Calvino's Combinational Creativity

Calvino's Combinational Creativity

Edited by

Elizabeth Scheiber

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Calvino's Combinational Creativity

Edited by Elizabeth Scheiber

This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-8710-2
ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-8710-6

For Joel
who always believes in me

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

> I wanted to tell you of my fondness for geometrical forms, for symmetries, for numerical series, for all that is combinatory, for numerical proportions... (Calvino 1988, 68)

In his essay "Exactitude" from *Six Memos for a New Millennium*, Italo Calvino openly states his fondness for the topic that inspired this volume: creating combinations. Whether combining literature with math or science or creating intertexts in order to dialogue with authors past and present, Calvino infused his works with other sources to enrich his story and characters as well as the language itself and to explore the limits of literary form. While other authors examine their lives and look to the physical world for artistic stimulation, the Ligurian author locates topics of artistic inspiration in literary or scientific ideas. This can be seen in *Cosmicomics* (1965), in which the narrator Qfwfq purports to have lived through scientific processes that humans could never have experienced, like the Big Bang, and *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979), which contains a series of opening chapters of fictitious novels, each written in a different style. This latter could be said to be a tour de force of post-modern pastiche and commentary on literature and the book market. Even Calvino's first novel *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* (1947), inspired by his experiences as a *partigiano* during the Second World War, is hardly a realistic depiction of his experiences.

Six Memos is not the only time Calvino expressed a formal interest in combinations. His 1967 lecture entitled "Cybernetics and Ghosts," as its Italian subtitle "Appunti sulla narrativa come processo combinatorio" ("notes on narrative as a combinatory process") suggests, is an exploration of combinations in literary creation. Here, he discusses the elements of a story in varied combinations to produce meaning and knowledge. As he comments on oral tales as the first forms of narrative and contemplates the possibility of a writing machine, Calvino pinpoints the importance of combinatorial play in uncovering the unconscious. As artists and poets experiment in their respective media, one of their many combinations "becomes charged with an unexpected meaning or unforeseen effect which the conscious mind would not have arrived at deliberately: an unconscious meaning, in fact, or at least a premonition of an unconscious meaning"

(Calvino 1986, 20). For him the "power of modern literature lies in its willingness to give a voice to what has remained unexpressed in the social or individual unconscious" (ibid., 19), and he goes on to call literature "a combinatorial game that pursues the possibilities implicit in its own material, independent of the personality of the poet, but it is a game that at a certain point is invested with the unexpected meaning..." (ibid., 22). Calvino conceived of writing as a means of learning about the world, and combinations play a role in a "combinatorial mathematical game" which "can work to challenge to understand the world or as a dissuasion from understanding it" (ibid., 26). Teresa De Lauretis elaborates further on how combinational creativity is a means of learning about the world: "By constantly dismembering given sociocultural systems and recomposing their fragments into new universes of meaning, by self-consciously destroying the forms of his fiction and reutilizing their elements to propose new visions of possible worlds, Calvino suggests that literature, like myth and like science, is an ongoing and dialectical process of interpretation of reality" (De Lauretis 1975, 231).

Calvino's interest in a form of combinational play is especially apparent in the works he created after the lecture "Cybernetics and Ghosts". As Anna Botta has noted the author's "concern for structural-linguistic permutations" after his encounter with the *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* (Oulipo) and states that "Calvino's last works are all organized around a code that the author imposes as a rigid constraint on his narrative material" (Botta 1997, 86). Calvino of this later period does not completely abandon the fabulist that wrote *The Cloven Viscount* (1952) and *The Baron in the Trees* (1957) because the childlike wonder of simple tales still plays a role in the later narratives. Borrowing from Vladimir Propp's structural analysis of fairy tales and implementing constraints inspired by the Oulipo, Calvino's later novels like *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1969) and *Invisible Cities* (1972) show the author's interest in mathematical proportions and permutability, in exploring variations on a theme.

Before examining more of Calvino's work, we should pause to flesh out further what constitutes *combinational creativity*. First and foremost, it should be understood that it is not an inferior form of creativity. In *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms*, Margaret Boden defines creativity as "the ability to come up with ideas and artefacts that are *new, surprising and valuable*" (Boden 2004, 1, author's emphasis), and she conceives of creativity as an "aspect of human intelligence in general" rather than some special faculty (ibid., 1). Within her discussion, she locates three types of creativity: combinational, exploratory, and transformational. The first

type, combinational, consists of "making unfamiliar combinations of familiar ideas... the novel combination requires a rich store of knowledge in the person's mind, and many different ways of moving around within it" (ibid., 3). In order for the product of this type of creativity to be valuable, "it has to have some point" (ibid., 3). The second type of creativity involves the exploration of what the author calls "conceptual spaces", defined as "structured styles of thought" or "any disciplined way of thinking that is familiar" to a group. These are not personal ways of thinking but rather stem from a culture (ibid., 4). As far as concerns this volume, one conceptual space is the various forms of poetry or prose with their conventions and rules. Boden sees the value of this type of creativity in its ability to "enable someone to see possibilities they hadn't glimpsed before. They may even start to ask *just what* limits and *just what* potential this style of thinking has" (ibid., 4, author's emphasis). According to Boden, "[a]ll professional artists and scientists do this sort of thing [explore a structured conceptual space]" (ibid., 5). The final type of creativity involves recognizing the limits of a conceptual space and somehow going beyond them:

> The deepest cases of creativity involve someone's thinking something which, with respect to the conceptual spaces in their minds, they *couldn't* have thought before. The supposedly impossible idea can come about only if the creator changes the pre-existing style in some way. It must be tweaked, even radically transformed, so that thoughts are now possible which previously (within the untransformed space) were literally inconceivable (ibid., 6, author's emphasis).

