

FUGITIVE DIEGESIS OF THE FIRST PERSON SINGULAR
IN BORGES AND CALVINO



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The focus of this essay is Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (1979) and Borges's "El inmortal" (1949).

In the last twenty years of literary criticism, the pair under comparison here has been one of the most frequented by scholars in narrative studies. It happens that, besides sharing a set of peculiar ideas about narrative, some of Borges's and Calvino's works also share the contours of a singular, outstanding, first-person narrator.

Michel Lafon reminds us: "Calvino découvre Borges en 1953 et dès lors ne cesse de le lire, de le saluer, de le citer, de le commenter" (11).¹

During the fifties, Calvino reads *Ficciones*; then, in 1962, he writes for the first time about Borges in the essay *La sfida del Labirinto*. In 1984, Borges is in Italy for a conference and Calvino takes the chance to dedicate to the Argentinian writer an essay that later on will be added to *Lezione Americane*, and that is today in *Perché leggere i classici*.

¹ "In 1953 Calvino discovers Borges and since then he never stops to read, greet, quote, and comment him" (My translation).

This famous essay, "Jorge Luis Borges," in which Calvino describes the fundamental elements of Borges's poetics, is the point of departure and continuous reference in those studies that aim to outline Borges's influence on Calvino (McLaughlin and Nava give two fine accounts of this influence):

In quel saggio (...) Calvino in sostanza sottolinea quattro elementi fondamentali dell'opera borgesiana: (1) la creazione di un mondo letterario governato dall'intelletto; (2) la sua economia dell'espressione -per Calvino Borges è il maestro dello scrivere bene; (3) l'importanza che Borges attribuisce alla parola scritta (...) (4) le sue speculazioni sul tempo, sull'infinito, e sulla ciclicità dei tempi. Denominatore comune di tutte queste qualità è l'intelletto e l'intelligenza dello scrittore. (McLaughlin 85)²

Borges changed Calvino's ways of writing, and even if during the Seventies the Italian writer was closer to semiotics and structuralism than to Borges's poetics, the influence of those four elements he outlined in his essay on Borges, was easily detectable in his works of those years. McLaughlin gives a wide account of the Borgesian themes at work in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*.

Both narratives are self-referential and rely mostly upon their first-person utterances for the conveyance of their metatextuality. Calvino's and Borges's first-person narrators share several narrative functions, they are manifold: they are in turn narrators, objects of narration, readers, and bearers of an authorial function. Both "I"s live the narrative adventure of their functions, and have in common a multiple frame: they are narrators aware of being the characters of several possible stories inside another story. Repetition is the privileged space of the two utterances' action. On these elements Borges and Calvino construct their textual discussion about the authorial figure and its function in the narrative.

² "In that essay (...) practically Calvino underlines the four fundamental elements of the Borgesian text: (1) the creation of a literary world governed by intellect; (2) his economy of expression --for Calvino, Borges is the master of writing well; (3) the importance that Borges confers upon the written word [...] (4) his speculations on time, on its cyclic movement, and on infinity. Intellect and the writer's intelligence are the common denominators of all these attributes" (My translation).



One of the distinctive marks of the contemporary novel is self-reference. The contemporary narrative trend to self-reference has led to the fictionalization of several elements of the narrative discourse such as the narrator, the narratee, the author, the reader, and the story. The metatext has become fiction. *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* fictionalizes its self-reference and the first-person narrative function becomes a character in itself.

Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore has a multiple narrative frame, a main plot spaced out by nine different stories, plus a tenth incipit generated by adjoining the nine titles. The protagonist of the story, the Reader, buys the new novel by Calvino *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*. After having read the first pages, he realizes the book in his hands is not Calvino's work. From that moment on, the Reader, together with the Other Reader (the female protagonist of the story), will desperately seek for *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, but will run into nine other different books that he will never succeed in reading completely. Chance, misfortune, and strange coincidences will always make him find the wrong book, the one that is not the continuation of the preceding, but a new story. The nine novels are esthetically conceived as open works; their plots have no closure, and this is the basic narrative motive that carries the main plot on, since the Reader, in his search for the endings, will pass from story to story so that the unraveling of the major plot is in his hands. On a metatextual level, the implications of this authorial choice make the balance of the narrative process rely strongly on the reader in terms of production of sense.

