistreatment of Italian workers and the unambiguous plight of their everyday lives. Like the beautiful, pared-down visual descriptions of De Sica's films, Calvino's novel relates its story in straightforward colloquial language and visually striking images.

But it is Calvino's very first novel-length work, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*, or *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*, which provides us with one of the most thorough and revealing instantiations of the Neo-Realist genre in literary fiction. Published in 1947, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* might appropriately be called a "Resistance novel" insofar as it attempts to represent the experiences of a group of disparate partisans living and fighting together in the hills outside of San Remo, a coastal city in the Western Ligurian Riveria. The story is filtered (though not exclusively) through the consciousness of a naive orphan, Pin, who finds himself adopted by a partisan detachment after he steals a German soldier's pistol. Through Pin's curious eyes, Calvino draws our attention to every minor aspect of life in the Resistance. We hear the partisans' stories and see their daily activities: the way they eat and sleep and fight and joke with one another.

What is perhaps most characteristic of Calvino's novel, and what makes it so identifiable

as Neo-Realist fiction, is its immediacy of expression. This is to say, first and foremost, a simple

and earnest desire to *express* the rich, variegated experiences of everyday life in as

straightforward and sensitive a manner as possible. In 1964, less than two decades after

publishing *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*, Calvino authorized a re-edition with an extended,

meditative preface. Here Calvino's commentary is broadly oriented; addressing his novel, but

also the postwar period and Neo-Realism more generally:

> …having emerged from an experience—a war, a civil war—which
> had spared no one, established an *immediacy of communication*
> between the writer and his public: we were face to face, on equal
> terms, bursting with stories to tell…[overwhelmed by] the urge to
> express. Express what? Ourselves, life's rough taste which we
> had just experienced, the many things we thought we knew or
> were…characters, landscapes, shoot-outs, political messages,
> dialect words, swear-words, lyric passages, violence and sexual
> encounters, all these were but colours on our palette…[10]

Precisely this sort of narrative directness characterizes *The Path to the Spiders' Nests.* Calvino's

use of concrete language and images to build immersive landscapes and settings for the reader

helps to establish this "immediacy of communication." Pin's natural, childlike infatuation with

the overwhelming sensorial experience of the world provides Calvino with the opportunity time

and again to craft near obsessive descriptions of Pin's (and therefore the reader's) fictional

environment. Consider, for instance, an exemplary passage describing Pin playing with the

German soldier's pistol that he has impulsively stolen:

> Pin unrolls the belt, opens the holster, and with a gesture as if he
> were taking a cat by the neck pulls out the pistol. It is really big
> and threatening…suddenly Pin cannot resist the temptation any
> more and points the pistol against his temple; it makes his head
> swim. On it moves, until it touches the skin and he can feel the

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[10] Italo Calvino, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*, Trans. Archibald Colquhoun and M. L. McLaughlin (New York: Ecco, 2000) 8-9 (my emphasis).

coldness of the steel. Suppose he put his finger on the trigger now? No, it is better to press the mouth of the barrel against the top of his cheek bone, until it hurts, and feel the circle of steel with its empty centre where the bullets come from. Perhaps if he suddenly pulls the gun away from his temple, the suction of the air will make a shot go off; no, it doesn't go off. Now he can put the barrel into his mouth and feel its taste against his tongue. Then, the most frightening of all, put it up to his eyes and look right into it, down the dark barrel which seems as deep as a well.[11]

This extract is stylistically significant for a variety of reasons. Firstly, with simple, present tense verb constructions, Calvino presents unfolding action in a way that absorbs the reader in the sequence of events. We move almost cinematically from the belt to the holster to the pistol and to each new part of Pin's body. At the same time, Calvino invites us to participate in Pin's own intimate thought processes with the boy's implicit questions and answers—"suppose he put his finger on the trigger now? No, it is better…" Throughout the passage we are encouraged to submerge ourselves in the action and Pin's perspective, which unfolds logically and continuously before our eyes.

The passage also illustrates the kind of "love affair" with concrete, convincing, and detailed physical description that Calvino attributes to the Neo-Realist aesthetic. There is what I have already described as an obsessive, here almost sadistic, psycho-sexual quality to the way Pin takes in the novelty of his experience. It is not enough for the boy to simply hold the pistol—he must scrutinize it from all possible angles, fondle its various component parts, *taste* its unique flavor. Pin (and Calvino) revel in the tangible reality of the gun, and its superfluous description seems to exist, at least partially, for the sake of describing. Like much of the novel, this naturalistic passage is bursting with descriptions of sensorial experience that Calvino renders openly and frankly. We can observe in this selection Calvino's desire to engender our empathy

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[11] Calvino, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* 47.

toward his protagonist; we literally think (and feel and see) *with* him, and we do so easily, unselfconsciously.

As *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* delights in this kind of convincingly naturalistic storytelling, it does so ultimately in the service of communicating a political message. On the whole, the novel is a kind of extended meditation or apologia for the Italian Resistance movement. Calvino offers a hierarchy of ideological justifications for joining the Resistance, prioritizing some as more worthy than others. This political work of the novel is disproportionately concentrated in chapter ix, when the commissar Kim of the partisan forces comes to review Pin's detachment before a decisive battle. The leader's visit creates an opportunity for Calvino to reflect on his large cast of characters, as Kim thinks analytically about each man's perspective and place in the movement. Some, like the young Red Wolf, are more ideologically motivated; however, the vast majority of partisans have narrowly self-interested reasons for fighting: to improve the social or economic position of their family, such as the Calabrian brothers-in-law, or to carry out "revenge on a woman," such as Cousin, or even to exercise some obscure exorcism of self-punishment, as is the case with Dritto, the small detachment's leader.

