Book Reviews

Centenary Calvino, Here and Elsewhere

Celebrating the centenary of an author such as Italo Calvino entails a correct critical posture of due compromise between the scientific and memorial needs that such a historical occurrence arouses in academics, and namely the necessity to recombine the tiles of writing, fortune, and authorial reception into an organic mosaic, and, on the other hand, the “entirely stateless”1 identity of this writer-funambulist of the mind, of this picaresque “archaeologist” of narration, who has always preferred to shield himself through Perseus’s mirror,2 to disrupt the tiles and start all over again. The hypostasis of the authorial self, which comes to assert itself (or to dissipate) through studies and interpretations of the style — or, to put it better, the manner3 — of that author, will always be susceptible, in Italo Calvino’s work, to a deeper hypostasis of the Other’s gaze, of the numerous Others and Elsewhere that fragment the identity among the infinite chrisms of writing and reading.

For these reasons, to retrace Calvino’s literary work is always to “think about the drawing of a bush or a tree, not the wake of a ship”4 — reusing a

1. Rubini 2023, 33.
visual metaphor adopted by Mario Bareghi: in hindsight, the fortune and reception of his work has always moved into the territory of multiplicity, in an uninterrupted circularity of studies and perspectives characterized by divergent, even contradictory approaches.

The success of Italo Calvino’s work in Italy and around the world is, to this day, undisputed and continually growing. As an essential figure of the twentieth-century’s cultural intellighenza, a tutelary presence of the Italian literary canon, and an imperishable critical subject for school anthologies and academic studies, Calvino represents an equally successful unicum among the ranks of the most extensively read and studied Italian authors in the world. First in terms of the number of translations and editions of twentieth-century Italian compositions abroad, his works have circulated in more than 67 countries and have been translated into 16 alphabets of more than 56 languages, becoming compulsory reading even for freshmen in the 2018–2019 academic year at Hanyang University in Seoul. Since at least the 1980s, we are still witnessing the undoubted consecration of Calvino “from international writer to international classic”.

As the author of the very recent, and equally valuable essay Italo Calvino nel Mondo suggests, the “profound reasons” for such transnational success “remain inexhaustible and hidden”, like the protean figure of the author behind these processes of intellectual nomadism; but undoubtedly, the roots of this circularity can be traced back to the “elliptical” trajectory of an author who — as we read in the essay’s colophon — “appears to be a writer more in step with the times than ever before, for the variety and complexity of his reading of the world and for the agility and effectiveness of his literary inventions”, but of whom, at the same time, it would be an “unforgivable critical error” to forget the historical resistance of the past. Calvino thus leaves behind for his contemporaries and future generations the image of a narrative ellipse with two fires, an archetypal fire, which draws nourishment from a “concrete, real and decisive” history, profoundly linked to the historical experience of his homeland, and a fabled, vertiginous, cosmopolitan fire, which speaks indiscriminately to

7. Rubini 2023. The essay provides essential information on the most recent studies regarding fortune, international reception and tradition in translation of Italo Calvino’s works.
9. Ibid.
all, “a sort of world koinè of a fantastic-postmodern literary style”.\textsuperscript{10} It will be Calvino’s superior metaliterary sensitivity and profound self-reflexive capacity that will best explain the extent of this vertiginous, inexhaustible duplicity: “Ho sempre cercato d’essere, per quanto potevo un ‘cosmopolita’. (E forse questo è l’unico modo vero di essere italiano)”\textsuperscript{11}

Embracing these tensive and powerful antinomies that run through the figurative and textual reality of the \textit{hermit at home}, Italo Calvino, it is deeply significant that the works dedicated to the author on the occasion of the centenary start precisely from his “ideal and material nomadism that leads him to inhabit other spaces”,\textsuperscript{12} pointing out, first and foremost, the relevance of \textit{transversality} and \textit{multiplicity} as a gaze-shifting paradigm for a truly global and objectively current author. On closer inspection, the cultural initiatives, which see at the forefront the activities promoted by the Laboratorio Calvino,\textsuperscript{13} the Arnoldo and Alberto Mondadori Foundation and the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Rome, with the supervision and participation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation and the Italian Cultural Institutes abroad, embrace the legacy of wider-ranging studies, integrating and relaunching interdisciplinary and collaborative work of a philological, linguistic, critical, and librarianship nature, dedicated to the cultural and literary history, the publishing and graphic tradition of the author’s works in Italy and around the world.