The reader is the first narrative element to be fictionalized. The novel begins with a mirroring act: "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought" (3).³ Here "you" appears to be the deictic pronoun referring to the extratextual reader who has just opened the novel. After the first page, the reader soon real-

³ "Stai per cominciare a leggere il nuovo romanzo *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* di Italo Calvino. Rilassati. Raccogliati. Allontana da te ogni altro pensiero" (*Se una notte* 3).

izes that the subject “you” is twofold and refers to both himself and a character that will soon turn out to be the Reader, the protagonist of the novel. Along the pages of the first chapter, “you” will be more and more the direct pronoun for the Reader, but will maintain its duality in order to permit the first-person narrator to address at the same time both the Reader and the narratee of the novel, whom I will refer to as the reader, with the lower-case “r.”

The Reader begins to read his new book *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*. The reader partakes of the scene by a mirroring act: he reads of the Reader reading a book. Are both readers looking at the same page? Not at all. The reader finds himself in front of a description: “The novel begins in a railway station, a locomotive huffs, steam from a piston covers the opening of the chapter, a cloud of smoke hides part of the first paragraph (...) The pages of the book are clouded [...]” (*If on a Winter's Night* 10).⁴

Who is speaking here? The same first-person narrator who began the novel is describing the scene, assuming the Reader's perspective. The Reader goes on with his reading, the narrator goes on describing, he tells us of the station, the coffee machine, the cat, the steam: “All these signs converge to inform us that this is a little provincial station, where everyone is immediately noticed” (11).⁵ Here “us” is the indirect pronoun referring to the narrator, who is reading in order to describe, the Reader and the reader. Further below, we have a second mirroring act, the narrator tells us: “I am the man who comes and goes between the bar and the telephone booth. Or, rather: that man is called “I” and you know nothing else about him” (11).⁶ From that moment on, the “I” subject narrates what it is doing, as a character, in the book the Reader is reading: “I hang up the receiver, I await the rattling flush, down through the metallic throat, I push the

⁴ “Il romanzo comincia in una stazione ferroviaria, sbuffa una locomotiva, uno sfiatore di stantuffo copre l'apertura del capitolo [...] Sono le pagine del libro ad essere appannate [...]” (*Se una notte* 11).

⁵ Tutti questi segni convergono nell'informare che si tratta d'una piccola stazione di provincia, dove chi arriva è subito notato” (*Se una notte* 12).

⁶ “Io sono l'uomo che va e viene tra il bar e la cabina telefonica. Ossia: quell'uomo si chiama «io» e non sai altro di lui [...]” (*Se una notte* 12).

glass door again (...)” The perspective does not change, the utterance’s point of view is always the Reader’s.

This self-referring narration leads to the following metatextual statement:

If you, reader, couldn’t help picking me out among the people getting off the train (...) this is simply because I am called “I” and this is the only thing you know about me, but this is reason enough for you to invest a part of yourself in the stranger “I”. Just as the author, since he has no intention of telling about himself, decided to call the character “I” as if to conceal him (...) still, by the very fact of writing “I” the author feels driven to put into this “I” a bit of himself, of what he feels or imagines he feels. (15)⁷

Now we know the subject “I” is a narrative function that can partly bear a reading function and partly an authorial function. The narrator of this first open story (the false *If on a Winter Night’s*), who is the same first-person narrator of *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*, develops his authorial function by the reading narrative strategy described above. Our “I” is not the author, but it is authoring when mediating between the Reader and the reader: he is describing/re-writing what the Reader reads. This reading narrative strategy is repeated for all the open novels. See, for example, the first lines of the sixth story “In a network of lines that enlase”: “The first sensation this book should convey is what I feel when I hear the telephone ring; I say “should” because I doubt that written words can give even a partial idea of it (...)” (132).⁸

⁷ “(...) se tu lettore non hai potuto fare a meno di distinguermi tra la gente che scendeva dal treno (...) è solo perché io mi chiamo «io» e questa è l’unica cosa che tu sai di me, ma già basta perché tu ti senta spinto a investire una parte di te stesso in questo io sconosciuto. Così come l’autore pur non avendo nessuna intenzione di parlare di se stesso, avendo deciso di chiamare «io» il personaggio quasi per sottrarlo alla vista (...) pure per il solo fatto di scrivere «io» egli si sente spinto a mettere in questo «io» un po’ di se stesso, di quel che lui sente o immagina di sentire” (*Se una notte* 16-17).