It is Kim, though, who offers the most sophisticated and nuanced answer to the essential question: why do we fight? Kim, who aside from Pin, is probably the book's only unambiguously sympathetic character, appropriately offers us Calvino's political message. The commissar's perspective is wide and historically oriented—it is concerned not simply with fascists and anti-fascists ("official meanings"), but with altering the course of history, with

redeeming the dignity lost in the hands of "human misery."[12] Most significantly, Kim

appreciates that the future of postwar Italy will depend on the continuation of these ideals of the

Resistance. He muses aloud to himself:

> I could be making a mental study of the details of the attack, the
> dispositions of weapons and squads. But I am too fond of thinking
> about those men, studying them, making discoveries about them.
> What will they do 'afterwards' for instance? Will they recognize
> in post-war Italy something made by them? Will they understand
> what system will have to be used then in order to continue our
> struggle, the long and constantly changing struggle to better
> humanity?[13]

In short, Kim does not think of the Resistance movement as confined to a specific historical

moment, but rather as a continuous effort, promoting understanding and solidarity among all

Italians. The "purpose" of the Resistance is thus aligned with progress in the most emphatic

sense; for those who do not incorporate its ideals will "become individualists again, and thus

[also] sterile, they'll fall into crime, the great outlet for dumb resentments, they'll forget that

history once walked by their side…"[14]

As the novel was published in 1947, two years after actual combat ended, Kim's

appealing, if idealistic, conceptualization of the Resistance serves as a kind of post-facto

historical corrective to alternative, perhaps less flattering, readings of the movement. With its

not so subtle emphasis on historical "purpose" and "constant and continual" struggle, Calvino's

communistic message, palatably presented by commissar Kim, gives the Resistance peerless

political responsibility for human improvement in Italy's future. Calvino reflects that for himself

and others who had participated in the Resistance, "having been a partisan" seemed to be "an

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[12] Calvino, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* 141.
[13] Calvino 145.
[14] Calvino 145.

irrevocable event in [their] lives, not a temporary condition like 'military service.'"

Furthermore, after the Liberation, "[they] saw [their] civilian life as a continuation of the partisan struggle by other means."[15]

Importantly, thanks to the Neo-Realist aesthetics of *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*, these ideological positions are delivered more or less seamlessly, without drawing critical attention to themselves. Ideological authority is concentrated in Kim's character, which, in turn, is localized in the book's narrative: Kim is introduced in chapter ix, but does not physically appear in later stages of the novel. Yet his presence looms large over the rest of the text, as he embodies an anonymous, stable authority on which we, and the rest of the partisans, depend for "official meaning" and ideological orientation. Calvino's archetypal Neo-Realist drama, with its logical, continuous storyline, concrete language and images, and naturalistic illusionism, constructs a world and a cast of characters that we become intimately a part of, and therefore emotionally committed to; however, it does *not* foster the space necessary for analytical distance or prompt our *critical* intellectual engagement. As such, we are potentially able to passively accept Calvino's thesis championing a militaristic Resistance movement as a working model for Italy's political future. With *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*, Calvino successfully fuses Neo-Realist aesthetics with a political message in order to create a particularly compelling aesthetic springboard for his political perspectives. Calvino's prose style is open, frank, and naturalistic, which fosters an implicit trust between writer and reader, who receives and absorbs Calvino's ideas out of hand and without suspicion.

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[15] Italo Calvino, *The Hermit in Paris: Autobiographical Writings*, Trans. M. L. McLaughlin (New York: Pantheon, 2003) 147.

Formal Transitions: Calvino's *Marcovaldo, Or The Seasons in the City*

Despite having written a Resistance novel deeply indebted to the aesthetics of Neo-Realism, Calvino would not remain long in this stylistic mode. In fact, the 1950s proved to be a remarkably rich period of development for Calvino, whose output markedly increased with the publication of several novels and collections of short stories between 1952 and 1960. Perhaps most interesting about these years is Calvino's bold pursuit of "new modes of signification and new approaches to the real."[16] While Calvino's early Neo-Realist fiction strives to capture the sense of social commitment fostered by anti-fascist politics, it is clear by 1952 that the genre did not wholly suit the author's intent. Calvino has reflected lucidly on the subject of his re-investigation of literary form:

> The fact is that after my first novel…and my first few short stories, which told of picaresque adventures in an Italy of wartime and post-war upheaval, I had made efforts to write the realistic-novel-reflecting-the-problems-of-Italian-society, and had not managed to do so.[17]

He elaborates on this topic in a letter written to a friend years afterward concerning his reluctance to publish the novel, *I giovani* or *Youth in Turin*:

> My objective [in *I giovani*] was to provide an image of human integration with the world. Instead I ended up with a work that was uncharacteristically grey for me: in it the fullness of life, despite substantial discussion of it in the novel, does not come across much at all—that was why I never wanted to publish the work in book form.[18]

These glimpses into Calvino's rethinking of the form of the Neo-Realist novel are strikingly revealing. Ironically, the "realistic-novel-reflecting-the-problems-of-Italian-society"

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[16] Peter Brand and Lino Pertile, eds. *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 552.

[17] Italo Calvino, *Our Ancestors: Three Novels* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1980) vii.

[18] Calvino qtd. in Martin McLaughlin, *Italo Calvino* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1998) 35.

fails, Calvino believes, in the very act of re-presentation it seeks so meticulously to carry out.

The more explicitly Calvino's writing treats the richness and "fullness" of life (with respect to

the work's realism), the more grey and lifeless it becomes on the page—the more explicitly he

identifies society's ills, the more abstract they seem to become in translation. In short, in order

to access the intended effect of his socially committed novel, and in order to write politically

relevant literature, Calvino ultimately realized he would have to jettison many tried and true

aspects of the Neo-Realist program that had become restrictive to him. Though at this point in

Calvino's career he had not determined the precise shape of a literary form that would suit him

(he never "chose" a single one anyway), it was at least clear to him that a bourgeois intellectual

could not craft compelling literature to the benefit of Italians simply by writing "realistically"

about the ills of society.[19]

Ultimately, it is not especially difficult to apply Calvino's own criticisms of Neo-Realist

aesthetics to his first novel. Despite its accomplished lyricism, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* is

limited in scope and relevance today—it remains bound by the uniqueness of its own historical

context. While it attempts to re-present faithfully the experiences of those who participated in

the anti-fascist Resistance, it invariably damages these once vibrant memories. As Calvino

poetically assesses the dangers of writing in such a style, "the habit of projecting things on to a

literary plane where everything is solid and fixed once and for all, has now taken root, and has

faded and crushed the crop of memories in which the life of the tree and of the blade of grass

mutually nourished each other."[20] The rigidity of the Neo-Realist form—with its concreteness,

its dedication to realism, its general lack of ambiguity—is at odds with actual experience, with

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[19] Bolongaro 61.
[20] Calvino, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* 29.

the moving and multiform realm outside of the page. The result is a fairly quaint, even clichéd, narrative, whose positions on international Communism and Resistance politics seem like dry and hopelessly dated ideologies.

