

## Death of the Author in Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*

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**Abstract:** In the realm of Postmodern thought, there is a marked shift from the pre-existing dominance of the author to the all- pervasive ubiquity of the text. The text is no more seen as an entity that is the sole creation of the author-god, the uncontested creative genius. It is, on the contrary, a construct in language. The author remains no more than a “shaman” (as Roland Barthes would have it), a mediator through which the infinite play of language precipitates into the text. In this altered premise of thought, the author's position as the sole architect of the work is thoroughly destabilized and he is considered to be no more as a dictatorial and authoritative presence rendering meaning to the text through his act of writing, rather as a mere effect of language, easily mixable in its labyrinthine network.

**Keywords:** Shaman, Death of the Author, Linguistic turn, Impersonality of the author, Intertextuality.

Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* is an attack on the author's position as the creator of the text. Denouncing the authorial all-pervasiveness in a text, the novel affirms that writing is an impersonal act whose scope extends beyond the author's dominion. The diminishing magnitude of the author is explicitly noticeable in the very first chapter through the reader's inability to trace the “unmistakable tone of the author” and his concomitant conviction that the book is “readable . . . independently of what . . . [is] expected of the author” (Calvino 9). The depersonalization of the author becomes even more evident in the chapter “If on a Winter's Night a Traveler” where a decisively created disarray between the identities of the author, the reader and the character of the novel (the traveler in the train) perplexes us and we are not able to conceptualise them as discrete individual presences. These three distinct personalities dramatically merge into a single person (the traveler) with their separate persona or the “I [s]” [Calvino 15] thoroughly fragmented and getting mixed up confusedly amongst each other. Adding to the ripping apart of the author's individuality to an array of multiple fractions, the narrator in “Chapter five” describes that the “author has become plural” so that “no body can be delegated to represent anybody” (Calvino 96). Such disintegration of the authorial presence and its synchronic blurring of the author/reader/text barricades are resonant of the Roland Barthes concept of the “death of the author.” No

moreconsidered as the sole architect of the text, the author is now an unseen occurrence, an “anonymous presence against an even more anonymous background” (Calvino 14). Writing, bereft of authorial encumbrance, then remains an impersonal act. The narrator-author in “Chapter Eight” befittingly denounces any anthropocentric trace, whether social or cultural or psychological, that contributes to the shaping up of his individual subjectivity. They might, apprehends the author, curtail his limitless writing prowess. Depersonalizing the process of writing, the narrator aptly demonstrates: “Style, taste, individual philosophy, subjectivity, cultural background, real experience, psychology, talent, tricks of the trade: all the elements that make what I write the recognizable as mine seem to me a cage that restricts my possibilities” (Calvino 171). The author, in an attempt of self-assassination, intends to take his redundant “presence” away from the space in between “the white page and writing of words” (Calvino 171). His confessions are worth quoting here: “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 any one’s ever writing them there were not interposed that uncomfortable partition which is my person!” (Calvino 171). Interestingly however, he wants to erase his personality not for being the spokesman of trans-individual entities like the “collective unconscious” and “the spirit of the times;” but “to transmit the writable that waits to be written, the tellable that nobody tells” (Calvino 171). He writes only for the sake of the act of writing, not to represent any socio-cultural milieu, whether physical or psychological, that builds his persona. There is a death of subjectivity with the act of writing. Echoing a similar idea in his monumental essay, “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes says: “Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body of writing” (146-147). Making the author a mingling point in the ocean of language and citing the example of the French symbolist Mallarmé who could foresee his own death in his act of writing, Barthes continues: “For him, for us too, it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality . . . to reach that point where only language acts, ‘performs’, and not ‘me’” (147). French philosopher Michel Foucault, in his monumental essay “What is an Author,” describes the text, in a maverick tone, to be the murderer of the author as he construes: “The work, which once had the duty of providing immortality [to the author], now possesses the right to kill, to be its author’s murderer...” (175). Similar to the previous chapter, “Chapter five,” of *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, is an exemplary exposition of the notion of the “death of the author.” We see, in this chapter, how the publishing house agent Mr. Cavedagna struggles to find the author of the novel that the reader intends to read. Eventually, the letter of the translator Ermes Marana shown to the reader by Cavedagna in “Chapter five” puts an end