⁸ “La prima sensazione che dovrebbe trasmettere questo libro è ciò che io provo quando sento lo squillo del telefono, dico dovrebbe perché dubito che le parole scritte possano darne un’idea anche parziale (...)” (*Se una notte* 154).

Sometimes this self-referent narration undertakes the contours of a critical analysis: "But it is not impossible that this is the very effect I aimed at when I started narrating, or let's say it's a trick of the narrative art that I am trying to employ, a rule of discretion that consists in maintaining my position slightly below the narrative possibilities at my disposal" (109).

Cesare Segre gives an accurate description of the double narrative frame of *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, analyzing each element of the communication channel established between the author and the final reader, and the consequences implied in the duality of Calvino's "you." Although Segre recognizes that the real reader is three times removed from the narration, he refers to the first-person utterance in the novel as several "I"-characters who in turns narrate the ten unfinished stories. Besides these "I"-characters, he recognizes the narrator of the frame, the one who is responsible for the communication act with the narratee of *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*. This interpretation of Calvino's utterance fails in recognizing the shifts of narrative functions played on one only narrating subject. That same distance Segre recognizes between the narration and the narratee is modulated by the mediating and mirroring reading of the subject "I" that is one for all the stories. Here the "I"'s main feature is to be fictionalized as a function, not as a narrating character, or several narrating characters. The reading of Calvino's narrating utterance is an oblique act where the "I" reads of itself assuming the point of view of the fictionalized Reader as it were standing and looking at the same page over his shoulders. This perspective allows the mirroring act not to be a perfect, congruent reflection: hence, the narrative distances and the flexibility of the subject played on the pivotal reinterpretation of the text through reading.

For his narratological analysis, Segre uses the canonical tools the grammar of narrative puts at our disposal, he defines the utterance according to its relation with the narrated story; my analysis, although moving from the same departure point, takes a different turn abandoning the main path, since a rigid application of the narratological schemes not only fails in recognizing the flexibility of the narrating subject in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, but also depicts Calvino's and Borges's narrators as completely different,

whereas the two utterances, sharing the same multifunctionality, show to be similar and to be the strategic bearers of the same discourse about the authorial figure in narrative. The narratological status of Calvino's utterance, which is absent from the primary tale, but present in the other nine, which can address both the protagonist and the narratee of the primary frame, is not definable according to the schemes narratology has provided for it.⁹ Calvino's "I" is both a heterodiegetic narrator (if we consider its relation with the major frame, in which the utterance is a third-person narrator absent from the story it tells), and a homodiegetic narrator (if we consider its relation to the ten open novels, in which it is present as a character). This "I" subject is the utterance of a) an extradiegetic narrative (the primary frame from which it is absent as a character), and b) some intradiegetic narratives (the nine stories). But Genette tells us that to be intradiegetic, a narrative must be directed only to the internal addressees of it, while Calvino's "you" is manifold and addresses both the Reader, as the internal narratee, and the real reader. So, the very intradiegetic narration eludes the system. Furthermore, the fact that the narrating "I" wants us to consider it as a function -- the pronoun "I", as it has clearly stated -- makes it useless to define if the utterance is inside or outside any of the stories: it always is in and out at the same moment, mirroring itself while wearing different narrating masks but invading the narrative scene as a fictionalized function. When characterizing itself as a function, the first-person narrator blurs out the entirety Genette's system describing the utterance and its relation to the story. This could easily be considered as intentional on the authorial side. *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* has been published in 1979, when Structuralism was in its hay day. We know Calvino was deeply interested in Structuralist theories but was never really persuaded by them. Setting a narrative in the interstitial spaces of a structured narratological system, so to

⁹ The basic schemata still applied to the analysis of the narrator is the one provide by G. Genette in his *Figure*, with the variables added by W.C. Booth and G. Prince. The utterance is defined according to his relation to the narrated story (homodiegetic, heterodiegetic, or allodiegetic narrator) and to the different levels of it (extradiegetic, or intradiegetic narrative).

loosen the boundaries dividing the categories, was to him an easy game. Borges could not have such an intention, unless he was a foreseer of narrative grammar systems to come, which for many, he was indeed.