The year 1952 marked the beginning of a period of critical re-imagining for Calvino. The author began experimenting with fairy-tales in a variety of Italian dialects (*Italian Folk Tales*, 1956) and with more light-hearted moral and historical fantasies in three novels (*The Cloven Viscount*, 1952; *The Baron in the Trees*, 1957; and *The Non-Existent Knight*, 1960). *Marcovaldo ovvero le stagioni in città* (*Marcovaldo, or The Seasons in the City*) belongs squarely within this period of Calvino's literary retooling—in fact, because of its curiously prolonged period of composition, *Marcovaldo* is technically a contemporary of each of these innovative works. The novel (though it might more appropriately be referred to as a collection of vignettes) was written over the course of a pivotal decade for Calvino: the earliest portions date from the early 1950s, though the book was not complete and published until 1963.[21] In short, while Calvino's *Marcovaldo* is a compelling work of fiction in its own right, the book also deserves critical attention because of the historical circumstances of its production. Insofar as it is a playful, experimental, and transitional work for Calvino, *Marcovaldo* and its formal investigations extend from the author's disillusionment with the *aesthetics* of Neo-Realism, but also reaffirm Calvino's belief in the political efficacy of his craft.

There are, to be sure, a number of stylistic and thematic continuities in *Marcovaldo* with respect to Calvino's Neo-Realist roots. In a series of vignettes, the book sketches the character of the plucky, yet ineffectual Marcolvaldo (an "unskilled laborer," as we are reminded several

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[21] Italo Calvino, *Marcovaldo, Or, The Seasons in the City*, Trans. William Weaver (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983) Calvino's author's note.

times) and his everyday experiences coping with financial and social destitution in the alienating and "impervious" city.[22] In this sense, Calvino returns his focus to the everyday lives of the urban down-and-outs, as with his realist works, *Youth in Turin* and *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*. In *Marcovaldo* Calvino carefully, conscientiously renders the particularities of this socially downtrodden character and thus elevates his stories and experiences to the status of literature. Importantly, like the early Neo-Realist works, *Marcovaldo* is characterized by a frankness and simplicity of language that resonates with a common vernacular. Indeed, as Angela Jeannet suggests, the appeal of Calvino's language lies in its accessibility and almost "cartoon-like quality," a phrase that begins to suggest something of the bold, familiar, graphical nature of *Marcovaldo*'s descriptive imagery. [23]

But despite some of these familiar nods to Neo-Realist stylistics, *Marcovaldo* is most notable for the degree to which it departs formally from a work like *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*. As previously alluded to, *Marcovaldo* flouts important Neo-Realist conventions. It does not concern itself, for example, with the development of a single, continuous narrative (a critical aspect of Neo-Realist works). Instead, each new "chapter" of the book presents the author with an opportunity to, in effect, start a new tale. Calvino is willing to develop fantastic plotlines whose de-contextualized content seem to have no bearing on a larger narrative arc. Indications of passing time, for instance, are not simply left out of the novel, but specifically avoided by Calvino—the fact that Marcovaldo is on a direct flight to Bombay at the end of chapter twelve in no way precludes his unexplained, and immediate return in the following chapter.

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[22] Constance Markey, *Italo Calvino: a Journey toward Postmodernism* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida, 1999) 52.

[23] Angela Jeannet, "Escape from the Labyrinth: Italo Calvino's Marcovaldo," *Annali D'italianistica* 9, 1991: 218.

Moreover, while Calvino suggests a natural ordering of time in his book by associating each chapter with a portion in the cycle of seasons (e.g. chapter 9, "Spring: The good air"), his discontinuous narrative conspicuously aborts the novel's temporality. I.T. Olken has commented that these chapter descriptors (Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter) are as "misleading as they are categorical," for it is clearly evident from the shifting ages of Marcovaldo's children that the book's later stories do not necessarily come after the earlier ones, temporally speaking.[24] Calvino's overt subversion of immersive Neo-Realist narrative conventions lends *Marcovaldo* its fantastic, fragmentary, tenuous, and playful qualities. Ultimately, the effect is liberating, for as Franco La Polla has noticed, the book's narrative incongruities avoid becoming tied to specific "sense and meaning" by becoming signs for themselves, "free from any relationship with the reality [they are] a part of."[25] That is to say, the vignettes are "playful" insofar as they are not beholden to the creation of a convincing illusory world, and they are free to be "unproductive" to a larger ideological purpose.

There are other important ways in which *Marcovaldo* plays with form in order to achieve liberating, if jarring effects. Here is the opening to chapter seven, "Autumn: The lunch-box":

> The joys of that round and fat vessel, or lunch-box, known as the "pietanziera," consist first of all in its having a screw-on top. The action of unscrewing the cover already makes your mouth water, especially if you don't yet know what is inside, because for example, it's your wife who prepares the vessel for you every morning. Once the box is uncovered, you see your food packed there: salami and lentils, or hard-boiled eggs and beets, or else polenta and codfish, all neatly arranged within that circumference as the continents and oceans are set on the maps of the globe…[26]

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[24] I.T. Olken, "The Written and Unwritten Worlds of Marcovaldo and Calvino," *Quaderni D'italianistica* 11.1, 1990: 75.
[25] Franco La Polla, "A Note on Marcovaldo," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 6.2, 1986: 39.
[26] Calvino, *Marcovaldo* 31.

What is most immediately striking about this passage is its direct address to the reader. In fact, it is not the only portion of the novel to casually and momentarily slip from third to second person narration. In this case, even though it soon becomes clear that the "you" with the lunch-box is in fact Calvino's protagonist Marcovaldo, the reader is nonetheless briefly disoriented by this narrative shift from the omniscient narrator. Here Calvino explicitly predicts the reader's natural tendency to (passively) empathize with or inhabit the main character's perspective, and by doing so, is able to draw our critical awareness to this act of reader transference—he makes it strange and observable to us. Equally important, the passage also highlights its own artificiality as a textual object by underscoring the contingency of its "facts." By listing various possible lunches separated by the conditional "or," Calvino effectively constructs a kind of prose of potentialities, laying bare the arbitrary nature of the images he chooses as an author. No single detail is absolutely necessary to the story; rather, each is merely an authorial choice, interchangeable with the next, or with something else entirely. This approach to imagery and visual description is an emphatic retraction of Neo-Realist rigidity and concreteness, wherein the absolute specificity of a visual detail is called upon to substantiate the existence of an illusory world.

Calvino occasionally pushes the metatextual elements of *Marcovaldo* to the point of explicitness. When at the beginning of chapter four Calvino uses the metaphor of a "white sheet of paper" to describe the expanse of snow that has blanketed the city, he is carefully preparing the reader for the book's poignant conclusion. In these last pages, Marcovaldo finds himself in a bizarre dream-like sequence observing (or participating in?) the pursuit of a white hare by a black wolf. The imagery of the chase becomes increasingly abstracted as the crowded, variegated city streets melt into an expanse of woods. And then further along, "There was a line

where the forest, all black, ended and the snow began, all white. The hare ran on this side, and the wolf on that."[27] Eventually, the white hare disappears from our view and "only the expanse of snow [can] be seen, white as this page."[28] The concluding line of the novel elegantly completes the gradual collapse of Calvino's rich fictive imagery into the blunt physicality of the printed page. The effect is destabilizing. To the strange and ambiguously allusive passage we are denied any sense of closure. Instead we are reminded not only of the artificiality of the world Calvino has created for us, but of our *activity* as readers, for whom the text ultimately exists.

