A Journey Beyond Reality: Italo Calvino's Neo-Realist Experimentations in the Castle of Crossed Destinies

Abstract

Italo Calvino is one of the most prominent writers of postmodern Italian literature. Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* presents itself as a classic specimen of postmodern fiction by portraying the themes of the destabilisation of binary oppositions and the defiance to the modernist endorsement of the unity of reason and coherence of logic. What this novel of Calvino presents, instead, is a world where the pre-existing boundaries and dividing lines between different Manichean binary oppositions are perpetually faltering and where seemingly illogical and incoherent worldviews are offered as possible alternatives to the so-called logical and coherent existence. Inspired by the celebratory endorsement of a de-regulated, disordered and de-structured condition of existence by postmodernism, Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* experiments with a correspondingly unusual narrative technique (typical of postmodernism) that creates a chaotic and de-regulated fictional world where heirarchies, distinctions and boundaries are purposefully transgressed and where the defining conceptual frameworks of The Enlightenment like logic and reason are thoroughly shattered.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Neorealism,Binary Opposition, Antihumanism, Anthropocentrism,

Introduction

Italo Calvino's The Castle of Crossed Destinies is a classic specimen of postmodernist fiction. The novel is divided into several segments (in the form of individual stories) that are, nonetheless, interwoven in an utterly mindboggling and complex network. In the immense complexity of his narrative, however, Calvino makes particular efforts to showcase the two above-mentioned postmodern issues amongst which the former is, of course, an iteration of Derrida's categorical extirpation of binary oppositions. Echoing a typical Derridean deconstructive spirit, Calvino dismantles binary oppositions at various levels—physical, metaphysical, sexual and temporal.

Aim of the Study

Based on the above—mentioned precepts, this article intends to analyze the said novel of Italo Calvino as a typical, representative postmodern novel which truly reflects the neo-realist worldview of which Calvino is a universally accepted spokesperson. Moreover, this article also intends to demonstrate how Calvino in this novel illustrates postmodernism's trademark dissolution of the conceptual boundary between truth and fantasy, reality and its representation and the human and the non-human elements of the world.

To start with, we see in the chapter "The Tale of the Alchemist Who Sold His Soul" a gradual dismantling of the boundaries between the human/the beast/the vegetable and mineral. The downgrading transfiguration from the "human" to the "beast" is first located in the turning of The Wheel of Fortune by human beings where some of them were uncharacteristically adorned by "animalesque ears and tails" (Calvino 19). This "bestial metamorphosis," believes the narrator, is "the first step in a regression of the human to the vegetable and mineral" (Calvino 20). Such an anti-anthopocentric stance on the part of Calvino prefigures the "death of the [human] subject" as the ultimate abolition of the distinction "between human beings and the natural world, and between human beings and animals" puts an end to human "speciesism" (Sheehan 26). This human integration with Nature is endorsed by postmodern philosophers, Gilles

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Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their collaborative work Anti-Oedipus. They suggestively declare:

> We make no distinction between man and nature: the human essence of nature and the natural essence of man become one within nature in the form of production or industry, just as they do within the life of man as a species . . . man and nature are not like two opposite terms confronting one another . . . rather, they are one and the same essential reality, the producer-product. (4-5)

Additionally, the chapter tellingly elicits the dissolution of the conceptual boundary between the human and the physical world surrounding him/her through the instauration of the feminine entity trying to diffuse rather than enter into the City of Gold. Thought to be either a "water nymph" or "the queen of the elves of the air" or "An angel of the liquid fire in the earth's center" (Calvino 19), she is presented as a diffusible entity that can dissolve into the physical world of water, air and fire and her permeability suggests the breaking down of the emblematic palisade between the human and the external world.

A similar expunction of the separating line between the "man" and the world is evoked through the merger of the waverer, in "The Waverer's Tale," with the world of rudimentary matter. The narrator describes: "If the only thing he wished was to escape from individual limitation, from categories, roles, to hear the thunder that rumbles in molecules, the mingling of prime and ultimate substances . . ." (Calvino 62). Obviously, the defining entities of the waverer's distinctive subjectivity like his individuality, his categorisation, his roles are no more than limitations for him because of which he intends for an unassuming merger with those rudimentary fragments of external matter of which he thinks himself to be an evolutionised and mutated part. The narrator therefore says: ". . . every species and individual and the whole history of the human race are only a random link in a chain of evolutions and mutations" (Calvino 62).