to this ongoing beating around the bush in the complete depletion of the author from the text. In a tactful voice, Marana says: "What does the name of an author on the jacket matter"? (Calvino 101). Citing the instance of the anonymously authored Iranian epic Gilgamesh, Marana explains that after three thousand years, there will be some famous authorless books like Gilgamesh. On the reverse, there will be authors like Socrates none of whose works will survive whereas in another probable alternative, perhaps all surviving books will be attributed to a "single, mysterious author, like Homer" (Calvino 101). Effecting a disconnection between the author and the text, such descriptions by Marana confirm that the book is an authorless entity. Cavedagna's understanding of the author's role in text in the same chapter is worth considering. The narrator's long speech about Cavedagna's understanding of the role of the contradictorily dubious and indeterminable positioning of the author is worth considering. In his opinion, the authors are only "a name on a jacket," a "part of the title" (Calvino 101), a mere linguistic element, an "invisible point from which the books came" and a "void travelled by ghosts" (Calvino 102). On the other hand, he exists and does not exist at the same time. Intriguingly, the authenticity and credibility of the author are thrown into an unviable and dubious existence thereby destabilizing his very credible existence. In continuation of such a perception, the narrator of "Chapter seven" conceives of the author as an "alien voice" and a "silent nobody made of ink and typographical spacing" (Calvino 148). Evidently, the subjectivity agency, being an effect of language, dissolves unassumingly in the sea of language form which it is produced.

Adding a further dimension to the liberation of the text from the authorial ascendancy, the reader Ludmilla in "Chapter five," asserts the textual autonomy by saying that the novel should have its "own growth, like a tree, an entangling, as if of branches and leaves" (Calvino 92). Through Ludmilla's voice, we hear a reiteration of Derrida's notion of the automation of writing, as exemplified in his epoch-making book *Writing and Difference*, through its extrication from the author. Writing is an automatic activity as it does not originate from the author; rather, the author becomes a mere diaphanous element in the automatic going forth of writing. The author, says Derrida, should leave writing then. He beautifully explains it as: "To leave writing is to be there only in order to provide its passageway, to be the diaphanous element of its going forth . . ." (70). Apart from "writing," Ludmilla also expects "reading" to be cleansed from the last reminiscences of any implicit authorial persuasion through "rediscovering a condition of natural reading, innocent, primitive" (Calvino 92).

Latoria's adoption of a maverick method of reading a novel in "Chapter eight" poses another set back to the author's reign. Instead of reading the book in conformation to the authorial directionality, Latoria reads it electronically using a properly programmed computer that determines the meaning of the text from the order of the frequencies of its linguistic

components like “articles,” “pronouns,” and “particles” (Calvino 186) etc. In addition, the Irish writer Silas Flannery is convinced, in this chapter, that “the whole responsibility of writing weigh on those isolated syllables” (Calvino 189), not on the author. He also continues by saying that it is not he who creates the book; rather the “avalanche of isolated words” (Calvino 189) could construct his book and could express a truth which he himself does not know. Flannery's candid confessions are worth quoting: “Perhaps instead of a book I could write lists of words, in alphabetical order, an avalanche of isolated words which expresses that truth I still do not know, and from which the computer, reversing its program, could construct the book, my book” (Calvino 189). Eliciting a glaringly anti-humanist attitude, such an instance privileges language over the author in the detection of the textual meaning. Such an overturn of the pre-existing man-language relation echoes German philosopher Heidegger's voice in his book *Basic Writing*: “Man acts as though *he* were the shaper and master of language, while in fact *language* remains the master of man” (348). This change, believes Paul Sheehan, is part of a “linguistic turn” that is “quite explicitly antihumanist” (23).

“Chapter six” of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* offers revealing insights into the realization of unimportance of the author in a text. The translator Ermes Marana could convince the Irish author Silas Flannery that his unfinished novel can be completed easily by the appositely programmed computers with “the stylistic and conceptual models of the author” (Calvino 118) intact. We also learn in the same chapter that in the scenario of Flannery's inability to finish his work, there is the emergence of “a team of ghost writers” who can finish such half-written works with the original “nuances and mannerisms” (121) of the author.

Chapter 8 entitled “From the diary of Silas Flannery” offers more fascinating instances in this direction. In this chapter, Flannery meets a person who informs him about an ongoing outrageous practice of the publication of unauthorized translations of his books and as an evidence, he shows him one copy written in Japanese. Intriguingly however, we learn that Flannery has no knowledge of Japanese and it finally turns out that he has never authored the book which is mysteriously attributed to him. In a startling revelation, it is finally learnt that a firm in Osaka has hacked the secret code or formula of Flannery's novels through which it is able to produce Japanese books in the name of Flannery even though he has never written them. In another act of “diabolical swindle” (Calvino 179), the above-mentioned Japanese book is also translated into English and circulated in the market with Flannery's name as its author. Most significantly, it is also learnt that these fake copies contain “a refined and arcane wisdom that true Flannerys lack completely” (Calvino 179), a shocking discovery that asserts the author's needlessness in a text.

