

**Please write a response (no longer than 2000 words) to the following extract from the beginning of Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller* (1981), translated by William Weaver (2007). You might like to analyse the way in which the author and/or the translator presents reading and the roles of the reader and writer. You should also draw on your own encounters with books.**

'Translating Calvino is... pursuing a cadence, a rhythm - sometimes regular, sometimes wilfully jagged.'<sup>1</sup> - William Weaver. This description of Calvino's works alludes to the three-dimensional imagery and the translation complexities that lie therein. This essay will explore both. Regarding imagery, Calvino presents reading as an intercourse between reader and book, which may be unhealthy. Literature is shown to have unnatural power and force in the mind of the reader, and the reader in the novel experiences books differently when compared to the modern bibliophile.

Before delving into any text, it is important to understand the context. In this case, the context includes the language because the extract has been translated. The quintessence of translation is accepting the impossibility of cloning a text. When this has been conceded, the remaining goal is to achieve the most accurate version possible, with the fewest shortcomings. It goes without saying that any translated work cannot be entirely relied upon to reflect the true intentions of the author in the original language, as there are nuances in every tongue that cannot be expressed in another without tainting the nature or beauty of it. This is particularly the case with figurative and romantic vocabulary, which adds the most imagery to a text, so is the most at risk from translation. Indeed, many languages simply do not have a corresponding word that evokes the same meaning as the original. To illustrate this further, this essay shall look to the most translated book in existence,<sup>2</sup> the Bible.

The sheer number of translations of the Bible (and yet more being done) reveals the continual dialectic over such a matter. 'Semantic range' is a term often employed in Biblical studies, reflecting the multitude of contexts that influence translation.<sup>3</sup> The Greek word 'σάρξ' or 'sarx' is translated as no fewer than nine different words in the single book of Galatians in the 1984 New International Version, ranging in English meaning from 'flesh' to 'outwardly' to 'no one.'<sup>4</sup> Of course, the Bible is a polarised example compared to novels such as *If on a winter's night a traveller*. This is due to the unparalleled number of different manuscripts, as well as the stakes being somewhat higher when translating the perceived Word of God, which must remain 'sharper than any double-edged sword' (Hebrews 4:12). Nonetheless, the Bible still highlights beautifully the universal difficulty of translation, which is equally applicable to Calvino's novels. Furthermore, it is interesting to examine the approach taken within Islam when it comes to translation: 'It is an Islamic dogma that the Koran cannot be translated.'<sup>5</sup> For Muslims, the only Koran is the Arabic Koran, and translations are merely interpretations; they are not the infallible Word of God. The differing views of these two religions testify to the complexity of the translation issue, and Weaver is subject to this difficulty in his translation of Calvino's works.

On the other hand, why do the fallacies of translation matter? One can accept that identical translations are frankly impossible, but could the reader gain something from a non-identical translation? For, if a great book is interpreted differently by each reader, surely we are just interpreting one stage further down the chain of readers; we are interpreting Weaver's interpretation. And as Weaver was one of the men who knew Calvino best,<sup>1</sup> worked with him

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<sup>1</sup> (Weaver, Uploaded 2003)

<sup>2</sup> (Chamberlin, 1991)

<sup>3</sup> (Osborne, 2010)

<sup>4</sup> (Mounce, 2014)

<sup>5</sup> (Sachiko Murata, 1996)

closely and is considered the greatest Italian translator of all time,<sup>6</sup> if anyone could translate the work well it would seem to be Weaver. Arguably, Weaver's translation is like a second edition of the original; it has the same sentiments, but with extra additional insights. Umberto Eco, whose 'The Name of the Rose' was also translated by Weaver, seems to agree. He joked that the translation of his work was 'much better than the original'.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, while still giving Calvino due credit for the novel, it is possible to argue in favour of some added perks of translation.

Entering the text itself, in the first paragraph, Calvino writes: 'So, then, you noticed in a newspaper that *If on a winter's night a traveller* had appeared, the new book by Italo Calvino, who hadn't published for several years. You went to the bookshop and bought the volume.' This points to the respective roles of the writer and reader. There is a human tendency to go back to an author whose work we have enjoyed; if we have found a past work to be true for us, we buy into 'the appearance of success'.<sup>7</sup> Edward Said expressed this sentiment in 'Orientalism', when exploring the Western view towards the Orient and all things Oriental. 'If one reads a book claiming that lions are fierce and then encounters a fierce lion (I simplify, of course), the chances are that one will be encouraged to read more books by that same author, and believe them.'<sup>7</sup> This suggests that even if it is hard for an author to gain our trust, once achieved, this trust is maintained.