Although this volume bears the title *Calvino's Combinational Creativity*, we are not only interested in Boden's first type of creativity. In his writing, Calvino tests the plasticity of forms and words to find where the limits lie. By borrowing images, concepts, characters, and the like, Calvino is not simply juxtaposing different elements to create a new literary object but employing them as a means to explore conceptual spaces like the short story and the fable. In addition, by borrowing images, forms, or even specific turns of phrases from other authors, Calvino implicitly enters into dialogue with them. These intertexts are clues to the reader of Calvino's position vis-à-vis specific ideas and poetics, whether he accepted or rejected them or merely admired them. Therefore, this volume will examine not only how Calvino *combines* concepts, symbols, and theories, but also how he *explores* existing forms and languages and ask to what extent he *transforms* literature.

Calvino's writing shows that he has contemplated creativity at length, and in the essay "Visibility" from *Six Memos*, he described his creative

process. For him, creativity begins with an *image* without entertaining what he calls "theoretical questions" (Calvino 1988, 88). Calvino does not describe the origin of this image, but he does state that he does not concern himself with defining it with words in the early phases of conceiving a work. Rather, he looks for "an image that for some reason strikes [him] as charged with meaning, even if [he] cannot formulate this meaning in discursive or conceptual terms" (ibid., 88-9). As examples, he mentions that he started with the image of a man cut in two halves and a boy who climbs trees. In a second phase, Calvino describes an associative process as he starts to develop his idea:

> Around each image others come into being, forming a field of analogies, symmetries, confrontations. Into the organization of this material, which is no longer purely visual but also conceptual, there now enters my deliberate intent to give order and sense to the development of the story (ibid., 89).

The final stage consists of the hard work of shaping a story around the associations: "Finally, the written word little by little comes to dominate the field. From now on it will be the writing that guides the story toward the most felicitous verbal expression, and the visual imagination has no choice but to tag along" (ibid., 89). *Cosmicomics* differed in that Calvino's point of departure was scientific language. From the written description of a field of science, he says he would allow the words to lead to a "dreamlike fantasy" (ibid., 90). To summarize, Calvino's early inspiration escapes any kind of rational process. He allows an image to come to him, and around that image, he gathers other images and language. His own intent begins to seep in, gathering speed as he enters a phase of writing:

> In short, my procedure aims at uniting the spontaneous generation of images and the intentionality of discursive thought. Even when the opening gambit is played by the visual imagination, putting its own intrinsic logic to work, it finds itself sooner or later caught in a web where reasoning and verbal expression impose their logic (ibid., 90).

Although the early phases of inspiration seem to escape rational control, the reader should not conclude that the image of which Calvino conceives lies wholly outside logic and reason. For one thing, authorial intent lies in the *selection* of an image as a starting point. We cannot be sure how many images come to an author, how many images or scientific theories he rejected in locating the one that inspired him to pursue a narrative and a language to express the initial impetus. Second, many of these images may themselves have stemmed from works of literature he had read. Therefore, as we examine Calvino's creativity, we should be

aware of possible influences at all phases of the creative process, from the initial inspiration through the associative process all the way to the discursive practice of shaping a story.

It is a truism that the best authors are great readers, and no one was a better reader than Calvino. He enjoyed various genres and corresponded with the great authors of his time. His articles and correspondence show his intense scrutiny of literature from other periods and their contribution to literature, and his *Six Memos* is a testament to the advice he would give future writers to guide them in their literary creation. In short, he ingested all manner of words, images, and symbols and not only enjoyed them as a reader but processed and discussed them in letters, articles, and talks. All of this material served as nutrients for his own literary creation, as inspiration at all levels of his creative process.

Turning to his letters to seek out areas of creative inspiration may seem unnecessary since Calvino's inspiration did not derive from his personal life. However, his biography matters insofar as it informs us of what he was reading and thinking at specific points in his life. In fact, his published letters reveal less about his personal circumstances and more about his literary musings concerning individual work by other authors and even of his own work, all written with informality, humor, and irony that entertains as it informs. As the editor of his correspondence, Michael Wood says, in the letters "we encounter Calvino the voracious reader: as a young man catching up with Ibsen and Rilke and what seems to be the whole of western literature, paying attention to contemporary Italian writers of all stripes; as a prolific reviewer, reading books to review immediately, ...as a man who spent most of his adult life working as an editor in a publishing house" (Wood 2013 ix). Examining Calvino's correspondence, one observes the extent to which the author's life was saturated with reading.

Sampling just a few of his letters from his youth, while he was a student in college dabbling in writing through the publication of his first novel *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* (1947), Calvino's general contemplation of literature is evident and one can note the various ways his everyday life was filled with literary musings. In 1942, writing his friend Eugenio Scalfari, Calvino writes of his influences: "...my favorite authors, my only models, are those who took poetry as their only means and end: Rostand, D'Annunzio, Benelli. Others who influenced my work directly or indirectly are Ibsen, whom I intuited rather than understood, and Pirandello who cannot but influence us who come after him" (ibid., 10). In 1943, once again writing to Scalfari, he describes his growth as a writer who is beginning to move away from the influence of other authors:

"I'm beginning to develop a style, which maybe is a good sign: after having imitated others so much, I can now afford to imitate myself a bit" (ibid., 24). In a letter to Elio Vittorini written in 1947, Calvino speaks of wanting to write a piece on Hemingway which would also include Malraux and Koestler while also citing Sartre, all with the purpose of "clarify[ing] as it went down this route the meanings of the terms 'crisis' and 'decadence' and 'revolution', articulating a *morality within commitment*, a *freedom within responsibility*, since these seem to me to be the only morality and freedom possible" (ibid., 41, author's emphasis). In his letter to Cesare Pavese, he writes: "*Fra sole donne (Among Women Only*) is a novel that I immediately decided I would not like. I'm still among that opinion even though I read it with great interest and enjoyment" (ibid., 45). There follows a lengthy analysis in which he not only demonstrates his thoughtful consideration of this work, but he has compared it to other works by Pavese. In the course of his critique, he refers to Proust, Radiguet, Fitzgerald and Zola. As one final example of the ways Calvino shows his involvement with text in these early letters, he alludes to a famous line of Montale in a letter to Valentino Gerratana in 1950 as he discusses guilt he feels with regards to Pavese's suicide: "Now I can't get rid of the remorse that perhaps even from a conversation with me he might have had—by pure chance, maybe—an idea that would have borne fruit, a discovery of 'the broken mesh in the net'" (ibid., 70).

While there has been a great deal of critical attention to Calvino's work, there remains much to be studied, especially with regard to the extent to which his style intersects other writers' ideas, languages, and poetics. Because of his creative and critical output, he has inspired many authors, but he was also inspired by others. As a public intellectual, he wrote and spoke at length about literary creation and its uses. His work for Einaudi starting in 1947 put him in contact with other writers, and perhaps no one had as much interaction with some of the great authors of his time as he had, interaction which included letters in which he thoughtfully commented on the works of Cesare Pavese, Natalia Ginzburg, Elsa Morante, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Umberto Eco and many, many others. Collecting folk tales, interviewing Hemingway, writing reviews of literature, commenting on journals of his time, organizing his literary thoughts into articles: Calvino's life was full of art and literature and theory, all of which served to inspire his creative output. Olga Ragusa summarized his career as a life of the mind:

> When he is not telling stories, he functions as an intellectual, sometimes as a scholar: up-to-date on new works and ideas, in touch with what is being thought, written and read, engaged in the life of the mind not as

> introspection and meditation but as activity, productivity and performance (Ragusa 1983, 196).

Exploring Calvino's relationship to combinational creativity was the inspiration for a panel at the conference of the Northeast Modern Language Association (NeMLA) in 2015 to consider how Calvino incorporates the languages, images, and literary techniques of other authors or theories into his work in order to shed light on his literary philosophy. The present collection of articles resulting from the conference does not claim to be an exhaustive examination of the topic of Calvino's creativity or indeed of the influences on his writing. Rather, it represents a contribution to Calvino studies as it points to new lines of inquiry.

The volume opens with Natalie Berkman's "Reading Calvino Reading Ariosto" which examines the numerous mathematical and theoretical influences of *Il castello dei destini incrociati*, inspired no doubt by the intellectual trends in Paris while Calvino was living there. By reducing the basic elements of literature into basic components represented by the individual tarot cards in a deck, the author of the *Fiabe italiane* offers his own literary interpretation of Vladmir Propp's formalist analysis of folktales. The finite number of cards in a tarot deck appear to indicate a lack of faith in the originality of literary production, however the combinations thereof produce a seemingly infinite (though mathematically calculable) structure of tales for the reader of the novel to reconstruct as he wishes. The central cross holding the structure together is Ariosto's Renaissance classic, *Orlando Furioso*, a crucial text for Italian literary history as well as for Calvino himself, whose fascination with this epic poem reappears at several key moments in his literary and editorial work.

In her study of *Palomar*, Sara Ceroni proposes to reconsider the commonplace argument about the text's postmodernist nature in light of the concept of epiphany, associated with modernism. Ceroni's article, "Epiphanic Illuminations: Rewriting the Observatory in Italo Calvino's *Palomar* and Julio Cortázar's *Prosa del Observatorio*" shows how Calvino derives his ideas about science and poetry from Cortázar by employing a similar discourse on the observatory.

Two chapters will focus on Italo Calvino's *Cosmicomics* and *T Zero*, approaching the collection of short stories from different perspectives. In "Italo Calvino and Science Fiction: A Little Explored Reading," Elio Baldi considers Calvino's appropriation of the conventions of science fiction in order to elucidate what critics have noted as a shift in the author's poetics. His article explores the reasons Calvino rejected the label of science fiction while being inspired by aspects. In my own article, "The Buried Harbor of the Universe: Poetic Inspiration in Calvino's Cosmicomics," I

will show ways that Calvino borrowed images from the Italian authors Gadda, D'Annunzio, Ungaretti, and Montale in the humorously portrayed scientific processes. The big bang of "Tutto in un punto" and the appearance of color on earth in "Senza colori" actually served as a starting point for the author's meditations on poetics.

In "*Lo stile della complessità:* Italo Calvino lettore di Carlo Emilio Gadda" Cecilia Benaglia scrutinizes Calvino as a reader of Gadda. Placing Calvino's critical interest of the author of *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* (*That Awful Mess on Via Merulana*) at a crucial juncture in his career, she examines the question of stylistics not only as a means to poetic expression but also to ways of knowing.