I am especially concerned here with this concept of readerly activity in contradistinction to the passivity of the experience of reading a Neo-Realist work. Calvino once said in a lecture entitled "The Written and the Unwritten World" that the great writers are those "who succeed in conveying to the reader an *approach* to, rather than an arrival at knowledge."[29] By exposing the artificiality of its own construction, *Marcovaldo* seems unwilling to offer any piece of finite "knowledge" or an easily digestible message, political or otherwise (such as is delivered by commissar Kim). Instead the reader is intellectually engaged; continually forced to examine and re-examine his or her own role in receiving and creating meaning in the text. By combining this pronounced shift of focus from author to reader with what has already been described as Calvino's open prose of potentialities, *Marcovaldo* demands the reader's own interpretive and critical prowess. In an emphatically Barthesian sense, with the "Death of the Author" comes the birth of "The Reader."[30]

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[27] Calvino, *Marcovaldo* 120.
[28] Calvino 121.
[29] Calvino qtd in Olken 72.
[30] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Modern Criticism and Theory: a Reader*, Ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988) 150.

This adjustment to the conceptual framework of Calvino's formal approach implies crucially important responsibility on the part of the individual reader. The reader is empowered to interrogate the source of received information and evaluate its truthfulness and relevance to his or her own life. This touches a profoundly political cornerstone. Comparatively speaking, Calvino's Neo-Realist approach is disempowering insofar as it successfully immerses the reader in an illusory world where the author's material (i.e. imagery, themes, ideologies) are more passively absorbed by the reader. The sparse, ambiguous, and metafictional aspects of *Marcovaldo* all contribute to the book's "openness," in the rich sense meant by Calvino's contemporary and fellow countryman, Umberto Eco. In his landmark theoretical treatise published in 1962 (one year before *Marcovaldo*), Eco advances his concept of the *opera aperta,* or the "open work." In the briefest of terms, the open work is a piece of literature or art whose "indeterminacy of form" actively invites reader or viewer interpretation.[31] One of Eco's many literary examples is that of Bertolt Brecht's intensely self-referential "epic theatre." Brecht's plays do not, Eco writes,

> in the strict sense, devise solutions at all. It is up to the audience to draw its own conclusions from what it has seen on stage. Brecht's plays also end in a situation of ambiguity….although it is no longer the morbid ambiguousness of a half-perceived infinitude or an anguish-laden mystery, but the specific concreteness of an ambiguity in social intercourse, a conflict of unresolved problems taxing the ingenuity of playwright, actors, and audience alike. Here the work is "open" in the same sense that a debate is "open." A solution is seen as desirable and is actually anticipated, but it must come from the *collective enterprise of the audience*. In this case the "openness" is converted into an instrument of *revolutionary pedagogics*.[32]

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[31] Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, Trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989) 4.
[32] Eco 11 (my emphasis).

Eco's discussion of Brechtian theater has several important implications for a reading of Calvino's formal play in a book like *Marcovaldo*. Brecht's form of "epic theatre" (or what he often called "non-Aristotelian drama") uses techniques of fragmentation, contrast and contradiction to achieve the sense of ambiguity and unresolved conflict that Eco references. One of the primary goals of Brecht's plays is that the audience should always be aware of the fact that it is watching a play: "It is most important," Brecht writes, "that one of the main features of the ordinary theatre should be excluded from [epic theatre]: the engendering of illusion."[33] It is by virtue of its ambiguity, disjointed plot and narrative structures, and its metatheatrical nature, that a Brechtian production is "open" in Eco's parlance. Importantly, this openness has explicit political resonances for Eco, who likens the conflict and inconclusiveness of the open work to a political debate. In short, insofar as it actively encourages readers/viewers to participate in the "collective enterprise" of creating meaning and drawing conclusions, the form of the open work should be understood, in Eco's terms, as "an instrument of revolutionary pedagogics."

There are very striking ways in which the openness of *Marcovaldo*'s form requires precisely this kind of political work, even if its playful fable-like plot does not explicitly advance an ideological position. In fact, in many ways Calvino's protagonist might seem like the most *apolitical* of figures—Marcovaldo's innocence, lightheartedness, and general disinterest in matters outside of his own immediate experience, for example, do not call up images of a great political agitator or even a very responsible citizen. He is a comically ineffectual character—despite his parental care-giving role, he is decidedly naïve and childish. We cannot help but laugh and shake our heads at his innocence and optimism as he dreams up unlikely and

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[33] Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic*, Ed. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964) 122.

ambitious plans; he "invents," for instance, a homeopathic wasp-sting cure for the city's arthritic

patients and starts a clinic in his home. But the whimsical plans of each new chapter always end

up collapsing on themselves (in this case, a hoard of angry wasps sends everyone to a real

hospital), leaving Marcovaldo out of luck and back precisely where he started. Furthermore, we

are left with the distressing impression that Marcovaldo has learned nothing from the experience

of his mishaps, as is evidenced by their repeated occurrence and the cyclical nature of the

narrative.

There are serious, even disturbing, realities of Marcovaldo's daily existence that do not

seem to correspond to his innocent and optimistic characterization or the general tone of

Calvino's book. Marcovaldo's lack of critical perspective on his position is simply ill matched

to the persistent difficulties he faces, like finding enough food for himself and his large family,

the inadequacy of his tiny one-bedroom apartment, or his exploitation at the hands of cold and

uncharitable bosses. In one anecdotal story, Marcovaldo brings his whole family to the

supermarket even though he has no money to spend on food and no intention of buying anything.

He is there out of the simple urge to conform: "[Marcovaldo] wanted only to experience the

pleasure of pushing [the food] around for ten minutes, displaying his purchases like everyone

else."[34] Marcovaldo cannot resist his consumerist fantasies; he moves through the aisles

selecting brilliantly colored food items simply for their beautiful packaging, even when the

names of the products are "undecipherable" to him.[35] It is a social performance for Marcovaldo;

he merely wants to fit in with those around him, he is drawn to the *appearance* of affluence, but

seems unconcerned with his very real lack of resources.

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[34] Calvino, *Marcovaldo* 86.
[35] Calvino 86.