Like *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, Borges's "Inmortal" has a double narrative frame. A brief introduction, uttered by a third-person narrator, tells us that in 1929 a certain Princess of Lucinge bought Pope's *Iliade* from the antique dealer Joseph Cartaphilus. We have a description of Joseph Cartaphilus from the Princess's point of view, and we are informed that the man has died. A manuscript is found in the last volume of Pope's *Iliade*, we have no certainty about its author until the end of the story, when a postscript tells us that the narration is attributed to Cartaphilus, but, according to a scholar, it could be apocryphal. By then, anyway, we have learned that whatever signature at the end of the manuscript would be meaningless in itself; we shall see why. Cartaphilus, so we suppose, remembers to have lived since when Diocletian was Emperor. He was then "Marcus Flaminius Rufus, military tribune of one of the legions of Rome" ("El inmortal" 186).¹⁰ Having not found glory in any battle, Rufus went in search of the City of the Immortals. We come to know along the story, from what he remembers, all the "I"s he has been, all the narrating subjects and the authorial figures he has interpreted.

The "I" subject in Borges's works is a strong bearer of the authorial function. In "Borges and I" we read: "It's Borges, the other one, that things happen to (...) I live, I allow myself to live, so that Borges can spin out his literature, and that literature is my justification" (324).

Unlike Calvino's "I," Borges's first-person narrator still has a strong filial relation to his extratextual creator. Borges used to say that he did not have any character in his stories, he just imagined himself in different situations.

In his essay on Borges, collected in *Perché leggere i classici*, Calvino states that one of the best invention Borges has made is the invention of himself as a narrator, renouncing the role of an original au-

¹⁰ " --yo, Marco Flamínio Rufo, tribuno militar de una de las legiones de Roma--" ("El inmortal" 12).

thor: "In order to write briefly, Borges' crucial invention, which was also what allowed him to invent himself as a writer (...) was to pretend that the book he wanted to write had already been written, written by someone else, by an unknown invented author (...) and then to describe, summarise or review that hypothetical book" (*Why read the Classics?* 239).¹¹

We may say that in "El inmortal," on the metatextual level the "I" represents the authorial figure, as Kadir writes: "What we read in this frame is what the narrator has authored. Authorial function and narrative utterance coalesce, become congruent and consonant" (Kadir 44).

As in Calvino, Borges's "I" loses its subjectivity, its reference to an extratextual author to become the ever lasting anonymous "I" of every and each narration, born "by the textured spaces of incunabula as traces of what has been termed by one of Borges's most astute students – Michel Foucault – "authorial function" (Kadir 40).

For what concerns "El inmortal" as a self-referent discourse about writing and the founding elements of narration, I rely on and refer to Kadir's analysis and conclusions. Here I will just recall that the labyrinthine spaces of the City of the Immortals are a representation of "the graphic scene and its polytropic labyrinths" (Kadir 48).

Both in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* and in "El inmortal" the dissolution of the "I" as a referent into an extratextual author happens through a process of mirroring repetition: in Calvino's novel the reading narrative strategy is repeated throughout the entire narration. In "El inmortal," the plot itself serves as a metaphor for mirroring and repetition, every element of the story is repeated to the loss of its textual significance, to become the metatextual referent for a disguised discourse about writing itself:

For several days I wandered without finding water-or one huge day multiplied by the sun, thirst, and the fear of thirst (...) I could see fortifications, arches, frontispieces, and forums (...) A hundred or more

¹¹ "Per scrivere breve, l'invenzione fondamentale di Borges, che fu anche l'invenzione di se stesso come narratore (...) e' stato fingere che il libro che voleva scrivere fosse già stato scritto da un altro, da un ipotetico autore sconosciuto (...) e descrivere, riassumere, recensire questo libro ipotetico" (*Perché leggere* 295).

irregular niches like my own riddled the mountain and the valley (...) From those wretched holes, from the niches emerged naked men with gray skin and neglected beards. (185)¹²

I descended the ladder and made my way through a chaos of squalid galleries to a vast, indistinct circular chamber. Nine doors opened into that cell-like place (...) the ninth led through another maze to a second circular chamber identical to the first. I'm not certain how many chambers there were; my misery and anxiety multiplied them. (187)¹³

The same process of repetition is applied to the subject "I." After having found the waters that give immortality, Rufus is finally enlightened: "Among the immortals, on the other hand, every act (every thought) is the echo of others that preceded it in the past, with no visible beginning, and the faithful presage of others that will repeat it in the future, *ad vertiginem*" (192).¹⁴