In the final chapter, Sebastiano Bazzichetto proposes an examination of similarities and differences between Calvino and his contemporary Umberto Eco in "Calvino and Eco's Postmodernism: The Crossed Destinies of the Novel Before." Proposing that both authors produced works that fit into the Neo-Baroque strand of postmodernism, this chapter will explore the authors' use of simile, metaphor, and emblem as ways of constructing literature and metaphorical labyrinths to be explored by readers.

About twenty-five years before the writing of this present volume, Ragusa posed a question in the conclusion of her study of Calvino's *career*: "What are the chances of survival for an oeuvre so embedded in contemporaneity, so consequent in its denial of the weight and conditioning of the past, so successful in achieving freshness and novelty for its every new component?" (Ragusa 1983, 200). The articles in this work propose that Calvino continues to interest readers of today and his works continue to amuse and inspire as we move further into the 21st century that he addressed in his *Six Memos.* Calvino's work continues to fascinate and inspire critical interest in part because of what it teaches us about literature and the relationship readers and writers have to the art of writing. The author's love and respect for other authors is apparent not only in his letters and articles but throughout his literature as well.

Works Cited

Boden, Margaret. 2004. *The Creative Mind: Myths and Mechanisms*. New York: Routledge.

Botta, Anna. 1997. "Calvino and the Oulipo: An Italian Ghost in the Combinatory Machine?" *MLN.* 112.1.

Calvino, Italo. 1988. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

—. 1986. *The Uses of Literature*. Translated by Patrick Creagh. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

De Lauretis, Teresa. 1975. "The Shape of the World: Report on Structuralism and Semiotics in Italy." *Books Abroad*. 49.2.

Ragusa, Olga. 1983. "Italo Calvino: The Repeated Conquest of Contemporaneity." *Literature Today*. 57.2.

Wood, Michael (ed). 2013. *Italo Calvino: Letters 1941-1985*. Translated by Martin McLaughlin. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

CHAPTER ONE

READING CALVINO READING ARIOSTO[1]

NATALIE BERKMAN

In the first chapter of Italo Calvino's 1979 novel, *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*[2], you (the real reader and not the protagonist, also designated as "you"[3]) believe you are finally reading the title novel, the book that the reader within the book has also just begun. However, as often happens with Calvino, it is not quite that simple. The chapter seems to be the beginning of a book, an "exercice de style" à la Raymond Queneau, in which the real author (Calvino) writes a fake beginning of a book that does not exist. You—the real reader, and not the reader within the book—certainly understood this postmodern gimmick before you even opened the novel. This book makes the real reader (still you) believe you are reading the beginning of ten novels of different genres, but the real story is rather that of the other "you" (or rather "tu"), a protagonist who wants to continue his first reading that is constantly interrupted. As the text shifts its perspective from addressing the reader within the book to reproducing the book that this reader is reading, you realize that this chapter of "Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore" (the book within the book and not the book you are reading) isn't a real book at all. Rather, it is the reading of "tu", told by an "I" who is not necessarily the author of this book, nor of the book that you are reading.

If this revelation seems confusing, it is probably because the relationship between reading and writing is blurred for Calvino as well. As with *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, Calvino's literary writing often demonstrates a particular attention to the parallel activity of reading. The reader might be inclined to ask: what is Calvino reading? Calvino was an avid reader throughout his life, so focusing uniquely on the presence of one author, Renaissance poet Ludovico Ariosto, restricts this vast topic to a more manageable corpus. In 1966, Calvino wrote an introduction to the work of Ariosto for Einaudi, the publishing house for which he worked throughout his career. Three years later, when Calvino was living in Paris, this interest for the work of Ariosto would find its culmination in *Orlando*

Furioso di Ludovico Ariosto Raccontato da Italo Calvino. Difficult to classify, this work seems to be a reading guide, composed of a selection of the original text and a partial prose translation and explication by Calvino. At the same time, Calvino was working on his *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (1973), a novel that retells two tales from *Orlando Furioso* as well as other classic stories. A study of these three successive apparitions of Ariosto will allow for a greater understanding of the importance of reading in Calvino's writing.

I. Calvino and Einaudi

> Ho lavorato molto nell'editoria, nei momenti liberi scrivevo tanta di quella roba da cui poi venivano fuori dei libri, ma il massimo del tempo della mia vita l'ho dedicato ai libri degli altri, non ai miei. (Ribatti 2009, 17)

As Calvino said himself, the greater part of his professional life was spent reading through his work with Einaudi, a career that began with occasional assignments in 1947 when Calvino became an agent for the publishing house and also published his first novel, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (Ibid., 26-7). Although brief, this important work would launch the young writer's career, give him the chance to see the world of publication from an insider's perspective, and allow him to enter into contact with some of the great intellectuals of the time such as Natalia Ginzburg and Cesare Pavese. In 1950, Calvino would resume his work for Einaudi after publishing a short story collection, *Ultimo viene il corvo*. Even as his career as a writer grew, he would return to his editorial work, helping many unknown authors to publish (such as Leonardo Sciascia). While the purpose of this essay is not to bring to light the value of this lesser-known "publishing Calvino" in his writing, this brief introduction highlights an important editorial sensitivity in Calvino's own literature. Calvino knows about books, how they are written, how they are published, and how they are read. Indeed, some of his editorial work for Einaudi included writing introductions for well-known books, including one for *Orlando Furioso*. Such work necessarily led the author to consider pertinent questions about translation, adaptation, and classic literature. These three themes are present in much of his writing—whether fiction or theoretical. Calvino's essayistic reflections on them can therefore help elucidate the importance of Ariosto as one of Calvino's literary models, as well as his understanding of literary values and how classic works operate upon the reader (even if the reader in question is Calvino himself). In other words, a quick examination of such texts provides a vocabulary that will be useful in a discussion on Calvino's literary model, Ariosto.