Calvino also heavily implies the power of literature. History has shown time and time again that books are among the most dangerous weapons in existence. Censorship as an attempt to manage this is seen consistently throughout societies, with dramatic examples from time to time such as the Nazi book burnings of 1933.<sup>8</sup> The power of books is also evident in novels of all kinds, from Jane Eyre's escapism<sup>9</sup> to the comedic dictation of Alonso Quixano's life.<sup>10</sup> In this way, Calvino joins the plethora of recognition of literature's weight. The use of a proper noun for each category denotes importance and personifies each one. Every category seems to have a different kind of power, whether it's the lingering guilt of 'Books You've Been Planning To Read For Ages,' pushed away by procrastination, or the excitement of 'Books That Fill You With Sudden, Inexplicable Curiosity, Not Easily Justified.'

Moreover, this power is presented as somewhat toxic within the reader's psyche, as they see books as forceful in order to alleviate the guilt of academic underachievement. Inextricably interwoven with the book categories is a narrative of military-style attack, for example 'you are attacked by the infantry' and then 'eluding these assaults, you come up beneath the towers of the fortress, where other troops are holding out.' This combative language suggests conflict and a power struggle between the reader and the books. Normally this would be absurd, but in the reader's mind not at all; as aforementioned, the books are given proper noun status and appear to have their own persona. This imagined conflict implies the insecurity of the reader; insatiable thirst for knowledge leads to perpetually falling short of what is expected, merely because one has not read every book in the shop. Before the reader (which, due to Calvino's second person approach, is ourselves), has even opened a new book, they are overwhelmed by the legions of those they have not yet read. This is an inevitability that Calvino must have foreseen for many of his readers. Other interpretations are of course plausible. Rather than perceiving the assault of books through the lens of intellectual self-doubt, could Calvino actually be making a wider comment on our consumerist culture? Perhaps he is suggesting that one cannot help but constantly see more things to buy, and the militant language serves to emphasise this

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<sup>6</sup> (Thomson, 2013)

<sup>7</sup> (Said, 1978)

<sup>8</sup> (Dietrich Bracher, 1970)

<sup>9</sup> (Brontë, 1847)

<sup>10</sup>(Cervantes, 1605)

societal pressure. In support of this hypothesis, one study found that in Italy books are the third main product purchased, after furniture and automobiles.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, it is also worth mentioning how the world today is not the world in which Calvino did his writing; the technological revolution from 1981 to now has altered the readers' experience of books. Returning to the very first line, Calvino writes 'you noticed in a newspaper... you went to the bookshop.' The description that follows seems whimsical, bearing similarities to the bookshops encountered by Tom Pinch in Charles Dickens' *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit*: 'But what were even gold and silver, precious stones and clockwork, to the bookshops.'<sup>12</sup> However, as well as the decline of newspapers,<sup>13</sup> bookshops themselves are hugely in decline, blighted by instant access to e-books and e-readers. The UK has seen a mass closing of bookshops,<sup>14</sup> as has Italy, where over 2300 shops closed between 2014-19.<sup>15</sup> Hence, Calvino's modern audience reads about a sensual experience that may not be the current reality.

To conclude, Calvino presents reading as a whole, multi-faceted experience. Books are more than just words on paper. With favourite authors established and retained, the reader's experience starts before actually reading. History shows time and time again the force of literature and how society behaves when exposed to it, or when exposure is denied. Yet Calvino argues that the power of a book is even more than this; books have intrinsic power in the mind of the reader, and because his novel is written to make us the described reader, this is a direct hit. Stepping away from the relationships presented in the novel itself, there is a different kind of relationship to be examined between Calvino and Weaver. Although Weaver's translation is not the original, this does not detract from the impact on the reader; the whole extract is alive with imagery. Who can state with authority that the experience is more profound in either Weaver's English translation or Calvino's Italian original?

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<sup>11</sup> (Guerreschi, 2019)

<sup>12</sup> (Dickens, 1844)

<sup>13</sup> (Meyer, 2004)

<sup>14</sup> (Flood, 2019)

<sup>15</sup> (Wanted in Milan, 2020)

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