I raise this example of Marcovaldo's naïveté and passivity in the face of his quite serious social and economic poverty because I believe that it is connected to the political work of the novel happening at the formal level. What Marcovaldo lacks—what could really be construed as his tragic flaw—is his indifferent perspective toward his disadvantaged position. Never once do we see him muse about the fairness or meaning of his condition, and as we witness his plight, his uncritical naïveté becomes more and more unsettling. It is this flaw that helps to keep him within the unchanging cycle of social discrimination, economic destitution, and political impotency. Though other external forces surely might conspire to dictate Marcovaldo's life, it would be meaningful if his perspective were more self-conscious regarding his delusional fantasizing and self-deception. Instead, as Olken argues, over the course of the novel, Marcovaldo experiences "no change or modification or any signs of conspicuous growth of consciousness;" in fact, not even "*intuitions* of new [or] different forms of awareness" seem to enter his realm of consciousness.[36] In short, Marcovaldo lacks the very same critical awareness and distrustfulness that Calvino's novel seeks to enact in the reader. This effective interplay between *Marcovaldo*'s plot and form underscores the political message of the novel: do not accept facts (social, political, literary, or otherwise) as unchangeable necessities; they are all "authorial" choices that must be constantly challenged, revised and revisited. To return, momentarily, to Eco, the political "work" of the novel belongs to a certain "aesthetic principle":

> [That] the only meaningful way in which art can speak of man and
> his world is by organizing its forms in a particular way and not by
> making pronouncements with them. *Form must not be a vehicle
> for thought; it must be a way of thinking*.[37]

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[36] Olken 75.
[37] Eco 142 (my emphasis).

It is not a prepackaged ideology that Calvino's *Marcovaldo* gives to us, but an impetus and a

model for free and critical thinking. Interestingly, with *Marcovaldo* Calvino turns the qualities

that were so appealing and natural about Pin's character in *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*—his

youthful innocence and naïveté—on their head: Marcovaldo's innocence and lack of critical self-

awareness are strangely disturbing to us and politically problematic. In this manner, Calvino's

formal play in *Marcovaldo* grants the author a deeper level of political efficacy in his fiction. By

laying the groundwork for a critical and distrustful *way of thinking*, Calvino infuses his novel

with un-historically fettered political meaning that has enduring relevance and applicability in

the present.

Further Afield: The Mature Postmodernism of *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler*

This paper began with a quotation from the critic Alessia Ricciardi, which leveled a

serious criticism at Calvino's late literary career. With the postmodern turn in Calvino's fiction,

Ricciardi senses a rigorously self-reflexive involvement with literary theory and semiotics, one

that ostensibly confirms the author's literary solipsism and nullifies his dedication to "socially

committed" literature. If Ricciardi had just one of Calvino's late novels from the 1970s and 80s

to illustrate such a thesis, she might readily choose *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979),

probably the author's most successful and challenging work. Indeed, other critics and

contemporary readers have not minced their words about the intellectual difficulties presented by

this book—Salman Rushdie describes it as "quite possibly the most complicated book you…will

ever read," while an evidently skeptical John Updike finds the book "cool with few warm spots, [a novel that] cannot sustain for its length so intricate an interplay of reader, author, and hero."[38]

What is it that makes *Winter's Night* such a difficult read? And if this novel that took Calvino five full years to complete is so "cool," so cerebral and opaque that some of its most penetrating readers are confounded, has it not lost touch with the world outside its pages? Has its author not retreated into the utterly baffling (though thoroughly seductive) fantastical universe of a Borgesian literary experiment? How is *Winter's Night* not merely, as Ricciardi challenges, a "formalist game" avoiding any "costly or serious 'human' association?" These are absolutely essential questions for Calvino's mature fiction—ones that must be grappled with in order to locate any semblance of continuity with the political commitment of his Neo-Realist beginnings. In fact, it is by its playful and relentless interrogation of theoretical issues such as the locality and nature of authorship and the problems of interpretation that *Winter's Night actualizes* the anti-authoritarian and collectivist political sentiments that are merely pointed to in Calvino's earliest fiction. It is by virtue of this kind of playfulness that Calvino's postmodernist novel can be read as the author's most effectively political work; in short, as the culmination, rather than nullification, in the development of his socially committed literature.

The narrative and structural complexities of *Winter's Night* are promptly evident as we begin to read. In this book, the casual use of the peculiar and unexpected second person narration has reached a more rigorous level of sophistication since Calvino's initial (and partial) experimentation with the technique in *Marcovaldo*. In fact, as the opening chapter of *Winter's Night* makes abundantly clear, "you the reader" will become one of the novel's central

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[38] Salman Rushdie, "Calvino," *London Review of Books*, 1981: 17; and John Updike, "Italo Calvino," *Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism* (New York: Knopf, 1983) 472-473.

protagonists. The affable and impudent narrator "I" (perhaps too) casually addresses "you"

(using the Italian *tu* form), instructing the reader how they ought to begin reading with a series of

suggestions: "Find a comfortable position…Put your feet up on a cushion…Adjust the

light…Anything else? Do you have to pee? Alright, you know best."[39]

However, even before the reader (presumably now comfortable enough to begin reading)

has made it several pages into the novel, its structural instabilities begin to surface. The

character "you" discovers that the Calvino novel he or she intended to read has been misbound

with the pages of another text by a different author, and to make matters worse, the replacement

copy requested from the book vendor is yet another, different misbound copy. Before "you the

reader" has a chance to realize this mix-up, they notice a woman in the bookstore with a similar

predicament: Ludmilla (the "Other Reader") also would like to return her defective copy of

Calvino's most recent novel. The rest of *Winter's Night* becomes a convoluted playing out of

this conceptual framework—two readers searching tirelessly amongst the pages of so many

unfinished novels, embarking on a "labyrinthical quest" for the completed or "whole" object of

Calvino's original text.[40] The resultant storylines are an elaborate, shifting system of regressions

that plunge the reader into confounding problems of literary meaning, authorship, and

translation.