In continuation of his characteristic deconstructive scheme, Calvino now turns towards expunging the boundary between life/death—an issue that has perpetually stirred the realm of religious philosophy. The combined image of the tree inside the papal tomb, on which the Grave-Robber of the chapter "A Grave-Robber's Tale" unexpectedly finds himself after his descent into the latter, becomes the symbol of both 'death-in-life' and 'life-in-death' where they mingle into a symbolic indeterminacy as neither death nor life is found to be the sole reality. The Grave-Robber, therefore, simultaneously "descends into the abyss of Death" and "climbs again the Tree of Life" (Calvino 27).

In this continually proliferating demolition act, nevertheless, we see an attempt on the part of Calvino to dismantle the reason/unreason binary. We find Roland, in the chapter "The Tale of Astolpho on the Moon," losing his sanity or reason (which Calvino prefers to call "illumination") to the extent that he is not able to separate the binary pair "man and wise beasts"/"beasts and mad man" (Calvino 36). Echoing a Foucauldian endeavour to eliminate the socially established sanity/insanity binary, Calvino duly resurrects the secluded and marginalised aspect of human psyche that is called insanity and strikes hard at the very foundation on which the sanity/insanity or its symbolic equivalent man/beast divide stands. This also can be taken to be a frontal attack on the absoluteness of "reason" (the very premise on which the whole philosophical discursive patterns of the West stand). However, Calvino does not stop here. He further goes on to evoke and consequently destabilise the Christianity/Paganism binary by making Roland roam like a lunatic in the forest being "driven to madness by Eros, the pagan god" (Calvino 36). Roland's acceptance of Paganism along with his concomitant rejection of Christianity looks to be Calvino's implicit endeavour to challenge the religious domination of Christianity through the forceful suppression of Paganism. The narrator further comments that "Eros, the pagan god who, the more he is suppressed, the more devastation he causes" (Calvino 36). On close observation, his statement seems to be cloaked with the implications that increasing the forceful suppression of the "Other" (Paganism) will ironically lead to its further rebuffing thereby putting more challenge to the entity on the left side of the binary slash (Christianity). This, in a way, is Calvino's attempt to interrogate the fixity of the hierarchy between Christianity and Paganism (Christianity being superior) and thereby, to destabilise the dividing line between them.

Similar to the above-mentioned chapters, we find in the chapter "The Tale of the Forest's Revenge" the destabilisation of the man/machine boundary as machines are found to perform all the work of man in a scenario where the whole human civilisation has become dispensable. Such a spectacle resembles similar spectacles created in many postmodern films (Ridley Scott's cult movie *Blade Runner*, for instance) where the "boundaries between the human and the inhuman/cyborg" are "blurred and even effaced" (Woods 217). In this particular movie, Deckard's task of hunting down the 'non-human' cyborgs gradually leads to a situation where it becomes clear for us that the distinction between the 'human' and the 'replicant' starts disappearing. In a similar vein, Calvino poses a severe jolt to anthropocentrism as we learn from the narrator's delineations that the world has become full of birds that, though had become extinct, have come to life again and have started dominating the world by dispelling the human beings into the holes underground.

After the accomplishment of all these dismantling activities, Calvino now concentrates on gender issues by ending the supremacy of the 'male' over the 'female' by reversing the existing gender hierarchy as the narrator conjectures that the 'female' will rule the 'male.' He describes the situation as: "The proud strongholds of our sex collapse one by one; no man is spared . . . For the man who thought he was Man there is no salvation. Vindictive queens will rule for the next millennia" (Calvino 77).

In the chapter "Two Tales of Seeking and Losing," Calvino brings in the Derridean play between "presence" and "absence" and concomitantly

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dissolves their difference. In this chapter, Parsifal concludes that the existence (presence) of the world is actually constructed around its absence. In other words, it is the absence that constructs the presence and the existence of "presence" is impossible without the conception of its "absence." The narrator fittingly describes: "The kernel of the world is empty, the beginning of what moves in the universe is the space of nothingness, around absence is constructed what exists." (Calvino 97). The incessant play of the "presence" and "absence" is more explicitly expressed by Faust's conclusion, at the time of the pendulum reaching one extreme, that "The world does not exist" (Calvino 97)—a scenario which will be duly reversed when the pendulum will reach the other extreme leading to a obverse conclusion that the world does exist.