For the reception of Calvino’s work, the occasion of the centenary furthers the possibility to reaffirm the value and profound sense of the practice of multiplicity, intrinsic to every element of Italo Calvino’s life and writing, and to “look from above”, or rather, \textit{from the outside}, the evolutions and contradictions of the narrative, editorial and translation history of an author who is always \textit{Here and Elsewhere}, a history nourished “by dazzling encounters and uncertain harmonies, by broad and systematic publishing projects and isolated initiatives, by delays and accelerations, by scrupulous dedication and unscrupulous manipulations, by great successes and silences”.\textsuperscript{14}

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\item Gnisci 1998, 90.
\item Cfr. Baranelli 2000, 949.
\item Rubini 2023, 27.
\item Collaborative Workshop of the Department of Humanities and Modern Cultures of the Sapienza University of Rome, with the State University of Milan, the University of Milan Bicocca, and Oxford University.
\item Rubini 2023, 17.
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It is precisely the spatial dichotomy, *Here and Elsewhere*, that acts as the common thread of the critical experience at the dawn of the Calvinian century. *Here and Elsewhere* inaugurates a course of study, begun in 2018 under the guidance of Laura di Nicola, one of the first to have explored the depths of the author's library and now director of the Laboratorio Calvino, with a distinctly international and multidisciplinary critical approach, involving universities and cultural institutes around the world, and enabling the author’s literary experience to be clarified within a broader, organic horizon of global reception. Also under the sign of the *Here and Elsewhere*, the project for a new series of books, published by Carocci in Rome, operates as a base to re-launch philological and critical studies on Calvino’s work. Among these, there are Claudio Milanini’s essay, *L’utopia discontinua. Saggi su Italo Calvino, a new revised and expanded edition*, and the aforementioned work reconstructing Calvino’s publishing experience around the world by Francesca Rubini, *Calvino nel mondo. Opere, lingue, paesi* (1955–2020).

The third component of the thematic “sylloge”, the exhibition *Calvino Here and Elsewhere*, hosted by the Laboratorio Formentini and realized by the Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori Foundation in collaboration with the Laboratorio Calvino and with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, aims to disseminate, through the medium of Calvino’s works in foreign editions and the transformation of their editorial and graphic design, the sense of a broader international and multicultural belonging, of the evolution of narrative practice through a renewed understanding of the concepts of *authorship* and *editorship*, of the history of the literary text as a broader history of *editing*.

In the form of a future touring exhibition, the project intends to retrace, through the diplomatic-consular network of the Italian Cultural Institutes, the stages of a journey through the places closest to the author, reconstructing a *geography* of cultural and existential apprenticeship in which Calvino profiles himself as a tireless *editor of others* and *translator of himself*, and, through this dual filter and means of distancing, gradually becomes aware of his own role as an intellectual and writer. Through the folders of his works and correspondence with his international editor of choice, Erich Linder, preserved at the Agenzia Letteraria Internazionale-Erich Linder Fund (ALI; since 1999 part of the patrimony of the Arnaldo e Alberto Mondadori Foundation in Milan), the exhibition *Calvino*

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Here and Elsewhere presents a twofold, critical cross-section of Calvino’s literary macrocosm: on the one hand, it allows us to rethink, in a more systematic way, the importance of the editorial forge as the place where Calvino “found his identity as a modern intellectual”; on the other, the role and importance that the panorama of editors, literary mediators, and translators had in the asymmetrical transmission and transfiguration of the Italian writer abroad, and thus the sense of the different degrees of intentionality acting on the text, in the continuous dialectic of author’s will, publisher’s will, and translator’s will.