As we have seen, Calvino's opening chapter to *Winter's Night* indicates that we are in

very different territory than *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* or even *Marcovaldo*. This is a story

explicitly about telling stories; it's a novel about writing and reading, but also about methods of

interpreting. *Winter's Night* is a "difficult" read because it persistently seeks to complicate our

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[39] Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveler*, Trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981) 3-4.
[40] Markey 116.

too-easy relationship with language and the larger ideas it is used to communicate. In addition to reading, writing, and interpreting, *Winter's Night* is also a novel about translation—or that inherently approximate interpretive act which occurs not only when moving from one language to another, but at every single stage of the writing/reading/interpreting process: from idea to articulation to written words to reading to interpreting and re-reading. In Calvino's view, "meaning," that elusive pest, is altered (partially lost, partially created) with each of these acts of translation, and therefore, lives an utterly flexible, de-centered, and highly contingent existence.[41]

Formally speaking, *Winter's Night* revels in pastiche. Each new chapter's subplot inhabits the style of a different popular genre fiction: a sentimental love story, a thrilling international spy drama, an exotic travel novel, or, perhaps Calvino's most frequently employed, a "whodunit" detective mystery. As he utilizes one clichéd plot structure after the next (only to break them off at climatic moments), Calvino develops, now much more explicitly, the playful self-reflexivity of *Marcovaldo*. Because none of the familiar micro-narratives are ever intended to be finished or even developed, Calvino's appropriation of these styles mostly serves to call attention to his authorial technique and the artificiality of various literary devices. What is more, just like the tattered edges of the ten unrelated and unfinished storylines that Calvino introduces and surreptitiously abandons, *Winter's Night* makes no attempt whatsoever to resolve or neaten any of the raggedy philosophical problems it raises. Rather, as Constance Markey has observed, the novel promotes an environment of mystification and bewilderment: "confounding the

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[41] An important and interesting implication of this theoretical position is that an interpretive analysis of the English language "version" of any of Calvino's texts (such as my own) is theoretically just as (in)valid as an analysis of the original Italian—we are simply at *another* (not greater or lesser) stage of translation.

reader," she writes, "undermining his servile reliance on literary convention, is the novel's strategy."[42]

It is worth reiterating here that these formal strategies are the very same ones that Calvino began experimenting with in *Marcovaldo*. There is, however, an important development: whereas the formal playfulness, self-consciousness, and cyclical, discontinuous narrativity of *Marcovaldo* lends that text a certain charming lyricism, the same, greatly augmented qualities of *Winter's Night* produce a thoroughly cerebral, intellectually disorienting experience for the reader. If *Marcovaldo* marks Calvino's conceptual transition to a more *open* form—open in Eco's sense, that is, seeking to "bring in" the reader and their critical perceptions—*Winter's Night* could very well be the ultimate stage in the development of that literary impulse. It is the author himself, predictably enough, who indicates this point most succinctly. At the very end of the opening chapter, for instance, the narrator addresses the sense of "disappointment" that surfaces upon discovering that the book you are about to read has very little, if any, connection to the author who has supposedly crafted it. Of course, *Winter's Night* is filled with just these sorts of disappointments: authorial displacement, unfinished endings, misinterpretations, failed translations, and the like. "At first, 'you the reader,'" the narrator says,

> feel a bit lost, as when a person *appears* who, from the name, you identified with a certain face, and you try to make the features you are seeing tally with those you had in mind, and *it doesn't work*. But then you go on and realize that the book is readable nevertheless, independently of what you expected of the author, it's the book in itself that arouses your curiosity; in fact, on sober reflection, you prefer it this way, *confronting* something and not quite knowing yet what it is.[43]

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[42] Markey 116.
[43] Calvino, *Winter's Night* 9 (my emphasis).

There are several core Calvinian notions embedded in this introductory passage of the novel. Most critical is the emphasis on "appearance" and "confrontation"—the appearance of this strange, unexpected book, because of its stubborn resistance to the reader's attempts to know or *recognize* it, to pin it down, opens up productive possibilities of "sober reflection" and a confrontation with the unknown. As in *Marcovaldo*, by defying "expected" or comfortable interpretive solutions, *Winter's Night* will shift the burden of critical thinking and the production of meaning away from the unitary author and onto an inherently multitudinous body of readers.

This critical suspicion and *re-positioning* of authority, meaning, and language are fundamental hallmarks of post-structuralism. Indeed, Calvino's playful commitment to de-centering harkens to Jacques Derrida's seminal 1967 essay of post-structuralist thought, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in which he writes:

> It [is] necessary to begin thinking that there [is] no center, that the center [can] not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center [has] no natural site, that it [is] not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions [come] into play.[44]

Needless to say, given *Winter's Night's* shifting, variable, and confounding approaches to storytelling, the theoretical context of literary post-structuralism—with its appreciation of the value of play—is central to an investigation of the novel.

Winter's Night is so thoroughly dedicated to this conceptual turn that it is actually difficult to locate a chapter that does not help to illustrate it in some way. One of the many curious stories we encounter in the novel, a chapter entitled "In a network of lines that enlace," has an important predecessor from the very beginning of the book. The first story chapter, "If on

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[44] Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," *Writing and Difference*, Trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1978) 280.

a winter's night a traveler," begins in a nondescript train station with a speaker/narrator who

identifies himself as "I." As readers, we do not tend to question the content of this dominant

first-person pronoun, but rather tacitly accept its definability, its recognizability, its authority.

But from the outset these very preconceptions are unsettled: "I am the man," our speaker relates,

> who comes and goes between the bar and the telephone booth. Or,
> rather: that man is *called* "I" and you know nothing else about him,
> just as this station is only called "station" and beyond it there exists
> nothing except the unanswered signal of a telephone ringing in a
> dark room of a distant city. I hang up the receiver…[45]

In this instant, the narrator's ambiguous identity ("you know nothing else about him") is a

function of language's arbitrary referentiality. In the absence of the speaker's essence, we

replace him with a word, a sign, just as we replace the idea of a railway station with the word

"station." These signs on the page have nothing behind, or "beyond" them, and so they become

like unanswered phone calls, or futile attempts to connect with a presence on the other end of the

line.

This de-centering of the narrator in the first chapter has critical implications for the rest

of Calvino's novel. Almost immediately, as he dedicates himself to deconstructing this authorial

character and thereby the author-function in his book more generally, Calvino calls into question

the role and value of the *source* of what we read. One important consequence of this re-

positioning is that any temporality in the writing necessarily breaks down. As Barthes explains,

when we "believe in the author" the "book and author stand automatically on a single line

divided into a *before* and an *after*. The author is thought to *nourish* the book…as a father [does]

his son." [46] However, deconstructing the author-function means the failure of this paradigm, and

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[45] Calvino, *Winter's Night* 11 (my emphasis).
[46] Barthes 148-49.

