Names, Travelers, Transindividuality:
Italo Calvino in the 1970s.

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Abstract
Situating the novel within the cultural, literary and political milieu of the period, this article provides a reading of Italo Calvino's 1979 hypernovel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* and its relation to the French literary group Oulipo. It analyzes the work's link to questions of authorship and collectivity at the core of 1970s literary, philosophical, and political discourse both in Italy and France. In particular, the analysis concentrates on the function of names in the novel as signifiers of individuality and/or collectivity.

> We are accustomed … to saying that the author is the genial creator of a work in which he deposits, with infinite wealth and generosity, an inexhaustible world of significations. The truth is quite the contrary: the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works, he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses.
> (Michel Foucault, «What is an Author?» 1970).

The debate surrounding the meaning and function of authorship, proper names, signatures, classification, albeit an important matter of discussion over all the history of Western philosophy, became particularly prominent in Italian and French literary culture during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the accent placed on the notion of collectivity as a political, aesthetic and philosophical principle overcame the importance of the paradigm of individuality and individualism. Among the reasons for this switch in importance is the great number of written works on the nature of classification, the role of the author and their use as a theoretical basis for collective and ultimately political practices.

The most representative thinkers of the Italian and French late 1960s and 1970s, such as Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, have all produced work on naming, ordering, and classifying, evidencing the epistemological nature of these topics. From Foucault's and Barthes' diatribe over the death of the author to Eco's notion of 'open work', the indeterminacy – and consequent depersonalization – of the art form; from Renato Barilli's statement that «we can only speak about signifiers» and that «about signifieds, we know nothing,» (Barilli x) to Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of the signature as a territorial domain, the mystification or manipulation of the primary signifier – the proper name – in all its forms and expressions is an appropriate starting

point for the study of contemporary literary forms and their intertwining with political practices.[1] As a result of this anti-individualistic current, the culture that arose from the movements of protest of late 1960s France and Italy was significantly invested in cooperative practices of all kind. Writing itself became a type of collective experience, and group readings of texts across narrative and non-narrative genres, collective analysis and open interpretations were thought to be determinant in the redefinition of the political and social role of trans-individuality: the space that defines the position of the individual as part of a multiplicity, or, to use the Marxist term that became popular in Italy at the time, of the general intellect.[2]

One of the assumptions of radical and experimental 1970s culture regarded the intrinsic value of collective action, in opposition to the predominant ideals of individualism and the «free development of the personality.»[3] Among the many political movements that worked to spread this ideals, *operaismo* had a particular impact in Italy during the 1970s in the development of political theories and social activism. The movement took the name *operaismo* because the its theory was directed towards the political subjectivity of the worker – the *operaio* – in its opposition to the scientific objectivity of the production system. While a linear history of the movement is not easy to trace, the multi-layered influence of its forms and disciplines laid the philosophical and narrative groundwork for

[1] Numerous recent scholars have pointed out the great influence of the French thought of the late 1960s, or as it has been named, 1968 thought on cultural and linguistic practices. In his analysis of literary culture «from Mai '68 to the fin-de millénaire» for instance, critic William Paulson declares that «Poststructuralist thinkers were skeptical of language's capacity to convey meaning stably or unequivocally, and thus attentive to the multiple possibilities for uncertainty or creative disruption to be found in texts and utterances.» (Paulson 60) To give another example, Kristin Ross points out in her book *May '68 and its Afterlives*, that the revolutionary climate of the end of the sixties, which touched politics, culture, and the media influenced the way a generation envisioned not only philosophy or art, but a way of living altogether. This influence, however, also coincided, according to Kristin Ross, to the waning of the role of the intellectual as a hegemonic political figure (as Sartre was) in favor of the birth of an anti-hegemonic collective culture. Ross insists that art started then to «see its purpose as that of keeping apace with events, with achieving a complete contemporaneity with the present and with what is happening around it.» (15)

[2] In the *Grundrisse*, Marx uses the expression general intellect to define a form of social knowledge that has become «a direct force of production» that conditions the «process of social life itself.» (Marx 706) We may find similar concepts in the contemporary works of Italian theorists active in the 1970s, and in particular Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno. The latter, for instance expands the notion of general intellect «well beyond the idea of knowledge materialized in fixed capital … It includes the epistemic models that structure social communication and incorporates the intellectual activity of mass culture.» (Virno 22)

[3] Paul Ginsborg writes that the students' sense of rejection «was able to find fertile support in minority developments in both the dominant ideologies of Italy, Catholicism and Marxism. The pontificate of John XXIII had opened the Italian church to a new ferment of ideas and activities. More than ever before, attention was paid to the need for social justice. In 1967, Don Milani, a dissident Catholic priest, published an extraordinary book called *Lettera a Una Professoressa*. In it, students from the school of Barbiana, in the village of Vecchio Mugello, north of Florence, documented the class bias of the educational system and the triumph of individualism in the new Italy. The philosophy of Italian education, according to Don Milani's school students, ran as follows: 'Woe betide him who touches the Individual. The Free Development of the Personality is your supreme conviction. You care nothing for society or its needs … you also know less than us about your fellow men. The lift is a machine for avoiding your neighbors, the car for ignoring people who go by tram, the telephone for not talking face face and for not going to other people's homes.' The book rapidly became a cult text for the student movement.» (300)

theories permeating all areas of society. The insistence, within the movement, on the re-definition of a collectivity (such as the redefinition of mass-worker from the pages written on it by Marx and Antonio Gramsci) and the creation of the group set the basis for an experience founded on work and politics just as much as on poetic expressions. Given their fortune and their omnicomprehensive scope, the general principles of *operaismo* allowed the movements formed around it to expand well beyond work organization, affecting numerous collective projects in architecture, literature, the arts, as well as the totality of everyday life.