The translator Ermes Marana's theorization of the author's role in a text is worth discussing here. In his atypical vision, the author of every book should be a “fictitious character” (Calvino 180) invented by the real

author so that he can doubly distance himself from the text. Moreover, Marana is interested in the author Flannery because he can both fake and be faked thereby reducing the role of the author to either a faker or a faking material. Finally, he believes that the ideal author is he who is “dissolved in the cloud of fictions that covers the world with its thick sheath” and is capable of “identifying himself with the whole” (Calvino 180). This cloud of fiction covering the whole world is nothing but a construct in language and hence, the author merges anonymously into the labyrinth of language from which he is born. Finally, Flannery also gets influenced by the theory of Marana and tries to find another fake name to be the proxy-author for him. In a convincing voice, he declares: “I, too, would like to erase myself and find for each book another I, another voice, another name, to be reborn; but my aim is to capture in the book the illegible world, without center, without ego, without I” (Calvino 180). He heartily realizes that his “true vocation” is to be like what is known as “a ghost writer” (Calvino 180-181) in America, a “professional of recognized usefulness even if not of great prestige” and finally, a mere “writing hand” that gives “words existences too busy existing” (Calvino 181). Arguably, Flannery self-consciously re-presents himself as an “ego-less,” “cogito-less,” “centre-less” and “I-less” “writing hand” that places words in their proper places in the thoughtless, mechanical process of writing. We can also find a fragmentation of the “self” of the so-called author Flannery when he declares that he could have “multiplied . . . [his] I's” and assumed “other people's selves” (Calvino 181) through a process of continual authorial displacement and erasure of personality. Moreover, we find in “Chapter eight” that some pages from Flannery's manuscript are stolen by the shadow of a stranger whereas he again finds the lost pages intact after some days. In a dramatic turn of events, nonetheless, he is not able to recognize his own manuscript and finally, he is not able to recognize his own self. Moreover, we also find that the reader Ludmilla finds that the image of the author she forms of her reading of the book and the real author are not the same person. The deliberate distortion of the identity of the author into hazy, ambiguous individuations is the oblique references to his figurative death. Moreover, the automatic production of the book through the author-shaman is expressed by the most appropriate allusion where the author writes “as a pumpkin vine produces pumpkins” (Calvino 189). Moreover, the author's act of writing is accurately expressed through similar epithets like “the wind that shapes the mountain, the wrack of the tides, [and] the annual circles in the bole of trees” (Calvino 189). Such epithets are adequately indicative of the fact that the author is not the creator of his writing, rather, is the ineffectual medium through which writing takes place.

In this process of the dethronement of the author, it is not just Flannery who becomes the casualty; the great Allah and his earthly incarnation Prophet Mohammed also are sacked from the authorial cathedra of the Holy Koran. Their authorship gets metonymically substituted by the

scribe Abdullah who, nonetheless, fails to realize that he is also the meaning-maker of Koran through his “physicality of the act of writing” (Calvino 190) through which he does the work of “organizing the sentence,” of orchestrating the “internal coherence of the written language,” of maintaining its “grammar and syntax” (Calvino 182). Finally, he loses faith. In Flannery’s estimation, however, Abdullah was wrong because he “lacked faith in writing, and in himself as an agent of writing” (Calvino 182). Abdullah conceives of Allah and Mohammed as the real authors of Koran with their diction and sermonizing and himself no more than a scribe. Flannery, nevertheless, is aware that without Abdullah’s writing, the great Allah would have never been able to express himself in Koran. Mohammed knew this fully well and hence, allowed Abdullah to complete his unfinished sentence. In a sense, Abdullah becomes the author of Koran, not Mohammed. Flannery describes such a situation very aptly as: “The scribe’s collaboration was necessary to Allah, once he had decided to express himself in a written text. Mohammed knew this and allowed the scribe the privilege of concluding sentences; but Abdullah was unaware of the powers vested in him” (Calvino 182). What evolves here is the privilege of language (through writing) over the subjective presence of the author who is no more than an object of endless displacements that is suggestive of his figurative death.