"Tradurre è il vero modo di leggere un testo" is an essay written by Calvino in 1982, near the end of his career. At this point, Calvino understood firsthand the frustrations of translation after having translated *Les fleurs bleues* (*I fiori blu*) by Raymond Queneau, a French author and friend of Calvino who had the tendency to write in a spoken French, with phonetic orthographies and very specific cultural references. Through this attempt, Calvino rewrote the book in a more Italian way rather than adhering to a more traditional method. He had also seen his own novels and short stories translated. It is from this point of view that Calvino wrote these meditations on translation. He speaks of the experience of reading his own work in translation and discovering something different that he had failed to notice in the original:

> Tradurre è il vero modo di leggere un testo; questo credo sia stato detto già molte volte; posso aggiungere che per un autore il riflettere sulla traduzione di un proprio testo, il discutere col traduttore, è il vero modo di leggere se stesso, di capire bene cosa ha scritto e perché (Calvino 1982).

Translation is therefore, according to Calvino, a tool for better understanding both a text and oneself. The act of "translating" Ariosto into his own work necessarily involves both the Renaissance author and Calvino, addressing itself to a new reader, but also in a way that is impossible to dissociate from the new author.

The collection *Perché leggere i classici*, published shortly after Calvino's death, consists of the author's reflections on the concept of a literary canon. Even if this edition can be seen as an example of a capitalistic appropriation of an author immediately after his death (considering that these essays can all be found in the collection *Una pietra sopra: discorsi di letteratura e società*), this volume still reads as a coherent whole. The first essay[4] begins with a "proposta di definizione": "*I classici sono quei libri di cui si sente dire di solito: «Sto rileggendo...» e mai «Sto leggendo...»*" (Calvino 1991, 11). For Calvino, one does not simply read a classic for the first time. Even if the reader has never before read the book, he already has an idea of it before beginning. Calvino continues to describe how a classic operates on a young reader as opposed to on a mature one. For the young reader, the content will remain hidden in his memory, changing the subsequent rereading of that classic as the reader changes and grows. This discovery creates new maxims:

4. D'un classico ogni rilettura è una lettura di scoperta come la prima.
5. D'un classico ogni prima lettura è in realtà una rilettura.

La definizione 4 può essere considerata corollario di questa:

6. Un classico è un libro che non ha mai finito di dire quel che ha da dire (Calvino 1991, 13).

The process of defining a classic leads Calvino to reflections on the way literature operates. If a first reading of a classic is already a rereading, how would one classify a reading of Calvino's rewriting of a classic? Continuing on: "11. *Il «tuo» classico è quello che non può esserti indifferente e che ti serve per definire te stesso in rapporto e magari in contrasto con lui*" (Calvino 1991, 16). For Calvino, Ariosto is a particularly important classical model. Through the translation thereof, Calvino succeeds in better understanding *Orlando Furioso* and also his own work.

Le lezioni americane were intended as the Norton Lecture at Harvard University, a discourse on the value of literature and on the most important elements for the millennium to come. In his lesson on "Rapidità", Calvino writes:

> …il suo segreto [of the fairytale he is analyzing] sta nella economia del racconto: gli avvenimenti, indipendentemente dalla loro durata, diventano puntiformi, collegati da segmenti rettilinei, in un disegno a zigzag che corrisponde a un movimento senza sosta (Calvino 1988a, 36).

If Calvino admires this economy, it is perhaps because it is similar to the movement of *Orlando Furioso*, a constant narration made of diverse stories that interact within an open structure that Calvino applauds in his introduction to the text.

The essay that Calvino wrote for Einaudi was entitled *La struttura dell'Orlando* (1966), and today it can be found (a version slightly modified in 1974) in the collection *Perché leggere i classici*. Calvino begins the essay with a thought that problematizes the notion of introductions: "L'*Orlando Furioso* è un poema che si rifiuta di cominciare, e si rifiuta di finire" (Calvino 1991, 78). Also for Calvino, the work on Ariosto refuses to begin or to end—this sentence is even present in *Orlando raccontato da Calvino*, but not textually. Rather, it appears in the first illustration rather than in the text of the *Presentazione*[5]. This is reminiscent of Calvino's maxim about classics: "*Un classico è un libro che non ha mai finito di dire quel che ha da dire.*"

After this immediate challenge, Calvino then qualifies this refusal to begin or to end:

> Si rifiuta di cominciare perché si presenta come la continuazione d'un altro poema, l'*Orlando Innamorato* di Matteo Maria Boiardo, lasciato incompiuto alla morte dell'autore. E si rifiuta di finire perché Ariosto non smette mai di lavorarci (Calvino 1991, 78).

This compositional method seems to be the reason for which the structure itself is exceptional, a choice that opens the story to an infinite number of possibilities:

> Questa dilatazione dall'interno, facendo proliferare episodi da episodi, creando nuove simmetrie e nuovi contrasti, mi pare spieghi bene il metodo di costruzione di Ariosto; e resta per lui il vero modo d'allargare questo poema dalla struttura policentrica e sincronica, le cui vicende si diramano in ogni direzione e s'intersecano e biforcano di continuo (Calvino 1991, 78-9).

Once more, the vocabulary is remarkably similar to the "secret of the story" as Calvino described it in the *Lezioni americane*.