This 'new culture', then, tended to integrate not only the historically separate ideas of intellectual and manual labor, but high-brow and low-brow expressions in the arts and literature.[4] In this sense it could be useful to take briefly into consideration an essay by Max Henninger titled «Patchwork 1979: Notes on *Blackout* by Nanni Balestrini.» Through the reading of a poem by *operaista*-writer-Gruppo 63 member Nanni Balestrini, the article provides an overview of the multiple artistic and political movements that promoted, in 1970s Italy, a culture of mass intellectuality. Often referred to simply as «the Movement,» the different expressions of political antagonism that sprung from *operaista* theories expanded all over the Italian territory: the fusion of the notions of worker and intellectual propounded, by most of the political currents involved, majorly influenced poetic and artistic experiments. Interestingly, many literary attempts to come out of this movement were reflecting the notions of collectivism and organization of shared space. Henninger talks about Balestrini's poetry as a «calculated assemblage,» and «not so much the spontaneous expression of a single narrator as a quasi-mathematical process of *organizzazione di segni*.» (9) Balestrini's combinatory procedure becomes, as it were, a call to the reader to engage in a process of creative re-combination. All these concepts are based on the principles of «collective mind,» or of «mass intellectuality,» elaborated in their political aspect by movements like the *operaisti*, and elaborated in their literary sense by authors like Balestrini, retain a strict link with all the theories on the de-individualization of the author and the de-signification of names by way of anonymity, pseudonymity or heteronimy.

Calvino's writing has been amply studied internationally, but the de-individualizing aspects of his work have received only marginal attention by scholarship.[5] However, after an observation of the trajectory of his writings, we can consider the corpus of works he produced in the 1970s as an embodiment of this collective/designifying, and most importantly, combinatory value. The questioning of the proper name as a plausible unit

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[4] Henninger writes: «With the appearance of the journals *Quaderni Rossi* and *Classe Operaia* (in 1961 and 1964, respectively), there emerged in Italy a new current of Marxism known as operaismo. It constituted an attempt to formulate a conceptual apparatus and a practical strategy that would do justice to the transformation of the Italian working class during the period of postwar reconstruction while taking account of the problematic character of Soviet Marxism as highlighted by the tragic outcomes of the Hungarian insurrection of 1956. The distinctive trait of operaismo consisted in its insistence on the autonomy and primacy of working-class struggle with regard to capitalist planning. For the theorists of operaismo, the working class needed to be thought of not as passively responding to the transformations of capitalism as imposed by entrepreneurs, but rather as the driving force behind those transformations.» (1-2)

[5] Although my article draws mostly from criticism in English, a number of Italian scholars have studied this aspect of Calvino's writing. Some of the most interesting analyses are present in Raffaele Aragona's *Italo Calvino: percorsi potenziali*; Mario Barenghi's *Italo Calvino, le linee e i margini*; Brunella Eruli's essay collection *Attenzione al potenziale! Il gioco della letteratura*.

of signification underlies all of Calvino's work. In his fiction Calvino often dwells on considerations of what may happen to a text when the first element of what composes it, the name, ceases to signify, or, in the writer's words, ceases to become a distinguishing mark. This preoccupation on the part of the writer is particularly evident, and accurately theorized in Calvino's 1979 'hypernovel' *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler* (*Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*), where proper names (and first of all the name of the author) are systematically used as multi-referential items. The gesture of opening names to multiple references, however, should not only be understood as an application of Eco's idea of open work or the paradigm of openness to a theory on names, but as a literal 'breaking open' of the proper name that reveals its inner lack of unitary signification. This operation in Calvino can be seen as an attempt to dismantle and put back together what the writer calls the «complex and unpredictable machine» of language.

My reading of Calvino's 1979 novel, then, will attempt to shift the focus to the cultural aspects that link his work to the general intellect of 1970s Italy, in order to resituate Calvino's metaphor of the 'machine' to its techno-scientific discursive complex. Putting the accent on combinatory structures, on the virtually unlimited possibilities that language and narrative allow for, and on concepts such as the meaning of proper names and definitions, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler* contributes with a new chapter to the debate on the role of the novel, the author and the reader in modern (and postmodern) society. Analyzing the multiplicity, the absence, and the significance of names in *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler*, furthermore, I wish to underline Calvino's role as a connector between Italian and French theories of poetics, or between the Barthesian concepts of «death of the author» and of «text-producing reader,» and the notion of indeterminacy in contemporary art forms developed in Italy around the publication of Umberto Eco's *The Open Work* (*Opera Aperta*) in 1962. This analysis will lead me to show how Calvino's hypernovel draws together, in its structure, the Italian and French intellectual debate on the new forms of the work of art. In the debate surrounding the relation between aesthetic forms and the theoretical logic of their genesis is inherent a discussion of the potentialities of the writer, the reader and the written work to influence a vision of the world. Calvino's interest in how names and signatures are stripped of their specific signifier, then, will be a point of departure for the discussion of the concepts of indefiniteness and multiplicity in the writer's work.[6] My aim is to show how this work is not detached but rather linked