Rufus remembers to have been many "I"s since the beginning of literature. He realizes that the immortality of the textual subject "I" is paradoxically gained only by the death of subjectivity, the nominal subjectivity referring to an author: "I have been Homer; soon, like Ulysses, I shall be Nobody; soon, I shall be all men -- I shall be dead" ("The Immortal" 194).¹⁵

¹² "Varios días erré sin encontrar agua, o un solo enorme día multiplicado por el sol, por la sed y por el temor de la sed (...) Vi muros, arcos, frontispicios y foros (...) Un centenar de nichos irregulares, análogas al mío, surcaba la montaña y el valle (...) de esos mezquinos agujeros (y de los nichos) emergían hombres de piel gris, de barba negligente, desnudos" ("El inmortal" 10-11).

¹³ "Bajé; por un caos de sórdidas galerías llegué a una vasta cámara circular, apenas visible. Había nueve puertas en aquél sótano (...) la novena (a través de otro laberinto) daba a una Segunda cámara circular, igual a la primera. Ignoro el número total de las cámaras; mi desventura y mi ansiedad las multiplicaron" ("El inmortal" 13).

¹⁴ "Entre los Inmortales, en cambio, cada acto (y cada pensamiento) es el eco de otros que en el pasado lo antecedieron, sin principio visible, o del fiel presagio de otros que en el futuro lo repetirán hasta el vertigo" ("El inmortal" 21).

¹⁵ "Yo he sido Homero; en breve; seré Nadie, como Ulises; en breve, seré todos: estaré muerto" ("El inmortal" 25).

The immortals, the troglodytes Rufus meets near their City, “naked men with grey skin and neglected beards” (185), despite their plurality, act like one, like a single subject:

“The Troglodytes, childlike in their barbarity, helped me neither survive nor die. In vain did I plead with them to kill me (...) For my departure from the barbarous village I chose the most public of times, sunset, when almost all the men emerged from their holes and crevices in the earth and gazed out unseeingly toward the west” (186).¹⁶

Two or three of these men will follow Rufus toward the City of the Immortals, but just one will wait for him to come back, the one he will discover to be Homer. When we finally learn that Rufus himself has been Homer, we realize that the troglodytes were but reflected images of one only subject “I”, just like Calvino’s reflected “I” in the open stories of his novel.

Calvino, perhaps mindful of “El inmortal,” makes his ghostwriter Marana write:

What does the name of an author on the jacket matter? Let us move forward in thought to three thousand years from now. Who knows which books from our period will be saved, and who knows which authors’ name will be remembered? Some books will remain famous but will be considered anonymous works, as for us the epic of Gilgamesh (...) or perhaps all the surviving books will be attributed to a single, mysterious author, like Homer. (*If on a Winter’s Night* 101)¹⁷

The author goes even further and reinterprets Borges’s story and its immortals as one subject. Here is the summary of a letter by Marana:

¹⁶ “Los trogloditas, infantiles en la barbarie, no me ayudaron a sobrevivir o a morir (...) Par alejarme de la bárbara aldea elegí la más pública de las horas, la declinación de la tarde, cuando casi todos los hombres emergen de las grietas y de los pozos y miran el poniente, sin verlo” (“El inmortal” 11-12).

¹⁷ “Che importa il nome dell’autore in copertina? Trasportiamoci col pensiero di qui a tremila anni. Chissà quail libri della nostra epoca si saranno salvati, e di chissà quali autori si ricorderà ancora il nome. Ci saranno libri che resteranno famosi ma che saranno considerati opere anonime come per noi l’epopea di Gilgamesh (...) o forse tutti i libri superstiti saranno attribuiti a un unico autore misterioso, come Omero” (*Se una notte* 116).