The ingenious nature of the structure, Calvino explains, is in the editing and assembling ("montaggio"). Should Calvino choose a word that calls to mind cinema, it is because Ariosto's structure feels much more modern: he leaves space in the poem to follow whichever character he wants (creating caesurae), often promising the continuation of the poem to the reader at the end of each canto (that continually leads him farther into the text); finally, at the beginning of the poem at the end of each canto (akin to modern "cliffhanger" endings) only to slow the pace in the following canto, lengthening the action, contrary to what had been promised at first. Overall, to speak of the structure or the form of *Orlando Furioso* is impossible:

> …perché non siamo di fronte a una geometria rigida: potremmo ricorrere all'immagine d'un campo di forze, che continuamente genera al suo interno altri campi di forze. Il movimento è sempre centrifugo; all'inizio siamo già nel bel mezzo dell'azione, e questo vale per il poema come per ogni canto e ogni episodio (Calvino 1991, 80).

It is perhaps ironic that, in order for Calvino to rewrite *Orlando Furioso*, he finds it necessary to use this fundamentally unstructured text as a rigid central cross organizing the thematic content of *Il castello dei destini incrociati*. The rest of Calvino's introduction to *Orlando Furioso* is reproduced in the presentation of *Orlando Furioso di Ludovico Ariosto raccontato da Italo Calvino*, and it therefore seems rational to move onto this next text. *Orlando Furioso* of Ariosto, according to Calvino, is a

classic that never stops speaking to Calvino as a reader, and about which Calvino as a writer will never stop writing.

II. Orlando Furioso di Ludovico Ariosto raccontato da Italo Calvino

The cover design of this volume reflects the nature of the work itself. The title, *Orlando Furioso di Ludovico Ariosto raccontato da Italo Calvino*, contains a well-known title of a great Italian classic and the name of its author. Beneath that, even larger than the typography of Ariosto, is Calvino's name. Even if his book is *raccontato* by Calvino, this is a "reading" Calvino (and in some cases, reading his own commentary on Ariosto). Even the illustrations support such an understanding (see image on page 6 of the text). While this book is used today for pedagogical purposes, through "translating" Ariosto, rather than making himself invisible and letting the original text speak, Calvino renders himself even more visible. In *Il castello dei destini incrociati*, Calvino takes an opposite approach—he erases all evidence of a narrator, and retells Ariosto's epic poem using only the interpretations of a voiceless narrator reading tarot cards.

This text is rarely studied (and has yet to be translated into English), as Michela Pollutri notes in her short essay: "Forse pochi sono a conoscenza del fatto che Italo Calvino fosse un'amante delle Opere di Ludovico Ariosto e, in particolare, de *L'Orlando Furioso*" (Pollutri 2008, cover). And even if Pollutri's essay presents itself as a journey into the presence of Ariosto in the work of Calvino, it fails to enter deeply into the discussion of why. It is perhaps because Pollutri overlooks the importance of *Orlando* in *Il castello dei destini incrociati*, but overall, her essay opens an important conversation. According to Pollutri:

> La passione di Italo Calvino verso l'*Orlando furioso* non si risolve nella stesura dei due saggi, ma va ben oltre, e si manifesta in un volume interamente dedicato a un 'racconto' del poema ariostesco (Ibid., 27).

The *presentazione* begins at the moment in the original introduction when Calvino spoke about the origins of Ariosto's *Orlando* (the original story, *La Chanson de Roland*, the Breton cycle, and Boiardo's continuation). But Calvino corrects himself immediately:

> Il difetto d'ogni preambolo al Furioso è che se si comincia col dire: «è un poema che fa da continuazione a un altro poema, il quale continua un ciclo d'innumerevoli poemi», il lettore si sente subito scoraggiato: se prima

> d'intraprendere la lettura dovrà mettersi al corrente di tutti i precedenti, e dei precedenti dei precedenti, quando riuscirà mai a incominciarlo, il poema d'Ariosto? In realtà, ogni preambolo si rivela subito superfluo: il Furioso è un libro unico nel suo genere e può essere letto - quasi direi: deve - senza far riferimento a nessun altro libro precedente o seguente; è un universo a sé in cui si può viaggiare in lungo e in largo, entrare, uscire, perdercisi (Calvino 1995, 26).

Calvino himself begins with a similar discussion of origins, then retracts it halfway through (this revelation comes just after his explanation of Canto I, 1-4). What should interest us here is that Calvino initially proposes a reading that seems akin to his own notion of the classic, and then immediately negates it. If Calvino wanted to recommend a reading that would not reference any preceding or subsequent text, such a reading would be impossible for a reader of this book (and also for any reader of the edition of *Orlando* for which Calvino wrote the introduction).

With this proposition, the reader arrives at the discussion of the ottava, which, for Calvino, makes *Orlando* the "poema del movimento, o meglio, annuncia il particolare tipo di movimento che lo percorrerà da cima a fondo, movimento a linee spezzate, a zig zag" (Calvino 1995, 34). The ottava is flexible and follows the rhythm of spoken language, a combination that renders the poem a type of game whose variations are never monotonous, but also a game that defines its own readers (present and future). This language is practically identical to that of the *Lezioni americane*—for instance, the use of the term *zigzag*.