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[6] In the introduction of Eco's *Opera Aperta* (1995 reissue) we read: «dobbiamo riconoscere che …O.A. si è imposto come l'inizio di un dibattito che avrebbe investito la società culturale italiana degli anni Sessanta e avrebbe poi trovato I suoi momenti più caldi con l'uscita del Menabò 5 e la prime sortite del Gruppo 63…L'Opera Aperta ha messo alle corde, da una parte quelli per cui l'opera letteraria é prius, originalità originaria, oggettività e soggettività sublimi; e dall'altra parte quelli … per cui l'opera è posterius, derivazione seconda, sovrastruttura dialettica. Ha portato all estreme conseguenze un discorso che, nelle condizioni della cultura italiana, sembra oppresso da una serie di 'complessi' mentali ed interessi costituiti, accademici, partitici, aziendali. [We need to recognize that … the Open Work imposed itself as the beginning of a debate which would involve the italian cultural life of the sixties and would then find its crucial moments with the issue of *Menabò 5* and the first works of Gruppo 63…The Open Work has defeated on the one hand those for whom the literary work is *prius*, originary originality, sublime objectivity and subjectivity; and on the other those … for whom the work is *posterius*, second derivation, dialectic superstructure. It brought to extreme consequences a discourse which, in the context of Italian literature, seems oppressed by a series of mental 'complexes' and constituted interests of the academia, parties, corporate world.]» (Eco, Introduction ix)

to questions of authorship and collectivity that were at the core of 1970s literary, philosophical, and political discourse.

Calvino's literary career is usually divided into two distinct phases.[7] In the first phase, roughly going from the late 1940s to 1965, the writer comes to terms with the moral imperative of militant writing by writing a kind of *letteratura d'impegno*, or politically engaged literature. Born in 1923, Calvino reached his twenties in the middle of World War II and was directly involved in the Resistance.[8] His first phase, then, is unfailingly considered as neorealist, anti-Fascist fiction, in the sense that it explores the possibilities of man's meaningful participation in the process of history through the photographic depiction of social portraits linked to real historical events. Progressively, however, Calvino detaches himself from neorealism, or at least he masks the elements of social denunciation in his writing through the adoption of highly imaginative, fairytale-like narrations. Books such as *The Seasons in the City* (*Marcovaldo,* 1963), or the chivalric epic trilogy *Our Ancestors* (*I nostri antenati*, 1952) are still pervaded of a moral sense that presupposes an involvement in social themes, such as alienation in big modern cities, the necessity for rebellion, the absurdity of institutions and bureaucracy, but the ways in which these issues are addressed has very little in common with the canon of realist or neorealist narration.

The second phase in Calvino's writing, which goes from 1965 (the year in which the writer moved permanently to Paris) to his death in 1984, has often been referred to as the «French Connection,» since the writer maintained continuous contacts with the latest innovative French literary trends, ranging from the antinovel or «nouveau roman,» to structuralism, semiotics, and the sensational Parisian literary workshop Oulipo. As a consequence of oulipian influence, this phase in Calvino's writing is characterized by more abstract narratives and literary games which tend to interrogate the act of writing and textuality itself. Drawn to these «provocative, diverse, but rarefied experimental movements and ideas,» (Weiss 88) and at the same time stimulated by a lifelong interest in genetic, astronomic, and cosmologic theories, Calvino was inspired to create a new genre of narratives that encompass semiotic theories, linguistic experiments, structures informed by mathematics and philosophical reflections on the possibilities that new technologies (especially the computer, then a relatively new tool) were offering to literature.[9]

All these theoretical and practical elements converge in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, and are expressed through the rigor of its structure which contrasts with the fantastic

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[7] The majority of critics usually agree upon this distinction. See for instance, in Italy, Alberto Asor Rosa, Mario Barenghi, Giorgio Baroni, Cristina Benussi, Marco Belpoliti, Giuseppe Grasso, Silvio Perrella, Mario Lavagetto, Francesca Serra, Nicola Turi. In English: Lucia Re, Joan Cannon, Teresa De Lauretis Constance Markey, Franco Ricci, Beno Weiss, Martin McLaughlin.

