

Modern and Medieval Languages Essay Prize 2021

Within Calvino's extract lies a dialectical exploration of the relationship between author and reader, where authorial power is relinquished to their books, and the reader reigns supreme. The ideas bear resemblance to Barthes' *The Death of the Author*¹, which argued that an author's interpretation of their own text has no bearing on the validity of other interpretations - the reader has power, no longer being the receptacle of an author's writings. Calvino examines this idea in terms of readers' relationships to physical books and to the practice of reading, rather than the ideas expressed by the author. Where Barthes championed the perceived democratisation of literature to come with this transformation, Calvino raises other questions pertaining to authorial impotence and readers' empowerment: do readers use literature for less wholesome purposes than to satisfy a love of reading? And, crucially, what end should literature serve, if not to satisfy this love?

Calvino's extract emphasises the acquisition of books over the act of reading itself. He suggests that readers perceive books as passive tools to be selected in order to cultivate one's own cultural capital, rather than as active expressions of thought. A similar idea, though pertaining to art, is put forward by John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*, where in an essay on oil painting, Berger suggests that consumers of art, particularly of classical art, bought paintings not necessarily for aesthetic or intellectual purposes, but to communicate that one was a buyer of such art: "if you buy a painting you buy also the look of the thing it represents"². Perhaps, what art - and books - represent is the owner's own prestige. Most obviously reminiscent of Berger's words is Calvino's category "Books Made For Purposes Other Than Reading", implying that readers' purpose in buying these books is not to appreciate them as pieces of creative expression, but to hold what the books represent; to communicate to others that they have acquired literature, and its concomitant cultural capital.

The verb choice in this phrase is key - "made" rather than "written" suggesting that these books are engineered and manufactured, without creativity or love for the medium. In this way, Calvino hints at the same cynicism that Berger found in the art collectors of the oil painting's heyday: just as painters adapted their style and subjects to the market, the writer of such a book does so knowing that the product will be absorbed into the image of its owner, who is not necessarily its reader. Ergo, Calvino suggests that the author of a "Book Made For Purposes Other Than Reading" writes in full knowledge of their own irrelevance. They "make" books to fulfil the market's demands, while meaning is secondary. If books can be written for a purpose other than reading, then the content of these books is utterly immaterial, and literature of this type is devoid of meaning: its words are not meant to be read, nor its ideas explored. A book not meant to be read, Calvino argues, has no meaning beyond the statement of its corporeality.

Thus, the extract criticises a certain form of empowerment of the reader, where books are treated as nothing more than a way to enhance the reader's image. Calvino preemptively mocks his reader's

¹ Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press 1977) p.142

² John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin 2008) p. 83

solipsism, with the continuous use of the second-person voice rendering the reader acutely aware of their power in the bookshop. The employment of this tone obliquely berates the reader for the fact that their journey in the bookshop is not necessarily one of enrapturement, but rather of self-congratulation. Calvino's claustrophobia-inducing fixation on the reader's stream-of-consciousness is also a source of levity in the extract, whereby the meticulousness of the examination of the reader is juxtaposed with the simplicity of the transaction. According to Sartre's ideas on the comedy of the absurd³, "analysis may be the instrument of science, it is also the instrument of humour." This duality is explored by Calvino in his "scientific" analysis of literary culture, as such scrupulousness renders the final transaction slightly incongruent. Contrasting the philosophising of the extract with simply asserting "your right to own it", Calvino highlights the overzealousness of the previous analysis, to comic effect.

Calvino's reader views reading as a way to gain the mystical enlightenment supposedly inherent to the practice of reading or simply to owning books, which, Calvino suggests, negates the goals of literature to an unacceptable extent. "Books Made for Purposes Other Than Reading" are perhaps made to offer a ready-made version of the supposed moral purity of the arts and humanities. This is suggested to be an outcome of the reader's empowerment: when books are disassociated from their authors, the reader is the sole participant with agency, and their views on books are the only views present. If the reader's goal in obtaining books is to cultivate their own cultural capital, then the extent of books' meaning is the narcissistic fulfilment felt by the reader in possession of Literature. In emancipating the reader from the author's supremacy, which might have condemned this mode of consumption, will the reader's attitude result in the transfer of meaning from books' words to books as commodities? Should the author and critic therefore be reinstated as texts' primary interpreters?

The overarching similarity between Calvino and Berger's thoughts is summarised by the words of Lévi-Strauss - "painting was perhaps an instrument of knowledge but it was also an instrument of possession"⁴. Calvino critiques the use of books as "instrument[s] of possession" and laments readers' rejection of books as "instruments of knowledge". Berger and Calvino were Marxists, and discourse around commodity fetishism is common to their texts. Both *Ways of Seeing* and the extract discuss how pieces of art and literature are ascribed social, spiritual, and cultural meaning beyond what they truly offer, while being simultaneously stripped of meaning by the assignment of greater value to "being a reader" or "owning art" than to materially engaging with these media.

