

## The Case for Calvino

Calvino's goal for his fantastic novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*, was to "find... a truth that I would not have been able to find otherwise." But reading this book, I did not find an overarching truth. Instead, I found many small truths. I found collectable quotations, I found moments of pause, I found insights, reflections, conclusions, and while the big picture was somewhat lost to me, I found fully-grown snippets of significance.

Italo Calvino's novel is about a Reader, namely "You," who has started to read *If on a winter's night a traveler* by Italo Calvino. Some ways into the book, You realize that it has been misprinted, and the pages keep repeating. Already wrapped up in the story, You go to the bookshop and inquire about getting a new copy. The bookseller tells You that there has been a horrible mix up, and that the book you were reading was actually *Outside the town of Malbork*, by Tazio Bazakbal. So You buy this book, and read it until you find only blank pages. You go in search of the rest of it, and along the way you encounter the beginning of many different novels, all of which break off for serendipitous reasons at the most climatic points.

It is written in fragments, with a somewhat linear narrative stringing them together. I say "somewhat," because after each novel, You're sometimes in a different scene, perhaps in a different country, and it's unclear how you got from there to here. Secondary characters move in and out of the story as if their lives are paused when they are not being written about. So there's no developed sense of a world beyond what we are reading. There's no linearity. But, then again, Calvino hasn't attempted to create a developed world. Let me contextualize the reasoning.

*If on a winter's night...* is a postmodern novel. Postmodern writing was developed as a response to modernism, which relies on rationality, logic, history, and science, and requires a distinction between reality and fiction. Although, technically, every way of thinking has at some point been "modern," modernism has gained special status and the most used and recognizable school of thought. In modernist writing, the real world is the product of observation and analysis.

But postmodernism completely rejects the concept of a "real" world. It blurs reality and fiction and questions generally accepted truths. Postmodernists maintain distrust in traditions, and as David Lehman describes, they play with words rather than try to assert mastery over them. It is a genre of experimentation, and, consequently, it is quite difficult to follow.

Reading and writing are usually the subject matters of focus. Whereas modernism utilized the written word as an expressive medium, postmodernism looks to writing as a material part of the world. It is text, it is scrawled symbol, it is structure. It is not consciousness, symbolism, or intent. What follows from this, is a heavy reflection on the reading process. If writing does not carry theoretical, emotional, or symbolic meaning, from where do those meanings arise? It must be the case that there is something about reading itself that creates significance.

So when Calvino says that he is writing to "find truth," he literally means that, "the truth of literature consists only in the physicality of the act of writing." The postmodern interpretation supports this view, and Calvino makes this assertion within the book. So the goals of this writing do not include fully developed scenes and characters and plot points, rather, they include meditations on the writing and reading processes as mediums through which significance is found. This is difficult. We're so used to reading books set in the real world, or set in fantasy worlds that mirror the real world, with linear narratives and predictably structured plotlines, that when we're confronted with concepts so abstract and unfamiliar as these, we're tempted to brush them off as being failed attempts at something we know. While it is understandable to renounce

Calvino for these ‘misgivings’ that lead to confusion, it is more important to recognize that these ‘misgivings’ are not characteristic of this style, nor are they the point.

To read this, you truly have to step back and let go of any expectations. Books as you know them are not found in these stories, and if it is routine and comfort that you are looking for, then this book is not for you. But as a deviation from the norm, as a commentary on what you are doing in this very moment, it is wonderfully refreshing and thought provoking.

There are four main reasons for *If on a winter's night a traveler's* success as a postmodern novel:

1. Its structure. Calvino is known for his architecturally focused work, and he takes one small idea and expands it outwards. Within *If on a winter's night...*, he explains the basis for this book through the voice of Silas Flannery, a writer of one of the novels You stumble across. Silas states in his diary, “I would like to be able to write a book that is only an *incipit*, that maintains for its whole duration the potentiality of the beginning, the expectation still not focused on an object.” This is exactly what Calvino has created. He has written the beginnings of seven different novels, changing his tone, setting, characters, and thematic build up as he goes, and the newness of each story creates anticipation, intrigue, and a sense of being on the edge of something that is about to begin. These feelings remain present throughout our reading experience, and we’re forced to pay attention to how each narrative is laid on top of the other, rather than the narratives themselves.