[8] In 1943 Calvino was called up to serve in the Italian army under Mussolini's Salò's government. Markey states: «By this time (1943), having been influenced by leftist friends, Calvino was a clandestine Communist opposed to fighting for the Fascist cause. With their parents' support, young Italo and Floriano resisted the draft and went briefly into hiding. Soon after, they joined the Italian Resistance where, as freedom fighters or garibaldini, they saw active combat against the detested nazi army occupying Italy…When the war ended in 1945 and Italy had been liberated, Calvino resumed his normal life, but with a new maturity … He maintained his ties with the Communist Party that had championed the Resistance and, with social reform in mind, began to work for the communist paper *L'Unità*, first as a journalist and later as an editor.» (Markey 6)

[9] If we wished to compile a more complete list of Calvino's influences, we should certainly mention his inermittent «American» phase. Calvino first got to the United States in 1959, and later returned, in the 1980s, to give a series of lectures at Harvard University. As he repeatedly stated in essays, interviews and journal articles, his visit strongly influenced his later work.

development of the multiple plots. The continuous changes of direction in the subject matters treated in the novel allow the writer to obtain a lack of authorial distinctiveness, towards which he aimed by his own admission.[10] And indeed, critics have often underlined the difference of the two periods in Calvino's writing as if they constituted the work of two distinct authors altogether. To make an example, in a review of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* that appeared on *Time Magazine* in 1981, Melvin Maddocks writes that «anything seems possible except that Calvino, 57, now an editor of the Turin-based publishing house Giulio Einaudi Editore was once a Marxist and a veteran of World War II Resistance, who had once believed, that literature should be dedicated to 'political engagement,' to 'social battle.'» (*Time* May 25, 1981). Many, especially in Italy, have strongly criticized Calvino's detachment from realism, and his predilection for a 'dry' and highly theoretical approach. After the publication of *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler*, for instance, many reviewers denounced Calvino's excessive attention to the narrative technique. Cesare Garboli, for instance, writing in *Paragone Letteratura* in 1979, sees Calvino's new direction as a sign of malaise, a degeneration of the writer's love for literary play. He states: «Ciò che sorprende, nell'ultimo Calvino, non è l'artificio formale, l'organizzazione del gioco – questi sono elementi superficiali. Se c'è qualcosa di sorprendente in Calvino oggi, è il suo ostinato spettacolo di mediazione e dialettica.»[11] (Garboli 69-70) Garboli, with many Italian critics, insists in underlining the lack of interest Calvino in realism and his resort to technicism, which creates, in his reading, a dysfunction, a disproportion that makes the combinatory game inferior to the malaise that has inspired it. *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, in other words, is quite literally the work of an author that questions the role and functions of authorship, and the potentiality of this role in its relation to militant literature.

If on a Winter's Night a Traveler may be considered the epitome of the second phase in Calvino's production; it addresses philosophical questions such as the relations of the writer (and of the reader) with the text, the importance of authorship, the question of genre, and it is specifically centered around the discussion on the significance, or, more appropriately, the de-significance of proper names in novels.[12] It is important to underline, however, that the novel brings forth all these theoretical insights by making use of the structures and the constraint proposed by the Oulipo.

Oulipo, the experimental literary group founded in Paris in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lyonnais is particularly interesting for a reading of Calvino's oeu-

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[10] In Markey's book we read: «The author was influenced by Jacques Derrida's poststructuralist movement and its skeptical critique of language as the bearer of ultimate truth. Al of these fresh literary endeavors Calvino saw as a means to enliven fiction, to escape the monotony of traditional historical narrative, and thereby elude (at least on paper) the natural limitations of the human world. Little by little, via these eclectic postmodern inquiries, the social writer Calvino inevitably gave way to the restless intellectual within.» Also: «In all Calvino's postmodern works there is an impatient striving on the author's part to liberate himself from the shackles of time and place.» (Markey 19)

[11] What is surprising, in the latest Calvino, is not the formal artifice, the organization of the game – these are superficial features. If there is something that is surprising in Calvino today, is his obstinate staging of mediations and dialectics.» (Garboli 69-70)

[12] *If on a Winter's night a Traveler* is not the only book in which Calvino engages with these topics. Another, possibly more famous endeavor of this kind is the 1972 book of short narrative sketches *Invisible Cities* (*Le Città invisibili*).

vre within the scope of his interest for the materiality and artifact quality of literature.[13] In his 1960 article «La Littérature Potentielle,» Raymond Queneau affirms that The Oulipo's aim is to propose «new structures of a mathematical nature, or to invent new artificial and mechanical procedures that contribute to literary activity.» (Motte 321) The works signed by the Oulipo are organized like a poetic form of mathematics, as a set of economic choices that fit precisely within a pre-defined structure through mathematical constraints self-imposed by the writer, and is interested in the form of writing as practice, work, and play. If we add that these forms are seen in opposition to what Georges Perec calls literature's «great capitals (Work, Style, Inspiration, World-Vision, Fundamental Options, Genius, Creation, etc)» (Motte 5) we can see how the importance that the Oulipo attributes to names is paramount. In the foreword to *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*, Noël Arnaud writes: «The future of Oulipo is inscribed in its name. More precisely, its name imposes a form on the group, its only manner of being (and of acting)» (Motte xi) These words are striking for their insistence on the role of the name as an ontological constituent: in the case of the Oulipo, the name gives form, and, more than this, life. Because, Arnaud continues, «If the Oulipo abandoned this form involuntarily, it would die; voluntary abandon would be suicide: the group would scuttle itself.» (Motte ix) The name Oulipo reveals an undefined area 'in between' the clear taxonomic distinction among genres, and even among disciplines. Motte writes:

> An *ouvroir* –a word that has fallen into disuse- once denoted a shop and, as late as the eighteenth century, a light and mobile shop made of wood, in which the master cobblers of Paris displayed their wares and pursued their trade. The word could also denote that part of the textile factory where the looms are placed; or, in an arsenal, the place where a team of workers performs a given task; or a long room where the young women in a community work on projects appropriate to their sex. … Later, and for a short time only, ouvroir denoted a group of well-to-do women seeking to assuage their consciences in needlework for the poor and in the confection of sumptuous ecclesiastical ornaments. Curiously enough, it was this last notion, the 'sewing circle,' that prevailed in the minds of the Oulipians. (xii)

Aside from the apparent link of the name *ouvroir* with the wider notion of *operaio* (and, implicitly, also with *operaismo*), which directly suggests an association between writing and manual labor, as well as a laboratory, the Oulipians relied on combinatory structures through the use of complex mathematics in their works, as well as the maximum possible hybridization of literary genres. In their views, contamination has the possibility, just like a recursive structure, to multiply the potentiality of literature. For these reasons, we may not enclose the Oulipian work within the traditional generic frame of authorial oeuvre, but we should rather take it as de-territorialized work, or as work that detaches itself from the specific cultural place assigned to it. Within this type of work, names do not function as tools to define a thing, or even a field, but rather open towards multiple

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[13] The *oulipiens* were: Noel Arnaud, Marcel Benabou, Jacques Bens, Claude Berge, André Blavier, Paul Braffort, Italo Calvino, Francois Caradec, Bernard Cerquiglini, Ross Chambers, Stanley Chapman, Marcel Duchamp, Jacques Duchateau, Luc Etienne, Paul Fournel, Michelle grangaud, Jacques Jouet, Latis, Francois le Lionnais, Hervé le Tellier, Jean Lescure, Harry Mathews, Michèle Métail, Oskar Pastior, Georges Perec, Raymond Queneau, Jean Queval Pierre Rosenstiel, Jacques Roubaud, Albert-Marie Schmidt.

fields. Texts become «light» because they do not possess the weight usually ascribed to the subject or the responsibility given by the authorial name, as implied in the definition of the name Oulipo itself.

Calvino had maintained a strict contact with Queneau and the Oulipiens since 1965, and officially became a member of the group in 1973. Calvino writes *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler* following the Oulipian rules of literary/mathematical constraint, and for this reason he considers the Traveler (as he liked to call it) an Oulipian novel. In 1980, with an article included in the *Bibliothèque Oulipienne*, and titled *Comment j'ai écrit un des mes livres* (a parody of Raymond Roussel's *Comment j'ai écrit certains des mes livres*) Calvino explains the complex set of constraints that lie behind the construction of his book, often considered among the first examples of hypernovel, a low-tech, multidirectional text anticipating more contemporary forms of written communication. He writes, for instance, that in the *Traveler* «the structures chosen by the author are relatively few in number, but the possible realizations are combinatorily exponential.» («Comment j'ai écrit» 143) More specifically, Calvino defines the Traveler as an «anticombinatory» experiment, calling anticombinatorics the multiplication of literary possibilities given by a set number of choices. Starting with a limited number of entries (a series of hypotetical actions and relations among a limited number of characters and locations), Calvino notices that the number of possible stories to be developed is uncountable for the human mind.[14] Transposed to the *Traveler*, the practice of anticombinatorics is applied to reveal a vision of a forma mundi that operates through language: it narrates a story about the pleasure of the text. But it is also a book about the writing (and the reading) of books as it informs the characters' daily life: as critic Teresa De Lauretis' states, it is «a novel about novels, a story about storytelling whose characters are only readers and writers.» (De Lauretis 135)[15]

But how is this world of language portrayed in the book?[16] The main plot (or frame) is the story of an unnamed male Reader (Lettore) addressed by an extradiegetic narrator through the second person pronoun «You» (tu). This is a relatively new technique that Calvino derives from the French experiments and the Nouveau Roman, and more specifically from Perec's *A Man Asleep* and Michel Butor's *La Modification*. The adventure of the Reader («Your» adventure) begins with the reading of Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. The narrator provides a lengthy (and highly eroticized) description of the pleasures that the new book promises to the Reader:

> Rigiri il libro tra le mani, scorri le frasi del retrocopertina, del risvolto, frasi generiche che non dicono molto…Certo, anche questo girare intorno al libro, leggerci intorno prima di leggerci dentro, fa part del piacere del libro nuovo, ma come tutti i piaceri preliminari ha

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[14] This game of anticombinatorics is intended as a reflection on how the «open» paradigm may be found through «closure» or through a limited set of possibilities.

[15] De Lauretis' article, included in the collection of critical essays *Calvino Revisited* (ed. Francesco Ricci), is a study of the novel that takes into consideration the category of postmodern in its generic quality. The article also dwells on a (less interesting) discussion of gender roles in Calvino.