Another letter (...) tells of an old Indian known as the Father of the Stories, a man of immemorial age, blind and illiterate, who uninterruptedly tells stories that take place in countries and times completely unknown to him (...) The old Indian, according to some, is the universal source of narrative material (...) according to others, a seer (...) according to still others the reincarnation of Homer, of the story teller of the *Arabian Nights* (...) but there are those who reply that Homer has no need of metempsychosis, since he never died and has continued through the millennia living and composing, the author, besides the couple of poems usually attributed to him, also of many of the most famous narratives known to man. (*If on a Winter's Night* 117)¹⁸

Calvino's "I" embraces Rufus's experience and conclusions about the labyrinthine space of writing (a space with no departure point and no centeredness) and the refraction of the subjectivity. Here is his first-person narrator in "In a network of lines that intersects": "It's my image that I want to multiply, but not out of narcissism or megalomania, as could all too easily be believed: on the contrary, I want to conceal, in the midst of so many illusory ghosts of myself, the true me who makes them move" (*If on a Winter's Night* 162-3).¹⁹

If read in its metatextual meaning, this statement is obviously paradoxical: no true me can be concealed in any "I" narrative function.

This open story begins with a Borgesian touch of saturation and stratification of meanings for each word, the only difference is that in Calvino the connotations are clearly unfolded: "Speculate, reflect: every thinking activity implies mirrors for me. (...) I cannot concen-

¹⁸ Un'altra lettera (...) vi si racconta d'un vecchio indio detto il «Padre dei Racconti», longevo d'età immemorabile, cieco e analfabeta, che narra ininterrottamente storie che si svolgono in paesi e in tempi a lui completamente sconosciuti. (...) Il vecchio indio sarebbe secondo alcuni la fonte universale della materia narrativa (...) secondo altri, un veggente (...) secondo altri ancora sarebbe la reincarnazione di Omero, dell'autore delle Mille e una notte (...) ma c'è chi obietta che Omero non ha affatto bisogno della metempsicosi, non essendo mai morto e avendo continuato attraverso i millenni a vivere e a comporre: autore, oltre che del paio di poemi che gli si attribuiscono di solito, di gran parte delle più note narrazioni scritte che si conoscono" (*Se una notte* 135-6).

¹⁹ È la mia immagine che voglio moltiplicare, ma non per narcisismo o megalomania come si potrebbe troppo facilmente credere; al contrario, per nascondere, in mezzo a tanti fantasmi illusori di me stesso, il vero io che li fa muovere" (*Se una notte* 189).

trate except in the presence of reflected images, as if my soul needed a model to imitate every time it wanted to employ its speculative capacity. (The adjective here assumes all its meanings: I am at once a man who thinks and a businessman, and a collector of optical instruments as well)" (161).²⁰

Like Borges, Calvino denies both a privileged author and a departure point for textuality. Concerning Borges, in this regard Kadir writes:

Borges (...) strikes a dual blow at the mystification of a privileged centeredness. First, he subverts the notion of an illusionary, primal self – a privileged subject, authorial or otherwise. Second, he undermines the notion of an equally illusionary primal origin – a locus of pre-scriptive ontos, a Pascalian, ubiquitous center at a transcendental point of "zero" which authorized subsequent desultory discourse and textuality. (58)

Calvino seems to follow the same narrative path:

Getting rid of the suitcase was to be the first condition for re-establishing the previous situation: previous to everything that happened afterward. (...) I would like to erase the consequences of certain events and restore an initial condition. But every moment of my life brings with it an accumulation of new facts, and each of these new facts brings with it its consequences; so the more I seek to return to the zero moment from which I set out, the further I move away from it (...) . (15)²¹

²⁰ Speculare, riflettere: ogni attività del pensiero mi rimanda agli specchi. (...) Sarà forse per questo che io per pensare ho bisogno di specchi: non so concentrarmi se non in presenza di immagini riflesse, come se la mia anima avesse bisogno d'un modello da imitare ogni volta che vuol mettere in atto la sua virtù speculative. (Il vocabolo qui assume tutti i suoi significati: io sono insieme un uomo che pensa e un uomo d'affari, oltre che un collezionista d'apparecchi ottici)" (*Se una notte* 187).

²¹ "Il disfarmi della valigia doveva essere la prima condizione per ristabilire la situazione di prima: di prima che succedesse tutto quello che è successo in seguito. (...) vorrei cancellare le conseguenze di certi avvenimenti e restaurare una condizione iniziale. Ma ogni momento della mia vita porta con sé un'accumulazione di fatti nuovi e ognuno di questi fatti nuovi porta con sé le sue conseguenze, cosicché più cerco di tornare al momento zero da cui sono partito più me ne allontano (...)" (*Se una notte* 17-18).