After all this, Calvino now turns to the Derridean dismantling of the speech/writing binary, so predominant in the Western logocentric pratices. It should be reminded here that French philosopher Rousseau is the prominent upholder of the speech/writing binary as he reckons that speech is the primary phenomenon and writing is only an epiphenomenon to it. Christopher Norris, in his book *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, explains Rousseau's rendering of prime importance to speech over writing when he says: "Rousseau . . . treats of writing as the 'supplement' of spoken language, existing in a secondary relation to speech just as speech itself—by the same token—is at one removed from whatever it depicts" (33). Derrida, nevertheless, oppugns the Western domination of speech over writing by destabilising the longstanding barrier between them as he opines in his *Of Grammatology*: "Our language, even if we are pleased to speak it, . . . is already eaten by writing" (226). In consonance with the Derridean destabilisation of the speech/writing binary, Calvino alters the scenario by prioritising writing over speech simultaneously using it as an oppositional ground on which the repressed and marginalised voices that do not find a place in "speech" come to the forefront and assert their presence. In a way, "writing" becomes the voice-giver to these lost voices. The narrator in the chapter "I Also Try to Tell My Tale" very aptly says: "In writing what speaks is what is repressed" (Calvino 102).

Coming back to the decimation of differences, we find in the same chapter the abolition of the distinction between the "city" and the "landscape" through the narrator's statement that "only the city gives a meaning to the bleak landscape of the hermit [Saint Augustine]" (Calvino 107). This is further substantiated through the engraving of the famous German painter and engraver of Renaissance, Durer and in the drypoint of the famous Dutch artist, Rembrandt. The narrator finds in the engraving of Durer that "the saint, flattened against a hillock in the foreground, has his back to the city" (Calvino 106). In Rembrandt's drypoint, similarly, we initially find the hermit "reading blissfully in the shadow of a walnut tree [representing Nature]" whereas we also find a little later that "At evening . . . lights come on at the windows [of the hermitage];

[and] the wind bears, in gusts, the music of festivities [of the city]" (Calvino 106). The narrator also comments: "The hermit's strength is measured not by how far away he has gone to live, but by the scant distance he requires to detach himself from the city, without ever losing sight of it" (Calvino 106). The point the narrator intends to stress upon is probably the fact that the "city" and "Nature" are inseparable entites despite their outward appearence of contradictoriness.

The painting of Saint Jerome in the same chapter adds further insights to such a seemingly ironic reconciliation of opposites. In the painting, Saint Jerome is seated at the mouth of a cave along with a lion placed a little farther. It is really fascinating to observe that the peaceful serenity of the saint is juxtaposed with the violence of the lion that represents the "inhumanity of the universe" (Calvino 105). The ironical juxtaposition of these two diametrically opposite facets of the universe is probably a step towards their osmotic melange. The narrator interestingly opines that "the two [the saint and the lion] often resemble each other" (Calvino 105), a statement that shows that the one contains the "trace" (to use a Derridean terminology) of the other and vice versa. The narrator describes the scenario beautifully in the following lines: ". . . so it gives me satisfaction and security to see them together, to try to recognize myself there, not particularly in the saint or even in the lion (though, for that matter, the two often resemble each other), but in the pair together, in the whole, in the picture, figures, objects, landscape" (Calvino 105). The painting, therefore, creates a holistic picture where the opposite facets of the universe diffuse into each other.

The same chapter also erases the age-old antithesis between words (either read or written) and objects. The narrator describes the dismantling scenario in the following paragraph:

> In the landscape the objects of reading and writing are placed among rocks, grass, lizards, having become products and instruments of the mineral-vegetable-animal continuum. Among the hermit's bric-a-brac there is also a skull: the written word always takes into consideration the erasure of the person who has written or the one who will read. Inarticulate nature comprehends in her discourse the discourse of human beings. (Calvino 105-6)

A close look at the passage reveals that there is not only a dissolution of the boundary between the mineral, the vegetable and the animal worlds through the instauration of the "mineral-vegetable-animal continuum" concept, but also the same between words and things (both animate and inanimate). This is because we learn that the "objects of reading and writing" are both the "products and instruments" of the "mineral-vegetable-animal continuum" (rocks, grass and lizards). What is emphasised here is the erasure of the difference between the written or spoken words and their corresponding objects. Similarly, we also find the erasure of the boundary between the written words

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and the human subject (that has written them or will read them) through the symbolic placement of an unidentifiable skull in the hermit's bric-a-brac as the narrator observes that the written words erase the person who has written them or will read them. The above-mentioned deletion of the difference between words and things probably reconstrues the world as what Calvino calls, in his magnum-opus *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, "a unitary book" (Calvino, *Winter* 255). In other words, the whole world is found to be a construct in language just like a book is. Jaques Derrida, in his epoch-making book *Writng and Difference*, evokes a similar scenario by throwing light on the abolition of the boundary between the book and the world by the famous Jewish writer and poet Edmund Jabes. Jabes, we come to know from Derrida's discussions, conceptualises the world in the form of a book by reinvoking the Middle Ages practice of conceiving the world of Nature as the Book of God. Jabes, in his book *Le Livre des questions*, says therefore: "The world exists because the book exists" (33). Derrida explains the situation a little more explicitly by saying: "To be is to-be-in-the-book" (*Writng* 76). Such a situation further reiterates Derrida's confirmation of the "constructed-ness" of everything through language in his monumental treatise *Of Grammatology* as he says in this book: "il n'y a de hors-texte" (158) meaning there is nothing that is 'outside-text' because "for the human species everything is always mediated by language" (Bertens 127).