Looking at the choices Calvino makes when selecting excerpts to include or comment on reveals much about how the author takes advantage of this "zigzag" structure to create a new book. In the appendix[6], I have written a resume of all the parts of *Orlando* that Calvino reproduces in his *rereading*. Through Calvino's essay on the structure of *Orlando* and the presentation, it is clear that, for Calvino, the genius of Ariosto is due to the open structure of the book that gives the reader the impression of continual motion, always encouraging more interest and participation. This effect is produced by the composition itself, of the end of each canto (that promises the continuation of the poem and accelerates the reading), and of the beginnings (that slow down the reading rather than continuing as promised). To examine what Calvino eliminates, however, is to realize that his version loses these beginnings and endings of each canto more often than not. Instead of reproducing the entire original text, Calvino rewrites what he removes in prose, a commentary that frames the excerpts of Ariosto's original. The resulting reading is certainly easier (shorter, not all in antique verse, with explanations before and after), but

also a zigzag reading in which Calvino puts only a selection of passages, sometimes not even in the proper order, with his own interpretations interrupting Ariosto's masterpiece.

Calvino shares his own reading of *Orlando*, and takes the parts that interest him. With his comments, he offers not only a context to accompany the poem, but also his own interpretation of the work. According to Pollutri:

> Quindi Calvino non conserva l'ordine della struttura organizzativa della materia del poema; predilige una suddivisione per temi, affiancati secondo un labile ordine cronologico, e questi temi nemmeno riescono a riassumere tutte le vicende narrate nell'*Orlando furioso*, ma solo i fili narrativi portanti" (Pollutri 2008, 28).

Next, with a short summary of the chapters in the book, Pollutri concludes that Calvino's method is "comprensivo di tutte le vicende principali" (Ibid., 29). However, this interpretation refuses both to begin and to finish, always surrounding the original text in a subtle, yet pedagogical, way. The work of Calvino is not to explain this classic, nor is it to clarify, but rather it is to retell a story that never stops telling itself. This strange frame is more of a collage made of historical ambiance, comments on the original, summaries, and interpretations from a new narrator who never once tries to hide.

Pollutri highlights the role of Astolfo in Calvino's "translation": "Il quale descrive Astolfo come una pedina essenziale di quel movimento a cui sono trascinati tutti gli altri personaggi da Ludovico Ariosto" (Ibid., 45). Astolfo will continue to be a major element in Calvino's readings of Ariosto, providing half of the central cross of his structure for *Il castello dei destini incrociati*. This rewriting is even more problematic than the first two, because it is here that Calvino recounts two tales from *Orlando Furioso* without context, without explanations, and most importantly, without a voice.

III. Il castello dei destini incrociati

In 1967, after writing his introduction to *Orlando Furioso* but before publishing *Orlando Furioso raccontato da Italo Calvino*, Calvino transferred to Paris where he would remain until 1979 (McLaughlin 1998, xv). Characterized by a refusal of his political interests (and a definitive split with the Italian Communist party) and by his association with French writers and intellectuals, Calvino's Parisian works are different from what he had written previously. In 1969 in Paris, the intellectual world was

fascinated by the recent translation (1965) of Vladimir Propp's *Morphologie du conte*. Propp's theory was that fiction is produced through the combination of a limited number of prefabricated elements subject to fixed rules. He compared Russian folktales in order to discover predictable patterns of "functions", actions by characters that further the plot in regular ways. No folktale contained all 31 functions, but the functions that appeared always did so in the same order and contributed in similar ways. Propp constructed a "grammar" of narrative based on plot structures, character types, genres, etc. Literary theorists such as Greimas, Todorov, and Bremond then elaborated on his work. Lucia Re speaks at length about this in her article on the value of literature according to Calvino:

> …in the mid-to-late 1960's Calvino was faced with the structuralist reduction of all literature to a set of linguistic functions, oppositions, and permutations, and with the placing of literature by semiotic and structuralist analysis on the same level with other codes and systems of signs, such as advertising, spy thrillers, and fashion. (Re 1998, 128).

Finally, it was in the company of Raymond Queneau, Georges Perec, and their writing workshop the OuLiPo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle, Workshop of Potential Literature) that his obsession with literary structure found refuge in this group of likeminded individuals. Their application of formal, mathematical constraints greatly appealed to Calvino.

Faced with these trends (with which he was acutely familiar given his own work on folktales), Calvino adapted his own texts to address them. *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (1973) could be viewed as one such attempt. The novel puts famous tales of Western civilization into play: Faust, Parsifal, Oedipus, Roland, Don Juan, etc. In the framing story, a group of travellers, having lost their way in a forest and found shelter in a castle, decide to kill time by telling stories. Except for one problem: they cannot speak and must use a deck of tarot cards to "tell" their tales. The novel is made up of two parts: *Il castello* (published originally in the volume *Tarocchi, Il mazzo visconteo di Bergamo e New York*, 1969) and *La taverna* (Calvino 1973, 123). For simplicity's sake, the focus of this paper will be on the first part that includes Ariosto, of which the original publication included colored miniature tarot cards. While the two texts operate according to the same combinatorial method (but with two different types of cards), the first part is not only more pertinent to the discussion on Ariosto, but also more readable due to its better formulated structure.

The genesis of *Il castello* follows a pre-existing project: Calvino had been experimenting with (and extremely frustrated by) the Marseilles tarot

cards (a project which would become the second volume) when invited by publisher Franco Maria Ricci to write a text based on the Visconti Tarocchi deck. Given the technical problems (the Marseilles tarots were too different to allow Calvino to salvage the greater part of his original work), a new story came to mind:

> Il riferimento letterario che mi veniva spontaneo era l'*Orlando Furioso*: anche se le miniature di Bonifacio Bembo precedevano di quasi un secolo il poema di Ludovico Ariosto, esse potevano ben rappresentare il mondo visuale nel quale la fantasia ariostesca s'era formata (Ibid., 125).