"in complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born *simultaneously* with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing…every text is eternally written *here and now*."[47] Ultimately, for Barthes, without this author to precede and govern the text "*writing can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, [or] representation.*" In other words, in writing, what happens is analogous to what occurs when a phone rings in a dark room and there's nobody on the other line. As Calvino's speaker/"author" explicates,

> [when the phone rings] there is [an] interruption of the continuity
> of time, the space is no longer what it was before because it is
> occupied by the ring, and my presence is no longer what it was
> before because it is conditioned by the will of this object that is
> calling.[48]

In a sense, with the deconstruction of the author, all that seemed constant is made contingent by the object referent: time, space, even the *presence* of the speaker, are all subject to "the will" of an entity that is powerful precisely for its *absence*. In this metacritical moment, Calvino subverts the Western tradition of *logocentrism* that Derrida also famously challenged. *Logocentrism*, Ross Murfin explains, holds that "in an ideal beginning were creative *spoken* words, words such as 'Let there be light,' spoken by an ideal and *present* God. [Now, according to the logocentric bias,] these words can only be represented in unoriginal speech or writing."[49] Calvino undermines this hierarchy by destabilizing our understanding of *who* is capable of "ideal speech"—what comes first, the author or the text?

Returning to the metaphor of a telephone ringing in a dark and empty room as it is initially introduced in the first chapter, we find that Calvino offers an important elaboration on this idea in the chapter, "In a network of lines that enlace." The essential deconstruction of

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[47] Barthes 148-49.
[48] Calvino *Winter's Night* 133.
[49] Ross C. Murfin, "What Is Deconstruction?" *The Dead (Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism)* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1993) 208.

boundaries delimiting the roles of "writer" and "reader" begins in the very first line of this later chapter when the speaker, the "I" and ostensible author-function, recasts himself in the position of a *reader*: "The first sensation this book should convey is what *I feel* when I hear the telephone ring."[50] As it will become clear in my discussion of this chapter, the sensation of hearing the telephone ring or of receiving a call is likened to the experience of the *reader* faced with the problem of interpretation. Thus, from the very beginning we are on unstable ground, for our speaker with the *author*ity of the author-function has set out to convey his difficulties as a reader.

The most serious implication of deconstructing the author-function, and this becomes the central concern of "In a network of lines that enlace," is the problem of interpretation. Barthes claims that once we acknowledge that a piece of writing has deconstructed itself, "to decipher [the] text becomes quite futile." For "to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing," and thus make it discernable or "penetrable" to critics.[51] In Calvino's chapter the futility of the interpretive process is manifest in the frantic and humorous jogging of the speaker as he runs aimlessly about his neighborhood. The ringing telephones that seem to follow him from house to house represent a kind of call to interpret. If he could only "pick-up" he would be able to receive the message (i.e. the meaning), but again and again he is "torn between the *necessity* and the *impossibility* of answering".[52]

Yet even while showing the ways in which his text deconstructs itself and renders interpretation futile, Calvino seems to want to challenge these very ideas as well. In fact, by blurring the boundaries between the roles of "writer" and "reader," between giver and receiver, Calvino makes room for the possibility of a complete *role-reversal*, wherein the reader's

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[50] Calvino, *Winter's Night* 132.
[51] Barthes 149-50.
[52] Calvino, *Winter's Night* 134 (my emphasis).

response is granted the very authority of the author-function. Importantly, it is the speaker's

verbal speculative play that underscores this important concept, for the initial "plot" of the

chapter is driven primarily by a succession of various potentialities offered by the speaker to

explain his predicament:

> In the irrational logic that ringing never fails to provoke in me, I
> think: *perhaps* it is indeed for me, *perhaps* my neighbor is at home
> but does not answer…*perhaps* the person calling knows he is
> calling a wrong number…*or else…or else….*[53]

This kind of prose of potentialities (another carryover from *Marcovaldo*) is not unlike what critic

Stephen Booth has in mind when he asserts that the reading experience results from a

"multiplicity of organizations." Calvino's speaker, in the role of reader, provides many

"fragmentary, inconclusive, and unfinished" "texts" that parallel an active reader's attempts to

"make sense" of a work by combing through a matrix of meanings.[54]

Of course, Calvino's complete de-centering of authorial intent serves to wrest authority

from the writer by simultaneously exposing the complex and multivalent means by which

readers struggle to derive "the meaning" of a text. In Calvino's overtly metacritical novel, we

might begin to read the chapter "In a network of lines that enlace," in light of these terms. The

ringing telephones, for example, can represent various calls to interpretation, but more

specifically, a web or *network* of available meanings and interpretations. It would be a

"mistake," the speaker warns us, to establish that "I and the telephone are in a *finite* space such

as my house would be," rather, "what I must communicate is my situation with regard to

numerous telephones that ring."[55] Here, the speaker/reader's "situation" can only be understood

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[53] Calvino, *Winter's Night* 133-34.
[54] Stephen Booth as qtd. in Murfin 127.
[55] Calvino, *Winter's Night* 133.

by triangulating between many interpretive acts, and by avoiding a closed or self-contained text such as might be available in the fixed locus of the speaker's house.

As the chapter develops, the reordering of traditional roles and boundaries between reader and writer become ever more pronounced. In many ways, the speaker/reader of "In a network of lines that enlace" is an ideal subjectivist reader. As he humorously clambers through the chapter, the speaker personalizes each event of the plot. For instance, even though the phone calls are clearly not meant for the speaker (their ringing comes from strangers' houses or distant neighborhoods), upon "hearing a ring," his "first thought every time for a fraction of a second is that the telephone is *calling me*."[56] In fact, the plot is even further subjected to the speaker's will as he begins to jog through the streets of his town: "As I run," he observes, "I feel a vague sensation of alarm, and even before I can pick up the sound with my ear, my mind records the *possibility* of the ring, almost *summons* it up, sucks it from its own absence, and at that moment from a house comes…the trill of the bell."[57] In this scenario, Calvino seems to be playing with the subjectivist mode of interpretation—each personal inclination of the speaker becomes the sure prediction of such an occurrence, and so he takes priority as creator of the text.

It becomes increasingly clear, as the chapter progresses that the plot bends to the psychological demands of the narrator. Despite the unlikelihood that the phone ringing in a stranger's house would be intended for him, the narrator feels impelled to break in and answer the call. When he does so, the voice on the other end of the line doesn't seem to know the speaker, nor does it seem to matter as the criminal icily describes a hostage situation and hangs up without warning. At first the speaker distances himself from the crime and the hostage,

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[56] Calvino, *Winter's Night* 134 (my emphasis).
[57] Calvino 135 (my emphasis).

Marjorie, claiming, "I do not know this Marjorie, I do not know any Marjorie."[58] But this is

patently false, for as he quickly concedes, not only does he have a student named "Marjorie

Stubbs" at the university, but she is a girl with whom the speaker has had an inappropriate

relationship (or at the very least, an "unpleasant misunderstanding").[59] So it appears as though

the speaker's psychical guilt has driven this peculiar plot the entire time. The speaker's

psychological need to "save" Marjorie from a dangerous fate and thereby absolve himself is the

manifestation of his own subjective narrative, and thus makes him responsible for the content of

the plot. This would explain the otherwise perplexing ending where Marjorie contemptuously

blames the speaker for her captivity, for even if he did not physically kidnap her, this responsive

reader *read* the crime *into* the text.