Rendering writing an “impersonal form,” Silas Flannery, in “Chapter eight,” authenticates the depersonalized statement “Today it writes” just like “Today it rains” (Calvino 176) simultaneously disregarding the authorial statement “Today I write.” The possession of the depersonalized qualities of writing becomes explicitly evident as Flannery ascertains: “Only the ability to be read by a given individual proves that what is written shares in the power of writing, a power based on something that goes beyond the individual” (Calvino 176). Giving another blow to the authorial claims to originality, Flannery reveals that in his act of writing, he is merely copying from Dostoevsky’s famous novel *Crime and Punishment*. He candidly admits that he almost “succumb[s] to the temptation to copy out all of *Crime and Punishment*” (Calvino 178) and seems to be thoroughly fascinated by the “inconceivable vocation... of the copyist” (Calvino 178). Hence, we see a clear regression on the part of the author from the respectable position of an all-important creator to the obnoxious status of an unscrupulous copier.

The narrator in the chapter “Looks down in the gathering shadow” gives another blow to the author’s omnipotence. In a candid mode of confession, he finds his own narrative to be the intertextual imprint of so many other stories already written or told thereby undermining his own notion of originality. His writing outstrips his control as he sees his own narrative as “a forest that extends in all directions” where the reader finds this narrative forest “dispersed into so many trickles” (Calvino 109). In such a situation, the reader feels that he can move “in all directions, as in

space” and the essential events of the present story are only the “last echoes and reverberations” (Calvino 109) of so many other stories intertwined with the present one. This is precisely the reason why the reader of the story “may feel himself a bit cheated” (Calvino 109) for not being able to trace exactly the single author's story in the main narrative. The narrative, therefore, extends beyond the author and hence, the narrator self-consciously keeps his position “below the narrative possibilities at . . . [his] disposal” (Calvino 109).

Calvino's oblique hint at the “death of the author” can also be traced in “Chapter six” where a letter from the remote South American village Cerro Negro provides a powerful evidence of the above-mentioned issue. The letter informs about the old Indian “Father of stories,” a man of “immemorial age” with a timeless presence and a curious study material of anthropologists and parapsychologists. It is startlingly revealed that this old Indian had recited so many novels of famous novelists even before their novels appeared. The letter describes him with the epithets like “the universal source of narrative material” and “the primordial magma” from which develop the “individual manifestations” (Calvino 117) of other authors. It moreover describes him to be the timeless reincarnations of scores of other famous authors including Homer, the story teller of the *Arabian Nights*, the author of the *Popol Vuh*, Alexandre Dumas and James Joyce. Manifestly, the books of these authors are no more their creations; rather are the plagiarized versions of the old Indian's recited stories. Such a thing is a frontal attack on the claims of originality of these texts by the above-mentioned authors thereby incurring their figurative death. Hans Robert Jauss expresses a similar opinion in his essay “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory” in which he asserts that no literary work is completely new and original, rather, a reawakening of the memories of the texts that are already read. He construes: “A literary work, even when it appears to be new in an informational vacuum . . . It awakens memories of that which was already read . . .” (1554).

The reader Ludmilla puts another nail to the author's coffin in “Chapter seven” where she sees the author as a “ghost with a thousand faces and faceless” (Calvino 159). As a reader, she communicates not with the living author, but enters into “fickle, carefree relations” with multiple “incorporeal persons” (Calvino 159) who have contributed to the formation of the book. This, subsequently, defeats the “idea that behind each book there is someone who guarantees a truth” (Calvino 159). Echoing a similar tone, Ernes Marana dreams of “a literature made entirely of apocrypha, of false attributions, of imitations and counterfeits and pastiches” (Calvino 159) without any genuine link between the author and the text. Iterating Marana's ideas, Silas Flannery in “Chapter eight” intends to be the “author of apocrypha” (Calvino 193). The word “Apocrypha,” having its etymological root in the Greek word “apokryphos,” refers to texts “falsely attributed to a period or to an

author” (Calvino 193). Effecting a typical postmodernist disconnection between the author and the text, Flannery, in partnership with Hermes Marana, desires to “flood the world with apocrypha” and “camouflage his falsifications” by arbitrarily assigning names of the “numerous and productive” novelists to the “flourishing production of genuine raw materials” (Calvino 193). The purposeful instauration of the concept of “apocrypha” by both Marana and Flannery is amply evocative of the fact that the very act of designating the author to the text is no more than a sham and falsification. Flannery finally declares his own death as a writer in the end by saying: “Something in me has gone: perhaps the ego, perhaps the content of the ego. . . . Isn't depersonalization what I was trying to achieve?” (Calvino 192).

In the final analysis, Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* offers a thorough understanding of the renewed Postmodern perceptions about the role of the author and the language in the text. Through a radical alterity of vision, Calvino topples the position of the author upside down reducing him from an individual existence to an invisible point easily mixable in the tangles of language. This novel convincingly arouses Calvino's conviction that it is not the author who speaks through the text; rather, it is language who does the talking.

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