Whereas in *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* the fragmentation of the "I" and the construction of a plot - textuality - are generated by a reading act, in "El inmortal" that generative reading is remembrance, an act of the memory. "El inmortal" begins with "As I recall" and Cartaphilus goes on in his narration either recalling or not recalling.

The distance, which in Calvino is spatial and is modulated by reading, is in Borges temporal and modulated by memory. Borges's "I," like Calvino's, bears a reading function; Rufus/Cartaphilus re-reads and reinterprets his story after one year from the first writing (this is the moment when, despite his unreliable memory, he realizes that what he wrote had been written by one being at least two: Homer and Rufus). Furthermore, the "I" narrating the postscript tells us of another rereading and reinterpretation of the same story.

We see how, despite their narratological status, the first-person narrators of *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* and of "El inmortal" are alike, if we consider their functions in the stories they narrate, not only their uttering positions. From a narratological point of view, these two utterances are completely different, Borges's "I" does not pose the same problems as Calvino's. In "El inmortal" we have a narrator of the manuscript, who is a homodiegetic narrator; a narrator of the introduction, who is a third person narrator, and a narrator of the post-script, who is a first-person narrator with an unclear referee - we do not know who he is. If we should stop our technical analysis of the utterance at this point, we could never get to the conclusion that the unclear referee might be Cartaphilus/every "I." This is not an ideological or thematical conclusion not pertaining to the grammar of narrative, as many narratologists could argue: this status of the narrator, whose function shifts from the production side of the narrative process (by its authoring function) to the fruition side of it (by its reading function) still pertains to the study of the structure of the narrative discourse.

The interpretative function the two examined utterances share place them in a strong mediating position between the stories they narrate and their narratees, a position strengthened by distance as discerned by Federico Pellizzi. Pellizzi recognizes distance as a peculiar structural figure of the new narrative genre that, according to

him, Calvino and Borges have created. He calls this genre “racconto romanizzato” ‘novelised tale’ (291):

«Distanza», termine ricorrente soprattutto nella produzione saggistica dei due autori, ha un significato profondamente ambiguo: nel momento stesso in cui stabilisce una separatezza, una dislocazione di spazi, ne postula anche la connettibilità, la possibile affezione reciproca. Distanza ha quindi un significato intimamente «dialogico» che (...) indica la possibilità, attraverso un salto cognitivo ed esistenziale non privo di perdite e di riduzioni, di assumere il punto di vista dell’altro. (294)²²

This is what happens in the case of *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore*’s narrating “I,” which assumes the Reader’s point of view provoking in the real reader, through distance, a sense of loss, and this is what happens in the case of Rufus/Cartaphilus’s narration that moves from an uncertain memory, thus generating a sense of loss.

To both authors, the subject “I,” far from being a reliable point of reference, is the playful means by which they write and discuss their literature from a distance. That same distance allows them to dialogue and play with their reader and invite him to decode the deeper meaning of a story, as in the case of Borges, or to take part in its writing, as in the case of Calvino.

Borges and Calvino share the continuous game with a paradoxical situation where the “I,” sentenced to death, must live to keep on narrating its dying act. We have the eternally repeated exhibition of a dying subject that never dies: “I live, I allow myself to live, so that Borges can spin out his literature, and that literature is my justification. I willingly admit that he has written a number of sound pages, but those pages will not save *me*, perhaps because the good in them no longer belongs to any individual, not even to that other man, but rather to language itself, or to tradition” (“Borges and I” 324).

²² “«Distance», a word that occurs especially in the essay production of the two authors, has a deeply ambiguous meaning: at the same time it establishes a separation, a dislocation of spaces, and affirms their connectivity, their possible reciprocal affection. Thus, distance has a profoundly “dialogic” meaning that (...) indicates the possibility of taking the other’s point of view by a cognitive and existential jump not without losses and reductions” (My translation).

Of course, in the case of Borges and Calvino language and tradition cannot but let the "I" live: the reading/interpretative function of the examined utterances locates them in a crucial mediating position without which narrative would be impossible since, once the author and the text have been denied in terms of originality (every text is a re-writing and no original author exists), the "I" subject becomes indispensable to the production of narrative as an interpreter of what has already been written.

By their first-person narrators, whose main tendency is to jump out of the story they are telling and out of that telling itself, Borges and Calvino expand their fictitious worlds, web-like, into the realm of the only reality they acknowledge: a written/read reality.

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