   If this particular chapter, or any other part of *Winter's Night* seems humorous or

irreverent, it is because its author is at play. Calvino plays not only with conventions and

expectations of genre and narrative, but with firmly entrenched (and therefore generally under-

examined) ideas about language, representation, and authorial intent. The structural boundaries

Calvino seeks to unsettle—between author and reader, sign and signified— are essential ones,

and the implications of his play are politically serious. The extent to which Calvino believes that

this deconstructive approach to literature can and should have political efficacy is most

eloquently articulated in the author's essay, "The Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature."

Originally read at a symposium on European politics at Amherst College in 1976 (three years

before *Winter's Night* was published), Calvino's paper concludes:

> If at one time literature was regarded as a mirror held up to the
> world…now we can no longer neglect the fact that books are made

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[58] Calvino, *Winter's Night* 137.
[59] Calvino 138.

of words, of signs, of methods of construction. We can never forget that what books communicate often remains unknown even to the author himself, that books often say something different from what they set out to say, that in any book there is a part that is the author's and a part that is a collective and anonymous work. This kind of *awareness* does not influence literature alone: it can be useful to politics, enabling that science to discover how much of it is no more than verbal construction, myth, literary *topos*. Politics, like literature, must above all know itself and distrust itself.[60]

Subtending the ideas in this incredibly rich passage is once again the Calvinian preoccupation with the notions of appearance and confrontation. The postmodern text, in its most expanded, open condition, can become a kind of critical space of appearing. That is to say, a place where author, reader, critic, or interpreter can meet one another, as representatives of a plurality, to communicate and interrogate meaning collectively—as Eco was previously quoted: "the work is 'open' in the same sense that a debate is 'open.'" The text, because of its de-centered, "anonymous," and flexible structure, fosters a confrontation with the "unknown," an awareness and distrustfulness of authority in whatever forms it might appear.

Calvino's reference to "the time when literature was regarded as a mirror held up to the world" should resonate with our understanding of our author's earliest attempts at fiction—the literary conventions and aesthetics of Neo-Realism and novels like *Youth in Turin* and *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*. In the passage above, Calvino reiterates his growing sense of the inadequacy of such a conception of writing, which, he feels, because it does not accurately reflect the highly unstable and ambiguous nature of language, meaning and authorship, is akin to bad politics. In other words, a literature that does not "distrust itself" is equated here with a

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[60] Italo Calvino, "Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature," *The Uses of Literature: Essays* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987) 99-100.

convinced and powerful political ideology that forces its citizens to conform to its concrete, unchanging narrative.

Calvino has clearly conceived of *Winter's Night* as an anecdote to the problem of a too-confident literature. This mature, intensely experimental work is deeply suspicious of itself. It is a provocation, a *model*, rather than some discrete container for political thinking or activity. In short, *Winter's Night* embodies the quality that Calvino has said belongs to the greatest literature, that is, "an *approach* to, rather than an arrival at knowledge." I believe that Calvino would like, quite earnestly, to import the confrontational and participatory environment fostered by the interpretive mastication of his text to the realm of politics. It is in this light that the author's playful semiotic games and unconventional approaches to storytelling, which persistently dislocate meaning, undermine authority, and demand critical activity of the reader, become essential blueprints for a way of thinking and acting responsibly in politics.

Conclusion: Revising and Re-visioning, the Politics of Play

If Italo Calvino is remembered for one thing, it is his persistent literary innovation. Over the almost forty years of his prolific career in fiction, Calvino investigated so many disparate approaches to form, narrative and genre, that this very experimentalism could be said to be the only really predictable element of the author's style. Yet behind this insatiable formal revising lies a motivation that might appropriately rise to the level of a guiding principle for Calvino. It is embodied by an old and simple question: What is literature good for? This inquiry motivated Calvino from the very beginning, and haunted him until the very end. His earliest Neo-Realist works, such as *Youth in Turin* and *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*, place anti-authoritarian

ideological messages about social and political progressivism at the center of an immediate and tangible world, while his later fable-like and self-reflexive stories (*Marcovaldo* and *Winter's Night*) approach the same political concerns precisely by jettisoning the immediate and tangible in favor of the intellectually demanding and uncertain.

The nature of this lifelong re-visioning reveals Calvino's dedicated pursuit of the political efficacy of literature and provides a critical conceptual framework for reading any of his fiction. If Calvino's art is *useful* to us, it is certainly not in a narrowly definable sort of way. Rather, it has something to do with that last, broad and penetrating insight quoted from his 1976 lecture: "Politics, like literature, must above all *know* itself and distrust itself." There has been a great deal of discussion in this paper of Calvino's critical distrustfulness, but I would add emphasis now to this paired notion of *knowing*. For as it becomes explicitly clear over the many years of Calvino's artistic career, the author's conception of literature eventually comes very near to that of *cognition*. Angela Jeannet has observed that Calvino's protagonists are "usually searchers," who "inspect and watch intently the world around them in order to *understand* themselves and it."[61] Pin, with his innocent curiosity, tirelessly observes the smallest of details about what is happening around him, and ultimately discovers his own unique place in the world: the secret place where the spiders' make their nests. Marcovaldo too is a keen observer, though his sensitive naturalist's eye is really ill suited to the life he actually leads in the repressive, unforgiving city. As a result, he is one of Calvino's most tragic figures, precisely because his cyclical searching never amounts to an enlarged understanding of himself or the world around him.

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[61] Angela Jeannet, *Under the Radiant Sun and the Crescent Moon: Italo Calvino's Storytelling* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2000) 35.

By the time Calvino wrote *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, this problem of *knowing* had metastasized to envelop the entire experience of reading, writing and interpreting. Now, Calvino asks us to participate in the very same search of the two readers in his story: the hunt for an elusive, inherently incomplete novel. Our struggle to do so is the most important, and also the most political, aspect of Calvino's late fiction. The writer's playful self-reflexivity stems, after all, from a genuine urge to investigate *how* we know what we know about our world, *and* what we can't know—how do we construct meaning? from what sources and "authorities"? under what conditions and limitations? These are the utterly essential questions to which Calvino's postmodern novels demand we direct our attention. They comprise models of cognition that might be productively borrowed from the kind of distrustful, de-centered literary analysis that Calvino self-consciously employs. Here we locate the absolute seriousness of Calvino's authorial playfulness: its task is to help us to *know* ourselves, recognize others, and understand the bewildering world we share, always in a more humane and ethical way.

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