The result is an almost surreal awareness of the text. We are readers, reading about a Reader reading, reading the books that the Reader is reading. This is not only trippy. It’s reflective. We are forced to ask ourselves: How am I moving through this narrative if there’s no climax? Am I being passively pulled along or am I eager to read the stories that never end? If the stories don’t end, can meaning be extracted? What about the endings do I miss? Even beyond these questions, you focus on the word choice and the descriptions and the voice that comes through in the narration. You focus on the text, and while you aren’t fully immersed in a world, you’re fully immersed in the writing.

2. Its authorial intrusions. Salman Rushie correctly explains that, “[Calvino] has already said about himself just about everything there is to be said.” He has already pointed out his motivations, his challenges, and his meanings. This is what the postmodern style offers: a chance for the author to literally speak to the reader. Not through his character’s voices, but through his own. Consequently, we are allowed a glimpse into Calvino’s writing process. We watch as he moves through his words, and we are left with a feeling of intimacy almost to the point of intrusion. But of course, there is an added layer: “the author of every book is a fictitious character whom the existent author invents to make him the author of his fictions.” Here Calvino explains that while we may feel as if he is directly speaking to us, the ‘author’ is in fact another character. And this meta-author allows us to question the absence or presence of a true author. This is a genre of inquiry and of reflection, and with this tactic Calvino pushes us to ask fresh questions about the importance of the writers that we read. And as a writer, I

was pushed to question my own authorial voice and determine if my true self or a fictitious author were the best writer for my piece.

3. Its moments of vivid clarity. Although sections of these narratives are admittedly dense and easy to stumble on, there are chunks of beautifully descriptive writing that paint clear pictures of these theoretical and abstract worlds. My favorite of these sections sets up the scene in the first novel. Before the pages start to repeat, we are introduced to the train station that the plot takes place in, but we are not yet familiar with a plot or protagonist. Calvino writes, “there is a veil of other images that settles on her image and blurs it, a weight of memories that keep me from seeing her as a person seen for the first time, other people’s memories suspended like the smoke under the lamps.”

He eloquently captures the feeling of a small town without stating anything concrete about the scenery. Calvino avoids pointing out obvious atmospheric descriptions and instead relies on intangible metaphors. And here is where the postmodernist shines: he is able to communicate abstract feeling in a concise and recognizable way.

4. Its moments of initial confusion. This reason is not contradictory, because in these confusions we find clarity. Yet unlike the vivid descriptions, these moments require what is described by David Mitchell to be an “archaeologist’s brush.” Look here: Calvino explains that “we can prevent reading: but in the decree that forbids reading there will be still read something of the truth that we would wish never to be read.” You stop and think that this mess is indecipherable, that it doesn’t mean anything. But you have to break the sentence up, picture a man stamping decrees on public boards, or, better yet, mass producing posters in large and exclamatory font, taping them to front doors and store windows. You have to create something in your mind that isn’t described but eluded to. And suddenly, there’s meaning. People are reading the signs outlawing reading, and they are discovering truth. Now, we can’t be busy “shoveling” through this text, because we would be lose a lot of this well-thought out, almost clever, detail. And although some passages must be worked for, reread, dissected, the layered writing and complicated theory that emerges is more satisfying than any familiar conclusion.

As I finished *If on a winter’s night...* I was full of the discoveries and thoughts that had swam around my head since I first picked up the postmodern novel. I put it down, and I was itching to pick it up again. Mitchell claims that while Calvino is “breathtakingly inventive,” his novel can only be “breathtakingly inventive once.” And while there is some truth to this theory of rereading, I have to think that there is more to discover within this postmodern masterpiece. With an even finer brush, I am sure that I could uncover more of the truths that Calvino hoped to discover.

And some part of Calvino agrees with me, as he explains in one of the last chapters. You encounters several readers, all of which approach reading differently. One of them reads to reread. He believes that the reader brings her own experience to the text, and with each new

experience, a new text is developed. So each time a book is reread, a new book is essentially created. I'd like to agree. With the layered complexity of postmodern writing, and its focus on the reading and writing process, there is a significant element of interpretation; you get out of the novel what you are able to bring to it. And as I continue to develop my writing and reading habits, I'm sure that as I reread, I'll uncover more collectable quotations, moments of pause, insights, reflections, conclusions, and perhaps, one day, the big picture will dawn on me. But even without a eureka moment of understanding, I have found truths of my own in this book that I hope you will be willing to discover.