In the same chapter, we also find the dismantling of the temporal/atemporal dimensions through the evocation of the fight between Saint George and the dragon—a fight that is represented on two halves of a canvas, one half picturising Saint George "galloping with his lance at rest" and the other half representing the dragon "attacking with a concentrated expression" (Calvino 108). We come to know initially that the fight is "fixed outside of time" whereas we are also immediately informed that the canvas contains the details of "a calender of corpses whose stages of decomposition reconstruct the temporal development of the story" (Calvino 108). So, there is a visible dissolution of the temporal/atemporal dimensions. This typical postmodern non-temporal perception of the world of events, believes David Ray Griffin, is contingent upon the influence of modern Physics pioneered by Albert Einstein's endorsement of timelessness. Griffin, in his article "From The Reenchantment of Science," duly discusses about the abolition of the dividing lines between past, present and future by Einstein who said: "For us believing physicists, the distinction between past, present and future is only an illusion, even if a stubborn one" (qtd. in Griffin 484). This can be taken as a refernce to the fact that postmodern thinking cuts across disciplinary boundaries thereby assimilating ideas from divergent branches of knowledge.

In the process of the destabilisation of boundaries, Calvino thoroughly shatters the conceptual demarcation between what is logical and what is non-logical. Coming to this issue of defying logical coherence (as mentioned in the second part of the title), Calvino provides us with an illogical, incoherent and anti-establishmentarian worldview by evoking the "world of the moon" which "would allow us to indulge in the old fancies of an upside-down world, where the ass is the king, man is four-legged, the young rule the old, sleepwalkers hold the rudder, citizens spin like squirrels in their cage's wheel, and there are as many other paradoxes as the imagination can disjoin and join" (Calvino 38). By such reversion of established logicality and coherence, Calvino offers us a possible alternative where the world of the moon can be "full of sense, the opposite of the senseless Earth" (Calvino 39).

Apart from this, we also find an instance of the non-conformity to logic and normality in the same chapter where the narrator tells Justine that she can learn from her sister Juliette that there are some people who "enjoy being Hanged by their feet" (Calvino 102). It must be noted at this juncture that Calvino provides an alternative non-logical, abnormal worldview that stands as a diametrically opposite possible condition of existence as opposed to the logical and the established one through the evocation of the recurrent image of the "hanging man" along with the image of the "world of the moon." These purposeful images are the symbolic expressions of the postmodern rejection of the unity of reason, logic, coherence and normality endorsed by The Enlightenment. Sabina Lovibond puts it effectively as: "Postmodernism rejects this picture [projected by The Enlightenment]; that is to say, it rejects the doctrine of the unity of reason. It refuses to conceive of humanity as a unitary subject striving towards the goal of perfect coherence . . .or of perfect cohesion and stability . . ."(qtd. in Woods 9). In a way, Calvino's postmodern treatise, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* strikes at the very foundation of Enlightenment that had boastfully attributed man with the unity of reason and stability.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* offers us with a negation of contradistinctions. What come under scanner, under attack and under revision, therefore, are the innumerable Manichean binary oppositions that have created a perpetually disseverred world-order. These binary oppositions, obviously, generate a heirarchical continuum where the perpetual subjugation of the "dominated" by the "dominant" is the fundamental principle of maintaining the status-quo. Calvino, nevertheless, challenges this heirarchisation by ressurecting those voices, those views and those knowledges that had so far been pushed to the margins. What is offered in Calvino's narrative is the plausibility of an alternative to the existing order—an altered premise that paves the way for exploring the other unexplored possible conditions of existence. Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* truly justifies many of the defining principles of postmodernism as stated by Dick Hebdige that postmodernism designates "a plethora of incommensurable objects, tendencies, emergencies" and that it has "an anti-teleological . . . tendency within epistemology" and that it effectuates "an attack

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on the 'metaphysics of presence'" and also the "de-centering of the subject" (qtd. in Woods 2).

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