[16] See Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du Texte*. Here Barthes discusses the concepts of readerly and writerly texts. The writerly text, he claims offers two kinds of enjoyment: pleasure (*plaisir*) and bliss (*jouissance*). Jouissance has a connotation of ecstasy and sexual delight. Pleasure comes through straightforward processes of reading, while *jouissance* derives from a sense of interruption, a «breakdown» or gap, where something unexpected occurs.

una sua durata ottimale se si vuole che serva a spingere verso il piacere più consistente del-
la consumazione dell'atto, cioè della lettura del libro.[17] (*Se una notte d'inverno* 8)

But after the Reader, finally gets 'inside' the novel and is captured by the plot, he is
forced to interrupt the reading because of a binding mistake in the copy.[18] The erot-
ic/sexual charge of the act of reading (and the frustration that derives from its interrup-
tion) is here rendered with great force of details. After the Reader finds out about the
mistake, his reaction is frustrated and violent:

> scagli il libro contro il pavimento, lo lanceresti fuori dalla finestra … fuori della casa, fuori
> dell'isolato, fuori del quartiere, fuori del comprensorio urbano, fuori dell'assetto territo-
> riale, fuori dell'amministrazione regionale, fuori della comunità nazionale, fuori del merca-
> to comune, fuori della cultura occidentale, … proprio come si merita, né più né meno.[19]
> (*Se una notte d'Inverno* 26-27)

Rushing to the bookstore to return the defective copy, the Reader finds out that the
book he was reading was not the new Calvino. The wrong pages, the bookseller says,
were bound between the wrong covers. What the Reader started (and now wants to
finish) was a book by an unknown (and fictive) Polish author, Tazio Bazakbal. In the
bookstore The Reader also meet a female reader named Ludmilla (Lettrice, or the Other
Reader in William Weaver's translation) who apparently came across the same problem
with her copy of the book. The Reader and the Other Reader, immediately attracted to
each other by their common passion for novels, decide to abandon the Calvino in favor
of the Bazakbal, hoping to continue the reading at the point where it was interrupted.

Bazakbal's novel, completely different from Calvino's, is nonetheless engaging.
However, when the plot starts to engross the Reader, another printing mistake occurs,
and the reading is once again interrupted. This time, too, the mistake in printing suggests
that the novel is not really by Polish author Bazakbal; it is instead a translation from an
unknown Cimmerian author called Ukko Ahti. From this moment on, the twelve chap-
ters that form the novel's «frame» or «macrotext» sequentially recount the unsuccessful
adventures of the Reader (but also, You) in his search for the different novels' ending,

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[17] «You turn the book over in your hands, you scan the sentences on the back of the jacket, gener-
ic phrases that don't say a great deal … Of course, this circling of the book, this reading around
before reading inside it, is a part of the pleasure in a new book, but like all preliminary pleasures, it
has its optimal duration if you want it to serve as a thrust toward the more substantial pleasure of
the consummation of the act, namely the reading of the book.» (*Traveler* 9)

[18] This interruption also has a functional aspect: it offers an opportunity to Calvino to go on in details
about the techniques of book-printing and binding. We read: «È nel rilegare il volume che è successo
l'errore: un libro è fatto di 'sedicesimi'; ogni sedicesimo è un grande foglio su cui vengono stampate
sedici pagine e viene ripiegato in otto; quando si rilegano insieme i sedicesimi può capitare che in una
copia vadano a finire due sedicesimi uguali; è un incidente che ogni tanto succede.» (*Se una notte
d'inverno* 26); «The mistake occurred as they were binding the volume: a book is made up of sixteen-
page signatures; each signature is a large sheet on which sixteen pages are printed, and which is then
folded over eight times; when all the signatures are bound together, it can happen that two identical
signatures end up in the same copy; it's the sort of accident that occurs every now and then.» (*Traveler*
25)

[19] «fling the book to the floor, … hurl it out of the window … throw it out of the house, out of the
block, beyond the neighborhood, beyond the city limits, beyond the state confines, beyond the re-
gional administration, beyond the national community, beyond the common market, beyond western
culture… Merely what it deserves, neither more nor less.» (*Traveler* 26)

and his more successful attempts to seduce the Other Reader.[20] Within this frame are inserted ten novel fragments, all of which are left unfinished. Every time the novels are interrupted for different and more imaginative reasons: besides the errors in binding and printing, we read about a mix-up of different texts, an incomplete text from a nonexistent country, a fake translation, a grotesque arrest and book confiscation in a fictive Latin American dictatorship. All ten novel incipits are exercises in different genres and constitute the pretext for the continuous quest of the Reader. All along the quest the Reader is introduced to a number of highly stereotyped characters, all of whom are in some way related to textuality, reading or writing. Besides the Other Reader Ludmilla, he come across the Non Reader Irnerio, the publisher Cavedagna, the shady translator Ermes Marana, the author of best-selling novels Silas Flannery, and what De Lauretis calls «the critical-feminist reader:» (De Lauretis 138) Ludmilla's 'evil sister' Lotaria.[21] The structure is further complicated by the fact that the title of «the book within the book» coincides with the title of the book itself, and it appears at the beginning and at the very end, when Reader and Other Reader, married at last, enjoy an evening at home, reading *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler.*