Just as Marxists like Walter Benjamin criticised the idea of *l'art pour l'art*⁵, Calvino questions the iconography of literature as something which bestows intrinsic goodness upon the reader. Benjamin argued that art for art's sake was not useful, nor did art which merely represented the working class necessarily emancipate them. (Benjamin attributed fascistic values to *l'art pour l'art*, both prioritising aesthetics above all.) Something greater had to be made of art for it to be useful, in his view: the

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean-Paul Sartre, *An Explication of The Stranger*, trans. Annette Michelson, (New York: Criterion Books 1955) p. 5

⁴ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 84

⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books 1969) p.20

communist politicisation of art. Similarly, in referencing useless books which don't merit reading, Calvino could be criticising, to paraphrase, *la littérature pour la littérature*; suggesting that the production of books - without necessarily reading them - is not inherently positive. Thus, Calvino argues that the empowered reader might not use books in a useful way, and that this could contravene Barthes' hopes for the idea, having aspired to a more democratic system of analysis⁶.

The performativity of cultural exercises is also examined at the beginning of the extract, when Calvino congratulates the reader on their participation in the world of literature: "good for you." The monosyllabic sentence laments a way of consuming texts which seemingly ignores why an author writes a book in the first place. Surely, authors do not write books to satisfy readers' desires to perform some cultural obligation. The sentence is an expression of an author's frustration with readers who read in ways that negate authors' individuality: rather than creating something, the author is perceived as filling in another piece of the canon, to attain the esoteric state of cultural enrichment. This would be in direct opposition to what Barthes hoped would be accomplished by the death of the author: by removing the author from the discourse, he imagined that readers would escape from the "Author-God"⁷, and be empowered to freely interpret texts. In using their power to acquire books which they believe to honour the "Author-God", readers never escape from authorial supremacy. Hence, Calvino shows how performative readers cement their subjugation as critics of the literature they consume.

However, it would be reductive to claim that Calvino's extract is purely cynical, as passion for literature is a prevalent theme. While the mentions of such passion are largely in terms of the reader's joy in reading (communicated by the zoomorphic, militaristic metaphors for the books themselves), the moments of unadulterated, instinctual interest in books are surely influenced by Calvino's experiences with literature. Last in the asyndetic list of book types are "the Books That Fill You With Sudden, Inexplicable Curiosity, Not Easily Justified". As well as the placement of this category at the end of a lengthy list being ambiguous (highlighting it as the most important, or presenting it as an afterthought?), the phrase "Sudden, Inexplicable Curiosity" is significant for its viscerality, and its implication that love of literature is unpredictable. Crucially, this excitement is not the result of a vain desire to increase one's cultural capital, but of something "Not Easily Justified".

Such a love of literature is to be found in Virginia Woolf's 1928 "biography", *Orlando*, in which, throughout her metamorphoses through space, time, and gender, the sustaining force of the protagonist is literature. As a child, Orlando's persistence is shown by his breeding glow worms, for a light by which to read. The fire he builds, again in pursuit of light, "almost burnt the house down"⁸. Aside from the haunting, mesmerising image of a house, set ablaze by a young boy's fervent wish to read, the fire itself is symbolically significant. Just as fire is a stock motif of romantic desire, Woolf uses it here to present literature as a similarly vital, emotionally captivating force.

⁶ Barthes, *Image Music Text*, p. 147

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 146

⁸ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1992) p. 71

The extent of Orlando's obsession with literature is shown by the description of him as "afflicted with a love of literature"⁹. Woolf's position in *Orlando*, as "biographer" to Vita Sackville-West likely prompted her to this facetious idea of a love of literature as burdensome, which bears some similarities to Calvino's extract. Perhaps in jest, Calvino presents the journey to buying a book as physically perilous and overstimulating, using a conceit of books as soldiers. Labels such as "barricade", "infantry", and "assaults" contribute to the sense of books having agency (linking once more to the transfer of power associated with the *Death of the Author*). Even books which, it has been established, do not warrant reading, clamour to be owned, portraying the bewonderment felt by a reader when presented with a vast collection of books.

Alongside Calvino's discussion of cynical aspects of literary culture lies a romantic view of literature, in which the ultimate goals are pleasure and fulfilment. Able to understand the role of social class in the industry of literature, the reader would be empowered to criticise its iconography, applying Barthesian ideas to literature as an industry. Authorial passion is not precluded by this change, but in the absence of literary institutional power dictating the Books You Should Read To Feel Cultured, a departure from the omnipotence of the Author-God might be facilitated. Preserving the sacrosanctity of the reader's freedom, authors will no longer create texts solely to appeal to readers' vanity, but in emancipating themselves from the shackles of the market's cynical demands, become able to create for the purpose of expression. Transposed to literature, Walter Benjamin's comments on *l'art pour l'art* are instrumental to understanding this text: the creation or ownership of books are not ends in themselves. Only the satisfaction of passion should be the goal of writing or reading literature.

⁹ Woolf, *Orlando*, p.71

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