The exhibition, as more broadly the set of essays and cultural initiatives arising under the sign of Calvino Here and Elsewhere, thus makes it possible to clarify the role of co-authorship and multi-authorship played, for example, by Erich Linder’s Agenzia Letteraria Internazionale, by François Whal in France, and by Archibald Colquhoun and Vera Frank for the Anglo-Saxon world, as privileged interlocutors of a textual phenomenology that does not merely have editorial and commercial repercussions, but also involves the broader process to which Calvino entrusts the sense of his artistic making. The text, understood as a work of poiesis and at the same time of material, documentary reality, evolves and transforms itself continuously in Time and Space, “non irrigidito in una immobilità minerale, ma vivente come un organismo”.

The field of study opened up by Calvino Here and Elsewhere, moreover, benefits from a privileged philological and bibliographical situation: the ALI Fund collection, part of the main Calvino Translated Fund, part of the Laboratorio Calvino since 2018 and deposited, in its over 1,100 volumes of translated works of authorship, at the Sala Calvino of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Rome, and the third Fund of translated works, at the Italian Institute of Culture in Paris (since 1995). It represents for Calvinian scrutinizers a rare patrimony of more than 1,500 catalogographic units for the comparative study of the complete reception of authorship on the international scene. The uniqueness of this cultural heritage, therefore, has made it possible to recognize and define, in the succession of projects orbiting Calvino Here and Elsewhere, a detailed diachrony of three cultural seasons in which to distinguish the evolution of Calvinian reception in Europe and the world (from the first volume translated into France in 1955, Vicomte pourfendu, to 1970; from 1971 to 1985, and finally

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the path of consecration as a world classic, from his disappearance to
the second decade of the twenty-first century), as well as a differentiated
topography of the different modes of reception and authorial intervention,
which is uninterrupted and dialogic in places such as France, Germany,
the United Kingdom, and the United States, alternating and selective in
the Iberian peninsula, South America, and the Scandinavian countries,
asymmetrical and late, but of significant diffusion, in the countries of the
Asian continent.18

Compared to the potential acquisitions on Calvino’s workshop of
narrative and editorial construction, the centenary activities dedicated to
the experience of being translated.19 bring out more clearly the Calvinian
impasse concerning the sense of an irreducible impoverishment, of
inadequacy and intrinsic betrayal of every translation, combined with
the sense of a deeper, peremptory will of dialogue with his ideal Reader,
of a necessary sacrifice. Initially experienced with irrelevance and
frustration, therefore, the practice of translation becomes much more often
a teleological path deeply experienced by the author, as a strong-willed
protagonist of editorial and paratextual choices, of lexical and symbolic
trans-coding, of graphic compositions and advertising mechanisms linked
to every process of international cultural mediation. Translators, publishing
mediators, and literary agents will thus become as many agency processes
for the recognition of the authorial Ego, a device of profound narrative
self-awareness, as well as a fundamental alter ego of deflagration and
multiplication of the Self through those “second-degree mirrors”20 that are
the works of translation, mechanisms that allow one to “scomparire”
behind the hermeneutic practice of reading, to unhinge the “scomodo
diaframma”21 of one’s own person; and — the logical counterpart of every
Calvinian reflection — to acquire more of oneself through this distancing,
through the paradigmatic pathos of distance.

The effects of the projects that link the centenary of Calvino to the
*Here and Elsewhere* pathway, therefore, do not only intercept Calvino’s
hermeneutic value and narrative practice, but also establish a broader
reflection on the value of the intellectual figure in a transnational twentieth

18. For a complete and detailed case history, I refer to Rubini 2023 and the reference
bibliography on the subject. For the concept of translation asymmetry, see in
particular Schwartz 2021.
20. Ibid. 29–30.
century, on the sense of a different projection of identity in a postmodern global horizon, no longer in terms of comparison, but in relation to the sense of being irreducibly different as a collective paradigm of possibility. It is on this path, then, that we establish the cognitive, historical, and cultural presuppositions that allow us to define what it means, today, to become a classic.

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Works Cited

For an overall census of the research activities and projects inaugurated by Italo Calvino’s centenary, please refer to the Ministry of Culture website (https://biblioteche.cultura.gov.it/it/notizie/notizia/Italo-Calvino-Centenario-della-nascita/) and the dedicated page on the Mondadori Portal (https://www.mondadori.it/autori/italo-calvino/), respectively.