The structure of the novel is striking for its geometrical precision, which seems in contrast with the imaginative situations that constitute the plot. The main frame, Calvino affirms, develops from basic strategies derived from Greimas' «semiotic square,» a structuralist explanation of meaning construction in narrative. Schematically speaking, the square suggests that a narrative will be organized around a pair of terms whose relation is oppositional or negational, or, as Greimas writes, as «a binary semic category, of the type white vs. black; the relation of the terms of this category is that of mutual contraries, each one being at the same time capable of projecting a new term which would be its contradictory…The subsequent assumption is that this elementary structure of signification furnishes a semiotic model adequate to account for initial articulations of meaning within a semantic micro-universe.» (25) Constructed as a semiconductor-shaped recursive structure (a series of switches, to be clearer), the main frame of *If On a Winter's night a Traveler* literally divides the narration into ten opposite set of choices. In this sense, the adventures of the Reader are determined by the type of novel-fragment that he reads and vice-versa.[22] In his (rather cryptic) scheme of chapter one, for instance, Calvino explains the set of choices as follows: «The reader reads the book/the book narrates the story of

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[20] I borrow here the terms «macrotext» and «frame» from Mariolina Salvatori's article «*Italo Calvino's If On a Winter's Night a Traveler*: Writer's Authority, Reader's Autonomy»: 186.

[21] De Lauretis insists: «Lotaria, the bad sister and mirror image of Ludmilla, is the negative image of Woman, the *unheimlich* double of a female Dorian Gray. She is the woman reader we shouldn't be. Or so the text tries to convince us. For, whether it is due to male narcissism, blinding homophobia, or to a rather shocking cultural naiveté in a writer so sophisticated otherwise, Calvino seems unaware that there are women readers – let alone the amazon of old – who simply have no interest in men or men's desire.» (De Lauretis 139) I quote this passage by De Lauretis not because it is particularly relevant to my analysis of *If On a Winter's night a Traveler*, but because it summarizes the positions of a number of feminist readings of the novel.

[22] For instance, when at the beginning the Reader is looking for his full reading satisfaction, the structure predicts that this satisfaction may come from two sources: from «sensations» and from the «Ego.» Immediately following we will start reading the second novel fragment, named the «novel of corporal experience,» which is all about the description of full material sensations, and suggests the choice of the first choice over the second. The second choice, at this point, is not forgotten but only delayed and it will be the source for the next novel and so on.

the reader in the book/ The reader in the book cannot read the book within the book/the book within the book does not tell the story of the reader/the reader in the book pretends to be the reader of the book/ the book pretends to be the book within the book.» («Comment j'ai écrit» 154) As we may see, the constraint that underlies the narrative is based on a series of variations on the themes of reading and writing.

Some of the ideas proposed by the Oulipo and addresses in Calvino's novel, such as the exploration of the liberating constraint of language, are reminiscent of the poststructuralist approach (see Barthes and Derrida for instance) that sees language as a meaning-differing machine that must be continuously reworked and that can eventually offer a form of jouissance. Others, such as the discussion of the name-function and the stress on the non-originality of the artistic product, reflect the ideas proposed in politically informed philosophical studies such as Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* and Umberto Eco's *The Open Work* that had an enormous influence on the intellectual world of contemporary France and Italy. In other words, although the idea of Oulipian constraint seems to work best on abstract concepts, such as repetition, formulas, multiplicity, and the work of the Oulipo rarely addresses the affairs of the world in a direct manner, the point of departure for its philosophical conceptions is strictly grounded in its own time. The works of the Oulipo thus establish a link between the abstract quality of the rhetorical argument, and the principles of political theory they implicitly use as reference.

Writing about the Italian influence of the Oulipo, the French avant-garde and poststructural theory, Paolo Albani states that Calvino's Oulipian writings are «da una parte un'analisi delle possibilità narrative dei giochi combinatori derivati dalla scuola dei formalisti Russi, da Roland Barthes e la narrativa di *Tel Quel,* dall'altra un approccio alla tendenza della cultura contemporanea che vede il mondo come discreto – nel senso matematico del termine, come 'composto da parti diverse' – piuttosto che continuo.»[23] (Albani 125) In Oulipian writings, and in Calvino, the concepts of fragmentation (or discreteness) of the subject, the reader, the narrative, function as points of departure for the development of narratives and poetry. In making a parody of the types of reader (the average, the ideal, the academic, the non-reader) and of writers (the productive writer/the tormented writer and so on) *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler* does not simply deal with structural constraints and wordplay, but with a complete theory on the status of contemporary literature, positioning itself within this theory and, implicitly, within the historical and cultural moment. Within the framework of the Oulipian experiment, Calvino might not directly talk about the world of the time, but adopts and restructures the discourses on the world of the time. Despite its apparent distance from any form of letteratura d'impegno, then, Calvino's novel retains all the main paradigms that best define the highly engaged 1970s Italian and French culture, language and society.