It should hardly seem surprising that, in the midst of his work on *Orlando Furioso raccontato da Italo Calvino*, Ariosto would come to mind. But the fact that this fundamentally unstructured story is what Calvino used to organize and implement the structure to his own novel is unexpected. What Calvino found was the following:

> …mi fu facile così costruire l'incrocio centrale dei racconti del mio 'quadrato magico'. Intorno, bastava lasciare che prendessero forma altre storie che s'incrociavano tra loro, e ottenni così una specie di cruciverba fatto di figure anziché di lettere, in cui per di più ogni sequenza si può leggere nei due sensi. Nel giro d'una settimana, il testo del *Castello dei destini incrociati* (non più *La taverna*) era pronto per essere pubblicato nella lussuosa edizione alla quale era destinato (Ibid., 125).

He was not as lucky with *La taverna*:

> Se mi decido a pubblicare *La taverna dei destini incrociati* è soprattutto per liberarmene. Ancora adesso, col libro in bozze, continuo a rimetterci le mani, a smontarlo, a riscriverlo. Solo quando il volume sarà stampato ne resterò fuori una volta per tutte, spero (Ibid., 128).

In the note that can be found in the English translation[7], the author explains the fundamental principle of the novel:

> This book is made first of pictures—the tarot playing cards—and secondly of written words. Through the sequence of the pictures stories are told, which the written word tries to reconstruct and interpret (Calvino 1976, 123).

This paratext is, according to Calvino, the main story—miniature reproductions line the margins and the full sequence of cards generally appears at the end of each tale, the finished design becoming apparent at a

crucial moment towards the end[8]. For Calvino, this experimental impetus is an authorial game:

> I thought of constructing a kind of crossword puzzle made of tarots instead of letters, of pictographic stories instead of words. I wanted each of the stories to have a coherent significance, and I wanted them to afford me pleasure in writing them—or in rewriting them, if they were already classic stories (Ibid., 126).

The cards in this design are assembled in rows and columns, which intersect each other, and the stories are based on one row or column (and reading forward or backward changes the story). Therefore, each card does not have only one meaning, but rather the meaning depends upon the current story. The tarot cards serve as building blocks whose various combinations create stories. As biographer Martin McLaughlin notes:

> Apart from experimenting with visual forms of narration, Calvino is also here exemplifying something which he had discussed on several occasions in the previous years, the fact that all narrative can be reduced to a finite number of units or functions which can therefore be put together in a combinatory process that yields infinite solutions (McLaughlin 1998, 110).

This combinatorial reduction of literature was not invented by Calvino, but his use of the tarot cards as a narrative code acts as a commentary on the theory, stripping away the façade of fiction and leaving only the combinatory process through which it is produced. The seventy-eight tarot cards can be seen as the basic elements of narrative. Joann Cannon explains the appropriateness of this choice:

> The chivalric characters represented in the tarot cards are devoid of what Propp calls secondary characteristics, such as psychological attributes, which are irrelevant in the structural analysis of narrative based on functions. The actions depicted in the tarot cards, again borrowed from the chivalric genre, also lend themselves to be categorized in a finite number of functions (Cannon 1979, 85).

As with Propp's original folktales and language itself, the principle here is called "discrete infinity"—it is possible to build an infinity of meaning from a finite and discrete number of elements. The tarot cards here function in precisely the same manner: although finite in number, they allow for limitless combinations. As Cannon notes,

> Literature is inexhaustible not only because the system, symbolized in *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* by the deck of tarot cards, can generate an infinite number of combinations, but also because a single variation, a single story, can never be exhausted by the reader (Ibid., 89).

Like the reader of tarots, the writer can never exhaust the possibilities of fiction (and in this case, the reader and writer seem to be one and the same, Calvino):

> I began by trying to line up tarots at random, to see if I could read a story in them. 'The Waverer's Tale' emerged; I started writing it down; I looked for other combinations of the same cards; I realized the tarots were a machine for constructing stories; I thought of a book, and I imagined its frame: the mute narrators, the forest, the inn; I was tempted by the diabolical idea of conjuring up all the stories that could be contained in a tarot deck (Calvino 1976, 126).

As Calvino explains in his Italian note, he had the idea to "…adoperare i tarocchi come una macchina narrativa combinatoria…" (Calvino 1973, 124). The potential of combinatorics reminds us of Raymond Queneau and the Oulipo. In Oulipian combinatorial texts, it can seem as though chance governs the result while the true organizational force is not random at all. The difference between this ideology and the way Calvino writes *Il Castello dei destini incrociati* is that the rule did not precede the composition. While he played with the tarot cards, Calvino continually modified his design to reinvent his story-telling machine.

However, as often happens with Calvino, there is an obstacle between the author and the reader. The narrator of each story begins by choosing the card, which most closely resembles him, and placing it on the table. The narrative unfolds as the "player" lays down a sequence of cards, which is reproduced in the margin of the text. The text itself is not told directly, but is rather a "reading" of the cards by the narrator of the framing story, who is not necessarily Calvino. Because the number of cards at their disposal is limited to seventy-eight (in the fifteenth-century Visconti deck), these narrators must construct their tales in such a way as to intersect with the cards already played. The characters are playing a game that Calvino has already played with himself: a strange game between author and reader (the author of *Il castello*, searching for stories to tell in a card game and the reader of Ariosto, whose structure-less story finds itself at the center of Calvino's own structure). I would suggest that this result comes from the way in which Calvino wrote the text, the struggle between stabilizing the rules of the game and finding stories in a