Having mentioned the closeness of Calvino's thought with postmodern and poststructuralist theories, we need to specify that the proper names in *If On a Winter's night a Traveler* (a novel that, we have seen, consciously makes a literary practice of such theories) may never be seen as Platonic «dividing tools,» but at best as traces. The term

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[23] Albani writes that Calvino's Oulipian experience is «On the one hand an analysis of the narrative possibilities of combinatory games taken from the school of Russian formalists, of Roland Barthes and the fictional writing of *Tel Quel* and, on the other hand, an approach to the tendency of contemporary culture that sees the world as discrete – in the mathematical sense of the word, as in 'composed of separate parts' – rather than continuous.» (125)

trace must be understood here in its Derridean sense, that is to say, as the content that every linguistic sign has in relation to other signs. According to Derrida, a trace is then an element that is potentially inherent in the sign but is nonetheless absent. It follows that a sign is not only a mark of presence but it also includes an absence within itself.[24] In Calvino's writings, proper names are often chosen in order to reveal the trace of what they lack. They are the first elements to allow the reader (and the writer) to acknowledge and reveal this trace. A trace in Calvino's work is not just a potentially inherent element, but rather a material absence. In other words, instead of hiding under a veil of signification, proper names in Calvino's fiction present, quite literally, their «improperness.»

But how does a proper name become improper? Calvino revels in attempts to answer this question, either by exposing names' inability to define what exists (as in Lotaria's multiple names which reveal only a series of masks) or in their multiple referentiality (as in the non-name of the Reader, which can be applied to a multiplicity) To make a final (and possibly the most significant) example, we may observe the signature of Calvino-the-author in *If On a Winter's night a Traveler*. As briefly mentioned, the story includes the name of the author at the beginning and at the end. We know, though, that Calvino's name must be understood in its relation to all the other fictive writers of novel fragment. The name Italo Calvino, then is no different from Tazio Bazakbal, Ukko Ahti, Bertrand Vandervelde, Silas Flannery, Takakumi Ikoka, Calixto Bandera: fictive and irrelevant.

The reflection on the role of names in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, finally, can be extended to more general considerations on what names stand for. The novel, we have mentioned, displays a large number of theoretical digressions on the role of the author, that of the reader and the book itself. The search for the definition of the self, the subject, and, consequentially, the object-novel, however is not revelatory of the presence of these elements, but rather of their absence. In an article titled «Italo Calvino: the Last Two Decades,» Joan Cannon states that «*If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* … lays bare the dual potential of literature: poised between two voids, the absence of the subject and the absence of the object, literary discourse may be only a series of veils mistaking a blank page or it may be an effective cognitive activity unmasking the inexhaustible depths of reality.» (59) As we may observe, the core of *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler* consists necessarily in its ability to define an absence of definition, and to address the multiplicity included in names and their referents.

To conclude, if the attempt at defining the «property» and «propriety» of names (or, in other words, the reason why names came to be considered as proper) is of equally ancient origin as the envisioning of the act of name-giving as an instrument of legal, political, and even divine, power; then the political significance of names and the act of naming is a gesture that potentially contests the rules that surround the legal, institutional, and conventional power of proper names. Such a gesture may be observed either in what we can call counter-cultural forms of expression (the avant-gardes, activist circles, politically engaged literature), or in writings that are well aware of the cultural and political significance of names. In the case of Calvino, they are the product of a complex form of cooperative work. If the literary group Oulipo specifically worked on the exploration of linguistic constraint, and on the interconnection between mathematics and language structures, Calvino, through the reflection on proper names in his work, adds an element of socio-political reflection to the Oulipian corpus, often accused by critics of engaging in simple and meaningless word games. This element, I claim, is what re-directs Calvino's

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[24] See Jacques Derrida, *Positions*; *Writing and Difference*

«second phase» writings within the literary and political debate that was dominating the Italian and French 1970s. An inquiry over an abstract topic such as the waning of the proper name and the self-deconstruction of the individual, that considers itself only as a tool for the collective transformation of society is in fact a common aspect either in Italy or in France at the time. However, in its intricate form of openness, the work also questions national specificity: it suggests that starting from those years, a clear separation of the French and Italian cultural contexts that is not strictly based on language is unrealistic. The choice of a transnational space of analysis as opposed to a strictly national one, on the ther hand, is what allowed writers and intellectuals to pin down the common points at the basis the two literary, social and political cultures. Furthermore, a study that touches both the Italian and French tradition under the sign of proper names can, in my view, draw together the French theories on the «death of the subject» and the Italian studies on the «General Intellect.»[25] All these concepts are in fact based on the political principles of «collective mind,» or of «mass intellectuality,» which retain a strict link with all the theories on the de-individualization of the author and the de-signification of names by way of anonymity, pseudonymity or heteronimy.

In brief, focusing on the "literary mark" of individuality par excellence, the proper name switches the focus on the ways in which this mark has been perceived by a transnational culture of de-individualization. In other words, it points out the historicity of 1970s theories of language, naming and classification, and see how their interrelation with fictional texts is at the basis not only of literary, but also of cultural and political paradigms.

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[25] The author-function, in the words of Michel Foucault is the of the «mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society.» («What is an Author?» 148)

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